



“Racism just isn't an issue anymore”: Preservice teachers' resistances to the intersections of sexuality and race



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H I G H L I G H T S

- We examine race in relation to sexuality.
- Participants historicized race and contemporized sexuality.
- Participants resisted intersecting race with sexuality.
- Intersectionality is essential to teacher education.

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Through year-long focus group interviews with members of a secondary English Education cohort this paper considers both 1) participants' understandings of sexuality and race and 2) how participants' understandings of sexuality and race shaped their interactions with one another. Themes established through data analysis suggested that 1) participants maintained positioned racism as an historical issue that contrasted with the contemporaneity of LGBTQ issues; 2) participants resisted intersecting race and sexuality; 3) participants silenced Andy, the only queer student of color, when she argued for the intersectionality of race and sexuality.

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1. Introduction

This research's setting is the Southeastern United States, a region that includes those states “South of [the] Mason–Dixon Line and Ohio River, from [the] western Texas border to the Atlantic Ocean” (Library of Congress, n.d.). Historically, the region has been associated with politically and socially conservative policies, including state-supported resistances to racial desegregation and lawmakers' longstanding oppositions to women's rights (Sanabria, 2012; Whitlock, 2010). We will use the terms “South” and “Southern” throughout the paper in reference to this region.

The South has a history of resisting LGBTQ legal protections. Nearly all of the states that prohibited same-sex marriages prior to the Supreme Court's historical ruling on marriage equality were in this region (Human Rights Campaign, 2014), and in comparison to

the rest of the U.S., no Southern state offers what *The Guardian* refers to as “maximum protection” for LGBTQ Americans, including equal employment protections and safeties from gender- and sexuality-based harassment inside state-funded schools (Guardian Interactive, 2012). Specifically in Southern schools, the 2012 Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) nationwide study determined that “[a]s bad as bullying can be at all schools, it seems to be amplified in the South” (n.p.). Researchers attributed the finding to Southern cultural beliefs, which contribute to a lack of public support and resources for LGBTQ populations (2012). Given this environment, Southern LGBTQ students are especially vulnerable (Whitlock, 2010).

In this context, the first author taught a secondary education methods course for pre-service teachers at a Southeastern research-intensive university. During a class discussion on LGBTQ issues in the secondary classroom, a student asked how she might address her mentor teacher's reluctance to address gay-bashing in a socio-politically conservative school. Several other students raised their hands with related questions, consistently stating that

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they did not know how to challenge the heteronormative and discriminatory language in the classrooms and hallways of their student teaching placement schools.

In response to the students' inquiries and concerns, [the-first-author] established an optional and extracurricular discussion group with the purpose of focusing on LGBTQ issues in education. The group's initial focus was to support novice secondary literature teachers' efforts to establish themselves as LGBTQ allies within their school contexts. They discussed a wide range of issues in relation to LGBTQ topics, but the discussions and the study took an early unexpected turn that widened the scope of the study to include race in relation to sexuality. During the first focus group meeting, [the-first-author] noticed that arguments erupted often when 'Andy' participated. The transcriptions from this first and later meetings confirmed that the other 16 were in regular opposition to her when she introduced race as a topic related to LGBTQ issues.

All of the students who participated in the study had known one another for three years as members of a cohort. Andy, who had intentionally selected a masculine pseudonym to reflect her gender-queer identity, was one of four self-identified students of color and one of two LGBTQ students, but the only queer student of color in the study. Prior to the beginning of the research, there had been no observed tensions between Andy and her peers; at least half of them socialized with Andy beyond the cohort program, and all of them both readily and productively worked with Andy in classroom settings. [The-first-author] was troubled by the evident tension in the focus groups when the other participants resented and resisted Andy's efforts to discuss issues of race as being relevant to the LGBTQ issues that the group had anticipated examining. As a result of that tension, the following research questions guided this paper's focus:

- 1) How do participants understand race when discussing LGBTQ issues?
- 2) How do participants' understandings of sexuality and race shape their interactions with one another during the focus group discussions?

