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Queering the Social Work Classroom: Strategies for Increasing the Inclusion of LGBTQ Persons and Experiences

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ABSTRACT
The inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) perspectives and experiences in the social work classroom is necessary to adequately include LGBTQ students and prepare graduates to practice effectively. Drawing from queer theory as a theoretical framework and the authors’ experiences in practice and teaching/learning spaces with LGBTQ youth, this article offers practical strategies for creating classrooms inclusive of LGBTQ persons. Queering the classroom builds skills in students beyond practice with LGBTQ people and communities, thereby enhancing their capacity to engage diversity in practice more generally and to advance human rights and social justice.

KEYWORDS
LGBTQ; queer; social work; social work education; pedagogy

Background & Literature

Research suggests that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) social work students often do not see themselves reflected in affirming ways in course content or classroom practices (Austin, Craig, & McInroy, 2016; Craig, McInroy, Dentato, Austin, & Messinger, 2015). Instead, they experience the classroom as a cisnormative and heteronormative space that places the burden on students to include LGBTQ identities and experiences (Craig et al., 2015; Dentato et al., 2016; Hylton, 2005; Martin et al., 2009; McPhail, 2008). Such expectations create spaces in which LGBTQ students must decide whether to take on a hypervisibility or to engage in self-silencing (Bernard, Fairtlough, Fletcher, & Ahmet, 2014). LGBTQ social work students also experience more overt forms of hetero- and cissexism (Austin, Craig, & McInroy, 2016). As many as one third of LGBTQ students in a North American study reported homophobic experiences in their social work programs (Craig et al., 2015).

When instructors and peers fail to intervene during instances of homo/transphobia, students do not feel supported (Craig, Dentato, Messinger, & McInroy, 2014). Such experiences require LGBTQ students to engage in...
additional emotional work to remain engaged in the learning environment (Bernard et al., 2014), including the process of assessing whether to self-disclose in learning spaces such as field (Newman, Bogo, & Daley, 2009).

The role of faculty is key in establishing the classroom environment. Research has suggested that attitudes and beliefs of social work faculty may contribute to the limited discourse related to LGBTQ experiences in social work education (Dessel, Woodford, & Gutierrez, 2012; Einbinder, Fiechter, Sheridan, & Miller, 2012; Fredriksen-Goldsen, Woodford, Luke, & Gutiérrez, 2011; Woodford, Brennan, Gutiérrez, & Luke, 2013). Attitudes in support of LGBTQ identities and experiences are high among social work faculty (Chonody, Woodford, Brennan, Newman, & Wang, 2014; Craig et al., 2015; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011) showing improvement over time. However, prejudiced attitudes still exist and may be related to other ideologies and beliefs held by social work faculty, such as political ideology and sexist beliefs (Chonody et al., 2014), or to the kind and auspices of institution in which an educator is teaching (Einbinder et al., 2012).

The lack of LGBTQ-specific content and the presence of both overt and covert forms of hostility toward LGBTQ people and identities limit social work education’s capacity to adequately prepare all students to practice effectively. Craig and colleagues (2015) found that LGBTQ students reported low perceptions of their practice readiness for working with LGBTQ clients and communities and an even lower perception of readiness among their non-LGBTQ peers. Skills necessary to achieve competency in LGBTQ affirmative practice vary among students with regard to attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Logie, Bogo, & Katz, 2015). Such lack of readiness to practice with LGBTQ persons is reinforced by limited field education opportunities in many programs (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011).

Research has suggested that pedagogical strategies, such as experiential exercises and coursework, can reduce bias toward LGBTQ people among social work students (Bassett & Day, 2003; Chonody et al., 2014; Dongvillo & Ligon, 2001; Woodward & Bella, 2003). Little is understood, however, about how widely these practices are used in social work programs and classrooms. Similarly, research is limited in addressing how practice competence with LGBTQ people is demonstrated given the complexity of LGBTQ identities in a rapidly shifting social and political context. Although useful, the addition of LGBTQ content in the curriculum is insufficient for achieving full inclusion of LGBTQ experiences (Gezinski, 2009; Newman et al., 2009). Competence requires practices that interrupt traditional ways of thinking and interacting. Just as McPhail (2004) suggested that the presence of transgender people in society creates opportunities, from a postmodern perspective, for us to call into question existing identity categories and socially constructed practices, a similar process is needed to begin to critically question the ways in which current classroom teaching methods may be upholding the kinds of socially
constructed arrangements that limit our capacity as educators to fully include LGBTQ people and content.

