



Alone on stage: How one LGBTIQ+ educator uses poetic performative autoethnography for social change

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Abstract

In this article, I analyse my self-reflexive examination of my poetry performance calling for the need to have lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) educators serve as role models in the secondary classroom setting as a mechanism to promote social change. I presented an original poetry collection in front of 400+ high school students and educators advocating for the need for queer educators to come out of the proverbial closet, and here I reflect on this act as both poetic inquiry and performance autoethnography, providing a hybrid methodology—Poetic Performative Autoethnography (PPA), while framing the experience and its meaning to both me as participant-researcher and the audience. I include discussion about the importance of/and political nature of representation, the need for space and dialogue, as well as obstacles facing LGBTIQ+ educators in the classroom.

Keywords: LGBTIQ+, performance autoethnography, poetic inquiry, educators, role models

Introduction

‘Begin with a shocking statement,’
I teach my writing class
so, I begin,

I’m a father of three sons,
I was married for 12 years,
now divorced, and living,
well, barely, a life of my own,
as a Gay man.

‘Next, explain why they should care,
why your topic is important, universal.’

I continue my lesson,

When I made my vow,
a lie I kept, not knowing how,
to be honest to myself,
my wife, my children to come.
So, I denied my place among the Gays,
and along the way, I stumbled,
as many of us do,
tripping on the truth that must come out.
‘To complete your introduction,’

I preach to my students,

‘In a single thesis statement,
admit your purpose, your goal.’

So, here goes.

For 18 years I coached competitive speech and debate at four different high schools in Texas, and while the outsider’s initial thought of debate focuses on argumentation, logic, and analysis, it also includes the theatrical perspective of oral interpretation; students compete using performance of literature. One of these events, Poetry Interpretation, is scripted performance of either a single poem or a collection of poetry by theme or author. As a coach, I encouraged students to find their voice and address historic and current issues that face our diverse and changing national culture through verse. Many of my students found great success in performance when traditional argumentation was not their strength. However, I contend that a themed collection of poetry on an issue of national or international scope performed in front of an audience is, indeed, a form of argumentation.

Thus, my argument in the original poetry excerpts provided herein derives from the belief that LGBTIQ+ secondary educators in today’s classroom should be what I think of as out-role models for LGBTIQ+ students who face the same discrimination, fear, and isolation the teachers face within the educational system. In this article, using a hybrid of performance autoethnography (Carver, 2014; Spry, 2009, 2011) and poetic inquiry (Killingsworth, Brasel, & Crawford, 2014; McCullis, 2013; Prendergast, 2009) as methodological frameworks, I assert that the act of honest spoken performance regarding the need for out educators (Tunåker, 2015; Wells, 2017) opens a self-reflexive dialogue, which in itself is a mechanism for social change toward acceptance, equality, and workplace protections for all LGBTIQ+ individuals in a school setting.

Standing alone on stage in front of over 400 students, teachers, and parents at Creekview High School, outside Dallas, Texas, on December 10, 2011, I presented the poem that

appears at the start of this article to begin a 10-minute Poetry Interpretation performance, asserting that I would no longer be an educator who hid in the proverbial closet.

Private/public context(s)

Growing up in the suburbs of Houston, Texas, I was told by my peers that “Gays die of AIDS,” “Faggots are sick, evil, and go to Hell,” and “Once you go Gay, you will never be loved again.” I was terrified of myself. I knew who, or rather “what” I was at the age of 12, but after several failed attempts to come out I resigned my life to the white-picket fences of suburban bliss. I married my best friend after college, and we had three beautiful boys. It was not until 12 years into the marriage that I realised our friendship had diminished. Something had to change. In January 2009, I began to live an authentic life. Ironically, regardless of other concerns, my biggest fear was about how I was going to live authentically in my classroom.

In 2011, several issues led me to perform my poetry performance: (1) I was tired of lying to students, (2) I was not being a role model for my LGBTIQ+ students, (3) I was tired of standing by and letting others say what they wanted, while I remained silent, and (4) I had guilt for my silence on recent political and social issues involving the queer community.

