Teacher Educators Using Encounter Stories

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Abstract

Many prospective teachers are unaware of the encounters that Black, heterosexual women or White lesbians face. Here, we present encounter stories—individual narratives of poignant encounters and interactions that we have experienced with people unlike us—to identify with and ultimately draw on their experiences. Subsequently, the narratives become data that not only inform our work as teacher educators and scholars but also are used to shape prospective teachers' understanding of inimitable difference. Despite the heralded affirming visibility of Michelle Obama and Ellen Degeneres, oppressive practices and perspectives against Black women and lesbians continue. Our encounter stories are put forward as qualitative data that goes against the grain and empowers. Further, our narratives challenge the conventional linear written format by intersecting our authentic voices with extant theory. Given the growing diversity in K-12 education, it is crucial that prospective teachers gain meaningful insight of unique, real life experiences, examine those experiences against their own familiarities to recognize sameness amid difference. Subsequently, this recognition will help to situate prospective teachers to meet the curricular and social needs of all schoolchildren.

Keywords

Counter Narratives, Encounter Stories, Lesbian, Gay, Queer Sexual Orientation, Racial and Sexual Diversity, SocioculturalConsciousness, Teacher Education

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Many prospective teachers are unaware of the encounters that Black, heterosexual women or White lesbians face. Here, we present encounter stories—individual narratives of poignant encounters and interactions that we have experienced with people unlike us—to identify with and ultimately draw on their experiences. Subsequently, the narratives become data that not only inform our work as teacher educators and scholars but also are used to shape prospective teachers' understanding of inimitable difference. Despite the heralded affirming visibility of Michelle Obama and Ellen Degeneres, oppressive practices and perspectives against Black women and lesbians continue. Our encounter stories are put forward as qualitative data that goes against the grain and empowers. Further, our narratives challenge the conventional linear written format by intersecting our authentic voices with extant theory. Given the growing diversity in K-12 education, it is crucial that prospective teachers gain meaningful insight of unique, real life experiences, examine those experiences against their own familiarities to recognize sameness amid difference. Subsequently, this recognition will help to situate prospective teachers to meet the curricular and social needs of all schoolchildren. Keywords: Counter Narratives; Encounter Stories; Lesbian, Gay, Queer Sexual Orientation; Racial and Sexual Diversity; Sociocultural Consciousness; Teacher Education

Encounter Stories

Janna: I'm glad that we've decided to work on a project together because we're both interested in how identities play a role in our work as teacher educators preparing future teachers for 21st century classrooms.

Danné: Yeah, I would never have imagined that from our initial meeting 13 years ago the influence we'd have on each other's professional lives especially our perception of the world and considerations of how to use our identities to shape our work.

Janna: It's like you read my mind! I was thinking that we could study how our identities shape not only ourselves, but also each other!

Danné: Yes! I am certainly more aware of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) issues than I was before I met you!

Janna: But I think it's also more than that. I've been thinking a lot lately about how I can use my identities to gain insight into the identities of others.

Danné: You have to be careful, though. Certain folk don't appreciate it when other people claim to "understand" and illuminate their lives.

Janna: That's true. But the way I think about it, understanding the identities of other people is like an asymptote—do you remember that from math?

Danné: Is that when the curve comes down and approaches the X-axis, getting closer and closer, but never actually touching it. Is that right?

Janna: Exactly! So even though I can never know what it's like to be Black, or a Black woman, in America, that does not mean I cannot try to deepen my understanding. I just need to recognize that that understanding can never be complete.

Danné: Yeah, just remember not to paint Black folk as all having the same experiences or beliefs.

Janna: Good point! Just like with being gay—being gay in Boston is a completely different experience than being gay in the rural South, as I found through personal experience and through a comparison of two studies on gay and lesbian teachers (Jackson, 2013).

Danné: And it gets even more complicated than that. Since people are made up of multiple, often complex identities that inform each other, it's difficult to separate out a single marginalized identity without recognizing the impact of other identities, including dominant ones such as White, Christian, middle to upper class, able-bodied, heterosexual, male.

Janna: True, but I still contend the ways in which people construct identities and interpret their lives through marginalized and dominant lenses can inform our understandings of the lives of other people.

Danné: Yeah, I completely agree with that. Let's just be careful to avoid oversimplifying something as complicated as identity, especially ours.

Janna: Agreed. You know, our relationship, and I guess any friendship, is also like an asymptote. You can never truly know someone, but we certainly have gotten to know each other much more deeply in the 13 years we've known each other.

Our First Encounter

Danné: Remember when we first met, you saw me as the lone Black person in a sea of White folk at orientation for our graduate program.

