Educational literacy scholars have demonstrated the rich possibilities of the English language arts, and of queer-inclusive and critical literacy practices in particular, to disrupt heteronormativity and affirm gender and sexual diversity (GSD). However, there are few empirical studies that report what's involved in preparing literacy teachers to organize classrooms in which recommendations for inclusive practice can land safely. In this article, we provide an account of what happened when we endeavored to prepare a group of secondary preservice literacy teachers for GSD-inclusive education in the context of a university-based literacy methods course and the negotiation of discomfort that ensued. Drawing on queer theoretical perspectives and Kumashiro’s (2001) framework of anti-oppressive education—which figures an important relationship among the concepts of desire, resistance, and crisis in unlearning common sense—we explore how the methods curriculum put many students into a state of emotional crisis. The sources of participants’ discomfort included learning that teachers have been complicit with the oppression of queer youth and wrestling with questions about how to bring their commitments to GSD-inclusive literacy instruction to bear in practice. Our findings suggest that participants who were willing to move toward their discomfort—what we call a deliberate move to lean in—positioned themselves to become strong advocates for queer youth. We argue that emotional discomfort should be figured as a productive tension in queer interventions in English education. Toward that end, we offer leaning in as a generative tool for grappling with the dynamics of heterosexism, homophobia, and broader oppression.

Introduction
As literacy teacher educators and researchers who identify as queer, we (Sara and Bethy) have been deeply affected by the disturbing number of lives lost in recent years among youth who identified or were perceived to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ). Embedded in many narratives left behind by those youth was evidence that school was often an unsafe place and a contributing factor to the hastened end of young life. Given the resounding silence around gender and sexual diversity (GSD) (Meyer, 2010) that has long pervaded teacher preparation (Athanasas & Larrabee, 2003; Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2013;
Mayo, 2007; Quinn & Meiners, 2011; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008; Vavrus, 2009), we argue that university-based teacher education in English language arts has also been complicit. Given our own positions within that enterprise and the commitments to democracy, diversity, and social justice we emphasize in our scholarship, we understand this problem as a moral dilemma with which we are obligated to grapple. We have sought to confront that dilemma by foregrounding GSD in our work with preservice and inservice literacy teachers. In this article, we provide an account of what happened when we endeavored to do that work with a group of preservice secondary ELA teachers in the context of a literacy methods course by reorganizing the curriculum and situating GSD at heart-center.

During the fall of 2012, Sara piloted a reorganized, GSD-themed curriculum with preservice teachers enrolled in the literacy methods course. Encouraged by the generally enthusiastic ways in which many students responded, and keenly aware of the need for empirical studies that explore what happens when preservice teachers are afforded opportunities to grapple with GSD (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Payne & Smith, 2012; Szalacha, 2004), we designed a study to document what happened when we enacted that curriculum with a new group that would populate the course the following spring. Initially, we were interested in how students would respond to our integration of GSD-inclusive topics, including heteronormativity and queer-inclusive literacy practices. What we found was that the curriculum put many students into “crisis” (Kumashiro, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002a). That is to say, our foregrounding of GSD invited complex emotional responses as students both resisted and engaged with the process of unlearning (Britzman, 1998) commonsense notions (for example, that schools are generally safe), and as they grew in awareness of how teachers—the very professionals they were in the process of learning to become—have been complicit in making schooling unsafe for queer youth. Moreover, we found that the curriculum confronted many students with the partiality of their knowledge (Kumashiro, 2001) and brought uncertainty at a time in their preparation when they expected to learn how to do this thing we call teaching. As Kumashiro (2002a) suggests, emotional crisis is central to anti-oppressive education, and as we will demonstrate, discomfort importantly shaped how some preservice teachers responded to the curriculum—that is, by resisting discomfort altogether. Others, though, were willing to move toward discomfort. In this work, we refer to that coming toward as a deliberate move to lean in (Chödrön, 2009).^2^ Our findings suggest that by semester’s end, participants who desired to lean in to discomfort also positioned themselves to become strong advocates for queer youth.

We situate this research in calls to “strengthen teacher knowledge of LGBT issues” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2007) and expand the research agenda of LGBTQ issues in education generally (Wimberly, 2015) and literacy teacher preparation specifically. There is a growing body of literature on preparing literacy educators to organize learning environments that affirm queer youths’ identities (e.g., Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Dodge & Crutcher, 2015; Hermann-Wilmarth, 2010; Kedley, 2015; Schieble, 2012), and this study builds on the contributions of that important work. There are, however, few empirical reports of novices re-
responding to opportunities of engagement with GSD in secondary literacy teacher-education contexts (e.g., Clark, 2010), and fewer still that describe the negotiation of discomfort that might ensue. The present study is a move to fill that gap.

