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#### **Queering the Ed.D: A Report on the Experiences of LGBTQ Individuals in a State University System**

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### Abstract

This paper describes findings from a study of LGBTQ students, faculty and staff working in EdD programs linked in a statewide university system. Although many EdD programs are oriented toward issues of social justice and serving marginalized communities, gender and sexuality remain underexplored as topics in coursework. The heteronormative nature of the educational spaces in which many EdD students work as professionals creates additional silence around these aspects of identity, and can create blind spots on the part of researchers. After applying a theoretical framework informed by transformative queer theory to data collected from surveys completed by 108 respondents and interviews conducted with 16 people, we identified the following primary themes that describe participant experiences: cohort structure; intersectional identities; differing perceptions based on role; and the role of allies. We end this paper with suggestions for improvement and opportunities for growth offered by the expansion of coverage of LGBTQ topics and the use of queer theory perspectives in EdD programs.

**Keywords:** *survey, LGBTQ, Queer theory, campus climate, course content*



## Queering the Ed.D: A Report on the Experiences of LGBTQ Individuals in a State University System

Relating theory to practical field-based knowledge is a key element of EdD program design (CPED Consortium, 2009). A growing body of research demonstrates the need to attend to the needs of LGBTQ students in K-12 schools (Kosciw, Greytak, Barkiewicz, Boesen & Palmer 2011; Mayo, 2014), and higher education (Hackman, 2012; Rankin, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010; Renn, 2011). Issues of gender and sexuality, however, are often glossed over or absent from educator preparation programs both in terms of serving students in these settings and in addressing the identities of EdD students and their development as researchers. Particularly in programs that emphasize issues of social justice, lack of attention to gender identity and expression and sexual orientation is a problem that must be addressed.

This paper examines how graduate preparation programs can contribute to broader understandings of social justice and advocacy by emphasizing the need to consider the identities of students at both the K-12 and higher education levels through an intersectional lens (per Crenshaw, 1991). Specifically, we focus on findings from an investigation that collected data across campuses in one university system that sought to assess the support offered to LGBTQ students in education doctoral programs and for research that employs queer studies perspectives.

### Previous Research on EdD Student Experiences

Although studies exploring the purpose of research produced in EdD programs for the broader educational field exist (Auerbach, 2011), very little work has been done to investigate the unique experiences of students in these programs beyond meeting their needs as working professionals. This is an issue of concern because students whose identities are often marginalized in educational spaces may also experience marginalization in professional workplaces (Hill, 2009; Pizer et al. 2012; Rudoe, 2010). The lack of attention paid to LGBTQ identities in most educational preparation programs combined with the fact that most EdD students are working professionally in *other* educational settings presents a compounded challenge.

Further, much of the literature about LGBTQ identities in higher education focuses on students that tend to be younger than the average EdD student and are working professionals frequently already well-established in their field. Indeed, in her review of the current state of LGBT and queer research in higher education, Renn (2011) stated “if studies of student gender and sexuality have been contained and constrained, studies of the experiences and identities of LGBT faculty, staff, and executive leaders have been nearly absent” (p. 136). EdD students are positioned in a potential double bind as they simultaneously occupy the role of both student and leader. As such, the developmental needs of EdD students are different than those of undergraduates or students who leave their professional positions to attend graduate school.



## Theoretical Framework

The objective of this project is also aided by the use of an explicitly transformative theoretical lens. We choose a broadly defined “queer theory” approach that seeks to disrupt heteronormative and binary assumptions about gender and sexuality and attends to intersectional aspects of identity with the goal of promoting inclusive practice. Borrowing from Pinar’s (1998) classic volume on queer theory in education, such an approach attempts to “find ways to decenter and destabilize the heterosexual normalization that so constructs...the public world we inhabit” (p. 6). Used as an umbrella term for a “diverse, often conflicting set of interdisciplinary approaches,” it can also be used to embrace a fluidity of identity that emphasizes temporal and social contexts (Giffney, 2009, p. 2).

## Methods and Data Sources

### *Study Context*

The state of California enrolls the most diverse population of K-12 students in the United States, and educational leadership preparation programs in the state’s largest university system reflect a focus on issues of racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity and equity. This investigation sought to assess the knowledge base of students and faculty relative to issues of gender identity and expression and sexual orientation enrolled in Educational Leadership doctoral programs in the California State University (CSU) system. We also examined how LGBTQ EdD students experience their programs across locations, and explored how an intersectional understanding of identity can support the particular needs of LGBTQ students from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, ethnicity, disability status, religion, age, socioeconomic class, and language. The study was guided by a pragmatic mixed methods approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) and used a queer theory lens to inform data analysis. Data were collected through an online survey, individual interviews, and document review.