Performance as interactive dialogue

After reciting the first poem, I closed the binder from which I read and introduced my performance. In my own words, I offered,

Current educational researchers argue LGBTIQ+ students face hate epithets every 14 minutes of their day—words like homo, dyke, and faggot. While these students suffer, it is often the LGBTIQ+ educator who remains silent. This is a poetry performance dedicated to the point at which education and sexuality collide—the gay teacher. And, as for my own students in the audience tonight, I have told you for years to use your voice as your power. In case you’ve forgotten, this is what it looks like.

At that moment there was quite a tremendous response from the audience—lots of claps, whistles, and so on that gave me a renewed sense of strength as I stood on stage. Reflecting back, I realise that the text of my poetry and the words I spoke in the introduction had invited an open discussion between me and the audience.

Truthfully, I was not aware that my performance was a shared dialogue until I heard those cheers, whistles, and claps. Here, “in those moments when we are forced to encounter the other’s view of ourselves” (Styhre & Tienari, 2013, p. 206), my understanding of self-reflexivity emerged. The poetic verse was, whether or not I had realised it, written for this audience. I looked over the auditorium to where my 10 students were sitting and winked at them as I opened the poetry binder and continued the performance.

In my own classroom, as if it meant nothing,
 A student laughs, “That’s so Gay!”
 Oblivious to the pain, another student laughs, too,
 and says, “Yep, that’s so Gay!”

Still, I fear the truth at work,
 the bullying, the comments, the snickers,
 not just from students in the halls,
 but from teachers at the copier, the coffee maker.

Despite current legislative and cultural shifts regarding equality, “questioning’ students, teachers and other workers are often required to hide or defend their sexualities” (Addison, 2012, p. 537). Reflecting back on my years in the classroom through the poetry, I indicated how unsure I was about how to negotiate the duelling realities of educator and queer man.

Poetic inquiry and performance autoethnography: A literature review

While reading poetry may seem foreign to some in educational research, “the use of poetry in qualitative research is not particularly new” (Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009, p. 3). In *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences*, Prendergast introduces the concept of Poetic Inquiry, offering over 40 terms and phrases already in use in academic writings that incorporate elements of the methodological umbrella, so to speak, known as Poetic Inquiry. These terms range from “ethno-poem” to “poetic analysis” and “narrative poetry” (2009, p. xx–xxi), to name three.

Poetic inquiry—the process of using poetry in research—offers a creative method to understand a subject by featuring “poetry in some way as an analytical device, whether in data collection, as a tool to view data in unique ways that can help yield new insight, or as a way of representing findings to peers and the general public” (McCullis, 2013, p. 88). In essence, Poetic Inquiry is the qualitative research methodology of using poetry to convey data.

As researchers have contended, poetic inquiry is the use of poetry in a multitude of manners, including a “methodology of data analysis, by which data is synthesized by way of poetry” or “a data-set of actual poems generated by participants” (Killingsworth et al., 2014, p. 169). Others have reminded us that in poetry, “The writer chooses the subject, the words, the form, pauses and rhythm and in artistic processes of creation put together what becomes the poem . . . In contrast, in poetic inquiry, the words come not only from the writer/researcher, but from a web of relations in the research process” (Görlich, 2016, p. 525). This is where calling my poetry Performance Poetic Inquiry becomes complicated. It is a version of the age-old question: which came first, the poetry or the data? Was I a researcher, using my poetry as data, or was I a novice poet, simply writing my lived reality? Could I be both simultaneously?

Was I considering how “personal subjectivity influences the investigative process” (Holt, 2003, p. 14)?

To further my definitional dilemma, Spry (2011) has posited that “performance autoethnography is a critically reflexive methodology in a narrative of the researcher’s engagement with others in particular sociocultural contexts” (p. 498). While Custer (2014) defined autoethnography as “a style of autobiographical writing and qualitative research that explores an individual’s unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions” (p. 1), Carver (2014) defined the performance element of autoethnography thus: “I write my life story, intertwining the two together, performing life as an academic and an ethnographer of human communication, and writing for the stage” (p. 212). Each researcher “starts with a body, in a place, and in a time” (Spry, 2009, p. 603) to write about larger social and academic issues, and this moment on stage was my place and time.

Continuing my uncertainty, I note that Blinne (2010) explained that autoethnography is a way to “write myself in time, in space, and in place . . . write myself to belong to something bigger than myself” (p. 189), whereas Pillay, Pithouse-Morgan, and Naicker (2017) have asserted that poetry is a “form of research practice and research writing that can be almost as evocative, imaginative and fluid as the act of knowledge creation itself” (p. 264). Initially, I believed my performance in front of an auditorium of students and teachers was, in earnest, a performance autoethnography that happened to employ poetic inquiry.

