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From the Margins to the Center:  
Queer and trans teachers of color in K-12 Public Schools  
By Esteban Cabrera-Duran  
Spring 2018

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*A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for a Special Major in Sociology and Anthropology, and Educational Studies  
at Swarthmore College.*



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## Abstract

Interviews with nine self-identified queer and trans teachers of color (QTToC) address how teachers both work within and resist the reproductive function of schools. Findings suggest that QTToC enter the profession with a set of values and commitments. The pedagogies of these teachers can have a transformative effect on the academic outcomes of students and prepare them to be critical of ideologies and systems of oppression. To fulfill this role and commitment, teachers must have the support of the school context and culture. This thesis adds to the growing body of literature on QTToC and presents a more optimistic outlook on the profession.

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## Introduction

### **Opening *Testimonio***

I begin with a *testimonio* to replicate the vulnerability participants in my thesis demonstrated and to elaborate on my position, as a researcher and future educator in this work. Furthermore, a *testimonio* is speaks from personal experiences in narrative form that “puts forth powerful messages that carry a sense of urgency” (Necochea, 2016, p. 33). I give a condensed account of my relationship with the institution of school and education that is very much rooted to my identities and backgrounds. Finally, illuminate my personal reasons for entering the profession of teaching and my visions as to how schools can be a space where society can be transformed and moved towards social justice.

Growing up my parents always reminded me, *mijo, tienes que echarle ganas para ir a la universidad y formarte para ser todo un professional/* you have to work hard to go to college and become a professional. Like many other children of immigrants, I felt an obligation to make my parents sacrifice coming to this country worth every moment. As I grew older, my parents’ guidance became easier said than done. Growing up I thought the conditions which my schools were in was common. Where I saw similarity in living conditions among the people in my neighborhood, others saw deficiency. My neighborhood schools were always among the poorest and worst performing in the district. The student population consisted mostly of immigrant students and my teachers were majority white. The way the media and others spoke about my neighborhood was very different from what I saw and experienced.

I was the introverted, avid reader who enjoyed learning, helping others with their schoolwork, and participating in a number of extracurricular activities that engaged my multiple interests. I demonstrated to teachers, as Valenzuela (1999) states, care towards the “abstract and

aesthetic commitment to practices that lead towards achievement” (pg. 61). As a result, it was visible to me that teachers provided a united and concerted effort in supporting me in all my academic pursuits. At that the moment, I perceived the relationship as one of caring, since they cared for me as a person, and I was motivated to meet teachers’ high expectations. What followed was the creation of an identity, shaped and defined by those around me as “the smart one.” While at the moment I appreciated the compliment, I felt my humanity diminished to my association with the institution of schooling rather than the complexity of my being. At the same time, I began experiencing questions about my own sexual identity, being the target of queer antagonistic bullying when I had yet to comprehend my feelings and attractions. Furthermore, I felt disjointed from my own cultural identity—I consented to the school’s project of “cultural disparagement and de-identification” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 94)—and assumed that to be academically and professionally successful would require me to leave my neighborhood.

The summer after my first year of high school, I participated in a summer youth program aimed at developing participants’ skills in community organizing. The following school year, I volunteered at the non-profit once a week through my high school’s service learning program. I soon became part of the core group of youth at Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP). During my three years at SWOP, I was mentored by long-time organizers and worked with a radical group of immigrant youth and youth of color, particularly women, who were all committed to transform the spaces where we lived, worked, and played. Our main focus for a good part of those three years was working on a Student Bill of Rights. I became very involved in the process of having conversations with youth about changes in our education system. I later found myself prioritizing my activism above school, as well as adopting a new self-proclaimed identity: organizer. I would come home from school and go off to a meeting or rally. My parents were not

entirely sure of what we, my sister and I, were up to, but they were supportive at least on the surface. In my time organizing, I was able to meet youth from all over the state and country to collectively reimagine our visions not only for public education, but also our world. I attended numerous conferences where I shared these visions with organizers in other states as well as shared strategies and tactics. I participated in marches and rallies with other social justice organizations in Albuquerque. I visited the state legislature to push senators and representatives to support policies that would transform the material conditions of the most vulnerable people in the state of New Mexico. As many organizers know, this process is spiritually and physically exhausting. As I began looking into colleges and applying to scholarships my senior year, I came to the resolution that I would put my organizing on pause for my time in college so that I could commit to school fully and work towards the expectations my parents set for me. Despite my plan, my organizing continued to follow me well into my academics.

Aside from the college admissions process, my Senior Action Project (SAP) was a priority in my last year of high school. My SAP was, as I would later identify, a participatory action research project. My project focused on the lack of ethnic studies in my school and school district. After taking a course on social justice topics and conducting extensive research on the issue, I set out to generate conversation about the need for ethnic studies in our schools. I was inspired in large part by the activism of Arizona youth against the ban on Mexican-American studies courses in their schools and by my own desire to learn about my history. The project was a turning point as my cultural identity began to feel like essential part of my being. However, I also began to think about how my queerness could intersect with my revitalized cultural identity and be integrated into ethnic studies. Throughout the project, I kept envisioning myself as an ethnic studies high school teacher. By the end of the project, I was more than certain that

teaching was something that I potentially wanted to pursue as a career. Yet, I found myself held back by the “professional” culture of neoliberalism that diminishes the work of teachers. This discouraged me to some degree from teaching.

My letter of acceptance to Swarthmore was opportune. Nearing the end of my senior year, I became increasingly anxious about affording college as a number of scholarships I had applied for fell through. While the colleges I was admitted to offered me generous financial aid packages, they were not enough. Furthermore, I wanted to leave my home state because I held on to the notions that success meant leaving my neighborhood and that being away from home would help me explore my queer identity beyond the reach of my family. My decision to attend Swarthmore was based on my financial need. While for some, it appeared that I had won the lottery, I felt in many ways extremely limited in my choice as I did not want to take on debt. It was either to go to Swarthmore or go to my local university.

While my visit to Swarthmore was wholly optimistic and important in my decision, as a first year student, I underwent intense cultural and emotional shock. It was a world entirely detached from the one I lived in for 18 years. It was at Swarthmore where I learned that I was low-income/working class. For a time, I was ashamed about who I was and what my family did for a living, manual labor and service jobs. I began moving in spaces with people with the wealth and comfort that I had never experienced before. Many of my peers had parents who were professors, doctors, and lawyers; basically, all the things my parents wanted for me and my siblings to become. Despite wanting to be a teacher, I could not let loose the idea of finding something more “professional.” While my peers strived for jobs as lawyers, doctors, and diplomats, I felt deficient once again. If I were to have a financially stable future, I would have to enter these professions. Teachers were underpaid, overworked, and unrecognized. Meanwhile, a

career in software programming was lucrative and financially stable. I could also help my parents in their retirement. It was also in my first year at Swarthmore that I experienced an intense depressive episode. For most of the spring, I found myself unable to get out of bed, unmotivated to do any homework, and going full days without eating. I was lost and fearful. I did not know where to go and I felt ashamed and embarrassed to ask for help. By the end of the year, all I wanted to do was to go home and not come back to Swarthmore again. I had made the wrong decision and wanted to leave Swarthmore for good.

However, I had met incredible people who grounded me in my values and commitments and also shaped how those would manifest in my life. Not surprisingly, we all had shared identities and experiences, as well as similar backgrounds: low income/working class, of immigrant experience, first generation college students, people of color, and queer and/or trans. We became each other's source of support as we moved in the wealth and privilege that frequently suffocated us. A number of incredible professors came into my life who believed in me and my abilities as a scholar when I was certain I was the admissions mistake. The relationships I built were the reasons I decided to return to Swarthmore, aside from not wanting to be defeated by the institution and privilege of the school. The next year, my sophomore year, I developed a number of survival skills. I learned that I had to continuously advocate for myself. Swarthmore had accepted me, but I had to put in the work to get from the institution the types of support I needed. I had to actively create spaces for myself and for others, ENLACE and Colors being two of those spaces. Another important survival skill that I developed at Swarthmore was to live out my existence fully so that I could not lose sight of who I was, who I want to be, and my vision for a better world. On one hand, this meant embracing all the ways I was marginalized and oppressed as well as the ways I had privilege and newly gained access to social capital.

In my short pursuit of computer science, I realized it was something I did not actually want to do. I was interested programming as a career, but I could not connect my own vision and philosophy for social justice with this field of work—I would be striving to rise to the top and from there look down and lift others up in my logic. Once I was able to deconstruct this culture of professionalism, I broke off from it with the help of a few professors. Despite my concerns, my parents were not surprised at my decision to become a teacher. In fact, a number of my relatives in Mexico were and are teachers. On top of that, my parents greatly admired a number of teachers and recognized teaching as a noble profession. Not feeling guilty about not pursuing a more “professional” career. I dove into my courses in Sociology and Education and found in them a familiarity and a grounding in practice that I couldn’t find in my courses in other departments. Moreover, I met a number of incredible Swarthmore alums who were cooperating teachers for my field placements and I was moved by their descriptions of how Swarthmore shaped their practice as educators.

Exhausted physically and spiritual after two and a half continuous years at Swarthmore, going abroad was a much-needed break. In my time in Chile and Argentina, I visited a number of schools and held conversations with a number of teachers, scholars, and student/activists. I became inspired by activists in both countries in their work for making education a public good, a direct attack against the neoliberal agenda of both countries. In a number of ways, I found my own experiences organizing in high school reflected in the work of youth in both countries, but particularly Chile. I also had the opportunity to conduct work similar to this thesis in Santiago, Chile. I met with a number of queer educators and activists in Santiago and we discussed their experiences as teachers, their work and activism for challenging oppression in the classroom and outside, and their visions for their city, country and the world. After the program concluded, I

returned to the United States convinced that addressing oppression in the institution of school was a direct front against the broader, ideological and structural forces that marginalize people.

These experiences have shaped my values, commitments, and pedagogies I commit to as a teacher. Firstly, to build relationships with my students on care and honesty. To affirm and integrate my student's cultural identities and experiences in my classroom and curriculum. Thirdly, co-construct knowledge with students as well as be critical of the knowledges we are taught. Finally, use our education and critical perspectives to challenge broader sociopolitical and economic structures that marginalize. It is with these experiences and background in education and activism that I write this thesis. I have been unsuccessfully able to detach my lived experiences from my academic study, or rather have not found the freedom to detach my lived experiences from my academic work. These values and commitments are strengths that I bring to the classroom that I know will be the foundation upon where my work as an educator begins.

### **Overview**

The research herein addresses a number of questions I have begun to consider as I prepare to become a teacher. My previous research on teachers of color (Cabrera-Duran, 2016), painted a pessimistic outlook in what it would mean for me to enter the profession. Teachers of color make up a small percentage of the public school teacher workforce (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013). Furthermore, the teachers of color in public school faced a plethora of challenges, such as the lack of agency in their schools (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011), hostile racial climates of schools (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Kohli, 2016), and lack the necessary support necessary to discipline students (Kokka, 2016). As I reflected on these findings, I became increasingly anxious—teachers of color face a multitude of challenges and I had yet to add a queer and trans dimension to my research. My reading of the literature on queer and trans



teachers highlighted a number of challenges faced by these teachers, namely experiences with harassment, discrimination and termination (Emanuel, 2017; Ford, 2016; McCarthy, 2003; Wright & Smith, 2017). Generally, this previous study demonstrated that being a queer nonbinary person of color working as a teacher would not be easy. More specifically, my research indicated the particular challenges I would and could face as an educator.

These findings still felt disjointed—there lacked an analysis of queer and trans identities in the literature on teachers of color and a lack of emphasis on people of color in the literature on queer and trans teachers. The existing literature on queer teachers of color have provided a clear sense of what it means to teach at the intersections of race, gender, and sexual oppression. The findings of these studies relate similarly to much of the existing literature on queer teachers and teachers of color, such as vulnerability to queer suspicion (Brockenbrough, 2012), lack of recognition for their knowledge (Hayes, 2014), and fear of judgement, harassment, and termination (Ford, 2016). At the surface level, I noted the plethora of issues, challenges, and oppressions I would face as a teacher, and not so much the values, skills, and talents, I could bring to my role as a teacher.

My research found pushes against this pessimistic outlook of teaching for queer and trans people of color. Rather, my research demonstrates the possibilities for queer and trans educators of color to fulfill their commitments to enacting anti-oppressive pedagogy, commitments to their students, and the ability to shape and transform the schools in which they work. While I do not want to enforce the narrative that the work experiences of the nine teachers interviewed is optimistic on the whole, they do highlight the positive aspects of their work that affirm their decisions to teach and remain in the profession. I center these experiences to reflect the ways in which queer and trans teachers of color work within the institution, their role in the school

community (and ability to transform them), and their work with students. I argue that queer teachers of color enter the profession influenced by their lived and school experiences that also shape their pedagogies, and the school contexts impact their ability to commit to their values.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 gives an overview of existing literature that answer three questions: (1) How does identity impact teachers' decisions to teach, their experiences in schools, and their commitments?; (2) What pedagogical approaches do queer, trans, and teachers of color bring to the classroom?; and (3), How does school context, relationships, and organization affect the commitments of teachers? Chapter 2 outlines the methodologies employed in this research, along with information about the sample of teachers interviewed. Chapter 3 examines the reasons why the participants in the study entered teaching. I argue that participant's identities and experiences shaped their decision to teach, the subjects which they teach and the pedagogies that they adopt as teachers. All of these factors additionally shape the visions they have for change in schools. Chapter 4 examines the pedagogies of the nine teachers in the study. I argue that teachers engage in a number of pedagogical approaches: *Building Honest, Trusting, and Caring Relationships with Students; Creating Welcoming, Supportive, and Empowering Spaces in the Classroom and School; Recognizing the Diversity Among their Students; Including the Diversity Among Students in the Curriculum; and Developing Critical Analysis of Systems of Oppression*. Chapter 5 explores the context of the schools in which these nine teachers work. I argue that the context in which teachers work in allow them to not only exist fully present at their schools, but also engage in the meaningful roles, work, and pedagogies they want to engage with students. I conclude with an overview of my findings, as well as personal reflections and considerations for future research.