*(De)Constructing the Problem: Undisrupted Heteronormativity in Schools*

This research is framed by a queer theoretical perspective on the problem of heteronormativity in schools. Blackburn and Smith (2010) have defined heteronormativity as “a way of being in the world that relies on the belief that heterosexuality is normal, which implicitly positions homosexuality and bisexuality as abnormal and thus inferior” (p. 625). Expanding that definition, we understand heteronormativity as also regulating normative perspectives on gender. Queer theory maintains that gender and sexuality are fluid, expansive, constructed, and performative (Britzman, 1995; Butler, 1990; Jagose, 1996; Pinar, 1998; Sedgwick, 1990), but in everyday practice, they are figured not as dynamic constructs that can be experienced in multiple ways, but as stable, mutually reinforcing characteristics cast in terms of oppositional binaries and hierarchical power relations (e.g., male/female, gay/straight). Butler (1990) attributes gender and sexuality’s entangled relationship to a hegemonic, discursively produced system of meaning—what she calls the “heterosexual matrix” (p. 151), which presumes heterosexuality as the norm through which everything else is defined (Renold, 2006). Put another way, this heteronormative framework constructs and strictly regulates a set of rules in which heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual orientation, and gender conformity, or rigid adherence to the gender binary’s construction of masculinity and femininity as discrete and dichotomous categories, is the only acceptable way of performing gender. In this way, heteronormativity fuels dominant assumptions, framed as common sense, that everyone is “straight,” that heterosexuality and traditional ways of performing masculinity and femininity are “natural,” and that individuals who are perceived to transgress those norms are deviant, sick, and sinful (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003). As Renold (2006) notes, the hegemony of heterosexual gender norms is maintained “through the shaming and policing (or ‘othering’) of ‘abnormal’ or [unintelligible] sexual/gender practices” (p. 493). Therefore, when left undisturbed, heteronormativity is oppressive. It promotes heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia, as well as bullying, harassment, and other aggressive policing behaviors. In her work on gender and inclusion issues in education, Meyer (2008) refers to that kind of disciplinary behavior as “gendered harassment,” noting that it is endemic in schools.

Because schools are heteronormative institutions (Blackburn & Pascoe, 2015), they often become hostile contexts for students who traverse normative boundaries of gender and heterosexuality. As data from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network’s National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014) indicate, queer students frequently experience verbal and physical harassment at school for their gender expressions and/or perceived sexual orientations. We maintain that bullying and harassment are serious outcomes that must be considered—without exception—as among our obligations to prepare teachers
to confront. And we align ourselves with GSD-focused scholars who have been critical of generic antibullying campaigns that, while popular, overlook heteronormativity and fall short of provoking the kind of systemic change necessary for schools to become safer. Antibullying interventions not only promote discourses that locate the problem in individuals, rather than in institutional practices that encourage bullying and oppress on the basis of sex, gender, and sexuality (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010), but they also construct queer youth as victims, further reifying essentialized representations of queer identities as subjects that occupy marginal positions on the periphery of normalcy (Bryson & de Castell, 1993).

**Toward Disrupting the Problem through Literacy Teacher Preparation**

Schools can and should disrupt heteronormativity. Instead, they tend toward validating and perpetuating heterosexism and gender-essentialist beliefs (Blackburn, 2005). To change course, public discourses must move beyond antibullying narratives and promises that “it gets better” to take up more centrally the goal of affirming GSD in schools, and literacy educators must be implicated as vital actors in that work. Some educational literacy scholars have advanced that point. Arguing that “identity matters” (McCarthey & Moje, 2002), Moje and MuQaribu (2003) have called for greater attention to literacy practices and teacher preparation that honor the roles of gender and sexuality in shaping students’ literacy engagement and identity development. Because curricula are largely heteronormative, students are rarely afforded opportunities to engage with content that positively reflects queer identities and experiences; includes transgender identities at all (Green, 2010); or challenges heteronormative conceptions of gender, sexuality, relationships, and families (Thein, 2013). In order to disrupt that trend, literacy educators must be prepared to affirm the queer identities that students might enact as they engage in literacy practices in the language arts. As Moje and MuQaribu (2003) aptly note, this is particularly important given the popularity among contemporary literacy pedagogies of foregrounding youths’ experiences—for example, inviting students to make their experiences the centerpieces of their writing and to engage texts as both “windows and mirrors” (Bishop, 1990) that enable readers to see themselves reflected, and also to catch glimpses of identities and worlds different from their own (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

Other scholars have demonstrated the rich possibilities of the language arts, and of queer (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Martino, 2009; Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2013) and critical literacy practices in particular (Bernstein-Young, 2009; Crisp & Knezek, 2010; Davies, 1997), to disrupt heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia and work toward positive social change. Certainly, this research is crucial. It has brought visibility to queer issues in English education, underscored the significance of integrating queer themes into literacy pedagogy and curricula, and generated valuable recommendations for teachers aiming to be inclusive. One critique we raise concerns a caveat to which Blackburn (2005, 2006) calls attention in the context of educational literacy scholarship on gender. Blackburn argues that language arts teachers can counter the violent consequences of heteronormativity by making “gender trouble” (Butler, 1990, p. 44), that is, by “foster[ing] multiple and
variable performances of gender and sexuality” (Blackburn, 2005, p. 413). Cautioning, however, that queer inclusion requires safe contexts in which performances of gender and sexuality as diverse and fluid can be enacted, Blackburn notes that most schools and classrooms do not meet that criterion. That significant tension animates the present study.

We contend that more scholarly attention must be paid to what’s involved in preparing teachers to organize classrooms in which recommendations for inclusive practice can land safely. Because heteronormativity has silenced topics of GSD in teacher education, too, generations of teachers continue to leave university-based preparation wholly unprepared to make “gender trouble” in ways that are affirming rather than dangerous. Indeed, when queer content is included in curricula, it is often done so problematically (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). In our view, preparing literacy teachers to create the conditions in which GSD can thrive requires supporting their understanding of how heteronormativity runs amok in everyday classroom life, unless it is critically challenged. This means that teachers must be supported in developing awareness of the subtle yet powerful ways in which heteronormativity mediates their assumptions about what is appropriate (and not) to teach with respect to gender and sexuality, their instructional decisions, and pedagogical moves.

