Chapter 10
A Critical Queer Literacy Approach to Teaching Children’s Literature about Same-Sex Parenting

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ABSTRACT

Too often, critical literacy and critical pedagogy are complicit in maintaining silence around issues of sexuality. Similarly, queer pedagogues often focus on generalized descriptions of homophobia, heterosexism, or heteronormativity without addressing white, gender, and middle-class normativities. This chapter blends two approaches—critical literacy and queer pedagogy—to focus on what Kevin Kumashiro (2002) refers to as “participation in” normative practices when teaching children’s literature about same-sex parenting. Queer studies terminology like heteronormativity and homonormativity are used to describe children’s literature taught in elementary schools. Particularly children’s literature on same-sex parenting is reviewed from a critical perspective. The cases discussed illustrate how teaching children’s literature about same-sex parents in elementary school classrooms can disrupt heteronormative goals while resisting homonormative ones. In the end, the author issues a call for additional examples of critical queer literacy that can be instantiated in practice and support critical engagement for students, teachers, and communities.

A Queer Intervention in Critical Literacy

’Washing one’s hands’ of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral (Freire, 1985, 122).

What is the queer? Queer is non-canonical, a term of perhaps momentary coalition. Are queers revolutionaries against the patriarchal heterosexist social order? Or just plain folks? There is something of a separatist moment among some of us; many reject assimilationism despite continuing hopes for broader alliances and conditions (Pinar, 1998, 43).

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Critical literacy and queer pedagogy are two subfields within the broader field of education that share complementary social goals and intellectual traditions: Marxist, feminist, and anti-racist, to speak broadly. Scholars of critical literacy, concerned with what is often termed social justice, seek to marry the field of education with broader cultural concerns. As the above quotations from Paulo Freire (1985) and William Pinar (1998) suggest, these two fields are both concerned with the “powerful and the powerless” while aiming for “broader alliances.” Looking at collections of essays about critical literacy and queer pedagogy, one quickly realizes that overtly queer perspectives are offered at roughly the rate of one essay or chapter per volume (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). The relatively fewer examples of edited collections on queer studies in education have historically underrepresented issues of social class, race, immigration status, and religion (Pinar, 1998; Sears, 2005). One notable exception to this rule among texts relating to queer studies in education is *Queering Elementary Education* (Letts & Sears, 1999), which frequently inserts a variety of intersecting perspectives. Further, these volumes taken as a whole call for critical praxis to be reflected on and examined, but the scholars rarely discuss or list specific examples of pedagogy that are acknowledged as powerful, or even good, for students. More could be done to take this research to a level where it can affect practices in classrooms, in schools, and in communities.

Critical literacy needs to become queer; its scholars need to join in the discussion of queer issues and relate them to social justice generally. Researchers across both disciplines might simply say that we need to come to terms with intersectionality—the various interlocking ways in which power and powerlessness are constructed and enforced across any number of important social categories. Richard Jones and Bernadette Calafell (2012) talk about how “intersectional reflexivity” and personal narrative can be used to contest neoliberalism and to advance academic discourse. The idea here is that through telling our own stories and reflecting on the stories of others we can form strong affective connections that build community.

If, as Jones and Calafell (2012) suggest, we focus on discussing neoliberal discourses of valorization, post-racism, and individualism, this reflexivity might serve a purpose other than making affective connections. It might help us understand how racism and individualism constantly limit the ways we can know each other and ourselves, and the ways we can see change within and outside of ourselves. However, examining intersectionality often results in “our efforts to challenge one form of oppression” while “unintentionally contributing to other forms of oppression,” and “embracing one form of difference often excludes and silences others” (Kumashiro, 2001, 1). The scholarship above describes how practitioners cannot easily address a complicated social matrix either through the language of critical pedagogy or queer studies alone: the fields need to discuss queer ideas together. They must be willing to be critical of monolithic representations of difference. They must cross-pollinate, collaborate, and learn to be reflexive from each other.

**Criticizing Normativity:**
**Hetero- and Homo-**

To start, practitioners of critical literacy need to understand normativity and how sexual outsiders become normalized. In a landmark article about sexual politics, Gayle Rubin (1984) describes a sexual hierarchy in modern Western societies:

*Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top erotic pyramid. Glamouring below are unmarried monogamous heterosexuals in couples, followed by most other heterosexuals. Solitary sex floats ambiguously . . . Stable, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectabil-*