## Chapter 1: Overview of Existing Literature

Crenshaw (1991) describes how research has an inclination to focus on a single dimension of identity, therefore not exploring what happens at the intersection of multiple identities (cited in Ford, 2016). Literature on teachers work typically has a single dimension focus. While research on queer teachers and teachers of color are expansive, literature on trans teachers as well as queer and trans teachers of color is limited. A review of existing literature in these three areas reveal a collection of themes that are relevant to the lives of the teachers interviewed for this thesis. As a whole, the literature addresses three broad themes: (1) the impact identity has on individuals' decision to teach, as well as their experiences in schools and commitments; (2) the pedagogies queer teachers, trans teachers, and teachers of color may enact in their classroom and the impact that has on their students; and (3), the ways in which school context and culture make it possible for teachers to enact their pedagogies as well as support queer and trans teachers of color and foster the academic achievement of students.

*How does identity impact teachers' decisions to teach, their experiences in schools, and their commitments?*

### **Queer Teachers of Color**

Brockenbrough (2012), Hayes (2014), and Ford (2016) break new ground in research that centers queer and trans teachers of color. On one hand, these studies indicate the numerous challenges queer and trans educators of color face in school, namely vulnerability to queer suspicion (Ed Brockenbrough, 2012), lack of recognition for their knowledge (Hayes, 2014), and fear of judgement, harassment, and termination (Ford, 2016). In turn, these studies highlight the contributions queer and trans educators of color bring into their work, namely continuing the tradition of "warm demanders" (Hayes, 2014) and utilizing honesty to create the necessary conditions to create change Ford (2016). Work on queer and trans teachers of color is a growing

area of research. Brockenbrough (2012) and Hayes (2014) both focus on the experiences of gay and queer Black and Latinx men, meanwhile Ford (2017) shifts focus to black lesbian women. I analyze how scholars have looked at the ways in which queer and trans identities and racial and ethnic identities have impacted teacher's decision to teach, their experiences in schools, and their commitments.

### **Queer and Trans Teachers**

Due to shifts in the increasing visibility of queer and trans people in the public sphere, studies published after the year 2000 will be analyzed. The literature highlights the fear of and experiences with harassment, discrimination, and termination, the concealment and disclosure of queer and trans identities, push for LGBTQ topics and programming in schools, and addressing queer and trans antagonisms in school.

#### *Fear of and Experiences with Harassment, Discrimination, and Termination*

Queer and trans teachers face a multitude of challenges in the workforce: fears of and experiences of harassment, discrimination, and termination. Several studies indicate that fears of termination are common among queer and trans teachers (Ford, 2017; Wright and Smith, 2017). However, Wright and Smith (2017) indicate that fears of being terminated have dropped in the last decade, from 36% in 2007 to 22% in 2015. The decrease in fear of termination may indicate that administrators are either increasingly supportive of queer and/or trans teachers or anti-discrimination policies are preventing the dismissal of these teachers based on grounds of their sexual orientation and gender. On the other hand, Wright and Smith (2017) indicate that fears of losing their jobs were much higher when teachers had to come out to students (53% in 2007, 61% in 2011, and 54% in 2017). The possible reason for this fear is that students will tell parents, who will in turn, contact school administration to either remove their children from their

classroom or at the extreme end, request termination. Additionally, experiences with harassment and discrimination may be more common due to constant interaction with students.

Experiences with harassment and discrimination were common among queer and trans teachers as well. Wright and Smith (2017) found that 27% of participants reported experiences of harassment at school—a percentage that fell between 2007 and 2011 from 27% to 21%. Thirty-five percent of participants felt that the attitude of their schools was unsafe for LGBT people. The percentage of teachers reporting their schools as unsafe for LGBT people rose from 41% to 78% between 2007 and 2011. Increased harassment and discrimination were experienced by trans teachers at increased rate than cisgender teachers. A recent study of transgender teachers by National Public Radio (2018) found that 56% transgender participants experience harassment and discrimination in their schools. Of the 79 participants in the study, 20% reported verbal harassment, 17% reported that they have been asked to change their gender presentation, and two were fired. These findings, along with McCarthy (2003) and Emanuel (2017) position schools as places that are potentially hostile to trans teachers. Teachers in both McCarthy (2003) and Emanuel (2017) recalled how their colleagues felt uncomfortable around them, parents pulled their children out of their classrooms, and were not rehired after coming out. These findings make clear that queer and trans teachers may decide to conceal their identities as to prevent harassment, discrimination, and termination.

#### *Concealment and Disclosure of Identity*

Seventy-one percent of LGBT teachers are out in their schools (in some capacity) and the remaining have not disclosed their identities (Wright & Smith, 2017). In the face of fears and experiences with harassment, discrimination, and termination, queer and trans teachers utilize various criteria for disclosing or concealing their identities. McKenna-Buchanan, Munz, &

Rudnick (2015) outline five of those criteria: cultural, gendered, risk/benefit, contextual, and motivational. Cultural criteria were based on the sociopolitical climate of their location.

Gendered criteria refer to the gender performances that enabled or prohibited the ability for teachers to “pass” as straight. Risk-benefit criteria was the calculation of the risks and benefits by teachers that could emerge in their disclosure of sexual identity. Motivational criteria were the internal motivations of teachers to disclose or conceal, as participants were motivated to come out not only so that they could find solidarity with students with marginalized sexual orientations, but so that they can also encourage their students to think critically about difference.

Contextual criteria—the physical environment where disclosure takes place—are an important category for queer and trans teachers for concealing or disclosing their queer identities. Starting at the classroom level, disclosure was dependent on course content. Moreover, educators conceal their identities because the classroom is unwelcoming for queer students and teachers (Endo, Reece-Miller, & Santavicca, 2010). More broadly at the school wide level, school leadership and geographic location impact the ability for K-12 educators to disclose their identities and participate in radical honesty. Teachers described how school leadership that actively values inclusion, honors diversity, and insists on a culture of respect can “create a climate in which gay and lesbian educators are more freely able to teach authentically (DeJean, 2007, p. 67).” For many teachers, this meant that school leadership handled negative reactions to their commitment to radical honesty, and therefore alleviating the stress and isolation teachers may feel at negative reactions. For trans teachers, moving to different schools in other states improved their happiness with their work (Emanuel, 2017). When the leadership of a school can instill safety and trust, teachers can do the same for their students.

Honesty is an important quality that several studies recognized as shaping queer and trans teachers work in their classrooms (DeJean, 2007; Ford, 2016; Keenan, 2017). Queer and trans teachers construct their classrooms with materials that reflect images of the world, by bringing their life partners to school, and participating in open and honest dialogue with students, individually and as a whole class (DeJean, 2007). Keenan (2017) recalls a particular experience as an elementary school teacher where the invisibility of his gender queerness, meant “a potential missed opportunity to support my student’s own queering of gender” (p. 545). The resistance of his student, Dylan, to the gender binary allowed Keenan to “bring my own queerness into the classroom” and “allow both of us to bring more of ourselves and our own agency into the sometimes-suffocating space of the classroom” (p. 545). Similarly, Ford (2017) found that honesty among the participants in her study had two purposes: as a component of dismantling systems of oppression and a value for wholeness. Honesty, Ford (2016) argues is “an essential governing mechanism that Black women use to create the individual and collective conditions necessary for shared energy to make change” (p. 393). Radical honesty, Parker (1998) argues, is an important step in the growth of teachers because effective teaching is established from authentic selfhood (cited in DeJean, 2007). Furthermore, honesty is radical because it is often disruptive to an educational system “that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract” (Palmer, 1998, p. 12). This commitment to radical honesty freed up the energy that would otherwise be consumed by remaining in hiding, however, teachers became exposed, to negative responses by students and parents as well as criticism by colleagues. School leadership is essential in ensuring that teachers can maintain a commitment to radical honesty in the face of negative repercussions. A pedagogy of honesty can provide students a model, so that they too can be honest in their lives.

*Push for Queer, Trans, and LGBTQ Topics into the School Curriculum*

Many schools already include queer, trans, and LGBTQ programming in their schools and curriculum. A quarter of LGBT teachers in Wright and Smith (2017) reported that their school include LGBT individuals, events, issues or information. Meanwhile, half of these teachers reported having no training in working with LGBT students, a number that has decreased from 2007. The majority of trans teachers are attempting to create more inclusive schools as well as being “out” to create visibility of trans individuals in schools, although many of them stated having a degree of “passing privilege” (Kamenetz, 2018). For queer and trans teachers, there is a recognition of their ability to push for LGBT topics into their school curriculums. Furthermore, queer and trans identity expands the conceptual understandings of teaching quality for teachers. Teacher quality is not narrowed by content knowledge but expands to include pedagogical awareness and critical self-knowledge.

[Gay and lesbian] teachers believe it is important to teach students not only school sanctioned literacies, but also to encourage them to explore intrapersonal literacy that fosters a greater understanding of their individual identities and beliefs as well as interpersonal literacies that provide a critical awareness and respect for the identities and values of others. (DeJean, 2007, p. 66).

Queer and trans teachers push for inclusion of LGBTQ topics in the curriculum and programming in their schools, consequently directly challenging queer and trans antagonism in schools.

*Addressing Queer and Trans Antagonism in School<sup>1</sup>*

While the percentage of homophobic comments heard in schools has remained the same since 2007, Wright and Smith (2017) found that more teachers and administrators are addressing

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<sup>1</sup> I utilize queer and trans antagonism rather than homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia to firstly widen the scope of who is affected to include all who are not cisgender and heterosexual and draw attention to structural systems of oppression; and secondly, to present antagonism towards these communities as mediated and rationalized by the individuals that hold them rather than irrational.



homophobic language. In turn, the percentage of teachers and administrators ignoring homophobic language has dropped to its lowest. Regarding transphobic language, the study shows that about three quarters of teachers heard transphobic remarks. It is evident that schools are queer and trans antagonistic to the detriment of students.

### **Teachers of Color**

Literature on teachers of color is expansive and covers a wide range of topics. Several of those topics include the challenges teachers of color face in the profession, the values and commitments they bring to their work, their anti-oppressive pedagogies, and the ways in which school organization and culture can support their work.

#### *Challenges presented to teachers of color and their contributions*

While widespread recruitment efforts have been successful in recruiting teachers of color for hard-to-staff, disadvantaged schools (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Ingersoll & May, 2011; Kokka, 2016), turnover rates among teachers of color have been significantly higher than their white counterparts (Ingersoll & May, 2011). The organizational cultures of schools were strongly related to the departure of teachers of color. The schools where these teachers are employed have “less positive organizational conditions than the schools where White teachers are more likely to work” (Ingersoll & May, 2011, p. i). Lack of social capital, lack of multicultural capital, and challenging power relations were predominant reasons teachers of color leave teaching. Ingersoll and May (2011) identify faculty decision making and instructional autonomy as factors closely related to teacher of color turnover. Furthermore, these factors were more significant than salary, professional development or classroom resources for teachers in their decision to leave teaching. Drawing on these studies, the following organizational cultures and structures are factors in turnover of teachers of color: (1) lack of teacher influence in decision making, (2) lack of

instructional autonomy, (3) lack of support in culturally responsive or social justice education, (4) weak collegial support, (5) low expectations or negative attitudes about students of color, and (6), problems with administration. Although they are committed to working in schools with predominantly low-income students and students of color, teachers of color face a significant number of challenges that affect their ability to perform their commitments to students' academic and social success.

Closely related to organizational cultures and structures, are the racial climates of these schools that make the work of teachers of color particularly difficult. Kohli's (2016) analysis of narratives from 218 racial justice-oriented, urban teachers of color found that despite serving majority students of color, urban schools operate as hostile racial climates. Two forms of racism to which teachers of color were exposed to in their schools were color blindness and racial microaggressions. Bonilla-Silva (2013) describes that color-blind racism, as an ideology, explains "contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics" (p. 2). On the other hand, microaggressions are subtle racial insults and assaults. These forms of racism experienced in urban schools take a toll on the well-being, growth, and retention of teachers of color. On top of the organizational cultures, structures, and challenges, the racism teachers of color experience in their work affect their retention in schools. The realities of teachers of color are disheartening, considering the values, goals, and pedagogies they bring to their schools.

#### *Values, contributions, and pedagogies of teachers of color*

Teachers of color are committed to working with low-income, and communities of color and have been successful in their work. Teachers of color are drawn to teaching to work in schools that have high proportions of students of color and low-income students (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Reviewing a corpus of literature on teachers of color, Villegas and Irvine (2010)

identify five practices of successful teachers of color--having high expectations of students of color, using culturally relevant teaching, developing caring and trusting relationships with students, confronting issues of racism through teaching and serving as cultural brokers. Villegas and Irvine suggest that teachers of color can improve the educational outcomes of students of color if they are well-prepared and increasing diversity of the teaching workforce will have direct and indirect payoffs for students of color. Although teachers of color are committed to serving low-income students and students of color, their ability to fulfill their commitment is directly affected by their own preparation, the forms of capital and organizational structures of their schools.

*What pedagogical approaches do queer, trans, and teachers of color bring to the classroom?*

Queer teachers, trans teachers, and teachers of color enter and work within the profession, having mediated their pedagogical approach either through their own identities and lived experiences and/or their teacher preparation. The four principles have been identified across the pedagogies of queer teachers, trans teachers, and teachers of color: relationships with students are built on care, honesty, and high expectations; affirming and embracing student's identities in the curriculum; knowledge is shared, co-constructed, and critical; and challenging oppression in school and society.

