

# Thinking Through Biases and Assumptions About LGBTQ People

Drawing on theories discussing gender as a process, homophobia, and intersectionality, this chapter examines the pervasiveness of heteronormativity and the varieties of queerness to help readers understand where bias comes from, as well as be attuned to differences in the experiences of gender diverse, creative, and/or nonconforming students and/or sexual minority students. Looking at the roots of homophobia in bias against gender diversity will help link homophobia to transphobia and sexism as well. Examining sexuality as racialized and gendered, in turn, will illuminate differences in experiences of sexual minority students across diverse identities and provide a fuller understanding of how race structures sexuality. This chapter will help readers understand the theories of gender, sexuality, and race that have influenced writing and research on LGBTQ students as well as helped structure current LGBTQ and ally political projects in schools.

## GENDER AS PROCESS

In her book *Gender Play: Girls and Boys at School*, Barrie Thorne (1993) examines how and why gender comes to have salience in young people's school experiences. Practices like having elementary students line up by gender or organizing teams of boys against girls, she argues, highlight the importance of gender differences to young students at a time when they also are working through different ways of being gendered themselves. Concerned that the institutional culture of schools not only creates rigid ideas about gender but also pits one gender against the other, she suggests that adults in schools consider more carefully the messages about gender that even simple practices, like making gender-based small groups or encouraging gender-segregated play, convey to young people. Thorne shows too that gender salience ebbs and flows, and that students understand and rework the gender binary messages they receive. Even as her work pushes us to think beyond simple questions about what gender is and instead look at how and why gender differences emerge in particular situations, her work

shows that gender and negotiations over its meaning continue to highlight cultural desires about normalcy, conformity, complementarity between genders, and so on.

*Heterosexism* and *heteronormativity*, the beliefs and social practices that maintain the dominance of heterosexuality over other forms of sexuality, rely on a stable conception of binary genders. Men have to act in accordance with norms regulating masculinity, and women need to be feminine, not only in order for their genders to be legible in expected ways but also to justify the “opposites attract” version of heterosexuality. Gender and sexuality, then, sort out who is “normal,” and the categories provide norms that interact with one another. People of all sexualities and genders experience these social pressures to conform, whether they actively try to conform or they are nonconformist or they don’t even know they are trying to conform. In other words, gender and sexuality are categories by which life in schools and elsewhere is organized, and understanding those norms frames everyone’s experience even if they are involved in critiquing those norms. Gender nonconformity and sexual minority status may be linked by school peers inaccurately, exacerbating the harassment transgender youth face (D’Augelli et al., 2006). Moreover, LGBTQ students themselves may express their identities through both gender and sexuality, so even trying to define what each term means may not fully explain how deeply they are linked (Hereth et al., 2020).

Understanding the interplay of normative identities, intersections of identity categories, and creative reworkings of norms and categories can help provide better strategies for members of school communities to consider their own practices more carefully and to challenge how normativity and homophobia create barriers to education for all students. More holistic approaches to teaching about gender and sexuality diversities have shifted away from targeting individualized bullying situations to considering instead how the entire school should reframe its messages about gender and sexuality (Payne & Smith, 2012). One way to think about the roots of homophobia is to think about how gender normativity—what counts as a “normal” male or female—gets taught and learned. How do genders become understood as having particular qualities, actions, appearances, and so on? How do gender identity and sexual orientation, stabilized as normative, then become the foundation for the normative and normal communities and personal relationships? To understand these processes within schools, Thorne (1993) looks at not only adult expectations and definitions, but also the general tendency of institutions, especially educational institutions, to sort and label their members. Her work pushes us to see as well that countermoves follow each of these institutional moves: The elementary school students whose classroom work and playground activities she observes in her study play with gender as a *border category*, that is, a category whose meanings are understood but also open to challenge.