Janna: That is true. I felt really out of place being a lesbian among people who presented as extremely straight, so I followed some advice someone gave me one time—if you feel out of place, find someone you think might feel more out of place than you and befriend them. I figured that you might feel out of place more than I since I can *pass* as straight, but you certainly cannot *pass* as White…

Danné: nor would I want to…

Janna: Hmm, this story seems to follow what we were saying earlier—using our own experiences to try to understand the experiences of another—not just through similarities, but also through differences.

Danné: Speaking of differences, something as superficial as clothing can say a lot about oppression.

Janna: How so?

Danné: Well, in grad school, you were always commenting on how "neat and professional" I always looked.

Janna: That's true. And I took complete advantage of being a student again and dressed down as much as possible. I was so sick of dressing up when I was a high school English teacher, which I felt I had to do to distinguish myself from my students since I look so young.

Danné: Did you ever think about *why* I paid such attention to how I dressed?

Janna: I just thought that was a part of who you are.

Danné: No, not hardly. I would have loved to dress casually, although perhaps not as casually as you. But, as the only Black person among a sea of White people, I knew that I stood out—and that, to some, I may be their first encounter with a Black doctoral student (sadly, there are not enough of us!)—so it was extremely important to represent. I felt that I needed to look like a doctoral student, and in my head that meant dressing up. That thinking was something I wrote about in 2000, stressing the importance of role models and positive images in the classroom (Davis, 2000).

Janna: That reminds me of what one of the participants in a study I did with gay and lesbian teachers said:

> When I first came out it was so important that I be the poster child and not the stereotypical poster child. And so it was so important that when there was a faculty softball game, that I was good. It was so important that I won the faculty free throw competition because I was gay. That it was really important to me still to not perpetuate the stereotypes. (Jackson, 2007)

This gets back to my point about making connections between identities.

Danné: Yes, connections among people who are marginalized—instead of between oppressed identities and dominant identities. I'm so tired of being defined in relation to White folk!

Janna: Me too! Wait, I am White. What I mean is being compared to people who are straight—"look, gay people can raise kids just as good as straight people"—as if straight people are the standard.

Danné: I don't think we can dismiss dominant identities so easily. First of all, we both have some. Second of all, our students largely come from dominant identities—White, middle class, heterosexual. Ideally, we want to come up with a tool they can use. Isn't that the point of this collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012)?

Janna: That's true. Perhaps we can create an atmosphere in which our students can serve as *critical friends* to each other, just as we have served as *critical friends* for one another.
Critical Friends

Danné: Yes! I was just reading about critical friends. Bass, Anderson-Patton, and Allender (2002) discuss how crucial critical friends are to studying the self:

> We have noted how privilege and entitlements, unless directly addressed by the person and critical friends, can interfere with one's ability to attend to others—reducing others' agency and one's ability to learn and accept challenges. We rarely challenge our privileged status until we try to empathize with its negative impact on others. This move, from the reflective to reflexive thinking, is valuable for grappling with issues of identity as well as with the trials of collaboration. . . .Self-study provides a forum for practicing a valuable kind of self-monitoring; critical friends with alternative views temper it. Critical friends get to know each other's reactive points and blind spots, and hopefully learn when to support and when to challenge. (p. 67)

Janna: And Loughran (2004) points out the importance of alternative perspectives in challenging one's own perspective, but not in a way to triangulate or confirm the interpretation, rather to shed further light and to realize the multiplicity and possibilities of interpretations.

Danné: That's similar to the "crystallization" approach proposed by Richardson (2000), that is the telling of a common experience from unique perspectives, which for us are our interactions with diversity and bias, particularly racism and heterosexism.

Janna: However, Schuck and Segal (2002) point out some of the challenges of being critical friends and suggest building trust, creating an equal partnership, and testing it out in private before going public (p. 100). Critical friends allow for the advantages of both insider status and outsider status to inform a study, but it involves a lot of work and trust.

Danné: Well, we certainly have acted as critical friends for the other—providing investigative and analytical support during the examination of our teaching and identity perspectives, only possible because of the comfort, regard, and trust that we have for each other.

Janna: Yes, when we share *critical experiences*—experiences that have shaped our worldview—we've been willing to ask each other some challenging questions including

- Why did you react in such a manner?
- What messages did your words and behaviors transmit?
- Why might the person have reacted the way she or he did?
- How might others' view the situation?
- What happens if you replace the word *race* with *sexual orientation* or vice versa?
- What generalizations are you making about the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) community? About people of color? About

> individuals and identities matching the dominant group? What evidence do
> you have which supports or refutes that generalization?
- Which societal messages influence and frame these interactions?
- What is left unsaid?

Danné: Yes. Like Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) suggest, our questions attempt "to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle" (p. 20) our perspectives.

