

# INTERSECTIONALITY AS EDUCATION POLICY REFORM: CREATING SCHOOLS THAT EMPOWER TELLING

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I am writing this commentary two days after the act of terror and hate that occurred at Pulse in Orlando, Florida in which Omar Mateen murdered 50 people at a queer night club during a celebration of LatinX cultures and identities. Historians have long observed that social movements are preceded by tragedy. Anyon (2014) argued that schools in general and teachers in particular occupy a practical and theoretical space at the center of community crises. As a result, educators—consciously or not—are irrevocably tethered to the oppression or liberation of their students and share responsibility in responding to and further preventing community atrocities (Anyon, 2014). I am writing in the wake of this tragedy to urge educators to not neglect their unique and essential role in the movement for the safety and empowerment of queer identities and identities of color. I also urge educators to be attentive to how these identities intersect to create matrices of oppression in schools and communities.

In this commentary, I first offer a brief description of intersectionality and then provide insight into how I began to see the intersections of queer and racial issues as they manifested in my first grade classroom. Following a glimpse of the consequences for not understanding intersectionality, which left me complicit in the oppression of my students, I then reframe intersectional issues in education through the lens of anti-discrimination policy reform. This reframing offers a first step schools can take to begin providing students and educators with discourses to share their full narratives, respond to their unique oppressions, and advocate for their civil rights and human dignities in more effective ways. As a White, cisgender, queer woman and educator, this commentary is shaped by an ever-deepening understanding of my role as an ally to queer communities, communities of color, and the intersections of these identities in P-12 and higher education contexts.

## Intersectionality

A decade after the 1981 release of Cherrie Morgan and Gloria Anzadula's edited collection, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, the concept of intersectionality began to seep into scholarship (Graves, 2015). Crenshaw (1991) revealed that, at the time, feminist and anti-racist discourses "failed to consider intersectional identities" as they "readily intersect in the lives of real people" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242-1243). That is, scholarship at the time examined being a woman or being a person of color, but did not attend to the stories that could be told by women of color at the crossroads of their identities. As a result, the identity of women of color was forced to a "location that resists telling" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242).

Crenshaw's (1991) goal was thus to explore how race and gender "intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color" (p.1244). Though not the extant focus of her work, Crenshaw (1991) acknowledged that race and gender must also be explored as they intersect with class and sexuality, and that her work was a call for multiple identities to be explored when "considering how the social world is constructed" (p. 1245). While this call was made in 1991, Wimberly (2015) claims contemporary scholarship undertheorizes how the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality contour student and teacher school experiences.

As a new teacher, I did not have the language to name this gap in the literature, yet I felt it. The intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality were absent from the training or professional development offered to me as an aspiring educator and current educator, and it remains largely absent in my preparation to become a teacher educator. In this commentary, I hope to first address this gap in the literature by sharing my experience as a first grade teacher to a Black, gender non-conforming student and then suggesting steps for anti-discrimination policy reform. In doing so, I hope to move the identity of queer students of color, and other intersectional identities, to a "location" that empowers "telling."

## Awakenings

As an elementary educator, I had never considered intersectionality—as a concept, way of knowing, or way of being—until Jayden[1] entered my classroom. Jayden was a kind, intelligent, and thoughtful child who demonstrated an outstanding talent for

singing and songwriting. I most vividly remember Jayden writing a song for me for my twenty-fourth birthday and, at the age of six, bravely singing it in front of the class as a gift to me. However, when my colleagues would speak about Jayden privately, they would speak in hushed tones, using words in private like “fruity” and “fairy.” Publicly, they tried to police Jayden’s boundaries—what ze[2] could and could not read and with whom ze could and could not play. Witnessing a vibrant child reduced to a slur, listening to assumptions made about hir sexuality based on transgressions of gender norms, and observing a Black child living in poverty withstand a school environment that wanted to suppress beautiful dimensions of who ze was, changed me and changed my relationship with Jayden.

Like a fish noticing water for the first time, I began to see the matrices of oppression in which Jayden and I had always lived. However, at the time, neither Jayden nor I had the language to name them. The consequences of our ignorance were dire and had left me complicit in hir oppression and in the oppression of all queer students of color.

