

RISE Themes for Queering Contexts

Queering teacher education cannot be done by applying a monolithic, one-size-fits-all approach because differences in classroom locations and compositions require approaches to queering that are adaptive to individual contexts. (See also [Guidelines for queering core teacher education courses](#).)

Throughout the RISE Research Project on 2SLGBTQ+-expansive Teacher Education, we set out to provide information and develop approaches for introducing 2SLGBTQ+ content into teacher education—from anti-homophobia, anti-biphobia, and anti-transphobia approaches that seek to make schools safer, to 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive ones that set out to increase representation and content in schools, to queering and Indigiqueering approaches that seek to more fundamentally shift normative school cultures and challenge dominant, settler-colonial pedagogies. The content developed for RISE is not intended to be an exhaustive list of approaches or interventions; rather, they are an attempt to provoke and spark thinking about the possibilities of 2SLGBTQ+-expansive education and to provide starting points to re-think teacher education strategies and approaches.

To this end, the Queering Contexts section of the RISE site identifies three of our main thematic foci in our work and then applies these to different classroom contexts.

Themes in our research

From its inception, RISE identified the themes of intersectionality, resistance, and allyship as key themes in our process. In recognition of the different positionalities and stances that teachers occupy, and that occur within school systems, we provide a brief introduction to these themes here.

1) Intersectionality

The concept of *intersectionality* was initially developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw as an analytic tool to analyze how different aspects of our social identities such as race and gender interact (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Crenshaw recognized that the oppressive experiences of Black women were not adequately represented by single-issue feminist and antiracist theorizing and politics that treated sexism as separate from, rather than interacting with, experiences of racism, and vice versa. For example, a Black woman's experience of assault might be affected by historic (and continuing) discourses of misogyny and white entitlement to treat Black people as property. Since then, intersectionality has been taken up in many different disciplines in recognition that "single-issue" advocacy and anti-oppression neglect the needs of many marginalized people (see Carbado et al., 2013).

Enacting an intersectional approach requires a recognition of the plurality of queer and trans identities and experiences in schools. It is vital to attend to the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ students through an intersectional lens, realizing that not all 2SLGBTQ+

have the same experiences, are marginalized in the same ways, or will always feel included in the same “inclusion” efforts.

Compounding effects of multiple oppressions

Intersectionality goes beyond a mere recognition of various marginalized aspects of identity—such as sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, race or racialization, disability, neurodiversity, class or socioeconomic status, body size, nationality and immigration, geographical location, religion, language proficiency—and seeks to address the “interacting” effects of multiple oppressions in the lived experiences of people that are impossible to disentangle simply by identifying the impacts of all aspects and adding them up. Importantly, and particularly relevant for understanding experiences in schools and how to improve them, an intersectional analysis looks at both structural and sociocultural mechanisms of oppression.

Avoiding assumptions about students

Intersections of race, disability, class, nationality and other grounds of privilege and oppression with sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression create qualitatively different experiences of marginalization and oppression in schools. One simple way that this may happen is in assumptions of “singular” identities, such as assuming that a Black student is cisgender-heterosexual or prioritizing certain aspects of a student’s identity as being *the* marginalizing force in their lives. A white gay boy in school is going to have a much different experience than a Two-Spirit Indigenous girl, and anti-homophobia policies may be applied differently to each of these students due to compounding effects of racialization, sexual orientation, gender identity, or other factors—not necessarily intentionally, but often in ways that reflect unconscious biases. Intersectionality emphasizes that differences in experiences are not simply explained by considering one aspect of oppression or exercise of social power, but rather play themselves out through the interlocking nature of oppression. Some common experiences of marginalized people in general are particularly common for multiply marginalized people: unintelligibility (i.e., not understanding or refusals to hear what is being said), silencing, erasure (i.e., refusing to see aspects of someone’s identity or recognizing their potential impacts), white-washing of 2SLGBTQ+ people, considering all 2SLGBTQ+ people’s experiences to be similar (e.g., homonormativity; Duggan, 2003), and relying on status quo structures that reinforce dominant systems and power structures (i.e., “school policies already include and protect everyone”).

