

“Why You Wearing Them Barrettes?”: A Playful(ly) Queer(ing) Reflection on Teacher-Self in Rural Education

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This arts-based autoethnographic piece explores my layered experiences as a queer educator working in a rural high school, where heteronormativity and small-town familiarity often complicate notions of teacher identity, professionalism, and belonging. Using paper dolls and narrative vignettes, I explore how a queer teacher-self is negotiated and expressed within the cisheteronormative and gendered expectations of schooling. Emphasizing the disruptions possible in queer work, I emphasize that rural schooling can be a site of empowerment and joy through disruptions that students and I called “gray spaces” of possibility and affirmation—for both them and me. By highlighting moments of tension, joy, resistance, and community, I challenge notions of rural schools as solely hostile terrains for queer people, and underscore how they might alternatively be spaces of relationality, playfulness, empowerment, and transformation. Through the use of paper dolls as both metaphor and method, I accentuate that teacher identity, like pedagogy, is always layered and richly textured by context.

“So, Ms. Shelton, if you’ll fill out this form, we’ll add it to the school newspaper.”

A new teacher to a rural high school, I was a stranger in a small town. I had grown up in a neighboring rural county, so I understood that I was an outsider to the community—an oddity when most people had known one another for years, if not generations (Shelton, 2022; Showalter et al., 2019). I felt my hands clench and my stomach tumble as I scanned through the provided form. The questions highlighted the degrees to which I truly was an outsider. Items such as “Your spouse’s name,” “List your children’s names,” and “Local

church you attend,” reverberated in my gut as reminders of heteronormativity.

The school’s newspaper advisor looked at me expectantly, effectively shoving the paper into my hands. “I’ll come back after your planning period to get that,” she said, smiling quizzically at my hesitation and silence.

Layerings of a Queer Teacher-Self

I am a queer gender-flexible lesbian who is often, but not always, masculine-presenting. Within the field of education, teaching as/while queer “is a complex business” because being an educator is to be constantly layered with conventional notions of “professionalism,” feminized gender conventions, and a commitment to being authentic in ways that sustain one’s self and support students (Gray & Harris, 2014, p. 2). Adding in the additional layer of teaching as/while queer, working in a rural context complicates those concerns and efforts. Queer rural people often experience a “sense of isolation and vulnerability” both generally and specifically within educational settings (Brockenbrough, 2018, p. 122). As “schools reproduce discourses of heteronormativity” (Johnson, 2017, p. 14), the effect is “silencing processes” (Johnson, 2017, p. 15) that situate queer teachers to “negotiate the terms of their [queer] participation in the homophobic milieus” of schooling (Brockenbrough, 2018, p. 125). Exacerbating these realities, a rare large-scale study of rural education found that “LGBTQ [people] in rural schools faced more

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hostile school climates [than those] in urban and suburban schools” (GLSEN, 2020, p. xxviii). The layers of a queer teacher-self within the cisheteronormative expectations of a highly feminized profession, while situated within rurality, are challenging.

This article draws explicitly on this concept of layers and layering to offer an arts-based piece grounded in queer theorizing of layered selves. Haraway (1988) pointed out that all experiences are “embodied accounts” comprised of “every layer of” ourselves and our contexts (p. 578). Specifically, an arts-based exploration offers new ways to explore “how meanings and bodies get made ... in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance” for authenticity and agency within sociopolitically oppressive and normative spaces (Haraway, 1988, p. 580). This creative approach affords new possibilities, particularly as the constantly growing literature on LGBTQ+ issues in education typically focuses on students—effectively erasing queer educators’ perspectives and experiences (Gray, 2014; Wright, n.d.; Wright & Smith, 2015). Furthermore, within the need to more fully consider the experiences of queer teachers, an additional gap exists in considering queer experiences within rural educational spaces, which have traditionally been understood to be hostile to queer people and possibilities (Blackburn & Thomas, 2019; Shelton, 2022; Shelton & Lester, 2020), but that are often vibrant with playfulness and joy, which this artful approach centers.

