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Above: “A Tribute to Charles White” (1998) by John Zender Estrada
Sponsored by the University of New Mexico’s Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies, Intersections: Critical Issues in Education is an online, peer-reviewed, open access academic journal. We seek to deepen understanding of how race, class, gender, sexuality, exceptionalities, power, well-being, and other subjectivities play out in educational settings as a means of advancing social justice for all people. Intersections serves as a forum for diverse voices and perspectives reflecting a variety of disciplines, focusing on work that interrogates, disrupts and challenges oppression. We welcome a range of materials, including academic papers, personal perspectives, and other innovative forms of scholarship that may speak to an audience beyond academia.

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John Zender Estrada

Born and raised in East Los Angeles, John Zender Estrada experienced a rich and diverse cultural environment drawing from the strong personalities of the Chicano youth around him. Upon graduating from high school, John continued his fine arts studies with the Otis Art Institute majoring in Fine Art and Illustration. While attending Otis, John was influenced by the New York art scene, primarily the abstract-graffiti-pop expressionists. Actively involved in establishing the Los Angeles style of graffiti art, John was one of the many early pioneers that created the graffiti movement in the early eighties. John recreated himself as Zender (the rising-mountain) and had his first one-man show at Otis titled “Zender-Neo Expression” in 1987. Deeply committed to making public art, Zender has produced over 300 murals in Los Angeles and throughout the United States. For more information on the artwork of John Zender Estrada, check out his website, www.johnzender.com.
Situating Giving Back for Native Americans
Pursuing Careers in STEM:
“You Don’t Just Take, You Give Something Back”

Janet Page-Reeves, University of New Mexico
Gabriel Leroy Cortez, University of New Mexico
Yonesha Ortiz, University of New Mexico
Mark Moffett, University of New Mexico
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Abstract
This article explores how a desire to give back influences Native Americans pursuing education and careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). We present analysis of data from 51 interviews with Native students and STEM professionals. Despite the compelling evidence of the core significance of a community orientation among Native Americans, insufficient attention has been given to thinking about the unique challenges faced by STEM professionals in devising ways to give back and how this relates to the continuing problem of under-representation of Native Americans in STEM. Here we propose strategies for universities and industry to honor Native ways of being by recognizing and embracing giving back as a value, and supporting STEM students and STEM professionals to overcome challenges to be able to give back to their communities. These strategies for situating giving back will promote expanded participation for Native Americans in STEM. This work provides insight for thinking about other under-represented populations in STEM.

Keywords: Giving back, underrepresentation, STEM, Native Americans

Introduction
That’s one of the things that I would like to do is to give back to my community…it’s just for my particular degree, there really wasn’t any potential for me to [come back].

We’ve always had to try to figure that out…. What do we do?… I don’t know…. How are we going to use this education? It’s like, I have no idea… And that’s the biggest thing that I’ve been struggling with recently…. trying to figure out how this degree in mechanical engineering and my role as an aerospace engineer, how’s that gonna be useful at all to [my tribe]?... And… if
I’m going to come back, there’s not really going to be an existing job there for me to jump into. It has to be created out of something that doesn’t exist yet.…

You don’t feel like there’s an immediate, direct path back into the community workwise and that you’re kind of going out, you’re blazing that trail, you’re trying to take a leap of faith and going out there and doing things.

—Quotes from Native American STEM professionals

An increasing number of Native Americans are going to college, getting a college degree, and pursuing graduate studies (Winkleby et al., 2009). However, despite these gains, Native Americans continue to be significantly underrepresented in education and careers involving science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (National Science Board, 2016; Ferrini-Mundy, 2013). As part of an effort on the part of universities, industry, and science sector funders (e.g., the National Science Foundation) to promote participation by underrepresented minorities in STEM, a wide variety of pipeline, internship, mentorship, and scholarship programs have been created. These programs offer Native American students opportunities for developing knowledge, skills, social connections, and interests that will position them to pursue a career in the sciences. These initiatives and investments are important pieces of the STEM education/career puzzle for students from underrepresented populations, but statistics on Native Americans in STEM demonstrate they have fallen short of hoped-for outcomes. Figuring out how to achieve greater gains in broadening STEM participation for Native Americans continues to present a challenge.

We propose that Native American underrepresentation in STEM requires consideration of issues that have not been sufficiently addressed by programming that targets STEM curricular, knowledge, social, and skill deficits, or educational financial barriers. Data we gathered while conducting a study about the factors that support success among Native Americans in STEM suggest that cultural dimensions of the choices that Native American students make regarding what discipline or career path to follow are of more importance than is generally reflected in the design of STEM participation initiatives. Elsewhere we discuss Native American identity as an important component of Native American success in STEM (Page-Reeves et al., 2017b). Here we consider how the value of “community” influences Native American STEM participation. Below we argue that a culturally sanctioned conceptualization of the need to use one’s education to give back to the community\(^1\) plays a significant role in the educational and career choices that Native American students make. Using one’s educational achievement to give back to the community—to one’s local or Tribal community, to the broader Native American community, or to society—is given a high priority and value.

\(^{1}\)In the anthropological literature, we understand that there are many types of Native American “communities.” However, here, we employ the phrasing “giving back to the community” because this reflects the way that interviewees generally spoke about their relationship to “their community” or “the community” broadly defined as singular. In this usage, interviewees routinely conflated reference to their own Tribe with a broader pan-Native American identification, or even with broader social impact, and often they moved from one usage to another and did not make a distinction.
For many Native American students, it may not be immediately apparent how one could possibly use a STEM degree or career to give back. For example, becoming a physics professor or developing expertise in computational mathematics may not seem to have relevance or use in the context of a Native American community. As a result, although there is often a tendency to attribute low Native American participation in STEM to lack of capacity, many Native American students make a choice: it is not that they do not have STEM knowledge or interest, but rather, they may consciously choose not to pursue a degree or career in STEM in favor of other options that appear to offer a greater potential to achieve community-oriented goals and objectives that they value (e.g., teaching, social work, nursing, etc.). We suggest that a key reason for such a decision is that they cannot reconcile their understanding of STEM content/activity with the culturally defined value placed on community. Institutions and funders interested in promoting STEM participation for underrepresented populations have not sufficiently conceptualized the importance of this dynamic for Native American students. Moreover, the way that STEM subjects are taught in the mainstream classroom does not tend to incorporate attention to this issue in a meaningful way that would allow Native American students to imagine aligning their STEM educational and career aspirations with their community-oriented values.

**Giving back as purposeful motivation**

Having aspirations that go beyond personal and individual accomplishments has long been recognized as a potentially powerful motivation for individual academic attainment and persistence, and as promoting subsequent career performance and capacity. In studies by Yeager and colleagues, for example, students with a “transcendent purpose for learning” persisted longer when required to engage in a task that was considered “boring” and were less likely to drop out of college (Yeager et al., 2014), and those with “purposeful work goals” were found to derive more meaning from life and schoolwork (Yeager & Bundick, 2009). In the education, career counseling, and community service literatures, this dynamic is often described as a desire to give back to the community. The desire of students to give back to their community has been shown to have an important influence on educational, career, and volunteerism dynamics in a variety of cultures and contexts, including among African Americans (e.g., Charles, 2005; Farmer et al., 2006), Chicanas (e.g., Bernal, 2001), Mexican-origin Americans (e.g., Vallejo Agius & Lee, 2009), Asian Americans (e.g., Chang, 2004), and Samoan Americans (e.g., Borrero et al., 2009). However, among Native Americans, giving back has been identified as a foundational and unifying cultural construct, and as both a core motivation for and a defining feature of success (e.g., Guillory, 2008, Guillory & Wolverton, 2008). For Native Americans, giving back has a deep meaning that relates to the specifics of their culture and historical experience.

**The significance of giving back for Native Americans**

The literature on Native Americans and the core cultural significance of giving back is compelling. Okagaki, Helling, and Bingham (2009) found that Native American individuals place great value on the need for their own education and
work to result in pragmatic benefit for not only themselves, but also for others in their families and communities. They describe this value as a “cultural orientation” (p. 171). Waterman and Lindley (2013, p. 147) write that, “community is at the core of the existence of Native American nations” and that in Native American communities, there is a deep “sense of obligation and responsibility to community well-being” reflecting culturally defined values that permeate everyday life. In a study by Guillory and Wolverton (2008, p. 75), giving back to the community was cited as a source of both encouragement and motivation for Native American college students. Commitment of students to family and community becomes a resilience factor that enables Native American students to overcome challenges and barriers in the “hope of making life better for their families” (p. 74) and cultural practices involving giving back remain “guiding forces throughout their lives” (p. 75).

Giving back and Native American nation-building

For Native Americans, the paradigm of giving back is more than just “do-gooding” or community service. In his delineation of Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit), a theoretical framework for understanding the complex reality and experience of Native American people and Native American communities, Brayboy (2005) highlights the relations of power that inform the structural and experiential landscape for Native Americans. Using a TribalCrit lens, giving back can be understood as essential for Native American self-determination. Guillory (2008) sees the community orientation of giving back as a mechanism for decolonization by nurturing the skills needed for “rebuilding that which [was] damaged” in the historical experience of cultural and physical genocide (p. 175). Kawulich (2008) explores how giving back builds leadership in Native American communities that has far-reaching implications for positive strength-creating community processes. Waterman and Lindley (2013) see the culturally defined dynamic of giving back as a form of community cultural wealth (p. 147)—a mechanism for maintaining cultural integrity that is necessary for Native American communities to continue as sovereign peoples (pp. 152-153). A nation-building perspective on giving back acknowledges the structural relations of power that operate to limit and keep Native American (and other individuals of color) out of spaces of STEM education and careers. Many individuals who might have interest in a STEM career are led not to pursue one by dynamics that exclude them, rather than merely the result of an individual choice. In this context, positive synergy between STEM and giving back can contribute to the strength of both the individual and the community. Giving back, then, is an integral component of Native American nation-building (Waterman & Lindley, 2013, p. 148).

Understanding giving back for Native Americans in STEM

Here we explore how the desire to “give back” to their community, to the broader Native American community, or to society influences Native Americans pursuing education and careers in STEM. We present analysis of data from 51 interviews with Native American students and STEM professionals. Our findings build on the work by Native American Scholars and others referenced above that has
begun to examine how the central role of a relational ethic based on the Native American cultural value of community influences educational persistence and career trajectories for Native Americans and connects back with broader community and political processes. Our findings contribute further insights that help us think about nuances entailed in the giving back paradigm, including dynamics specific to Native American individuals pursuing education and careers in STEM. Despite the compelling evidence of the core significance of a community orientation among Native Americans, insufficient attention has been given to thinking about the unique challenges of giving back faced by STEM professionals and how this relates to the continuing problem of under-representation of Native Americans in STEM. Here we propose strategies for universities and industry to honor Native American ways of being by recognizing and embracing giving back as a value, and supporting STEM students and STEM professionals to overcome challenges to be able to give back to their communities. These strategies for situating giving back will promote expanded participation for Native Americans in STEM, but we believe that they also have implications for thinking about participation for African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and other populations that continue to be under-represented in STEM.

Methods

We conducted this study through a collaborative partnership between researchers at the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES), the University of New Mexico (UNM), and Northwestern University (NU). Our research team includes both Native American and non-Native American investigators, and junior Native American researchers who were learning to conduct research. We developed the discussion presented here from our analysis of 1,926 pages of interview transcript data that we gathered through 51 interviews—30 interviews with Native American college students, and 40 interviews that we conducted in two iterative Phases with 21 Native American STEM professionals (21 in Phase 1 and 19 in Phase II). All participants provided signed informed consent. Interviews lasted one to two hours, and were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist.

Student interviews were conducted by two junior Native American researchers (Cortez and Ortiz). Student participants were junior- or senior-level college students at UNM or Central New Mexico Community College (CNM). The student cohort of 18 men and 12 women was diverse in terms of Tribal affiliation, and included both STEM and non-STEM majors. The STEM professional interviews were conducted by an experienced anthropologist (Page-Reeves). STEM professional participants were a national cohort that we chose with an eye to diversity in relation to Tribal affiliation, geographic location, academic degree, STEM discipline, and work sector (academia, industry, government, Tribal government, private business). We followed the STEM National Science Foundation (NSF) definition of STEM disciplines which, in addition to the traditional physical sciences and math, include life sciences, environmental sciences, education sciences, and social sciences (NSF n.d.). Additionally, we also considered the category of medicine/medical research as
a STEM discipline. However, our participants were overwhelmingly affiliated with the traditional hard science, math, and engineering STEM disciplines (See Table I.)

Table I: Interviewee Affiliations and Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aerospace Engineering</td>
<td>Government (2)</td>
<td>Ph.D. (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>Government/Industry (1)</td>
<td>MS (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical Engineering (3)</td>
<td>Industry (4)</td>
<td>MBA (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Engineering</td>
<td>Private Business (4)</td>
<td>BS (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Science/Hydrology</td>
<td>Tribal Government (3)</td>
<td>Medical Student (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish Biology</td>
<td>University (7)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Forestry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manufacturing Engineering</td>
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<td>Materials Engineering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mathematical &amp; Computational Sciences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mathematician</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medicine/Medical Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nuclear Engineering/Physics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Programming/Software</td>
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<td>Engineer/Computer Science (3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small Business Owner/Retail</td>
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<td>Water Resources/Chemistry</td>
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<td>University (7)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The STEM professional cohort was balanced in terms of gender (10 women and 11 men). Interviewees all strongly self-identified as Native American (Page-Reeves et al., 2017b), but were from diverse backgrounds that included urban, suburban, rural, and reservation experiences.

We posed questions in the interviews in a way that was designed to be open-ended to allow the interviewees to drive the direction of the interviews, and we derived questions in Phase II of the STEM professional interviews from our analysis of Phase I interview data. We were interested in understanding factors that contribute to success for Native Americans in STEM. We had five principle, underlying domains of inquiry: 1.) the types of experiences and relationships individuals have had that supported success in STEM (including mentors, teachers, family members, study groups, student and professional organizations, “discourse communities,” social networks, and “protected spaces”); 2.) individual perspectives on the relationship between indigenous and Western science epistemological orientations, and how they describe their own ability to navigate between/within the two; 3.) the extent to which individuals see themselves or “people like them” as being involved in and having the capacity to be successful in scientific endeavors; 4.) how they understand and explain their own and others’ success in STEM; and 5.) “counter narratives” regarding their own success or experiences or about science that challenge status quo thinking or images related to science or Native American participation in STEM. However, because our project design employed an anthropologically inspired approach (Madden, 2010), interviewees were encouraged to present their stories in a broad and open manner rather than being proscribed/constrained by a priori questions developed by the researchers, and for
the most part, interviews followed a more conversational structure than traditional interviewee/interviewer dyadic interactions.