Preparing for GSD-Inclusive Education: Desiring to (Un)Learn through Crisis

Bringing those goals to bear, in the context of this research we looked to the promising pathway of GSD-inclusive education, which Meyer, Taylor, and Peter (2014) broadly define as a transformative and anti-oppressive (Kumashiro, 2002b) form of education that integrates gender and sexuality into curricula in ways that affirm queer identities and also challenge hetero- and gender-normative practices. In other words, including queer topics and intervening in gendered harassment are crucial, but GSD-inclusive education also takes interest in interrogating (hetero) normative practices and helping students learn to critically examine how those norms function in schools and society (Meyer et al., 2014). Preparing teachers for GSD-inclusive education, then, involves building their capacities to disrupt heteronormativity, even as it operates in their own commonsense thinking.

Given our interest in understanding what’s involved in preparing literacy teachers for that work, we leveraged Kumashiro’s (2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002a) framework of anti-oppressive education, which figures an important relationship among the concepts of desire, resistance, and crisis in the process of troubling commonsense notions. Drawing on Butler (1997), Kumashiro (2002a) characterizes oppression as the repetition of dominant identities and forms of knowledge in social practice. From this perspective, one form of oppression in schooling concerns the ways in which dominant approaches to curricula and pedagogy repeatedly subject students to a privileging of white, heterosexual, cisgender identities and heteronormative ways of thinking. Because those repetitive forms are so deeply embedded in social constructions of what counts as normal, they are often taken for granted as common sense, or just the way things are. In secondary English classrooms, the
canon’s privileging of the voices and stories of only a certain kind of person represents perhaps the most salient form of repetition. Kumashiro (2001) suggests that instead of looking to inclusion as a remedy, because full inclusion is never achievable, the anti-oppressive literacy practitioner might organize instruction around critical, queer questions in the service of “looking beyond” (p. 3) what is known and represented as normal. For example: How does this story reproduce stereotypes about queer youth? Which stereotypes does it challenge? Which aspects of queer youths’ lives are left silent? Though there are rich possibilities for the application of anti-oppressive pedagogy in the ELA curriculum, substantive discussion of them is beyond the scope of this paper.

Influenced by queer readings of psychoanalysis, Kumashiro’s framework asserts that students unconsciously desire the repetition of common sense and resist learning that which disrupts what they already know. That implicit desire to reaffirm commonsense notions presents a challenge to anti-oppressive education. Kumashiro (2001) puts it this way:

Learning about oppression and unlearning (Britzman, 1998) what we had previously learned is normal and normative can be upsetting. In particular, learning that the very ways in which we think and do things is not only partial but oppressive can be a very discomforting process, a form of “crisis” (Felman, 1995), and thus, is not what we typically desire. . . . The crisis that results from unlearning, then, is a necessary and desirable part of anti-oppressive education. By implication, learning to overcome one’s desire for the comforting repetition of normative knowledges, identities, and experiences involves learning to desire the discomforting process of unlearning. Desiring change involves desiring to learn through crisis. (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 8, emphasis in original)

If desiring the discomfort of unlearning is required by anti-oppressive education, then, as this framework suggests, a crisis of unlearning might be an experience that is fundamental to becoming a GSD-inclusive educator. Because our approach to preparing GSD-inclusive literacy teachers was oriented toward this perspective, a unique feature of this inquiry is how we challenged participants to confront and, potentially, renegotiate their heteronormative assumptions about gender, sexuality, and what counts as appropriate to take up in ELA classrooms.

Methods
In this section, we discuss the context of this research, including an elaboration of the instructional contexts, participants, our roles as researchers, and our approach to data collection and analysis.

Research Context
This study unfolded in a 16-week literacy methods course—a core requirement for candidates pursuing secondary English licensure in one teacher education program housed in the School of Education at a large, public university in the Mountain West. Candidates typically took literacy methods the semester before
moving into student teaching. Though the larger teacher education program offered several licensure programs, all students enrolled in the methods course we studied were pursuing initial licensure. The School of Education’s mission declared commitments to preparing teachers for equity and social justice, though faculty and course instructors (who included graduate students in the school’s doctoral program) embedded them in their courses to varying degrees.

Participants
During the semester’s first week, we invited all 17 students to participate in the study, and 16 consented. We eliminated from data analysis 3 students who made fewer than three total contributions to in-class fishbowl conversations and the course blog—two of this study’s key data sources. While we can’t know for sure why those students remained relatively silent, they contributed minimally in discussion-based activities in the course overall, even in whole-class conversations where GSD was not central. Thus, 13 participants informed our analysis. Of those, 11 self-identified as female and 2 as male. Additionally, 4 participants were graduate students in pursuit of a master’s degree plus teacher licensure, and 8 were undergraduates. We have chosen not to report additional identifying information, though we note that, consonant with the racial demographics of the majority of candidates in the larger teacher education program, all participants self-identified as white.

Roles as Researchers
During this study, we were both graduate students in the school’s doctoral program. Prior to data collection, Sara had taught literacy methods for three semesters. Reflecting on her lack of attention to GSD in the first two iterations of her methods-course design, Sara resolved to foreground GSD, and she collaborated with Bethy in reorganizing the curriculum and designing the present study. While Sara’s role was that of lead instructor, Bethy was a participant observer in three class sessions. Bethy’s roles also included introducing the study, facilitating a guest lecture on gender and sexuality, participating in instructional planning, and reflecting regularly with Sara following GSD-focused class sessions.