Thorne's (1993) point is that such negotiations of gender are part of all students' experience. Research on sexual harassment points to ways that girls especially feel pressure to conform to gendered norms or feel the hostility of gender dynamics particularly keenly (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2001). Transgender students, too, understand how difficult it is to negotiate the dynamics of gender difference and conformity, having to strategize their own gender identity in the context of social expectations unused to their innovative approaches to enacting gender or refusing their birth gender. In some situations, their peers understand how the issues raised by transgender students can help all students rethink gender norms and expression, but very often transgender students face exclusion and bias in schools. Transgender students themselves also may feel pressured to conform to the gender binary, hiding their birth gender or deciding to be as gender normative in their chosen gender as possible so as not to raise any suspicions (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Ehrensaft, 2013).

Youth, of course, are already engaged in these reworkings of social norms whether in school or out. In her discussion of the resistances of queer street youth, Cindy Cruz (2011) describes youth of color who are resistant in the face of institutional disrespect. Her work shows that queer and transgender youth have well-honed practices of talking back and of providing support to one another in difficult situations. For instance, when one young transwoman is being treated brusquely by EMTs, her friend changes the meaning of the scene by declaring the ambulance sirens to be in her honor: "Look at that. You such a diva that they had to announce with sirens that you weren't feeling good" (p. 552). The complexity of gender and sexuality is interwoven, as well, with messages, definitions, and reworkings of the meanings of other categories of identity like race, ethnicity, social class, disability, and religion, among others. In her discussion of an after-school meeting space for young queers of color, Mollie Blackburn (2005) describes another form of talking back: speaking in slang both to assert public identity and to maintain a degree of privacy. Venzant Chambers and McCready (2011) describe how Black students, including Black gay and gender nonconforming students, understand exclusions they face through policies and practices in schools and in response make their own space there, creating "a sense of safety, sanity, and community within a larger, unfriendly school culture" (p. 1356). These acts of resistance stand as reminders that young people of color create their own support systems in the midst of contexts that are otherwise challenging. But they are also reminders that young people and young adults, as in Cruz's research, may find adult responses inadequate and even damaging. sj Miller (2019) discusses similar strategies among transgender and gender creative youth, noting that they carefully navigate exclusionary institutions and create micro-sanctuaries in spaces and relationships to sustain themselves and build community.

Thorne's work, like other approaches to gender that focus on the process of social construction, pushes us to ask how and why gender comes to have salience and stability in some contexts and how it comes to be in play in others. For Mindy Blaise (2005), early childhood educators need to understand the pressures young people are facing and be proactive in raising the possibilities for gender play and gender critique. When teachers help students look more explicitly at the processes and instabilities that define gendered interactions, they themselves can begin to see patterns of gendered exclusions more clearly. Students also initiate these discussions and show that they can have a good sense of why some contexts over-stabilize complex meanings—and potentially create hostilities against those whose behavior or identity does not conform to normative expectations (Boldt, 1996). While Thorne (1993) argues that young people's play opens the possibilities of ambiguities in meanings of gender and sexuality, giving space for young girls to be athletic or boys to sit at the "girls'" table or play in the "girls'" area of the playground, she also shows that such occasions of playful attempts to cross the gender divide can be met with hostility and that teasing can cross over the line of play and into harassment.

Despite pressures to conform to normative gender, gender remains in play. While this sense of play may open possibilities, play with gender or play with sexuality also raises anxieties and bias against transgender and gender nonconforming youth. Such bias and harassment affect gender nonconforming, transgender, or cisgender youth at a higher rate than gender conforming youth and may come from peers or school personnel (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). By suggesting to adults that there are more possible identities for students to inhabit than adults might consider normal or even possible, such play may indicate not only adult insufficiency of understanding but perhaps also adult lack of control of young people's identities. Unexpected differences in identity or behavior may seem to break rules, even rules that adults think didn't need to be articulated, like those indicating that boys and girls, or young men and young women, dress in particularly gendered ways. For instance, a 14-year-old Florida student, who preferred not to share his sexual identity, was punished for wearing makeup to school (Sieczkowski, 2013). The principal claimed the student was in violation of the dress code, but the dress code had no reference to makeup (Sieczkowski, 2013). Other similar situations, including a young woman wearing a suit (Esseks, 2010), a transgender student wanting to wear a dress (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2013), or simply cisgendered heterosexual students dressing in nonconforming ways, also have led to principals requiring the students to change clothes or remove makeup (Lui, 2011; Rasmus, 2013). Perhaps young people who defy expectations also raise larger issues of how much of what is normal needs to be explicitly taught and how much diversity ought to be allowed. Schools may fall back on insisting on normatively gendered behavior and in the process reinforce gender divisions and restrictions.