We reviewed transcripts using a rigorous, disciplined approach to create an empirical analysis of the data according to Hammersley’s (2008) criteria for qualitative research based on plausibility, credibility, and relevance. We followed Gläser and Laudel’s (2013) framework for theory-driven qualitative content analysis. We reviewed the transcripts and identified conceptual categories and patterns related to the domains of inquiry, extracted data, and developed conceptual summaries. Following review and summary, we coded extracted data for systematic themes and their domains. We used “constant comparison” (Perry, 2003) to explore interconnections between theme categories and made connections with concepts we had identified in the literature by developing a holistic interpretation of the data that we present below.

Findings

Despite the diversity of the interviewee cohort, we identified a number of key themes in our analysis of the interview data. Elsewhere we discuss themes of identity (Page-Reeves, et al., 2017b), wayfinding (Page-Reeves, et al. 2017c), and resilience (Page-Reeves, et al., n.d.). Here we consider the theme of giving back in relation to five domains:

1) Duty, expectation, & reciprocity
2) Defining success in STEM in relation to giving back
3) Translating & bridging functions of giving back in STEM
4) Being a role model & blazing a trail in STEM
5) Giving back as a challenge in STEM.

Duty, expectation, & reciprocity

A primary motivation for interviewees to want to give back was because they feel a sense of duty, responsibility, and obligation that is in line with previous studies of giving back in Native American communities (e.g., Guillory 2008, Guillory & Wolverton 2008). For example, interviewees commented,

My family was very supportive when I decided to go into…STEM…but in addition, they were always…reminding me of that duty to help the people and give back to the family. And, when we talk family, that’s basically the community and not only our community but all Native American communities.

There’s a lot of things I want to do…But as a Native American, I’m obligated to…go work back with my community and to help out like the people where I grew up because it wouldn’t feel right to just up and leave and not go back.

I was doing [it] because I felt bound and obligated that I should become this person that all of the people before me were and that this is my path. And that you know this was the way that I would give back all of these gifts that I’ve been given…and…I would go back to the reservation and pass on my knowledge and that I would…try to help…other people from my tribe go to school and…show them the way.
Oh, I think that’s something that every Native American is taught. It’s part of the culture…and it starts when you’re very little. If somebody gives you something, you don’t just take, you give something back…I remember. This was a story I was told and I passed it onto my little sister that even with Mother Nature, with Mother Earth, you don’t just take, you have to give back. And how our ancestors were shocked when the White men came and just chopped down a bunch of trees and planted corn and didn’t think about how to give back to Mother Nature, and you know, you don’t take from Mother Nature without giving in return. And so…I think that it’s the same then when you have a chance for an education, and you have a chance to do special things like science, that it’s your obligation to give back.

Part of the sense of duty that interviewees expressed has to do with living up to the expectations of others. Expectation pushes them to live up to the obligation they feel; however, similar to experiences recounted in studies by Guillory (2009) and Makomenaw (2014), it also provides a source of strength to be able to confront educational and professional challenges. One interviewee said,

“There’s a whole community of people and your elders that you’re supposed to listen to. There’s…a whole expectation of Native American people to…go out and get an education that’s supposed to be to come back and help the people. And, and so it’s not like you can go off and be selfish and study whatever you want. It’s almost like you have that in your mind the whole time, that you need to find something that’s useful. And…so, like even for me, I felt like I had other interests…but I stuck with engineering, even though I knew it was harder and even though there were parts that should have driven me away, because they weren’t very fun or very interesting to me, but I stuck with it because I knew it was gonna be very useful in the end.

But the expectations of others have further implications. Charles (2005) found that African-American teens from an urban community see their own success as impacting a larger narrative about race. He reports that they believe that “If I don’t succeed, they would say, I told you so” (p. 8). Similarly, because Native Americans are underrepresented in STEM, interviewees feel a sense of responsibility for making sure they stay on a straight path—that failure is not an option because it would only serve to reinforce negative expectations, stereotypes, and narratives about Native American ability. One interviewee described it as needing to make sure that he did not “drop the ball…an expectation on ourselves to…succeed and to not stray.” Another said,

“We still hear it every day that we need more Native American scientists and engineers because there’s just none. There’s not very many. We have a very low representation in the STEM fields. So, I feel like being one of the few, I have to perform well. I have to do well.

Succeeding in STEM is, in itself, a form of giving back by proving that negative caricatures are not correct.

In addition to wanting to improve conditions in one’s community or live up to expectations, the desire to give back contains an acknowledgement of a debt created.
by personal benefit. Reciprocity, or the idea that individuals who have received something need to return the favor, is an important dimension of the giving back paradigm. Interviewees in this study said things like, “My main focus and goal is to have Native American children…have the same opportunities like I had,” and “I feel like it’s my responsibility to share that…I learned it from someone else and now I’ll have to teach someone else what I learned.” But reciprocity has implications that go beyond merely repaying a debt. Among Korean Americans, Chang (2004) reports that individuals who are understood to have gotten ahead as a result of support from the community then feel obligated to contribute time or money in return as a way of repaying the debt, but do so in a way that holds the community together in the face of economic and social forces that otherwise diminish community cohesion. Similarly, for Chicanas, Bernal (2001) sees reciprocity as a mechanism that reinforces collaborative ties between community members. She describes this as a form of cultural resistance. Among Native Americans, Brayboy, Solyom & Castagno (2014, p. 587) recognize the important role that the dynamics of reciprocity play in tribal nation building, and Minthorn, Wanger & Shotton (2013, p. 62) understand reciprocity to foster the development of leadership in the Native American community.

Defining success in STEM in relation to giving back

As indicated earlier, purposeful goals are not only a part of the giving back paradigm, but are associated with academic and career success (Yeager et al., 2014; Yeager & Bundick, 2009). The importance of having a strong sense of purpose has been identified as a defining feature Native Americans’ determination to “give back” (e.g., Guillory, 2008). Interviewees see a sense of purpose as integral in their own career trajectories (Page-Reeves et al., 2017c). They described this as something beyond personal or professional success or as “a purpose, … that you’re not doing this for yourself.” It could be related to family: “I had a bigger purpose because… I needed to do what I could do best for my family.” But they often saw it as part of their connection to a community. Interviewees commented,

I would bring all our kids here… I spent the first eight, ten years here teaching them… all of these things that they need to know as people, to be good people first…and understand their purpose in life—that they have… individual parts in this larger mechanism, but that each one of them have an important purpose…and each one of them, working independently but together at the same time, to make things better…and…it goes back to that purpose thing.

And,

I would always be available to help the community because we were a community and the only way that we would remain a community that we all did our parts to improve it or make oneself available... my dad would always put it in the context, remember you’re not doing this for just yourself, you’re doing this for your community and the good that comes from your dedication and the work will benefit not only you and your family, but your community….So…a purpose…kind of a thing, Yea…that…you’re not doing this for yourself.
While we generally understand the concept of purpose in relation to doing something for others or for the greater benefit of the community, within the giving back paradigm purpose is often defined within a framework of cultural values and a spiritual ethic. Bernal (2001) found a thread of spirituality woven through the Chicana orientation to enhancing the community. “For these women their spirituality was connected to their commitment to their families and communities. They saw their educational journey as a collaborative journey not an individualistic one” (p. 634). In Charles’ (2005) study in an urban neighborhood, the desire to give back to the community among African American teens was experienced as a moral obligation derived from their Christian faith. They have “an “immutable sense of ‘stewardship’ that can be found in the religious teachings of the New Testament” (p. 5). Similarly, interviewees in our study see a spiritual dimension and purpose to their work in science and the way they are able to give back. Speaking about her work in science, one interviewee said,

*Creator gave us this mind to dream big, but with purpose, and again always to give back to the community…to dream big but realistically and the whole intent and purpose of that ultimately is to benefit your larger community.*

Another said,

*People have purpose. People have souls that we have to respect, so that when we pursue something, it starts with prayer, and I see the connectivity in my mind…there’s a spiritual aspect. So rather than…separating in separate compartments, math, science, the environment, and whatever else, it’s all connected so that the spiritual side is sort of the thread that holds all of these together.*

Interviewee narratives suggest that this spiritual orientation enhances rather than encumbers their ability to do meaningful science:

*Having a spiritual component to life makes me, and probably others, a better scientist…observing nature…and…directing the human experience in a way that’s harmonious and consistent with nature, what our ancestors were all about, and that’s what we’re facing today.*

And, having a spiritual connection provides them with a framework of support:

*That’s what got me through…going back to that and re-routing myself…with the prayer and the practices and the spirituality…that’s what kept me going because…if we look back at our ancestors…they struggled, they survived, they withstood time…and I saw myself there too…and then I saw that happened to me and so I went back to…gathering myself together and going back to my spirituality, praying and re-centering and talking things out…just going back to my faith or gathering myself and picking myself up and understanding where I belong in the world…having a sense and place and knowing that I needed to be, [that I would] be an engineer, and sticking with it.*

Spirituality, then, not only gives interviewees purpose, it gives them the strength they need to confront both philosophical and everyday challenges of pursuing a career in STEM, and ultimately becomes the foundation for giving back, reciprocity and the development of Native American leadership.
For Native Americans, conceptualization of giving back as a duty, an expectation, and a reciprocal obligation with a broader purpose and spiritual roots is the way that success is defined. Talking about their own personal careers in STEM, interviewees said things like, “I guess I really don’t look at it as, as succeeding…in that sense…because I…think of it as just doing…my part or giving back,” and, “I guess success for me…is not necessarily based on…the grants or the publications…it’s really investing my time and helping [in the community].” Interviewees told us how they view success in STEM, in particular, as having a unique capacity for inspiring others (Page-Reeves et al., 2017c). These data from Native American STEM students and professionals support previous findings that for Native Americans, success is measured by how one’s individual achievement contributes to the wellbeing of others and their community (Guillory, 2008; Juntunen et al., 2001).

Translating and bridging functions of giving back in STEM

For Native Americans pursuing a career in STEM, giving back has a particular importance because of the technical and scientific knowledge that individuals learn that has implications for benefiting Native American communities. Interviewees feel they have the ability to translate scientific concepts to make them more meaningful for people in the community who do not have scientific training or who might not understand the issues. For example, one interviewee, speaking about her own expertise, said she wants to

\[\text{[help] people to understand climate change…}\]

I have a better understanding of both [my tribe’s] perspective and then the scientific perspective and then translating it into the language so that they can understand it. So, some terms may not be directly translated, like climate change…there’s no word in [our] language that means climate change, but there are other concepts in [our] philosophy that allude to…a demise or an unbalanced time.

Another framed it as leveraging his position as a trusted insider to help community members understand scientific data that forms the basis of debates that influence Native American land and resources. He said that he could help

\[\text{[translate] environmental-related stuff that’s going on, on their land, and if they have a person who’s non-Native American coming on, then their…}\]

you know their tribal council’s not gonna trust them, but if you have some Native American kid who grew up in that community, who knows how to you know understand what the data’s saying and all that.

But the idea of translating is not a one-way process. A number of interviewees see their role as a bi-directional translator. They believe that they are developing skill and expertise that has implications for Native American communities, but that the synthetic perspective that they have developed—uniting Indigenous and Western ways of knowing—has benefit beyond the Native American community. One interviewee spoke about how this plays out in chemistry, saying,

As a Native American chemist…you think about those things. You say, well, how is it going to affect our people? How is it going to affect our resources?… I think, indigenous science not only ties in the Native
American culture, but is also providing substantial data and information to the other worlds… it’s not a double-edged sword, it’s an even plate… it’s good all around… I think it’s connected.

However, specific scientific knowledge itself is not the only way that interviewees think about their professional and STEM expertise in relation to giving back. Interviewees also described their role as one of bridging institutional and structural relations between Native American and non-Native American communities. One interviewee sees his individual role in working as a liaison. He said,

I’m definitely kind of working in that space like between tribes and like outside organizations like… government agencies, labs, universities… lots of non-profits… [and] for-profit companies… that are trying to do work with… Indian country.

Another interviewee focused on the importance of being able to learn the rules of different systems and sharing that knowledge. He said,

I think being more open to other aspects of how society works or how cultural things work you know if you can understand two different ways it’s better than one you know if you’re in a classroom they’re not gonna teach you in a traditional sense, well maybe like a, a Native American traditional sense you know, they’re gonna teach you the way that they learned it from their professor who probably wasn’t Native American right? So if you can understand both ways and how to, how to, learn how the professor teaches, how that’s structured, and then be able to take what you learn and teach it to your community in a more, in a fashion that’s more culturally appropriate maybe? Then that’s great, then you can transcend those two things.

Yet another sees his role as helping his community to learn how to mobilize resources. He believes that he is

gathering other resources and knowledge… and then [you] return home… you… build your experience and career and bring something back home, not only yourself but these other resources... This is a holding place for us, we’re gathering all our resources, but we have plans and visions to go back home… learning how to do that, networking, knowing where resources are, and then connecting it back to yourself and then to the community and then tying it all together.

Being able to bridge between Native American communities and non-Native American knowledge, institutions and resources is crucial to Native American health and wellbeing, and ultimately central to Native American nation-building.

**Being a role model & blazing a trail in STEM**

A key dimension of the giving back paradigm has to do with setting an example for others, especially for young people. Guillory (2008) discusses the importance of role modeling in the Native American conceptualization of giving back. Individuals who are successful become concrete evidence for kids that they have options,
breaking out of stereotypes or expanding kids’ sense of who they can be (Page-Reeves et al., 2017c). One interviewee said,

For me, I think…my impact comes from…those humble beginnings and dealing with…struggling in undergrad, and then getting through and succeeding. Like that’s the story I want people to know and have it be out there so that they can go and do [it too].

Another said,

Going back to the career…points of being a STEM major is that you’re pretty much guaranteed to make more than you would in other fields. And you’re able to use…those funds and take it back to the reservation. You can take your knowledge back to the reservation and help your community…And it would just help…the Native American community to be able to show these other kids that it’s do-able…like a role model, right…I didn’t really know…any Native Americans who were in the STEM field growing up. Most…all of the older people that I knew, they were all in the construction business and like my dad….it would definitely help our community and help the image as a whole.