An online survey was distributed to all campuses in the CSU system with active EdD programs. Of these fourteen locations, 108 responses were received from eight campuses. An overview of respondent identities is included in Table 1. Survey respondents were invited to provide an email address at which they could be contacted with additional follow-up questions; 39 people did so. Of these, 11 participated in a phone interview and an additional five completed an email interview. Participants included 12 students, two who were student/staff members of the institution they attended, and two faculty. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide these conversations, which were between 25 and 56 minutes in length. The interview questions were informed by the overall theoretical framework and goals of the study, as well as by preliminary review of survey results. All interviews were digitally recorded for accuracy and transcribed for analysis. An interpretive, open-coding approach (Creswell, 2006) utilizing the Dedoose qualitative analysis software platform (Dedoose, 2014) was used to identify patterns and themes across interviews.

## Researcher Positionalities

Our research team included an assistant professor, a third-year EdD student from a CSU campus in southern California, and a second-year EdD student from a CSU



campus in northern California. We are joined in our interests to promote inclusivity across educational learning spaces and bring distinct but complementary experiences and expertise. Allison Mattheis is a former secondary school science teacher who holds an administrative credential and who is now a faculty member. She moved to California for her current position in 2013 and is a White woman in her thirties. Dickson Perey is from the southern California region, is of Philipino descent, and is in his forties. At the time of this study, he was a high school guidance counselor in a large urban school district. He is now an assistant principal at the same high school and completed his EdD in 2015. Valerie Royaltey-Quandt is from the northern California area in which she currently works. She is a career educator who recently turned fifty. At the time of the study, she was a middle school principal; she now works as a central office administrator and recently defended her dissertation. Both Perey and Royaltey-Quandt investigated issues related to LGBTQ issues and K-12 schools in their EdD dissertations. Mattheis is in a registered same-sex domestic partnership and Perey and Royaltey-Quandt are both legally married to their same-sex spouses.

**TABLE 1:** Overview of Survey Respondents

Survey Item	Number (%) (N=108)
<b>Current Role in EdD program</b>	
1 <sup>st</sup> year student	32 (30%)
2 <sup>nd</sup> year student	32 (30%)
3 <sup>rd</sup> year student/ABD	25 (23%)
alumnus	2 (2%)
faculty (full or part-time)	15 (14%)
support staff	2 (2%)
<b>Professional Role (outside EdD program)<sup>a</sup></b>	
K-12 School Administrator	15 (n/a)
K-12 Teacher	15 (n/a)
Higher Education Administration or Student Affairs	9 (n/a)
Higher Education Faculty	6 (n/a)
Academic Counselor	5 (n/a)
Non-profit sector	4 (n/a)
Other	7 (n/a)
<b>Gender Identity<sup>b</sup></b>	
Female	68 (63%)
Male	8 (35%)
All-gender	2 (2%)
<b>Gender Expression</b>	
Feminine	69 (64%)
Masculine	35 (32%)
Androgynous	4 (4%)
Other	3 (3%)
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	
Asexual	1 (1%)
Bisexual	4 (4%)
Gay	14 (13%)



Lesbian	3 (3%)
Pansexual	1 (2%)
Poly	2 (2%)
Straight	80 (74%)
Queer	2 (2%)
Other	2 (2%)

- a. This survey item was a voluntary open response question answered by 61 students of 91 students and alumni total.
- b. Survey responses included the following: woman, man, agender, all-gender, genderqueer, transgender, trans\*, other. Only categories selected by at least one respondent are included in this table.

### Findings

In this section we present a sampling of results of analysis of the survey and interview data collected for this project, organized around themes that represent an interpretation of important aspects of the EdD programs and student and faculty identities that impact their experiences. Throughout this section the term “CSUX” is used to avoid identifying particular CSU campuses by name. Pseudonyms are also used to credit all interview quotations.

