QUEER(Y)ING CULTURE THROUGH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A REIMAGINING OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT AND RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

Cristina Guerrero, Armen Shahnazarian*, Michelle F. Brown*

University of Toronto, Toronto District School Board*

Abstract:
In this article we document our experiences as facilitators for the "Engaging All Students" professional learning community (PLC), which was implemented to help Toronto public school teachers re-engage underachieving students. These students, who are known as "marker students," are members of the school system's most marginalized groups and are identified by their schools based on cultural aspects like race, place of origin, and language(s) spoken. Along with our problematization of the naming and concept of "marker students," we also propose a queer*(y)*ing of the notion of culture to re-imagine how we engage students with culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy.

Introduction

Educational policies and systemic barriers have reproduced inequitable educational opportunities and outcomes for students who are members of historically marginalized groups. These inequities are especially prevalent in urban educational settings (Cammarota, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The Toronto District School Board (Toronto DSB), which is the largest and most diverse school board in Canada, has acknowledged the existence of what it calls persistent "opportunity gaps" for particular groups of students. For example, the school board's 2011 Opportunity Gap Action Plan (OGAP) memorandum reveals that students from the Aboriginal, Black, Latino, Portuguese, and Middle Eastern communities face substantial challenges in their schooling. In addition to higher rates of poverty among these "opportunity gap" groups, student achievement data reveals that they have the lowest scores on standardized tests, the lowest rates of credit accumulation in secondary school, and the lowest graduation rates (Brown, 2006; Toronto DSB, 2011). Male students from these communities face even more challenges, thus bringing to light a gendered nuance to the "opportunity gaps" (Toronto DSB, 2011). An additional complication is the fact that students from these communities are more likely to be overrepresented in Special Education and non-university track programs of study (San Vicente, Sultana, Seck, & Williams-Shreve, 2015). This tracking in turn creates significant limits to graduation outcomes and post-secondary options (Clandfield et al., 2014; Parekh, 2013).

In response to the data, numerous Families of Schools[1] within the Toronto DSB established resources and initiatives aimed at providing teachers with the tools to better serve the needs of their students. Indeed, culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy has been identified by the Toronto DSB as a key tool through which to implement its student achievement initiatives within its Families of Schools. Drawing from Ladson-Billings' (1995) conceptualization of *culturally relevant pedagogy* and Gay's (2000, 2002) notion of *culturally relevant pedagogy*,[2] the Toronto DSB's framework of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy centres teaching practices that are both relevant to students' cultures and responsive to their needs. Through this framework, teachers incorporate culturally relevant curriculum in ways that continuously nurture caring learning environments that answer to students' social, emotional, and academic needs. This framework, according to the Toronto DSB, will facilitate increased student achievement and graduation rates. To facilitate teacher implementation of this framework, the Toronto DSB has also mandated that "100% of Families of Schools have relevant professional learning communities that focus on visibly improving culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy and/or competencies, inclusive curriculum and assessment practices" (Toronto DSB, 2013a).

The Toronto DSB's Years of Action plan (2013b) explicitly generalizes the need for improving "student achievement of racialized

students" (p. 1). This board-identified need is also specified in it board improvement plan, which mandates that "the percentage of students achieving at the provincial standards from the lower achieving groups (e.g., students from Black, Spanish Speaking, and Aboriginal) will be improved by a minimum of 15%" (Toronto DSB, 2013b). We agree with the board's mandate to improve student achievement and implement effective pedagogy. At the same time, however, we also feel that it is important to problematize and intentionally work towards a more comprehensive approach to the term culture. This more comprehensive approach necessitates an understanding that culture comprises different tenets that are not always visible, cannot be amalgamated, or grouped as a singular entity. When it comes to critical and relevant dialogues with students, it is crucial to incorporate varied aspects of culture, particularly because they also figure into their schooling experiences and outcomes.

Our Goals for the Article

In this article, we document our experiences as participants and facilitators of "Engaging All Students," one such initiative centred around culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy and aimed at increasing student engagement and achievement. This initiative was implemented in one Family of Schools as a multi-year professional learning community for K-12 teachers. We define professional learning community as a group of educators who are committed to collaborate with and support each other towards a collective goal related to student achievement. In this collaboration, educators engage with student achievement data collection and analysis, the regular review of student progress, and the assessment of the impacts of collectively identified action plans and interventions (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007).