Adding to the complexity above, my poetry itself is a dataset (in this case a single participant’s response to lived experience) referenced in poetic inquiry scholarship, while my performance simultaneously places me in the realm of performance autoethnography. I could argue that my poetry does not qualify, as others have stated, as deriving from interviews, datasets, and the research of multiple participants. However, “poetry invites researchers to experiment with language and to engage imaginatively with experience” (Walmsley, Cox, & Leggo, 2017, p. 14), which did occur through the writing process. The words themselves do present a single voice, placed in a singular moment, which is data. Thus, many qualitative researchers would argue that this is poetic inquiry whereas other researchers would argue that this is performance autoethnography.

Furthermore, labelling properly a juxtaposition of a performed poetic autoethnography is troubling. This difficulty may be an example of why Prendergast (2009) presented over 40 terms historically used to define Poetic Inquiry. One term referenced in Prendergast’s introduction comes from Spry’s 2001 article, *Performing autoethnography: An embodied methodological praxis*, in which she references “performative autoethnographic poetry” (p. 709). However, as a former speech and debate coach, in an area in which there are clear delineations between literary genres for performance, I was perplexed.

Let me explain. Smith’s works, *Twilight: Los Angeles: 1992* (1992) and *Fires in the Mirror* (1993) are both categorised by the Library of Congress as drama, even though they are clearly written in poetic structure and form. In contrast, *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway* (2005), a Tony Award winning play, is listed by the Library of Congress as a

poetry anthology that uses first person perspective in its poetic lines. While Smith's work is performance ethnography, not autoethnography, both works use characters and poetic verse to convey messages.

I agree with Spry (2011) that performative autoethnography is "based in a negotiation between self/other/culture/language, a system of relationship between body/I/we/word" (p. 412), but I struggle to negotiate literary genres when they are blurred in multiple forms of writing. We can question whether Shakespeare's iambic pentameter in *Romeo and Juliet* is poetry or drama. Is Greek tragedy poetry or drama? Where do we draw lines in terminology? How do we know what is poetry as opposed to what is drama? With this in mind, I offer a perspective that allows me as a researcher to be true to my background in competitive speech.

Since poetic inquiry is the fusion of poetic form and participant data, inasmuch as performance autoethnography is the blend of performance and autoethnography, both these autonomous research strategies derived originally from a union of two research methodologies. However, what happens when these unified methodologies merge yet again?

Since our new ways of knowing are genetically linked to both parental methodological approaches, names, places, identities, and understandings are negotiated, chronicled, lived, and infused with one another for cohesion just as they are when a child is born. This new progeny has come to be named Poetic Performative Autoethnography (PPA).

I suggest in this article that PPA is an offspring (of these two similar, yet different methodologies) in which two entities are united to define, create, and shape both the researcher and other stakeholders in the conversation. Through PPA, the use of poetics as a means of data embodies the participant-researcher and those lived experiences. PPA allows me, as the researcher, to focus on the performance autoethnography element of the presentation, acknowledge the poetic nature of the language, and thus not limit myself to a single methodology.

Further, I argue that it is important for us as researchers to explore the hybridity of research methods, in contrast to their parental methodologies, to negotiate the complexities of our ever-changing world. When I was a speech and debate coach, I always asked my students to find literature in which they saw themselves (making connections with culture, race, sexual orientation, and so on), and, as researchers using that same mindset, we should explore beyond normative social science methods when we are addressing personal issues, so both researchers and participants alike can recognise their own identities in the research process as well. Finding and/or constructing a methodological framework that connects with the study should be the goal of a researcher instead of forcing the study into a predetermined methodological framework.

Perspective(s)

I grew up in competitive speech and debate (I was a student in the field) and I very much liked the opportunity to find myself in literature. A fundamental skill in performance for competitors is the ability to take the works of others and find themselves in this literature.

In my dramatic performance lecture,
I teach my students to take us on a ride:
10 minutes of ups, downs, tear out
our heart and make us cry.

10 minutes of an emotional roller-coaster.