Instructional Context
Our reorganization of the methods curriculum was guided by three assumptions. First, we assumed that some students would identify queerly, regardless of whether they shared those self-identifications with us. Second, we assumed that some students would enter the methods course with substantive knowledge of GSD. However, given the historical silence around GSD that has enveloped educational contexts, we assumed that many more would enter the course with limited knowledge. Third, we assumed that recursive attention to GSD over the course of the semester was necessary. Guided by those assumptions, we organized the curriculum so that GSD was a theme threaded throughout the course, alongside more traditional methods content (e.g., instructional design practices), but we also flooded students with three waves of GSD-specific content. To provide instantiations of what embedding GSD might look like in a literacy-methods course context, we briefly explain the content of each wave below.
The first wave surfaced in Weeks 3 and 4 as a broad introduction to GSD, the problem of heteronormativity in schools, and the relationship between literacy and sexual identity. Assigned readings included selections from educational literacy researchers (e.g., Blackburn, 2012; McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Moje & MuQaribu, 2003) and popular media (e.g., Erdely, 2012). In Week 4, we read and discussed two position statements from the National Council of Teachers of English on preparing teachers for diversity (1999) and LGBT issues in particular (2007). Those texts framed Week 4’s fishbowl—a 40-minute conversation structured around an open-ended question that invited students to discuss their professional obligations to address queer identities and perspectives as ELA teachers.

In Week 5, the second wave brought readings on the need to prepare teachers for GSD inclusion (e.g., Meyer, 2007, 2010) as well as Blackburn and Buckley’s (2005) argument for queer-inclusive literacy curricula and pedagogy. We assigned those selections alongside chapters from Wessling’s (2011) text on designing literacy instruction in a time of Common Core Standards. In class that week, Bethy guided students toward exploration of gender and sexuality as fluid, expansive constructs, and students began practicing the work of curricular integration of queer topics and disrupting heteronormativity by way of instructional design.

The third wave rolled in during the final three weeks of the semester. Readings included Blackburn and Smith’s (2010) argument for moving beyond inclusion in the ELA classroom. In Week 15, we organized “An Evening with LGBTQ Youth and Allies”—an event in which a group of local youth shared their experiences of navigating schooling, where they felt most safe and seen, and what they wanted teachers to know about the importance of GSD-affirming spaces. Witnessing that conversation was a large audience of educators, including many teacher candidates. All students in the methods class were invited to attend. Finally, during the last class session, we organized a fishbowl to give attendees of the youth and allies event an opportunity to talk about that experience and also to create space for students to ask each other questions they were still holding about creating affirming ELA classrooms. That conversation lasted 45 minutes.

Data Sources and Analysis

Our analysis was informed by data collected during the first and third waves outlined above. Those data sources included: (1) two whole-class fishbowl conversations audiotaped during Weeks 3 and 16; and (2) discussion threads on the course blog that students contributed to during Weeks 4 and 15. The blog was meant to support students’ negotiation of the implications of GSD for their future literacy teaching practice. In each discussion thread, we asked students to respond to an assigned prompt and also at least two of their peers’ posts. In Week 4, the prompt was: What do the problems of heteronormativity, homophobia, and silencing of LGBTQ content mean for how you will organize your classrooms? For which texts you teach? Norms you set? In Week 15, the prompt was: What will you do to “move beyond inclusion”? As ELA teachers, how will you disrupt heteronormativity and homophobia?

To launch analysis, we created transcripts from both audio recordings, which generated 18 pages of analyzable text. For each discussion thread, we converted
students’ individual posts and responses to one another into one continuous document, which generated 21 pages of text. Letting the tools of inductive analysis guide our initial passes through those data, we read each transcript several times and jotted notes in the margins about students’ responses to GSD-inclusive content. Once we had an initial sense of the lay of our data landscape, we reviewed those data again with this question in mind: How did students respond over time to GSD-inclusive content in the methods curriculum? Looking at our data again through the lens of that question, we identified salient themes (e.g., references to emotion and talk of teachers’ responsibilities to disrupt/not disrupt heteronormativity) and developed preliminary codes from those themes (e.g., emotion, obligation to disrupt/not disrupt). Next, looking within and across data sources, we tried on those codes to see how they fit. We noticed an interesting pattern where we applied the code emotion, particularly among data collected early in the term: many students’ responses were characterized by sharp emotional contours, that is, marked by words such as “disgusted,” “horrified,” and “uncomfortable,” and those language choices were directly linked to the GSD-specific content that students had engaged during those weeks. We also noticed that presence of emotion stood in stark contrast to a pattern of absence of emotion that characterized a smaller number of other students’ responses. In the second phase of analysis, which we elaborate below, we asked, what of this emotion?

### Crisis as Analytic Tool

In conversations about the salience of emotion, we found ourselves landing on Kumashiro’s notion of crisis. We wondered how engaging with content that unearthed traumatic consequences of heteronormativity for queer youth might have incited a state of emotional crisis for several participants. Leveraging crisis as a deductive analytic tool, we looked at our data again—this time, through the lens of this question: How did students respond to a discomforting process of unlearning initiated by the methods curriculum’s emphasis on GSD? Drawing on the dimensions of crisis outlined above, we refined our list of codes. For example, we recoded emotional upset as discomfort; talk of wanting to disrupt heteronormativity as desire to disrupt; and talk of teachers’ obligations not to disrupt heteronormativity as desire to resist. Then, we applied those codes within and across data sources using constant comparison method (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). Through that second-level analysis, we noticed a pattern of discomfort that surrounded several participants’ talk about “how” to practice GSD inclusion and what it looks like in the ELA classroom; we labeled those moments wrestling with praxis. We also noticed two rare moments when, toward the end of the term, two participants turned introspectively toward their discomfort; we labeled those moments leaning in to discomfort. As we discuss more below, those two codes figure prominently in our findings. From there, we created a spreadsheet to represent a chronological map of each student’s coded responses, which enabled us to see patterns within and across students and also trace consistencies and shifts across individual students’ responses over the 16-week term. Based on those patterns, we constructed three categories of student response: dedicated disruptors, comforted, and resistors. There
were three students in the dedicated disruptors’ group, eight in the discomforted group, and two in the resisters’ group.