As mentioned above, in this article we focus on our experiences as participants and facilitators of the "Engaging All Students" professional learning community in particular. We share our critical analysis of our experiences with "Engaging All Students" and explore several dimensions of these experiences, particularly the limited understandings of culture and pedagogy that we encountered in the school board's discourse and among the participating teachers. In our multiple roles as classroom teachers, facilitators, and researchers, we have often found that culture is simplistically conceptualized in association with one's ancestry, ethnicity, race, and/or creed. Like Ladson-Billings (2014), we have noted that tokenistic and superficial practices like "adding some books about people of colour, having a classroom Kwanzaa celebration, or posting 'diverse' images" have become the prevalent approach to culture and culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy in schools (p. 82). This tokenistic approach has been particularly salient and often practiced in superficial ways during heritage months like Black History Month and Latino/Hispanic Heritage Month. These practices, often occur as "add-ons", and are accompanied by uncritical and superficial conversations about phenotype and at times, religion, but, are not embedded into the curriculum in meaningful ways.

Our reconsideration of the Toronto DSB's framework of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy does not suggest that our colleagues' work is deficient (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Instead, we speak to our own collective processes as educators who resist the "singular [and] dominant narrative" (Goldstein, 2013, p. 68) that can accompany teacher-centred and static understandings of culture and pedagogy. We have become unsettled about the ways in which culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy has been conceptualized as a tool through which teachers could fix the marker students' problems of academic underachievement and disengagement. Within these static understandings about culture and pedagogy, we have also noted an omission of critical conversations addressing gender identity, LGBTQ identities and the ways in which they figure into the lived experiences of students. This omission takes us to our queer(y)ing standpoint, from which we share our questions about how the notion of culture is understood.

Here, we must also point out that we use the terms *queer* and *queer(y)* as verbs and our call to action and not solely as a term of identification. In our processes of queer(y)ing, we interrogate, query, and ponder the ways in which static understandings of culture overlook multidimensional identities and continue to perpetuate inequitable relationships of power in schools. We ask: What is culture? How do these understandings of culture take up (or not) the many complexities of culture and identity among students attending Toronto public schools? How can we further take the concept of culture towards a more critical "understanding of the relationship between texts, meaning-making and power in order to undertake transformative social action" (Janks & Vasquez, 2011, p. 1)? In our exploration of these questions, we offer a queer(y)ing of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy that calls for a critical stance on culture and the acts of engaging in critically conscious pedagogies.

Before we elaborate on our line of inqueer(y),[3] we would like to engage our readers with two things: our introductions of ourselves and our outline of the processes involved in the implementation of the "Engaging All Students" professional learning community. Here, we would also like to clarify that while we joined the initiative in the 2013-2014 academic year, which we call

Year Two, we also provide information for the previous year as a means of providing context that was pertinent to our experiences with the work.

Introducing Ourselves and Our Current Roles

We introduce ourselves as a way of sharing our unique experiences that not only inform our day-to-day practices as educators, but also as colleagues who have questions about the frameworks within which we work. We are facilitators of the "Engaging All Students" initiative and introduce ourselves as Cristina Guerrero, Armen Shahnazarian, and Michelle Brown.

Cristina Guerrero has 10 years of experience as a secondary teacher. Over the past 3 years, she has been serving as an Instructional Leader at the Toronto DSB's Equity and Inclusive Schools unit. Her central board position comprises equity-focused work with teachers, students, and administrators, including professional development, consultation, curriculum co-planning, and team teaching. Cristina identifies as a heterosexual woman, mother, and the daughter of immigrants from Ecuador.

Armen Shahnazarian is the sole Secondary Student Work Study Teacher at the Toronto DSB. He is cross-appointed between two departments: Teachers Leading and Learning and Student Success School Support Initiative. In this role, he supports students and teachers through pedagogical documentation, giving voice to student learning within classroom spaces informed by educational research. Armen is of Armenian ancestry, but he was born in Iran due to the displacement of his ancestors as a result of the Armenian Genocide. He identifies as a gay man and as an immigrant.

