

## “Our Silent Day”: One White Gay Teacher Explores Teacher Agency and Counter-Socialization during the National Day of Silence

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- Reflective use of teachers’ LGBTQ identities offer underexplored assets in civic and social education for counter-socialization, as models of critical consciousness
- Participating in the Day of Silence promoted greater teacher agency because all 150 students chose to participate, and nearly 100% expressed meaningful engagement
- In contrast to other studies, here DoS served to promote empathy, trust and communal concern when the teacher expanded its terms of participation, particularly for students of color
- LGBTQ teachers and students continue to face a “civic paradox” in schools, even in politically liberal contexts

**Purpose:** This study examines one “out” gay teacher’s participation in the Day of Silence (DoS), an international event highlighting the silencing of LGBTQ people in schools, to illustrate teacher agency in counter-narrative teaching, particularly for countering the typical civic exclusions of LGBTQ people.

**Design:** Civic education and queer theory inform this interpretive qualitative case study based on four semi-structured teacher interviews and document analysis.

**Findings:** When all 150 students chose to participate and nearly all found DoS meaningful, the ritual’s possibilities for counter-socialization and civic inclusion deepened, expanding teacher agency and suggesting increased trust and communal concern, particularly for students of color. Though being “out” may often be perceived as a constraint or liability for social educators, this teacher drew on his identity and queer theory as clear assets for crafting effective, experiential counter-socialization learning.

**Research limitations:** District concerns limited data to those collected from the teacher, limiting triangulation efforts.

**Practical implications:** “Out” LGBTQ teachers able to contextualize counter-socialization learning with their own experiences of civic exclusion may have particular assets for social education. DoS and queer theory may offer useful tools for non-LGBTQ educators, especially when multiple or intersectional meanings are validated.

**Keywords:** case study, civic education, social education, queer theory, qualitative research, LGBTQ

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## 1 Introduction

On a typical school day, talk permeates school spaces, facilitating and defining belonging, connection and meaning. Rarely do students – or teachers – choose to be silent; yet for one day every April, the Day of Silence expects just that.

Participants in the Day of Silence (DoS) enact a counter-narrative, unlike many school holidays promoting uncritical patriotism, or cultural unity through assimilation. This ritual, an annual, student-led event celebrated in schools across the U.S. and four other nations,<sup>1</sup> focuses on students and educators taking a vow of silence throughout the school day to “highlight the silencing and erasure of LGBTQ<sup>2</sup> people at school,” and demand more inclusive and responsive school experiences for LGBTQ students (GLSEN, 2018, para 1). Studies have found sustained evidence that U.S. students who identify or are perceived as LGBTQ experience hostile school climates, with higher rates of harassment and bullying, suicidal ideation, lowered GPA, lowered self-esteem, higher truancy and drop-out rates, and cognitive overloads (see, e.g. Kosciw et al, 2016; Pascoe, 2004).

Started in 1996 by students at the University of Virginia, DoS grew from 150 student participants to more than 650,000 in 10,000 schools today in the U.S., New Zealand, Singapore and Russia, with GLSEN as its organizing sponsor (GLSEN, 2018). Elementary, middle, high school and college students and staff take part, representing a cross-section of regions and settings in the U.S. (Becca Mui, personal communication, July 10, 2001; GLSEN, 2018). Participation may include passing out cards to teachers or peers sharing their reasons for not speaking, and using buttons, stickers, face paint, temporary tattoos, or other visual cues. Now over 16,000 student organizers and educators, often with student clubs such as GSAs (Gay-Straight or Gender and Sexuality Alliances), promote and organize participation, and may include a “breaking the silence” event at the end of the school day.

While current DoS accounts emphasize students’ participation and experiences (see Curwood, Schliesman & Horning, 2009; Woolley, 2012; Young, 2009), LGBTQ teachers face significant challenges in participating, including being “especially vulnerable to harassment and discrimination at work” (Connell, 2012, p. 168). Currently, workers in 28 states in the U.S. can be fired for being LGBTQ (Movement Advancement Project, 2018). Only 72 nations offer any legal protections for LGBTQ employees, and elsewhere their identities are subject to lengthy prison sentences, corporal punishment, or death (Carroll & Mendos, 2017). Moreover, being explicitly “out” throughout school and community spaces (see McKenna-Buchanan, Munz & Rudnick, 2015), is often presumed to be a constraint in social education because of frequent expectations of teacher neutrality on issues marked as controversial (see Hess, 2009; Ho et al, 2017; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). School cultures often punish those who challenge the narrow norms of gender expression and heterosexuality (Beck, 2013; Mayo, 2004; Pascoe, 2004). Teacher disclosure about LGBTQ identities, inclusion of queer content in curriculum, and participation in



events like DoS thus reflect potentially high personal and professional risks – and potential rewards (Rands, 2009).

Opposition movements demonstrate how DoS participation signals a critical and activist stance, resisting the exclusion of LGBTQ people found in schools and elsewhere. In 2005, the conservative Christian legal group Alliance Defending Freedom launched a counter-protest event named "Day of Truth," renamed "Day of Dialogue" when Focus on the Family became its sponsor (Day of Dialogue, 2018). Claiming DoS promotes a "homosexual agenda" inconsistent with free speech, these and other counter-protests, including "Anti-Gay Day" and "Day of Silence Walkout," have been promoted across the U.S., leading to legal challenges, disciplinary and sometimes violent consequences for DoS participants (Lambda Legal, 2018; Volokh, 2014; Woolley, 2012).