Even when intersectionality is taken into account, educators must be careful to avoid totalizing assumptions about students. For example, attending to the needs of a specific 2SLGBTQ+ Indigenous student means listening to their experiences and learning about them, not assuming that their experiences are more difficult or easier than non-racialized students; there may be aspects of their experience that reflect privilege and some that are oppressive, and the different constellations of identities will construct their

particular experience, contribute to their resiliency, and should inform interventions to support them in schools.

Colonialism in the classroom

In Canada, the historical and ongoing context of colonialism contributes to structural and systemic inequality too. Intersectionality, as noted above, includes a focus on both cultural and structural/systemic aspects of oppression and marginalization. When European settlers arrived they imposed a colonial system of governance that enacted an ongoing effort to assimilate Indigenous peoples, introducing heteropatriarchal values and gender binary understandings that were imposed through Christianity, laws such as the *Indian Act*, and the residential schooling system (Wilson, 2015). The education system has been a prime location where the imposition of values has been enacted through structural means, including the formalization of education systems, the validation of objective and rationalist knowledge, and the normativizing of Eurocentric values. Recognizing the impacts of settler-colonial structural and systemic oppression, and seeking to validate Indigenous knowledge, cultures, and languages, is an important consideration for addressing structural, systemic oppression.

2) Resistance

Resistance to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion may take a variety of forms, from outright homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic (HBTP) comments or harassment to more subtle forms of discrimination that invalidate 2SLGBTQ+ experience, convey cisnormative or heteronormative assumptions about gender and sexuality, or simple silence about 2SLGBTQ+ realities. Knowing some of the reasons for resistance and having strategies for addressing it is an important part of ensuring that 2SLGBTQ+ students have safe learning environments and in working toward 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion in schools.

Hidden forms of resistance

Overtly HBTP attitudes can be extremely harmful for 2SLGBTQ+ students. Even while human rights legislation in Canada prohibits discrimination based on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, these attitudes persist and contribute to hostile, damaging, and destructive school climates. Finding strategies to counter overt resistance is important, and all public institutions should be held to a high standard in this regard; human rights legislation provides a vital protection and legal backing to counter HBTP forms of discrimination. However, it is worth noting that even while individuals may hold HBTP views and attitudes, they may not give voice to them or they may attempt to act on these views using other justification; these hidden forms of HBTP discrimination are more insidious and just as damaging, and often rely on silence and others' lack of knowledge or discomfort in order to exclude 2SLGBTQ+ topics and/or identities. This is a big reason why 2SLGBTQ+-specific interventions are needed and require strong support in educational settings. For example, once an anti-

homo/bi/transphobia harassment policy is put into place, there is a clear, institutionally supported mandate to take action and counter homophobic prejudice, harassment and discrimination targeting 2SLGBTQ2+ students, staff and families.

Resistance through erasure of 2SLGBTQ+ people and topics

It is important to remember that not all resistance is a willful denial of 2SLGBTQ+ realities or a personal disavowal of 2SLGBTQ+ people; resistance may reflect a personal discomfort with talking about sexual orientation or gender identity, a fear of being seen as too allied with 2SLGBTQ+ people, or a lack of knowledge about 2SLGBTQ+ people or content or the lack of awareness that it is important to actively talk to students about 2SLGBTQ+ topics. These may not be overtly hostile attitudes, but they can have similarly damaging effects for 2SLGBTQ+ students who do not see themselves as welcome, included, or represented in school. On top of this, silence regarding 2SLGBTQ+ people and topics reinforces dominant normativities regarding (cis)gender and (hetero)sexuality; rather than being interpreted as a neutral or a quietly supportive stance, silence conveys that 2SLGBTQ+ realities, unlike cisgender heterosexual realities, are unfit for discussion in schools and, by extension, that 2SLGBTQ+ people don't belong there. Teacher education can play a key role in providing teachers with the ability to address resistant attitudes before they fully enter into the teaching profession.