Michelle Brown currently teaches in the Primary division at a Toronto DSB school. She identifies as a Queer mother to children who descend from the Thompson River Nation of British Columbia. Through her previous work with children with various exceptionalities and numerous inner-city communities, she brings with her a focus on making schools safe spaces for all students.

Our collegial relationship began during the 2013-2014 academic year. Beginning that year, Cristina served as the Equity Instructional Leader who co-facilitated the "Engaging All Students" professional learning communities with an Instructional Leader from the Aboriginal Education department. Michelle participated in the professional learning community as a Grade 2 teacher. Armen was a secondary school teacher and participated in the professional learning community as an exploration classroom teacher. Michelle and Armen were invited to participate again in the 2014-2015 academic year as members of "Engaging All Students" facilitation team so that they could share their expertise and strategies with participating teachers. We share these details as a foundation from which to dialogue both about the evolution of the "Engaging All Students" professional learning community and our own changing roles through our years collaborating together. In the next section, we describe the overall format of the professional learning community, beginning with its inception in the year prior to our joining. This information is provided for context, and we refer to that prior year as Year One. We also emphasize that our focus in this article addresses our experiences with Years Two and Three of the "Engaging All Students" professional learning community.

The Methodology and Logistics of "Engaging All Students"

Inception and Implementation: Year One

The "Engaging All Students" professional learning community comprised a group of approximately 25 K-12 teachers from schools in a Family of Schools located in the Toronto DSB' southwest region. This five full-day session initiative was implemented in the 2012-2013 academic year as a partnership between the Family of School's Superintendent of Education and two central Toronto DSB units: Equity and Inclusive Schools as well as Aboriginal Education. The mandate of "Engaging All Students" was to increase student achievement by engaging teachers with professional learning rooted in the principles of

culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. While culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy was a key concept in board discourse about student achievement, the Family of Schools that housed the "Engaging All Students" initiative also sought to better serve particular groups of students. Its schools serve large numbers of Portuguese, Roma, Black, and Aboriginal students, who all represent "opportunity gap" groups. Moreover, over one-third of the families within this Family of Schools live below the poverty line, and almost one-fifth receive social assistance (Toronto DSB, 2014).

Participant recruitment. Participants for the "Engaging All Students" professional learning community were recruited in three steps. First, the Superintendent and the Equity Instructional Leader would lead an information session at one of the Family of Schools' regular monthly meetings with the Principals; this information session entailed a brief presentation on student achievement data as well as an overview of the professional learning community format. For the second step, interested Principals shared details about the professional learning community with their staff, who would then prompt the third step, which was registration for the professional learning community.

The set up processes. Prior to the first professional learning community meeting, the Equity and Inclusive Schools department collected and anonymized qualitative data from student focus groups. Each participating teacher was asked to choose 5-6 students to participate in the focus group, which involved questions about their experiences at school and their recommendations for better serving students facing academic and social challenges in the classroom. Students were eligible to participate after submitting the express written consent of a parent or guardian. Within each focus group, teachers were also asked to include two marker students. These marker students were selected based on three criteria: 1) identification with one or more of the school board's identified "opportunity gap" groups; 2) academic achievement below provincial standards; and 3) demonstration of academic disengagement. Each participating teacher was responsible for recording and reporting back on their implementation of different teacher strategies as well as the levels of achievement and engagement among their marker students.

The format of the professional learning community. The "Engaging All Students" professional learning community comprised 5 full-day meetings with all participants, and at times, members of their administration team. At the first meeting, the group engaged in a facilitated examination of school board-wide student achievement data as well as the raw data from the focus groups. Teachers then collectively determined key themes emerging from the focus group data and then used those themes to identify areas of intervention.

To provide a theoretical underpinning for the year-long professional learning community, the facilitators also provided an overview of the Toronto DSB's framework of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. During this overview, they also provided examples of culturally relevant and responsive teaching strategies for teachers to choose from and implement in their classrooms before the next meeting. To assist the teachers in their preparation for the second meeting, the facilitators also distributed data collection templates onto which teachers could record their goals and data in relation to their two marker students. The teachers were also encouraged to bring in examples of student work that reflected the impacts of their interventions.