Gender restrictions, of course, affect everyone in schools. As young women continue to gain more access to athletic activities and educational and career advancement, older ideas about male–female relationships have changed; for instance, the necessity for feminine submissiveness to male power has waned significantly. Dress codes that prohibited women from wearing anything but skirts and dresses now generally seem old-fashioned. Increased attention to gender equity in education, through Title IX and other programs to get more young women interested in math and science, have had significant effects on the gender ratio in such fields in undergraduate education. Still, gender norms continue to function, putting a larger burden on heterosexually active young women to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy and blaming them for their inability to control male sexual urges. In addition, since many policies intent on helping address sexism have replicated a binary gender divide, transgender youth and other gender nonconforming youth may face difficulties that go beyond policies intent on protecting women from bias. Moreover, transgender and cisgender women both face institutionalized sexism, although sometimes in very different ways.

Gender bias is also a problem not only for women. Young men who understand cultural messages about masculinity as encouraging their demonstration of superiority show their power through aggressive taunting. Whether because of pressure to conform to this problematic notion of male power or out of concern that they will be thought to be weak or gay if they don't harass, young men are the group most likely to harass LGBTQ youth and young cisgender women as well. Even though we live in a time when gender norms continue to stretch, especially for women, schools are still institutions where gender sorting occurs, whether it is in the classroom or in community settings that debate policy and curricula. Sex education continues to be a relatively conservative part of schools, leading with abstinence-until-marriage messages that not only exclude most LGBTQ students, but also leave girls at disproportionate risk for unwanted pregnancy (not because—obviously—only girls can get pregnant, but because so few young men are held responsible for the children that result).

## **SEXUALITY, NORMALCY, AND INTERSECTING DIFFERENCES**

Like gender, sexuality, too, is an unstable and complex issue. While the purpose of this book is to show how LGBTQ issues can be addressed more educatively and productively in public schools, it is important to understand that challenging sexual and gender normativity can help people of all sexualities and genders. People may be able to easily say what would count as “normal,” but they also know that conformity is difficult, if not impossible. Does sexuality involve only particular acts and particular genders in

particular relationship to one another? How are sexual identities also defined by intense relationships, desires that may not be acted upon? How are attractions defined through ideas about gender, race, and class? In other words, as we think about making schools safer for sexual minorities, how do we even begin to address important issues, for instance, whether racial harassment is part of homophobia? Can we also think about how homophobic taunts are meant to keep all students maintaining a very narrow notion of what is appropriate to their gender? Thinking about how homophobia and anti-gay sentiment are used to keep all students in line also can help us see how assumptions about gender identity and sexuality overlap into bias against racial and ethnic minority students as well.

Some people, including school professionals, root their beliefs about gender norms or the inappropriateness of homosexuality in their cultural background or religious tradition. Cultural beliefs and religious texts often are interpreted to mean that LGBTQ people are aberrant, sinful, or at the very least unacceptable. Pushing beyond what seem to be determinative statements from a given culture or faith tradition often reveals a much more complex picture of the culture in which same-sex affection and partnership have long played an important role or in which various gender expressions have found support in a tradition. It may, of course, be difficult for adherents of particular religious traditions to embrace the same interpretations of the intensity of same-sex love and commitment within their texts as LGBTQ people of faith do or even to begin to grapple with the possibility that positive representations coexist with prohibitions against similar activities.

Further complicating the issue of sexual orientation and gender identity may be the sense that such forms of diversity and difference come from somewhere else, not from within a particular cultural tradition but imposed from outside. For instance, current dominant forms of homophobia may be directed at people who appear to be simply gay but are, in fact, living traditional, Indigenous identities. Two-spirit people, that is, people who embody American Indian traditional practices that defy contemporary definitions of gender and sexuality, often find themselves harassed by those ignorant of the place of third genders and sexualities in Indigenous cultures (A. Wilson, 1996). A commonplace assumption about homosexuality, not unrelated to the former example, is that all gay people are White, related partially to the White dominance in many gay communities and partially to the inability to see diversity as more than one aspect of identity at a time. Too often, discussions of diversity seem to assume that all people have one identity, not that they might live complex lives in which their multiple differences intersect and affect one another.