The role of supportive policies

Resistance to 2SLGBTQ+-expansive education may also come from administrators, parents/guardians, or members of the broader community. For instance, Payne and Smith (2018) write about how administrators resist, avoid, or block LGBTQ professional development by refusing its relevance to their schools or in their contexts; this resistance is often motivated by not understanding the need for such training, not recognizing its importance, desiring to avoid conflict with school boards or community members, or assuming that their school staff would not be interested in learning about LGBTQ students or topics. Similarly, parents/guardians or community members sometimes have strong personal beliefs or biases against 2SLGBTQ+ people and they view 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive education, even anti-HBTP harassment measures intended to support the basic safety of 2SLGBTQ+ students, as imposing on their rights as parents. This can be further exacerbated when education legislation or policy provides conflicting messages about what is often deemed to be “sensitive” material (e.g., notifying parents/guardians anytime lessons are taught about sexual orientation or gender identity, which signals these issues as “controversial” or “sensitive material” and requiring parental notification). Situations such as these underscore the importance of having clear legislation or policy supporting 2SLGBTQ+ students to ensure educators know it is their responsibility, that they will be supported in doing it, and that they are able to navigate any resistance that may arise.

Working with teacher candidates to challenge resistance

Providing teacher candidates with a thorough understanding of these potential forms of resistance, both from within the school system and from the wider school community, and providing them with some strategies for countering and/or addressing these concerns effectively is an important component of 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive teacher education.

As we discuss in the [Guidelines for queering teacher education](#) section, ensuring that teacher candidates are able to effectively address homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia is vitally important, but 2SLGBTQ+-expansive education needs to go beyond only this approach. Queering and Indigiqueering approaches are potentially more unsettling than anti-homophobia, anti-biphobia, and anti-transphobia approaches and may give rise to more deeply engrained forms of resistance. As queering approaches seek to disrupt dominant, normative understandings of social positionalities, identity, education, and teaching and learning, they may give rise to forms of resistance from those who are more deeply invested in the existing systems of power and privilege and/or who do not see or understand the oppressive nature of gender and sexuality regimes, colonial systems, or other forms of social oppression that marginalize 2SLGBTQ+ people. For instance, white fragility emerges in response to discussions about race; male fragility emerges when traditional “masculine” characteristics are challenged or when discussions about heteropatriarchy and cisnormativity challenge dominant gender regimes. Likewise, concerns about not knowing how to discuss 2SLGBTQ+ content may unsettle the “expertise” or “authority” that teachers so often expect of themselves. Introducing this content is vitally important and may require that teacher educators pay close attention to reactive forms of resistance and be prepared to actively address them in order to counter them effectively.

3) Allyship

Allyship is a vital part of creating supportive educational spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ people and in developing 2SLGBTQ+-expansive practices in education. Having the material and social support of non-2SLGBTQ+ people is a vital aspect of this work to bolster inclusion efforts, support 2SLGBTQ+ people, and act in solidarity, amplify the voices of 2SLGBTQ+ people, and advocate for 2SLGBTQ+ issues and human rights. As minoritized gender and sexual identities, 2SLGBTQ+ people need the support of members of the “majority” to support them. In education, the question should not be *if* a teacher should support 2SLGBTQ+ students but *how* to do so effectively, professionally, and respectfully.

Allyship is enacted by a member of a privileged group acting in solidarity with an oppressed or marginalized group, such as cisgender-heterosexual people working to support 2SLGBTQ+ people, or white people working to support Indigenous people or BIPOC. The term *ally* has ties with early 2SLGBTQ+-inclusion efforts to provide “safe spaces” training for people who wanted to support 2SLGBTQ+ people. Training and

professional development are key considerations in providing supportive spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ students, and these early efforts took up these approaches earnestly to provide accurate and comprehensive information to assist allies in being informed about 2SLGBTQ+ people and topics.