*Relationships with students are built on care, honesty, and high expectations*

Relationships built on care and honesty catapult students to meet the high expectations of their teachers and schools. Teachers expect students to demonstrate caring by an abstract or aesthetic commitment to academic achievement. However, immigrant and U.S.-born youth are committed to "an authentic form of caring that emphasizes relations of reciprocity between teachers and students" (Valenzuela, 1991, p. 61). Students view caring relationships with adults

as the basis for all learning. These contradictory notions of care are a source of disengagement for students from school and generates feelings of being unwelcomed. While students still care about education, they are resistant to the irrelevant, uncaring, and controlling aspects of schooling. A pedagogy of care has incredible potential for youth. Delpit (2013) argues that “when students believe that the teacher cares for them and is concerned about them, they will frequently rise to the expectations set” (p. 82). Furthermore, Delpit (2013) finds that “when students believe that teachers believe in their ability, when they see teachers willing to go the extra mile to meet their academic deficiencies, they are much more likely to try” (p. 82).

Teachers must believe that their students are capable of academic success for this approach to be successful (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Villegas and Irving (2010) highlight that successful teachers of color held their students to high expectations. Teachers also “maintained fluid student-teacher relationships, demonstrated a connectedness with all of the students, developed a community of learners, and encouraged students to learn collaboratively and be responsible another” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 480). As “warm demanders,” teachers care for their students well-being and know this is a critical step to set up their students to meet their high expectations.

Pedagogy of honesty or radical honesty is a recurring theme in the literature on teachers. Gay and lesbian teachers in DeJean’s (2007) study emphasize that being out meant a commitment to radical honesty. Keenan (2017) recalls a particular experience as an elementary school teacher where the invisibility of his gender queerness, meant “a potential missed opportunity to support my student’s own queering of gender” (p. 545). The resistance of his student, Dylan, to the gender binary allowed Keenan (2017) to “bring my own queerness into the classroom” and “allow both of us to bring more of ourselves and our own agency into the sometimes-suffocating space of the classroom” (p. 545). Ford (2017) found that honesty among

the participants in her study had two purposes: as a component of dismantling systems of oppression and a value for wholeness. Honesty, Ford (2017) argues is “an essential governing mechanism that Black women use to create the individual and collective conditions necessary for shared energy to make change” (p. 393). Radical honesty, Palmer (1998) argues, is an important step in the growth of teachers because effective teaching is established from authentic selfhood (cited in DeJean, 2008). Furthermore, honesty is radical because it is often disruptive to an educational system “that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract” (Palmer, 1998, p. 12). School leadership is essential in ensuring that teachers can maintain a commitment to radical honesty in the face of negative repercussions for doing so, even so for queer and trans teachers who decide to come out. A pedagogy of honesty can provide students a model, so that they too can be honest in their lives.

To establish caring relationships among teachers and students, teachers must recognize the ways they are victims to the institution of schooling and complicit in the system that neglects youth. Moreover, because of the student’s weak power position relative to them, teachers, Noddings (1984) argues must be initiators of social relationships (cited in Valenzuela, 1999). However, as Noblit (1994) will find, pedagogy of care extends beyond students and teachers-- principals can assert their leadership by authentically caring for the teachers and by promoting honest dialogue on how to care authentically for students (cited in Valenzuela, 1999). A pedagogy of care is founded on the relationships formed in schools among its members. These relationships are the basis of learning for youth that have the ability and power to support students achieve high levels of success. Supported by school leadership, teachers can be honest and be their complete selves in the classroom, consequently shaping their relationships with students.

*Affirming and embracing student's identities in the curriculum*

One practice of highly successful teachers of color is engaging in culturally relevant teaching (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). A culturally relevant pedagogy “helps students accept and affirm cultural identities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Teachers engaging in culturally relevant pedagogies “pull knowledge” from their students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). One way to “pull knowledge” from students and help affirm their cultural identities is to integrate them into the curriculum. Teachers need to “acknowledge the diversity among their students, but also to embrace these differences and to treat their students as raced, gendered, sexualized, and classed individuals” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 28). To accomplish this task, Kumashiro (2002) explains that specific units on these cultural identities must be included in the curriculum, as well as integrated *throughout* (original emphasis). Schools and teachers must also “address the intersections of different identities and their attendant forms of oppression” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 33). This approach works against oppression by focusing on “what all students--privileged or marginalized--know and should know about the other” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 31). Helping students accept and affirm their cultural identities is enacted by “pulling knowledge” from students and integrating it throughout the curriculum.

The strengths of this approach is the call for educators to “bring visibility to enrich their students’ understandings of different ways of being” , p. 33) as well as building empathy and normalizing difference. However, Kumashiro (2002) presents three weaknesses—(1) the approach could present a dominant narrative of the Other’s experience that might be read by the students to be *the* (original emphasis) experience and essentialize difference, (2) it may position the Other as the expert in the classroom, and (3) based on modernist goal of having full knowledge rather than a disruptive knowledge that challenges students.

*Knowledge is shared, co-constructed, and critical*

Successful teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings (1995) finds, conceive knowledge as dynamic—it is shared, recycled, and constructed. Knowledge must also be viewed through a critical perspective (Keenan, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Two types of knowledge that lead to the harm of the Other are “knowledge about what society defines as ‘normal’ and what is normative” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 31) and knowledge “about the Other but encourages a distorted and misleading understanding of the Other that is based on stereotypes and myths” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 32). Otherness is known “only by inference, and often in contrast to the norm and is therefore partial” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 31). The partiality of this knowledge leads to misconceptions, and schools contribute to the construction of this partial knowledge through the selection of curriculum. Schools may do very little in challenging the stereotypes and misrepresentations students hold about the Other. Understanding of gender, the body, and trans identity are one example of the ways knowledge harm students, especially trans students. Keenan (2017) highlights the necessity of recognizing that there is no universal system of gender, that there is a multiplicity of ways gender is understood around the world, and that all transgender people experience gender differently.

*Challenging oppression in school and society*

Pedagogies that challenge oppression function at two levels: challenging those existing school, and more broadly, those in society. Successful teachers of color conceive of their roles and pedagogies as a way to challenge systems of oppression that manifest in schools. (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). One way in which teachers of color can challenge oppression in their roles as educators is by “questioning and defying rules and regulations that are not in the students’ best interest” (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Irvine, 1990 cited in Villegas & Irvine, 2010, p. 184) as well as helping students make appropriate adaptations and transitions

into mainstream culture (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). In their roles, teachers and schools need to provide and be “helpful spaces for all students, especially for those students targeted by forms of oppression” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 34). These spaces are conceptualized in two ways: (1) “the entire school needs to be a space that is for students that welcomes, educates, and addresses the needs of the Other” and (2) provide separate and empowering spaces “where the Other can find resources and tools to challenge oppression themselves” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 28).

Kumashiro (2000) highlights the strengths and weaknesses of creating spaces for Othered students in this approach. One strength of this approach is that it makes the call for teachers to make schools into places for all students. However, the focus on the treatment of the Other rather than the operation of oppression is a significant weakness. Furthermore, in creating these spaces, teachers need to define who the Other is, which runs the danger of being centered on fixed, exclusive identities. In addition, the approach is problematic as it assumes that teachers can accurately address the needs of their students.

The second level of this approach is the way in which the classroom can be a space where critical perspectives are developed to challenge oppression in broader society. This approach invites educators and students to examine how some groups are “favored, normalized, privileged, as well as how this dual process [of privileging and Othering] is legitimized and maintained by social structures and competing ideologies” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 44). Schools are understood as existing and complicit within these structures and ideologies. Therefore, the role of school is to work against oppression by critiquing structural and ideological forces as well as moving against its complicity with oppression. The knowledge and thinking skills to understand the dual process of normalizing and Othering are important for students to develop. The knowledge and understanding developed by students in this approach leads to empathy for the Other, the ability



and the “will to resist oppressive ideologies and change societal structures” (Kumashiro, 2002, pg. 47).

However, a weakness of this approach is that implies that “oppression has the same general effect on people” (Kumashiro, 2002, pg. 47). The approach lacks an understanding of how members of the same group experience different forms of oppression because of additional membership to other oppressed populations. The second weakness is that the conscious-raising and empowerment goals of the approach assume that “knowledge, understanding, and critique lead to personal action and social transformation (pg. 47). Awareness and empowerment, Kumashiro (2002) argues, does not necessarily lead to personal action and social transformation. The third weakness is that the approach puts into play “a modernist and rationalist approach... that is actually harmful to students who are traditionally marginalized in society” (p. 48). The approach assumes that reason alone is what leads to understanding rather than the connections the Other is able to make based on their lived experiences.

*How does school context, relationships, and organization affect the commitments of teachers?*

For the participants in the study, the context of their schools where they taught provided them with the flexibility and support necessary to perform and enact their pedagogies and their roles in the lives of their students. Four organizational contexts allowed the nine teachers to fulfill their commitments to culturally/linguistically relevant teaching and cultural/professional roles: human capital, social capital, multicultural capital, and power structures and relations (Achinstein and Ogawa, 2011; Leana, 2011).

#### *Human and Multicultural Capital*

Capital is exchanged within the organizational structures of the schools, rather than embodied by the individuals that compose the institution, such as teachers and principals

(Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Three forms of capital that are exchanged within the school are human capital, social capital, and multicultural capital. Human capital includes teacher experience, subject knowledge, and pedagogical skills of teachers (Achinstein and Ogawa, 2011; Leana, 2011). Multicultural capital includes the resources to “navigate and affirm diverse cultural contexts” (Achinstein and Ogawa, 2011: pg. 25). As will be described in Chapter 5, many of the participants worked in recognized the cultural resources they brought to their work as teachers.

### *Social Capital*

As will be elaborated on in Chapter 5, social capital emerged as the most prominent form of capital that provided teachers of color the support and ability to perform their commitments they bring to the profession. Social capital are the patterns of interaction among teachers (Leana, 2011). Viewing the interactions of teachers as communities of practice are helpful for understanding their relationships to one another in relation to the goal of schooling. Weak communities of practices are characterized by “private and highly variable practice” where success with students is “considered a matter of individual teacher quality and student background, rather than an issue for department or school policy or collective work” (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001: pg. 10). Whereas, strong communities of practice have impacts on the achievement of students. Strong school communities and strong communities of practice were places where teachers worked together and were united by shared beliefs and responsibility for teaching.

A shared vision and goal of schooling provide the baseline through which teachers and staff can build school community. In turn, the fostering of school community provides spaces where authentic teaching and authentic learning can happen. Strike (2010) posits that *authentic*

*learning* is “an act of affiliation with a community” (p. 18). When something is learned authentically, Strike (2010) adds, “we internalize the norms, ideas, and skills that were developed by and are maintained by the interactions of the members of various communities.”

The failure to learn, therefore is often a failure of community. The following are essential characteristics of school communities:

1. They have shared goals expressed in a publicly acknowledged shared educational project.
2. The curriculum they provide has coherence because it expresses shared goals.
3. While there is some division of labor involved in different subject matter expertise, teachers are not highly departmentalized. They teach their subjects so as to express shared goals, and they see their tasks broadly as one of achieving the school’s overarching mission rather than one of communicating their subject matter.
4. Students come to understand and internalize the shared project of the school and see themselves in cooperating with teachers and one another in pursuit of shared aims. Knowledge is valued for its contribution to the understanding and appreciation of experiences and its contribution to justice and citizenship. It is not merely a commodity.
5. Tracking and electives are minimized for a shared curriculum and other shared experiences intended to create community.
6. Behavioral norms flow from shared goals and shared conception of justice. The school has moral authority because teachers and staff are seen as acting from commitment to shared aspirations.
7. Trust and care are seen not only as features of the relationship between some individuals, but as flowing from shared commitments (Strike, 2010, p. 36).

These seven characteristics are defining characteristics of school communities. As will be shown in Chapter 5, many of these characteristics were embodied by the schools where teachers were employed. Principals who provide teachers with the time, space, and resources needed to develop social capital are effective (Leana, 2011). The ability to develop strong communities of practices and form shared visions and goals are built upon a power structure and relation where teachers are able to engage in this work.

### *Power Structures and Relationships*

Schools are typically organized as a hierarchy, positioning administrators at the top with power over the functioning of the school, the roles of teachers, and yet as the bridge to district, state, and federal educational agencies. The hierarchy shapes the power of the actors in schools and the way the individuals that make up the institution relate to one another. Power structures and relations, “formalize and legitimate what counts as capital.” Furthermore, power structures and relations include “norms that define the nature of social relations between organizational roles, including decision making and influencing the behaviors of others” (Achinstein and Ogawa, 2011: p. 26). Schools where teachers have decision-making power influence their decision to stay in the profession, especially for teachers of color (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Ingersoll & May, 2011). As will be described in Chapter 5, a number of teachers had some degree of decision-making power in their schools that allowed them to shape the culture and shared goal of the school. Beyond decision making power and influence, the degree of classroom autonomy held by teachers of color is strongly correlated to turnover rates. The power structures and relations in the school greatly shape the capital that teachers bring to their schools as well as the cultural capital of students they can tap into, the extent to which teachers have power in decision making, and their ability to engage in their mediated pedagogies.

### *Supportive School Contexts*

As detailed above, capital and organizational contexts in relation to the cultural/professional roles of teachers of color created less supportive and more supportive contexts. Figure 1 below is taken from Achinstein and Ogawa (2011) and provides insight into the ways the context of schools is influenced by the three forms of capitals outlined and power structures and relations.