By investigating Talbot's<sup>3</sup> decision to participate in the National Day of Silence, this study aims to understand how one "out" gay teacher challenges civic exclusions in his context by teaching counter-socialization, and how his identities shape his agency in doing so, asking: *How does the process of planning and participating in the Day of Silence influence this teacher's views on agency for teaching counter-socialization?*

## 2 Theoretical Framework

Literature in queer theory and civic education illuminates how this teacher's context, identity and process (Torney-Purta, Amadeo & Andolina, 2010) of DoS participation influence his understanding of his own teaching agency. Queer theory illustrates how ideas of normality, marginalization, and exclusion are constructed and maintained in schools, how they impact people and institutions (Loutzenheiser, 2006; Schmidt, 2010) and definitions of citizenship (see Crocco, 2008 for a thorough historical overview). Reviews of social education literature show that educators, researchers and curriculum largely still ignore the possibilities of applying queer theory (Castro & Knowles, 2017; Maguth & Taylor, 2014; Mayo, 2017; Schmidt, 2010). Given these limits, this study also draws on recent empirical research from learning sciences and literacy exploring student and teacher LGBTQ identities.

### 2.1 Identifying as LGBTQ: A Civic Paradox in U.S. Schools

Since official curriculum rarely includes queer identities, histories and struggles for civil rights (Crocco, 2008; Mayo, 2017; Schmidt, 2010; Thornton, 2004), most students and educators lack a political or historical context for understanding queer people as civic subjects, or may actively resist their inclusion. While research affirms the academic, health and school climate benefits of LGBTQ-supportive practices and policies for *all* students (see Kosciw et al, 2016; Toomey et al, 2012), rarely do U.S. educators and schools make sustained efforts toward civic inclusion for



LGBTQ people (Beck, 2013; Hess, 2009; Thornton, 2004). In the public spaces of schools and classrooms (Parker, 2003; Schmidt, 2010), the naming of LGBTQ people (or those presumed to be so) occurs regularly and explicitly, leading to social and political marginalization (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004; Pascoe, 2004).

I describe this phenomenon as a *civic paradox* because in the process of being publicly named and represented (even inaccurately) as LGBTQ, students or educators simultaneously experience civic marginalization. They must stay closeted, or avoid affiliations with LGBTQ identities or stereotypes, to experience reliable civic protection and legitimacy in curriculum and schools (Camicia, 2016). Even when represented in curriculum and teaching roles, LGBTQ people must often "cover" their gender and/or sexual identities to align with or approximate heteronormative values (see Yoshino, 2006) or accept charitable forms of inclusion taken for granted by heterosexuals granted full citizenship (Thornton, 2004). By framing LGBTQ exclusions as merely individual experiences of homophobia, schools socialize students and educators to ignore *heteronormativity*, the pervasive, systematic ways that the gender binary and heterosexuality are constructed and promoted as natural, normal, and superior human experiences (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; DePalma, 2013; Sumara & Davis, 1999). LGBTQ teachers of social education face a special paradox in that being "out" may imply progressive political views, making their visibility incompatible with expectations of teacher neutrality, or even professionalism.

## 2.2 Teacher Agency & Counter-Socialization

While many school-based holidays and rituals serve to memorialize the nation with uncritical patriotism, teachers participating in DoS offer their students a counter-socialization opportunity, in Engle and Ochoa's (1988) terms. Unlike celebratory narratives of "predictable progress" for holidays such as Thanksgiving or D-Day (VanSledright, 2008, p. 119), DoS centers an ongoing civic need in schools and a group often excluded from American democracy. By focusing on this marginalization, DoS offers the possibility for "a learning process designed to foster the independent thought and social criticism that is crucial to political freedom" (Engle & Ochoa, 1988, p. 31). Rather than a flat rejection of past learning, teaching for counter-socialization requires that students engage in reflective analysis of their beliefs and collective deliberation of significant social problems, necessitating an expansion of curriculum content and instructional methods (Hess, 2009; Ho et al, 2017; Parker, 2003).

Teacher participation in DoS clearly interrupts school as usual, especially holiday celebrations as usual, because teacher silence offers entirely different possibilities for learning and leadership. For LGBTQ-identified teachers, their decisions on if/how to be "out" with students and colleagues, and if/how to participate in DoS, also reflect significant turns of civic identity navigation, and possibilities for counter-socialization in showing LGBTQ identities as assets, not liabilities. With the authority embodied in the teacher's role, an "out" teacher's presence may function as a form of



official curriculum, challenging the presumed negativity of queerness. Since DoS highlights school-based and civic exclusion of LGBTQ people, participating teachers may role-model a form of social criticism consistent with counter-socialization.

To understand teacher agency as vested in the teaching role, its actions and interactions, Tina Gourd's (2018) concept of *teaching as agency* also offers insight. Rather than seeing teacher agency as functioning primarily through structures, institutions, rules and resources (from structuralist and structurationist theory) or exceptional teacher talent or contexts, Gourd employs post-structuralist theory to envision teacher agency as centering on actions and inactions inherent in *all* teaching roles and contexts, from the mundane to most activist. She argues that teaching entails agency as action/inaction in three forms: agency within – not despite – constraints; agency within contested and ambiguous spaces; and structures (such as rules, policies, and institutions) enabling agency through relationships, collective efforts, roles, etc.