In studies of giving back for a variety of populations, role modeling is often specifically discussed as a way to combat negative community dynamics such as drugs, alcoholism, teen pregnancy, and criminal behavior which can lead to prison time (e.g., Bingham et al., 2014; Borrero et al., 2009). Our data suggest that while these things are a concern, interviewees are also interested in inspiring kids to love science and to feel joy in that. One interviewee said,

What am I gonna do specifically for my community?…maybe I’ve inspired others to sort of…take the STEM discipline…it’s hard to tell…that’s what I’d like to think, but nevertheless…being identified as being successful…if people see me in that light, well, that’s great, but how I would like to take advantage of it myself is to…not necessarily…try to…bask in any glory or something, but to try to use that…for some of the youth…to help inspire them.

Related to the idea of role-modeling, is the desire to have one’s actual experiential knowledge be beneficial for others. Interviewees repeatedly used the metaphor of “traveling a path” to describe their experience. However, the path to becoming a STEM professional is acknowledged to be fraught with challenges. This is reflected the idea expressed by a number of interviewees that they are “blazing a trail” (Page-Reeves et al. 2017c) One interviewee discussed how difficult it is, saying,

and that you’re kind of going out, you’re blazing that trail, you’re trying to take a leap of faith and going out there and doing things…that’s like…a lonely road, you know?... [Native American STEM professionals] are truly…blazing trails.

Interviewees see what they are doing is learning how to overcome obstacles so that they can pass that knowledge on. Interviewees said,

So I want to give back and the reason I want to give back is to support the younger generation and to make that path easier for them because it was
such a big learning curve for me and that just to let them know it doesn’t have to be so hard if you go this way or that way.

Another said:

[T]his value, this ethic for giving back... I guess how I imagined that to happen is more helping those who are coming behind... young people who may have endured or experienced the same kind of struggles, have the same... obstacles in their life, but how have a desire to do something different... to follow this path to be able to provide encouragement and... share my experience with them in a way that kind of helps them move along that path. That’s kind of how... I’ve always internalized... that ethic.

Still other interviewees see this process as having more expansive implications. One interviewee discussed how he envisions the path he has traveled going to college, working in industry, and starting a business as a STEM professional as a cumulative process. He said,

I look at my community ... There’s very few job opportunities ... And I feel like the thing that will sustain us in the future and sustain us as a people and sustain our sovereignty is to have economic development in the form of jobs and employment and those kind of things which will allow us to stay in the community, allow us to have opportunity to make a living for ourselves economically and allow us the ability to stay in our community and be connected with our traditional ways. But who’s gonna make that happen? It’s those of us who are going out, getting our degrees, getting experience in the... in the larger world who can come back home and create opportunities... I think being able to bring viable business opportunities to the community is huge... So many of our communities have a casino or a hotel or something... each generation going forward should have the... intent to improve upon with what they were given... you should always think about not only yourself but for those who come after... The destiny is within our hands... I think it has to be... a holistic approach... it’s a slow, methodical process and it’s... an accumulation process.

Role-modeling and trailblazing, like other dimensions of the giving back paradigm, operate on multiple levels. Role-modeling makes it possible for others to imagine becoming a STEM professional. Trailblazing makes the experience of becoming a STEM professional easier for others in the future. Both contain seeds of transformation to strengthen Native American communities and to enhance Native American sovereignty.

**Giving back as a challenge in STEM**

While giving back is a clearly articulated objective for Native Americans and as we demonstrate above, giving back has many dimensions of meaning, figuring out exactly what giving back entails is not as obvious (Guillory 2008, p. 170). This fact has significant implications for STEM participation—who decides to go into STEM. It also influences Native American STEM professionals in an ongoing way. A lack of appreciation of the cultural priority placed on giving back by Native American students exists in the orientation and goals of college administration and STEM
coursework. This lapse has been identified as a damper on Native American participation in STEM. HeavyRunner and DeCelles (2002, p. 8) write that “institutions fail to recognize the disconnect between institutional values and [Indian] student values; hence the real reasons for high attrition rates among disadvantaged students are never addressed.” In a study comparing perspectives of Native American college students and college administrators, Guillory (2009) and Guillory and Wolverton (2008) found that ideas about what it takes to promote Native American persistence and academic achievement held by Native American students and those held by college administrators did not align. While administrators focused on tangible things like financial assistance and curriculum content, students’ responses indicate that “family and giving back to tribal community [provide] the determination and desire to finish [college]” (Guillory 2009, p. 16). Students who are not able to connect their goal of giving back to a college education are less likely to continue their education. Smith and colleagues (2014) looked at this dynamic specifically for Native American STEM students. They identified a lack of “goal congruence” between the priority placed upon giving back by Native American students and a perceived individualistic orientation of careers in the sciences. This perceived individualistic orientation is generally supported by the way that STEM classes are taught and the nature of the knowledge conveyed, even if it is not necessarily indicative of all careers in STEM. Smith and colleagues believe that this lack of perceived goal congruence negatively influences Native American participation in STEM. They “contend that to the extent that Native American students highly endorse communal work goals, this goal endorsement will be associated with feeling that they do not belong in STEM and undermine their persistence in STEM majors” (p. 415).

Interviewees in our study discussed how the challenge to give back is a continuing struggle for STEM professionals. This was a pervasive theme in the interviews we conducted, and a dilemma for interviewees. They discussed a variety of things that make giving back difficult. One described it as a problem of proximity: “We talk about giving back to your Native American community and I don’t have that opportunity because I don’t live near my Native American community.” Another described it as a function of infrastructure: I do think that science needs to come to the reservation. There’s got to be a way that it can be implemented to really help things there and I’m still trying to figure out how that is. There’s not a good infrastructure for engineers to come back and readily help the reservation. It has to be created from…nothing.

In the sciences, certain disciplines are easier to connect to giving back than others. Some of the interviewees in this study have expertise in water resources, forestry, or fisheries that have obvious implications and uses in Native American communities. But others who have degrees in physics, aerospace engineering, mathematics, or computer science find it more challenging to identify ways that the specific content of their scientific expertise can be mobilized in the service of community goals. Interviewees remarked, “That’s one of the things that I would like to do is to give back to my community…it’s just for my particular degree, there really wasn’t any potential for me to [come back],” or “You don’t feel like there’s an immediate,
direct path back into the community workwise,” or “It is a hard thing to understand how going into physics is ever going to help anyone,” and

The concept of giving back…that’s the biggest thing that I’ve been struggling with recently…trying to figure out how this degree in mechanical engineering and my role as an aerospace engineer, how’s that gonna be useful at all to [my tribe]?... And, and if I’m going to come back, there’s not really going to be an existing job there for me to jump into. It has to be created out of something that doesn’t exist yet… I don’t think I’m gonna be working in the same field.

Figuring out how to give back is a continuing challenge that clearly emerges from interviewee narratives.

Conclusion

A number of authors have proposed ideas about how to address the challenge of giving back for Native Americans. Brayboy, Solyom, and Castagno (2014) discuss this issue from the perspective of tribal nation building. They believe that the focus on individual merit and achievement by colleges and universities needs to be transformed to honor Native American students’ cultural values. They see a need for a tribal nation building orientation at institutions of higher learning to not only promote recruitment, persistence, and retention among Native American students, but to facilitate Native American leadership development by specifically supporting a student’s capacity to give back. Guillory (2009) suggests the need for colleges to create programs to allow Native American students to maintain a connection to their community and to have culturally sensitive career counseling. Guillory and Wolverton (2008) recommend creating collaborative programs between tribal communities and educational institutions. Makomenaw (2014) believes that service learning and volunteer programs could be created to allow Native American students to integrate their education with the cultural value of serving communities. Minthorn, Wanger and Shotton (2013) want, in addition to cultivating relationships with Native American communities for collaboration and service learning, to see colleges internalize the priorities of Native American culture and communities in a more structured way. This suggests that connecting Native American students with Native American faculty for structured mentorships that involve work in Native American communities would serve this purpose and would have the added benefit of further promoting leadership in Native American communities.

Situating giving back in STEM

Brayboy, Solyom, and Castagno (2014, p. 590) write that Native American students need more information about how “a college degree can (and to some extent should) add benefit and value from a Native American perspective.” Writing about this issue with a specific focus on STEM education, Smith and colleagues (2014, p. 424) believe that a way to address goal incongruence between the STEM curriculum and Native American students’ values is by incorporating culture in the curriculum. They suggest that first year curriculum courses in STEM could
emphasize the communal value of science and engineering careers, and provide real world applications. Our data suggest that this approach would be extremely valuable. We believe that interviewee narratives demonstrate the need to situate giving back specifically in relation to STEM. Elsewhere (Page-Reeves et al., 2017b) we have discussed how important it is for young people in Native American communities to understand that they do not have to give up their Native American identity if they pursue a career in STEM. We describe how interviewees explicitly indicated that they see our research as providing perspectives that can contribute to developing strategies to help Native American youth understand this fact. As Brayboy, Solyom, and Castagno (2014, p. 591) astutely point out, “institutions of higher education can help encourage students to believe that they do not have to choose between home community/culture and being a college student.” We believe that this is particularly key in STEM, and has implications for thinking about giving back. We propose that in addition to strategies for universities to encourage and connect with Native American students’ desire to give back, STEM industry employers and Native American organizations have a role to play.

In this article, we have demonstrated nuanced dimensions of the giving back paradigm as it relates specifically to careers in STEM. We did this through presentation of quotations from narratives gathered from Native American STEM students and professionals. We have 1900+ pages of transcript data. As should be evident from the extensive quotes we were able to weave into our discussion above, the narratives we gathered were rich, and interviewees—particularly, the professionals—were eager to speak about their experiences and share their ideas. We were incredibly inspired by their stories and their insights. All of them expressed the desire to give back, but the challenges are significant. Building specifically on ideas from Smith and colleagues (2014) for STEM education, and in line with broader insights from Brayboy, Solyom, and Castagno (2014), our data support the idea of a need for specific course content in STEM to help students understand how to connect their career aspirations to their desire to give back.

Students require information to guide them in understanding the ways that a career in STEM can be synthesized with their Native American values and identities (Page-Reeves et al., 2017b) and in figuring out how to think about orienting such a career path to giving back. This is particularly key for those careers that cannot be understood as immediately relevant to the priorities of Native American nation building (e.g., computational mathematics, laser science, or aerospace engineering). We propose that universities and industry could benefit from working with individuals like the interviewees in this study, and our partner, AISES—a national Native American nonprofit dedicated to promoting Native American participation in STEM and a partner on this research (Page-Reeves, et al. 2017e)—to develop course content, curriculum, workshops, and presentations to help students situate giving back into their own conceptualization of what it means to pursue a career in a STEM field. Universities could tap Native American STEM alumni to create these educational components. STEM industry companies could mobilize Native American employees and provide resources for work with universities on these ideas and to create professional contexts where this information could be shared for individuals who have completed their education in STEM and entered the work
world. AISES could be involved in a variety of ways, including by identifying Native American STEM professionals who are particularly interested in these issues.

We propose that Native American professionals who have been trailblazing a path in STEM education and careers have perspectives that are particularly salient for contributing to the development of messaging to communicate positive ideas about STEM to Native American young people. Many are the first Native American individuals to work as professionals or to receive advanced degrees in their field and they have personal experience connecting their professional career goals and activities with their Native American values in order to give back in a way that we have called wayfinding (Page-Reeves et al., 2017c). These individuals have unique experience and perspectives that can help universities and industry develop culturally appropriate materials and processes that can help Native American students see themselves becoming STEM professionals and self-identifying as scientists (Page-Reeves, et al. 2017b). But developing these resources requires a concerted and structured approach. If done strategically, coherently, and holistically, we believe that these strategies for situating giving back will promote expanded participation for Native Americans in STEM. However, because giving back has been demonstrated to resonate with individuals from a variety of populations that continue to be under-represented in STEM, we believe that situating giving back in this way could also have implications for thinking about similar strategies to improve STEM participation for African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and other populations.
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“When You Don't Believe Something Is Real, You Can't Actually Advocate for or Support It”:
Trans* Inclusion in K-12 Schools

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews, ethnographic observations, and survey data, the author examines the ways teachers, administrators, and policy makers conceptualize and influence school environments for students of all genders. This article engages queer studies in education and disability theory to analyze the inclusion of trans* students in schools. Looking at the implementation of the New York City Department of Education’s Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Student Guidelines in K-12 schools, the author questions how we can understand and address the gap between educational practice and policy to create schools that are inclusive of trans* students. How does the denial that transgender and gender non-binary students exist act as a barrier to implementation of the New York City Department of Education’s policy? Administrators’ and teachers’ beliefs that trans* students did not exist in their schools structured ways in which such students were not seen, advocated for, or imagined.

Keywords: education policy, transgender, inclusion, K-12 schooling

Introduction

Seldom are schools safe places for trans* ¹ students (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN, 2017). According to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, students who “expressed a transgender identity or gender nonconformity while in grades K-12 reported alarming rates of harassment (78%), physical assault (35%), and sexual violence (12%); harassment was so severe that it led almost one-sixth (15%) to leave school” (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, & Keisling, 2011, p. 3). Moreover, GLSEN’s 2015 National School Climate Survey found that “three-quarters (75%) of transgender students felt unsafe at school

¹ Throughout this article, I use trans* with an asterisk to refer to a wide range of identities that fall under the trans umbrella such as transgender, genderqueer, gender fluid, gender non-binary, gender nonconforming, gender variant, gender expansive, gender creative, and otherwise non-cisgender. I draw from Avery Tompkins’ (2014) discussion of trans* in Transgender Studies Quarterly’s inaugural issue, in that the asterisk “opens up transgender or trans to a greater range of meanings” (p. 26). Further, my use of trans* is informed by Jack Halberstam’s (2018) position that “the asterisk holds off the certainty of diagnosis, it keeps at bay any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender variant form may be” (p. 4) as well as by Cáel Keegan’s (2018) argument that trans* “indicates an unsettled condition that reflects historically racialized, classed, and gendered intracommunity politics about who counts as a trans subject, while simultaneously pointing at a range of undetermined potentials for interdisciplinary theoretical elaboration” (p. 12).
because of their gender expression, while 60% were forced to use a bathroom or locker room that did not match the gender they live everyday” (Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN, 2017, p. 3). School climate for trans* youth can be non-affirming, unhealthy, and even dangerous; yet, there is little understanding or national discussion about how to better serve this vulnerable population within the compulsory institution of schooling.

