

Queering Queer Educational Absences: A Reflection

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absence /'æbs(ə)ns/

“a state or condition in which something expected, wanted, or looked for is not present or does not exist : a state or condition in which something is absent” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Queer identities and experiences have long been underrepresented in formal educational spaces and materials (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; Rayside, 2014; Walton, 2004). As the collective efforts of individuals, activists, advocates, theorists, scholars, and educators continue to increase awareness and visibility of queer, trans, and non-binary identities, there remains a dearth of inclusive 2SLGBTQ+¹ representation in curricula across Canadian schools. My experience as a queer youth mirrors the reality that sexual orientation and gender identity are infrequently mentioned in Canadian classrooms (Grace & Wells, 2015; Taylor et al., 2011, 2016). This enduring erasure has shaped my personal trajectory as both a queer scholar, educator, and activist. In this article, I use queer autoethnography (Jones & Adams, 2010) to unpack the impetus behind my research and consider ways to queer the absence of gender and sexually diverse identities in schools by elevating lived experience.

The historical and continued absence of gender and sexually diverse identities and communities in curricula functions to strengthen discourses of normativity, oppression, and erasure that deny the lived experience and potential futures of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. Like many individuals grappling with their sexuality in the early 2000s, the absence of education and affirmation in formal education led me to become a self-taught queer, drawing knowledge from dial-up internet and seeking community. I became accustomed to educating and being educated by others, developing resource materials and presentations, and touting education as a missing link in advancing 2SLGBTQ+ rights and affirming intersectional representation. This reality shaped my personal and professional trajectory in myriad ways, including my current research. However, as my writing progressed, I was left with more questions than answers.

This piece draws on my doctoral research, which explores how community advocacy organizations and informal educational spaces speak back to the absence of 2SLGBTQ+ identities and realities in curriculum, focusing on queering the absence of 2SLGBTQ+ content in schools. Across Canada, current representations of 2SLGBTQ+ identities in both social and educational

¹ I utilize this acronym to increase legibility; however, I acknowledge that it is inherently exclusionary. The language of identity is highly personal, ever-changing, and Anglocentric, which is why I use the terms ‘queer’ and ‘gender and sexually diverse’ where possible, intended to signify a vast spectrum of orientations and identities which do not align with constructed cisgender or heterosexual norms. I place 2S, referencing Two Spirit individuals and identities, at the beginning of the acronym intentionally to honour and recognize that Indigenous individuals were the first gender and sexually diverse peoples on Turtle Island and have been subject to ongoing colonial violence and erasure for hundreds of years (Sylliboy & Young, 2017).

spaces are anchored in a predominant discourse that often over-determines 2SLGBTQ+ lives and experiences or erases them entirely (Thorpe, 2015). Many gender and sexually diverse students not only fail to receive relevant and representative education but have their very existence erased or delegitimized from the start of their school experience (Airton, 2013; Anderson, 2014; Grace & Wells, 2015).

I look to queer autoethnography as a method of working through these unknowns, seeking paths forward. Queering refers to an ongoing process of disruption and recreation that seeks to identify and address normative and oppressive discourses, a practice I consider vital to creating change in social, political, and educational contexts (Muñoz, 2009). As espoused by Ellis (2004), autoethnography serves to break down the boundaries between “the autobiographical and personal” and social, political, and cultural context (p. xix). Queer autoethnography exposes this relationship further, disrupting conventions of method and illuminating the “push and pull between and among analysis and evocation” (Jones & Adams, 2010, p. 198). To explore these memories, I seek to situate my experiences within the dominant discourses of normativity, in particular heteronormativity and cisnormativity, deeply embedded in the context of schooling (Kjaran, 2017). As a white, cisgender, lower-middle-class queer woman, my lived experience is mediated by my positions of privilege, and this privilege has afforded me the ability to engage in activism and explore queer questions within academia.