### 2.3 Queer Theory and the Tensions of Inclusion

Though summarizing the wide scope of queer theory would be impossible here, several core principles illuminate this inquiry. First is the understanding of gender and sexuality as fluid, dynamic, multiple performances shaped through the demands of context, and varying over time, replacing the notion of a stable, coherent subject with a constellational identity framework (Loutzenheiser, 2006; McWilliams & Penuel, 2016). Second, queer theory helps us see the hidden curriculum (Eisner, 2003; Kumashiro, 2003) at work in schools, and the ways in which queer individuals and groups may be constructed as vulnerable, at-risk, or negated - but retain significant agency nonetheless (Meyer, 2010). Third, queer theory emphasizes two meanings of queer: defined in opposition to heterosexuality, or against normativity (Rands, 2009). While liberal democratic states typically value inclusion and representation, queer scholars insist such concepts are insufficient for achieving equity or justice. For example, Beck's (2013) study poignantly illustrates how inclusion of discussions on same-sex marriage only deepened LGBTQ students' experiences of exclusion and discomfort in the secondary classroom. Even with caring teachers and thoughtful planning, curricular inclusion and representation was insufficient for promoting LGBTQ student safety, or discourses about LGBTQ people beyond deficiency.

To provide an effective counter-narrative to civic exclusion, queer theory requires a critical and intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) pedagogy to attend to multiple forms of marginalization (Mayo, 2017). Unfortunately, the limited lens of academic queer theory may overlook those at the center of queer histories and movements: people of color, working class people, and others with multiply-marginalized identities (Alexander, 2018; Bassichis, Lee & Spade, 2011; McWilliams & Penuel, 2016). Similarly, multicultural and culturally relevant approaches in the social studies tend to minimally engage with topics of gender and sexuality, or position such topics as disconnected from race and ethnicity (Crocco, 2008; Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004; Mayo, 2017). This



perceived separation strengthens the power structures that uphold both racism and heterosexism, with particularly harsh outcomes for LGBTQ youth of color (Burdge, Licona & Hyemingway, 2014; Diaz & Kosciw, 2009; Kahn et al, 2018). For the educator, highlighting multiple exclusions simultaneously may be a demanding endeavor, while negotiating dynamic identities and social limits in the classroom and beyond (Miller, 2015). With its challenges, queer theory offers important potential for civic education to move beyond standardized and relatively static procedural knowledge to rich possibilities of meaning and civic engagement (Mayo, 2017; Schmidt, 2010).

### 3 Methods

To understand complex, contextually-embedded phenomena such as a teacher's changing perceptions of agency during teacher participation in the Day of Silence in a detracked classroom, case knowledge is suitable and needed (Shulman, 1986; Yin, 2017). This interpretive qualitative case study relies on a purposeful teacher sample (Patton, 2002) based on several criteria: interest in participating in the Day of Silence, self-identification as LGBTQ+, at least 3 years of teaching experience to support navigating this complex topic with students, and curricula that relate to citizenship, global topics and identity. Talbot was 35 years old and a White, cisgender male English/Language Arts teacher from a middle-class background who identified as gay or queer. This was his third year teaching, all at Douglass High School, and he was "out" to everyone in the school community.

"Douglass High," an ethnically diverse public high school of about 1,700 students, stood in a liberal West Coast city, in a state with laws explicitly prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. This site provided a potential contrast (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to the general hostility in predominantly White schools reflected in school-based studies of queer students and teachers (see, e.g. Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2017; Mayo, 2004; Pascoe, 2004; Woolley, 2012). The school's diversity in terms of race, socio-economic status, languages and immigration status, and its location in a historically African American neighborhood contributed to a reputation for social activism. Thus, it was not a likely location for a counter-protest like Day of Dialogue. The largest student populations were White (41.4%), Black (24.8%), Asian (17.2%), and Latinx (7.9%), with 30% on free/reduced lunch. Queer staff and students had access to LGBTQ-specific supports through a long-established Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA), several "out" teachers, a club for transgender students, and a Queer Arts Club.

Four semi-structured teacher interviews (70-100 minutes each) and document analysis of lessons and syllabi, collected over five months and concentrated on the Day of Silence (April 27, 2018), illustrated how this teacher understood his agency within contextual opportunities and constraints. A summary of data collection follows:



**Interviews:** Interview one in January 2018 focused on teacher identity, pedagogy and philosophy, curriculum and professional development resources, and his needs/goals for participating in the study. Interview two in April 2018 centered on planning for the Day of the Silence, his classroom and community context, and how they influence curriculum and instruction. Interview three was conducted immediately after school on the Day of Silence, focused on reporting and reflecting on patterns of his and students' experiences and engagement. Interview four in June 2018 returned to reflect on the impact of DoS participation on classroom community and teaching goals. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and member-checked for accuracy.

**Document Collection:** Analyzing lesson and classroom materials, including syllabi, reflection questions and in-class assignments, proved essential to understanding the teacher's goals and practice for DoS.

**Approach to Analysis:** Constructivist grounded theory, which positions the researcher as a coproducer of the data through their interactions with it, "and therefore the meanings that the researcher observes and defines" (Charmaz, 1995, p. 35) aligns well with this study's theoretical framework, queer epistemology and my insider-outsider status (Fine, 2000). My personal lens, and my interactions with Talbot and the data, were certainly informed by my experiences as a White, queer, cisgender and middle class woman and secondary teacher. Interpretations also drew on almost a decade of contextual knowledge of Douglass High: first as a student, then volunteer and teaching intern, and recently teacher coach. While the school and community were very familiar, I met Talbot only once before this study, briefly during a partnership program for high school students and teacher candidates.

Triangulation of data sources and methods (interviews and document analysis) collected over multiple occasions aims to promote greater validity and reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) in this study. I employed member checks of the data and findings, and peer review with analysis and emerging findings. Data analysis included coding, analyzing, and reflecting on data within and across school settings. Starting with open coding, I generated 27 initial codes using in-vivo and open coding, using emic themes of repetition such as "empathy" and "protest" and codes of contrast like "performative" and "not performative." This enabled generalizations by testing representativeness and weighing the evidence (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). The third coding process searched for evidence of agency within (not despite) constraints, agency within contested and ambiguous spaces, and structures enabling agency, while searching for supporting and disconfirming evidence before and after participating in the DoS.