Findings
The nature of responses among the dedicated disruptors and resisters remained notably steady over time. Therefore, we have chosen to focus our findings on the discomforted—the group for which our analysis noted the most significant and interesting shifts from the beginning of the term to the end, particularly with respect to students’ knowledge, their stances toward GSD-inclusive literacy teaching practice, and their perceived self-efficacy regarding their ability to advance the project of disrupting heteronormativity in their future literacy teaching. Of note, it was within that group’s responses that emotional crisis was most salient. We have also chosen to develop these themes by focusing on a few students’ experiences rather than pointing to examples from all eight students in the group. More important than demonstrating that several participants experienced emotional crisis is our illustration of discomfort, wrestling with praxis, and leaning in as students grappled with GSD and our invitations to resist heteronormativity.

The Discomforted
Our analysis constructed these students’ responses to GSD in the methods curriculum foremost as a crisis of discomfort, the first signs of which were detectable in their blog posts in Week 4. In fact, discomfort and emotional crisis were most salient in their responses to a Rolling Stone article (Erdely, 2012) assigned that week that reported on the loss of nine students to suicide in Anoka-Hennepin—the largest school district in Minnesota—in just two years (four of those students self-identified as or were perceived to be LGBTQ by their classmates). With respect to that reading, we traced swells of discomfort across the responses of every student in the discomforted group. To illustrate this theme, we point to Emily, who wrote, “Homophobic behavior, especially within schools, can become so violent that I truly become disgusted. I read the Rolling Stone article first, and I feel so horrible and disappointed about the actions—or lack thereof—of teachers and administrators within the Anoka School District.” As the emotional peaks of her response suggest, when the initial wave of GSD-inclusive content flooded the course and contextualized the problem of heteronormativity in schools, it initiated for Emily and others an unsettling process of unlearning. More specifically, participants’ discomfort was provoked as their assumptions about educators—ostensibly, adults with great capacity to garner safety for youth in need—were troubled by specific accounts of individuals who failed magnificently to protect and care for queer students.

Also noteworthy was an element of shock at play in students’ responses. Several in the discomforted group reported not having previously explored GSD in substantive ways, and our analysis suggests that these students entered the methods course with notably less prior knowledge and awareness of GSD than the dedicated disruptors, which may have contributed to their initial emotional pain. For example, at this point in the semester, the dedicated disruptors were able
to point to ways in which undisrupted heteronormativity operates in educational contexts; students in the discomforted group seemed surprised to learn about the troubling consequences of undisrupted heteronormativity and the extent to which they are reproduced in schools. Likewise, after reading about the nature of institutional barriers that make GSD-inclusive education risky work for teachers in various contexts, some discomforted students responded with disbelief. One student’s post directed a note of incredulity at the existence of policies that fail to protect teachers in some states who are advocating for LGBTQ students, and in some cases, even prohibit teachers from saying the word “gay” in affirming ways. Rebecca’s post from Week 4 also captures those contours of discomfort. She wrote:

The articles this week were difficult for me to get through—the Rolling Stone article was appalling. Growing up in California, and then moving [for] school, I feel I haven’t seen as much of these hateful instances, because I’ve been around such large liberal areas where the LGBTQ is more accepted than in comparison to an evangelical district. It was hard to read the article because I was a little disgusted by it, especially the school boards staring teenage suicides in the face and revising policies, asking teachers to “stay neutral in matters regarding sexual orientation.”

For Rebecca, the content of Weeks 3 and 4 troubled her assumptions that the current sociopolitical landscape is persistently progressive, as the national movement toward marriage equality might suggest, and that liberal communities in which queer folks are generally accepted are less the exception than the rule. Rebecca’s crisis of unlearning seemed to be initiated by the reading’s construction of school as a homophobic, violent place—a depiction that troubled her own experience growing up in neighborhoods and school communities that she fondly recalled as accepting.

As reflected by their early-term expressions, the discomforted students seemed to share an implicit desire not to reproduce the egregiously homophobic responses of the educators they read about. Importantly, however, at the same time that the first wave perhaps made students self-conscious of that desire, it also made them aware of gaps in their professional knowledge related to GSD-inclusive practice. Emily’s blog post in Week 4 captures this tension well. She wrote:

The readings for this week really put me in an uncomfortable place. I am not one to shy away from the LGBTQ topic or individuals. . . . The point I become uncomfortable is when I think about the fact that I don’t know how to handle these issues within my own class and talk about them with my students. . . . [Anoka-Hennepin’s] neutrality policy was something I wanted to think was ridiculous, but I ended up thinking to myself that I would probably be like those other teachers and just say nothing. Not because I don’t want to intervene and create a safe space for all my individuals no matter their differences, but because I have no idea how to intervene. I would have focused on the bullying problem, but as Blackburn said, “By focusing on bullying, rather than homophobia, the approach points to the problem on bullies as individuals rather than the systemic problem of homophobia, in which all of us are implicated.” These articles made me real-
ize that there is so little I know about LGBTQ matters. From the McCarthey and Moje reading I realized that the only tool I would have considered to use in the classroom, literature, is more complicated than I thought. What I give my students in relation to LGBTQ and other forms of identity will greatly affect the way they will view themselves.