There is a growing body of educational research that identifies that the surveillance of bodies as gendered along a binary is taught to young people from the very first days of schooling and continues throughout secondary school (Woolley, 2015; Connell, 1996; Ferguson, 2001; Martin, 1998; Thorne, 1993). In schools, the hidden curriculum of gender regulates bodily comportments, practices, and embodiments, making gendered bodies and their movements appear natural and rigidly dichotomous (Martin, 1998). Individuals’ experiences and subjectivities are constituted to a great extent by school policies, school-level processes, and the identity categories around which educational exclusions and inequalities revolve (Youdell, 2006). A variety of seemingly mundane aspects of schooling govern and reinforce schools’ gender regimes, including dress codes, team sports, segregated bathrooms, different entrance lines for boys and girls, typically gender segregated courses like shop and home economics, and heterocentric sex education (Connell, 1996). These school structures reinforce heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality through rituals of heterosexual performance; regulate gender expression so that it is easily interpreted as masculine or feminine; and mete out penalties for those who cross gender boundaries or express gender in ways that do not match stereotypes assigned to their biological sex (Epstein, 1993; Khayatt, 1995; Renold, 2000).

Educational researchers tend to focus on the ways students’ gender is produced and shaped in schools (Author, 2015; Connell, 1996; Ferguson, 2001; Martin, 1998; Pascoe, 2007; Thorne, 1993), but little focus is given to the ways in which teachers help produce gender, address gendered marginalization, and implement changes toward gender inclusion. Ethnographic research has analyzed how gendered school spaces shape gender identity and student experiences (Banks, 2005; Eckert, 1989), but few have examined how this affects transgender and gender nonconforming students (Woolley, 2015; Ingrey, 2014). Importantly, it has been shown that teachers and administrators often reinforce oppressive norms rather than actively work to fight them (Dessel, 2010). Even among teachers who attempt to address biased remarks of all kinds, biased remarks regarding students who do not conform to traditional gender norms are the least likely of any type of biased comment to be addressed by teachers (Bryan, 2014). Scholars working in this area have called for research to account for the ways critical pedagogy or diversity education inclusive of gender nonconformity influences school safety for gender variant children (ibid.).

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is a federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any education program or activity that receives federal funding. Although the Trump administration withdrew the 2016 Department of Education and Department of Justice’s “Dear Colleague Letter” on transgender students, Title IX still ensures that transgender students have the right to be treated according to their gender identity. As of the time of writing, the Department of Education continues to interpret “sex” to include gender identity under Title IX. However,
“the practical effect of rescinding the guidance is that the federal government is no longer instructing schools that they have an obligation to treat transgender students with the same dignity as any other students including when it comes to restroom access, and that the government has signaled that it may not fully enforce Title IX’s protections” (Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN, 2017, p. 6).

In 2011, California established the FAIR (Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful) Education Act (Senate Bill 48), which compels the inclusion of contributions of LGBT people in textbooks, as well as public schools’ social studies curricula. Since then, only the state of New Jersey has joined California in passing such a law requiring LGBT representation in the curriculum. Yet such policies have had little impact as administrators and practitioners are hesitant to implement changes (Leno, 2013; Leonardi, 2017). In 2013, two years after passing the FAIR Education Act, California enacted the School Success and Opportunity Act, the first state law protecting trans* students. In the same year, New York State passed Education Law 3201, which prohibited discrimination in public education based on a person’s sex.

After a number of high-profile suicides by trans* youth in 2015, New York State issued a set of guidelines to ensure that all students regardless of gender identity or expression have equal access to educational programs and activities. At the time of print, New York State is one of fifteen states (CA, CO, CT, HI, IL, IA, MA, ME, MN, NJ, NY, OR, RI, VT, WA), plus the District of Columbia, that has a nondiscrimination law protecting students based on gender identity and guidelines for creating an inclusive learning environment.2 In New York, state and federal policies—New York State’s Dignity for All Students Act (DASA), New York State Education Law 3201, and Title IX—protect trans* students from discrimination based on their sex, gender identity, or gender expression in public schools. Yet, about 9 in 10 LGBTQ students in New York State regularly heard other students make negative remarks about how someone expressed their gender, such as not acting “feminine” or “masculine” enough, and 27% regularly heard staff make negative remarks about someone’s gender expression (GLSEN, 2013). In 2014, the New York City Department of Education (NYC DoE) established recommendations for schools to create a safe and supportive school environment for trans* students. In March 2017, the NYC DoE revised and extended these recommendations considerably, publishing the Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Student Guidelines. In these guidelines, the NYC DoE asserts:

It is the policy of the New York City Department of Education to maintain a safe and supportive school environment for all students free from harassment, intimidation, and/or bullying and free from discrimination on account of actual or perceived race, color, creed, ethnicity, national origin, citizenship/immigration status, religion, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, disability, or weight. (New York City Department of Education, 2017, p. 1)

My research questions emerged from this policy context as I wondered how these guidelines were being implemented in practice and what kinds of challenges teachers and

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2 While there are 15 states with such nondiscrimination laws in place to protect trans* students, as recently as 2017 seventeen states, including New York State, proposed legislation to ban transgender students from using the school facilities that match the gender they live every day (Al, AR, IL, KS, KY, MN, MO, MT, NC, NY, SC, SD, TN, TX, VA, WA, WY) (Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN, 2017, p. 7). For up-to-date information, see Equality Federation, http://www.equalityfederation.org/lae/antitrans.
administrators may find in implementing them. In this work, I question how we can conceptualize and address the gap between educational practice and policy in the case of creating K-12 schools that are inclusive of trans* students. It is our responsibility as researchers and practitioners to question what inclusion for trans* students in K-12 schooling looks like, and this is the primary question I take up in my research in New York City (NYC) schools.

Methodology

Data collection and analysis

This study draws on qualitative research methodology, weaving together ethnographic observations, interviews, surveys, and the collection of artifacts. The multiple sources of data I gathered—including audio-recorded interviews and transcripts, ethnographic fieldnotes, survey responses, and cultural artifacts generated by participants—enabled me to effectively triangulate patterns and recurring themes in my data and my research findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Using the framework of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), I focused on multiple schools as sites where the NYC DoE policy is being implemented. In my ethnographic observational fieldnotes in schools, I focused on structures and practices that offer opportunities for inclusion or exclusion of trans* students, such as the curriculum; bathrooms and locker rooms; systems for tracking student information; gender segregation practices like lining up boys and girls separately; the visibility of LGBTQ people and topics; and resources available about being trans* (e.g., health center, gay-straight alliance or gender-sexuality alliance or GSA, counselor, social worker, etc.).

I used interviews to better understand teachers’ and administrators’ practices, perceptions, and ways of negotiating challenges they face trying to make schools more inclusive spaces for trans* students. Individual interviews provided me insight into participants’ perceptions and understandings, processes of meaning-making and explanations of phenomena in their social worlds, as well as how they narrate and represent their experiences. Interviewing, as a qualitative mode of inquiry, calls on participants to answer and elaborate on their responses to open-ended questions, to narrate their stories and experiences, and to offer their interpretations of these experiences (Seidman, 2006). I collected survey data to get a sense of teachers’ experiences across a wider range of schools, and for those teachers I interviewed, to gain more insight about their experience teaching and their school. As cultural and material records of information produced in school, artifacts help to round out a picture of how knowledge about gender is generated, contested, and negotiated. Some artifacts I collected include publicly available DoE communications, news articles about DoE teachers and schools in my study, educational materials from LGBTQ-related DoE professional development workshops, and LGBTQ visibility materials from the schools. All of these data sources—ethnographic, interview, survey, and artifacts—work to provide a more comprehensive picture of how trans-inclusive policy is being carried out in practice.
I called on the help of two undergraduate research assistants, as well as a professional transcriptionist to transcribe the interview recordings. I coded and analyzed fieldnotes, artifacts, and interviews using Discourse Analytic techniques in order to examine how language in action produces gender normativity (Jaworski & Coupland, 2006; Wooffitt, 2005). Using MAXQDA, I organized, coded, and analyzed my data to reveal emerging themes, patterns, and anomalies. In this process, I wrote analytic memos discussing evidence that confirmed or disconfirmed the patterns I identified.

Sites and subjects

During the 2016-2017 school year, I carried out ethnographic site visits in 19 different schools and at three NYC DoE Professional Development events related to LGBTQ issues in education. The 19 sites spanned New York City’s five boroughs, with the fewest sites (1) and fewest participants (5%) from Staten Island. Similarly, I only visited one school in the Bronx, but teachers from the Bronx made up 13% of my interview participants. I visited three schools in Queens, but Queens teachers accounted for just 5% of my interview participants. I visited seven schools in Manhattan and seven in Brooklyn. Although over a third of my sites were located in either Manhattan or Brooklyn, 29% of my interview participants teach in Manhattan schools, while 48% teach in Brooklyn. Of the 19 sites in my study, 37% were in high poverty schools, 42% in mid-high poverty, 16% in mid-low poverty, and 5% in low poverty schools.3

I recruited teachers through various means beginning with emails to principals for permission and circulation at their schools per the Department of Education’s direction. After initial contact was made with all 1,835 public K-12 schools in New York City and approved by the NYC DoE, I reached out for participants through local teacher education programs as well as listservs like the United Federation of Teachers, NYC Teaching Fellows, NY Collective of Radical Educators, GLSEN, and the Trans and Non-Binary Educators Network. I employed purposive sampling to select interviewees, and I recruited teachers who had a particular interest or history in supporting trans* students in schools. Although I began by recruiting teachers to participate in interviews, it quickly became clear that principals and other school staff had important information and perspectives to share, as well as the desire to do so. I expanded my subject pool beyond teachers, and in total, I interviewed 52 teachers, eight principals and two deans, eight GSA coordinators, three guidance counselors, two social workers, and seven paraprofessionals. I also interviewed three policy makers and employees at the New York City Department of Education. To compensate participants for their time, I made a $45 donation to their school or the donorschoose.org cause of their choice.4 I also collected survey data from a small sample size of 80 teachers, many of whom I interviewed either before or after they completed the survey. For this study, the survey data served as further

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3 According to the National Center for Education Statistics, high-poverty schools are defined as those where more than 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL (free/reduced-priced lunch), mid-high poverty schools have 50.1 to 75.0% students eligible, mid-low poverty schools have 25.1 to 50.0% students eligible, and low-poverty schools have 25.0% or less students eligible for FRPL. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_clb.asp

4 This was with the exception of the DoE employees who could not accept compensation for our meeting.
explanatory information about the teachers’ schools and experiences to complement what I learned in their interviews.

In reaching out to principals and recruiting participants, there was a range of reactions to my call. Some of the folks who participated had some stake in supporting trans* people or issues—for example, they may have identified along the trans* spectrum, or as queer, or were close to someone who does. Others had colleagues or friends who identified as LGBTQ, and they were interested in ways to support this demographic. Other participants may have been motivated by the compensation, not necessarily their experience or interest in the topic of my study. There was another group of participants who felt strongly opposed to trans* people’s rights and the NYC DoE’s policy, and a last group that declined to participate.

The racial demographics of my interview participants were: 53% white, 16% Latinx, 14% Black, 10% multiracial, 5% Asian, 1% Native American. Interestingly, 46% of my sample identified as straight or heterosexual, while 54% identified on the LGBQ spectrum. Of the LGBQ population in my sample, 55% self-identified as queer, 13% as gay, 13% as bisexual, 11% as lesbian, and 8% as flexible. In terms of gender, 58% of my participants identified as cisgender women, 26% as cisgender men, and 16% as transgender or somewhere on the trans* spectrum. The participants whose words are represented and discussed in this article identify across a wide variety of identity markers: (Puerto Rican, Polish, Russian, Bengali, Jamaican, West Indian, Black, Latinx, Southeast Asian, mixed race, white, Catholic, Baptist, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, atheist, large bodied, woman, trans, transmasculine, male, queer, bisexual, and straight). Throughout this article, I intentionally exclude identifying markers and information about my participants so as to protect their anonymity. Revealing specifics about how they identify, what kind of school they work at, or in what borough unnecessarily risks disclosing who my participants are. What is more important to consider is that they are the perspectives and experiences of K-12 teachers and administrators across the vast New York City public school system.

**Researcher positionality**

As a white, cisgender, queer woman who is an academic researcher and professor, I experienced the social privilege of being granted access to schools and participants for this study. My professional status, whiteness, and cisgenderedness further aided this access, as I was viewed as somehow normatively belonging to the space of schools despite my clear outsider status as a researcher from outside the district. Similarly, my professional status and whiteness also made it more difficult for me to gain the trust and admittance of some principals and schools. As someone who is cisgender working on trans* issues in schools, I aim to be an ally to trans* and other marginalized people. Doing this work means sometimes leveraging my cisgender privilege to advocate for others, and at other times seeking out collaborators amongst my trans* participants, research assistants, and colleagues. Through this process, I have tried to put the voices and concerns of trans* educators, administrators, and students at the front of what I do and to pay attention to the ways my cisgender privilege can structure my understanding of gender. I rely
on and am deeply grateful for the feedback and guidance of my trans* colleagues and participants. As a queer-identified woman with queer political commitments and a scholar in queer studies with queer theoretical leanings, this work is shaped by my positionality.

Policy in Everyday Practice

Despite taking expansive approaches toward implementing New York City Department of Education policy, schools have adopted recommendations in irregular fashion. Administrators’ reactive approach toward implementing gender inclusive policy and practices in schools is justified by the logic that trans* students do not exist in their presence. The refusal and denial of trans* existence coupled with perceived absence and invisibility contribute to the faulty logic that trans* students are not present and do not need inclusion or access to K-12 schooling.