The Evolution of Encounter Stories

Janna: So, what we are doing is asking questions of critical experiences—but it's more than that. I think what we are trying to capture is similar to the notion of counterstories, or personal stories that challenge the White, heterosexual, male privileged meta-narratives that often frame educational systems in the United States.

Danné: Yes, like how Bernal (2002) describes teachers of color using their "nonmajoritarian perspective" (p. 116) to challenge White normativity. She goes on to describe these counterstories as having significant pedagogical consequences:

> Counterstorytelling can also serve as a pedagogical tool that allows one to better understand and appreciate the unique experiences and responses of students of color through a deliberate, conscious, and open type of listening. In other words, an important component of using counterstories includes not only telling nonmajoritarian stories but also learning how to listen and hear the messages in counterstories. (p. 116)

Janna: But what we have been describing is not quite the same as counterstorytelling. It's really about using our individual experiences to deepen our understandings of the realities of people with other identities that are often marginalized.

Danné: Right. We are going beyond simply storytelling *about* experiences with folk unlike us to *using* those narratives to deepen our knowledge of the realities of people different from us along with understanding ourselves. And since academics are known to turn a phrase, let's call these narratives encounter stories.

Janna: You were always the wordsmith of the two of us! I love it!

Danné: Well…perhaps our next step, then, is to reflect on our own encounter stories—which includes not only critical experiences, but also how those experiences have changed or influenced us as people, teacher educators, and scholars.

Janna: Whoah. That's a lot at once. Let's first examine how they have changed us.

Janna's Encounter Stories

Janna: Shortly after I came out to myself as a lesbian, a White friend of mine said that being gay helped him become more understanding of Black people. He asked me if I had experienced the same thing. I remember naïvely saying no, thinking I already was sympathetic to the plight of Black people in the U.S. At the time, I thought I had already

arrived in some imaginary place of enlightenment about race. Looking back on that incident, I laugh at how wrong I was. Little did I realize at the time, like Tatum's (1997) observation, we are all smog breathers breathing in and exhaling racism. It is only when we become aware of this that we can hope to clear the air.

Despite my earlier reaction, I have come to realize that reflecting on my own experiences with homophobia has allowed me to make connections with racism while at the same time exploring the differences between the two oppressions. As a lesbian, I face issues of homophobia every day; but as a White person, I have the luxury of thinking only about race at my discretion. Being on the receiving end of homophobia, however, has increased my understanding of what it might be like to be on the receiving end of racism. I am not saying that heterosexual White people cannot empathize with the insidious nature of racism, but in my particular case, being gay has given me tremendous insight into what I think it might be like to be Black in the United States. I do realize, however, that someone cannot know what it is like to have another identity, especially since it is impossible to generalize about any group of people. Being Black in a small town in Georgia is probably very different from being Black in Boston, just like being gay in Georgia I know is very different from being gay in Boston. As someone with White privilege, I will never know what it is like to be Black or any other oppressed racial or ethnic group in this country. Even if I changed my physical features like Griffin in *Black Like Me* (Griffin, 1961) did, I would only experience Blackness in the present through my White lens and would lack the knowledge of what it is like to grow up Black. Given that everyone has her or his own experiences and that it is impossible to know what life is like for someone else, commonalities do exist between racism and homophobia, thus, like an asymptote, I am brought closer and closer to understanding, although I will never fully know what it is like to be a member of an oppressed racial group in the United States, or anywhere for that matter.

Tapping into my own experiences with discrimination has made me much more understanding of my students. For example, a mortgage company gave my partner and me all sorts of hassles, claiming that we were behind one payment, despite us paying on time every month. Even after I went in and showed them canceled checks for every month of our mortgage, we would receive nasty phone calls late at night harassing us. Because I will never know if this harassment was due to their incompetence or discrimination based on two female names on the mortgage, this incident made me realize how hard it is to pinpoint the basis of discrimination, making it so easy to become a little paranoid. When I taught high school and parents or students pointed out racism in cases where I did not immediately see it, I tried to see through their eyes. Now, when White students complain about people using what I have heard others term *the race card*, I tell them my story and hope they can see that *the race card* is often indicative of the amorphous nature of racism. Although I can never know what it is like to be Black, my previous encounters make me more empathetic towards Black people and deepen my understandings of race; an understanding I try to carry into my classroom.

An incident that occurred when I attended a forum on racism in the gay community helped shape my approach to communication in the classroom. Before the forum began, different community groups made announcements regarding upcoming events. A Black woman spoke about one particular event. Then, a White man from the same community group stood up and said essentially the same thing she did. A Black member of the audience pointed this out and asked him why he, as a White male, felt the need to use his voice to usurp that of a Black woman's. Although this caused intense embarrassment for him, it made me much more aware of how people use their voice and their silence to support, negate, or undermine others. In the classroom, I pay particular attention to my role as an educator in valuing the voices in my classroom because of this incident.