Further, I situate my reflection within the context of colonially named New Brunswick, Canada, on the unceded traditional territory of the Wolastoqiyik, Mi’kmaq, and Peskotomuhkati peoples. New Brunswick is often viewed as a relatively small, rural, conservative, and working-class province (Wilson-Forsberg, 2012). 2SLGBTQ+ youth² continue to face systemic discrimination within the New Brunswick school system (Burkholder & Thorpe, 2019), and discursive analyses of social studies curricula conducted by Dr. Casey Burkholder and myself have shown a striking absence of queer, trans, and non-binary people and communities (Burkholder, Hamill, & Thorpe, 2021). While a burgeoning body of work has begun to develop over the past few decades that highlights this erasure in addition to the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ youth in Canadian schools (Callaghan, 2018; Grace & Wells, 2015; Rayside, 2014; Taylor et al., 2011), there remains a dearth of research that considers how to address this reality in critically queer ways. In what follows, I present three memories that I will draw on to inform three strategies for queering queer educational absences. These memories, plucked from nearly two decades of queer advocacy, are but a few of the driving forces behind my research. In the concluding section, drawing on my experiences, I consider how bringing narratives of lived experience into the classroom might begin to queer these absences.

Memories and Reflections

Junior High

² When I speak of youth, I do not seek to place parameters on age. While I predominantly discuss youth in the context of K-12 schooling (therefore, school age and up), children are socialized from birth to understand heterosexuality and cis, binary gender as normative. Consequently, I argue there is no age too young to discuss topics of gender and sexual diversity.

The year is 2002, and I've just started junior high in a rural community in colonially named Nova Scotia. There are no "out" 2SLGBTQ+ youth at my school. In health class, we are encouraged to ask questions by placing them in a large box. Despite the guise of anonymity, it takes time to gather the courage to raise "queer" topics. The teacher receives several questions on 2SLGBTQ+ identities and declines to answer any of them. As a nascent activist, I help plan a Respect Day for my school featuring speakers on various topics. I meet the executive director and education coordinator from The Youth Project, an organization for 2SLGBTQ+ youth under 25 nearly an hour away in K'jipuktuk³. Immediately following the presentation, I approach them: how do I start this magical club they speak of, a Gay-Straight Alliance⁴, in my school?

High School

Three years pass. By the end of junior high, I had started a Gay-Straight Alliance, come to the realization that educators can be homophobic, and been told I "can't be queer" because of my academic performance and appearance by the first adult I tried to talk to. Now in high school, I've been involved with The Youth Project for several years and have begun presenting to elementary and junior high classes and creating resources for educators. I participate in a 2SLGBTQ+ youth panel for representatives from the local school board. We share our stories and answer questions about our experiences. We're told with unbridled disdain that words like "fag" and "dyke" are harmless and not nearly as damaging as being called "pizza-face"; I learn that to some educators, discrimination related to sexual orientation or gender identity is considered normative.

Graduate School

During my doctoral studies on unceded Wolastoqiyik territory known as Fredericton, I was fortunate to collaborate on the *Where Are Our Histories?* research project led by Dr. Burkholder at the University of New Brunswick. This project allowed me to discuss school climate with several youth participants in colonially named Fredericton, on Wolastoqiyik territory, with several 2SLGBTQ+ youth participants. I recall the competing emotions that bubbled in my chest as I listened to youth recount stories that mirrored my own experiences over a decade earlier. While I was unsurprised, I felt dismay, anger, and for a fleeting second, futility. My experiences over the past few years working with the local Pride organization and leading the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) initiative at the University of New Brunswick have provided additional opportunities to engage with both 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and allies and further confirm the persistent lack of representation and resources. This knowledge fuels my desire to address erasure in school settings, but I remain conflicted on how best to create change.

Queering Queer Absence

I recall my junior high health class and my educator's refusal to discuss topics of sexual diversity. This absence was not solely limited to constraints of curricula but a conscious decision to perpetuate the discourse of erasure that weaves through sexual health education across the country (Elia & Eliason, 2010). From my teenage perspective, leaving students' questions purposefully unanswered was more isolating than the lacking representation of the curriculum. Nearly twenty years later, I acknowledge the possibility that the educator felt unequipped to answer these questions (James, 2020; Taylor et al., 2016).

³ The Mi'kmaq name for the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, which means "great harbour."

⁴ Now termed Gender-Sexuality Alliances.