When we begin to complicate what sexuality means in relation to race, class, gender, disability, region, and religion, it quickly becomes clear that we need to be thinking not only about multiple versions and variations of sexual identity but also about how different communities and contexts

shape the life possibilities and definitions of sexual and gender identity of LGBTQ, queer, and gender minority people (Bello et al., 2004; Blackburn, 2004, 2005; Irvine, 1994; E. P. Johnson & Henderson, 2005; Kumashiro, 2004; Leck, 2000; McCready, 2010; Ross, 2005; Sears, 1995; Sonnie, 2000; A. Wilson, 1996). Minority sexualities and gender identities—like other differences within communities—are themselves reminders that not all in a given culture, race, ethnicity, or other seemingly similar coherent group are the same; there are differences within communities and subcultures structured around sexual orientation and gender identity. This may seem an obvious point, but dissent by members of a community from its sexual and/or gender norms can result in a feeling that community norms have been disrupted and perhaps even a sense that the nonconformist person is a traitor to community cohesion.

Without addressing the deep cultural, political, and historical obstacles to educating LGBTQ people and educating about them, progress toward respectful education and justice will be only halfhearted at best. While some religious traditions may be the root of some cultural disapproval of homosexuality, most religious traditions do not require their adherents to demand doctrinal discipline from those outside their faith tradition. Given the pervasiveness of homophobia even among people who do not ground their discomfort in religious traditions, it is clear that other anxieties also motivate discomfort about minority sexualities and gender identities. Many religious denominations are very supportive of sexual and gender minorities. Consequently, the tendency to blame religion for homophobia and transphobia is an oversimplification. Denominations supportive of sexual and gender minorities include the Metropolitan Community Church, Reform Judaism, Hinduism, United Church of Christ, Society of Friends (Quakers), and Unitarianism, as well as segments of the Episcopal and Lutheran churches. Individual congregations of many faiths are also supportive of sexual and gender diversities.

As education against homophobia proceeds, it is necessary to find ways both to support people who experience homophobia and also to ask difficult questions about the cultural, religious, and contemporary roots of or alibis for homophobia. Acknowledging the existence of multiple cultural, local, and global forms of same-sex affection and gender diversity may be one starting point. Examining the variety of expressions of tolerance and value of minority identities within minority and majority cultures may give insights into the differences that make up even seemingly coherent and unified cultures and subcultures. These issues should be familiar to anyone thinking carefully about how to study and educate about any form of identity. But there are particular features to sex and gender identity that make addressing it challenging.

How much of homophobia is a reflection of cultural attitudes about sex in general and how particular objections to teaching about LGBTQ

issues and sexuality are related to the young age of students (Silin, 1995)? How much of homophobia is bias against gender nonconforming behavior? Does homophobia reflect a cultural disparagement of femininity, or as some would put it, is homophobia a weapon of sexism (Pharr, 1997)? We can think here of the use of “girls” to insult young men and what that says about the pervasiveness of sexism. Does homophobia indicate anxiety about the fragility of the heterosexual norm? When even slight gender nonconforming behavior or friendship with someone of the same sex can begin rumors and harassment, or when people feel compelled to assert their heterosexuality should doubt arise, we can see the process of normalization working on everyone. The ease with which such anxieties surface, despite a climate of heterosexism that generally does not allow discussion of queer possibility, indicates the haunting presence of queerness even in the midst of what is generally the unquestioned norm of heterosexuality. As Catherine Lugg (2015) has pointed out, school policy and practice is often actively involved in the erasure of queerness.