The Council on Social Work Education’s (2015) educational standards require that students in accredited programs demonstrate competence to engage diversity and difference in practice and advance human rights, social, economic, and environmental justice. However, there is significant variety in pedagogical approaches to achieving these standards. Faculty often approach these competencies as separate and distinct without acknowledging the intersections between them. For social work students to demonstrate competence related to diversity and justice in their fullest form and breadth, it is important to examine frameworks that (a) create an inclusive learning environment so that all voices can be heard and (b) teach critical thinking skills that challenge students and faculty to examine existing structures, and teaching discourses that maintain oppressive systems. Competence in the current U.S. climate must attend to the complexity and ever-changing nature of difference and injustice. Queer theory provides such a framework, and LGBTQ youth are the queer theorists who can inform this shift, based on the knowledge they develop through their existence and resistance.

A Note About Language

We have chosen to use the acronym LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) to refer to persons who identify within and between the identity categories that reflect the diversity of people who do not fit within the identity categories of heterosexual or cisgender. Language, of course, is both powerful and limiting. As such, the LGBTQ acronym may not be the one that all members of this population would choose to use when referring to themselves. For the purposes of this article, however, it has both enough familiarity for the general reader and sufficient room to include those who do not see their identities fitting neatly into one existing category.

Theoretical Framework

As a critical theory, queer theory destabilizes existing knowledge via several key principles. First, it challenges binary thinking, particularly with regard to gender identity and sexual orientation (Jagose, 1996). Socially constructed binaries (such as male/female or heterosexual/homosexual) serve to reduce the complexity that exists within the human experience, and they contribute to the invisibility of many LGBTQ people. Queer theory calls us to deconstruct existing categories and to question who benefits from their existence (Butler, 2004).

Second, queer theory recognizes that identity can be dynamic and fluid rather than fixed (Jagose, 1996). Although this notion has been supported in
the research literature for over a decade for subpopulations under the LGBTQ identity umbrella (Diamond, 2006), social attitudes toward people whose identities shift and change continue to be stigmatic. This reality is reinforced within the LGBTQ rights movement, which is often predicated on the idea that people do not choose their sexual and/or gender identities—a belief that has been criticized as minimizing the rights of those who are perceived as exercising choice or agency in their identity and their expression of it (Wagaman, 2017). The concept of fluidity in identity encourages a critique of existing identity categories in society. Similarly, many models and theories of sexual identity development uphold traditional notions of a linear process of development (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005; Cohler & Hammack, 2007), reinforcing the idea that there is a unidirectional progression of identity.

A third principle of queer theory is its emphasis on praxis (Sullivan, 2003). Praxis is the application of theoretical principles and the knowledge that it generates. Some scholars have identified this as queer theory in action (Abes, 2007; Tilsen, 2011). Theory is used not only to explain the world and the behavior of humans in it but also to honor and validate the knowledge that is created through living and being in the world. Living and existing in the current social structure as a queer person is a queer act. In many ways, queer youth employ praxis as they engage in the queering of their worlds by creating and claiming identities that emerge from the margins of existing identity categories (Saltzburg & Davis, 2010). For example, young persons who are engaging in praxis may define their identity as “gender pivot” to lay claim to the experience of identity fluidity and avoid the restrictions that the existing gender binary (male/female) places on them. In this way, LGBTQ youth are queer theorists who, through negotiating their identities and environments, are applying queer theory and thereby developing new knowledge.

LGBTQ youth put queer theory into action by pushing the boundaries of social norms and structures on a daily basis. As such, programs, classrooms, and other spaces that seek to keep up with the knowledge being produced by queer youth must apply similar principles and approaches. The application of queer theory principles, along with the practice knowledge that queer theory generates, is useful for challenging social work educators to go beyond content inclusion and create a structural shift in the way that LGBTQ experiences and perspectives are valued as forms of knowledge.