Indigiqueering teacher education

A core area in the RISE project has been to advocate for an Indigiqueering approach to teacher education. The theme of allyship is an important one in considering how white allies can work to promote and enact an Indigiqueering approach. Similar to the question of how cisgender-heterosexual allies can work to support 2SLGBTQ+ people, considering how an Indigiqueering approach to teacher education can usefully transform education without being appropriative or exploitative is something allies need to think about carefully and commit to investing in. While much of the RISE project has focused on 2SLGBTQ+-expansive education in general terms, we acknowledge the tendency for generic approaches to “white-wash” understandings of queerness or contribute to singular understandings of queerness that may be read as conforming to dominant social structures; in this, we have tried to enact intersectionality throughout to unsettle these understandings and point to the diverse experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ people. Intersectionality is an essential component of thinking of all 2SLGBTQ+ people, as there is not a monolithic experience of being 2SLGBTQ+. Indigiqueering means centring Indigenous ways of knowing, pedagogies, and peoples in education—and recognizing the vitality, relationality, culture, and interconnected character of learning; it means questioning the hierarchical and colonial education systems that often prescribe “best practices” or one-size-fits-all approaches that centre objectivist, rationalist, and individualist notions of knowledge. Through the Indigiqueering portal (under development), we invite stories about Indigiqueering approaches or Indigenous pedagogies to assist in allyship efforts and develop Indigiqueering understandings.

Resources for learning and “un-learning”

One of the key starting points for building allyship is in reading and learning—and in recognizing that “un-learning” and ongoing listening/learning are important parts of this work. Articles and references included throughout the RISE site may be useful starting points. We also list several here to help learning about Indigiqueering approaches and in thinking about allyship:

- Alex Wilson and Marie Laing (2018), “Queering Indigenous education”
- *Indigenous Ally Toolkit* (Swiftwolfe and Shaw, 2019); http://reseaumtlnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Ally_March.pdf
- Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), “Decolonization is not a metaphor” (<https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630/15554>)

- Sarah Hunt and Cindy Holmes (2015), “Everyday decolonization: Living a decolonizing queer politics”
- Chantal Fiola (2020), “Naawenangweyaabeg coming in: Intersections of Indigenous sexuality and spirituality”
- Marie Laing, *Two-Spirit: Conversations with young Two-Spirit, trans and queer Indigenous people in Toronto* (<https://www.twospiritresearchzine.com/zine>)
- Marie Laing (2021), *Urban Indigenous youth reframing Two-Spirit*
- Corey Snelgrove and Klara Woldenga (2014), *Why the term “settler” needs to stick.* (<https://unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com/2014/04/06/why-the-term-settler-needs-to-stick/#:~:text=“Settler”%20is%20a%20political%20and,colonial%20settlement%20has%20never%20ceased>)

How do you become an ally?

It may also be helpful to consider the ways that allyship has been critiqued in thinking about how to act effectively as an ally (e.g., Potvin, 2020). For instance, the act of claiming an ally identity for oneself may be seen as self-celebratory or as centering oneself within a marginalized group’s movement; this raises the question of whether a person can declare themselves an ally or whether an ally may be better thought of as identity that is bestowed upon those who have earned the trust of the people with whom they align. Allyship may be seen as a term of accountability to which people commit themselves, recognizing that by personally identifying with the term they are being called to solidarity and to action.

Relatedly, we might consider whether *ally* should be thought of as a noun or a verb; that is, is an ally what one is, or is it what one does? This may seem like a minor question of semantics, but it can be a useful way to think about allyship: Allyship is not necessarily a once-and-for-all status achievement; rather, it is an ongoing effort that works toward respect, inclusion, equity, and support of 2SLGBTQ+ people. There may be times when allies are more effective than others, or times when people were able to act as an ally and others when they missed the opportunity; given our different positions within education, our actions may differ based on our roles, from classroom teachers to principals or school administrators to guidance counsellors or social workers. One single training, or one episode of support, does not create true allyship—it requires an ongoing commitment to relationship building, learning, support, solidarity, accountability, reflection, and action. In other words, allyship is built over time and requires a sustained effort to enact practices that respect 2SLGBTQ+ and cultivate welcoming spaces.

