Cyberbullying is a misleading term. Most youth interact online with people they already know offline (Ito et al., 2009), so bullying is rarely limited to the cyber world. The systematic harassment of young people by schoolmates has become so prevalent in our culture as to manifest the word *bullycide*. This noun represents the process of repeated negative aggression directed toward an individual person who, under pressure, ends his or her torment through suicide. Another less common spelling is *bullicide*, which I prefer as it gives less visual weight to the perpetrator(s). While cyberbullying victimization is around 24% among teens in general (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), the percentage more than doubles to 53% for teens who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). When the harassment and assault occur in schools, 62% of these students believe school staff will take no action; 34% reported that when an incident did occur at school, school staff did indeed do nothing in response (Kosciw et al., 2010).

In a world of twenty-first-century issues, teachers can better prepare themselves and their students to navigate certain social hurdles by incorporating *queer theory* into their discussions concerning individual differences. Students who deviate from the social norm are the most likely to suffer from bullying, and the queer lens can better prepare teachers to stand up and advocate for these youth. This article will provide a brief background on the theory, give an introduction to central ideas of the theory connecting them to bullicide, and suggest several steps that can be taken immediately to foster a more inclusive learning environment.

### A Brief Background

Queer theory focuses on non-normative practices and identities—particularly those in which sex, gender, and sexuality do not align in a heterosexually prescribed way (Corber & Valocchi, 2003). “Queer” often serves as shorthand for the lengthy phrase “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender” (“LGBT”), and the theory has strong roots in the gay and lesbian studies of the late twentieth century. The theory is also indebted to women’s studies scholarship that emerged in the 1980s; such scholarship created more nuanced ideas about sexuality, power, and gender. A central idea that has emerged from queer theory is *heteronormativity*—the cultural bias for heterosexuality and the privileges that come with opposite-sex relationships. These privileges range from simple expressive freedoms like talking about a boyfriend, girlfriend, or even parents in the classroom to social institutions like marriage that provide financial, economic, and social benefits for spouses.

While some readers may view the word “queer” as a derogatory term, it is important to understand that linguistic reclamation of the term within the LGBT community has been underway since the early 1990s. The term also has
an etymological heritage in non-normative identities that are separable from sexuality (Brontsema, 2004). Examples of some queer identities include a young man who dresses in clothes from his mother’s closet, a woman who desires to live life solo, or the person who questions rigid categories of people like heterosexual/homosexual. Queer, then, is a far-reaching and highly inclusive word for many people.

When used as a verb, “queering” represents the active process of questioning heteronormative expectations. These norms often rely on dichotomies like private/public, homosexual/heterosexual, strong/weak, natural/artificial, masculine/feminine. An enactment that blurs the line between these constructs destabilizes the entire binary. For example, as a public librarian, I worked with a young man who used the Internet as a cyber extension of himself by creating a Facebook page as “Jenny Joy.” Shawn revealed Jenny to a few select friends in the local community. The Web allowed him to think beyond heterosexual expectations and to queer boundaries for enactments of various gender identities (Berg, 2012). Identity is not something inherent and stable; rather, it is constructed and contingent upon social contexts.

**Queer Theory Informs Bullying**

In 2010, four young men killed themselves over a 19-day period as a result of bullying. Two slightly-built 13-year-olds were among the victims of this bullicide spate. Seth Walsh hanged himself after years of bullying (Cloud, 2010). Asher Brown shot himself after classmates derided him because “they believed he was gay” (Freeman, 2010). In other words, Asher was not persecuted for his sexual preferences, but rather for other students’ sexualized interpretations of his practices. People employ language to make practices sexual or gender-specific, even when the practices have no intrinsic sexuality or gender. Dichotomies like “masculine” and “feminine” are social constructions that often have detrimental effects for those people who do not measure up. Twelve-year-old Dylan Hueggerich’s parent contacted school authorities about the homophobic slurs of classmates and the physical abuse the young man was subjected to at school. His mother was told that “it was her son’s fault for standing out and that he should cut his hair or try to act ‘more manly’” (Webley, 2011). In her classic 2001 text on adolescence, Nancy Lesko showed how such myopic thinking continues to poison our schools:

Despite well-publicized curricular reforms around multi-culturalism and anti-sexual harassment efforts, secondary schools are likely to promote informally a narrower normed idea of what a good student is and does. Certainly, more of a focus on physical dominance through pumping iron, competitive athletics, and, unfortunately, harassment of perceived weaker students is occurring. In short, hegemonic masculinity is reinforced, ever more vitally performed, and strictly enforced. (p. 184)

Teachers may unknowingly support a single conception of masculinity. A few questions might help clarify biases that exist in our teaching practices. Look at your classroom library. Are there more biographies and stories about sports “heroes” than male dancers and fashion designers? Are athletes who are gay represented in the collection? To answer these questions, teachers could get students involved in an investigation of classroom and school libraries to foster critical literacy skills related to representations and bias in texts. Next, do male students attend sporting events but forego school plays and/or concerts? If the answer is yes, students can read these actions as supporting the normed “good” student that Lesko discusses. Seth, Asher, and Dylan would more likely have been in the school play than on the football field. Even a teacher who does not outright bully teens may make professional
choices and implement practices whose messages can be read as support for particular identities.

Those students who blur gender and/or sexuality categories are not the only victims of bullying. Any young person who diverges from a local social norm may suffer. For instance, when a teen is desirable, s/he must surmise the peer groups’ norms of sexual behavior. Phoebe Prince, who had just turned 15 when she killed herself, was called an “Irish slut” and “whore” (O’Neill, 2010) on Twitter and Facebook because she was sexually active with two males who had statutory rape charges brought against them, though those were dropped. When sexually loaded words are thrown around, the language arts teacher is perfectly positioned to examine the meanings.