Pull the heart and soul of the character,
take the most beautiful lines and thoughts,
use the power of the language to make us,
take us, on a 10-minute journey somewhere else.

In my unscripted, unwritten life,
without the publisher's final edits,
no determined denouement or climax,
I live my life like a 10-minute cutting:

Ups, downs, and someone always cries.

I teach my kids to cut out the mundane—
to eliminate the small details—
to remove what isn't needed—
to forget the parts that link it together . . .

Standing in a room with scripts—
cut-up, torn-up, lying on the floor,
I pick up a remnant I told a kid to forget,
and in those words I find us.

Trying to live my life like a 10-minute cutting,
I forgot to make the connections—
to find the moments that bond us together,
to make sense of the whole story. . .

Next year, when I teach this lesson again,
I will ask my students to hold dear the words
we often discard when cutting to the chase—
the ideas and phrases that define who we are.

Leggo (2005) contended, “I am convinced that by writing about our experiences, and ruminating on those experiences, and interpreting those experiences, we can become more effective teachers” (p. 441). Therefore, when I focused on the writings on coming out, both in private and public spheres, and looked at those poetic pieces as a researcher, peering into the soul that is familiar, yet distant, I stopped feeling sorry for myself, and focused on my teaching. I was, after all, still making a difference in the lives of my students, or so I hoped.

Stanley (1993) offered that life is never composed of one “person alone” but, rather, of a “variety of social networks of others that the subject of ‘a life’ moves between” (p. 50). Thus, ironically, it was at this same moment a boy I will call Damian came into my life. Damian was a transfer student from another school whom I knew through competition, but not personally. Damian was trying to start over in a new school, with a refreshed focus on self-improvement. I soon realised that for this openly gay student, I was not being a successful role model, an unspoken task expected of teachers, whether we like it or not. I questioned, “Does one (do I) have to be queer to be a role model for LGBTIQ+ students?” I thought, initially, “No.” Yet I realised who, if not me, then performs the role of LGBTIQ+ role model in this school setting?

Educational context(s)

Denzin (2003) has explained, “In the discursive spaces of performativity there is no distance between the performance and the politics that the performance enacts” (p. 258). Therefore, as the performer of my poetry, I was inherently entangled in the politics of being an out educator. In 2011, LGBTIQ+ individuals struggled with issues relating to equality regularly seen in political and social mainstream discourse. However, as public opinion in the United States and the world was changing regarding LGBTIQ+ issues, these youth frequently found themselves “constructed as an Other, or as a problem that needs to be ‘dealt with’” (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004, p. 151).

My PPA continued.

Eight years ago, I use to be competent;
I knew what to say to anything that happened
in the confines of my classroom.
I could handle whatever they said, no matter what.

When Sheniqua, who was riotously laughing,
at some smartass comment I made in class,
yelled across the room, “Mr. Baker, you just an M-F.”
I knew how to handle that.

In a completely heterosexual manner, I twirled around,
posed (GaGa and Madonna would approve)
to catch my breath and simply explain to class,

‘Yes, my wife has children!’

Through humor, I knew what to say.

Eight years later, I am lost,
When Alex, out of nowhere asks,
‘Mr. Baker, am I not equal to the others,
am I not the same because I’m Gay?’

Through frustration, I didn’t know what to say.

How do you tell a 17-year-old boy:
‘I’m sorry the Constitution tells men (like us)

we aren’t equal, we don’t have those rights;
we aren’t good enough to be married?’

Through fear, I didn’t speak, but wanted to say:

The relationship you have with your boyfriend,
in the eyes of your classmates and others in society
is viewed as deviant, an abomination, a sin,
even though you and I know that love is simply love.

The attitudes of those around us:
the blind lawmakers, the fanatical ‘Right,’ the bigoted,
the oppressors, who suppress our rights
feel threatened, scared, and religiously superior.

Sadly, I feel incompetent,
when I am fine with being called a ‘mother-fucker’
in front of my students, but fear-
being called a ‘faggot.’