In addition, homophobia has diverse roots, so being more aware of the different biases and anxieties behind its expressions can be key to challenging it and to challenging transphobia and other forms of exclusion as well. Even in the midst of thinking about bias and ensuring a fully educational response, there is a danger in letting homophobia define how and why lessons on sexual minorities are included in school. Institutional and legal restrictions have shaped the lives of sexual minority people, yet it would be a vast oversimplification to say that is the only reality of their lives. Sexuality, as discussed in Chapter 1, has a long and varied history—indeed histories of identities and subjectivities may bear little resemblance to the categories by which we currently define sexual identity. As much as those communities and identity formations were related to restrictions on individuals’ ability to live, they nonetheless formed cultures and associations, and—like other minorities living in a cultural context shaped by bias—reshaped their worlds. Tactically, it may be possible to convince people who initially do not want to include sexual minority issues in schooling that to do so would help address the risks that LGBTQ students face. However, we also need to be careful not to frame LGBTQ issues as only risk or deficit ones. We need to provide the opportunity to examine the positive aspects of LGBTQ communities and cultures and the abilities of sexuality and gender diverse people to live lives beyond institutional constraints.

LGBTQ youth of color report harassment that intersects their identities as LGBTQ and raced; and they report higher rates of homophobic harassment than racial harassment—but if we understand their identities as intersectional, that is, defined by race and sexuality, how do we even tease apart their negative experiences in schools? We might all know what sexual norms are, know as well that people don’t conform to them, and know further that



we're not completely certain, with all of these complications, what sex or sexual orientation is.

If we look at how sexual norms function to create and stabilize the meaning of gender, we get a better idea of the links between sex and power. In a classic article exploring the relationship between sexist cultural and political institutions and the way that heterosexuality becomes “compulsory” for women, feminist theorist and poet Adrienne Rich (1980) details how the assumption of heterosexuality is an active process of ensuring that women are dependent on men and that particular forms of gender identity that reinforce this heterosexual relationship are fostered in institutions like schools. Her conclusion is that all women have been actively kept from understanding and experiencing their sexuality because of gender and sexual norms. R. W. Connell (1987) and M. Kimmel (2010) each discuss similar processes of instilling normatively gendered behavior among young boys in order to educate them into normative sexuality that is defined through male dominance. Deborah Tolman (2006), in her research on adolescent girls, revisits Adrienne Rich’s notion of compulsory heterosexuality to show how normative heterosexuality relies on hegemonic and interlocked definitions of masculinity and femininity. Tolman suggests that studying “gender complementarity” (p. 80), that is, how the hegemonic forms of each gendered identity encourage particular sorts of activities—for example, boys in groups boasting that they can get girls, and girls using femininity to hold them at bay—will provide us with a better picture of how gender functions in a social context defined by male power. But she cautions, too, that such male power is not available to all men and so studying the way norms function also can help us understand how race, class, and sexuality position men outside of normative and hegemonic masculinity. Her work also has implications for thinking about how the normative gender binary restricts other possibilities of gender, including transgender identities.

Cathy Cohen’s (1997) work on race and queer sexuality similarly analyzes how heteronormativity is raced and how racialization is also a process that positions non-White sexuality as non-normative. Using the example of slavery, she shows that people of African descent were unable to legally marry and that legacy coupled with laws against racial intermarriage marked out only Whiteness as a normative sexual category. Later pathologization of the Black family—the supposed recklessness of Black masculinity, and the dangers of Black welfare mothers—continues, she argues, the process of defining normative sexuality not only by sexual orientation but by race, class, and gender as well. Schools, too, are prime sites for such contests over the meaning of race and sexuality. In his analysis of the intersections of race and sexual orientation in public schools, Lance McCready (2010) argues that schools need to be attentive to ensuring they address both racism and homophobia. His analysis of an in-school program for LGBTQ youth

shows that LGBTQ youth of color are not able to access such a program because the overwhelming Whiteness and uninterrogated racism of White LGBTQ youth have yet to be adequately challenged.