For the second and third meetings, the group shared the data from their templates and continued to learn more about the Toronto DSB's framework of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. They also learned about other teaching strategies and were tasked with implementing them in the classroom as well as recording data on their marker students.

The purpose of the fourth meeting was not only to continue reflecting on the impacts of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy on the marker students, but also to visit the classroom of an experienced Grade 4 teacher that exemplified the framework in her daily practices. The experienced teacher was nominated by several Principals who had worked with her before and who felt that she had a great deal of expertise to share with the "Engaging All Students" participants.

At the fifth and final meeting of the school year, the facilitators provided an overview of the collective work and key concepts. They also facilitated a dialogue through which the teacher participants could share their records once again and reflect upon their next steps. The facilitators also collected end-of-year feedback from the teacher participants as a way to measure the impact of the professional learning community and to help shape future offerings for subsequent cohorts.

The Beginning of our Collaboration: Year 2

Cristina joined the "Engaging All Students" professional learning community when she took on the Equity Instructional Leader position the following year. The Family of Schools' Superintendent of Education wished to continue sponsoring the professional learning community and requested that Cristina act as the facilitator. She opted to follow a similar trajectory as her predecessor, which included school and teacher recruitment, student focus groups, and the overall structure of the professional learning community. She made a few changes related to the the facilitation team, the format of the exploration classroom, and some of the conversations about culture and culturally relevant pedagogy. We explain these details in the next sub-section.

The facilitation team and the exploration classroom teachers. Cristina teamed up with the Instructional Leaders of the Aboriginal Education and Beginning Teachers departments for the facilitation of the professional learning community. When planning the exploration classrooms, Cristina noted that the teacher participants represented Junior Kindergarten to Grade 10. As such, she decided to organize two different exploration classrooms so that the participating teachers could observe a lesson that would be closer to the grade(s) that they taught. In order to drive home the notion that it is never too early to engage in culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, Kindergarten to Grade 5 teachers participated in a demonstration classroom within a Kindergarten space, working through a lesson that focused on social media to address ableism and classism. At the recommendation of the Instructional Leader of Beginning Teachers, Cristina met with Armen to explore the possibility of hosting an exploration opportunity in his classroom. Together, the three colleagues worked through the focus on marker students and the use of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy for the professional learning community. The "Engaging All Students" participants who taught between Grade 6 and 10 teachers visited Armen's Grade 9 mixed abilities English class to observe a critical media literacy lesson, which was an adaptation of a Power Walk, to work through the topic of advertising, social capital, and consumerism. The experience of seeing the implementation of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy strategies in an explorative classroom space provided the professional learning community participants with an opportunity to engage in the co-construction of methods they could implement in their own contexts.

Participant Feedback. In the last session of the Year Two professional learning community, the cohort shared that their marker students had improved grades and developed stronger relationships within their classroom spaces. Several participants expressed the hope for ongoing collaboration the following year, and recommended more work towards the practical implementation of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. The professional learning community was positively received by participating teachers. This feedback also pleased the Family of Schools' Superintendent of Education, who pledged renewed funding so that a new cohort could also benefit from the opportunity to also participate in the professional learning community.

Some Hesitations

Despite the generally positive feedback during, and after, Cristina's first year with the "Engaging All Students" initiative, she and a few of her colleagues had two major reservations about the ways in which the notions of culture and pedagogy were being taken up in relation to the marker students. While they understood and appreciated the system's move to utilize its demographic data to catalyze work aimed at ameliorating the educational outcomes of "opportunity gap" groups, they were concerned about the ways in which race became linked with poverty, and in turn, with academic underachievement. Of particular concern was the framing of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy in the project's initial discourse, which enabled it as a means through which teachers and schools could better understand and empower their marker students. As a result of this conceptualization, culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy was viewed as a tool to "fix" the marker students' problems of underachievement and disengagement.

