Chapter 11

A Code of Our Own: Making Meaning Queerly

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ABSTRACT

Queerly located inquiry can be disruptive and unsettling, jolting habitual perceptions of what can constitute a research narrative and narratives of research. Queer work conceptually contests and problematizes understandings of “I,” “We,” “Us” as an “internal, subjective or perceptual frame of reference” (Combs & Synge, 1959, as cited in Nelson Jones, 2011) and in doing so destabilizes the concept of identity as a social and cultural category of belonging. Queer work has critically interrogated the performativity of sexuality in and across social life, rearticulating textual, historical, and rhetorical understandings of same sex expressions and representations (Allen & Rasmussen, 2015). This chapter draws on three queerly operationalized research projects that investigated same-sex sexualities, sexuality-related diversity, equality and inclusion in educational domains. In interpretation it works from the ontological and axiological and epistemological margins with the aim of “integrating rather than eliminating the inquirer from the inquiry” (Montuori, 2013, p. 46).

INTRODUCTION: WHAT A DIFFERENCE A GAY MAKES

Differences of identity and affiliation are becoming more and more present in children’s and young people’s life worlds and the growing divergence of subcultural discourses in education have in recent years become significant as a field of study (Atkinson, 2004; Ellis & High, 2004; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Epstein, O’Flynn, & Telford, 2002; Kumashiro, 2002; Letts & Sears, 1999; Rasmussen, 2006; Vicars, 2006). In this chapter I draw on three different research projects that investigated same-sex sexualities in and beyond educational domains. The first project looked at experiences of parents of same-sex identified children in which the parents narrated the implications of (homo) sexuality in children’s lives (Vicars, 2008a). The second project focused on how sexuality-related diversity and inclusion was being addressed by senior and middle management in post-16 institutions (Vicars, 2008b) and the third project investigated the literacy practices of gay men in adolescence (Vicars, 2009).

The focus on same-sex attracted children and youth, in the context of educational research, routinely gets framed within discourses of health, well-being and inclusion (Hillier et al., 2010). These normalizing discourses, it could be argued, discipline sexuality research by focusing on deficit or risky behaviors of young people and seldom seek to trouble heterosexuality as presented and performed in schools. Heterosexuality has a panoptic power in educational domains and invariably is perceived as universal and natural whereas other forms of sexuality get thought of as unnatural, odd, perverse and queer. How to move beyond the binaries of understanding identity and speak back to the ways in which some identities are judged to have more value than others has been taken-up by a queering of what Warner (1999) has described as “the regimes of the normal.”

Dislodging the notion that sexuality is an essentialist, biologically constructed binary that fixes subjects within teleological narratives of accomplishment has emerged from the “queer turn” in academic life originating from a conference on sexualities in the early nineties at the University of Santa Cruz (De Lauretis, 1991), which has ricocheted through academic circles and politicized matters pertaining to sexuality (Warner, 2012). Queering scholars have looked differently at normative discourses; challenging and deconstructing perceptions of knowing and of the ways knowledge is formed and enacted across a range of hegemonic practices (Kollias, 2012; Taylor, 2012; Weber, 2015). Implicit in the work of the “queer turn” has been a paying of attention to the “doing” and the dialectic to “being”; furthering deconstruction of the “ways these various conventions and rules incite subversive performances, citations and inconveniences” (Britzman, 1998, p. 213). In this chapter, a queerly nuanced reading of policy, classroom practices, and curriculum through teacher/student narratives pays attention to the complexities and contradictions arising out of heteronormative ways of knowing. Taking a queer lens in research to unsettle the tacit production of normalizing knowledge claims has involved analyzing and making visible the hetero-norming apparatus of meaning making. Situating queer deconstruction and reconstruction to “question the constitution and effects of social and institutional norms” (Talburt, 1999, p. 537) has involved a rethinking of how meaning making is derived from being positioned by, to, and within the center/periphery dialectic and has invited critical consideration of different ways of knowing. Paradigmatically, queer, has been claimed to “hover at the limits of articulation” (Halley & Parker, 2011, p. 2) but how it has been used and where it has been aimed is revealing in terms of scope and its generative productivity. Talburt and Rasmussen (2010, p. 2) have suggested how:

queer educational research has much to say about the production of the social and the social production of institutions; relations between citizenship, nation, pedagogy, and identity.

My coming to queer, as a gay man growing up in a time and place in which I was constituted as a summoned subject “defined [my] position as respondent” (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 262) within heteronorming “discourses of the social and the individual” (Fox, 1997, p. 42). I have written elsewhere of my making too much of my particular claims of self but “accustomed and attuned to surveying the conventions, cultural understandings and assumptions of the domains in which I work and live” was a shaping interpretative location and “the imperative of sameness that would have me believe that I am making too much of myself when I speak and act as a gay man” has me now “speaking from a queer location as a way of critically interrupting how power and knowledge get materialised in everyday life” (Vicars, 2012, pp. 65-65).

My genealogy as an educator and researcher invested in queering has been formed through an auto-poiesis of dissent (Vicars, 2016), in which “the processes of self-production . . . self-construction emerges out of a set of relationships . . . thus, in an ontological context meaning emerges not from the thing-in-