### Cohort Structure

All the participants interviewed for this study are involved in EdD programs that group students by cohort; at smaller programs these cohorts are formed simply by year of entry, while some larger programs divide cohorts by a focus on K-12 or higher education. Perceptions of the cohort structure ranged from extremely positive, with students describing their cohort members as “family,” to very negative. Regardless of positive or negative perception, the impact of the cohort structure on student (and faculty) experiences in the EdD program cannot be overstated. Addressing particular group dynamics and identifying the needs of incoming cohorts is a key to the successful creation of scholarly environments that support all learners. Several interviewees described feeling dumbfounded by the ignorance on the part of certain classmates about issues of gender and sexuality, and wondering what that meant for their professional practice as educators. Particularly for those students who work as full time K-12 educators and administrators and who are required by California state law to enforce anti-discrimination laws in schools, this is troubling. On the higher education level, if faculty are themselves unaware of how to navigate such topics in EdD classrooms, they may inadvertently reinforce behaviors and assumptions that contradict the social justice stances their courses claim to take. As Carlos put it when describing his experience in his courses, “I wish these people at the doctoral level had some training [about] microaggressions.”

### Intersectionality of identities

**Race and ethnicity.** The CSU system enrolls one of the most diverse student bodies in the country. Although demographics vary by campus, many locations are federally designated minority serving institutions. Some participants described feeling grateful for the focus on racial and ethnic identity at their campuses but also reported that such a potentially limited understanding of “diversity,” and an overemphasis on



socioeconomic status as a predictor of academic achievement could obscure a more nuanced understanding of student experiences. One student referred to his primary “double-identity” as Latino and gay but expressed a sense that faculty members were much more likely to discuss issues related to ethnic identity than sexuality in EdD courses. Another student, Roberto, described himself as a gay Chicano but emphasized that his first language is English. Although he feels quite strongly about his Chicano identity, he expressed wishing he were more fluent in Spanish for professional reasons.

**Religion.** Religious conservatism was described as a strong social influence in geographic locations that impacted student and faculty perception of particular campuses. Juan, for example, described one campus in the following way: “[CSUX] is a Christian institution that disguises itself as a public university.” Brian, a faculty member who had worked at faith-based institutions earlier in his career perceived his current campus as much more opening and welcoming in comparison; this perception contrasted with the reports of some students from the same campus. Other participants described religious faith or traditions as guiding factors in their lives that provided community and a sense of support regardless of their other identities. Contrasting perceptions were evident throughout the data relative to religion; this likely reflects broader tensions in society regarding the role of religion in public institutions and differing perceptions of religious influence as constraining or supportive.

Other salient aspects of identity that were discussed in terms of “outing” oneself uncovered through data analysis included choosing to reveal an invisible disability and the stigma of attending graduate school as an undocumented student. Beth stated, “I’m [more] afraid to disclose my disability than my sexual orientation” but also noted that she felt her workplace was even more unwelcoming than her program. Other students discussed being first generation college students and navigating institutional structures while identifying as a member of several marginalized groups simultaneously. Across all aspects of identity, however, was a strong theme of commitment to work in education as a way to provide positive experiences for others and to help students like themselves.

**Differing perceptions based on role.** Notable differences between faculty and staff perceptions and student perceptions exist in the data. Both groups (generally, without disaggregating data by campus geographic location) rated their EdD programs higher in terms of visibility, physical safety, and social acceptance for LGBTQ people than their CSU campuses as a whole, but reasons for these ratings are likely to be quite different. Faculty experiences of higher education climates as workplaces are likely very different than students who interact with these spaces primarily as learning environments. These differences may work to impact perceptions in different directions: older working students may feel they have less in common with undergraduates at the same campus and feel more support and connection within their cohorts and, therefore, rate their EdD program as more welcoming than the campus. Conversely, queer students who find their cohort stifling or hostile may find additional supports elsewhere on campus, for example, in an LGBTQ resource center or in academic departments outside the college of education. Faculty and staff may similarly feel additionally constrained by political pressures on campus that students would be unaware of and find the overall climate less welcoming, or they may find like-minded colleagues outside of their own colleges and



departments with whom to connect.

### **The Role of Allies**

The vast majority of our survey respondents identified as straight and cisgender, and several interview participants also identified themselves as allies who were drawn to issues of LGBTQ advocacy. Many described experiences with family members who had come out, and several also linked this interest to their professional roles and responsibilities as educators. A faculty member described raising a child who is gender non-conforming as an experience that became a learning opportunity for him to expand his understanding of gender identity and expression, and a teacher described the development of a Gay Straight Alliance at her school as an important awareness raising tool. Interview findings indicated that students who themselves identify as LGBTQ are more likely to be aware of queer faculty members. It is possible that these faculty members are more likely to reveal this identity to students individually than to entire cohorts, or that queer students are more likely to pick up on subtle cues that might indicate a faculty member is queer.