There are plenty of other times when experiencing the world as a lesbian has caused me to rethink and deepen my views on race but the one that stands out the most was when a friend of a relative said that he did not think gay people should be allowed to adopt. Instead of standing up for me, my relative goaded him on by asking what he thought about gays in the military, which led to a conversation about gay rights in general. His homophobic statements hit me on such a personal level I knew I would be unable to respond without crying so I simply asked that we change the subject. After digesting my hurt and pain from this incident, I later reflected on the lessons it taught me. I realized that for my relative, discussing these issues was an intellectual exercise; for me it felt like a personal attack. This made me realize that there were times, I am embarrassed to admit, when I treated discussions of race and racism in my classroom as intellectual exercises instead of recognizing the human faces and feelings behind words: "It is reality for us. It is not a discussion, not a theory. It is flesh and blood" (Vanstory quoted in Cochran-Smith, 2000, p. 173). Until teacher educators "get personal" (p. 171) instead of intellectualizing discussions of identities in the classroom, the real work of addressing discrimination cannot begin.

This incident also made me think about my anger at this person for feeling that he had the right to determine what I could and could not do. I then thought back to the Civil Rights Era and how frustrating and anger-inducing it must have been to be Black and have White legislators and judges determining what Black people were allowed to do. Again, I cannot know what it is to be Black, but I do know how infuriating it is to have a state legislature of 200 people with only three of them openly gay deciding my rights. I do wonder how, with the history of racism in this country, people of color do not walk around angry all the time.

As I reflect on the struggles of other oppressed people and think about the current fight for gay rights, I see several parallels. For example, because humans have a basic instinct to protect their children, one tactic commonly used to cause people to fear another group of people is to depict them as preying on innocent children. For instance, Christians portrayed Jews as stealing Christian children to use their blood in rituals, and the continual false charges launched against Black men of raping young White women were (and still are) launched against Black men. This portrayal of the dominant culture as civilized and in control of their sexuality as opposed to the oppressed group who is portrayed as "sexually deviant"—the id out of control—occurred for gay people as well, exemplified by Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign in the 1970s to overturn a non-discrimination ordinance because it protected gay teachers (Harbeck, 1997).

Currently, queer scholars are shifting from focusing on the victim narratives of queer youth to stories of empowerment and survival. I recently attended a conference where a group of graduate students acted out their experiences with homophobia. During the question and answer period, one member of the audience objected to the depiction of gay youth as victims and a heated discussion ensued about how to frame the stories of queer youth. Similarly, the women's movement struggled with getting stuck in the victim narrative—a very useful narrative as it highlights the need for attention to women's issues, but, on the other hand, it perpetuates the myth of women as needing to be rescued. Ironically, a useful tactic for one phase of fighting for civil rights turns into a detriment in the next phase. Another example of this is tokenism—the act of having minority representation simply for the sake of appearances. Currently this is decried in the Black community but for queer people, an organization desiring queer representation in their boardrooms can serve as a recognition that gay people count. Despite the many differences gay people, Blacks, Jews, women, and others face, we can learn from commonalities across our fights for equality. Encounter stories are one way to share and understand the oppressive experiences of others.

The recent paradigm shift in Massachusetts is a striking example of the power of encounter stories. When the state legislature first voted on same-sex marriage in 2004, barely 25% of

the state legislators supported same-sex marriage. Three years later when the final vote was taken that secured same-sex marriage in Massachusetts, over 75% of the state legislators supported same-sex marriage. In an era when flip-flopping is seen as a fatal political move, the reason cited over and over again by legislators who changed their vote was the power of constituents' stories (Wangsness & Estes, 2007). In addition, all of the politicians who supported same-sex marriage were re-elected during this time period—largely because gay people also started telling their stories to their neighbors. Telling our stories was not easy. I remember going to the state house to lobby back in 2004. Although I considered myself an out and proud lesbian, the group of gay constituents I was in—a group that included an openly lesbian comic—experienced what I can only term *collective internalized homophobia*. We stammered and stumbled—not used to the language of same-sex marriage and trained by years of social messages to avoid making heterosexual people uncomfortable (despite the discomfort queer people have experienced at the hands of heterosexuals). This was in sharp contrast to the collective shrug by the people of Massachusetts 4 years later when the law that prohibited out-of-state couples from getting married in Massachusetts if their marriage was not allowed in their home state was repealed as no one showed up to demonstrate on either side (Muskowitz, 2008). In this case, the counterstories of gay and lesbian constituents provided opportunities for state legislators to experience encounter stories (i.e., to use their own experiences to identify with the experiences of others). If encounter stories can make this much of a difference in the political arena, imagine what they can do in education.