I distinctly remember a class where my students began a unit of study on the etymology of such terms, and a reading unit on feminism. I was not familiar with queer theory at the time, nor was it well developed. When a mother approached me about why the students were studying such “awful” words, I made her aware that the students had been using the derogatory terms, so I wanted them to fully understand where they came from, how they had developed, and what they meant. The mother, to my surprise, agreed with the idea and apologized if her daughter had been involved in the insults.

A more tolerant, dare I say loving, world will only be possible if both teachers and students are diligent in their questioning of the status quo and advocacy for people of all kinds. Queer theory is a useful framework for reexamining dichotomies and heteronormative structures that are taken for granted. With the 2010 adolescents’ bullying epidemic, I realized that my knowledge base was lacking because I could not account for—nor could any amount of reading explain—such tragedy. But queer theory has broadened my mind enough to realize that the issues cannot be addressed through a passive tolerance. It may help if teachers have gay and lesbian literature on the bookshelf and on the browser bookmarks, but if the teacher does not advocate for social justice and question heterosexism in the school and greater culture, paper and electronic tools will probably have little impact.

Since queer theory is not a common element in teacher education programs, I suggest reading the works cited above as well as the following three titles to gain a strong basis in the paradigm:

- Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*

**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITE THINK**

Gay and Lesbian Characters in YA Lit

Tune in to the ReadWriteThink.org podcast episode “Gay and Lesbian Characters in Young Adult Literature” to hear about the many different ways in which contemporary authors are including gay, lesbian, and transgender characters in their novels for teens, and listen for recommendations of new as well as classic gay, lesbian, and transgender titles.


After listening to this episode, be sure to print out the list of recommended titles to take to the library or book seller.


Lisa Fink
www.readwritethink.org

*Voices from the Middle*, Volume 20 Number 3, March 2013
The first two books were originally published in 1990 and have retrospectively come to be viewed as foundational to queer studies. The latter work is written by an English teacher at the college level, but she provides a solid explanation of the history of queer theory and supplies interesting classroom case studies. All three of the writers come from an English Education background. If time constraints prohibit your reading the full books, the introductions alone are insightful.

**Taking Action Now**

Steps must be taken to prevent bullying on all levels of society, including community, school, classroom, and individuals. The worst approach is to ignore bullying and the personal electronic devices where bullying often goes unchecked (Ito et al., 2009). A school’s staff must be trained in prevention programs like the Olweus system (Hazelden Foundation, 2011), which encourages bystanders to become upstanders who act to thwart malicious words, images, and behavior. All of us are responsible for standing between the predators and their prey—bull-I-cide. The teacher who fails to act now in hopes that a non-conforming teen’s life will improve in adulthood condones the persecution of too many young people with “it gets better.” Transformational teaching makes it better.

Teachers must interrogate constructions that reinforce heteronormativity. The study of queer theory helps sharpen the mind to ask the questions. A few suggestions—some already mentioned—for immediate and continued action include: a) questioning our own preconceptions regarding dichotomies such as masculinity/femininity; b) examining the historical development of derogatory terms that students may be using in the school; c) drawing attention to an individual’s words or actions that demonstrate a sexualized interpretation of an object or act that is not inherently sexual; d) balancing bookshelf choices and school event attendance; e) inviting students to share messages that they sense are insulting in order to discuss the (cyber)bullying in the classroom; f) modeling the interrogation of social institutions, laws, and practices in fiction and fact that marginalize non-normative couples and people who live life on their own; g) asking caregivers about their preferred forms of address in order to talk appreciatively with a student about his or her family; h) starting a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) group if the school does not have one; and i) prompting colleagues to consider how their ideas and/or actions may be based in a heteronormative ideology.

Finally, teachers might take the lead from a sixth grader who told me about her online fan fiction practices. She wrote “guy on guy” love stories, in the manga tradition, finding a common ground in human emotion (Berg, 2012). Teachers and students may both benefit from constructing an online identity of a gay male, transgender person, or any other identity that they do not practice in the lived world. Responses from other participants on the Web may surprise you—in positive, negative, and queer ways.

**References**


Margaret Berg was a classroom teacher in middle and high schools for seven years before becoming a teacher educator. She can be reached at Margaret.Berg@unco.edu.

2013 CEL Call for Proposals
The Conference on English Leadership (CEL) will hold its Annual Convention from November 24–26, 2013, in Boston, Massachusetts. The theme is “Transformative Literacy Leadership and Learning.” CEL fosters an intimate professional community dedicated to building the leadership capacity of literacy educators. A constituent group of the National Council of Teachers of English, CEL crafts an Annual Convention that features nationally renowned keynote speakers and engaging breakout sessions. These informative sessions are presented by literacy leaders who are department chairs, curriculum coordinators, building administrators, college professors, and early career and veteran teachers.

Sessions will focus on ways educators adapt their leadership and their instruction to meet the changing needs of students, teachers, and communities. CEL invites literacy educators at the elementary, secondary, and higher education levels to submit a proposal for consideration for its 2013 Annual Convention. As a nonprofit organization of educators, we are not able to give a stipend or expenses for this appearance. For more information on CEL, please visit our website at www.ncte.org/cel; for questions or more detailed information about submitting a proposal, email Heather Rocco at hrocco73@gmail.com. Follow us on Twitter @CELeadership.

Voices from the Middle, Volume 20 Number 3, March 2013