Queer theory principles can provide strategies for social work educators to center LGBTQ voices and experiences in the classroom in ways that both increase inclusion and enhance students’ capacity to work effectively with LGBTQ people and communities (Willis, 2007). To date, literature is limited in its exploration of queer theory as a pedagogical framework to guide classroom practices in social work education.
Drawing from extensive practice, research, and teaching/learning experience with queer youth, the authors have identified practices from the field and their teaching/learning experiences that can be incorporated into the classroom environment to queer the space and to serve as opportunities to explore ways that queer theory can be applied in practice. Indeed, practice informs teaching informs practice. Presented in this article are conceptual points for consideration—opportunities to push our collective thinking about the connections between theory and practice, theory and teaching, and practice and teaching. The authors are hesitant to be prescriptive in the application of queer theory principles but rather hope to engage in critical discourse about the potential for contextually specific ways to push social work education forward around LGBTQ issues in ways that are not simply additive. In fact, we invite readers to imagine ways that these principles have played out for them in practice and teaching.

**Situating Ourselves**

For all three authors, the application of queer theory in social work education came from the priority we place on bridging the social work classroom and our practice with queer youth. Positioning oneself within and among queer people is a practice that allows for attention to be drawn to the unique aspects of identity that impact one’s experience, even if people are aligned along one aspect of their identities. Positioning is important for acknowledging power in practice contexts (Dentato, 2014) as well as the classroom. All three authors are queer identified and have experience working with LGBTQ youth in a variety of capacities—in direct practice, policy advocacy, community organizing, participatory research, and as instructors and students—and thereby have come to view LGBTQ youth as queer theorists. Although the authors differ in age, gender identity, and class background of family of origin, all identify as White.

**Strategies for Queering the Classroom**

Drawing on queer theoretical principles and practice, the authors have identified four primary strategies for applying queer theory in the BSW and MSW classroom. The first involves an analysis of language—discourse analysis strategies—that creates space for the emergence of terms that appropriately center the experiences of queer people. A second strategy is to challenge dominant narratives about LGBTQ persons, particularly those that reinforce binary thinking. The third involves engaging students in challenging “taken-for-granted” assumptions about one another and disrupting expectations about how people should interact. A fourth strategy for
queering the social work classroom is to engage students in queer world making.

This plan of action for queering the social work classroom will enhance social work educators’ ability to create learning environments that are inclusive of LGBTQ students and experiences. In addition, the strategies build skills in students that will extend beyond practice with LGBTQ people and communities and enhance their capacity to engage diversity and difference in practice more generally, as well as advance human rights and social justice. A detailed discussion of each strategy and its application follows. Educators applying these strategies in their own teaching contexts are encouraged to consider including transparent dialogue with students about what they are doing, which has the potential for as much richness as the experience of implementation itself.

**Strategy 1: Practicing Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis is based on the assumption that language serves a purpose beyond that of exchanging information. For example, language is also a tool for establishing norms and frameworks for social roles and interactions. Discourse analysis is a method deployed to understand how language is constructed and used to establish social hierarchies and dictate which groups are allowed (or denied) access to resources (Gee, 2014). Interrogating language through a queer theoretical lens enables students to discover linguistic practices that disrupt hetero- and cisnormativity and to center the experiences of queer people. Such a plan should help students and practitioners advance their self-awareness by seeing where use of language often reinforces practices that silence LGBTQ people. For example, people who are unfamiliar with the complexity of identities related to sexuality and gender may use humor to reflect their own discomfort or ignorance. How many times have we heard people try to use a full acronym such as LGBTQIA and add on many other letters as if to poke fun of the notion that the identities, under the acronym, could go on and on? Use of humor, in relation to the complexity of identity, inadvertently reflects a belief that people’s identity complexity is too difficult to understand or to honor, or that it is in some way ridiculous. A classroom setting creates an opportunity for the educator to pause and ask such questions as, “What are the feelings that people in this room have when using the language of identity in discussion? How does it feel to say LGBTQ—for those whose identity is reflected by the term, and for those whose identity is not? Are these the same feelings we have when we use other identity-specific language in mixed-group discussions? Why, or why not?”