Social capital	Culture of isolation, low collaboration, and little professional support for new teachers; little opportunity to build relationships with students; low levels of connection between school and parent communities; barriers to relationship building with community	Systems, norms, and structures for enactment of collaborative professional culture and community building; extensive new teacher support; opportunities to build ties with students; school norms, structures, and practices that bridge to parent communities; school accesses community resources/knowledge for student and professional learning
Human capital	Few culturally and linguistically diverse teachers and staff; limited professional development and mentorship opportunities for new teachers of color to access cultural resources; overburdened faculty, resulting in burnout and turnover	Policies for recruitment and hiring of culturally and linguistically diverse faculty committed to cultural/professional roles; access to expertise and professional development through partner institutions, instructional leaders and mentors
	School orientation that does not advance culturally/relevant teaching; limited resources related to cultural practices; school culture and norms that do not	School orientation, practices, and enactment that affirm culturally/linguistically responsive teaching; school wide engagement with issues of race/culture of teachers and

Multicultural capital	address issues of race/culture; school responses to accountability that limit teacher's capacity to meet the needs of diverse learners	students; equitable climate; professional development related to culture; policies that support teachers of color
Power structures and relations	Top-down control over decision making; low teacher control over curriculum and pedagogy; culture of control and compliance	Systems for and enactment of shared decision making, teacher voice in curriculum and pedagogy

Figure 1. Achinstein and Ogawa, 2011: p. 109.

### Conclusion

Existing literature highlights the values, commitments, and pedagogies queer teachers, trans teachers, and teachers of color bring to the profession. This literature ties very well with already the growing body of research that centers queer and trans teachers of color. The pedagogies these teachers bring to the classroom have a potential to transform student's academic achievement as well as prepare them to exist in the world where they are marginalized and oppressed. Attention is drawn to the context and culture of the school that make this work possible for queer and trans teachers and teachers of color.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

The research herein will attempt to address my main research question: How do queer and trans teachers of color both work within and challenge broader sociopolitical, oppressive/marginalizing structures, if at all? I situate this question with an understanding of the reproductive function of schools in a white supremacist capitalist cisheterosexual patriarchy. Within this broader research question, I identified the following sub-questions of importance to addressing this larger question:

1. What values, commitments, and pedagogies do queer and trans teachers of color bring to their work as educators?
2. What challenges, if any, do queer and trans teachers of color face?
3. What support systems, if any, have they found supportive in their work?
4. What opportunities do queer and trans teachers of color have to challenge broader sociopolitical/marginalizing structures, if at all?

To answer these four inquiries, I conducted interviews of queer and trans teachers of color. Since my questions require comprehension of what it means for queer and trans people of color to work as teachers, it was necessary to utilize interviews as a data collection tool (Forsey, 2012, p. 365). Interviews are the best technique for “conducting intensive case studies of a few individuals” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). In addition, interviews provided me insight into the constructed social worlds of the target population and the conveying of these constructions in the interactional setting of the interview (Silverman, 1993).

With the financial support of the Eugene M. Lang Summer Research Fellowship, I began my research in the summer of 2017 with guidance from my advisers Lisa Smulyan and Daniel Laurison. During the 10-week duration of the fellowship, I conducted a total of five interviews.

Three of those interviews were pilot interviews--two with white queer and trans educators and one queer teacher of color. The pilot interviews generated more information than I had originally anticipated. Basing off the recurring themes in the interviews, I generated a new set of interview questions. While I kept some of the original interview questions, I modified others, and omitted those that I found were not generative or made participants address their experiences based on one of their identities and not the sum of them. This new set of interview questions asked participants about certain aspects of their work as teachers, such as pedagogy, school culture, relationships, and teacher preparation, and how these were shaped, if at all, by their identities. I used this new set of interview questions for the remainder of my interviews.

I originally planned a focus group in anticipation that the interactional experience among queer and trans educators of color would generate information and build connections among participants. Reflecting further on utilizing focus groups, I realized it would be more complicated to organize than anticipated. As Robinson (2012) notes, focus groups are time consuming and require considerable organizational skills. I considered the availability of these teachers during the summer and the school year to meet. I also considered the data I gathered through the interviews and decided it answered many of the research questions I had set out in this thesis. In sum, possible challenges in organizing and generative interviews moved me to not utilize focus groups as a method as I had originally planned.

Not only had I hoped that the focus group would generate intragroup data and connections among the participants, I also expected that it would generate themes for an original survey. As Fowler (2013) writes, focus group discussions is one of the steps needed for choosing and testing survey questions (p. 101). My aim with the survey was to generate a more representative sample of the experiences of queer and trans teachers of color and be able to



analyze intragroup differences. Thinking through how I would outreach to queer and trans teachers of color resulted in a list of challenges in gathering sufficient survey responses for analysis that would be representative considering time constraints in data-collection. Fortunately, Professor Laurison put me in contact with Dr. Tiffany Wright who has a forthcoming study on the experiences of LGBT educators in the US. After exchanging emails, Dr. Wright agreed to sharing her findings with me.

### **Interviews and the Sample**

To recruit participants in my study, I utilized my thesis advisors' existing networks to Swarthmore College alumni who belonged in the target population. These teachers were able to connect with 5 other non-Swarthmore alum teachers to interview. Participants were contacted via email using an email script.

Interviews were held in person with the participants who resided in the Philadelphia area at local cafes. In-person interviews were recorded on my cell phone and then transferred and stored to my computer. Two interviews were held over Zoom video conference services and the remaining interviews were conducted over the phone. The phone interviews were recorded onto audio-recording software on my computer. Notes were taken during all interviews.

Interviews were semi-structured and what was relevant to the participant was pursued (Merriam, 2009). Interviews lasted between an hour to two hours. While informants were told that the interview would last between 45 minutes and an hour, I decided to interview the respondent for as long as I could, as suggested by Weiss (1994) to support the fullest report a respondent can give. During the interviews, participants apologized for discussing topics tangential to those my question had prompted. I affirmed with participants that it was fine to address these topics since they were important to their experiences as educators. I also ended

with an open-ended question allowing participants to add anything about their experiences that were not collected through the set interview questions. At the end of the interview, I gave participants the ability to ask me questions. The questions participants most commonly asked me were about my interest in teaching and suggestions as to what teacher education programs I might be interested in pursuing in the near future.

A total of 9 individuals in the target population were interviewed. Four of the nine participants are Swarthmore College alumnae. The rest attended a variety of public and private, state and liberal arts institutions. Participants earned their certifications to teach in their undergraduate and graduate schools as well as alternative programs with courses at a local university. Two participants earned doctorates in the field of education. A total of 7 participants currently work at charter schools and 2 work in public schools. Participants varied in their years teaching, ranging from their first year to a decade.

From the nine participants, 4 identified as mixed race, 2 identified as Black, 2 as Asian (Chinese), and 1 as South Asian. Five teachers identified as mixed heritage; four of them had a white and black parent, and the other had a South Asian and Latino parent. Three participants identified as women, another three as men, two as trans men, and one as gender non-conforming femme. All identified as being queer, on occasion identifying themselves with more specific identities, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual.

## **Reflections**

Reflecting on my research procedures, I would have done several things differently if I had the opportunity to conduct this study again. I would first try to pursue my original research plan with more time and resources to dedicate to my research. Half of the participants in the study were Swarthmore College alums, indicating a potential bias in teacher education

preparation and philosophy that may align with the program. In the future, I would have worked towards having a much more diverse group of people from different institutions. In addition, the majority of participants work at charter schools. While this thesis is not meant to endorse charter schools, it may indicate a bias in support of charter schools. In future studies, I would not only seeked out more teachers at traditional public schools, but also asked the factors queer and trans teachers of color consider when selecting what type of school they want to work.

### **Conclusion**

Through semi-structured interviews and analysis of survey data will produce much needed scholarship of queer and trans teachers of color. I utilize a queer of color critique to pay dual attention to how queers of color are “constituted within, and resistant against intersecting arrangements of power” and lead us “to analyses of agency” (Edward Brockenbrough, 2015, p. 31).

### Chapter 3: Their reasons for becoming teachers

For the nine teachers in this study, their decision to become educators was influenced by a variety of factors including their work with youth, their own schooling experiences, their undergraduate course of study, their peers and professors, and the reliability and benefits tied to the profession. Achinstein and Ogawa (2010) identify two factors that influence the socialization and development of new teachers.

(1) their personal and professional backgrounds, which include families, cultural communities, and the teaching profession, and (2) the contexts in which they work, which include the schools in which they are employed and the broader policy environment" (pg. 30)

I utilize the first factor as a framework for examining how the personal and professional background of participants influenced them in becoming teachers. I argue that participant's identities and experiences shape their decision to teach, the subjects which they would later teach and the pedagogies which they would adopt as teachers.

#### **Working with youth**

For a number of participants, working with youth was an entry way into teaching and an experience that also shaped their present pedagogies. In these experiences, participants valued the connections they were able to build with students and families. They were able to locate the ways curricular programs did those students a disservice. Additionally, the lack of some of these values are later seen to be integrated in participants' work as teachers.

Some of these teachers worked or volunteered in youth summer programs in high school and college. These experiences led participants to consider working in education as a way to address issues they saw first-hand, but also to think about the ways they could enact social change in their role. For example, in high school, Jackson was already thinking about education

as an area of work he could pursue. At age 15, Jackson worked at a local library as a tutor for students at other public schools.

There was something really messed with our public education system if I was able to have this wonderful public-school experience, while these other kids had a far less supportive public-school experience. Someone had to do something about that and I figured it might as well be me.

Working as a tutor influenced Jackson to pursue educational policy as his area of study at his university. In his course work, Jackson was able to be a participant observer in a number of classrooms.

The more time I spent meeting families, observing classrooms, the more grounded I felt in my work and the happier. Gradually I transitioned into thinking... I would like to be in a classroom. I want to be seeing students every day or talking to parents.

After having positive experiences with youth in classrooms, Jackson worked as a teacher in a nation-wide summer academic enrichment organization that further shaped his decision to become a teacher. Jackson adds that his job was “very intense, but by the end of it I was confident that I wanted to be a teacher because despite all the hardship and stress I really wanted to do it all over again.” Jackson’s role at the summer enrichment program along with his positive experiences in the classroom motivated him to become a teacher instead of continuing with educational policy. Clarissa had also considered a career in educational policy before having an experience with youth that would motivate her to become a teacher. Clarissa saw the ways public schools were not serving students well in her role as a fellow in an elementary school.

I was in a 5<sup>th</sup> grade [classroom] and... I had come in January and I had been their fourth or fifth teacher that I thought about the importance of being a teacher and staying. And not to sound like a savior, I probably thought then coming from a very naïve place you know this idea that I can be different that I can stay I mean I didn’t leave in the middle of the year at this point, but I also see why people do.

Clarissa took a year off to pursue this fellowship, after having a challenging time dealing with the amount and sense of privilege among students at her college. While she was taking course in

educational policy, overall she felt like she was failing academically. When she returned to her college a year-and-a-half later, Clarissa decided to become a teacher instead of continuing her studies in educational policy.

Other teachers recalled how their decisions to teach were shaped by the potential they saw in helping students connect to the curriculum. Volunteer experiences during their undergraduate years were sites where participants could assess issues in education as well as the interventions in place. Michael volunteered at the local chapters of two nation-wide organizations that work with youth, particularly low-income youth.

I saw was a curriculum that didn't seem to make sense to me for the population. Like assignments that had no cultural relevance, and at the time I didn't have the vocabulary to say that. In retrospect, I realize that is what it was. I saw students struggling and I was like part of it... is because this is not at all relevant, that's why you can't make sense of it.

While Michael identified how the curriculum at the two program was not culturally relevant to the students, Sajan had an experience working with youth as an undergrad where he was able to bridge connections between content and the student's lives. Sajan ran a program at a middle school "bridging real-life applications to [the school's] content-based curriculum" with a focus on identity-work. Sajan describes his experience working with middle schoolers.

I felt very positive and very felt really strongly about being in a classroom and connecting with young people where they were really able to have real conversation with their closer [in age] peers.

The experience influenced Sajan's decision to pursue education along with art even though he entered the teaching workforce years after graduation. Meanwhile, Michael would be moved to pursue a doctoral study in education. The negative and positive experiences the youth in the programs they worked for gave Michael and Sajan insights into the challenges and opportunities that existed for connecting youth to the curriculum.

For other teachers, working with youth outside of schools after their undergraduate careers moved them to enter teaching. Although he did not become a teacher after graduation, Sajan maintained his work with youth as an arts mentor to high schoolers and as a case manager at a state-wide LGBT nonprofit. Although he was not in a teacher role, Sajan describes how his mentorship role was important in his decision to enter the profession.

I worked with a small group of students and they didn't necessarily [identify] as queer or anything, but they were thinking about "Who am I in the world?" I guess it felt like I had strength in connecting with that age group and it was also affirming to... have a connection with students of color in the city.

In his later role as a case manager, Sajan provided direct support to LGBT student clubs and advised teachers on how to deal with homophobia in the classroom. Advising teachers became a challenge for Sajan, since these teachers would push back on making space for conversations around homophobia, arguing that they had to manage large classrooms and a had curriculum to follow. Sajan's response to these teachers was "I actually have no idea what it's like." Sajan stated, "It's harder to affect day-to-day culture change when it's an outsider coming in now and then." Along with these conversations, Sajan talked with the youth about their issues at school during the organization's drop-in hours and they talked in length about the issues students were facing in school.

[The youth] just felt like [the drop-in center] was their place, that [they] don't have this anywhere else and there is no one like [the center's staff] at school. It was hard to leave that organization, but the motivation was to go into the school and that, I think, was a big push. Okay, I can be on the inside and I can see how I can push the conversation along... I am not having the conversation state-wide now, but I'll be [in the schools]. That was the motivation to go into teaching, in the big picture sense.

By becoming a teacher Sajan would expand on his work with LGBT youth and be a supportive figure for those students at their schools.