**Limitations:** School district concerns for student vulnerability related to questions of sexuality (see Cahill, 2012; Irvine, 2012) limited the school-based data sources to those collected from the teacher, and prohibited any site observations, or student interviews. The district's LGBT program manager also opposed Talbot's participation in DoS and expected LGBTQ teachers to come "out" only if and when they could identify a specific student benefit. Viewing "out" LGBTQ identities as conditionally permissible, unprofessional or irrelevant may reflect a policy of containment



(Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2016), and a standard to which other teacher identities are not held. This restriction limited efforts to counteract potential social sources of invalidity such as reflexivity problems, researcher distortion or selectivity (Symonette, 2008), and reflects an ongoing challenge for understanding the experiences of LGBTQ teachers and students in schools.

#### 4 Key Findings: Teacher Agency and Teaching for Counter-Socialization

In this section, I first describe Talbot's planning and participation in the DoS as a counter-socializing ritual, aiming to clarify how this process influenced his views of teaching agency. With a constellational view of identity relevant to Talbot's agency in this context, relationships between and among marginalized and privileged identities emerged as central to understanding the dynamics of trust and communal concern for Talbot and his students. After synthesizing Talbot's process and decisions about DoS, findings are organized through Gourd's (2018) conception of teaching as agency: 1) within constraints, 2) within contested/ambiguous spaces, and 3) through structures as agency.

##### 4.1 Context: Planning and Goals

Informed by queer culture and theory, Talbot saw his DoS participation as both a performance – of silence as a metaphor – and as a counter-narrative that he wanted students to experience as impactful. Performance, as Muñoz (1999) argues, works as a means of disidentification for queer people of color: a means of action and subversion, a strategic and critical re/enactment of identity in relation or resistance to society in a publicly staged manner (p. 293). While Talbot is White, these attributes resonated in his use of DoS to critically engage with school and civic exclusion as usual, including countering assumptions of teacher neutrality and aims of "balanced" instruction on controversial or undecided issues.

Given his experiences of alienation in civic spaces and institutions as a gay youth and adult, Talbot believed DoS silence could promote student understanding and potential empathy across multiple identities in his highly diverse classroom. As he explained in interview two, some students arrived well-versed in silences based on their earlier experiences of academic tracking:<sup>4</sup>

Some of them will have been told their whole lives everything they have to say is valuable. They're just conditioned to believe that, and others are conditioned to believe that they should shut up and they're stupid, and no one wants to know what they have to say 'cause it's not valuable. Or somewhere in the middle...

For the folks who feel silenced, what I want *them* to take away from [DoS is] that other people are also thinking about this now, and getting this experience. And the silence is external to you, and isn't necessarily because you're deficient in some way. The other group... I would want them to be thinking about the same questions from the other end, like what is the cause of the silence? Is it me? Is it people like me? Is it people like my parents? What can I do about it?



Talbot shows how promoting student thinking about privilege ("Is it people like me?... like my parents?") and solidarity around marginalized identities ("other people are also thinking about this now") can stimulate action ("What can I do about it?"), an extension of his counter-socialization goals.

Though Talbot first planned on participating alone, he invited each class to consider being silent together as a collective protest. He exploited the dramatic when introducing the event. One week before DoS, he wheeled his chair into the middle of the classroom, expressed his nervousness, and spun in a circle to see each student, all very unusual behavior that provoked extra student attention.

I owned my fear, and I said, 'There's this Day of Silence.' And I talked to them about what it has meant historically, and why it came to be... And the fact that I've never participated in this before, but I wanted to this year, but I wanted it to be meaningful. I didn't want to just posture, so my thought was: we could all be silent. Would that be okay?

Talbot modeled vulnerability as an essential ingredient for an supportive detracked classroom community, and pointed to potential collective impacts: "If we did this, if this is a class where we took 55 minutes to not speak and this was something that we all experienced together and shared, then it [might do] something to this space." Students discussed his request, and again a few days later in weekly student-led discussions, in which Talbot did not intervene, as was typical. No groups expressed strong views, but generally mild support. Talbot assumed some students might not want to participate, but he had no pre-planned response; he did not want participation to feel punitive or forced.

Importantly, Talbot expanded the day's focus from the invisibility and silencing of queer people to multiple forms of marginalization. Talbot recounted in interview three that when introducing DoS, he invited students to consider participating based on "any time any part of your identity feels shut up to you" in schools. By highlighting multiple forms of marginalization, he hoped more students could forge personal connections to this protest and experience empathy for others. Unlike instances of individual or group-based DoS participation (Curwood, Schliesman & Horning, 2009; Woolley, 2012; Young, 2009), Talbot saw shared silence, and expansion of the event's scope, as an effective means of encouraging students to listen to and make broader meanings from this ritual. While he personally focused on queer identities, he emphasized voices not heard and absences in school spaces and elsewhere.