Michelle and Cristina struggled with asking teachers to identify marker students based on factors like surnames and phenotypic features as this was a colonialist practice that reinforced the use of racial categories of whiteness and "other" categories based on teachers' perceptions of their existence (Lewis, 2003; Veracini, 2011). The other participants did not express similar struggles; during debriefs of the project's stages, teachers vociferously shared that they wanted to learn more about culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy and continue to engage with its implementation in their classrooms. In the 2013-2014 year-in-review session, for instance, several teachers asked how they could maintain their working relationship with Cristina and "continue these practices for next year, with support." Another teacher, who taught Grades 7 and 8 Special Education, shared his successes with the "Engaging All Students" professional development, indicating that "Students became much more engaged even though they weren't the marker students…[A success was] developing a sense of resilience using descriptive feedback for future directions."

In spite of the excitement expressed among participating teachers regarding their achievements with the professional learning community and their expectations for next steps, Cristina felt apprehensive about the perception that culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy was the tool that would "fix" the problems facing students instead of asking what systemic factors labeled them and how these system factors labeled them. The "Engaging All Students" initiative called for teachers to choose students based on categories like race and socio-economic status. This "sifting, sorting, and selecting" of students reinforced colonial practices linking academic struggle with race, phenotype, and socio-economic status (San Vicente et. al., 2015).

Such deficit-based practices and approaches constitute what Tuck (2009) terms "damage-centred" work, which "operates with a flawed theory of change: it is often used to leverage reparations or resources for marginalized communities yet simultaneously reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted" (p. 409). Cristina and Michelle sat in the conflicted position as academics and Toronto DSB educators working with culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy realizing, that as professional learning community leaders and participants, they were asking teachers to use these categories to identify marker students, who had membership in these groups, to be viewed as fixable. Our professional learning community was to become the workshop, and the tool being offered to "fix" the broken students was culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. The problem was not the use of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy in itself but rather the fact that it was part of a widespread Board discourse that framed it as a way, or rather, a pedagogy of "fixing" "broken students" from particular communities rather than the system. This realization created a great sense of discomfort and apprehension among us, particularly Cristina, who felt torn between her responsibility to the requirements of her Instructional Leader job and her sense of urgency to help facilitate equitable outcomes for underserved groups of students.

The second concern stemmed from the simplified notions of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy that served as the ideological foundation of the "Engaging All Students" project. Here, we note that the Toronto DSB's model of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy was promising in theory. Nonetheless, it was viewed by many educators in a reduced sense that posited it as a teacher-centred pedagogy focused on using failing students' own culture to move their academic achievement forward. To us, this approach of using culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy within the classroom context glossed over conversations directly confronting the systemic factors that categorized, othered, and measured marker students in ways that cast them as broken and fixable by the teacher.

While we reiterate our appreciation for the Toronto DSB's move towards closing opportunity and achievement gaps, at the same time we felt conflicted with our roles as educators whose work centred around culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. Our apprehension was not the use of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy in itself but rather the fact that it was viewed as the tool with which teachers could "fix" the marker students. While we worked with the participating teachers and had them engage with their own "inward gaze" (Paris & Alim, 2014) about their own identities and relationships with their students, we felt that we could have had a more explicit conversation about their own relationship with the systemic process of naming and "fixing" students. In this professional learning community, the taking up of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy created an expectation for teachers to critically interrogate their own views on culture and the ways in which it manifests in the everyday social interactions and curriculum in the classroom. However, what was also needed was a critical taking up of how power reinforces where and how culture is positioned in the classroom. In other words, we needed to talk more at length about the school system's complicity in reinforcing stratification and categorization while supporting initiatives meant to measure increased academic achievement on standardized tests that would influence the Toronto DSB's ranking as a top achieving school board. For us, centering teacher-led determinations of culture for the purpose of academic preparation constituted a "damage-centred" approach (Tuck, 2009).

Re-envisioning Our Work and Roles: Year 3

Cristina, Armen, and Michelle continued to engage in conversation and reflect on their experiences with "Engaging All Students" after the end of the school year. One recurring theme in their conversation was their observation that many of the participants believed that the purpose of the professional learning community and culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy was to increase numerical markers of success. Another recurring theme involved the ways in which static understandings of culture based on race and social class overlooked student experiences related to their gender, gender identity, and/or self-identification with the LGBTQ communities. Cristina invited Armen and Michelle to join the facilitation team so that they could share their experiences and strategies with the incoming cohort of participants. They accepted the invitation, and together the three of us

examined the Toronto DSB's culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy framework.