Working with youth in and out of school, gave these teachers an introduction into what being a classroom teacher was like. These experiences were mostly positive as the teachers were able to connect with students and their families. However, these experiences also revealed to them the issues in education. While many teachers had previously considered educational policy as a way to address these issues, working as teachers or mentors influenced them to work directly in the schools as teachers.

### **Schooling experiences**

For some teachers in the study, negative personal experiences in their schooling prior to college informed their decision to become teachers, and particularly anti-oppressive educators. As students in the K-12 system, these teachers witnessed and lived first-hand issues that they would later want to address as teachers. Among the issues participants saw and experienced included tracking, school segregation, and a curriculum that had no connection to their lived realities.

Negative experiences in their education were moments that politicized teachers into not only thinking about issues in education, but also the ways they can address these injustices. Desiree attended high school with a large population of black and brown students in their hometown and yet was tracked into honors courses with white peers. Desiree became increasingly aware of tracking and school segregation of other students in her high school. Although Desiree remarked being active politically at the time, she “kept [her] head down and did her work.” At the time Desiree viewed school as a non-political space and had mediocre teachers throughout her schooling. Desiree wanted to continue working with people and considered community organizing, just like her father, as a profession. However, Desiree wanted to do more “intellectually engaging” work. After taking courses in education and working with



youth, Desiree began thinking about social justice education and making it pragmatic for classroom teaching. For Desiree teaching became a way for her to continue her activism, and yet engage those issues intellectually in a school setting.

Another injustice teachers recalled in their own schooling experiences was related to curriculum. In particular, teachers noted the absence of their cultures and histories from the curriculum. Karen's schooling was characterized by this absence.

As someone who never saw herself reflected in the curriculum, I fell in love with history class when I was an eleventh grader, and it was partly because it was the first time I took a world history class where anything related to where I was from or where my parents were from was mentioned.

Seeing her culture and history represented in the curriculum was an impacting moment for Karen as she had previously not been able to explore and learn these at school and at home. As the child of immigrants from South Asia and South America, this was a particularly powerful moment for Karen. She recalled how her parents raised her in a "90s assimilationist immigrant mentality" and would not speak to her in their home languages. Their intent was to raise her as an "American". For Karen this experience would later shape her decision to center her student's cultures and histories in the curriculum.

For Desiree and Karen, negative experiences in schooling informed their decisions to become educators. These experiences were tied to issues of race and ethnicity in their schools, such as tracking, segregation, and lack of relevancy of the curriculum to the lives and experiences of students. Issues relating to sexuality and gender did not emerge in the negative schooling experiences of participants.

### **Undergraduate academics**

For a good number of the teachers in the study, teaching as a profession became an interest in their undergraduate years. Their courses, class readings, and class discussions were

opportunities for these teachers to think about education as a site of social injustice and teaching as a way to enter schools and address these issues.

Karen's courses at a private, liberal arts college would serve as a catalyst in her decision to become an educator with an anti-oppressive pedagogy. Karen talks about taking an Asian American literature course taught by an Asian American woman professor in her first year of college.

I fell in love with [the professor] and her classes and the ways in which... she taught Literature and English Literature in this way that was very much a social science and I loved her classes and then I was like, oh, I think I want to major in Literature, and then I realized that... in order to major in English Literature at [my college], you had to take... eighteenth century Literature classes and Victorian Literature class or some like course requirements that I'm completely turned off by. And so, I didn't end up doing that. I minored in [the professor's] classes.

Despite being turned off from studying English Literature in college, Karen had a transformative experience in her Education courses. Karen recalls a class project in her Urban Education course on the 1998 Proposition 227 in California, a ballot proposition that required California public schools to teach Limited-English Proficiency students exclusively in Spanish.

We learned about the bilingual education movement and we read articles about the importance of teachers of color, and we had a lot of important conversations. I started to think about my own schooling and my own education. I got really radicalized around the idea of how powerful it is to see ourselves in our curriculum and in some ways college was the first time I was even engaging with texts that were written by people of color. And so, I think it became very clear to me that I really wanted to be in schools, that I really wanted to be in a classroom.

All of these experiences were important in informing Karen's decision to become an educator and more specifically, an educator that challenged oppression in schools and society. By decentering whiteness from the curriculum and centering people of color, Karen works to create opportunities for her students to connect with the curriculum.

Course readings in education and outside the field area, were also avenues through which participants were able to think about education and its issues. In addition, they also provided

ways to address these issues as educators and enacting particular pedagogies. Desiree recalls the discussions about social justice in her education courses at her college.

I think the first time I read Delpit for example, was really important for me in terms of the questions she raises about teaching the culture of power. And so, I think for me a lot of my teaching approach is trying to make visible the culture of power in order to be able to make it have less power over us.

Desiree also recalls the questions she had about her experiences as a tutor in undergrad as well as the discussions held in her education courses about putting social justice education into practice in her own teaching.

How could I create really good lesson plans, really rigorous lesson plans, really scaffolded stuff? [How could I] have a pedagogy that was really aligned with my politics, but that was also sort of pragmatic for classroom teaching?

Reading Delpit, alongside with her experiences as a tutor, were informative in Desiree decision to have a pedagogy that is grounded in social justice and aims to make visible to students the culture of power. Reading works that inspired them to become teachers and the pedagogies they could enact were not limited to only education course for participants. Michael recalls a reading for an African American studies course at his large, public university in the South:

I took a class with [professor] at [my college] and one of the books that we had to read for class was *The Miseducation of the Negro* and I think that book was like revolutionary in terms of my thinking about the experiences of African-Americans in education historically and it really made me think about teaching as a profession. So then when I graduated, I think this is what I wanted to do. Before I wanted to [study/work in] law and after that I realized I was really interested in how I could help educate young black and brown kids and so I came to [graduate school], to [ID-002 current city] and started teaching.

*The Miseducation of the Negro* was a reading assigned to Michael outside a department or program of education that made Michael consider becoming a teacher.

Their academic work in undergrad gave participants a sense of the possibilities of addressing the issues they had identified in education as teachers. Participants were empowered

to address these historical issues in education as well as their personal experiences as it provided them the tools to which transform education.

### **Peers and Mentors**

Participants also mentioned the professors and peers during their undergraduate years had an influence in their interest in education. Beyond class readings, participants like Will were encouraged by their professors in education to enter the profession. Bonds with peers and friends who also pursued education provided support and community.

It was actually [a professor] who talked to me about being a teacher. I took the Elementary Education class with [another professor] and that was really like a very eye-opening experience for me and that's when I wanted to become a school teacher.

Positive experiences with faculty as well as relationships with them were important for participants, as they were encouraged to teach.

Beyond faculty, relationships with peers and friends pushed and encouraged participants to teach. Karen recalls entering her college wanting to pursue political science and was disillusioned from continuing in this field as it did not encompass her interest in social and political movements and radical politics. Karen stated, "I had a lot of friends who were studying education and I stumbled into an Introduction to Education course." In the course, Karen realized that schools were where the "rubber hit the road" of social injustice and decided to continue studies in the program. Her friends' studies in education brought Karen to take a course in the department. Friendships, as will be explained in the later example create spaces of community and support in studying education. Desiree describes friends she had made in college as important in her studies.

It happened that a lot of the radical kids of color who I kicked it with... ended up in education just for like whatever reason. So like I was in a cohort with a bunch of folks who are now kind of big fancy academics... we were all in the same

cohort together... so a bunch of us were like together as a crew of teachers of color and got certification together at [our college] and then went on to teach.

Desiree adds that many of those peers, as well as herself, have earned doctorates in education.

While she has returned to work in K-12 schools, her other peers have transitioned to working in institutions of higher education. Relationships with faculty and friendships with peers in education courses and programs encouraged participants to consider teaching as a profession.

### **Teaching as a reliable profession**

Teaching was appealing for several teachers, as they perceived the profession to be reliable. Will talks about graduating from college at the time of the recession.

There weren't that many jobs available in the non-profit sector and at the time it just felt like teaching was a really stable job. I was gonna get paid more than if I were to work at a non-profit and I would also have a really clear skillset.

Beyond stability, teaching also appealed teachers for the benefits they would receive in this role.

Sajan discusses how his decision from working at a non-profit organization to teaching felt good.

I'm fully grateful to have a reliable job and an union. I have a lot of protections and that feels really safe and good. You know like, I can take sick days if I am or my spouse is sick. And I have insurance. There are these practical things that... I'm very thankful for... I didn't have any sense those things would feel good.

Teaching was seen for many participants as reliable profession that would also come with benefits not found in the work they found themselves in.

### **Conclusion**

Five areas of experiences influenced participants to become teachers: their work with youth, schooling experiences, their undergraduate course of study, their peers and professors, and the reliability and benefits tied to the profession. These five areas are personal and professional backgrounds that socialized them and developed them as teachers (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011, p. 30). Further, these identities and experiences shaped the pedagogies they enacted in their classrooms.

## Chapter 4: Their Pedagogies

### Introduction

As described in the Chapter 3, the identities and experiences of the nine teachers in this study shaped their understanding of the issues existing in education along with the ways they hoped to intervene. Ultimately, participants decided to intervene by becoming social justice educators, enacting a number of anti-oppressive pedagogies. A few teachers explicitly stated how the literature shaped their pedagogy, but for the most part, literature on pedagogy explains the approaches the teachers decided to adopt. In this chapter, I examine the pedagogical approaches that emerged in the study: *Building Honest, Trusting, and Caring Relationships with Students*; *Creating Welcoming, Supportive, and Empowering Spaces in the Classroom and School*; *Recognizing the Diversity Among their Students*; *Including the Diversity Among Students in the Curriculum*; and *Developing Critical Analysis of Systems of Oppression*.

### Building Honest, Trusting, and Caring Relationships with Students

The nine teachers in the study expressed a commitment to building honest, trusting, and caring relationships with all their students. To build such relationships, teachers enacted a pedagogy of care, acted as “warm demanders” and performed a pedagogy of honesty. A pedagogy of care is founded on the notion that relationships between student and teacher are the basis of learning for youth (Valenzuela, 1999). These relationships support students in achieving the high levels of success expected of them by their teachers. Leo is one participant who stated their commitment to a pedagogy of care.

I try to build relationships with students based on accountability and care, so that the idea of holding them to high expectations, but then also providing high enough support that they need to reach those expectations.

Moreover, Leo’s pedagogy indicates that he is a “warm demander,” meaning Leo cares about his students and that care serves as a precedent for pushing students to reach the high expectations

he has set for them. With a foundation of care, teachers such as Sam can be honest with their students. Sam retells the story of one student who asked them if they were a dyke and the conversation that followed.

[The student] came back and apologized, and I was like, “That’s fine. I appreciate the apology. In the future, if you want to ask a personal question, that’s fine. I’ve told you guys I don’t mind answering personal questions. I just need you to find a more respectful way to ask those.” And [the student] was like, “Okay”.

Sam demonstrates a pedagogy of honesty by being willing to answering student questions honestly regarding their gender identity. The anecdote illustrates that students are curious about their teacher’s life. Clarissa is also aware of the curiosity and attentions students have towards her queerness.

I’ve purposely put myself way out [of the closet] so that I know that kids are gonna talk and so I tell other teachers to use me as an example. I’ve done that both here and at my old school. So that they know there’s always someone to go to.

Sam and Clarissa recognize that students talk about them, especially regarding their identities as queer and trans people. Pedagogies of care and pedagogies of honesty are linked in the lives of the participants in this study. Further, these relationships were built alongside creating welcoming, supportive, and empowering spaces in the classroom and school.

### **Creating Welcoming, Supportive, and Empowering Spaces in the Classroom and School**

For several teachers, creating spaces that were welcoming and empowering of their students was important, especially for their Othered students. Although they are a resident teacher and not creating lesson plans on their own, Sam is working towards creating the supportive and empowering spaces for students in their own classroom.

I’ve really focused on just trying to create that sense of communal safety of what it is to have a community space where we’re all accountable to each other and there needs to be some level of mutual respect.

Furthermore, Sam is one of several participants (along with Clarissa and Leo) who advise and lead Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA). Contrary to the name, the GSAs participants facilitate are more inclusive; a number of them have been renamed to Gender and Sexuality Alliance, broadening the scope to include a broader queer and trans communities. Moreover, Will discussed how he makes space in his classroom for students to resolve their frustrations with school.

What I believe is that kids need to be able to really learn discipline. Not discipline as in sense of punishment, but discipline as in you have to know how to be part of a structure. You have to know how to ... Because, yes, kids are energetic, kids are talkative, but you have to know that when you're in a classroom learning with other people, you have to know how to sit still, you need to know how to listen to other people, you need to learn how to ask questions, and those are the things that I feel that could be kind of hard for some families to swallow.

Will indicates that students, regardless of their membership with the Other, must learn self-discipline in order to know how to exist within a structure. These teachers recognized the need in creating helpful spaces for all students and currently advise and run the separate and empowering spaces students Othered by their gender and sexual identities.

The intention to establish these spaces falls into Kumashiro's (2000, 2002) first approach of anti-oppressive education, *Education for the Other*. This approach recognizes that schools are sites where students are Othered; in order to combat oppression, the entire school needs to be a safe space for all students. For students who are Othered, in particular, schools need to find and provide resources, and separate and empowering spaces. As Clarissa described, association with the group allowed her to connect with queer and trans students outside of the classroom as well as locate her as a resource for the students who are not out or not involved with the GSA. While the development of these spaces and the recognition of schools as hostile for Othered students in particular is a strength of this approach, Kumashiro (2000, 2002) outlines its weaknesses as well. Firstly, the focus on the treatment of the Other rather than the operation of oppression and the



defining and, secondly, addressing the Other that is often centered on fixed, exclusive identities. The third weakness is the assumptions that teachers can accurately address the needs of their students is problematic: Othered students are seen as problem and Othered students with more than one marginalized identities are further Othered.