On the Day of Silence, Talbot set a cheerful tone, smiling and showing each class photos of his high school, himself as a ninth-grader, then shared a few sentences describing the invisibility he felt there. His next slide explained, "I still don't see schools, including this one, doing much for folks who are beginning to figure this stuff out. That's why I'm silent today." He shared two photos of himself with his partner and pets, a humanizing move since he had never shown his partner's face to the students. Then he showed this slide:



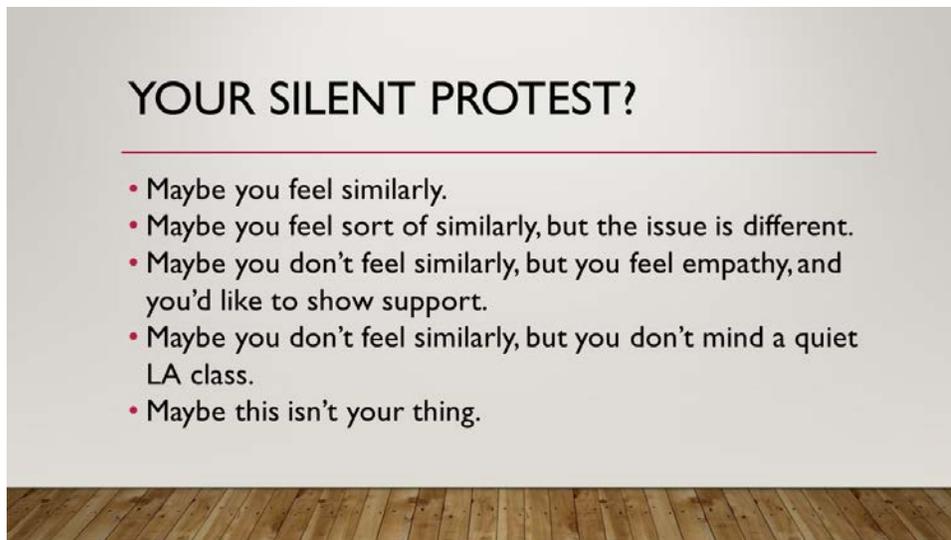


Figure 1. Talbot's slide framing potential students' personal motivations for participating in the Day of Silence.

The last slide read: "Today is about what you want it to be about. Give some thought to what you want it to be about."

In all classes, Talbot followed his lesson plan, using slides to lead various activities without talking. Ninth graders participated in a four corners activity, standing in different corners of the room to express identity group memberships along multiple prompts, then a seated individual writing exercise, and finally a gallery walk activity with identity objects students had brought. Tenth graders revised a partner's writing, then their own work. Each class closed with an exit ticket about their learning through the activities and what the silence felt like or meant.

#### **4.2 Collective Silence and Performance as Assets for Counter-socialization: Agency Within Constraints**

While an obvious constraint on instruction, for Talbot, silence became a counter-socialization tool because of the personal meaning, collective experience and larger activist context his performance and metaphor made available. Mobilizing DoS in this way clearly depended on trusting relationships with students, being willing and able to engage with this performance and ritual. As with studies of peer-based political socialization (e.g., Gordon & Taft, 2011), Talbot understood that many students were already engaged in multiple forms of activism and would create their own meanings for DoS participation, independent of adult-led efforts. He hoped that his personal connection to the event and the performance of silence could facilitate student meaning, not bound it.



Experiencing DoS as a performance and protest held clear promise for Talbot's goals of counter-socialization of heteronormativity – but such framing also represented a contextual constraint. In his initial request, Talbot asked students for feedback "to make this work well, because the last thing I want is for this to just seem like an empty exercise in phony activism." His references to "posturing" and "phony activism" held special salience at Douglass High, where student use of the word "performative" to mean "doing something for self-aggrandizement, without doing anything meaningful" became widespread, especially after teachers posed for a newspaper photographer wearing Black Lives Matter t-shirts during February's Black History Month. Talbot wanted to "put some skin in the game" while avoiding being "preachy" or "telling students what to think." By sharing his personal reasons for participating in DoS and then "do[ing] something about it" by promoting broader awareness, Talbot could engage civic action around heteronormativity and other exclusions. That no other student groups or teachers planned to participate may have heightened the contrast of his participation.

When every student chose to participate in silence, and when "almost 100%" described this performance of silence as personally meaningful on their exit slips, Talbot experienced "a paradigm-shifter" in teaching agency. Talbot cited three patterns of student responses that confirmed his DoS lesson as a counter-socialization endeavor. First, students voiced: "I'm not alone," whether LGBTQ-identified themselves, or silenced by other identities such as race or gender. On exit slips, two students came out: one as trans, one as gay. The second trend was surprise, particularly from highly privileged and high social status students: "I had no idea people felt this way all the time." The third was appreciation for the opportunity to show solidarity or empathy, to better understand what others regularly experience.

That Talbot's agency relied on student buy-in might represent a constraint, but students' meaning-making with DoS also deepened his pedagogy's transformative potential. This outcome clearly relied on the careful planning, relevant personal experience he shared, opportunities for choice that he embedded in student participation, and multiple avenues for students to discuss the event in advance. Prompted by students' exit slip feedback, Talbot shared new goals for queering his pedagogy and its impact across the school: making DoS participation an annual classroom ritual, encouraging colleagues to participate, adding curriculum on queer history and topics, and experiential learning on other identity-based topics. This was a marked shift from his first interview, when he described preference for queer pedagogy being "in the air" through brief comments and anecdotes, rather than part of explicit curriculum. While he first described the silence as "very isolating," and "lonely" that day after school, the silence did serve to deepen classroom community and relationships. Two months after, he reflected:

Now, the story that I'm telling myself about [DoS] as something that we all did together... I perceived it to have been a part of [students'] history of the class, too. They're like, "Oh, we did the Day of Silence" [in their unit summaries]. ... they firmly put [DoS] there and treated it like another learning activity, like right alongside other assessments.



Here, students claimed ritual ownership: *they* (not just the teacher) "did" the silence, and thus facilitated its meaning. Unlike school-based rituals that encourage but may not require students' ritual participation in significant depth, DoS here *required* every student's participation to function. Task "completion" necessitated a personal motivation beyond compliance because of the conscious demands of staying silent for 55 minutes, surrounded by peers. With that collectively chosen constraint, students enabled different meaning and learning than if some students had talked. The ritual became "our silent day," Talbot reported, adding that every class included DoS in their end-of-year reflections. These student actions may indicate lasting relevance of the ritual to their lives and learning, consistent with Talbot's aims.