For LGBTIQ+ individuals, languages in the context of schools can be overwhelming barriers to success. Words such as queer, faggot, dyke, or lesbian become explosives “hurled in an attempt to politically immobilize the queer body and render it visible as Other” and “to the 12-year old standing at his locker, hearing shouts or whispers of ‘faggot’ from his heterosexual peers is not affirming or enabling” (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004, p. 152–153) student achievement or growth. Furthermore, as Gust (2007) has offered, “The classroom is not and never has been sexually neutral territory. Any queer teacher who resists recognizing his/her sexuality as a present force in the classroom is, at best, probably ‘passing’ as heterosexual or, at worst, perilously unaware of the pervasive (although sometimes subtle) way in which sexuality is never fully absent in any human interaction” (p. 51).

Additionally, as Roffee & Waling (2016) have clarified, “The existence of homophobic violence” and “hate crimes” against queer people is “well documented” (p. 190).

Accordingly, as Slattery (2006) asserted, “We must address the continuing ignorance, greed, and bigotry that perpetuates sexism, racism, heterosexism, and ethnic divisions; everything we teach is incomplete if we do not constantly foreground issues of prejudice and violence in our schools and society” (p. 144).

Slattery (2006) added, “The evidence is abundantly clear that the human community is amazingly diverse, and our multicultural diversity is one of our greatest strengths to be celebrated and not a liability to be eradicated” (p. 144). Therefore, this pervasive need to protect, as well as appreciate LGBTIQ+ youth demands educators who are openly out to be role models.

When I wrote my poetry, I imagined standing up for my students in the classroom but was unsure if that would happen. Kidd (2016) has explained that poetry offers “space that allows me to re-define and re-present my struggle in ways that make my world accessible to others” (p. 139). Through PPA, I was able to present myself in a manner that permitted social change. I was able to open dialogue that allowed my personal story to reach beyond me, into an open space for others.

Social change

For Hanley (2013), “Performance presents a multilayered and dynamic embodiment of culture that enables focus for audiences and the artist on the multiple, variable, permeable, and subjective intersections of social justice and change” (p. 8). In the midst of my PPA, both me as participant-researcher-performer, and the audience joined in a common space in which a dialogue of progress was initiated. It was in this reflexive space in which I see myself as a queer-poet-researcher-educator who performs, that social change is possible.

Stovall (2010) has defined social change in education as “the ability to create places where young people, families, community members, teachers, and administrators can critically analyze their experiences, conditions, and contexts while participating in a process to change oppressive conditions” (p. 413) that inhibit cohesiveness in a community. LGBTIQ+ educators feel these oppressive conditions and do nothing for fear of retaliation, loss of job, or being told that “teaching is not an appropriate profession for the queer” (Endo, Reece-Miller, & Santavicca, 2010, p. 1023).

Whereas many teachers, LGBTIQ+ identified or not, express concern at addressing politically charged issues, these concepts must be addressed in the academic arena to help LGBTIQ+ students grow. Journell (2016) has contended that “teachers cannot realistically remain politically neutral because teachers are political beings” and those who claim they are neutral are “not so in practice” (p. 102). Furthermore, “teachers can use their positions of authority and power” (Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2013, p. 299) to navigate space for politically charged dialogue that provides safe and respectful classrooms for LGBTIQ+ youth.

Hatch (2009) has reminded us that “the challenges [we] face inside the school are connected to and compounded by things that are happening outside” (p. 18). Politically charged matters such as violence, unemployment, discrimination, homophobia, and bullying are issues teenagers face in schools.

With the difficult outside pressures of life, students, especially those who feel disenfranchised within the system, suffer. “Even more tragic is the senseless bloodshed of America’s youth, like Lawrence King, a fifteen-year-old student who was shot point blank in the head by another student . . . simply because he was gay and chose to express himself openly at school” (Endo, Reece-Miller, & Santavicca, 2010 p. 1023).

Therefore, providing open space for dialogue should be of primary concern to the LGBTIQ+ educator. One way to become an agent of change in schools is through “constructing spaces in which to communicate across race, ethnicity, religion, class, and culture” (Weems et al., 2015, p. 843). Unknowingly, my poetry performance had constructed a space for discussion, fraught with issues of my own un/privileged identity, my religious beliefs, and my own real/perceived culture(s). However, as Lambert (2016) has explained, poetic inquiry offers “a way for an often silenced and marginalized ‘voice’ to be heard, and in that act opened a space in which to challenge oppressive discourses and present a different angle, and type of knowledge regarding what it is like to ‘be’ different” (p. 578). Whether those acts included me or not after the presentation, my PPA provided an outlet for all students present to discuss, reflect, and engage with issues of social change.