### **Recognizing Diversity Among their Students**

In addition to building space for all and Othered students, many teachers recognized the diversity among their students. Sajan articulated that one of the reasons why he decided to teach was to build understanding across difference and understanding in general. Sajan expressed that he wants “to build compassion and empathy... My pedagogy really reflects that desire and that hope”. As an art teacher, Sajan described his vision of art as life-saving and nourishing self-reflection and self-expression. Sajan’s philosophy about art, understanding of content, and focus to acknowledge students difference all intertwine in building his pedagogy.

Every project, no matter how technical or abstract it may be, those are some underlying themes and inspiration. How can this facilitate a process of young people engaging with themselves? Can it facilitate the process of young people engaging with the people around them? How can this facilitate engaging with the world around them? Therefore, we can hope to find some healing through our work.

Sajan recognized the diversity among his students as well as his goals in connecting art to student’s lives. The recognition of the diversity among students reflected by Sajan is a strength of the first approach to anti-oppressive education, *Education for the Other*. The recognition of the diversity among students is an essential initial step to integrating curricular topics about the Othered students into the curriculum.

### **Integrating Diversity Among Students into the Curriculum**

To address oppression in schools, teachers include specific units about the Other in the curriculum as well as integrate Otherness throughout the entire curriculum. Half of the teachers’

pedagogies aligned with Kumashiro's (2000, 2002) second approach to anti-oppressive education, *Education about the Other*. Furthermore, this approach aligns closely with culturally relevant pedagogy, as it engages and affirms the cultural identities of students in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As will be explained, the subject areas of the teachers will often shape how this approach is manifested in their curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom. Jackson, an English teacher, seeks to create learning environments where his students can see themselves and a pedagogy that

Brings life and visibility to the communities on the fringe of the English Language Arts discourse. [I'm] teaching classes where we're analyzing the lives of queer people, women, people of color and being explicit... teaching lessons where students are learning about critical race theory and feminism

Jackson actively works towards creating those opportunities in his curriculum and reaching students on an authentic level. Sam another English teacher, adds that their identity shapes what writers they look at and builds the intent to move away from a focus on straight white male writers. Karen's pedagogy is also similar to Jackson and Sam.

[I believe] very much in the importance of seeing ourselves reflecting in the curriculum and that as someone who teaches English, Literature, and History, I really think that Literature and History, and the ways that we teach History can totally transform the way that people think about themselves and about society and so, I've tried in all of my teaching... made like kind of a silent commitment that I've shared with a few people but basically like I refuse to teach anything written by white folk.

Grounded in English as a subject as well as the social sciences, Jackson, Sam, and Karen all expressed a commitment to teaching about the Other. This commitment requires the decentering of Whiteness in the curriculum and a movement of the Other from the margin to the center.

Beyond the humanities and social sciences, opportunities to engage in integrating student cultures and identities into the curriculum can occur in the natural sciences. As a biology teacher, Leo found ways to *integrate Otherness* into the curriculum by highlighting the work of non-

white and women scientist who don't get mentioned and are not part of the typical canon of science.

I think if students can see themselves in there somewhere, or at least start to insert themselves beyond just curiosity, but being involved, then that would be really good for my personal goals as a science teacher. I don't know about for their state tests, but they need to see that science is not separate from the world, but it's situated in their same world.

Leo adds that he encourages students to read science books and has a small library in his classroom for students to use. Leo's approach may be closely tied to his own childhood experiences, having been exposed to science by his scientist parents.

While the strength of the approach is the call for educators to "bring visibility to enrich their students' understandings of different ways of being" (Kumashiro, 2000: p. 33) as well as building empathy and normalizing difference, Kumashiro (2000, 2002) presents three weakness—(1) the approach could present a dominant narrative of the Other's experience that might be read by the students to be *the* experience and essentialize difference, (2) it may position the Other as the expert in the classroom, and (3) based on modernist goal of having full knowledge rather than a disruptive knowledge that challenges students. Participants in the study did not describe their curriculums in a way that aroused the weakness Kumashiro (2000, 2002) describes.

### **Developing Critical Analysis of Systems of Oppression**

Beyond including student's culture's and identities into the classroom, it was important for participants that students could think critically about the operation of systems of oppression and the ways it shaped their lives. Desiree describes her approach to teach students to think about the culture of power.

My teaching approach is trying to make visible the culture of power in order to be able to make it have less power over us. So, when I first started teaching, I really struggled with whether I should teach about test preparation and how to take tests.

Eventually, I decided that, even though I don't want to take tests, even though I don't believe in them, ultimately, they have an impact on our students' lives. So hence, it's important to teach how to take tests.

Desiree recognizes the material impact standardized testing has on the lives of students, a reality that cannot she cannot ignore to enact her own pedagogy. Teachers, such as Desiree, must be able to negotiate between their own goals and visions for education with broader, federal policy. Moreover, Karen's desire to engage students into thinking critically about the systems of oppression is tied partly to her identity.

Part of my identity is really doing the work to interrupt some of the dominant ways of thinking, that's part of my identity as a person of color, as a queer person, or as a person who just really wants to one, be better myself and two, see a different world, in terms of what's considered normal or what's the borders we create, the boundaries we create in our lives and how we gender people, how we racialize people, all that.

Teaching involves not only critical awareness of these oppressive structures, it also involves strategies to change them. With an understanding of oppression as the dispositions, treatment and knowledge of the Other, educators and students must examine the dual process of privileging and Othering as situated and maintained by social structures and competing ideologies (Kumashiro, 2000, 2002). While the approach calls teachers to challenge oppression, one weakness of this approach is that it assumes that knowledge and understanding of oppression lead to personal action and social transformation analysis in their lives, but information regarding whether or not students engaged in the action was recorded.

## **Conclusion**

The nine teachers in this study decided to enter teaching as a way to intervene in the issues in education and society as a whole. Furthermore, the participants had formative experiences that lead them to intervene by becoming teachers with particular pedagogical approaches—*Building Honest, Trusting, and Caring Relationships with Students; Creating*

*Welcoming, Supportive, and Empowering Spaces in the Classroom and School; Recognizing the Diversity Among their Students; Including the Diversity Among Students in the Curriculum; and Developing Critical Analysis of Systems of Oppression.* As will be described in the next chapter, the school context and organization are critical for allowing teachers to perform these types of pedagogies in their classrooms. The schools participants chose to teach or have landed in allow them to use and develop the social capital in school that allow them to enact these pedagogies.

## Chapter 5: Their schools

The majority of teachers in this study were able to enact the pedagogies they entered the profession with because of the school context and cultures of the school. I argue that school culture and context can contribute to positive experience for queer and trans teachers, and their ability to bring their whole selves into their work and fulfill the commitments they bring into their teaching. Findings are presented in two broad categories: the context and culture of the schools where they worked in that allowed participants to fulfill their commitments and the relationships and support they received to fulfill them.

### **School cultures**

The culture of their schools emerged as an important foundation of participants' work. For the most part, teachers expressed their investment in the process of community-building in their schools. Furthermore, several teachers remarked that they felt they could influence the culture of their school. The culture of the school would later serve as the foundation on which teachers could fulfill their commitments to culturally relevant teaching and other anti-oppressive pedagogies.

### *Shared vision of school community*

A shared vision of the school community is the foundation for the work teachers are committed to enacting as well as shaping the culture of the school. Some of the teachers worked at schools with clear and shared visions of school community. Michael elaborates on the focus of his school in building community, democratic participation, and respect and the foundations on which this is built.

All of that, I think, requires a certain level of respect for each other as individuals. I can't participate in this community if I don't have a minimum level of respect for everyone in it, because everyone else has to participate as well. So I think that

as a school we do an excellent job of being inclusive, of building a culture of inclusiveness, of building a culture of respect for each other.

Michael adds that this process starts from day one and last through graduation. As a whole institution, Michael's school works together to create a democratic, respectful community. A shared, publicly acknowledged and expressed education project is a characteristic of a strong community of practice (McLaughlin and Talbert 2001; Strike, 2010). Strong communities of practices where teachers see their work as united and organized have impacts on the academic outcomes of students (Strike, 2010).

Some teachers mention how their schools publicly celebrate the cultures and identities of their students. Clarissa discusses how the progressive leaning of her colleagues creates opportunities for them to participate in events, such as Black Lives Matters Week of Action. Jackson adds that the school has made concerted efforts to celebrate marginalized communities by hosting assemblies to recognize and celebrate particular identities and cultures. Clarissa's school publicly acknowledges the diversity of the student body, one approach to anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000, 2002).

#### *Pedagogical autonomy*

For several teachers, administrators allowed them flexibility in their curriculum and pedagogy. Even though it has not been made explicit to her, Karen has a sense that the school administrators respect and value how important it is for her to teach in a way that reflects her beliefs and engage in culturally relevant pedagogy.

I think that they appreciate and respect that on some level, my students can look at me and feel that they, in some small way, are reflected or that they look like me in some way... And because I said it in my interview also, that this is why I am a teacher, and so they know that it's important to me and I think that they respect it.

Similarly, Will speaks about his experiences with administration regarding freedom and flexibility in engaging in his mediated pedagogy.

It was really clear that the principal made a lot of room for us to talk about where we came from and not just our identity, but our own journey and how that might influence our work. In either how we interact with our family, but also this vision that we have with our kids.

Although Will felt that he was given space to talk about the influences his experiences and identities have in shaping his curriculum, Will had difficulty adopting his own pedagogy at the school.

There just isn't a lot of room for me to create a lot of curriculum on my own. Because whatever agenda we have, it's not bad. It's not like I'm going to scrap this or go rogue on it because it's terrible for kids. It's great, it's actually pretty good for kids, but I would say that there isn't a lot of room for me to kind of connect with kids on a deeper level that I would like. It feels very fast pace, if you will.

Will is the only participant in the study who is an elementary school teacher. Although Will did not elaborate on this limitation, I hypothesize that the demands on teachers of the primary grades to prepare their students to take and pass standardized exams and the level to which their schools emphasize success in these tests may be a limitation for teachers to engage their pedagogies and curriculums. Sajan speaks about his relationships with the administrators at his school.

They see me as an individual with various identities. They value that. It strengthens our relationship because I think they are appreciative of the perspectives and insight I have based on who I am, and how I relate to students, and the experiences that I have had in the past that have developed my skills as an educational leader.

Being able to have instructional autonomy encourages teachers of color to stay in the profession (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Beyond allowing these teachers to enact anti-oppressive pedagogy, administrators sought these teachers for leadership roles school-wide. The foundation on which this can occur, I argue is that teachers are seen and respected for the values, identities and experiences, and commitments they bring to their work.



### **Schools where they are seen and respected**

The culture of the schools in which some of the participants are employed, allow them to feel like they can bring their identities, commitments, and pedagogies into their work. Leo mentions how his school wants the staff to reflect the demographics of the school and/or be able to connect with students.

I try to set an example as somebody who talks about my culture, to my advisory talks about being trans and being Asian. I don't know how much that parts resonate with them, just because so many of our students ... I do see that they can relate a lot and they can learn a lot and build really good relationships with teachers where they see their culture reflected... [the administration] definitely want to have more teachers that can reflect the student demographics. I think that's probably their number one thing with hiring, but it's very hard to do that, it seems.

Leo gives an example of a Spanish teacher who, although not Latino, is able to connect with students linguistically and culturally and that allows him to build good relationships with students. Leo adds that his lack of Spanish proficiency poses a barrier for connecting with the families of his students. Furthermore, Leo highlights the possibility for teachers of color who do not match the racial/ethnic identities of students to be able to connect and relate to students and their families.

Meanwhile, some teachers recalled how they were often the only voices pushing for initiatives around bringing student cultures into the school. Will speaks on his work in bringing culturally-relevant programming to his previous school.

I was one of... just a few voices that were pushing for us to really think about what it means to be culturally responsive in how we teach. And then what we mean by that is just making a lot of room for us to acknowledge that there's the curriculum and there's also the fact that we should do stuff for Black History Month, we should do stuff for... We should have more room to talk about the geography of New York, the diversity of New York, and things like that.

Will felt unable to push for more culturally relevant pedagogy from the school and his colleagues. Will left his school because he did not feel like it was heading the direction he hoped it would and felt like “it was the bottom for me.”

A number of participants stated a commitment to creating positive school cultures. Sajan adds that huge motivation to becoming teacher was to strengthen school communities.

I feel like I have a responsibility as an educator, and as a person of color, and as an educator of color, and as a queer and trans educator of color to really proactively push conversations around school culture so that it can be encompassing of the various identities and intersection of identities that our young people have.

Sajan has a clear vision of his role in shaping the culture of the school, to honor the identities present as well as build understanding across difference.

### *Coming Out*

The majority of the participants are out to their students. There are several ways teachers come out to their students as well as ways students may or may not read their queer and/or trans identity. A number of these ways are implicit, meaning they do not require teachers to explicitly tell their students, but markers around the classroom and teacher language can indicate queer and trans identity. Participants utilized contextual criteria, gendered criteria, and motivational criteria when considering disclosing their queer and trans identities to students, colleagues, and administrators (McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015).

Participants mentioned a number of messages students may receive in their classroom that indicate their teacher’s queer or trans identity. Pronouns are one-way trans teachers are able to bring their trans identity and gender as a conversation into their classroom. Leo recounts how students have interpreted their use of Mx. pronouns.

The first day of school I announced, "My name is Mx. Sam. I use they/them pronouns. If you have any questions about what that means, you can ask me after

school." And some of them are kind of curious and then immediately forgot, and then moved on because they have their own lives, they have their own things that they're worried about.

Sam add that the openly queer students in their classroom were immediately responsive to their pronouns and it "was really nice to have that connection with students". Sam's other students slowly caught on to their use of Mx. and they/them pronouns, drawing from the way colleagues referred to them and the sign on the door to their classroom.