While considering the Toronto DSB's three-fold model that comprised the tenets of high academic expectations and achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness, we noted that school board initiatives placed unequal emphasis among these tenets. While the tenets of high academic expectations and achievement along with cultural competence were more widely discussed, there was very little emphasis or understanding of critical consciousness. We determined that there was a clear need for us to intentionally engage with the concept of critical consciousness as a tenet of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy to arrive at academic success in ways that not only involved numerical markers of success but also the empowerment of youth and their civic development as advocates of their own learning. In order to build teacher capacity with staff regarding this tenet and its application to student outcomes, we offer a queer(y)ing of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy to arrive at a space of reimagining. From this reimagining comes our questions about how culture is understood. We ponder how these understandings may perpetuate inequitable relationships of power in schools that result in disengagement among students.

Our Guiding Concepts to the Professional Learning Community

As facilitators, we adopted three guiding concepts in our collaborative work with teachers during the "Engaging All Students" professional learning community. These guiding concepts were our commitment to be: (a) responsive and theoretically explicit, (b) provide ongoing and on-site support, and (c) facilitate reflexive approaches to collaboration (Loucks-Horsley, Stiles, Mundry, Love, & Hewson, 1998; Zozakiewicz & Rodriguez, 2007). To be responsive and theoretically explicit, we solicited at least two teachers from each of the participating schools and shared scholarly readings that bridged educational theory with classroom practice. Our expectation was for all participating teachers to not only implement their learning in their classrooms, but also to share with their colleagues at their home schools. This in-school grouping of teachers facilitated shared responsibility as well as mutual support between them. To facilitate ongoing and on-site support, Cristina visited participating teachers at their home school in between our professional learning community meetings. Her itinerant role as Equity Instructional Leader facilitated various formats for this one-on-one support, including lesson co-planning and co-teaching. To facilitate reflexive approaches to collaboration, we worked with teachers to "construct common understandings, share knowledge and experience, and develop common goals" (Donohoo, 2013, p. 3) with respect to the implementation of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy in the classroom.

Over the course of our three years as colleagues and co-facilitators, we engaged in regular in-person planning and debrief meetings, which in turn have yielded many reflections and questions about our roles in the "Engaging All Students" professional learning community. A repeated theme in these conversations was our interrogation of how the notion of culture was persistently being taken up in uncritical ways in school board discourse and among the professional learning community participants. This article is our way of sharing some of these conversations and pointing to a queer(y)ing understanding of culture that critically considers the multidimensional identities of students as necessary components of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy.

Queer(y)ing the Professional Learning Community

In order to engage with the notion of critical consciousness raising within the framework of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, we determined that we would utilize Queer Pedagogy in our quest to a queer(y) culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. We use *queer* as a verb, a call to action, and not solely as a term of identification. As Muñoz (2009) states, the act of queering is an intentional endeavor that necessitates an attentiveness to the past in order to critique the present. It is important for us to make the connection that the cultural aspects that shape us are ones that will continually affect how we engage with our surroundings as educators. The act of queer(y)ing culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy also "contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity...It is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future" that involves the voices and experiences of students in ways that extend beyond content knowledge (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). To acknowledge culture's fluidity and yielding of different identities that intersect with each other in different ways depending on context, we highlight the criticality of embracing cultural hybridity and the ways in which it is reflected in students' cultural identity markers (Hall, 1990).

To bring forth these ideas and to disrupt normative understandings prevalent in classroom and school spaces, we introduced our colleagues to the framework of Queer Pedagogy. Queer Pedagogy asks that educators not solely acknowledge the differences of their students but also embrace these differences (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 28). In order to engage in culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy one must not only be aware of the systemic components that make up a student's culture but also the cultural components with which students self-identify and choose to to belong to or not. These cultural components are more nuanced and require relationship building between the teacher and students in order to be more fully explored and integrated into the classroom. As Paris and Alim (2014) state, it is important to move away from oversimplified understandings of culture centred on historical understandings of language, social class, and race and towards more "contemporary understandings of culture as dynamic, shifting, and encompassing both past-oriented heritage dimensions and present-oriented community dimensions. These dimensions in turn are not entirely distinct but take on different salience depending on how young people live" (p. 90).