Reactive approach toward implementing policy

The NYC DoE’s guidelines call for schools to take a proactive approach toward implementing these support systems for all students regardless of how they may identify. Yet, most participants described their school’s approach as reactive—of reacting and working toward supporting trans* students only if and when someone disclosed their non-cisgender identity to the school administration. From there, schools worked with the specificity of that particular case and setting to consider accommodations. One teacher described the situation as, “We just have to work with what we have, and if it comes up we’ll deal with it, but there’s no actual plan to deal with it. And just because they are silent, doesn’t mean that they don’t exist or that there isn’t a need to address it” (Interview with AV77, 4/10/17). This teacher further considered how coming out and disclosing oneself as trans* could impact a student’s educational experience in their school, commenting:

I think the biggest challenge is just that there's no support from the powers at large – the administration. …. I don't know how my administration would react, and I don't know what I could do to support them, and I think the biggest challenge is not knowing how this school would respond to something like that. (Interview with AV77, 4/10/17)

Reactive approaches reproduce the exceptionalism of trans* identities while refusing to acknowledge their possible presence, or as one teacher pointed out that, “trans people have always been here” (Interview with HF43, 4/3/17). Talking about educating students about trans* people, this teacher continued:

You've always gone to the bathroom with trans people, and it never mattered, and you probably didn't know, right? So, they can just, like, them knowing that trans people exist, that trans people are not tropes, …. that they should always assume that it is a part of their world. (Interview with HF43, 4/3/17)

This teacher’s normalizing approach positions trans* people as a normal, not exceptional, part of their social world. I found there were a number of outstanding teachers teaching about LGBTQ topics, and transgender people in particular, and
their proactive and normalizing approach helped to make trans* people just another part of the curriculum and the school and classroom communities.

For many, the basis for taking a reactive approach was the belief that one does not need to act until there is a student present who is declaring themselves trans* and asking for accommodations. The most common response that I received from principals—of the 1800+ to whom I sent my recruitment materials—was that those students are not at my school. The belief that trans* students did not exist in schools, and by extension, in society, meant that trans* students were not seen. Despite the high probability that some gender nonconforming, gender non-binary, or transgender student has attended or is attending any of the New York City public schools, they were not necessarily recognized. Trans* students were invisible to the administration, which was made audible through their very denial. It is possible that not all trans* students want to be seen and that some chose not to disclose their identity. Eve Sedgwick (1990) argues that the closet is structured by double-binds that make coming out simultaneously compulsory, yet forbidden. If one conceptualizes such nondisclosure as remaining in the closet, then coming out as trans* is similarly compulsory, yet forbidden. The threats of violence for gender nonconformity are real, so in some cases the closet is the safest place to be. Yet, if a student was not out as trans* to many administrators and teachers, they were believed to not exist in that school.

Expansive approaches to trans* inclusion

The NYC DoE takes an expansive approach to inclusive practices and ways to implement their policy for supporting trans* students in their schools. Their guidelines suggest changes that schools can make in order to be compliant with the policy, such as using students’ chosen names and pronouns, corresponding names on student records and information systems, reviewing and eliminating gender-based practices without clear pedagogical purpose, avoiding gendered dress codes (e.g., requiring girls to wear skirts), providing opportunity to participate in physical education and sports, and addressing restroom and locker room accessibility.

Based on the 19 schools that I observed and the 42 schools my participants taught in, my findings suggest that the most inclusive schools for trans* students share certain traits. The schools that were most accommodating of their trans* students’ needs had in place systems for tracking students’ chosen names and pronouns and which to use with whom; professional development with staff about meeting LGBTQ students’ needs; the incorporation of LGBTQ topics into the curriculum; an active GSA; and some version of gender neutral or all gender bathrooms. Unsurprisingly, the most accommodating schools had LGBTQ visibility represented in the form of out LGBTQ staff and students, as well as in school materials and posters hanging in the hallways, LGBTQ sections in the library, and LGBTQ resources in classroom collections.

Many sites had designations as inclusive and bias-free schools from GroundSpark’s Respect for All Project, and some of the teachers and administrators wore OUT for Safe Schools® badges from the national campaign to visibly identify trusted adults to LGBTQ students. A few of these schools were beginning to pay
In the most inviting schools, there was a culture of acceptance and celebration of LGBTQ people, while in other cases LGBTQ people were merely tolerated or met outright hostility. At the sites where the school climate was not positive for LGBTQ students, one of the most challenging aspects was addressing hurtful language, and the schools struggled to educate students about the power of their words. Even in the most accommodating schools, offensive language was still prevalent but the teachers and students had developed routines for calling out and educating about the hurtfulness of language like “that’s so gay” and “she/he” or intentionally misgendering a student.

Interestingly, many of the schools successfully creating inclusive educational environments for trans* youth are also working toward or have already implemented Restorative Justice practices. Dialogue about grievances proved to be the most effective methods for mediating young people’s conflicts and supporting LGBTQ students who had been targeted or victimized at these schools. Schools with Restorative Justice processes tended to have more resources and support systems for their trans* students, such as student clubs like GSAs, counselors, support groups, trans* representation in curriculum and library books, and school policies aimed to protect trans* students from discrimination. Teachers, principals, and students at these schools reported positive learning environments that were not void of problems, but supportive overall.

Lack of uniform implementation

Across schools, teachers, and administrators, I observed a lack of uniform implementation or awareness of the DoE’s guidelines on supporting transgender and gender nonconforming students. In contrast with most inclusive schools for trans* students that I describe above, there were schools that I visited and that my participants worked in where there was no training or discussion of the NYC DoE guidelines and few structures, if any, in place to support LGBTQ or gender variant students. I interviewed members of the NYC DoE, who acknowledged this lack of awareness of the guidelines was common. Referring to the guidelines, they said:

We ask in our training if participants have seen these and they say no. We ask, because your principal provided you with these... a lot of them don’t remember hearing about it from their principal, don’t think that their principal provided it to them, and it can be a lot to expect somebody to go back to their school and inform their school principal about these policies. And so, we do need to do more to reach principals so that they know that these are the policies, and it is your responsibility to message these down to your staff. (Interview with NYC DoE, 1/9/17)
The NYC DoE specifies that the responsibility of ensuring school staff and students are familiar with the guidelines falls on principals or their designees (NYC DoE, 2017, p. 8). In many cases, teachers had to seek out this information for themselves.

I observed, as well as discussed, with principals, deans, teachers, and staff various practices in their schools that conflicted with the NYC DoE’s guidelines. Schools held onto gender segregation practices like having different color graduation robes for boys and girls, different parts for boys and girls to sing in a song at graduation, dress codes that enforced sex stereotypes such as requiring girls to wear skirts, and dividing along binary gender groupings. Dress codes were suspended, however, for special spirit days such as “Gender Bending Day,” in which students were invited to dress up as “the opposite” gender in a binary model of gender as masculine/feminine, boy/girl, man/woman. In practice, Gender Bending Days looked like girls wearing baggy clothes and boys wearing short skirts, fake breasts, and heels, hypersexualizing and mocking feminine gender performance. Gender bending on “Gender Bending Days” is sanctioned for cisgender heterosexual people to perform in an ironic fashion, not as a celebration of gender variance in identity and expression.

Although dividing students by binary boy/girl or male/female lines is discouraged by the NYC DoE, as well as research on pedagogy and gender (see Woolley, 2015), one third of my survey participants said that students were divided into binary gender groupings ‘sometimes to always’ at their school. Lining up students by gender was commonplace, but even more so at the elementary level. One teacher explained, “I try to do boy and girl lines when we're lining up because, you know, we try to make the classrooms as evenly as possible” (Interview with ST62, 3/24/17). The balance hinged on the binary was justified in terms of maintaining order and policing behavior. This teacher continued,

Some of my boys this year are a little rowdy, and they need a girl next to them to calm them down and be like, ‘Stop. You're not doing the right thing.’ Other times, it’s easier to have a boys’ line and a girls’ line because, especially in the beginning of the year, they can't go to the bathroom by themselves. We have to take them to the bathroom that's down the hall, so it’s easier to keep track of them. (Interview with ST62, 3/24/17)

The order imposed in separating students by boys and girls was more valued than a student’s autonomy not to be categorized by gender in order to go to the restroom.

One middle school in Brooklyn celebrated their “Girls’ Expo” and “Boys’ Expo” days, continuing with this tradition despite the DoE’s call for schools to review and eliminate gender segregation practices that do not serve a clear pedagogical purpose (NYC DoE, 2017, p. 8). In the Girls and Boys Expos students were separated “by female and male” as most administrators and teachers referred to these groups, using binary sex and gender categories interchangeably. The content and guest speakers varied across the two expos to reflect the sex/gender of their audience. At this school, at least one transgender student was forced to go to an expo in line with their sex assigned at birth, but out of line with how they identify and express their gender. The assistant principal explained that “the boys’ and girls’ summit was a big thing because the intentions are great, but here, this one student
doesn’t identify as female or girl, but is being forced to go to the girls’ summit despite the fact they identify as being male” (Interview with JM13, 5/25/17). Without forethought and possibilities for choice, requiring a student to participate in a gender-segregated activity can not only be embarrassing and delegitimizing for a student, but also runs the risk of inflicting trauma and/or a gender dysphoric episode.

The implementation of all-gender restrooms, gender-neutral restrooms, and single-stall occupancy restrooms spanned a wide range and was the most contested of accommodations I examined across the schools in my study. Resistance to adding such a bathroom was largely framed and understood through the notion of limited resources and the zero-sum game. That is, in order to accommodate some students and give them a resource like a safe bathroom, it was seen by teachers and administrators as necessarily taking away something from someone else. I collected data during the 2016-2017 school year, and thus, my data reflects how restrooms were addressed before Chancellor Fariña announced the Single Stall Student Restrooms Initiative on May 2, 2017. Although the implementation of accessible restrooms for transgender and non-binary students is an important site of intervention, the topic is outside of the scope of this article. I suggest further research be conducted on how the Single Stall Student Restrooms Initiative is being implemented in NYC schools.

Refusal and denial

A few participants reported working with administrators and teachers who were antagonistic toward LGBTQ students or who discouraged their staff from wearing Out for Safe Schools® badges. In some schools, LGBTQ people were not out about their LGBTQ identity, choosing not to disclose their gender and/or sexuality with their co-workers for a complex assortment of reasons. In most schools, LGBTQ topics were not spoken about nor represented in the curriculum. Most participants indicated they heard language like “faggot” and “that’s so gay” frequently at school, with the exception of those who worked in small alternative schools, which tend to have an ethos based on respect for diversity, as well as in transfer schools, which often have higher percentages of LGBTQ students who have been pushed out of their previous schools.

The DoE implemented an online system for tracking students’ information that allows for students to designate their preferred name and pronouns. Many trans* students use this technology, and there were administrators and teachers who acknowledge and respect their wishes, but this was not the case in all schools. Some teachers were aware of, but refused to adhere to and implement the NYC DoE’s guidelines. Their rationale was grounded in ideological beliefs, pragmatic concerns, and for some, a zero-sum logic of resources and rights. One teacher explained her stance:

I absolutely do not believe that you should require teachers to call a kid by a certain pronoun, or to respect their wishes in a name that is not the name that's on your enrollment. What you're doing is you're setting teachers up to get in trouble for yet another thing and, you know, when there's an
administration that's out to get a teacher, or there's a student that's out to get a teacher, and they call them, they refer to them as she and it was supposed to be he, or the other way around, like, suddenly the teacher's open to disciplinary action. So, when you grant rights to one group of people, you're taking them away from somebody else. And teachers are enough of a target. I just don't ever want gender to become something that is my responsibility. You come in here, boy or girl, whatever. It's on a sheet of paper: a name is on a sheet of paper and that is what I will go by. I don't want to get involved in your politics. And just because you feel, or some child feels that they have the right to express their individuality in any way they want doesn't mean that you can force me into whatever little dream world you got going on there with who you think you are. I don't give a shit who you think you are. I'm a teacher. I'm teaching content. Who you are is your own business. Keep it out of my classroom. I think that's dangerous territory for teachers for that to become our responsibility to respect their wishes. Screw that. They're children, you know? Your parents will tell you, tell us what gender you are and I will go by that because it's on our form. In my classroom, I will make sure that, you know, we are fair and open, and I will protect them as the children they are, no matter what their gender, but saying that I need to behave a certain way, I need to use certain words, I need to use certain names, just opens me up for getting in trouble and it's not my job at all. (Interview with MM70, 4/12/17)

For this particular teacher, the risk to a teacher who could face disciplinary action was more important than the risk to a student who could face a teacher unwilling to affirm their name, pronoun, or gender. Respecting a student’s wishes and their sense of self fell outside of what this participant thought should be a teacher’s responsibility. Instead, the vulnerability of teachers who are already targeted and may be subject to disciplinary action because they use the wrong name or pronouns is more important to consider and protect than any individual student who “feels that they have the right to express their individuality in any way they want” or who lives in a “little dream world” (Interview with MM70, 4/12/17). By referring to a student’s gender identity as a “little dream world,” this teacher indicates that she deems their gender—and by extension, their humanity and self—invalid, non-existent, and not based in reality.

Through the frame of the zero-sum game, this teacher articulated her resistance to implementing an all-gender or gender-neutral bathroom in her school, as she believed it would issue special treatment, not rights or accommodations, to non-cisgender students at the expense of cisgender students. She asserted that granting rights to one group of people meant taking them away from somebody else. She continued, “When you start granting rights and saying that the schools must comply,  

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5 The New York City Department of Education asserts, “Every student is entitled to be addressed by the name and pronoun that corresponds to the student’s gender identity that is consistently asserted at school. Students are not required to obtain parental consent or a court ordered name and/or gender change as a prerequisite to being addressed by the name and pronoun that corresponds to their gender identity. Teachers and other school staff should be made aware of and honor a student’s request to be referred to by the name and gender that corresponds to their gender identity” (NYC DoE, 2017, p. 6). I interpret this guideline as specifying that it is the responsibility of teachers and staff to respect a student’s wish to be referred to by their preferred name and gender, despite the opinions of people like participant MM70.
how many resources are we diverting for one or two kids who, you know, may or may not even be there in order to comply with something that is vague?” (Interview with MM70, 4/12/17). The payoff of securing a safe and supportive educational environment for these students does not justify the diversion of resources, as this teacher sees it. This teacher’s speculation about the presence or absence of trans* students who “may or may not even be there,” points to her disbelief that they are present in her school.

In some schools, there was disbelief that trans* students are present, or in some cases, that transgender people even exist. Teachers reported working with colleagues who doubted the realness – the authenticity and the legitimacy – of their trans* students. One teacher mentioned that “what was revealed is that some teachers were just like, ‘I don’t really. Like, I don't believe that people are trans’” (Interview with AC83, 4/3/17). Another teacher articulated this tension in the following way:

One of the things that feels hardest is with the other adults in the building. I've had conversations with them where it's just like, you don't get to decide that someone else isn't real. And that's essentially what you're doing by being uncomfortable and sort of scoffing at it, having to ‘accommodate’ somebody else's – what you think of as – imaginary identity, and that's really tough, right? When you don't believe something is real, you can't actually advocate for or support it. (Interview with HF43, 4/3/17)

Doubting the authenticity of a trans* student’s identity undermines their right to self-determination, but scoffing at a person mocks their right to declare who they are. When a teacher denies the reality of their students’ experiences and identities, there is no foundation on which to build relationships and to educate. Teachers cannot support or accommodate someone they do not believe is real, authentic, or valid. The logic of absence, as evidenced by invisibility and illegibility, structures how these teachers imagine and implement inclusion for trans* students.