It is this openness, this ability to dialogue, both with others and ourselves, that all educators, especially LGBTIQ+ identified educators, must be willing to embrace. We must conquer our fears, open our hearts, write our poetry, and allow our students to engage with us.

Educational leaders must acknowledge systems of inequity that force LGBTIQ+ students into hiding or into fearing their heterosexual peers/teachers. To ensure that schools are welcoming places for LGBTIQ+ youth “and for the negative consequences of heterosexism to diminish for all, homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and heterosexual privilege must all be explicitly addressed and interrogated in students’ learning” (Nunn & Bolt, 2015, p. 280).

Role models must be willing to engage, discuss, argue, and even cry for/with/about our students. In modelling what it means to be an active member of society, we must “expose, highlight, and undermine [the] power” (Leavy, 2010, p. 240) that continues to push our students down. Educators, acting as mentors, “must commit to redefining that reality as dictated by demands for social justice and equality” (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010, p. 2).

Obstacles to dialogue

Poetic inquiry “involves an epistemological position, in which the researcher is more visible than is the case for traditional qualitative work” (Görlich, 2019, p. 403), which opens the door to complicated dialogue where “truth telling, bravery, [and] vulnerability” (Prendergast, 2015, p. 683) are present. Unfortunately, this bravery comes at a cost for educators who are out. While it is important that LGBTIQ+ educators “make themselves available to students as

they feel comfortable” (Roe, 2017, p. 60), multiple obstacles, such as religious and political opposition, confront queer educators from students, guardians, and peers alike.

My PPA extends this argument.

Dusk, Saturday, January 5, 2008,
I came across a humorous street sign:
Turn left for Gay St., turn right for Church St.
The light was red.

To clarify: I couldn’t go Gay and still be on Church,
I couldn’t go to Church while still Gay,
I couldn’t turn left where I was supposed to be,
I had to turn right, to do as expected.

Sitting at this light along the Cumberland River,
Smiling at the irony on 1st Avenue,
Laughing at the picture I snapped in Nashville,
I realized a sad, but true reality:

I’d been sitting at this light my whole life.

I stood on stage and acknowledged my biggest internal conflict between my religious beliefs and my authentic life, knowing religious and political fundamentalists use religious texts as a weapon against homosexuality and queer teachers across the country. Michaelson (2010) has pointed out that “it is clear that our readings of the Bible have indeed evolved as the human race has evolved” (p. 38), yet LGBTIQ+ individuals still endure anger, threats, and hostility from religious people in the name of God (Deeb-Sossa & Kane, 2007). It is this conflict between my religious background and identity with which I most struggled. Likewise, queer students may struggle with polarity as they search for their own identity, too.

While civil rights have improved since the 2015 United States Supreme Court decision legalising same-sex marriage, there are still verbal and physical attacks on sexual minority youth that occur regularly. The 2017 GLSEN (formally known as the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network) National School Climate Survey clarifies realities of LGBTIQ+ youth in schools today: “more than 8 in 10” LGBTIQ+ students experience harassment or assault in school settings, “nearly half” experience cyberbullying (Kosciw, et al., p. 23), and the majority do not report these incidents because of “fears that reporting would make the situation worse” (p. 27) as staff members regularly “did nothing” or told the victim to “ignore” the offence (p. 31). LGBTIQ+ students have valid reasons to view schooling as a perilous journey since “violence in several forms consumes and stigmatizes their academic lives and selves” (Berry, 2018, p. 507).

Other obstacles facing the queer community include unrelenting questioning of same-sex marriage and workplace protections, grappling with the legitimacy of our relationships, agonising over the possibility that our employment can be terminated; finding and then using

the restroom that corresponds with our gender identity, and knowing that many states have current legislation under consideration that would make discrimination against LGBTIQ+ individuals legal. This is crucial to understanding the issues of sexual minority youth since “the legal right to marry, and legally guaranteed access to education, career choice, and the achievement of other personal milestones are essential in developing LGBTIQ youths’ sense of self-esteem and faith in their future” (Dysart-Gale, 2010, p. 27).