Lastly, Talbot saw his outness and queerness as assets for his teaching agency, rather than emphasizing their constraints or liabilities. Because of his "out" identity, colleagues and students (including not his own) regularly sought him out as a resource on LGBTQ and other social justice issues. He drew on his experiences of marginalization to facilitate trusting rapport with students marginalized in other ways. Finally, queerness as an identity informed a social analysis consistent with counter-socialization, he explained:

To me, being queer means that I was rejected by society in such a formative way that I have become so critical of pretty much *every* institution, that I look back on it now with a lot of gratitude. Like getting kicked out of the world, means that you look back at the world, and you kind of pick and choose what you want and what you don't want... My queerness is so formative, I'm an outsider permanently. And I really like that....What that means for me, is that other outsider kids, I got them. I can relate to them.

As Talbot explains, his experiences as an "outsider" queer are consistent with counter-socialization: converting injustice into agency and new understandings. The ability to "pick and choose" may reflect his other privileged identities: as male, White, cisgender, etc. that he frequently references with his teaching in this context. Yet being queer fundamentally shaped Talbot's "critical" socio-political consciousness to "look back at the world," enabling closer connections with marginalized others.

### **4.3 Student-Centered Pedagogy and Tracking: Agency within Contested and Ambiguous Spaces**

While he navigated many ambiguous school spaces, Talbot saw his classroom as the most significant – and contested – space for counter-socialization that he could influence. This ambiguity reflected two contextual and political aims. First, Talbot's counter-socialization teaching goals required the centering of student discourse and leadership in multiple forms, from all students rather than those most frequently valued in schools. While his role as teacher positioned him as authority, student-centered methods and emphasis on multiple perspectives meant a contestation of that singular power or expertise because of how student relationships, engagement and action were prioritized in his decision-making and pedagogy. Talbot's detracked



classroom also represented a stark contrast to the larger school's marked segregation along racial, socioeconomic and academic tracking lines.

Building relationships across differences of gender, sexual identity, race and class were key classroom goals for Talbot, but segregated school structures consistently proved an obstacle. Douglass High's location in a rapidly gentrifying, historically Black neighborhood set the stage for tensions in school. "Black Balcony" and "White Hall" served as physical reminders of the prevalence of racial segregation, which tracking around honors and AP courses only deepened in the past three decades. These trends were exacerbated by feeder school tracking and socialization, which in Talbot's view, taught some students, especially the White and/or affluent, that they were "worthy" of responsive, student-centered instruction while others, especially students of color and/or low-income students, were not. For two years, Talbot worked with a detracking team, despite district-level opposition, to develop a detracked English/Language Arts and Social Studies in ninth grade. This experience directly informed his goals of interdependence and effective communication across differences, outcomes he related to necessary literacy and human skills.

Talbot's instructional choices – focusing on significant social issues using student-centered discussion (Engle & Ochoa, 1988) and cooperative learning – drew from those goals and offered regular student voice opportunities. Consistent with Cohen and colleagues' (1999) focus on interdependent, equitable relationships to minimize differences in student status, his methods typically included complex instruction and project-based learning, restructuring student interaction patterns. All too aware of the social re-segregation that can occur in detracked classrooms using cooperative learning strategies (see Rubin, 2003), Talbot sought methods to avoid reproducing the inequities so prevalent in his context. He understood that students who experience regular violations of rights in schools or society, as Rubin (2012) shows, may see a conflict between lived realities and democratic ideals – a sense of disjuncture – while those who experience congruence must move from complacency to an awareness that change is needed for equity and fairness.

Talbot worked to "engineer" relationships and trust across difference through seating and partner arrangements with chosen and assigned pairs, project-based learning that required outside-of-class communication, various in-class committees, weekly rotating discussion leaders and early, intensive community building activities. His *Romeo and Juliet* unit with performances that students planned and cast, illustrated how fundamental student-centered interactions across identities are for his pedagogy:

I'm thoughtful about really diverse groups. I couldn't do it if there wasn't a community. Standing and acting Shakespeare in front of [30+ people]... It's risky. There's lots of examples of people going through the motions. Like, 'I have to do this at school,' but not a single one of my students did that... The buy-in was really great. That's, I would argue, 'cause they love each other... the things I wanna do, I can't do unless the community is there.



By April, Talbot's students had experienced a classroom community that regularly expected they share their voices, lead and take risks, rather than "going through the motions." As Pace (2015) describes, Talbot's teaching goals depended on student relationships with him and with each other: moreover, students stay engaged in challenging learning "because they love each other." Centering student discourse – while developing rapport and skills – was essential for pursuing Talbot's counter-socialization aims.

#### 4.4 Unexpected Structures Enabling or Containing Teacher Agency

Talbot clearly felt that the Day of Silence as a movement and annual ritual offered a unique structure that supported his teacher agency and facilitated student meaning-making around the civic exclusion of LGBTQ people and others. In his recounting, participation functioned as a personal inquiry or experiment for him and many students, one requiring changes in social and academic behavior. Sustaining silence for 55 minutes in a close-knit class accustomed to plenty of interaction represented an impressive force of will for most teens. Unlike the middle school students in Murphy's (2016) account, no rule or authority figure enforced silence: students themselves set and maintained that expectation as a norm, and even developed their own spontaneous norms. The absence of talk, a shared ritual, and chosen experiential learning all became crucial for utilizing DoS for counter-socialization, Talbot explained:

[DoS] should be just one day a year and it should be focused on LGBT issues... It's so *valuable* but I also wouldn't want it to feel normal. So what I want to do is think of ways to empower students to have experiences like this but that aren't this.