As the methods curriculum awakened Emily’s awareness of teachers’ roles in reproducing oppression, it also confronted her with the realization that, as she sat in the capstone course of her teacher preparation, her beginner’s repertoire included few—if any—tools for disrupting that trend. What’s more, Emily was beginning to grapple with literature and literacy as complex tools that enable and constrain identity constructions and representations and, therefore, have powerful implications for how her students might see themselves and what’s possible for their lives.

As the discomforted students began to approach seriously the task of disrupting something that they were just beginning to understand themselves, instantiations of wrestling with praxis became more salient. On the blog in Week 4, Alice wrote, “My job is to make each and every student feel confident in their abilities so that they can become successful and happy individuals. . . . That being said, I have a lot of questions on how to address LGBTQ issues in the classroom. I think, as an ELA teacher, it’s my responsibility to provide students with literature that includes people from the LGBTQ community, but would reading these books simply because they’re ‘gay’ books isolate some of the students?” Similarly, Rebecca posted, “I guess this would be a burning question, and something I’d like someone to expand on: what would the implementation of [LGBTQ-themed] books look like in a classroom? Which novels would be a good choice for a school? How can I address these topics in a safe and comfortable way? I’ve never had to talk about these topics as a teacher, so I’m not sure exactly where to go.”

In her blog post that week, Caitlin situated her discomfort in the context of her field-experience classroom. She questioned, “When (if ever) do teachers remain silent on these issues? And what qualifies as a situation that needs confronting?” Caitlin went on to recall an instance that had occurred earlier in the week in which a student shouted, “That’s so gay!” while her cooperating teacher was leading class. Remarking that she was “shocked” by the comment because she hadn’t heard it from a student since she was in middle school, Caitlin wrestled with her own inaction following the incident. She wrote:

I wanted to ask my [cooperating teacher] after class whether she had heard the student and/or how she addresses those issues in her classroom, but could not figure out how to word the question so as to not offend, especially since practicum has only just started. Ultimately, I didn’t end up asking because we never got around to the issue. Is that me still being silent? Is it in any way excusable that I did not do something about this situation? This experience has been keeping me unsettled since it occurred.

We point to Catlin’s post to show how students in this group muddled their way through, but not necessarily out of, discomfort, and also as a poignant example of the complexity involved for novices negotiating their roles as emerging
GSD-inclusive educators in field-experience placements. Here, Caitlin’s discomfort was provoked by her desire to disrupt homophobic language and the fact that she did not know how—that is, how to phrase the question, how not to offend the teacher supervising her practicum, and how to negotiate her position as a learner-observer in someone else’s classroom.

As the semester continued, the theme of wrestling with praxis remained present, though less pronounced than at the beginning of the term. And yet, by semester’s end, these students also demonstrated that they had developed considerable knowledge of how to practice GSD inclusion. In fact, by Week 16, every discomforted student was able to point to specific examples of actionable steps that literacy teachers could take to disrupt heteronormativity. Moreover, all group members except one, whose participation dropped off during the last two weeks of the semester, began to assume a dedicated stance toward GSD-inclusive education. To instantiate that point, we turn to Alice’s blog from Week 15:

Blackburn and Smith reinforced the need to critically examine the heteronormative structures we have in our curriculum and actively fight against the engrained way we think about gender and sexuality. . . . This made me think of all of the levels [that] heteronormativity must be challenged in the classroom, because some things go past traditions and find themselves in language itself. We’ve discussed letting students choose their own pronouns, but gendered terms are everywhere.

Finding a different way into the conversation, Rebecca responded to another idea: queering the literature curriculum. Taking Shakespeare as her entry-point, Rebecca mused, “Take a look at Hamlet as a character: many people question his sexuality, given his feminine traits. He is moody, often akin to anger for no reason, and is very, very emotional—all things we would classify as ‘feminine’. So, why don’t we ask WHY we must take a male character with feminine traits and automatically assume he is homosexual?”

These are just a few of many examples we could provide to highlight the positive shifts that occurred in relation to students’ knowledge, awareness, and understanding of GSD-inclusive literacy education. While we certainly celebrate that finding, it is not, in our view, the most compelling of this research. More fascinating to us was the finding that significant positive shifts in knowledge occurred at the same time that wrestling with praxis remained a prominent theme. Put another way, as students developed significant awareness of heteronormativity, their roles as literacy educators in maintaining or disrupting it, and methods of queer inclusion, they continued to hold questions, vulnerabilities, uncertainty, and, at times, discomfort. For example, in the body of Rebecca’s post excerpted above, in which she made an impassioned case for bringing queer and critical perspectives to bear on Shakespeare, she also wrote, “While I do believe there are good points made [in Blackburn and Smith’s article], there are just some things I am struggling with. I’ve written and rewritten this paragraph a dozen times, because I can’t quite work through well enough what I want to say. I guess there are points made that are just that—pointed out, without any regard for another path to take.” In that moment,
Rebecca was embracing a view in support of queering the ELA curriculum at the same time that she was wrestling uncomfortably with the ambiguity of it all—that is, with the partiality of her knowledge, which was magnified, in her view, by the authors’ disregard for giving readers like her a clear “path to take.”

We frame this as an example of a tension that, as our findings suggest, can emerge when students’ desires to unlearn butt up against a familiar desire for the comfort of education that repeats what they already know. For Rebecca, resisting the desire for repetition and sitting in a space of ambiguity was frustrating. The sustained presence of the theme of wrestling with praxis suggests that for novices who desire to construct knowledge that disrupts common sense and advances anti-oppressive change, what’s involved in this endeavor can be emotionally fraught. As Kumashiro (2000b) argues, that process is characterized by “ongoing labor” (p. 43). In the final section of our findings report, we turn to a discussion of how two students negotiated the demands of that “ongoing labor” by leaning in.