## TRANSPHOBIA IN SCHOOLS

Like the issues addressed in the previous section, the intersections between gender and gender identity have yet to be adequately addressed in schools. As Genny Beemyn (2013) points out, however, transgender issues are getting more attention, and increasingly the parents of transgender youth are acting as advocates for change:

As transgender people achieve greater visibility in society and popular culture, more and more parents are becoming open to the possibility that their children might be transgender or gender nonconforming and seeking to understand their children's needs, rather than forcing them to deny who they are. As a result, we are witnessing the first generation of trans kids who can actually be trans kids. (pp. 159–160)

Whether parents are supportive or not—earlier studies have found them not to be (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006) but more recent work is finding a new generation of parents who are intent on advocating for their transgender children (Meadow, 2018; Travers, 2018)—schools can respond thoughtfully. Even if school leaders, teachers, and counselors do not immediately understand fully how to educate transgender students, taking the time to explore access to restrooms and name and pronoun choice, and making sure that the entire school community responds with respect can ensure equitable educational access (Slesaransky-Poe et al., 2013). Schools can indicate to parents a willingness to work together and even point out the need for more study without being disrespectful. As one school guidance counselor put it, “I knew we were not ready yet, but I saw no reason why we couldn't be, and I knew we had a responsibility to become the right school for Martin” (Slesaransky-Poe et al., 2013, p. 31). Further, learning with parents to ask key questions and being willing to understand how to simultaneously rethink gender and gender identity norms and develop critical awareness of such issues ought to alter how schools organize around gender, not just for the one transgender youth initiating a particular situation but in terms of how schools use unnecessarily gendered processes and spaces.

Transgender students and their parents may choose to use hormone blockers to allow young people more time to think carefully and decide on their chosen gender without having to go through hormonal changes and the development of secondary sexual characteristics that may make such choices more challenging (Ehrensaft, 2013). Students may decide that they

prefer “going stealth” at school rather than having their decision become public (p. 10). While being out and public may work for some students and may help an entire school community prepare for a student’s or faculty member’s transition, the choice to remain private also needs to be respected with transgender students as with sexual minority students. Transgender students also may be concerned that they will be misrecognized as the gender they were known as formerly or that they will be misrecognized as transgender when they instead want to be known by their chosen gender. For some young people, a normative binary gender does not adequately express their gender complexity, but for others, being recognized only as the gender they are is crucial. Schools need to take the occasion of learning about gender diversity to understand that the impact of thoughtful change goes beyond particular situations.

Gender complexity is as difficult to negotiate for researchers as it may be for school professionals—students are increasingly innovative in the new formations of gender and self-identifications they use. As Greytak et al. (2013) found, such complications meant removing students from their study’s results because students’ identification on forms confounded the researchers’ expectations for categories. They explain:

Participants were also excluded from the current study if they did not provide information about their gender identity or if they could not be categorized as either cisgender or as transgender (i.e., participants who, in response to the gender identity item, wrote in that they were another gender—for example, genderqueer or pangender—and also did not select a transgender response option. (p. 49)

Other students used terms available in the survey but combined them in ways that it sounds like researchers weren’t expecting:

When asked about their gender identity, some youth selected both male and transgender or selected both female and transgender (but not male-to-female or female-to-male). These youth were categorized as “transgender and female” and “transgender and male.” Other youth in our sample identified as both male and female or both male-to-female and female-to-male and were categorized as “multigender” for the purposes of this study. (p. 51)

Whatever the complications of student identifications and self-understandings, Greytak et al. (2013) found that transgender students experienced more benefits associated with schools having nondiscrimination policies, anti-bullying policies, and GSAs.

Different kinds of complications also may arise from students, cisgender or not, trying to sort out gender normative identity and behavior from gender nonconforming identities and behaviors. Boldt (1996) found

elementary students willing to recognize cross-gender identifications but also noted that some students objected to their classmates' willingness to identify students in their preferred gender. She suggests that this uncertainty indicates not only a complex understanding of gender but also a recognition that children are looking to adults for some signal about gender correctness, a point that also reinforces Thorne's (1993) observation that students make binary gender differences more apparent in a context where an adult is present.