**Epistemologies of Exclusion**

Principles of universal design and equitable use would posit that making changes such as adding an all-gender bathroom that is accessible, including LGBTQ topics and people in the curriculum, or respecting a student’s desire to be referred to by a particular name and pronouns, benefits everyone—transgender or not. So, on the one hand, schools could implement the DoE’s guidelines proactively regardless if they have trans* students present or out in their school for the benefit of all. On the other hand, if teachers and administrators do not think that trans* students are real, or that gender variance is real, then why implement guidelines for a population they do not believe exists?

When disbelief structures how one thinks of a person or a population of students, their invisibility and silence reinforces one’s belief that they do not exist, and thus, can justifiably be excluded. Through refusal and denial, trans* students are treated like a justifiably excludable type, which acts as a barrier to implementation of gender inclusive policy and practice. Disability studies scholar, Tanya
Titchkosky, analyzes how the everyday narration of disability acts as a social power that reproduces the status quo even as the material environment changes. Titchkosky looks closely at the ways disability is conceptualized as absent or non-present, and I extend her argument to think about the ways trans* students are perceived as not present in schools. Titchkosky (2008) writes:

One way disability is represented in everyday life is as a justifiably excluded type... As a justifiable absence, this conception of disability acts as a barrier to inclusion for some disabled people. Unless the relation between environment and its participants is theorized and thereby disturbed, disability will continue to be included as an excludable type. (p. 46)

This logic justifies excluding certain people such as disabled people and trans* people by saying that they somehow are not present.

Here, absence is a useful presence. Saying such people are not present, even though empirically not true, justifies a mythical absence as part of the productive sensibility maintaining the status quo. That is, as not perceivable, perceivable only as a question, and absent from representation, according to Titchkosky’s argument. In this way, the social organization of disability or gender variance as an absent presence is expressed as an excludable type of people. The perceived absence of trans* students in K-12 schools justifies principals and administrators not implementing the NYC DoE’s policy guidelines through this logic of an excludable type. Such perceived absence, coupled with active denial of their existence, reproduces the exceptionalism and heightened visibility of trans* students. Moreover, their perceived absence calls on trans* students to out or disclose themselves in order to be visible and counted, so that they may possibly access certain services and resources, despite the safety and comfort issues that raises at their schools.

What are the barriers to implementing policy designed to create safe and supportive school environments for trans* students? Are the barriers attitudinal, structural, or relational? In this case, are the barriers ones of imagination, or are they epistemological? Dean Spade (2011) warns us that law reform strategies like anti-discrimination laws and hate crime laws beckon us to join the neoliberal order, overly rely on a model of individualized bad behavior rather than the structural violence of binary gender, and hide and preserve the conditions of subjection. Spade (2011) takes up the “question of whether legal recognition and inclusion are felicitous goals for trans politics” (p. 33). This question, in particular, engages with the problem that “neoliberalism holds out a false promise of inclusion” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2015, p. 63). Beginning with the epistemological and empirical questions of how one identifies a trans* person, the burden of proof falls on those made to be invisible (and simultaneously hyper visible), misrecognized (and illegible), and not imagined. The persistence of being invisiblized creates both material and discursive violence that impacts how we might imagine one’s presence and belonging. The logic of who is imagined as present and not present shapes epistemology and ways of knowing one’s world. Moreover, assumptions about who is and is not present shape access considerations. Alison Kafer (2013) explains that “the inability to value queer lives is related to the inability to imagine disabled lives. Both are
failures of the imagination supporting and supported by the drive toward normalcy and normalization” (Kafer, 2013, p. 45). In the myopia that normalcy and normalization produce, how might one see and recognize the range of gender expression humanity encompasses? Mired in normality, how might one come to see what one cannot imagine? “Who benefits from normativity being the precondition of access itself?” (Adair, 2015, p. 467). In this way, lack of imagination and lack of access shape normativity, reproducing trans* marginalization and invisibility.

Openings: Concluding Thoughts

While the NYC DoE guidelines and policy are comprehensive, how they are implemented in practice varies considerably across its 1800+ schools. Having support structures and protocols for care in place in schools may proactively create a more inclusive learning environment for trans* students. One teacher reminds us to be wary of reductive checklists or boxes that fail to capture the complexity of a whole person:

I think the way that the DoE and other folks wish it to be is that a kid shows up and is like, ‘here’s my certificate of transness, I was this thing, and now I’m this thing. Take me from this box to this box. These are all the things that I want and need,’ when like, how we actually support kids is like, we don’t know, I don’t know … the way we actually support trans kids is by like, I mean, there’s no formula, it’s a process. You just listen and talk and reformulate and figure things out and are supportive of the person as a human being. Not like here’s a checklist of what we do for trans kids. (Interview with CK24, 5/25/17)

The guidelines offer schools suggestions for things they can do to be compliant with the policy. For schools just beginning to implement changes, the areas covered in the guidelines and the examples given can serve as a kind of checklist. The guidelines provide a detailed list of practices and structures to develop, as well as those to edit or eliminate. But, as the teacher above warns us, the checklist cannot be everything we do or the only places in which we see trans* students. Because “there’s no formula,” supporting the needs of trans* students involve listening, reformulating, and being “supportive of the person as a human being” (Interview with CK24, 5/25/17). Such support cannot be reduced to a checklist, but should meet an individual’s emergent needs. Inclusion has to be about opening up our approach to attending to trans* students’ needs and to their emergent processes—allowing for the possibility that the ways they identify and make themselves legible may shift, while refusing to impose the violence of naming or solidifying gender. At the same time, inclusion must proactively implement structural changes without relying on the presence, visibility, and thus, vulnerability, of marginalized people.

What if the barrier to implementation of policy is denial, belief that someone or something doesn’t exist, and unwillingness to see or to imagine? Diversity initiatives, anti-discrimination policies, and lip-service to inclusion do not enact the structural changes needed to create more just educational institutions. Is it necessary for trans* people (self-identified, out, and visible, and thus vulnerable, as such) to
populate the public body or the student body of a school in order to be seen, included, and protected from discrimination? What if no one populates that public body as far as school officials may recognize? “Who is included or excluded in our political imaginaries?” (Kafer, 2013, p. 153). How do we hold schools accountable for including students they cannot or do not want to imagine? Why should the burden of legibility fall on trans* students rather than on schools as inclusive institutions charged with implementing inclusive practices for trans* students?

This work asks us to consider whose risk matters more? In what ways? Who decides what is real? Or valid? How do denial and disbelief structure possibility for trans* students? How do silence and invisibility structure their very absence and presence? By dismissing trans* students as a justifiably excludable type, or as not real, teachers and administrators choose to ignore their needs and fail to support or advocate for them. Rather, trans* students deserve respect, self-determination, and recognition of their humanity, and all schools should be resolute, yet flexible and emergent, in making trans* inclusive structures and practices throughout their institution. Spade (2011) calls for a trans politics that “finds solidarity with other struggles articulated by the forgotten, the inconceivable, the spectacularized, and the unimaginable” (p. 33). It is in this space of imagining that we might “assemble trans and disability such that rather than cohering as new transnormativities, they do not strive to manifest wholeness or to invest in the self as coherent and thereby reproduce liberal norms of being” (Puar, 2014, p. 80). By embracing the unimaginable and resisting externally-imposed coherence onto gender expression and embodiment, school officials would be better positioned to see and include their trans* students.

References


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Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the teachers and administrators who participated and the New York City Department of Education which supported my study. I also owe my gratitude to my wife Tiffany Tai and my mother-in-law Gloria Tai, who took care of my kids while I wrote this piece. My research assistants Em Rubey and Julie Nguyen provided invaluable support in helping to transcribe, code, and analyze my data. This article reflects a series of dialogues with all of the respondents and panelists with whom I presented various iterations of this paper. These dialogues enriched my argument and analysis, and for that I am deeply grateful to sj Miller, Em Rubey, Ashley Taylor, Brenda Nyandiko Sanya, Durell M. Callier, Lance McCreary, and Lee Airt. The generative responses and questions asked after I gave talks on this paper pushed my revisions and thinking. I am grateful for the space to present my research in Colgate University’s Social Sciences Division and Women’s Studies Program, the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA), and in the Committee on Scholars and Advocates for Gender Equity in Education, the Queer Studies Special Interest Group, and the Disability Studies in Education Special Interest Group in the American Educational Research Association (AERA). I appreciate the feedback from the anonymous reviewers as well as the direction and patience provided by the Editor, Beth Giebus-Chavez. This research project was generously funded by the Spencer Foundation Small Research Grant and Colgate University's Picker Research Fellowship and Research Council Grant. The views expressed in this article do not reflect those of the funding agencies, and any mistakes or omissions are solely my fault.
Constructing a Relevant Contemporary Philosophy of Education: 
Explorations of a Freirean Scholar

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Abstract

Using Paulo Freire’s (2005) theoretical construct of generative themes, this essay discusses the necessary elements of a relevant contemporary philosophy of education, drawing on dominant themes in the work of several representative, seminal thinkers: Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Dewey, Du Bois, Freire, Morrison and hooks. Each of these thinkers addresses issues that are quite pertinent to contemporary educational practice, highlighting the importance and intersectionality of class, race, and gender, alongside the importance of democracy as both a political ideal and instructional method. The essay will end with a harmonization of the identified generative themes of each of these thinkers into the author’s educational philosophy, formalized to be as pertinent as possible to the issues of today’s classrooms.

Keywords: Class, gender, race, intersectionality

A large part of what has formed us, both as educators and as people, is the writing that has shaped our thinking. Towards this end, the focus of much undergraduate and graduate coursework in colleges of education is to lead educators through the personal journey of developing their own philosophy of education. As an assistant professor working towards tenure, now working to guide this process with my students in their own coursework, I have spent a lot of time trying to identify the thinkers that have most influenced me. This essay represents an attempt at modeling the type of deconstruction of one’s own influences that I hope to help my students undertake.

In so doing, I am deliberately focusing on a few key figures, those who both represent significant shifts in educational philosophy writ large and whose work was personally influential in shaping my own educational philosophy. I have organized it chronologically, beginning with Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau (1918) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1891), moving to John Dewey (1921) and his contributions to the integration of democracy as both educational goal and method. With W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) and the literary example of Toni Morrison (1970), I explore my own growing recognition of how marginalized racial groups are not yet being fully included in Dewey’s idealized democratic society. With my discussion of Paulo Freire (2005) comes an even fuller recognition of how lower classes and citizens in developing countries are still marginalized within education, and how education can be used as a
mechanism to change that unequal reality and bring about a more egalitarian, utopian society. I will also consider how Freire’s general model of liberation through education, though limited in Freire’s own conception thereof with regards to race and gender, has been more fully developed in both areas by thinkers such as bell hooks (1994).

This progression of educational models and ideals of inclusion over time fits closely with Freire’s (2005) theoretical construct of generative themes—that is, in different time periods different principles have dominated the conversation within the philosophy of education. These principles tend to build upon one another, as each new generation of thinkers recognizes glaring inequalities and gaps in previous philosophers’ thinking and seek to fill those gaps through their own theoretical writings. While I did not encounter these thinkers chronologically in this same order, the progression of thinking represented in their writing here maps well onto the changes in my own thinking over time, and it is that personal progression that is the focus of this essay. I will explore each philosopher’s thinking in terms of the dominant generative themes that are addressed, as well as the blind spots which remain to be filled by future thinkers.

To conclude, I will discuss how I have harmonized the various dominant generative themes within each of these philosophical thinkers’ work into one philosophy of education that does its best to recognize all the needs which must be addressed through contemporary educational practice.

Rousseau

Rousseau (1918) is one of the first modern thinkers to fully address the education of children in his seminal tome, *Emile*. While my first encounters with Rousseau in an undergraduate philosophy course were relatively cursory, primarily focused on his theories regarding human nature, I delved much more deeply into *Emile* in graduate school. At that point, I had already become closely acquainted with the other thinkers I will discuss in this article, like Freire, Du Bois, hooks and Wollstonecraft. However, it was in reading *Emile* that I began to understand how fully Rousseau and other Enlightenment thinkers had set the foundation epistemologically for how I thought about the educational process.

For Rousseau, the primary concern of education is that it allows children to develop as nature intended, avoiding the corruptive elements that are inherent in human society. Within the first paragraph of his work, Rousseau (1918) powerfully asserts that “man is born free but is everywhere in chains” (p. 37). Later, Rousseau states more specifically that it is society that entangles and brings men down—men are, in his words, “enchained by our institutions” (p. 42). The solution to this predicament, in Rousseau’s eyes, is a return to the natural state of man, a return to the early innocence of childhood in which people are inherently free. With regards to the education of children, the paradoxical challenge to teachers is to allow children to learn and grow without allowing exposure to fallen human institutions to corrupt them. Rousseau (1918) argues that mothers naturally know how to care for their children (p. 46), and as such should simply “observe nature and follow the path it maps out for you” (p. 47). Rousseau similarly argues that the best way to allow the natural development of children to occur is to educate them in the
country away from the corrupting societal influences of the city (p. 103); in such a climate, they can develop their own natural abilities through practical experiences, learning by doing without being stunted by social pressures (p. 105).

I find Rousseau’s (1918) trust in the innate qualities of people very appealing. According to him, we are “born sensible” (p. 4), able to learn to speak and be without being pushed (p. 36), and endowed with reason naturally that will lead us to know good and evil without any outside help (p. 31). It is a fascinating paradox that Rousseau goes on at such length about the natural excellence of man, and how education should be focused primarily on maintaining and keeping connection with that state of nature. Yet his book is also filled with meticulous comments regarding things that must or must not be done for a child’s education to be complete (how to be clothed, how to be accustomed to strange noises or animals, how to become accustomed to firearms and other tools). This reveals an inherent paradox in Rousseau approach to education: children are naturally their best selves and education should only encourage that natural development, but education is inherently led by adults who have already been somewhat corrupted by their experience in society.