While research on queer youth of color is severely lacking, the small number of existing studies suggest that queer youth of color have disproportionately higher rates of negative outcomes in comparison to their queer White peers. Queer youth of color are less likely to be out to their families (Groo & Bimbi, 2006), more likely to experience depression and thoughts of suicide (Consolacion, Russel, & Sue, 2004), more likely to acquire HIV (Celentano, 2005; Choi et al., 2004; Harawa et al., 2004), more likely to experience sexual violence (Garofalo, Deleon, Osmer, Doll, & Harper, 2006) and homelessness (Dunn & Moodie-Mills, 2012), and more likely to experience victimization in school (Diaz & Kosciw, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen., 2013). Significantly, due to pressures to choose between their ethnic and queer identities, queer students of color are less likely to be involved in queer social support and cultural activities than their White, queer peers (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999; Rosario, 2004). My awareness of how oppressions compound, limiting my students’ ability to lead flourishing lives, has lead me to seek reform for the language of anti-discrimination policies. Through my experience witnessing Jayden’s complex identity unfold, I have also come to understand that, to remain relevant, these reforms to anti-discrimination policies must continually occur in partnership with colleagues and students who live at the intersections of historically marginalized identities.

### **Reforming anti-discrimination policies from an intersectional lens**

Our country has a violent history of *de jure* and *de facto* marginalization of communities by race, class, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and ability. The language of anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies thus seems appropriate—mandating that humans not discriminate against or harass other humans seems like a logical step towards liberation from oppression. Yet, “anti” policies are only “mitigative” (Gorski, 2015)—seeking to Band-Aid the aches and oozing of deep ideological, epistemological, and institutionalized infections without curing the disease. What is meant by discrimination and harassment and what it takes to eliminate discrimination and harassment is often not critically examined.

Enumerated anti-discrimination policies are significant, especially given that only nineteen states have enacted statewide anti-discrimination policies recognizing sexual orientation and gender identity. However, these policies reinforce that identities and values are discrete, not intimately connected within the experiences of the mind and body. According to policy definitions, discrimination is the action of prejudice (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012) which should be avoided. However, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) argue that we cannot “humanely avoid” prejudice, yet we can “identify, rather than deny, our prejudices” (p. xx). That is, we all have prejudices, and identifying and disrupting those prejudices is a lifelong process. Prejudice is not something that can be solved by simply telling ourselves not to do it, as anti-discrimination policies seem to suggest. Anti-discrimination policies ask educators to be neutral; yet, nothing and no one is neutral. Our words and our silences are imbued with our values—to suggest otherwise risks anointing our assumptions and biases as the natural and desirable way of knowing and being in the world. It is also inhumane to try to disfigure a whole person into individual identities, limiting their ability to tell their whole story and obscuring the enduring nature of prejudice and its disruption.

Instead of framing anti-discrimination policies with language such as “shall not discriminate or harass” with a following litany of identities, school systems must humanely confront the complexities of intersectionality in discrimination. One strategy for doing so is the development of policies that contain language that encourages educators to, in my words:

Identify and disrupt prejudice in their words, actions, and inactions in collaboration with students, colleagues, and families in order to create identity affirming school climates for students along the lines of race, class, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and the intersections of these identities as they manifest within and between students, colleagues, and families.

Only with this reframing can school systems lay the foundation for unraveling the matrices of oppression impacting queer students of color and all students who reside at the intersections of historically marginalized identities. Had these discourses and perspectives been a more explicit part of my preparation as an educator and the code of ethics of my profession, I may have been better prepared to empower Jayden’s complex identity as well as process my complex experiences with my colleagues.

In the wake of the Orlando massacre, we, as educators, must move intersectional identities to places that empower telling while recognizing and dislodging our own prejudices. We must commit to this lifelong work with the profound hope that our efforts contribute to our students' ability to share their full humanity. Most importantly, to ensure our work does not end with us, we must also seek to build our students' capacity to create and facilitate spaces that empower telling both within and well beyond the bounds of our schools.

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[1] Jayden is a pseudonym.

[2] Ze and Hir are gender-neutral pronouns. Ze is used in place of he/she and hir is used in place of him/her in order to not gender Jayden, who had yet to self-identify.

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