**Leaning In to Discomfort**

In our analysis, Emily and Alice certainly stood out for the remarkable shifts they demonstrated by semester’s end. Emily went from lamenting how little she knew about “LGBTQ matters” in Week 4 to posting the following on the course blog in Week 15: “It is not enough to just teach [LGBTQ] topics in order to get kids thinking, we also need to recognize the heteronormative practices in place within these spaces. I think this starts with taking small steps. Changing the way we talk in the classroom, having discussions about societal norms, how they affect us, how they are created, and how we can counteract them . . . ” Similarly, Alice closed her blog post in Week 4 by writing, “Just because I want to make [LGBTQ-themed] books a ‘normal’ aspect of ELA class content does not mean that I know how to teach them.” In Week 15, Alice shared with the audience at the queer youth and allies event how easily teachers can bring in queer perspectives, even with the most traditional texts. She offered the idea of asking students to consider, if a particular character identified as LGBTQ, how that might change that character’s relationships and worldview. Also of significance, the discomfort that was so pronounced in Emily’s and Alice’s contributions from Weeks 3 and 4 had become considerably muted by Week 15. We do not mean to suggest that discomfort disappeared; on the contrary, our analysis found instances in which Emily and Alice each began to frame their discomfort as generative and necessary—not as something to be resolved, once and for all. In other words, they seemed to become comfortably uncomfortable with the ongoing, always unfinished processes of (un)learning that they had spent the semester engaging. In our analysis, we called that move *leaning in* to discomfort.

We situate our use of *leaning in* in the work of Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön (2009), who writes:

[T]ake an interest in your pain and your fear. Move closer, *lean in* [emphasis added], get curious; even for a moment experience the feelings beyond labels, beyond good or bad. Welcome them. Invite them. Do anything that helps melt the resistance. (p. 55)
Constructed in this way, *leaning in* is a very queer notion: it invites a moving toward discomfort, rather than away from it, and inquiry into what can be learned from such energetic responses as emotional pain, fear, and discomfort. Bringing this notion to bear on our data, we came to understand *leaning in* as the desire, willingness, and capacity to sit alongside the discomfort that accompanies resisting repetition, desiring to unlearn, and recognizing that knowledge is always partial.

Among data collected at semester’s end, we found two instances of *leaning in*, that is, as Emily and Alice moved toward understanding that the partiality of their knowledge could coexist with their desires to affirm GSD. In her blog post in Week 15, Emily embodied *leaning in* in her response to Rebecca’s complicated post, excerpted above, in which Rebecca grew so frustrated at not being given a clear pathway for moving beyond inclusion that she became stuck. Emily wrote:

This topic takes so much reexamination of the self, of one’s own prejudices, and how we interact with those around us…. Any topic that makes us question who we are and what we do is going to be difficult. Something that I love is that you came to the realization, and helped me to also, that we are always going to be learning. Teaching is a process, another learning process that requires our full involvement all the time. The point is that we cannot get hung up on our faults, but should instead learn from them and try again.

Looking across the sum of students’ responses in our data corpus, Emily’s was unique. No other student except for Alice pointed explicitly to the discomforting nature of the process of unlearning. As Emily expressed, because that process involves rethinking “who we are and what we do,” it can also be deeply personal and uncomfortable, as it requires ongoing labor—what Emily called “our full involvement all the time.” But rather than resisting it, Emily invited Rebecca, and herself, to lean in—to resist getting stuck in what could easily be framed as fear, uncertainty, or self-doubt, and to turn toward those feelings instead to see what might be learned.

The second instance of *leaning in* came from the whole-class fishbowl recorded during Week 16, as Alice reflected on her experience attending the queer youth and allies event. Focusing her musings on the fear that she perceived many teachers in the audience to be holding, she said:

What really stood out to me was how open the students on the panel were and how afraid we all were. How it was so hard for the teacher side of things to be open and honest about this topic. And it sort of made me reflect on where maybe the fear is actually coming from, and maybe it’s not just outside pressures, but people still not knowing how to talk about it. One person who spoke was just so terrified that she was saying the wrong thing, and I think she was the one I admire the most for speaking up because I feel like she was really putting herself out there. And she just asked, I don’t know if I’m saying this right. Tell me if I’m saying it wrong. And I think that’s something we could all take into our own classrooms, being, like, I’m learning with my students. I’m learning with you guys. . . . I’m sure that we will all make mistakes.
In observing that elementary teacher candidate, who publically stumbled over the LGBTQ acronym as she attempted to communicate to youth on the panel just how new the topic of GSD was for her but how committed she was to supporting her future students, it seems that Alice witnessed what wrestling with praxis looks like in real time, just as Emily did with Rebecca in the context of the course blog. Unlike many other audience members who were not part of the methods course we studied, Alice had been negotiating the discomfort of unlearning and the partiality of her knowledge all semester long. We wonder if that helped her develop a keener sense, as her response seems to signal, of what’s involved for teachers who are just beginning to negotiate their roles in relation to GSD-inclusive education, and of how stifling fear and discomfort can be. As Alice shared, fear that so often surrounds the act of “putting [yourself] out there” is perhaps generated less by external forces than by internal ones—for example, fear of saying the wrong thing, of messing up, and of not knowing. Watching the elementary teacher candidate make herself vulnerable, in spite of the gaps in her knowledge, seemed impactful for Alice. What’s more, it seemed to foster in her an awareness of the significance of leaning in to fear and discomfort—that is, of stretching beyond the partiality of one’s own knowledge and opening oneself up to the vulnerability of (un)learning.