### **Limitations**

Institutional resistance and gatekeeping are challenges when conducting research that may generate data that potentially contradicts messaging about commitments to diversity and social justice. In the course of gathering data for this project, we encountered both expressions of gratitude and thanks as well as explicit hostility. The cooperation (or lack thereof) on the part of program directors is directly related to whether or not we were able to gain access to students at particular campuses. Although we employed various methods in our attempts to contact all 14 EdD programs in the CSU system, we are missing data from six campuses.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Findings from this study suggest that even in parts of the state considered most welcoming to LGBTQ identities, students and faculty experience explicit heteronormative expectations in their university settings and have received conflicting messages regarding their interest in conducting research that incorporates queer theory perspectives. Importantly, however, we also found that students attending a university setting in a part of the state known for more conservative social and political values was rated as *more* inclusive than those in supposedly progressive cities. Interviews revealed the ways in which that particular campus has worked to develop policies and practices that create an inclusive atmosphere and addresses specific local needs.

Students in EdD programs are by definition embedded in practice, and their dissertation topics are expected to be applicable to their workplaces. Research described by students and alumni cover a broad range of topics at the early childhood, K-12, and higher education levels. Of the 55 students who answered the survey voluntary open response question about their dissertation topics, two explicitly identified LGBTQ issues as a part of their research; 8% of the total respondents answered “yes” to the question “Did/will your dissertation use queer studies frameworks or involve LGBTQ issues?” These responses indicate that there is a greater interest in these topics than may be



reflected in current program curricula. Additionally, many other dissertation topics address issues that could—perhaps *should*—incorporate a lens that examines sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression. For example, several students across campuses report interest in topics related to Latino male academic success; dissertation chairs and committee members should encourage student researchers to avoid oversimplifying the category of “male” and explore the ways in which ethnic identity intersects in varying ways for men of diverse gender identities and sexualities. Students exploring school discipline policies and the “school to prison pipeline” should be sure to include data that indicate a disproportionately high number of LGBTQ youth are involved in the juvenile justice system, and discuss the ways in which school climates can create unsafe environments for LGBTQ youth.

### **Implications for Practice**

We end this paper with the suggestions proposed by EdD students themselves. Several participants discussed a perception that their coursework and professors were more willing to directly address issues of diversity around race, ethnicity, and disability than they were to explore issues around gender and sexuality.

Daniel described interventions he would like to see to improve his program around three specific areas:

Coursework: Include courses that explicitly include LGBTQ [identity] in the course description or course title. Include coursework that gives a firm understanding of theoretical frameworks that could help students research gender and sexuality. Cite research and expose students to authors who have conducted research on these topics.

Program Design: Increase diversity among faculty. Increase diversity among students enrolled in program. Offer opportunities to engage with scholars in symposia or fora that specifically address issues regarding gender and sexuality. Partner with other EdD programs through distance learning methods and develop project to understand gender and sexuality topics in different contexts.

Program Climate for LGBTQ students: Offer opportunities to network with students, faculty and staff on campus, in other programs, or through affinity groups in professional organizations. Encourage students to develop research interests relative to topics they want to explore.

Anna’s words reflect the importance of communication and self-awareness in developing positive program and classroom climates:

First, professors in the programs need their own education regarding queer theory, inclusion and lived experience in order for them to feel comfortable and knowledgeable in including it in their coursework. Personal relationships and reflection on the subject matter are essential for adult learners - both the professors and the EdD students. Examining their own biases and resistance to full inclusion is the starting point for all adults - not studying queer theory or LGBT school issues as an "othered" topic. Panels of experts, guest speakers, LGBT school administrators and students can all provide voice and face to the experiences of queer marginalization in our schools. Educational leaders need in-depth examination of their own blocks and misinformation. Why am I resistant?



What am I afraid of? Why is it even hard for me to say "queer"?

Finally, we encourage readers to consider that “Queering the EdD” opens an opportunity to take a truly intersectional approach to understanding how identity impacts educational experiences. Queer theory fundamentally involves a disruption of binary assumptions around a wide range of human behaviors and identities, and offers a window through which EdD programs can explore possibilities and work to develop innovative and forward-thinking solutions to the educational challenges to which we are committed to addressing.



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