More and more of them have been catching on that it's Mx., and it is outside the door is like, "Mx.," and when I corrected them, most of them are like, "Okay, Mx.," and don't really question why that is. One group of students came over, they were like, "Oh. Is it like you don't want to identify as either Ms. or Mr.? Like you don't want to identify yourself?" And I was like, "Yeah. That's a pretty good explanation," they're like, "Great."

While Sam's pronouns implicitly informed their students about their gender queerness, Sajan's pronouns in his room do not send messages to his students that he is trans. Sajan pronouns don't "necessarily share my trans identity specifically" because students may read his pronouns and him as cisgender. Sam utilized contextual criteria for coming out, as the event is contextual in the classroom. Other forms of intentional messaging may point to queer or trans identity. Sajan talks about a pin that he wears that says, "LGBT students deserve safe schools."

I think some students noticed [the pin], which is exactly what I wanted. I wanted to establish myself as somebody who at least, if not is LGBTQ, cares about those students, because I think especially in a charter school, college-focused atmosphere, there's tons and tons of talk about what's the racial achievement gap, but very little about LGBTQ students. That's what I did at the start of this year.

Sajan's use of the pin allows him to not only start conversations around LGBT issues in schools and later on his trans identity, but also create space for these conversations in schools where dialogues about college preparation and the achievement gap circulate with more frequency. Sajan uses motivational criteria, as he felt motivated to talk about LGBT issues regardless of whether or not he was LGBT or not. Messages students receive in the classroom have the potential for participants to talk about their queer and/or trans identities in the classroom.

Teachers come out to their students explicitly in a number of ways in the classroom, namely instances where students make queer antagonistic comments or through the context of the curriculum. Clarissa utilizes a model to come out to her new students every year. On the first few days, Clarissa explains how a student will say that something is “gay”, like a pencil for example

I’m gonna go “the pencil can’t be gay, but I’m gay! And all of a sudden it’s quiet and everybody knows... There’s a moment that kids don’t know because they don’t know me. It doesn’t last long at all, you know, and I don’t tell them another way.

Clarissa adds that she talks about her partner occasionally and brings her to school events. There is never a moment when she is not out. Other than relying on teachable moments, Leo utilizes teaching about gender in his biology class as a way to come out as both gay and trans.

We were looking at this gender-bread person. I thought that was a good time, and I talked about myself as an example and how for my gender identity it was male, and for my attraction it was something that had changed throughout my transition, and now I was attracted to men which meant that I was gay. I thought they were kind of interested in that, because I guess they also assumed that I was straight. Also, I wanted to share that to validate the fact that your attractions can change.

Coming out allowed Leo to bring his trans and queer identity into the classroom as well as challenging student’s prior perceptions about him. Leo adds that he comes out as gay as well to challenge fixed notions of heterosexuality. Leo comments that this year he has not been able to talk much about gender identity and sexual attraction but expects opportunities to show up throughout the year.

The relationship status and families of participants have created opportunities for participants to come out. Desiree discusses how her queer identity and identity as a parent are visible. Desiree elaborates that she has pictures of her family all over the room and she speaks openly about her partner. Prior to having children, Desiree describes how her queerness was less visible because she did not talk much about her family. Sajan also has pictures of his family in

his classroom, yet his trans identity is not visible because he has transitioned and is not assumed to be trans by his students. Karen adds how she too is not read as queer because she presents her gender in a normative way.

I think I'm often read as straight identifying and so I think that when students or staff or young people or adults learn that I identify as queer, I think, although, yeah, yeah. I think that they are often surprised... I can't like name to many examples of when somebody was like visibly surprised but, so maybe that's also my own assumption but yeah. I'm think I'm read as straight, often.

Being read as straight is a cause of frustration for Karen. Here, Karen utilizes a gender criteria for coming out, as not doing would not disrupt students construction of her as straight. Moreover, having to come out constantly is a source of additional stress, as it involves having to think about the process of coming out to her students who are different every year. As will be touched upon later on in this section, Karen feels comfortable bringing her partner to staff events. On the other hand, being single has created challenges for Will in connecting his queer identity to his classroom.

So for me the opportunity for me to kind of bring in queerness is limited. I can't just be like, "This weekend my partner and I went to this activity and this thing happened." I think those are more authentic ways of bringing in what it means to know a queer person.

While being single has not allowed Will to connect his queer identity to his classroom, Will has found other ways to talk about queerness in the classroom by talking about the variety of family structures.

I try to kind of set the tone that there are many different types of family structure. There are many types of ... Or I try to limit, also, the way that teachers might gender kids throughout the day. I don't really have a lot of things where boys versus girls because I was boy who didn't want to be with the other boys growing up. So I try not to do things like that, that might hyper ... That might make kids feel more hyper-sensitive about their gender identity. So I typically do more table groups and things like that.

Will's approach to connecting his queerness to his classroom is challenging notions about what families should look like and the gendering of students by teachers (Keenan, 2017). Discussion about their partners and pictures of their families have allowed a number of teachers to talk about their sexual and gender identity. However, being read as straight and cisgender by their students are a source of frustration for teachers. Furthermore, not being in a relationship does not give participants a way to connect their sexual identity to the classroom and thus they must find other ways to bring these topics into the classroom.

Disclosing their gender and sexual identity has had positive effects for the participants who are out to their students. After coming out, Clarissa adds that her students become very protective of her and opportunities to connect with students open up.

It's not only queer kids that come out to me, but kids who have queer parents, who come out as having queer parents and find a little bit of refuge knowing that I'm not gonna let [bullshit] be said in the classroom.

Clarissa has been able to relate to students after coming out. Leo has commented how coming out as trans has made it visible to students that he has also had struggles in his life.

When I came out to [my students], I talked a lot about the reactions of my parents and how they didn't really see me for who I was. I think a lot of students in high school feel like their parents don't really see them for who they feel they are. I talked about the dilemma of having loyalty to your family versus being who you are. I think once I made that visible, I felt a lot better. I felt a lot more comfortable and a lot more known with my students.

Leo finds that coming out creates the opportunity for students to more likely share their personal lives. Moreover, Clarissa discusses one student she had who started out being very homophobic in their first year of high school whose views changed after being in her class.

He wrote an essay about how he learned to have an open mind by being my student and now believes that whether you personally support homosexuality or not, I think he said it in a slightly better way. He feels like he wants to be an ally and that's a lot of work we've done, I've done as a teacher and GSA.

Coming out to her students has allowed Clarissa to address queer antagonistic language in her classroom. Additionally, coming out has created opportunities to connect with students who are queer and students whose families are queer, and push queer antagonistic students to challenge their ideas about queerness.

Participants have used a number of ways, both indirectly and directly to not only come out, but to also make space for conversation about gender and sexuality. Coming out as queer and/or trans, has allowed participants to also create relationships with their colleagues. Coming out was a tool for participants to perceive their relationship with their colleagues as well as allowed a sense of vulnerability that developed a connection between them. Leo speaks about how the response his colleagues have at his coming out to them allows him to measure the potential of their future relationship.

If they respond really positively and warmly, that is good... generally, my experience with colleagues has been good. I think the being trans affects it, because once I share that with them, it escalates the nature of the staff relationship... we can start to bond more.

In his years teaching, Leo stated not having received a bad response when coming out. Leo elaborated that a bad response for him meant that coming out would create awkward situations at work. Sajan, also a trans man, comes out to colleagues for a similar reason.

I felt I definitely needed to let my colleagues know. That set the tone in our relationship in terms of respect and appreciation... they both saw the vulnerability and saw the power that I wanted to hold in that too.

Sajan came out publicly two years ago after previously identifying as genderqueer and began transitioning soon after. Leo also finds himself in a similar situation as Sajan. He is one of 6 teachers who are out as queer, trans, gay, and along the spectrum of gender and sexual identities. Sam also speaks on their experience being out as gender non-conforming in their school and with their colleagues.

My immediate grade team have been very open and, for the most part using the correct pronouns, or like are very quick to correct themselves. That's not been a problem. And ... yeah. I've really appreciated actually how they've handled it

Sam mentioned being supported by their colleagues in their grade team. For the most part, Leo recalled their colleagues utilizing their pronouns as well as correcting themselves. As a whole, trans teachers in the study expressed how coming out to colleagues has been a predictive measure of their future relationships and have received some level of support at their current schools.

Not only are colleagues supportive of trans teachers; school leadership and administration have provided a sense of safety and support for these teachers. Leo described how his principal explicitly supported him in coming out and perceived that him doing so would be a benefit.

He thought it'd be good for the culture of the school, for me to be vulnerable and to share an important part of me to encourage students to do that, because our students... a lot of them are really reluctant to open up as teenagers.

Leo adds that the principal was supportive, and he had not heard about any complaints. This positive experience with the principal made Leo feel safe. Leo mentioned that "I've never felt like I was at risk of being punished or being fired for being trans." Leo contrasts this experience with an administrator that did not openly express their support them in coming out. The administrator, stated Leo was supportive on a surface level and was concerned about possible conflicts with parents.

He said, "Yeah, I'm sure there's going to be some parents that are very supportive, and some that are not and they call in and they're upset." After that, I didn't hear the sentence where you say, "But don't worry, I've got your back," or something. I didn't hear that in words or in his emotion, so that made me uneasy. He didn't say, "I don't want you to do it," but I didn't feel the support there.

By the time Leo decided to come out to his students, it was April and Leo had known his students for almost the entire year. Sajan also recalled feeling protected by the school from negativity after coming out.



I never had any ... I just don't think it's possible teaching somewhere for eight years to have not had a negative family or parent interaction. I think that someone was screening things in some way because I never received it, whether that was about any part of my identity.

Sam also recalled feeling welcomed and supported by the principal at their school. The level of support the teachers anticipate and are given is influential in their decision to come out. Sajan adds how in his transition, he felt supported by the families of his students.

I think [coming out] strengthened some of those relationships because I think they just saw, "Wow, this person's just being honest in their path and is sharing that with the school community." They were thankful. That bolstered this relationship. I think that's what I have to say about that.

For trans participants, it was important to come out to their students, colleagues, and school community. While the response of student's families were a concern for these teachers, participants did not receive negative responses from parents or know of them. These experiences contributed to a sense of safety.

Coming out in terms of sexuality has also been mostly positive for queer teachers. Karen shares her experiences with her partner at work related events.

There's no one on the staff that I don't feel comfortable talking to about being queer or saying my girlfriend or my partner or what not. But, yeah. I feel safe and I think, we've had a staff event, we've had a staff picnic and I brought my partner and so, yeah. I feel safe.

Coming out created the conditions for participants to be vulnerable with the school staff and facilitate opportunities for connections and mutual respect with their colleagues. Most of the teachers are out to their colleagues. Colleagues were accepting and appreciative of these teachers for coming out.

For the majority of the participants, colleagues and administrators were supportive of their coming out, or at least on a surface level as some will describe. These participants described their comfort talking about their partners and families in the classroom and bringing them to

school events and gatherings. Coming out would allow participants to connect and relate to students and teachers, as well as a number of other categories as will be described in the next section.

*Relationships and Connections based on Social Identities*

Beyond more professional relationships (student-to-teacher and colleague-to-colleague), participants were able to connect and relate with their students and colleagues through shared identities, such race, gender, sexuality, and immigration status and generation. Participants highlighted the ways their identities, experiences, and knowledge created challenges when connecting with students and colleagues. While participants connected with peers with whom they shared identities, they also mentioned the colleagues with whom they had difficulties connecting.

Race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality were markers through which teachers were able to build connections with their students. Furthermore, teachers hoped to be mentors and role models to their students. As a black man with a doctorate from an Ivy League, Michael hopes that he can connect with his students racially and through gender and inspire them.

I hope it has an inspiring effect, and I hope that it has an effect of giving me some leverage in terms of the relationships. It gives me a, I don't want to say a validity, but it gives me, okay I can talk to this person, not only can I relate to him culturally, but he has something going for him that I should tap into, or I can learn from.

Michael emphasizes how he hopes his identity will allow him to connect with his students, and yet understands that it is not always successful. However, the lack of shared racial identities, participants mentioned, posed a barrier for connecting with those students. Desiree mentions that even if she has never shared a [mixed] racial identity with her students, she is still able to build connection.

I think I literally never have taught a kid who's mixed black and white, so that's been an interesting ... that's always a mismatch. I have black students who I've connected with, but ultimately there were lots about our lives we didn't share. And similarly with Latino students. And then I have had some really nice connections with queer students over the years, who some were out, some were not out.

Even though Desiree did not share a [mixed] racial identity with her students, Desiree mentions how queerness is another way to connect, as well as shared upbringing.

The common background of being from [the city] makes a huge difference in our ability to connect. Honestly, I think being a parent shapes my relationship with my students a lot. I think I feel a lot more parental towards them now that I have kids of my own.

Students are able to relate to Desiree because they are from the same city. Being a parent also informs Desiree's relationship with her students. The identities of teachers, as well as their upbringing and background, give teachers points of access to connect and relate to their students.

Race, gender, sexuality, and immigration were four of categories through which participants were able to build relationships with their colleagues. Firstly, participants were able to connect with colleagues through shared race and gender. Michael mentioned being close to two teachers and a counselor on staff who are also black men. Meanwhile, Desiree described being close to her colleagues who are women of color. In regards of sexual identities, a number of teachers were close to queer colleagues. Jackson points out to the significant number of queer LGB teachers and one trans counselor that have allowed him to not feel like "the singular black queer voice." Furthermore, Jackson shares being mentored by the other two queer faculty in his department, one white and the other South Asian. This type of diversity among his colleagues was "not expected" by Jackson. Other participants also shared their relationships with LGBT, queer, and trans colleagues, such as Karen.