**Discussion and Implications**

As Kumashiro (2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002a) argues and the findings of this research confirm, education that disrupts common sense can provoke emotional distress. In this inquiry, the sources of students’ crisis included learning about the ways teachers have been complicit with oppression and the possibility that they, too, might reproduce heterosexism and homophobia, in spite of their desires not to. Also disorienting was grappling with the realizations that GSD-inclusive literacy practice is more nuanced than including LGBTQ-themed books “simply because they’re ‘gay’ books,” as Alice put it, and that all their questions and uncertainties about how to do the work would not be resolved by semester’s end. As Martino (2009) contends, ELA classrooms are important sites in which queer interventions should take place, particularly with respect to reading practices and literacy performances that disrupt rather than reinforce notions of normalcy related to gender and sexual identity categories. But, the sustained theme in this work of students wrestling with praxis suggests that what’s involved in preparing novices to move toward that goal is layered and emotionally complex. Therefore, we wish to echo calls made by other scholars for greater inclusion of GSD and queer-inclusive literacy practices in English education. If teachers are to move beyond inclusion to disrupt heteronormativity, they must be supported as they develop and practice anti-normative ways of engaging with literacy and literature and work through the emotional discomfort that may surface. Literacy teacher preparation is a crucial context in which that development should begin to unfold.

Given the small scale of this study, we cannot generalize our findings, or speculate about which participants might have enacted their GSD-inclusive stances once they landed in ELA classrooms. To develop deeper understandings of what’s
involved in bringing commitments to queer inclusion to bear in practice, more research that traces novices’ movement from teacher preparation into the field is needed. Reflecting on our findings, we wonder where the narrative arc of the storyline we constructed might have led if, at the outset of this study, we had anticipated a crisis of unlearning. We also wonder what might have shifted if we had introduced students, early in the semester, to the concepts of learning, unlearning, desire, and resistance. What might have happened if we had invited students to attend carefully and critically to their emotional responses and to lean in to discomfort along the way? Among data collected early in the term, there were glimmers of leaning in. In posts to the blog in Week 4, Caitlin, for example, was leaning in as she held space for that thorny question, “Is that still me being silent?” Emily was moving toward leaning in as she made the vulnerable confession of what she still did not know, despite being only months away from student teaching. What might have happened if we had called attention to those glimmers and framed them as moments to be celebrated for the ways in which they demonstrated students’ moves to turn toward discomfort and resist the urge to turn away from it instead? These are questions we continue to hold.

Our findings also point to the importance of helping preservice teachers raise their tolerance for discomfort, uncertainty, and ambiguity, particularly where efforts aimed at social justice are concerned. As Kumashiro (2002a) observes, resistance to anti-oppressive change happens even among expressed commitments to social justice, because people often desire certain forms of social change while resisting others. Though religious faith was not a mediating factor of the discomforted students’ responses to GSD in the methods curriculum, it was a powerful mediator of one of the resistor’s. Given allegiances of some students to religious institutions that may sustain heterosexism and homophobia, we find it intellectually honest to acknowledge the complex realities that pluralism in public education poses to educators preparing teachers for GSD, specifically those for whom the project of disrupting heteronormativity might present a very real challenge. How to support those individuals in grappling with religious faith traditions alongside their responsibilities as public school educators to affirm all students and families is a question we should take seriously, particularly in university-based teacher education contexts that are oriented toward social justice.

Finally, as our findings indicate, emotional discomfort should not be perceived as wholly negative; when figured queerly, that is, as productive tension, discomfort is generative—necessary, even, to grappling with the dynamics of heterosexism, homophobia, and broader oppression. As Kumashiro (2000a) argues, when education resists repeating what we already know and affirming what we already believe, then educators should expect students to enter into emotional crisis and, therefore, should provide pathways for working through crisis that do not privilege rationality:

For students, the desire to learn cannot be a desire to move forward rationally (meaning, to learn things that do not force the student to look within, to look back, to disrupt
one’s memories, to contradict one’s worldview). Rather, the desire to learn must involve a desire to unlearn, a desire to return to what has already been learned, not to repeat or relearn it, but to unlearn it, to understand it in a different way, and to work through resulting crisis. (p. 7)

Toward that end, we offer leaning in as a tool for literacy teacher educators aiming to prepare students (and themselves) to engage in the emotional labor of desiring to unlearn and work toward queer-inclusive and anti-oppressive change.

NOTES
1. *Queer* is an umbrella term inclusive of people who resist identification with fixed, binary categories of gender and sexuality. We use *LGBTQ* and *queer* interchangeably to affirm a range of variation captured by the shape-shifting constructs of gender and sexuality.
2. Rooted in Buddhist philosophy, our use of *lean in* should not be confused with Sheryl Sandberg’s, which promotes cisgender women’s ambition in the workplace.
3. The dedicated disruptors assumed what we coded as *dedicated* stances toward disrupting heteronormativity and affirming GSD, while the resistors assumed *resistant* stances. Both groups consistently assumed those stances all semester long.
4. Participants’ names are pseudonyms.

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Sara Staley and Bethy Leonardi are research associates at the University of Colorado Boulder. They are cofounders and codirectors of A Queer Endeavor, an initiative that aims to support educators and school communities in organizing safer, more affirming learning environments for LGBTQ and gender-expansive youth.

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