

# Chapter 3

## Queer Theory in Education Research

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses queer theory definitions and methods. It explores some key queer research study examples in education, including policy research, curriculum and textbook analysis, studies of classroom talk, student surveys and other study types. It provides some key questions that can be used in basic queer reading strategies and linguistics for policy, curriculum and classroom talk analysis; Butler's most well-known concept of performativity; and the potential usefulness of less widely applied concepts including overplay, transference and erasure, as well as other approaches. The chapter finally considers the value of key critiques of queer theory and the way the theory questions the privileging of certain models of time and space, including the Anthropocene age itself.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### What Is Queer Theory?

Queer Theory sits within the post-modern research paradigm. At first glance it appears to embrace the complexity and uncertainty ascribed to the 'wicked problems' of the Anthropocene Age (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Queer theory applies post-structuralism to identity (Sears, 2005, p. xviii) – most notably the work of Lacan, Foucault, Derrida and Butler – revealing queerness in things labeled 'normal,' and normality in things labeled 'queer.' At its core lies a challenge or an anti-position, rather than a particular position, to those grand narratives and structures which uphold 'heteronormativity' – the supposed normalcy and naturalness of heterosexual desire, sex, sexual acts and relationships. This challenge extended through the work of Judith Butler (2005) to

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constructions of sex (particularly the two-sexes male-female binary model), gender (particularly the two genders masculinity-femininity binary model) and sexuality (particularly the assumption that males are only attracted to females and females to males, in a clear-cut and stable manner, for reproductive purposes). Queer theory shows that in the heteronormative world view, sex traits and gender performances and sexual desires/ histories/ acts are inaccurately framed and limited into categories in ways which erase their potentiality and privilege male heterosexual power. Queer focuses on exposing the policing of the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990); the (re)production of heterosexuality through representation of bipolarised oppositions of sex, gender and sexuality as normative.

Queer Theory more broadly upholds any form of identity – based on any trait or trait combination at all – as performative (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004) – amalgamating performance, cultural (re)citation and embodiment. The idea here is that an individual only 'becomes' an identity by enacting their claim across imperfect (re)iterations of its creation, whilst simultaneously erasing all contradictory possibilities in themselves and in the identity (and group membership) construct in problematic ways. Queer Theory promotes 'anti-identity – politics' (Jagose, 1996, p. 130), and problematises the claiming of consistent heterosexual, gay, male, female, intersex or transsexual identities (or race-based or other identities), which require impossible erasures of contradictory elements and potentials across iterations. Yet it offers 'Queer' identity including all non-heteronormative possibilities (Alexander & Yescavage, 2009), even subversive forms of heterosexuality challenging 'hegemonic discourses' (Robinson, 2005, p. 25). This identity 'owns' its unqualifiable limitlessness.

Queer theory research thus requires a problematizing of the paradoxical relationality of 'the norm' (Kumashiro, 2003; Plummer & Stein, 1994; Simpson, 2012), constituting and constituted by 'the Queer' (Price, 2016; Yosef, 2004). The Queer is the anti-normal, and to claim a Queer identity is to claim (or perhaps, acknowledge) an anti-identity that is inconsistent, fluid and simply inclusive of any element if anti-normativity. Therefore, it is important to note that Queer Theory and Queer identity specifically exclude the possibility of a consistent and true 'gay identity' in research as much as a straight one – contrary to the common misperception that Queer Theory somehow supports gay identity. Queer education research work thus destabilises both binaries in education (e.g., male–female, heterosexual–homosexual, student-teacher and others) and normalising educational discourses in general (Robinson, 2005). Queer critique in education thus disallows essentialist notions of group membership in and around education spaces (ranging from education policy to classrooms, course books and identity roles) that can deny multiplicities of identities and experiences, and reinforce binaries of distinct, oppositional stereotypes sustaining the sense of heterosexuality as normative and homosexuality as subordinate (Butler, 1990, 2004).

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