Danné's Encounter Stories

Danné: My myriad experiences inform and continue to shape my appreciation of diversity. I grew-up in a two-parent home in Boston. My dad was a sous-chef; my mother an elementary schoolteacher. For grades K-6, I attended the city's public schools during the forced busing era of the 1970s. To avoid that tension, in the seventh grade my parents enrolled me in the Massachusetts funded Metco Program. Created in 1966 and still in existence today, the program's goal is to expand educational opportunities, increase diversity, and reduce racial isolation, by allowing city kids to attend suburban public schools in affluent communities. For me that meant boarding a yellow school bus, each school day at six o'clock in the morning then travel 19 miles to get a better education. In reality, by the ninth grade, all of the bussed Black kids were placed into the vocational track. The expanded educational opportunity for us was in the *hidden curriculum* (Jackson, 1968) of blue-collar workplace readiness. Given the working class backgrounds of our families, a school-based or district-wide administrator decided that preparing us to become efficient, skilled workers was best for us. A review of my transcript would show drafting and woodworking for trade work; typing and stenography for office work; and home economics for domestic work. While I easily graduated high school—I did well in home economics—getting into a four-year college was challenging because I hadn't taken enough college prep courses.

Apart from the three or four Black and Asian kids who attended the school as town residents, each day we disembarked the school bus and entered the campus, the racial diversity increased nearly 100%! In line with Metco's goals, our presence was to increase racial diversity and reduce racial isolation, which to some degree, I suppose, was accomplished.

Through the program, I came to recognize diversity in terms of socioeconomics, language, race/ethnicity, and religion. I lived with my parents and dog, Trixie, in an 11-room Victorian house situated on a 0.13 acre parcel in Boston, yet I had suburban classmates whose homes had 11 bedrooms and enough land to board a horse! Many of my peers supplemented their examination of French, Spanish, or Latin with study abroad trips while I

learned the rules of English in the classroom; that teachers celebrated Chanukah instead of Christmas was new and odd to me. Serendipitously, during the 1970s White flight, my Jewish, eighth grade science teacher moved from my neighborhood to my high school town. Combined, these differences introduced me to people and perspectives beyond my familiarity, instilling the notion that life offers myriad lessons created and lived by a range of folk. Mindful of the value of those lessons, I have written about and drawn upon my experiences as non-prosodic ethnographic narratives (Davis, 2008, 2009) to generate an appreciation of socioeconomic and racial diversity in prospective teachers—most of whom are White, female, and middle class. The need to develop this awareness is made clear in the concept of multicultural education.

The concept of multicultural education stems from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In response to demands for equity, opportunity, and social justice, especially in education, many scholars of color began conceptualizing, researching, and implementing anti-racist and anti-oppressive curricular practices. Nieto and Bode (2008) further define multicultural education as

> a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education permeates schools' curriculum and instructional strategies as well as the interaction among teachers, students and families, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy, as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and praxis as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes democratic principles of social justice. (p. 44)

While I'd long considered myself as a multicultural teacher education, this interpretation led me to question whether I was falling short in embracing and practicing multicultural education—particularly "gender among [the] other" of LGBTQ diversity.
In hindsight, I had ignored LGBTQ diversity excluding "multiplicities and nuance. . .paying limited attention to differences of sexuality, gender" (Asher, 2007, p. 65). My high school encounters did not afford such lessons nor had personal experiences with my traditional southern parents or my moderately conservative, Black Protestant community. Call it homophobia or heterosexism, many African Americans are apathetic to homosexuality and LGBTQ matters (Douglas, 1999). Sometimes the insensitivity is "attributed to a pervasive insidious oppression of Blacks, White sexual exploitation of black bodies" (Douglas & Hopson, 2001, p. 106) and dismantling of the Black family. Still others' apathy stems from religiosity's interpretation of Biblical and religious texts as contrary to LGBTQ culture because it is against God, and not reflective of Divine values, good character, and virtue (Douglas & Hopson). Regardless of the foundation, LGBTQ diversity in my professional life had been relegated to the fringes—a place I knew first-hand as detrimental to people within it but enduring in its perpetuation of power and privilege. I became cognizant of my pedagogical shortcomings in LGBTQ primarily due to my encounters with Janna.