While discussion of 2SLGBTQ+ identities and communities in the classroom is unequivocally essential, it is important that educators have the knowledge and resources to facilitate affirming and intersectional discussions. Nearly 25% of students who reported reference to 2SLGBTQ+ topics during their school experience characterized the representation of gender and sexually diverse populations as negative (Taylor et al., 2011). While the root cause of this negative experience is not specified, I suggest this could be due to curricula that limit and pathologize gender and sexual diversity or the ways in which these topics were raised by educators, be this due to a lack of knowledge or language or the educator's beliefs or prejudices.

The emergence of the SOGI program for students and educators on Canada's west coast (James, 2020) and a growing focus on incorporating gender and sexual diversity into teacher education (Airton & Koecher, 2019) are both vital to addressing both absence and negative representation. Educating the educators may increase both understanding and awareness of 2SLGBTQ+ identities, provide the language and resources to discuss gender and sexual diversity in affirming ways, and provide the skills to recognize when a curriculum fails to represent or functions to pathologize 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and communities.

To complement and queer these efforts further, I argue it is necessary to bring lived experience into the classroom. Teaching resources and vocabulary lists are essential; however, narratives of queer, trans, and non-binary lived experience serve to disrupt the longstanding absence of 2SLGBTQ+ lives and identities and resist reliance on one-dimensional, normative constructions of white, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender sexual diversity. I suggest three interconnected strategies for queering educational absences by elevating lived experience and 2SLGBTQ+ knowledge.

1. 2SLGBTQ+ Created Resources: Consider bringing materials into the classroom created by 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, particularly youth. Discourses of heteronormativity are prevalent in curricula and limit the potential for inclusive and affirming representation (Sumara & Davis, 1999). In my search for identity as a queer youth, I looked to other sexually diverse individuals for the knowledge and histories missing in my schooling. Resources such as SEQuYN, the Sexual Education Queer Youth Need, and Queer Histories Matter offer youth-created media and materials for both students and educators that focus on 2SLGBTQ+ voices and experiences.⁵

2. Youth Voices: While my high school experience on a 2SLGBTQ+ youth panel for educators and administrators was less than affirming, it does not negate the importance of elevating and engaging with youth narratives of lived experience (Mansfield et al., 2018). Through my involvement with the SOGI initiative in the Bachelor of Education program at the University of New Brunswick, I have invited diverse panels of young adults to speak to their experiences in school in direct dialogue with pre-service teachers. Creating productive and affirming opportunities to learn from and with youth may be seen as another mode of queering absence,

⁵ Both SEQuYN and Queer Histories Matter were developed by Dr. Burkholder. Queer Histories Matter encompasses the Where Are Our Histories project referenced. Visit www.sequyn.com and www.queerhistoriesmatter.org for more information.

queering one-dimensional and pathologizing narratives, and creating space to speak back to erasure.⁶

3. Community Resources: Consider engaging with local activist and community organizations and explore resources, events, and potential workshops in your area. Groups that engage in community work and advocacy often function as informal spaces of education and may offer valuable knowledge and resources (Thorpe, In Press). The introduction to *The Youth Project* in my teens undoubtedly shaped the course of my life and has led me to my current research foci and activist endeavours. These speakers also provided 2SLGBTQ+ representation that was wholly absent from my schooling and environment. Building community-focused connections in the classroom may serve to foster engagement in activism in addition to queering absence by making visible a rich history of advocacy that centers lived experience, community care, and solidarity.

In this reflective work, I have employed the concept of queering (Muñoz, 2009) to interrupt the resounding absence of gender and sexually diverse identities and knowledge in educational contexts with a focus on New Brunswick. Muñoz (2009) argued, “queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (p. 1). I present these three strategies focused on elevating lived experience not as answers but as potential paths to aid in imagining affirming and intersectional 2SLGBTQ+ representation in the classroom that is not bound by discourses of normativity and oppression. Reflecting on experiences past and present may serve as an invitation to consider possible futures for disrupting queer educational absences and creating 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum that draws on narratives of experience and challenges institutionalized heteronormativity.

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⁶ While beyond the scope of this article, it is valuable to note that many 2SLGBTQ+ and otherwise minoritized youth face the emotional labour of being expected to educate those around them. Intentionally creating space to elevate the voices of youth who choose to speak about this topic, and compensating them for their labour, may be viewed as a method to disrupt this problematic trend.

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