To be clear, the lives of these students are at risk since school-based “victimization contributes to higher risk of suicide, substance misuse, mental disorder, and unsafe sexual experiences” (Palmer & Greytak, 2017, p. 163). Consequently, educators must open as many spaces as possible in which to face heterosexist and homophobic attitudes in the classroom and to teach accordingly.

Gays scare me, kinda like clowns

To end my PPA, I concluded with a true story of an incident in my classroom in the fall of 2011. Most of the poems performed had been written over time, but this final poem was written directly as a result of a classroom experience just prior to the performance. This incident was the justification for speaking out.

We discuss in my class topics,
those that are controversial:
illegal immigration, legalization of marijuana,
and, of course, same-sex marriage.

‘Thank God, Gays can’t get married’
one of my upper-middle class White boys states.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Thank God, Gays can’t get married’

‘Gays scare me, kinda like clowns.’

Oh, God, he’s seen my polka-dotted tie,
he knows I wear a red, button nose.
They all see my over-sized, floppy shoes;
or am I not the clown in the spotlight?

In an attempt to teach a lesson,
in a manner in which he would understand,
in an outfit that makes him uncomfortable
I dress as a clown the next day in class.

‘As a clown, I find it extremely difficult
to be treated like a foreigner, while
others have freedoms, legal rights,
protections I do not.

As a clown, I do not have the freedom
to marry whom I choose.
As a clown, I am an outsider.
You laugh, while others say mean things.

Some say others are glad that clowns
just don't have rights here in Texas.
Some people are scared of me,
simply because of my polka-dotted tie.

When I am out of make-up,
I look just like everyone else.

And, while some cultures are not obvious:
race, religion, or gender,
I stand out with my red nose.
My hair shines above others.
I am ridiculed for being different . . .

I want to be treated like everyone else,
I am human, whether a clown or not,
I should be treated like every
normal nosed man or woman . . . ‘

I step back from the podium in my class,
take a deep breath and smile,
through the tear-stained fake nose,
and the uncomfortable rainbow wig . . .

I made a difference for the young, quiet clown,
who sits in the back of the room,
afraid to honk his nose, afraid to twirl his tie,
afraid to wear his oversized, floppy shoes.

Implications

Henderson and Bigby (2017) have suggested that a self-reflective methodology, such as PPA, “seeks to avoid the pitfall of ventriloquism by amplifying the voice of the individual while also acknowledging the role of the researcher who has played a crucial role in such amplification” (p. 53). Here, the written poetry represents my lived experiences as an out educator-participant, while my performance was the mode in which I, as researcher, disseminated data to an audience/my students. In truth, through my experience, both on stage and in my classroom, I realise that all teachers are bricoleurs of knowledge.

Lincoln and Denzin (2005) have explained that the teacher/author/researcher becomes the bricoleur—the maker of quilts, who brings together multiple stories, ideas, pieces of a puzzle to create a single work of art. “There are many kinds of bricoleurs—interpretive, narrative, theoretical, political, methodological . . . the interpretive bricoleur produces a bricolage—that is, a pieced-together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (p. 4). Though I have created a quilt of both my experiences and the methodological approach to understanding PPA, the “epistemological connection between creativity, critique, and civic engagement is mutually replenishing, and pedagogically powerful” (Conquergood, 2002, p. 153). I am fortunate to have experienced a moment in which a montage of ideas, thoughts, and beliefs merged together into a single performance before an audience.

As I pieced my collection together a small poem of mine almost got cut from the final product because of time constraints but I kept the poem to showcase the idea that out educators will still stumble, make mistakes, and suffer. While it is difficult for a teacher to come out in the classroom, it is vital for educators to be strong because other students, like Damian, will stumble, too. As role models, whether we are queer ourselves or not, we must open space for dialogue to safeguard effective learning for all youth. We must remind our students that

The measure of a man isn't determined
by his confident stride into a room.
The true measure of a man
is how well he picks himself up after
tripping over the carpet,
knocking into the coffee table,
breaking the glass top.

When I stepped off the stage after the PPA, I was hesitant regarding the possible response of my students who did not know what I was presenting to the audience, and I was afraid of criticism by adults who had no idea they were going to watch an open dialogue on such a politically-charged topic.

I walked backstage, entered the auditorium through a side door, and sat down beside Damian. He was crying. He would not look at me. He could not. Damian knew he was a clown in the back of the room, one who was once afraid to twirl his own tie.

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