Instead of using language as a demonstration of knowledge or competence, instructors can use discourse analysis strategies to unpack the ways in which we talk about LGBTQ identities. Instructors can pose questions such
as, “How do we and others reflect our dismay, discomfort, or lack of awareness in our discussions about LGBTQ identity labels? How do these discourses uphold dominant social values that minimize the experiences of LGBTQ people?” To not recognize the language of LGBTQ persons, their terms of identification, and their significance is to increase the divide between LGBTQ youth and adults, service user and service provider, academia and community. It is less important that social work students know and understand every existing identity and more important that they be able to apply queer theory to identify and deconstruct the ways in which language can be a tool that reinforces systems of oppression.

Similarly, it is equally important for social work students to possess the skills to identify and understand the ways in which language is a tool for simultaneously surviving and resisting oppressive forces. Language has been used for decades by LGBTQ people to increase visibility, promote change, and question the status quo. It has also been used to navigate hostile environments, connect with other LGBTQ people safely, and decrease attention that could lead to violence. Young people, in particular, constantly use language through the creation of terms to assert identities and experiences that are not reflected in existing social categories. Consider the emergence of gender-neutral pronouns such as ze/zir/zirs or ey/eir/eirs, or the use of identities like demigender, androboy, genderqueer, or boy-girl to describe gender identity. Instead of minimizing or excluding such terms in the classroom setting, or framing them as too confusing or complex, instructors can engage in dialogue about their complexity and why young persons might feel the need to create an identity that reflects their sense of self beyond existing categories. Discussing such uses of language in the context of empowerment and agency can help students understand why honoring language use can promote self-determination in practice.

**Strategy 2: Challenging Binary & Dominant Narratives**

A second strategy for applying a queer theory framework involves challenging binaries that exist about LGBTQ people and the dominant narratives that uphold them. Binaries are socially constructed categories that force people into one of two options and are viewed by queer theorists as harmful and restricting for all people (Burdge, 2007). Two of the most intricately socialized binary structures in U.S. society are gender and sexual orientation (Halberstam, 1998; Rand, 2005). Dominant narratives are messages, stories, or discourses that exist to establish a norm for how a group of people are perceived, and therefore treated, in the society (Goltz, 2013) and often are created and reinforced to justify the stigmatization or marginalization of a group of people. Further, the creation and maintenance of a singular dominant narrative leads to the subjugation of other sources of knowledge or
experience. Through social work practice with LGBTQ youth, it becomes clear that the dominant narratives circulating about their lives are often inaccurate, reductive, and rooted in historical mythologies of deviance and pathology (Mogul, Ritchie, & Whitlock, 2011). As a result, the policies and programs developed to assist them may neither engage them nor meet their needs. Queering social work education pushes students beyond a paradigm that depicts LGBTQ youth as solely vulnerable or deficient, incorporating additional perspectives of LGBTQ youth as resourceful, resilient, and thriving.

As an example of how such a strategy might look in practice, consider the issue of queer youth homelessness, where the dominant narrative is one of risk and instability. Although risk and instability accurately characterize part of the homelessness experience for queer youth, this preeminent narrative provides a one-dimensional understanding that reinforces the binaries of risk versus safety, and instability versus stability, and thereby overlooks the resourcefulness and growth of youth who actively search for a world in which they can be themselves (Shelton, 2016). When social work students learn about queer youth solely through a risk paradigm, they may begin to understand the population as inherently vulnerable. Such a limited view of queer youth will impact a social worker’s ability to practice competently—often focusing interventions on individual behaviors with little understanding or emphasis on context (Russell, 2005; Talburt, 2004). It is critical to note here that we are not suggesting that students overlook the risk that often accompanies the experience of homelessness; rather, we are emphasizing the importance of not reducing LGBTQ youth (or any individual or community) to one aspect of their experience. A both/and approach will enable students to uncover dimensions of experience that might otherwise be foreclosed.

Direct work with queer youth experiencing homelessness leads to a more nuanced understanding of the binary constructs of risk versus safety, or stability versus instability. For instance, queer youth have reported positive experiences related to their homelessness, including the ability to freely live as their authentic selves, knowledge and skill development, and connection to community. They describe a greater sense of self-efficacy and a determination to overcome the challenges that they face; moreover, some transgender youth have credited their homeless experience with saving their lives (Shelton, 2016).