Allyship development in teacher education has been taken up in the research literature in a number of ways. For instance, some scholars have introduced integrated training programs that involve developing preservice teachers’ understandings of 2SLGBTQ+ students and working to develop their abilities to create safer spaces in schools

(Kearns, Mitton-Kukner, & Tompkins, 2014). Other scholars write more broadly about the need to prepare teachers through teacher education programs to be 2SLGBTQ+ allies in schools (Clark, 2010; Doellman, 2017; Straut & Sapon-Shevin, 2002). Some scholars focus on school climates and seek to identify the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ students in schools to support in-service interventions that involve professional development and classroom practices that involve both students and teachers (Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003). Others critically take up the question of allyship itself to offer concrete advice and insights into how to be an ally (McGarry, 2013) or that seek to critically rethink what allyship involves (Schey, 2017; Potvin, 2020).

Teaching Activities

As we think about intersectionality, allyship, and resistance and the ways that they affect 2SLGBTQ+ people in schools, it is important to consider a variety of contexts. What does 2SLGBTQ+ allyship look like in a rural education context? How might 2SLGBTQ+ resistance look in a primary school or early-years setting? How does intersectionality work in religious contexts? The following vignettes are meant to encourage thoughtful conversations that build on the above discussions of intersectionality, allyship and resistance, and they may be used as B.Ed. classroom exercises.

Exercise 1

Bonnie is a white, heterosexual, cisgender woman teaching a Grade 3 class in a downtown school in a medium-sized city, populated mostly by children whose families live in lower income neighbourhoods. When she did a family tree exercise earlier this year, she learned that students in her classroom have 14 different first languages and nearly as many religions. There are Indigenous students, children of refugees, and children who live in foster or group homes. Differences abound in her classroom, and Bonnie works hard to meet everyone's needs while working toward pedagogical goals. One day, a student approaches Bonnie at recess and tells her that he doesn't want to play outside. After a bit of gentle prodding, he tells her that kids have been calling him a bad word. Through tears, he tells her that they have been saying he is a fag. He says he doesn't know what it means, but he knows it's bad. Bonnie agrees that the student can stay inside today. She sits at her desk and thinks about what to do next. She realizes that with all the differences in her classroom, she hadn't really considered that she might need to talk about 2SLGBTQ+ issues with her students, and she has no idea where to start. She wonders if she should tell the child's parents, and how they might react. She wonders if the school principal would have any advice. She isn't sure it is her place to talk about sex with 8 and 9-year-old students, and even if she did, what would she say?

Discussion

Ask B.Ed. students what assumptions Bonnie is making?

These assumptions may include:

- All her students are heterosexual and/or cisgender
- Parents who are BIPOC or have non-Christian religions or have low incomes are more likely to react badly to conversations about 2SLGBTQ+ issues.
- Students who are BIPOC are not also 2SLGBTQ+
- Talking about 2SLGBTQ+ people and issues as well as homophobia, transphobia, etc., with children is the same as talking about sex

Then consider and have a discussion: How would you apply learnings from our discussion of intersectionality, allyship and resistance to this situation? What would you do?

Suggestions and considerations:

Have students roleplay conversations with the school principal, with colleagues, with parents, and with Grade 3 students as they work their way through the challenge that Bonnie is facing in this exercise.

Ask them to think about why a teacher may make the assumptions that Bonnie is making and discuss alternate responses.

Highlight for students that addressing 2SLGBTQ+ issues with elementary age children is not talking about sex—it is acknowledging and supporting gender and sexual diversity that already exists in the world and in the classroom. Talking about sexual and gender diversity does not encourage people to be anything other than exactly who they are. De-centering heterosexuality and cisgender binary identities as the default makes room in the classroom for children for whom those categories do not resonate, and it teaches all children that sexuality and gender are more complex than they might think. Contextualized discussions, as well as references to diversity that are peppered through the curriculum in casual but intentional ways, serve to reinforce this point. The point is to reflect the diversity of ways that people live, not to explore the way they have sex—and the goal is to make sure that children know that everyone in the classroom is valued and that discrimination, bullying, etc., will not be tolerated.