My interactions with Janna resulted in new lessons of LGTBQ diversity. We met at as doctoral students matriculating at a predominantly White Jesuit institution. Within our 12-member cohort, I was the only person of color and was often reminded of it by denim and sneaker clad peers who routinely commented on my "neat and professional" appearance. Believing that I felt isolated, Janna reached out to me. I perceived her as a 30-something

White female, but could not discern her identity as a lesbian. As our friendship grew, she revealed feeling compelled to befriend me. However, in retrospect, I think that she was striving for solidarity with me to resolve her sense of invisibility. Although there were other White females in our cohort, none were lesbian. Over time, Janna shared with me her experiences with discrimination, seemingly to establish kinship with me while simultaneously trying to confirm her belief that encounters with racism had to be part of my life story as a Black woman. I also took advantage of our time together to let Janna's narratives to supplant my unfamiliarity with LGBTQ matters—at least from her perspective. Janna's narratives expanded my understanding of diversity. She shared with me her previous challenges as a high school teacher that contrasted with her current opportunities to celebrate collegial alliances presently as a teacher educator. In another instance, she confessed difficulty with finding her voice and revealed how scholarly explorations of feminist paradigms, posited by hooks (1990), and queer theory espoused Morris (1998), instilled a sense of personal liberation. Living this duality reminded me of DuBois's (1903) "double consciousness" too often carried out by people burdened by balancing two identities in usually unforgiving circumstances. Overtime these expanded lessons in sexual diversity began to inform my professional understanding and practice.

The contrast of our identities customarily resulted in discovering behavior, jargon, and circumstances foreign to me but normative to Janna. It wasn't until an opportunity apart from the context of our doctoral program that I realized the influence of her narrative on my professional behavior. I was one of several lead teachers in the Boston Public Schools serving as a mentor to first year teachers. Two days before the start of the school year, the school district held a new teacher orientation supported by the lead teachers. During my small-group break out session, one of the new teachers commented about pubescent female-male relationships. In trying to make a point about the heteronormativity in the teacher's comment, I remarked that some male students may be attracted to other males. Initially, the new teacher seemed puzzled by my words but eventually processed the message and then perhaps feeling rebuffed, remained silent for the remainder of the session. During the session wrap-up, another new teacher thanked me for speaking out and challenging the other teacher's thinking. Janna often recounts the incident, which I regard as pivotal in my ability to teach about the expanse of diversity and stress in prospective teachers that difference is superficial as well as invisible.

With LGBTQ diversity squarely on my radar today, my conceptualizing, researching, and implementing better align with Nieto and Bode's (2008) interpretation of multicultural education. While I expect the grumbles from students of "not this again" and expressed apprehension of offending me during discussions and activities about race, power, and privilege, I now anticipate prospective teachers' discomfort in queries of connections to elementary students during my attempt to "queer their gaze" (Doll, 1998) of multicultural education.

Despite the re-election of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States, the majority of prospective teachers are White, middle-class females, who have had few significant encounters with people of color and youngsters amid poverty (Cochran-Smith, Davis, Fries, 2004). Even with Ellen Degeneres as a day time talk show host, *Modern Family* and *The New Normal* featured in prime time, heteronormativity tends to frame prospective teachers' thinking about elementary classrooms (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012; GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012).

In reflecting on my interactions with Janna, I recognize that our encounters have greatly reshaped and expanded my view of diversity. I now effortlessly challenge students and colleagues' heteronormative behaviors, accommodate gender variant expression, remain

mindful of sexual diversity, and urge others with whom I regularly interact, to take up this mantle of difference awareness.

Applications to Teaching

Janna: What about the "so what" question? Marilyn, our dissertation advisor, always pushed us to ask what difference does this make?

Danné: Well, you know I teach undergraduate and graduate teacher education courses at a public university in the northeast. Most of the students are White, with many who boast of being 100% Italian or having hybrid identities because of their mixed race or ethnicity. Lately though, I have noticed an increase in Asian and Muslim teacher candidates. The representation of males and Blacks remains low, although when you and I started this project one of my classes had five Latino males. I have long been able to easily tap into the superficial difference among students—perhaps because of my lived experience as African American, female many times relegated to the margins. Mindful that marginalization is marginalization; one of my journal entries written early on in this process explains my initial approach towards LGBT inclusiveness.

While I knew instructional methods, and topics of race and ethnicity, I needed Janna to direct me towards feminist scholars and queer theory. When I sought her help she directed me to GLSEN, PFLAG, and TeachingTolerance.org and told me about LGBTQ special interest groups and queer scholarship. This was useful information because it enabled me to meet two goals for my students—to expand their understanding of diversity beyond the Black-White dichotomy, and provide them with resources for their professional and personal lives. My heightened awareness led me to require students to perform webquests that involved GLSEN.org, PFLAG.org, watch the film *Ma vie en rose*, view clips of ABC programs on transgender children, and examine LGBTQ children's picture/story books.