Excluding LGBTQ youth experiencing homelessness from a strengths-based and wellness discourse furthers their displacement and replicates the oppressive societal structures that have led to their initial displacement. When viewed through a queer theory lens, possibilities emerge that the dominant narrative represses. Furthermore, we can begin to consider LGBTQ youth who are experiencing homelessness as moving between risk and safety, or experiencing both simultaneously. Without the tools to
identify and deconstruct the dominant narrative, students can become complicit in the reinforcement of oppressive narratives that, in turn, are used to inform practice approaches, intervention plans, and social policies. Hence, with queer youth experiencing homelessness, social work students should ask questions such as, “How can social workers support the knowledge and skill development opportunities queer youth find on the street? How can we engage queer youth in the context of their communities, building upon positive social connections and their determination to overcome? How can their experiences and assets be supported and enhanced through service delivery?"

**Strategy 3: Disrupting Expectations by Centering Queerness**

A third strategy involves engaging students in challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about one another and disrupting expectations about how people should interact. Functioning based on presumptions often reinforces the status quo by making those whose lives do not fit within the established norm less visible. This is true for Whiteness and other aspects of identity in addition to hetero/cisnormativity (Pyles, 2014). By decentering the social norm in the classroom environment, students can become more comfortable with the cocreation of space, and the shifting of power, rather than placing a burden on the “other” identities to insert themselves into the existing norms.

One of the realities that working with queer youth has taught us is that queering, or calling into question our assumptions about one another, is essential to respectful interactions. This form of queering can create a lot of discomfort, which people respond to in interesting ways, particularly when there are power dynamics at play. For example, picture being a longtime volunteer with a queer youth support group and feeling confident in your role and your understanding of the needs of queer youth. Imagine suddenly being asked to incorporate the practice of sharing pronouns, which also means remembering and using those pronouns appropriately with the youth in the group. It is this kind of practice of queering that decenters that which we think we have come to know and understand. It centers the expertise and accompanying power in the individuals who are identifying themselves. The creation of space where power can be decentralized and assumptions called into question is what queer methods and practices are about.

When spaces are made for self-definition, then we see queer youth becoming queer theorists. Take, for example, a 12-year-old youth who is applying for a leadership program with an LGBTQ youth-serving organization with the gender identity of “gender pivot.” This assertion of identity pushed the program staff and volunteers to rethink their own understandings of gender and how they could reflect inclusion in their work with this youth. The
constant pushing and pulling creates uncertainty, fluidity, and questioning as the norm, rather than seeking comfort and security in what is known.

Such a custom can easily be incorporated into the classroom. Introductions at the beginning of an academic term can include pronouns or other aspects of identity that challenge assumptions of both classmates and instructors. This practice can be repeated periodically throughout the course to reinforce the idea that identity is fluid for some people and what we know one day may no longer be a reflection of reality the next day. In practice, an instructor may decide to ritualize this process by opening each class meeting with the sharing of names, pronouns, and a brief question related to the course topic. If the class is too large to accommodate such a practice, name-tags or pronoun buttons can be utilized as a way to make space for the articulation of identities. This practice may create discomfort in students who have never been asked to identify the pronouns they use, but it may also enable them to experience firsthand what transgender and people with non-binary gender identities often experience.

Another way to engage in this process is to utilize one of the many free online tools, such as polleverywhere.com, wordclouds.com, and wordle.net, that allow instructors to poll their students and create a visual representation of responses. Instructors could ask students about the aspects of identity that are most salient to them and use these tools to generate a living word cloud that shows the breadth of diversity in the room. This activity offers a safe way for students to share who they are—naming themselves—while breaking down assumptions (and disrupting expectations) across many aspects of identity. It can also serve as a platform for new learning, as terms unfamiliar to some are introduced.

The incorporation of such practices goes beyond introductions, engaging students in the queering of power. Students can learn to queer spaces where power has become entrenched and where presumptions drive practices. Students then can engage with their own assumptions and discomfort and practice strategies for shifting power to the clients and communities with whom they work. Such strategies will enhance social work students’ practice with LGBTQ people, but these strategies extend well beyond this population as social workers learn what it means to challenge injustice, which they regularly are called to do by their professional values and ethics.