Rousseau’s focus on promoting man’s natural goodness is also made somewhat problematic by his commitment to ideals of freedom and democracy, prominent topics in Rousseau’s social climate (which included the French Revolution). After all, in the natural world there are inherent hierarchies in which the freedom of some creatures is limited by their inherent weakness compared to other creatures. Rousseau (1918) applies this same principle to people, arguing that all should “keep to your appointed place in the order of nature” (p. 83) to be happy, and that true freedom comes when people are able to realize and live within their own limitations. In Rousseau’s (1918) words, “that man is truly free who desires what he is able to perform, and does what he desires” (p. 84), not aspiring to anything beyond that. Man’s strength comes in part from contentedness within himself, and weakness comes when man strives to do or be more than he can be (p. 81). This tension between human freedom and natural social harmony is another paradox within Rousseau’s philosophy of education.

Rousseau’s philosophy has several inherent strengths—recognitions of complexities within education that had not been recognized before. For example, Rousseau is the first to recognize that childhood involves several distinct stages, such as infancy, middle childhood (the age from around 3 and 12), and adolescence—indeed, Rousseau’s book is structured around these various stages. While some of his claims regarding specific child-rearing practices at certain ages may seem odd or counterintuitive by contemporary standards (e.g. the notion that swaddling is a form of bondage that inhibits children’s growth [Rousseau 1918, p. 45]), the simple recognition that child development should be divided into separate stages requiring different strategic approaches to instruction had not occurred before Rousseau and set the stage for important child development thinkers like Jean Piaget.

Rousseau’s focus on the individual, as well as education’s role in promoting a full human experience, is another strength I draw of his work. To Rousseau (1918), the purpose of education is the “true study…of the human condition” (p. 42) and the development of individual people’s strengths so that they can realize the extent of their potential. Indeed, to Rousseau “the man who has lived the most is not he who has counted
the most years but he who has most felt life” (p. 42). This development of individual potential is what allows for true freedom—granted, Rousseau’s focus on nature allows this discussion of individual potential to take a somewhat Darwinian perspective in which some people will be naturally stronger or more able than others, but his focus on the individual and the role of the individual in promoting freedom and realizing a full human experience is nonetheless groundbreaking for its time.

In sum, I draw from Rousseau three generative themes—the value of nature; the significance of freedom and the individual; and the recognition of different stages of childhood development. As for the role of nature, Rousseau repeatedly and powerfully asserts the natural goodness of man and the importance of nurturing rather than stunting man’s natural abilities. For Rousseau, the degradation of nature impacts man’s freedom and individuality, since Rousseau is intimately concerned with how the social structures of his time impinged on man’s natural abilities and potential (though, as noted, this emphasis comes occasionally into tension with Rousseau’s focus on the natural order of things, including differentiation between stronger and weaker men). Finally, Rousseau demonstrates how children’s education must align their cognitive development and provides an extensive analysis of how different stages of a child’s growth required different approaches to a child’s education.

As Rousseau is understandably a product of his time, many of the limitations of his work may be relatively low-hanging fruit in a contemporary academic climate. Especially given the sexist, classist and racist nature of his social environment, his work should be looked upon charitably to the degree that it does not address education for women, low-income communities or communities of color. However, those gaps are nonetheless limitations of his work, which future thinkers will happily fill in.

Wollstonecraft

The first educational philosopher I read who seriously questioned some of these gaps was Mary Wollstonecraft, who cogently and powerfully addresses the neglect for education of women in the work of Rousseau and other Enlightenment age thinkers. Wollstonecraft’s basic argument is simple: in her contemporary world, the only reason that women are not men’s equal is because they are not given the same educational opportunities. In Wollstonecraft’s (1891) mind, this can be easily fixed: “let woman share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man” (p. 287).

Like Rousseau, Wollstonecraft’s work is very much a product of the Enlightenment. Her argument is an appeal to man’s reason, and to basic Enlightenment principles of equality and progress. Women have the same potential as men to develop rationally and intellectually, but they are not given the same educational opportunities. In the name of equality and fairness, this should be rectified. It is a powerful, if simple, argument. Indeed, Wollstonecraft’s (1891) argument is phrased almost as a challenge to the men of her age: if men feel that women shouldn’t be educated, they should “prove first, to ward off the charge of injustice and inconsistency, that they [i.e. women] want reason” (p. 5). This argument is couched in conciliatory language, which states that women do not “have
sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue” (Wollstonecraft 1891, p. 19), and that “from the constitution of their bodies, men seem to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue” (Wollstonecraft 1891, p. 28). However, especially given Wollstonecraft’s time period and social world, this can perhaps be recognized as a political necessity on Wollstonecraft’s part—that is, she recognizes that her message will not be heard at all if men in power are not given some recognition of their goodness and supposed superiority.

Given all that, it is interesting that Wollstonecraft’s (1891) contemporaries give significant resistance to this piece, as she is very careful to couch her revolutionary claims regarding gender equality in very male-hegemonic terms, asserting that women are weaker than men both “in point of strength” (p. 8), or speaking physically, as well as with regards to reason (p. 28). Though Wollstonecraft (1891) makes the strong claim that women, like men, are endowed with reason, she also takes great pains to “frankly [acknowledge] the inferiority of woman” (p. 37). Perhaps, in addition to being a conscious political move on Wollstonecraft’s part, this also serves as an example of the power of hegemonic thinking. In other words, perhaps even a woman like Wollstonecraft, committed as she is to the cause of female equality in education, cannot help but be influenced by the dominant sexual mores of her time.

Despite these concessions of Wollstonecraft’s that somewhat undercut her primary argument regarding the need for women’s education, her work is a classic of feminist literature, a powerful statement regarding the equality of men and women when it comes to potential intellectual development. Wollstonecraft’s work is also powerful due to its recognition of gender as a social construction. Wollstonecraft (1891) is careful to assert that female inferiority is learned rather than innate, something “women are told from infancy” (p. 49) so that men can keep women “in a state of childhood” (p. 50). In this sense, Wollstonecraft (1891) believes that a woman is “a voluntary slave” (p. 59), meaning that she has the potential within her to break the bonds of gender inequality through her own personal intellectual improvement and betterment. Wollstonecraft (1891) insists that women are “rational creatures” (p. 9) and should be treated as such.

Wollstonecraft’s argument for women’s education is predicated upon several key principles: first, education cultivates reason, which enables a person to acquire virtue. As “every being may become virtuous by the exercise of its own reason” (Wollstonecraft 1891, p. 52), including women, women deserve access to education to make this self-improvement possible. Second, education will allow women to cultivate their natural faculties (like Rousseau, Wollstonecraft believed strongly in the natural abilities and potential of human beings) and an independent mind, so that they are not dependent on men or husbands to make decisions for them (see Wollstonecraft 1891, p. 66). Lastly, education will allow women to prove their equality, so long as they are given equal opportunity—“strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience [to men]” (Wollstonecraft 1891, p. 56).

In summary, the primary generative theme I personally drew from Wollstonecraft’s work is the importance of always taking gender and the rights of women into consideration. While this is a principle, I have also taken away from reading the work of Judith Butler (1990), Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Virginia Woolf (1927), the elegant simplicity of Wollstonecraft’s arguments has remained with me. To Wollstonecraft,
women are equal in potential and thus deserving of equal opportunity when it comes to education. Though this basic principle may seem self-evident in the 21st century, it indeed represents a “revolution” (p. 284) in Wollstonecraft’s (1891) day, and her forward thinking and stalwart commitment to her ideals in the face of opposition deserve the highest praise.

However, Wollstonecraft’s work does have aspects that are problematic. As mentioned before, Wollstonecraft occasionally makes statements that seem to imply her own acquiescence to “natural” male superiority. It is unclear whether such statements are a conscious political concession on her part, the unconscious reflection of her own acceptance of hegemonic gender norms, or both. However, such statements do not negate the power of her overall message regarding inherent and natural equality of intellectual potential between men and women.

Despite her commitment to women’s rights, Wollstonecraft also has blind spots to other marginalized communities. Much like Rousseau, Wollstonecraft does not address issues of social class (like Dorothy Day [1948] and other twentieth century feminists who follow her), and most of her specific criticisms of women’s education pertain only to the education of the upper classes (e.g. reading of romance novels and so forth). Wollstonecraft also does not address issues of inequality based on race. While it would be easy to attribute such problems to the time and place in which she lived, it is important to note that some critical race theorists, like Zeus Leonardo (2015) and Ricky Lee Allen (2008) would disagree, as white abolitionists existed in both the U.S. and Britain during the 1800s.

**Dewey**

John Dewey (1921) addresses one of these missing pieces through his focus on public education for all, including children of lower social classes and children of immigrants. This inclusion of all within education is central for Dewey because of his view of education as a means of promoting social cohesion and citizenship. For societies to thrive, there must be structures that pass on “the life of the group” (Dewey 1921, p. 3), which includes social norms and culture, as well as means of subsistence. Education in this sense is one of the primary means whereby the norms and practices of a given society are passed on from generation to generation. As Dewey (1921) states, “society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication” (p. 5). Only through the communication of norms from generation to generation does society continue to exist. Schools play a crucial role in this process.

Dewey’s focus on the socially reproductive nature of school seems remarkably like the focus of early anthropologists like Edward Tylor (1871), Lewis Morgan (1871), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955) and so forth on social reproduction, as well as the work of early sociologists like Emile Durkheim (1893). Indeed, Dewey’s (1921) descriptions of the “deliberate effort” made to pass on the “ideas and practices” which make possible the “constant reweaving of the social fabric” (p. 3-4) makes clear the social construction of knowledge and culture in a way that seems revolutionary given Dewey’s prominence before the rise of postmodernism and poststructuralism.
To Dewey, this socially reproductive nature of schooling is crucial for the promotion of democracy. Dewey disagrees with Rousseau’s assertion that education should promote what is natural in children; rather, Dewey (1921) sees “the natural or native impulses of the young” as something that should be “directed or guided” to be more in accordance with the social norms of their surrounding culture (p. 47). Through this education in social norms, individuals gain “a personal interest in social relationships and control” (Dewey 1921, p. 115), and this interest gives them reason to want to participate in democratic political institutions.

However, Dewey recognizes that education does not only take place within schools. To Dewey, all social life is educational. Education is “a continuous reconstruction of experience” (Dewey 1921, p. 93), and as knowledge is experiential, all social experience leads to greater knowledge. This will resonate strongly with Freire and his rejection of “banking education” (Freire, 2005, pp. 71-72) or education which divorces ideas and principles taught in school from their connection with the daily realities of students.

In sum, the generative themes I draw from Dewey’s work are social reproduction (as all societies must reproduce their basic beliefs and culture to continue to exist), public education (as all students deserve and need access to education to participate fully in society), and democracy (as schooling gives students the skills they need to fully participate in representative democracy). With his emphasis on these themes, Dewey addresses the need for universal education. His recognition of the inequality of previous forms of education (that is, the private education available only to upper classes in the age of Rousseau and Wollstonecraft) is a landmark shift, one that will only be taken further by thinkers such as Du Bois and Freire. Indeed, there is a need for these thinkers to take this further, as Dewey’s thought, while very progressive for its time, does not address inequalities on the basis of gender or race, and also does not recognize the full extent to which schooling is inherently unequal for the oppressed lower classes. Indeed, some of the principles of public education that Dewey most fully lauds (such as its socially reproductive function) will be questioned by critical theorists in the late twentieth century, as scholars like Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977), Paul Willis (1978), and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) point out that schools reproduce not only beliefs and culture for social cohesion, but patterns of inequality as low-income students are taught to maintain their social station rather than question or push against it.

**Du Bois and Morrison**

The primary contribution of W.E.B. Du Bois to my educational philosophy is direct and simple: to be fair and equal, education must recognize inequalities which exist in society on the basis of race. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903) famously states that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (p. 13). That is, all lived experience, including access to education, differs extensively for white people and people of color. As such, the generative theme of Du Bois’ work might most accurately be stated as being race—more specifically, recognizing how inherent and ingrained inequalities in Western society play out on the basis of racial stratification.
Personally, the social theorizing of figures like Du Bois regarding race had a more impact on my thinking through literary figures like Alice Walker (1982), Lorraine Hansberry (1959), Ralph Ellison (1952), Langston Hughes (2001), and as I will discuss hereafter, Toni Morrison (1970). I argue that these writers have made a prominent contribution to how philosophies of education affect communities of color through the expansive social reach of their writing, which has gone well beyond the reach of most academic theorizing. The contribution of women of color like Morrison is especially important to highlight, as it recognizes a prominent blind spot of previous thinkers, including Du Bois—that is, the unique experience of women of color. While Wollstonecraft argues eloquently for the inclusion of women in education, due to the time and place of her writing this plea does not include women of color. Similarly, though Du Bois makes a powerful contribution to the political dialogue regarding racism in the United States and throughout the West, his primary concern is with civil and other rights for black men—black women, and other women of color, remained quite marginalized in Du Bois’ contemporary discourse surrounding education.

Morrison’s work is perhaps most touching in its recognition of the acceptance of racial hegemony on the part of children of color, something which many educational theorists do not address. In *The Bluest Eye*, the main character Pecola idolizes the white child actress Shirley Temple, wishing that she could especially have the beautiful blue eyes of that actress and everything they represent in terms of social position and acceptance (Morrison, 1970, pp. 46-47). The complicated racial politics of the black community are discussed in powerful nuance throughout the novel, as other black characters with intentions for upward mobility and lighter complexions (like Geraldine) consider themselves above characters like Pecola, referring to her as a “nasty little black bitch” (Morrison 1970, p. 92). The acceptance of implied white superiority, and the complicated identity and community politics that this implies within communities of color, only makes the enfranchisement of communities of color in education (which as an institution is also inherently deferential to and based upon white cultural norms) even more complicated. Though not specifically a work intended for use in the philosophy of education, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* highlighted for me the need to recognize not only racial inequality in education, but the intersections between inequality on the basis of race and gender which play out daily in the school lives of children of color.

**Freire**

Paulo Freire’s work fills a unique gap in my philosophy of education as it is one of the first seminal texts in the field to come from the developing world, and as such it represents an intimate knowledge of the way in which class oppression plays out especially severely for disenfranchised low-income communities in developing countries. To make clear the point that society is inherently unequal, Freire uses very unequivocal language to describe how society is divided between those who are oppressed and those who are oppressors, the latter drawing their social power from their ability to maintain dominance over the former. The oppressive classes of society objectify and domesticate (Freire 2005, p. 51) the oppressed classes to maintain their place in the hegemonic power.
structure. As Freire (2005) states, “the oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination” (p. 58).