Our Queer(y)ing Interventions

As a way of queer(y)ing the notion of culture and to have participating educators explore their own social location in relation to that of their students, Armen facilitated two experiential activities: "Coming Out Stars" and "Stepping Out." The opportunities for participating teachers to explore their own social identities were crucial in helping them better understand how individuals' complex identities play out in the school setting and in their educational outcomes. Some participants in the professional learning community were especially resistant to seeing gender as a component of one's cultural makeup, thereby dismissing the idea of accommodation requests based on gender. They also viewed sex as the same as gender. To us, this conflation was problematic because it overlooks the differences between these two cultural markers and ignored the possibility that people's gender identity may not align with the biological sex assigned to them at birth. It must be recognized that gender and sex each function as two different entities on two different spectra. Sex consists of one's genetic makeup while gender is the way in which one chooses to identify and present themselves.

On one particular occasion, a participant challenged the Toronto DSB's move towards gender-neutral washrooms, stating that such a move was unnecessary and a potential threat to student safety. In response to this view, Armen facilitated an activity called "Coming Out Stars." Its purpose was to help teachers see beyond the male-female binary and align their practice with their legislative responsibilities to serve all students, including transgender and gender non-conforming students. In this activity, the teachers engaged in an experiential journey of "coming out" of the closet, which led them to one of four different journeys of coming out and coming to terms with one's sexual and/or gender identity. While the first of these journeys ended in acceptance from family, friends and teachers, the second involved limited levels of acceptance. The third journey involved with minimal acceptance from family, friends, and teachers, and the fourth ended with no acceptance and a resulting suicide. Throughout the activity, Armen brought up statistics from EGALE Canada Human Rights Trust[4] so that he could draw parallels with the current realities of LGBTQ youth in Canada. These statistics also mirrored the Toronto DSB's data, which not only indicates that LGBTQ youth are at higher risk of dropping out than their heterosexual peers, but also more prone to name-calling, physical threats, and cyber-bullying.

Building upon this discussion and to further probe into the concepts of social inequity and cultural capital, Armen facilitated a second activity called "Stepping Out." In the usual iteration of this activity, participants are assigned a secret identity or role, such as Prime Minister, a person with a physical disability, or a person of colour. These secret identities may or may not include additional details about the person's life. Participants are asked to not reveal any of these details until the very end of the activity, and are given a few moments to think about how their secret person's identities might play out in their day-to-day lives. In the next step, the participants stand next to each other at one end of the room and listen to prompts that are posed one by one. These prompts include statements like "you have never felt discriminated against", "you can see a doctor and obtain the necessary medicine when you need it," and "your sexuality is accepted by everyone in your life." The participants take a step forward each time their assumed identity can respond yes to a prompt and remain in place if their assumed identity could answer no to a prompt. At the end, everyone reveals their given identity and engages in a full-group discussion about the factors that impacted how some identities were able to move forward while others could not.

We amended this activity for the queer(y)ing purpose of our professional learning community and to intentionally encourage participants to engage in a reflection of their own lived experiences. We provided each participant with an identity card that read "you are yourself." Armen asked the group the same questions that he would have asked in the traditional iteration of the activity;

this time, however, the participants' concluding reflections would pertain to their own lives rather than another person's.

The "Coming Out Stars" and "Stepping Out" activities engaged participants in a dialogue about the importance of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy whilst illustrating that identity is often intersectional, contextual, and evolving. For us, it was necessary to bring up the importance of drawing critical literacies about culture and pedagogy in ways that not only foster meaningful relationship-building with students, but also a great care for their well-being. We assert that in order to authentically engage in this work, however, we must begin with a call to an "inward gaze" (Paris & Alim, 2014) and a confrontation of our own privilege as teachers and our complicity in perpetuating dominant forms of power. This self-confrontation is a key step in the process of queer(y)ing.