I'm very lucky to work at a school where I have quite a number of people who are friends of mine and most of them happen to be the queer staff. So, you know, I... feel very supported.

Not only does Karen have connections with queer staff members, but also works with a number of immigrant teachers. In terms of immigration and sexuality, Karen does not feel like an outsider among her colleagues as her students and many colleagues are immigrants themselves. Race, gender, sexuality, and immigration all facilitated connections with their colleagues.

Just as social identities aided teachers into connecting with students and their colleagues, they also had the potential to cause separation from both as well. A number of teachers mentioned how their upbringing and class status can often pose a barrier in connecting with their students. Desiree elaborates that even though she teaches in the city where she grew up, her upbringing was very different compared to her students.

I teach [Economics] and so I try to be pretty transparent about talking about class and class markers. And, despite growing up as a kid of color in Oakland, and going to public schools, I had a lot of class privilege.

Even though she grew up lower-middle class and is now middle class, Clarissa also feels like class is a barrier in addressing issues with the student body. Furthermore, Clarissa feels that her students may be better able to relate to working class Black teachers. Moreover, Desiree discusses the colleagues whom she's been able to form relationships, and those with which she has not.

I tend to not be close to my cis male colleagues. My closest people on campus are other women of color. Which is kind of the same as the rest of my life. Mostly it's in the area of closeness.

Teachers, such as Desiree, recognize the ways in which their upbringing is very different from their students and bring those into discussions into the classroom. Furthermore, teachers' relationships with their colleagues may very well be reflections of the people with whom they have relationships outside of work.

### *Leadership*

Some participants highlighted how their administrators tapped them to be leaders of the school community. Michael elaborates on how administrators have worked to “erase the distinction between administrator and teacher and staff” in order to give teachers decision-making power at the school. For many of these educators, being tapped to be leaders and having their values and contributions respected by administrators generated positive associations with the school. Sajan shares an important role he plays as a leader in shaping school culture.

I'm on the discipline team, for example, to help proactively run restorative circles, mediation, or whatever to help problem solve, troubleshoot teachers are having difficulty in the classroom. I feel like that I have that relationship with administrators in general is strong, and that my skills are valued and seen. I'm transparent with them about my identities. They look to me for guidance but respectfully.

Although Sajan mentioned being “pinned” by people for answers about being trans and/or a person of color, he mentions that with the administration that is “not happening.” Rather, he is seen as an “individual with various identities.”

I think [administrators] are appreciative of the perspectives and insight I have based on who I am, and how I relate to students, and the experiences that I have had in the past that have developed my skills as an educational leader.

Further, these leadership roles enrich the experiences of participants. Clarissa stated how at her previous school “teachers were begging to have more responsibilities” and now, at her current school, “you do not need to beg to get responsibility you just barely say word and you’ll get some whatever you want to do you’ll get done... whatever opportunity you want to have is possible.” Being tapped as leaders and for guidance by administrators gives teachers a greater sense of participation and belonging as individuals in the school community. Moreover, this contributes to their disposition to remain in the profession (Ingersoll & May, 2011).

*Issues of race and racism*

A number of participants brought up the tensions at their current and former schools, typically regarding race and racism. Three themes of race and racism these teachers described included color-blind racism, being mapped with racial stereotypes by colleagues, and disparities in the racial parity between teachers and students.

Color-blind racism and racial micro-aggressions take a toll on the well-being, growth, and retention of teachers of color (Kohli, 2016). Furthermore, racism in schools can influence teachers of color to leave the profession. Desiree talked briefly over her first teaching position where she had a negative relationship with administrators and colleagues. Desiree had arrived at the school as it was undergoing a demographic shift, from serving a white, working class population to immigrants.

The way people talked about the new student population was just incredibly fucked and tense with racism. But using the code language of the new student population, and how rowdy the new student population was, and how academically unprepared the new student population was. So that was horrific.

Furthermore, being one of eight teachers of color at a school with 300 total teaching staff, race became a tension as the faculty was not representative of the new student population. These instances were a reason for Desiree's departure from the school. However, since leaving the city, Desiree has landed in teaching positions in progressive schools with leadership that is composed of people and women of color. Currently, Desiree gets along well with the administrative team of her school.

A second theme that arose regarding issues of race and racism in schools was the racial and ethnic composition of teachers in schools where participants worked. Sajan describes how the lack of racial parity among students and teachers has become an issue.

There's a palpable distrust of white people. I think that [students] also... feeling kind of upset and tired of the teachers not reflecting the racial and cultural

identities of our student population. That conversation is something that's happening among adults, and it's happening equally among our student leaders.

Sajan reveals that because of the students' level of self-awareness, they are attentive to the lack of teachers who reflect their racial and cultural identities. Furthermore, Sajan adds that students are unable to connect with the teachers at the school. However, Sajan finds that his racial and ethnic identity "gives me a foot in for sure in terms of making connections with young people." While the demographics of South Asian students in his city is small, Sajan remarks that there is an interest from the students in "learning about where I come from." Even though Sajan racial and ethnic identity does not match those of his students just as a number of other participants such as Desiree, Leo, being a teacher of color allows him to bring his culture into the classroom, as well as make connection with his students.

The mapping of racial stereotypes onto participants was another issue that emerged. Beyond the racial and ethnic composition of their colleagues, the political orientation of participants' colleagues created positive supportive spaces for the nine teachers. Due to the progressive tendencies of her school staff, Clarissa feels less of an outsider than she felt when she was at her previous school.

I was seen as the angry black woman. It's actually really weird to finally be in a place, weird in a good way, to be a place where I can speak my mind and not be seen as my race. This is the first time that I don't feel like I stand out as my race or my gender. A little bit of sexuality, but I'm gonna say that I've never seen no one actively working on it, actively working on being better allies to queer students and people of color.

Clarissa's current school actively works to support marginalized students and is able to generate, through the organization, positive experiences for teachers of color.

Three themes of race and racism arose from conversations with participants that show up in their schools: color-blind racism, mapping of racial stereotypes onto participants by colleagues, and disparities in the racial parity between teachers and students. These stories

indicate the prevalence of racism in the teaching profession, as well as the opportunities to address it in schools.

### **Conclusion**

The nine teachers in this study were invested in the culture of their schools, they emphasized the need for community-building, a shared vision that guides their collective and individual work, and the ability to influence the formation of these cultures. A shared, publicly acknowledged and expressed education project is a characteristic of a strong community of practice (McLaughlin and Talbert 2001; Strike, 2010). Strong communities of practices where teachers see their work as united and organized have impacts on the academic outcomes of students (Strike, 2010). With a collective understanding of their work, teachers can situate and enact their pedagogical commitments. Being able to do so allows them to address and bring into the curriculum the identities and experiences of people of color, women, and queer and trans people. Furthermore, the schools where participants were employed were supportive of their coming out, allowed them to build relationships with people beyond professional ties, tapped into them as leaders, and were in the process of working to better support marginalized students and resist oppression in their school sites. On a whole, the school context where teachers were employed were supportive of their work.





## Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to find answers to my own questions about the intersections of my queer and racial/ethnic identities with my role as a teacher. My initial research on this topic have identified the significant challenges that queer teachers, trans teachers, and teachers of color face in the profession. Teachers of color make up a small percentage of the public-school teacher workforce (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013). Furthermore, the teachers of color in public school faced a plethora of challenges, such as the lack of agency in their schools (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011), hostile racial climates of schools (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Kohli, 2016), and lack the necessary support necessary to discipline students (Kokka, 2016). Moreover, the literature on queer and trans teachers highlights experiences with harassment, discrimination and termination (Emanuel, 2017; Ford, 2016; McCarthy, 2003; Wright & Smith, 2017). These studies typical lack a focus on the intersectional forms of oppression faced by queer and trans teachers of color. However, the existing literature on queer and trans teachers of color find that queer teachers of color are vulnerable to queer suspicion (Brockenbrough, 2012), are not recognized for their forms of knowledge (Hayes, 2014), and experience judgement, harassment, and fears of termination (Ford, 2016). However, queer teachers of color, trans teachers, teachers of color, and queer teachers of color bring to their role as educators their values, commitments, and pedagogies that aim at supporting the academic achievement of students as well as developing a critical perspective about systems of oppression in school and their lives.

I begin this research with the following values and commitments. Firstly, the necessity to build relationships with my students founded on care and honesty. The need to affirm and integrate my student's cultural identities and experiences in my classroom and curriculum. Third,

the notion that knowledge is constructed collective with students and the need to be critical of the knowledges, ideologies, and discourses that circulate us. Finally, the need to develop critical perspectives through education to challenge broader sociopolitical and economic structures that marginalize and oppress.

My research presents an optimistic outlook on the work of queer and trans people of color. My research demonstrates the possibilities for queer and trans educators of color to fulfill their commitments to enacting anti-oppressive pedagogy, commitments to their students, and the ability to shape and transform the schools in which they work. While I do not want to enforce the narrative that the work experiences of the nine teachers interviewed is optimistic on the whole, they do highlight the positive aspects of their work that affirm their decisions to teach and remain in the profession. I center these experiences to reflect the ways in which queer and trans teachers of color work within the institution, their role in the school community (and ability to transform them), and their work with students. I argue that queer teachers of color enter the profession influenced by their lived and school experiences that also shape their pedagogies, and the school contexts impact their ability to commit to their values.

My primary research question is: how do queer and trans teachers of color both work within and challenge broader sociopolitical, oppressive/marginalizing structures, if at all? I situate this question with an understanding of the reproductive function of schools in a white supremacist, cisheterosexist patriarchal, capitalist society. To answer my question, I conduct semi-structured interviews with nine self-selected queer and trans teachers of color. I asked participants a number of questions regarding their preparation as teachers, their pedagogies, and their schools. Four of the nine participants are Swarthmore alumnae, the rest attended public or private universities and colleges. All but one received certification through a traditional program.

Furthermore, two hold doctoral degrees. Racially, 4 identified as mixed race, 2 identified as Black, 2 as Asian (Chinese), and 1 as South Asian. Five teachers identified as mixed heritage; four of them had a white and black parent, and the other had a South Asian and Latino parent. Three participants identified as women, another three as men, two as trans men, and one as gender non-conforming femme. All identified as being queer, on occasion identifying themselves with more specific identities, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual. A total of 7 participants currently work at charter schools and 2 work in traditional public schools. Six worked as high school teachers, one as a middle school teacher, and one as an elementary school teacher. Participants varied in their years teaching, ranging from being in their first year to a decade. I then present my findings in three parts.

In Chapter 3, I argue that participant's identities and experiences shape their decision to teach, the subjects which they teach and the pedagogies which they adopt as teachers. Teachers of color's personal and professional backgrounds and the contexts in which they work shape their decisions to teach along with their pedagogies (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). The personal and professional backgrounds include: their work with youth, schooling experiences, their undergraduate course of study, their peers and professors, and the reliability and benefits tied to the profession. All of these factors additionally shape the visions they have for change in schools. Participants enter the profession of teaching with a set of values, commitments, and pedagogies they want to perform with students.

Chapter 4 analyzes the pedagogies participants utilize in the classroom. I argue that teachers engage in a number of anti-oppressive pedagogical approaches, including: *Building Honest, Trusting, and Caring Relationships with Students*; *Creating Welcoming, Supportive, and Empowering Spaces in the Classroom and School*; *Recognizing the Diversity Among their*

*Students; Including the Diversity Among Students in the Curriculum; and Developing Critical Analysis of Systems of Oppression.* Teachers hoped to intervene in systematic oppression in schools by utilizing these five pedagogical approaches. The contexts in which teachers worked allowed them to perform these pedagogies.

Chapter 5 looks at the characteristics and qualities of the schools participants worked in that allowed them to enact their pedagogies. I argue that the context in which teachers work in allow them to not only exist fully present at their schools, but also engage in the meaningful roles, work, and pedagogies they want to engage with students. Features of the school culture and context that stood out as being particular affirming and supporting of the nine participants. Included: a shared vision that guides the work of the members of a school community, a orientation towards addressing the issues faced by marginalized peoples, and strong communities of practice. Furthermore, their schools also were supportive of their coming out, were spaces where participants could build professional and personal relationships and tapped into their leadership and capital. While the schools where participants are currently employed are not perfect, they demonstrate that communities that more flexible in giving teachers pedagogical autonomy and are community based support teacher's commitments and work.

### **Implications**

This thesis reiterates the importance of school contexts in the identity formation of queer and trans teachers of color, as well as their ability to engage in their mediated pedagogy, and feel like members and leaders of a school community. While the study is not, by any reach, a representative sample, teachers, administrators, and policy makers should be able to identify features of organizational structures that need to be addressed to support queer and trans teachers of color. Furthermore, I argue that the contextual structures and mechanism presented that

support queer and trans teachers of color in this thesis can support the work of all teachers regardless of race, gender, and sexual orientation.

### **Further Research**

My work on this thesis have resulted in a number of questions and suggestions for future research. In general, research on queer and trans people of color in education must continue expanding as well as work on trans teachers. Beyond a focus on students and teachers, research can begin to analyze the experiences of queer and trans administrators of color. In my own work as a teacher, I hope to document my reflections on pedagogy and my relationship to people in the school community and culture. In future research, I would be interested in observing teachers in their work and the relationships they have with their students, colleagues, and administrators.

### **Closing Reflection**

As a future educator, my work on this thesis has greatly informed my work. I feel affirmed in my decision to become a teacher and a surer sense of the ways I can bring my whole self to my work as an educator. While the challenges I may face are significant, I am assured that I can work within this institution and change them for my benefit and for the benefit of my students. As a teacher, I aspire that my classroom is a space where we can all expand our worldviews and challenge them. I aspire that my classroom is inviting and engaging for my students. I aspire that my classroom becomes the site where we collectively (re)imagine what our futures could be like and work in solidarity to reach them.



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