2. Literature review

This study began in response to the students' concerns that their mentor teachers resisted addressing or even acknowledging LGBTQ issues in the classroom. However, given the focus on the group's discussions of LGBTQ issues in connection to race, this literature review works to examine the relevance of the LGBTQ topics that initiated the study, and that the group anticipated discussing. Additionally, we examine the complexity of race, and specifically White privilege, in teacher education, and the issues of race in connection to sexuality that the group steadily resisted.

Just as participants found in their placements, various studies have documented teachers' continued resistances to addressing heteronormativity and homophobia, because many teachers do not consider LGBTQ issues to be school issues (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2002; Thein, 2013). Teachers have consistently expressed a "belief that sexuality is not the concern of teachers or of schools" (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2002, p. 121). Despite a reduction in LGBTQ harassment in U.S. schools (GLSEN, 2014) and increased overall support for LGBTQ rights in the U.S. (CNN Library, 2014), heteronormative school cultures continue to silence and alienate LGBTQ students and teachers (Blackburn, 2012; GLSEN, 2014; Miller, 2013; Petrovic & Rosiek, 2003). One great hope for promoting equality and valuing diversity has been novice educators, such as those in this study, who are often more likely than their veteran colleagues to intervene when mistreatment of others is based on sexuality,

gender identity, or gender expression (Meyer, 2009; Schey & Uppstrom, 2010).

Our participants asserted throughout the study that they understood themselves to be "LGBTQ allies." Most definitions of "LGBTQ ally" are based on Washington and Evans' work (1991), and though ally characteristics vary from institution to institution, there are agreed-upon elements; researchers consistently understand an "ally" to be an individual who challenges heterosexism and homophobia while working for social change to create equality for LGBTQ people (e.g., Fingerhut, 2011; Goodman, 2001). Teachers who identify as and serve as allies are critical to students' success. GLSEN found in a survey of 7898 middle and high school students that over 70% of LGBTQ students reported being bullied and/or harassed during school (2014), but that participants consistently indicated that supportive teachers were the most essential resource in order for LGBTQ students to feel safe in school (GLSEN, 2014).

2.1. White privilege in teacher education

Similar to many educators dismissing LGBTQ issues as important to school settings, there is evidence that race and racism continue to be ignored as salient as well. The tendency to dismiss race as applicable to classrooms and teacher education is arguably a product of White privilege. White privilege is a system of advantage for those perceived to be White that both allows those individuals to be unaware of racist elements of and affords them potentially unconscious privileges in society (McIntosh, 1988; Tatum, 1997). McIntosh gives examples such as being sure "that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race" and that being White nearly always assures that if she seeks a person of authority, she will meet with someone of her own racial group (p.1). When specifically discussing K-12 settings, McIntosh (2009) writes that U.S. schooling,

discourages students from seeing beyond individuals to the power systems already in place in the worlds we are born into. It discourages students from recognizing systems of both discrimination and advantage, or privilege, and from seeing that our opportunities for choice are in part determined by the systems of power in our society. (p. 4)

The result of ignoring societal structures that maintain White people as the unquestioned dominant racial group positions teachers and students, no matter their racial identities, to ignore the ways that people of color are oppressed in everyday settings, including those in schools.

The consequence of such problematic structures being elided is that doing so prevents teachers and students from being responsible for recognizing and addressing systemic racism. McIntosh writes that when she fails to "acknowledge the oppressive part of my ancestral history [and] to reposition myself in the social and political world [I become] more [a] part of the problem than [a] part of the solution" (p. 6). In short, being White does not excuse one from failing to see race as a contemporary and systemic issue. In the context of this study, the White participants had not yet interrogated race as relevant to their personal and professional experiences, and while positioning themselves as social justice advocates, they were in fact reproducing systems of oppression by refusing to discuss racism as a contemporary issue. They were, as McIntosh put it, an unintentional part of the problem, while they intended to find socially just solutions.

2.2. LGBTQ issues and race

Though this study began with an attempt to address a concern

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