**Strategy 4: Engaging in Queer World Making**

A fourth strategy for queering the classroom is to engage students in queer world making. This is a praxis that queer youth engage in daily and involves living visibly in such a way that lays claim to how one wishes the world would be, rather than adapting to how the world currently is. As one queer youth stated, “Our existence is resistance.” Such an approach can encourage
students to think about possibilities for change that extend beyond the boundaries that they may unconsciously have imposed upon themselves, based on social norms. Such a practice, of course, requires the ability to make underlying values and assumptions visible—a task that can create dissonance and discomfort.

Queer youth often are engaging in queer world making, a process of creating the kind of world in which they want to live—one in which queer-identified persons are acknowledged and affirmed for who they are, and for the value that they bring to society. Because research on queer youth, and our dominant narratives about them, often implicitly accept the status quo, we develop interventions that focus on behaviors that are in response to systems that are hostile and less than affirming. Youth who engage in queer world making are aware of these systems and environments, but they do not accept them as the reality that must be. Instead, they envision a reality that could be, and they seek to create it in the margins of their everyday lives. This kind of thinking may seem simple, but when we really begin to examine the ways in which queer world making can dislodge and dismantle the status quo, it actually is quite revolutionary, and it is well aligned with the very skills that we aim to develop in our social work students.

Take, for example, the narrative of queer youth homelessness that was previously discussed. It is often centered around young persons who, we assume, would rather be with their family of origin but, because of their identit(ies), have been put out of their home. However, imagine for a moment a young queer person who was existing at home with their family of origin but decided that existing was not the kind of world or life that they wanted. If such young persons decide to leave their family of origin in search of a chosen family, and a self-created home where they feel affirmed and able to live in their identit(ies), in what ways does this new narrative change the story? In what manner does it shift how we think about supporting and nurturing queer youth? In what ways does it challenge our notion of family and community, empowerment and agency, risk and resilience? When we shift our thinking to that which engages in queer world making, we begin to explore the reasons for what we see and to unravel the systems and institutions that uphold a narrative, for example, of risk and victimization for queer youth. It is through such forms of dialogue that we begin to queer our approach to social change.

One way that students can engage in the practice of queer world making in the context of tackling social issues or developing a service is to construct a problem tree (Tuck, 2008) about the issue they seek to change. A problem tree is a popular education tool that involves drawing or mapping a social problem using a tree as the framework for visualization. As the issue of focus is mapped onto the tree, issues that the problem causes or symptoms that are manifested as a result of the problem are put in the leaves of the tree.
Elements, such as social attitudes or policies, which allow the leaves to flourish or that reinforce the leaves, are put in the trunk and branches of the tree. Finally, things that keep the problem firmly rooted are placed in the roots. These are realities that would still exist if the rest of the tree were cut down. When students explore social problems in this way, it supports an examination of the assumptions we make about causes of social problems and the connections that exist between problems, systems, and symptoms. Once students have a systemic understanding of the “what” of the problem, they can make informed choices about the “how.” Does it make better sense to reform existing systems, or to completely transform our approach to social issues? What would our response to a social issue be if we could imagine fully dismantling what exists, rather than accepting it as is?

Such an analysis opens up potentials for intervention and social change efforts that may not have been considered as possibilities before. For example, a group of undergraduate students wanted to develop a program to help veterans access mental health services. In the beginning of their planning, they discussed issues of access and coordination. They jumped into the “how” thinking of where the service should be located and how veterans would get to the site. Their solutions were all focused on addressing the limitations of existing systems. However, once they created a problem tree about the issue of veteran mental health, they gained a deeper understanding and discovered the systemic roots of the problem. The students began to acknowledge the inherent patriarchal masculinity of the military and the feminization of mental and emotional well-being in U.S. society. This level of understanding allowed them to imagine a world in which mental and emotional health were not gendered and to envision programs that could support this kind of change to improve veteran access to mental health care. After employing this form of analysis, the students revisited their planned intervention, making shifts in their approach to address the stigma associated with societal feminization of mental and emotional distress (and therefore viewed as weakness) as opposed to simply intervening around the mechanics of access to services. Moving away from the “how” thinking, that is reactive and bound by existing parameters, into world making, that interrogates the systems and structures underlying social issues, allows students to learn the skills necessary to respond with new and creative solutions to old and complex problems.