In their study, C. L. Ryan et al. (2013) found that elementary students brought up complications to and refusals of gender norms on their own. Elementary students also explained nonconforming gender in peers, showing not only that they were already in the company of students whose gender identity exceeded binaries, but also that they could begin to reflect on such experiences in class. C. L. Ryan et al. (2013) found that their vocabularies for such experiences were not completely accurate, but the students were not ignorant of the general issues around gender nonconformity and the limitations of gender norms. The teacher and coauthor with whom C. L. Ryan et al. researched, added her own concerns that students understand exclusions based on gender identity as connected to other forms of school-based bias and bullying. Like Rands's (2013) use of mathematics education to encourage students to study the degree to which peers intervene in bias, C. L. Ryan et al. (2013) show a classroom structured around understanding the intersections of oppression and discrimination and, further, knowing how to plan to step in to support someone being bullied. Each of these lessons draws all students into a consideration of the limitations of gender norms—something they are already engaged in themselves—and also helps them think educatively and constructively about intervening in situations where gender norms are being used to limit classmates' ability to express their own gender. Gender itself is placed in relation to other categories of exclusion, and so the particularity of gender identity bias or transphobia is specifically attended to while other issues are entwined as well.

As students are engaging with the issues of gender, they inevitably raise questions about sexism, about what expectations for gender mean, and why we become so attached not only to normative gender but also, relatedly, to normative sexuality. Kate Bornstein (1994) complicates gender identity by describing her own experience of the disconnection between her assigned gender and her gender identity not as a positive connection with womanhood but as a negation of boyhood:

I've no idea what a "woman" feels like. I never did feel like a girl or a woman; rather it was my unshakable conviction that I was not a boy or a man. It was the absence of a feeling, rather than its presence, that convinced me to change my gender. . . . Gender identity answers another question: "to which gender (class) do I want to belong?" Being and belonging are closely related concepts when

it comes to gender. I felt I was a woman (being), and more importantly I felt I belonged with other women. (p. 24)

This narrative may trouble the idea that transgender people choose their gender for only one reason or that inevitably they must subscribe to the feeling of being trapped in the wrong body, rather than literally embodying a critique of the gender they were born into. Bornstein (1994) complicates, too, what belonging to a gender means in a sexist society, in her analysis of how passing is discussed in transsexual and transvestite meetings she attended:

A lot of emphasis was given to manners: who stands up to shake hands? Who exits an elevator first, who opens doors? Who lights cigarettes? These are all cues I had to learn in order to pass as a woman in this culture. It wasn't 'til I began to read feminist literature that I began to question these cues or see them as oppressive. (p. 29)

Like the students in Greytak et al.'s (2013) study, then, Bornstein (1994) suggests a critical reading of gender can be coextensive with a change in embodied gender. In other words, transgender identity does not need to mean conforming to the other gender norm. Just as students created alliances across differences of gender identity and sexual orientations, Bornstein points to the need for a greater understanding of relationality in identity and common struggles with sexism, racism, and other forms of bias. Connecting transgender activism more firmly to feminism also can help highlight areas of overlap between gender-related struggles, challenge ideas about stable gender binaries, and open possibilities for new kinds of gender identities (Enke, 2012a).

## QUEER RELATIONALITIES

As we think about what queer theory can do to complicate our commonplace understandings of gender, especially in regard to how schools try to reproduce gender norms, we need to think critically about the damaging aspects of such fidelity to the stability of gender identity and sexual identity. We need to think critically as well about the diversities of those identities, whether they are complicated by the varieties of meanings of sex and gender as they intersect with other forms of identity and community, or whether they are complex within a given person's life and experience. Queer theory not only complicates what we mean by sexuality and gender; it expands whom we're talking about when we're talking about queer. If we all live under cultural norms that oversimplify gender and sexuality in problematic ways that have no purpose other than the reproduction of norms, then

people of all sexualities have much to gain by countering entrenched homophobia and transphobia, not only because excluding students, faculty, staff, and community members is unethical but also because such norms are limiting to everyone. Queer theory asks us to think critically about words that often are excluded from curricula: pleasure, perversity, possibility.