My new cognizance of sexual diversity situates me to assuredly interact with colleagues in my institution who are queer, straight and identities in between. Although the relationships are collegial, the personal and professional identities of two struck a chord with me—a man who was comfortably out in his bisexual identity, and equally outspoken in his constitution, and a woman divorcing her husband, while simultaneously sorting out her new identity as a lesbian. Their lived experience has strengthened my commitment to multicultural education, especially as a teacher educator who "accepts and affirms the pluralism [including] gender" (Nieto & Bode, 2008, p. 44) evident in my university community. Janna, I credit you with developing my ease in fostering these collegial relationships, which in turn, have given me data to develop fresh encounter stories, illustrative of my expanded grasp of diversity and increased commitment to multicultural education in my teaching and scholarship. Given the increased visibility of LGBT diversity in classrooms and society, multicultural teacher educators in particular would do well to examine how inclusive they are to this aspect of diversity. Teacher educators are responsible for preparing prospective teachers to be effective with all schoolchildren and their families. Being effective requires having an accurate understanding of identities inside and outside of classroom.

That's my answer to the "making the difference" question you pose. What do you see as the value of this work?

Janna: My experiences as a lesbian and my reflections on race inform my teaching in subtle and not so subtle ways. One incident, though, really marked for me the importance of making these connections because my encounter stories were able to change an emotionally charged situation into a productive and honest conversation. I taught this particular class on site—in

an elementary school. I was showing a portion of the video *The Color of Fear* (Lee et al., 2000), which has very frank discussions about race among men of various ethnicities. I knew that one of the men cursed loudly during the portion I was showing so I turned the volume down before that happened so that the elementary school kids in the school would not hear the cussing. As I did, I explained to my class why I did so. Unfortunately, I turned the volume down too early so some of my students of color were unhappy afterwards because they felt I was trying to silence the Black man in the video.

What I thought was most interesting was that some of the White students after the lesson were so happy to finally have a class where race is talked about while some of the Black students complained about always having to educate White people. I knew several of my students of color were disgruntled with the way race was discussed so I scrapped the lesson I had in mind for the next class session and instead began by relating some of my experiences described above to share how I came to my understandings of race and racism. I hesitated to do so because I feel it is more productive to have students discuss their experiences, but, by making my process transparent and stressing that this process is ongoing, I was able to open up the conversation and turn the discussion from an intellectual one to one in which students openly shared their feelings and listened to one another. This was reflected in the course evaluations in which students said I was a "risk-taker" who "makes the environment comfortable for everyone to share opinions." Like Berry and Loughran (2002) discovered, "we came to see an atmosphere of trust could be established immediately if we showed we were prepared to demonstrate our own vulnerability before asking student teachers to do the same" (p. 18). Taking this risk by modeling my own struggles helped push my students to move outside of their comfort zones, prompting students to traverse across their own personal borders.

Methods

Janna: How should we describe our methods, especially if we want others to consider or create encounter stories?

Danné: A methods section—this is our method! We have laid our methods bare. This dialogue enacts how we act as critical friends to one another, traces how we coined the term encounter stories, relates our own encounter stories, and describes how we have used encounter stories in our work!

Janna: So how would you describe our process of *calling up* our individual histories and eventually arriving at identifying our common or complementary encounters about privilege and prejudice?

Danné: I'd say everything grew out of our doctoral course work. First, we had to read about identities and education and analyze the content. For that to happen, in intimate groups we had to dissect the information, which meant acknowledging what was unfamiliar to us. Because we're perceived as smart, admitting that we didn't know something could only happen amid an atmosphere of trust. Once we felt that we could trust each other, the willingness to raise questions of and about our myriad lived experiences followed. That reciprocal interrogation put us on the same page, making us equal despite the visibility of our differences. In some way it created a level solidarity. After establishing trust with each other, we were comfortable to publically revisit those questioning interactions. Sometimes we would retell our own story; other times we add each other's details. Does that make sense?

Janna: I think so. Would an example of that be our earlier discussion about how we first met?

Danné: Exactly—that demonstrates the work that these kinds of stories can do—to build off of each other to create new insights, such as how our perceptions can shape encounters with each other.

Janna: We also drew from several data sources by maintaining personal journals to reflect and document our personal experiences and encounters with others and our students; interrogating each other about new insights and perceptions influenced by our actual and virtual communities; studying our teaching behaviors via artifacts such as syllabi, course assignments, and readings; examining the range of comments and actions of our students; and discussing the literature about gaps in teacher education and calls to identify new possibilities for preparing future teachers. As reflective teacher educators, we knew these methods would enable us to question our perspectives and assumptions behind our narratives and how they frame our teaching, and they did.

Danné: True, but remember how professors in our program always encouraged us to "be in conversation" with other scholars. How does what we just did speak to or against what others have done?

Janna: I see what you mean. Just like we use similarities and differences among identities to deepen our understandings of others, we need to ask how encounter stories are similar and different from what others have done to deepen our understanding of encounter stories in relation to what has already been done.

Danné: Exactly!