Such experiences, Talbot noted, should extend to other experiences of identity-based exclusion relevant to schools and society.

Expanding the ritual's purpose facilitated deeper intersectional thinking and relationships of trust, particularly with students of color. Talbot emphasized that his biggest lesson post-DoS was on intersectionality: "it's crucial that I remember where I fall" in terms of power and privilege based on identities. When Talbot framed the ritual with his own experiences of civic exclusion and connected this to other forms of marginalization, other marginalized students – particularly by race – seemed to interpret his actions as consistent with empathy or communal concern for them, rather than "performative" social justice interests. He reported a sticky note conversation during DoS with one Native American<sup>5</sup> student, who he had struggled to consistently engage academically and socially, but on this day, chose to do the work and interact with Talbot with unusual warmth. Another student, a queer woman of color notorious at Douglass for publicly critiquing teachers' ignorance, stopped by after school to chat: Talbot saw this ritual as enabling a "breakthrough in [their] relationship." Broader impacts that Talbot reported in the final interview included trends of greater warmth in student relationships with each other, more unexpected student partner selections across identity groups, and more willingness to "call each other out" and share bravely in class.



Perhaps the most surprising structure supporting Talbot's agency during DoS was a school-wide sports assembly that morning. When Talbot chose to stand by the gymnasium's central doors instead of monitoring students at the sides, his highly visible position and silent contrast to chatting colleagues made his participation and commitment public. The assembly also included a collective moment of silence for DoS, led by a student government officer. While it lasted only one second, for Talbot's purposes, the attention was helpful for heightening the event's visibility and easing students' transitions into his classroom.

Even with the school's reputation for a "liberal hive mind," the absence of support for DoS or other initiatives countering heteronormativity at Douglass, and in the district, remained a limitation for Talbot's agency. The site did not offer a contrast to the homophobia of predominantly White and affluent schools studied (e.g., Mayo, 2004; Pascoe, 2004; Woolley, 2012). While at first Talbot described school administrators as "having his back hard" in the past, his last two interviews referenced "studious neutrality." The one-second recognition at the sports assembly, Talbot's expectation of hallway harassment, a lack of specific resources from the district's LGBT<sup>6</sup> office, and unreliable district and school administration support indicated that the context's assumed liberalism did not offer LGBTQ people dependable protection or legitimacy. Even Talbot's own expectations may have been normed around exclusion, like teachers in Mayo's (2004) study. Toomey and colleagues (2012) report that LGBTQ students "may experience this type of victimization [harassment or bullying] but feel that it is expected and thus do not consider it when rating the overall school climate" (p. 193). Nevertheless, Talbot recognized his agency to support other school-based structures for LGBTQ needs and agreed to advise a new after-school LGBTQ+ Arts Club. Students sought to create this group after disappointments with the school's GSA, and their student-led discussions of LGBTQ media and issues fostered a "third space" for queer critical pedagogy (Mayo, 2013) and challenging heteronormativity.

## 5 Discussion

Planning and participating in DoS enabled a "paradigm-shift[ing]" experience in counter-socialization and teaching agency for Talbot when all of his 150 students chose to participate. Although heteronormativity indeed relies on silences to prop up and reproduce its own privileges, as Woolley (2012) eloquently insists, the collective silence here represented a shared practice of dissent (Schmidt, 2013) that implicitly – and for some, explicitly – challenged heteronormativity in schools. Nearly all students identified personally meaningful or "transformative" value from DoS participation, and spontaneously included it as central to their learning and classroom community months later. For Talbot, this meant his counter-socialization goals were met, more effectively than if only he or a few students had been silent. These outcomes certainly relied on caring relationships built and maintained over time, and student-centered instructional practices. Also, Talbot's ability to contextualize the purpose of DoS through his own experiences of civic exclusion, his scaffolding to support students in discussing and deciding whether and how to participate independently, and his move to broaden the day's symbolism to any identity silenced in schools



reflected his courage and desire to forge deliberate meaning with students. In choosing to participate, students who were multiply-privileged could realize how infrequently they felt silenced, while many multiply-marginalized peers found greater trust and connection.

Participating in DoS thus supported civic relationships based on awareness of privilege, and a shared effort to deepen trust and communal concern, attributes that political philosopher Danielle Allen (2004) describes as crucial for democratic citizenship. Perhaps ironically, framing DoS as a potentially shared teacher-student experience, rather than an individual one, may have helped students feel ownership, while increasing teacher self-perceptions of agency. Unlike other school holidays, the shared decision on if/how to participate enabled both teacher and students to claim the ritual as "our silent day." In contrast to recent student-focused studies (e.g. Woolley, 2012; Young, 2009), these results indicate that Day of Silence participation can be a thought-provoking tool for counter-socialization teaching when it centers queer silences, questions heteronormativity, and engages intersectional meanings.

Importantly, this teacher's intentional, reflective use of his "out" queer identity offered a significant asset for democratic social education and counter-socialization. Though being "out" may often be perceived as a constraint or weakness for educators, Talbot leaned on its pedagogical possibilities with DoS and beyond. Queer pedagogy and counter-socialization teaching drew on his life experiences of civic exclusions, which cemented the goals of empathy, trust and communal concern in his classroom. While already "out," Talbot's courage to take action, and personally contextualize the event, demonstrated teacher vulnerability and explicit social critique: a practice of critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2014). Instead of (simply) telling about himself, Talbot *showed* how to harness personal experiences of marginalization as fuel for deepening relationships and taking action (through teaching and DoS participation) for social change.