If all sexualities and genders do share a critical relationship to other key categories of identity, then thinking about identity relationally may be one way to indicate this shared fate and shared possibility for change. Especially given the increasing attention to family members and friends of LGBTQ people, thinking about identities as “identifying with and identifying as” gives us new ways of situating LGBTQ-seeming issues in a broader social field. Emphasizing relationality between genders and sexualities does not indicate that LGBTQ issues on their own aren’t worthy of notice. Kids of gay parents experience homophobia, many kids are exposed to homophobic taunts, and kids learn in contexts where LGBTQ information is largely missing from the curriculum. As a result, all students learn that this exclusion is meaningful to who they should become. This point simply returns us to Eve Sedgwick’s (1990) conception of universalizing discussions of gayness, that is, looking at how homophobia and same-sex desires suffuse almost all social interaction. We might follow a similar sort of intellectual trajectory in the research from either the early homophile movement or gay liberation or lesbian feminism to find other understandings of how much homosexuality/fear of homosexuality/fear of being considered a homosexual/fear of same-sex desire (one’s own or someone else’s) has created the social identity of the purportedly straight as much as it has allowed the proliferation of every other sort of sexuality.

The simple point here is that heteronormativity is as fractured and riddled with cultural anxieties as any other dominant social formation. Perversion of the norm is more widespread than might be apparent if we focus only on LGBTQ people. Norms, in other words, are so impossible to follow that everyone invariably transgresses them. The heteronormative school practices and educational research are not only functional as limits to what can be thought about sexuality; they are also indications of a certain degree of ignorance, if they really are meant to describe what goes on in sexual identity, activity, and fantasy, let alone community and representation. That various state legislators are interested in passing laws to prevent teachers from saying the word *gay*, or addressing questions students might have about sexual orientation or answering students’ questions about sexuality in gender, indicates persistent concerns about maintaining heteronormativity. Such attempts to legally limit learning about sexual orientation and sexuality also indicate an understanding that young people will ask such questions and that teachers potentially could help them think more fully about those issues than schools currently allow.

Research on bullying and bias shows just how ubiquitous and damaging heteronormativity and gender normativity are, but bias and harassment are processes that are also ineffective: Not everyone bullies, not everyone conforms. Young people play through and around categories, assert themselves against institutional power, and simply find people with whom to build pleasurable and supportive networks. But young people are also worried about how their parents would react to their coming out as gay. Young people of all sexualities, including heterosexual youth involved in LGBTQ advocacy, worry that their parents will find out that they are working in support of LGBTQ equity in schools. So even as heteronormativity does not always operate to completely limit consideration of gender or sexual non-normativity, sexual and gender norms operate and circulate well enough to keep LGBTQ youth worried that they will be kicked out of their homes or disrespected at school. They do resist, but they also are already in institutions that are structured by well-meaning teachers staging debates on same-sex marriage or addressing sexuality as abstinence-based lessons with more silence than content in contexts where same-gender partners attending prom still create controversy. This all only adds to how cruel the school setting can be, with its already palpable rumble of heteronormative institutional structure. But clearly in all of this, the queer, questioning, and ally kids learn a lot and they have much to teach as well.

This points to what we can learn from the vernacular forms of youth sexuality and gender questioning and curiosity, and a range of other formations that show the contextual possibility and complexity of gender identity. Youth may be nonbinary, pushing at the edges of what gender can be. Youth may also navigate spaces in relationship to other group membership. For instance, youth whose racial or ethnic identity may be their primary identification and site of solidarity may approach coming out and/or hiding in plain sight in diverse ways. There are heterosexual girls in Gay-Straight Alliances or Gender and Sexuality Alliances—which seems to indicate that such groups are not yet attracting the students who need them (Perrotti & Westheimer, 2001)—who then turn out to have interesting ideas about their own definitions of heterosexuality and their queer experiences, reminding us that young people are often more complex than they initially might present themselves (Mayo, 2007). Young men who reinterpret their experiences of homophobic hostility as an indication of interest in finding out more about same-sex attraction (McCready, 2010) and young people who rework gender for themselves—and to show what can be done—are engaging in acts of resistance but also acting as educators themselves. They show not only interest and desire to learn but a clear sense of what criticality might bring to the projects of sexuality and gender, resituating the terms more fully back into possibilities and back into relation with other categories of personal, social, and historical meaning.