Janna: Well, I believe that encounter stories fall into the realm of self-study and all the other methods that it encompasses/intersects with such as autoethnography and life histories, for example.

Danné: I see encounter stories as a means to self-study.

Janna: Right. Our use of encounter stories recognizes that teacher research—studying one's own classroom—only tells part of the story; who we are as people, our lived experiences, and our reflections on those experiences shape our identities as teachers and what we do within our classrooms. "Personal history. . . provides a powerful mechanism for teachers wanting to discern how their lived lives impact their ability to teach or learn" (Samaras, Hicks, & Berger, 2004, p. 905). Unlike the descriptions of self-study in education that begin with a teacher/teacher educator's practice, our use of encounter stories begins with our experiences outside of the classroom, and then reflects upon how these experiences inform our teaching practices. In this way, we employ the outward and inward gazes Ellis and Bochner (2000) advocate: "Back-and-forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refracts, and resist cultural interpretations" (p. 739).

Danné: Other scholars have written about how this uniquely recursive process can be particularly fruitful in terms of examining race. Self-study allows teacher educators to

connect the details of their experiences with their practice (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000)— "self-study is uniquely suited to contribute to an understanding of race and social class issues in education" (Brown, 2004, p. 520). However, Griffiths, Bass, Johnston, and Persellin (2004) point out some of the difficulties conducting self-study.

> Many self-study research projects do not address issues of social justice, yet self-study is rich with possibilities for addressing these types of issues. A self-study does not require asking questions about social justice, but moral and political issues are swimming just below the surface if one cares, or dares, to look. We don't always want to look. These are hard questions. Issues related to diversity, difference, equity, discrimination, and injustice have no easy answers and often implicate us personally, at least partially, in the injustices we uncover. Self-studies of a more instrumental character are safer, but can we afford, in teacher education these days, to choose to be safe? (p. 656)

Our use of encounter stories takes on the important work of examining one's self in relation to other people to use identities as bridges instead of as barriers. This is the function and power of encounter stories.

Danné: OK, so we're asserting that this activity of personal introspection and self-examination is a worthwhile tool to deepen our awareness of the realities of people who have been oppressed and routinely marginalized. But just because we are espousing it does not make it an uncomplicated task, without obstacles and limitations, right?

Janna: Yes, most definitely. We recognize that this looking inward requires courage but also some vulnerability and that this, by its very nature, involves risk. "Looking at ourselves up close, we risk exposing our insecurities, revealing bad habits and dangerous biases, recognizing our own mediocrity, immaturity, or obsessive need to control" (Nielson as cited in Samaras et al., 2004, p. 911). True change, however, does not take place without hard work: "Self-exploration is challenging because we rarely want to face the parts of ourselves that are in conflict or that do not satisfy us. But it is exactly these parts that can act as catalysts for meaningful change" (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001, p. 61). This change is not isolated to the self because "when we write vulnerably, we invite others to respond vulnerably" (Tierney, 2000, p. 549). Most importantly, modeling this vulnerability invites others not just to respond, but also to use critical reflection in their own development.

> It takes courage to expose our shortcomings, to make ourselves vulnerable . . .[but it] model[s] for [our students] the process of life-long learning, and, most importantly, to help them feel safe enough to take similar risks necessary for their own development. (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 858)

Danné: Agreed. Any introspection of one's exceptionalities is difficult because sometimes the researcher fails to see autobiographical data. The process should be easier for an individual who routinely looks inward or has keen self-awareness. However that does not erase challenges to identifying and using encounter stories. The work is challenging but we posit is useful to gain perspective on difference.

Conclusion

Janna and Danné: Encounter stories speak to larger issues of identities by making connections between the Self and the Other. We "use the 'self' to learn about the other" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 741) and use the other to learn about the self. This takes work as Connolly and Noumair (1997) explain that historically "differences such as race, gender, and sexual orientation of 'others' are often used as receptacles for the unwanted aspects of oneself" (p. 322), a process that is mostly unconscious. Moreover, since our use of encounter stories draws on the ways in which autoethnography situates a multi-layered self within the context of a multi-layered culture as the self both enacts and resists this culture, they can counter the myth that "written and verbal texts constituting the educative process are raceless, unbiased syntheses of a 'common culture', and that the beliefs and values embedded in teachers' and students' racial identities have no bearing on the knowledge that they mutually construct in the teaching/learning process" (Brown, 2002, p. 145). Mindful of Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) statement that "teaching and thus teacher learning are centrally about forming and re-forming frameworks for understanding practice" (p. 290), encounter stories are a way to develop another framework, whereby teachers and teacher educators view their life experiences as a window into the world of others. Critical examination of dissimilarities among people and of circumstances is arduous, complicated work. Yet, like many teacher educators, we are mindful that often the most enduring lessons result from challenging tasks.

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