Encourage B.Ed. students to think about their biases—conscious and unconscious—through writing exercises or in small groups, and then lead a class discussion sharing what students have learned about themselves and ideas they plan to bring to their classrooms.

Exercise 2

Navdeep is a queer woman of colour teaching Grades 9–12 English at a suburban high school.

A student questioning their sexuality approaches Navdeep for help. Navdeep realizes the student assumes she is heterosexual. Does she disclose? What are the potential benefits/risks?

Discussion:

This exercise gets at B.Ed. students' assumptions about 2SLGBTQ+, BIPOC, religion, intersectionality, etc.

How likely are students or teachers to assume that a person of colour or an Indigenous person is not also a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community? Conversely, how much riskier is it for a 2SLGBTQ+ person who is also a Black, Indigenous, or a person of colour to be open about who they are?

It also gestures to a double standard regarding heterosexual teachers' ability to share personal information about their lives and families and the concern that 2SLGBTQ+ teachers often feel about sharing details of their personal lives, even if it could benefit students. For example, even the simple act of a heterosexual teacher sharing that they are getting married and have decided to change their last name to that of their husband's is communicating to her students that she is heterosexual, and in doing so she is making heterosexuality visible in the classroom. Is it reasonable to expect a 2SLGBTQ+ teacher to keep a similarly significant life change to their self, which in turn may inadvertently communicate that being 2SLGBTQ+ is something to hide?

This scenario can also be used in a B.Ed. class discussion to explore the perceived or actual resistance that a 2SLGBTQ+ teacher might face with their colleagues, and how their race, gender, etc., comes into play. Students can explore how to address these challenges in small group discussions. B.Ed. students can think about strategies for challenging erasure and ways to support 2SLGBTQ+ colleagues who are in a position to help struggling students.

This scenario, like Exercise 1, gets at the resistance to broaching or modeling sexual and gender diversity (beyond heterosexuality and cisgender binary identities) in school settings. Through discussion, B.Ed. students can see that diversity already exists, and learning strategies for approaching it with allyship rather than erasure will make them better teachers for all students, not just the ones who identify as heterosexual and cisgender.

Exercise 3

Two students at a rural high school want to organize a GSA, but they cannot get support from their principal, school board, and parents. How can a supportive teacher help?

Discussion:

This exercise broaches issues of school board and provincial policy, overt resistance, religious resistance, and allyship. It helps familiarize students with the policies that will govern their work and provides context about challenges and changes to policies. It helps students understand the role of activism in education and the role of teachers in developing programs and systems that can help all students to feel safer at school.

Ask B.Ed. students to look at school board and provincial policies concerning GSAs. Ask them to find media articles about challenges to anti-GSA policies and how people worked to change them. Ask them, in small groups, to brainstorm ways to bridge divides within rural and religious communities. What has worked? What new ideas do they have?

Exercise 4

Fred, a teacher who wants to be inclusive of Indigenous Two-Spirit people and issues, puts an Indigenous student on the spot to explain to the class what *Two-Spirit* and *Indigiqueer* mean.

Discussion:

This exercise gestures to the challenges of allyship, the reality that good intentions are not enough. Rather, respectful strategies and insight about one's biases and assumptions are key; understanding the ways colonialism continues to operate in classrooms and in relationships is important, as are conversations about power imbalances. This exercise also provides an opportunity for teacher candidates to practice bringing intersectionality analyses to bear on a situation to understand how oppression and power dynamics operate.

What assumptions did Fred make? How could he have done this better?

Suggestions:

Assign students readings about past and present colonialism in schools, as well as readings about unconscious bias. Ask students to write reflections about their own biases and assumptions and how they plan to address them.

Invite a Two-Spirit or Indigiqueer speaker to talk with the class, or show a video of a Two-Spirit educator (e.g., Dr. Alex Wilson at University of Saskatchewan, who has a number of recordings on the subject).

Ask students to discuss in groups how they can check themselves for the kinds of assumptions and mistakes that Fred made in this example. Teachers can still do tremendous harm, even if they mean well—and it is vitally important to make a practice of regularly checking in about our biases and how we are challenging them.

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