**Discussion**

The social work profession has a commitment to advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice. To adequately respond to this duty, social work classrooms must be spaces of intentional inclusion, capable of holding multiple truths and uncovering subjugated knowledge.
Classrooms must become spaces in which students can dismantle dominant narratives, often rooted in hetero/cisnormative ideologies, and discover contemporary solutions. Queer theory provides a pedagogical framework for creating this type of learning environment in the social work classroom.

This article addresses the utilization of queer theory as a way to center LGBTQ voices and experiences in the social work classroom to enhance students’ capacity to work effectively with LGBTQ people and communities. Moreover, employing principles of queer theory may positively impact students’ abilities to engage diversity and difference in practice more generally. In addition to its utility as a pedagogical method for teaching about gender, sexuality, and power relations, queer theory also allows for the interrogation of identity categories, a critical examination of their emergence from classificatory systems, and the historical sociopolitical constructions of what traditionally is considered deviant versus normative (MacKinnon, 2011). Such critical thinking will challenge students to examine existing structures that maintain oppressive systems.

Although this article is focused on the classroom experience, the classroom is but one aspect of a social work student’s education. As such, its impact cannot be addressed in isolation. Outside of the classroom, programmatic and structural supports also need to exist to decenter hetero/cisnormative practices. For example, field instruction, the signature pedagogy of social work education, must be equipped to recognize and affirm LGBTQ identities through the visible presence of opportunities for all interns to work with LGBTQ clients and communities and for LGBTQ students to be recognized and valued. Looking beyond classrooms and field placement sites, it is important to consider the policies—both explicit and implicit—of the program and institution. We cannot think of the classroom environment outside the context of the institution, nor can we think of the institution outside its broader social context. Queering the classroom should not take the place of structural change.

The authors naturally recognize that applying these concepts and accompanying strategies to the social work classroom may pose challenges for some educators and within some institutions. The social work program always is a part of a larger institution that may or may not fully share the same values and social justice statements articulated in the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics. In those instances, we invite educators working under such auspices to refer to the guidelines offered by the Council on Social Work Education’s Council on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression on LGBT affirmative social work education (Austin, Craig, Alessi, et al., 2016; Craig et al., 2016). Social work educators can assess the institutional and unit-level policies and practices for points of intervention that will increase the capacity of classroom instructors to begin to critically examine the ways in which their teaching methods support or hinder full LGBTQ
inclusion. Depending upon the context, the classroom may not be the first place for change to occur. Following these thoughtful practice and education guidelines does not require instructors or program directors to shift their personal beliefs regarding LGBTQ identities. It does, however, require competent practice with LGBTQ clients, families, and communities.

Questions for future study emerge. First, what specific classroom protocols can instructors utilize to queer the social work classroom? Although this article has provided concepts and examples of their application, what is needed for instructors to feel adequately equipped to apply these frameworks in their daily classroom practices? Specifically, what unique barriers might instructors face when employing these strategies in institutions that have policies and practices in place that are not always affirming of LGBTQ persons, and how might these barriers be overcome? In addition, research is needed to better understand the impact of queering the classroom on social work students’ preparedness to enter into practice, and their readiness to engage with difference across all populations within varied practice settings. Similarly, how can shifts in the classroom environment, such as those suggested herein, impact the experiences of LGBTQ social work students in the classrooms, and in their programs more broadly? Finally, exploration of the application of queer theory principles through an intersectional lens is important as we consider preparing students to work with people who are at the crossroads of multiple identities that uniquely shape their experiences, including race, immigration status, and ethnicity. Collecting evidence through research on the impact of these strategies on educational experiences and outcomes would best support future application of a queer theory framework to the successful preparation of social work professionals equipped to competently practice with diverse populations.

In sum, the application of queer theory to the social work classroom, particularly informed by the lives and experiences of queer youth, holds promise as a framework for enhancing the competence of students in serving LGBTQ clients and communities, as well as their overall capacity to address diversity and difference in practice in ways that are connected with the promotion of all forms of social justice.

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