Due to contractual negotiations towards the end of Year 3, the Engaging All Students initiative was paused, though we have continued to reflect on the implications of this work and have supported interested teachers individually at their schools. As a result of these reflections, we implemented a necessary shift to queer(y) the notion of culture in order to re-imagine how marker students are identified and responded to within schools.

Conclusion: Further Capacity Building

As a result of teacher strike action and restructuring within the Toronto DSB, the "Engaging All Students" professional learning community has been put on hold for the time being. However, through our work with the teachers participating in this professional learning community, we realize that there is still a great deal of work to do to further our understanding of culture. In order to encourage educators to expand how they understood and addressed their students' cultural makeup within their classroom spaces we embarked on a journey of queer(y)ing culture. That is, we asked educators to take up the messy process of unlearning rigid binaries when it comes to culture, and instead to recognize and embrace the intersectionality and complexity of their students' cultural makeup. Our call to action is contextualized by the understanding that we require there to be systemic change, with the way in which the Toronto DSB engages with the concept of culture, not only in the Board's delivery of professional learning communities on culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, but also in how it defines marker students.

In order to effect change and to actively engage with the concept of queer(y)ing culture, it is necessary for educators to understand that culture cannot be solely marked by exterior attributes of a person. It is also crucial for us to speak to the notion of intersectionality by outlining visible and invisible markers of culture. This point about intersectionality is particularly pertinent in the move to galvanize critical consciousness amongst teachers and students. Often multiple markers of culture need to be navigated through simultaneously for students to effectively function within society. We ask that educators and school systems consider that culture is a complex and evolving concept, that is continuously redefined based on students' experiences and identities. We also encourage educators to reformulate their understanding of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy to actively engage in "meaning making ... and transformative social action" that contributes to the equitable achievement of students within schools (Janks & Vasquez, 2011, p. 1).

[1] The term Family of Schools refers to a cluster of schools located within a specific geographic area of the school board. At the time of the writing of this article there were 20 Families of Schools in the Toronto District School Board. Each one was led by a

Superintendent of Education, who identified and funded priority initiatives within their Family of Schools.

[2] Underlying both of these notions is the key premise of teachers' caring relationships with their students and care for their social and academic well-being. Ladson-Billings' (1995) work on *culturally relevant teaching* identifies three principles of effective and culturally relevant teachers: high academic expectations, cultural competence, and the practice of critical consciousness in the classroom. For her, these three interrelated principles provide students with a learning environment centered on encouragement, culturally relevant curriculum, and the opportunities to engage with critical dialogue on the social issues affecting the lives of marginalized youth and their communities. Gay's (2000, 2002) work on *culturally responsive teaching* entails teaching practices that are centered on the cultural experiences and lenses of diverse groups of students. She argues that "when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly" (Gay, 2000, p. 106).

[3] We use the term inqueer(y) as a play on the word inquiry.

[4] Egale is a national organization that promotes the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer peoples through a combination of research, community outreach, and education. For more information, please see http://egale.ca.

Biographies

Dr. Cristina Guerrero is a Sessional Lecturer in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto. She is also a secondary teacher with over 10 years of experience with the TDSB. Over the past 3 years she has served as an Instructional Leader at the TDSB's Equity department, working with staff and students on equity initiatives that include professional development, data collection, and curriculum co-planning.

Armen Shahnazarian is a teacher with Toronto District School Board. In addition to being a classroomteacher, Armen has also held Central and Department Headpositions at the TDSB. Heholds a collaborative Master of Education degree in Sociology and Equity Studies in Educationand Sexual DiversityStudies from theUniversity of Toronto. Armen is passionate about student success and equity within education.

Michelle Brown is currently a Primary teacher at the Toronto District School Board. She identifies as a Queer mother to children who descend from the Thompson River Nation of British Columbia. She has previously worked with children with various exceptionalities and numerous inner-city communities, and is committed to making schools safe spaces. Michelle's current Master's research documents the narratives of parents of Aboriginal children and their unique experiences of integrating with the formal school system.

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