With specific regard to schooling, Freire classifies education as oppressive insomuch that students (especially marginalized students) are objectified through their participation in schools. Freire (2005) describes the method used for this objectification as “banking education,” a school model in which students are seen as empty receptacles to be “filled” with knowledge by teachers (pp. 71-72), and a student is seen as “good” if they passively and meekly receive what they are given (p. 73).

One element of Freire’s philosophy hearkens back to that of Rousseau, in that he sees education as an essential element of humanization. To Rousseau (1918), education is successful when it leads participants to feel life strongly and live life the fullest (p. 42). To Freire (2005), the entire purpose of education is, especially for the marginalized and oppressed who have been objectified and dehumanized by school and society, to “become more fully human” (p. 68). However, to reach full humanization in a Freirean sense, it is not enough to recognize the resilience and strength of marginalized groups: truly revolutionary education must be both emancipatory and humanizing in its very nature.

This is achievable if teachers consciously remember to treat their students as co-creators of knowledge and educational practice, rather than as “subjects of investigation” (Freire 2005, p. 107). To accomplish this, students should take an active part in curricular design, from the identification of the basic themes of instruction to the construction of the actual pedagogical practices used to address and explore these themes (see Freire 2005, p. 108-115). This participatory pedagogy becomes what Freire (2005) terms as praxis, or reflection combined with action, with a conscious aim to do so for the purpose of social transformation (p. 51). Only through such praxis can individuals reach full humanity; divorced from application, knowledge returns to its previous banal and flavorless state, becoming a meaningless collection of dates and trivia that has no use beyond memorization and regurgitation. Knowledge, when seen through a lens that recognizes its transformative potential, is the root of all meaningful social action. When knowledge is truly created, through a pedagogical process that involves meaningful interaction with and reflection upon one’s circumstances, then education truly becomes liberating. As Freire (2005) states, “liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information” (p. 79).

The first action that must be taken to achieve Freirean social transformation is an act that is deeply personal: one must learn to “name the world” (Freire 2005, p. 88), or be able to identify the elements of structural oppression in one’s personal and professional experience. It is from that point of naming that one can move forward and pursue social change. This process of learning to name one’s experience with oppression and pain is a necessary first step towards seeking social change—indeed, “to speak a true word is to transform the world” (Freire 2005, p. 87). This is so because through this process, one gains an increased sense of self-efficacy that makes social change seem not only possible, but plausible. As Freire (2005) states, “people to come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades” (p. 124). This is the process of reflection that makes up the crucial first part of praxis. That reflection brings forth not only concrete recognition of structural inequalities, but also promotes critical
thinking that stimulates creative and innovative potential responses to such inequality, and thus leads to action towards concrete goals. The end goal of this process for a Freirean educator is that “the thematics which have come from the people return to them—not as contents to be deposited, but as problems to be solved” (Freire 2005, p. 123).

All of these pedagogical principles have one primary purpose in mind—that is, education in a Freirean context leads students to liberation. This is perhaps the most fitting generative theme of Freire’s work: liberation through education. As students learn through critical pedagogy that they can be subjects instead of objects, and not only recognize inequality in their own lives but challenge it, widespread social transformation becomes not only a utopian possibility, but a true potential reality.

hooks

However, while Freire’s work is a powerful treatise on the effects of oppression, it neglects to “name” several of the most prominent forms of oppression, especially oppression based on gender and race. bell hooks (1994), perhaps one of the most prominent followers of Paulo Freire, addresses these blind spots in her own construction of “engaged pedagogy,” which draws heavily from feminist literature as well as Paulo Freire’s construction of critical pedagogy. As hooks (1994) states, “‘engaged pedagogy’ is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy” in that “it emphasizes well-being,” meaning that students of all backgrounds (including all potential variations of race, gender, class and sexuality) must be recognized as “fully human” and encouraged in their own personal processes of what hooks terms “self-actualization,” a construction which in hooks’ usage closely parallels Freire’s notion of “critical consciousness” (p. 15). Freire’s critical pedagogy provides a clear and powerful model wherein marginalized students can be led to recognize their own potential self-efficacy, while hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy takes this model and makes it even more inclusive and personal by overtly centering the ways in which Freire’s model of critical pedagogy can overlook injustices perpetuated on the basis of race and gender.

Harmonizing a Philosophy of Education

All of these thinkers contribute elements which I have shaped into my own philosophy of education. From Rousseau, it is important to note that education should be tailored to fit the various stages of a child’s development, and should recognize the fact that children are born with certain innate strengths granted them by nature. Education should seek to magnify and enhance these natural talents if students are to reach their full potential.

From Wollstonecraft comes recognition that this natural ability to develop reason is not limited to men; rather, women have just as much innate potential for self-improvement through education as men, if they are allowed to pursue such. Du Bois (and literary figures like Morrison) bring the important acknowledgment that this innate potential within people extends to communities of color as well, and especially to communities (like women of color) that experience intersections of marginality based on race, gender, and/or sexuality.
From Dewey comes the affirmation that education is a right to which all are endowed, and that education (by its nature) is an inherently socially reproductive act. From Freire and hooks comes recognition that this social reproduction is not always positive—rather, schooling is one tool used by those in power to maintain their power and keep marginalized communities in their place. However, Freire and hooks also provide a pedagogical model that can subvert hegemonic social reproduction in education, leading students to recognize their own self-efficacy in the face of inequality and work towards transformative social change.

Perhaps most importantly, Freire and hooks provide a powerful model of how educators can move forward reflectively, recognizing that there are likely still many innovations in education yet to be made and blind spots yet to be recognized. In Teaching to Transgress, hooks (1994) discusses her own interactions with Paulo Freire, and how when confronted with his own failures to recognize sexism in his work, Freire was a “generous spirit” (pp. 54-55) that was willing to recognize those shortcomings, asserting that hooks (1994) and other philosophers could build upon his thought and make it much more than Freire was able to make of it himself. Indeed, hooks (1994) asserts that Paul Freire “[embodies] the [self-reflective] practice he describes in theory” when he discusses the importance of praxis (p. 56). As every thinker’s contributions to the field are similarly human and short-sighted, I can only work towards the goal of my own work being similarly self-reflective, willing to recognize when my philosophical models are insufficient and have room for improvement.

It is important to note that the scholars and writers presented here are far from an exhaustive list of those who have shaped my educational philosophy. Using Freire’s (2005) generative themes as a literary device here has been helpful, but is also inherently limiting, as a focus upon individual scholars to represent educational philosophy surrounding gender, race, and social class means many personally meaningful names go unmentioned and impactful bodies of work go unexplored—important names like Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Audre Lorde (1984), Miles Horton (1998), and Malcolm X (1965). However, both those explored in this text and those mentioned here have contributed to a personal philosophy of education that I view at its root as focused upon humanity—that is, the affirmation of the full humanity and equality of all students and educators, and the recognition that the educational process can (and should) be a means of recognizing and expanding that humanity. As a cisgender white man raised speaking English by two upper-middle-class academics, I have always lived in a world and been educated in schools that have recognized my humanity and encouraged me personally to “become more fully human” (Freire, 2005, p. 68). The thinkers I have discussed here are those who have helped me to recognize that the same has not been true for students and children whose identities are different from mine on the basis of race, gender and social class—especially for those (like Toni Morrison) who grew up being marginalized on multiple intersecting axes of social difference. Given the fact that the majority of our nation’s educators and administrators continue to not reflect the identities or backgrounds of the students they serve (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), I share this piece to model a jumping-off point for reflection among similarly positioned colleagues with whom I work and whom I teach.
References


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* Also known as act like a pompous fool...

By Fatima van Hattum
Refer to a European philosopher or thinkers’ very obscure or very specific concept or idea...

Well, I think everyone would agree that Plato’s allegory of the cave is an instructive example...

Uhhh...what cave? Like spelunking? S*** is Plato on the reading list?!
Imply that it is common knowledge everyone should know. This serves as an excellent pedagogy of shame and also reinforces internalized colonial knowledge hierarchies, as one would likely not feel ashamed if reference was made to Waman Puma de Ayala or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and one didn’t know who they were.
Wherever possible, seek to effortlessly include French, Russian, German or Latin terminology to give things a certain je ne sais quoi (← see what I did there?).

Well, your argument is interesting, but I think we should really consider the state of the lumpen proletariat...

Is this guy for real?!?

PSA: Smug use of Marxist terminology ≠ liberatory. 😒

Right? I could use obscure terminology from one of the other three languages I speak...

Just saying...
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Professor Ruth Trinidad Galván for her transformative "Decolonial Thinking & Pedagogy" class.

Thank you to my cohort friends, Minea Armijo Romero and Peter Njagi for the inspiration behind this, the discussions, laughter, moral support, and love.

Thank you to my parents, family, and friends for your support. If I make it, this PhD belongs to you.

Some of the ideas in this comic were inspired by "The Idea of Latin America" by Walter D. Mignolo.
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INCLUSIVE MATHEMATICS EDUCATION: STATE-OF-THE-ART RESEARCH FROM BRAZIL AND GERMANY

Edited by David Kollosche, Renato de Souza Marcone, Michel Knigge, Miriam Godoy Penteado and Ole Skovsmose (2017).

ALEXIS C. PADILLA
University of New Mexico

Judging by the title of this book, readers may get the impression that it is a mere constellation of empirical research reports. Despite this initial perception, one soon finds that this edited volume contains a series of chapters with powerful metatheoretical and inclusive practice reflections relevant to anti-oppressive and inclusive equity scholarship. Tacitly centered on the tradition of Disability Studies in Mathematics Education (DSME, e.g., Padilla & Tan, 2019), several of the chapters in this volume establish powerful sociopolitical analogies between the micro-level dynamics of deficiency-centered models of dis/ability versus normalcy and anti/post-colonizing notions such as Said’s Orientalism or Fanonian political philosophy accounts (for example, Marcone’s chapter in Part II). Decolonial and postcolonial paradigms have demonstrated great potential for examining intersectional dimensions of dis/ability and racialized othering resistance in Global North and Global South contexts (Padilla, 2018).

The book contains nine parts. Part I introduces the comparative landscape. It situates the reader within the conceptual and disciplinary significance of comparing inclusive mathematics practices in a Global North country with those of a Global South nation whose policies and inclusive teaching practices are recognized as being in many respects more advanced (see, for example, the introductory paragraph in the book’s Preface), contrary to the prevailing Eurocentric biases of other scholarly comparisons of this sort.

Parts II and III contain outstanding conceptual chapters. Part II is highly critical of naïve conceptions of inclusivity in mathematics education. Thus, for instance, Baraldi, Rosa, Capellini, and Miranda demonstrate very persuasively in their chapter that reflexive teacher formation and pedagogical practices are a prerequisite for genuinely caring and equity-driven inclusivity to be possible (Tan & Thorius, 2018). Part III, on the other hand, stresses the need for deep conceptual and empirical exploration of core inclusive education constructs such as learning environments, so-called “learning office,” dialogic learning, and landscapes of investigation.

Parts IV and V zoom in the lens to address issues pertaining to specific dis/abilities, hearing impairment and autism respectively, in relation to inclusivity in mathematics education. Peixoto’s chapter is worth a special mention. It analyzes the unique meaning contours of problem solving in deaf students’ sense of conceptual agency and
representation of unique thinking schemes. Peixoto indicates that, although Brazil incorporates deaf students into their mathematics classrooms with hearing students, deaf individuals using sign language whose everyday experience is extremely visual are a minority in a world whose main language modality is oral-auditory. Peixoto studied the preferred mathematical schemes of deaf students in his sample, arguing that educational situations for deaf learners should consider their schemes, valuing gestures in coordination with Libras (i.e., Brazilian sign language), to promote meaningful mathematical communication with teachers and co-learners in inclusive contexts. On the other hand, Hagelgans’ chapter relies on design-oriented problem-solving mathematics research. It targets students with dis/abilities whose self-motivation has been limited by environmental factors. Hagelgans shows in a German speaking context that there are instances when students with intellectual dis/abilities characterized by strong problem-solving skills opt not to write their answers grounded on their prior negative experiences with exclusionary learning environments (Straehler-Pohl & Pais, 2014). This, in turn, protects their self-concept and gives them a sense of being in control, determining what is to be done and not done in the lesson.

The last four parts of the book address the relevance of language, emotional dimensions, special institutional circumstances, and teacher education for the fostering and stifling of inclusive equity in mathematics education. Concerning teacher education, Bock, Siegemund, Nolte, and Ricken’s chapter is at once interesting and paradoxical. The interesting aspects are connected to its collaborative emphasis in the learning fields relevant to general and special education teacher candidates in Germany. Authors show that such collaborations can in principle foster interdisciplinary understanding among teacher candidates. Paradoxically, their findings show that pre-service teachers preparing to work with “special needs” students (note that this European word choice centers on needs rather than agency) emphasize students’ motivation instead of mathematics skill building. However, general education pre-service teachers are more likely to stress skill building. Under a deficits model, students with dis/abilities are likely to face “specialized” teachers in inclusive settings who are preempted in their relational approach and in the design of lessons by presumptions that do not privilege their unique student assets and their skill-building learning preferences (Tan, 2016 & 2017).

In sum, this edited volume expands the horizons of anti-ableist, inclusive equity in mathematics education scholarship, giving a special place to Global South perspectives. It is true that some of its essays remain anchored in traditional views of students with dis/abilities in mathematics education settings (e.g., the chapter by dos Santos Carmo, Gris & dos Santos Palombarini and the chapter by Orbach, Herzog & Fritz, both of which are concerned with mathematics’ anxiety). However, in general terms, critical and anti-oppressive theoretical and practice-driven concerns are given preeminence, resulting in a well-balanced work that promises to help transform the field of anti-ableist mathematics inclusivity for years to come.
References


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Alexis C. Padilla is a recent Ph.D. graduate from the Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies department at the University of New Mexico. Dr. Padilla is also a lawyer, sociologist and conflict transformation engaged scholar. His work explores emancipatory learning and radical agency in the context of decolonial Latinx theorizing and critical disability studies. His contributions emphasize the activist/dis/ability advocacy vantage point combined with actionable dimensions of inclusive equity research and practice.
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