## 6 Implications

While educational research and social education literature generally emphasize constraints and risks for "out" LGBTQ teachers, this study reveals important affordances, particularly for critical social education pedagogy and teacher agency. This is not to suggest that all LGBTQ teachers should or must come "out," regardless of contextual consequences, rather that those doing so in thoughtful connection with civic curriculum may offer specific assets in social education. Talbot's results of transformational meaning-making from DoS represent valuable pedagogical tools that may only become available when "out" queer perspectives and civic experiences are validated and centered. Talbot's methods – participating in the Day of Silence as a performance and protest informed by queer theory and disclosure of civic exclusion – drew on his queer identity, community, and culture as assets for building students' socio-political or critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2014).



Similarly, this study does *not* indicate that only LGBTQ people can enact meaningful counter-socialization teaching around the Day of Silence, rather that queer theory and pedagogy can support more meaningful civic education through this event, and throughout a curriculum. These findings echo many queer scholars' critique of inclusion and tolerance discourses as solutions to the violence experienced by those identified or perceived as LGBTQ (Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Meyer, 2010; Reddy, 2011), and their limited value in critical civic education. What did contribute to meaningful counter-socialization teaching and agency was prioritizing experiential learning designed to promote empathy, trust and communal concern. Drawing on queer theory to craft experiential learning activities was a key tool for Talbot's framing and experience of the DoS as a shared silent ritual performance. His instructional design aligned with Mayo's (2017) goals of asserting LGBTQ legitimacy and dignity through experiences that position LGBTQ people as "more familiar, viewed as fellow human beings instead of a 'category'... easily objectified and rejected" (p. 266). Practices of adopting and "hearing" the experience of often-silenced others may be a broadly powerful tool in counter-socialization teaching.

Knowledge of geopolitical local contexts (Camicia, 2016) and local practices (Nasir & Hand, 2006) are also crucial for navigating the opportunities and constraints of LGBTQ teacher self-disclosure choices, even more than regional or legal context, as Connell (2012) argues. Social education needs a much wider range of contextual research on LGBTQ education to understand when and how "out" identities serve as assets. To what extent did Talbot's "out" identity and counter-socialization curriculum function this way because of his liberal urban school, district and state? Importantly, his geopolitical context limited his agency and did not insulate him from harassment, despite the clear contrast intended with site selection. Additionally, queer students of color were among those most marginalized in Talbot's school - even in LGBTQ-led spaces - consistent with recent research (Burdge, Licona & Hyemingway, 2014; Diaz & Kosciw, 2009; Kahn et al, 2017; Singh, 2013).

Further studies of teacher participation in DoS and other LGBTQ education efforts from a range of contexts are necessary to build broader understanding of educational approaches that challenge the civic paradox and position LGBTQ identities as legitimately civic, not inherently controversial. This study joins Cahill (2012) and Irvine (2012) in calling for IRB reforms to access student thinking about and experiences of LGBTQ identities, as this study's district approval process illustrates. In particular, focusing on the strategies and resilience of queer educators of color and others who are multiply marginalized may offer insights for when and how being "out" works as a constraint on teacher agency (Brockenbrough, 2016) and/or as an asset. Such research may illuminate how "out" teachers' identities shape counter-socialization and socio-political consciousness approaches, and when that agency may depend on other aspects of identity, such as race or class, being privileged in their school context and in broader spheres.

Since student participation and meaning-making became crucial for both Talbot's goals for the DoS and for his sense of teaching agency, this study also points to the need for models of teaching agency that incorporate student relationships, engagement and action. As Talbot explained: "the



things I wanna do, I can't do unless the [classroom] community is there." Teacher dependence on students for meaningful, rigorous classroom outcomes and experiences may increase in socioculturally diverse classrooms, Pace (2015) argues, and the task of fostering classroom harmony without suppressing student discourse or diminishing expectations remains a perennial teaching challenge. Those students and teachers experiencing the most acute consequences of this civic paradox, in combination with other marginalized identities in classroom communities, may be best positioned to show how civic exclusions function and how they might be unlearned, in classrooms, schools and beyond.

Finally, this study joins Mayo's (2017) call for social education research that can give voice to queer people silenced over time, helping teachers, students and fellow scholars make sense of national and global narratives about LGBTQ identities and how such narratives impact people's lives. For LGBTQ students and teachers, when social education fails to address their lived realities – the civic paradoxes they face in schools and society – such curriculum and learning become irrelevant, alienating and even damaging (Beck, 2013; Camicia, 2016). Sidelining or dismissing queer studies as irrelevant and LGBTQ issues as "controversial," as Snapp and colleagues' (2015) recent curriculum findings demonstrate, may make our discipline complicit in the ongoing injustices LGBTQ individuals (and those perceived as such) face in schools and beyond. Counter-socialization instruction that promotes communal concern, in Allen's (2004) terms, remains an urgent tool for civic education - one necessary to counteract the civic paradox upheld in schools and society through heteronormativity.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Countries including the Netherlands have created their own events (Day of Silence, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer. While numerous identities related to gender and sexuality are often added to this acronym, and/or recognized through queer as an umbrella term, I generally use LGBTQ in this paper because those are the identities that the Day of Silence explicitly centers.

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym.

<sup>4</sup> In the United States context, tracking is the separation of students into separate academic pathways and classes, for all or specific subjects. This article focuses on within-school tracking, though among-school tracking and post-secondary tracking are also significant phenomena in the U.S. See Leonardo and Grubb (2014) for a useful introduction.

<sup>5</sup> Native Americans are Indigenous peoples of North America, specifically in U.S. geography, "who have inhabited lands before colonization or annexation; have maintained distinct, nuanced cultural and social organizing principles; and claim a nationhood status" (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 983).

<sup>6</sup> The school district program office name relates to LGBT identities, but does not include the Q for queer.

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