I explore these concepts of layers and layerings through paper dolls and personal narratives, such as my initial paper doll creations in Figure 1 (Shelton & Jones, 2025). The cutting and assembling of the layers of dolls,

clothes, and objects reflect the queer process of being “cut together-apart” as a human “patchwork made of disparate parts” (Barad, 2014, p. 169). This dynamic, messy, and shifting collaging of self, contexts, and concepts offers a way to be “in play” and playful in exploring queer(ness)/(ing) (Haraway, 2016, p. 129) in rural schooling. The literal layering of paper dolls and the accompanying narratives highlight the often stark realities and challenges of being/doing queer in rural education, including the moments when the self is bifurcated across ranges of expectations and norms, while also underscoring the joy in constructing and continuously building a queer teacher-self in a rural high school.

“Why You Wearing Them Barrettes?”

I was standing on a chair trying to reach extra textbooks on top of a cabinet when I heard a student ask, “Ms. Shelton, why you wearing them barrettes?”

My hand involuntarily fluttered to the butterfly clips holding my hair back. My gut knotted and bubbled, as my mind tumbled with hyperawareness of the contradictions in my appearance and interactions. As an openly queer high school teacher in a sociopolitically restrictive rural school district, my combinations of men’s shoes, sparkly nail polish, metal-studded belts, and butterfly barrettes disrupted conventional notions of what a teacher looked like, and, indirectly, what it means to be a teacher.

Climbing down with the dusty and duct-taped-together books, I wanted to be defensive. “What, I can’t wear barrettes?” was vibrating unspoken on my lips. Instead, I looked at the student’s face and saw genuine curiosity. Why

Figure 1
Initial Paper Dolls Representing Me as a Rural Queer Person



was I wearing barrettes, given that I regularly wore clothes bought in the men’s sections of stores? I smiled and touched the hair clips.

“I like that they sparkle while they keep my hair out of my eyes.”

Eyes widening, the student smiled and nodded. “Yeah, they’re cool,” they agreed, and helped me to move the books to my desk. Every day that I stood in my classroom, I was constantly aware of the ways that my appearance disrupted what students had been taught to expect of teachers, and that particularly within this small school, I was an embodiment of *other* for most students and colleagues. Figure 2 offers an example of those disruptions in paper doll form, with the

contrasts of a pink barrette alongside “masculine” clothing. My tattoos, my dozen piercings, my rainbow bracelet all visually reminded them and me that my presence de/reconstructed who/how a teacher might be. While I often felt “the tiredness of making corrections and departures” through and due to my queerness (Ahmed, 2014, p. 147), “direct or indirect forms of self-revelation” constantly expanded for them—and, importantly, for *me*—how I might exist as an educator (Ahmed, 2014, p. 147). To reflect these tensions, Figure 3 “blurs” the rainbow flag as a way of visually representing the ways that LGBTQ+ people and imagery often exist as resistance and/or as contentious with(in) educational spaces.

Figure 2

My Queer Teacher-Self, With “Men’s” Clothing and a Barrette, Surrounded by Markers of Teaching in a Rural School



Figure 3

The Same Image as Figure 2 but With the LGBTQIA+ Flag “Blurred” to Represent “Gray Spaces” as Discussed in This Piece



“We Gone Stay in These Gray Spaces, Ain’t We?”

I had worked at the high school for over 7 years. Parents/guardians/families knew who I was and often stopped me in the local grocery store to say, “I’m really glad my baby is in your class” and “I went up to the school yesterday and told them to put my child with you for next year.” I was still an outsider, as I regularly failed locals’ quizzes about “Who’re your folks?” and “Where your family from?” when people did not know the names and locations that I provided, but I was a valued member of the community whose contributions were important to, at this point, hundreds of children and their families. These connections were a source of joy for me, as I built relationships with families and communities,

taught siblings of past students, and learned the rhythms and relationships of the school and surrounding areas.

I had also noted, as are the national rural trends, that the high school was experiencing high teacher attrition (Gutierrez, 2016; Showalter et al., 2023). After several years, I was one of the most senior teachers at the school, and the constant turnover and years of experience had made me bolder about who I was and how I taught. I was openly queer, with rainbows, trans flags, and pictures of locations such as Gay Street in New York throughout my classroom. The curriculum, however, was controlled by the district, so while I had LGBTQ+-affirming texts available to students, what I taught was generally not my decision. *How* I taught, however, was.

There were ranges of what the students and I called “the gray spaces,” which were opportunities for us to (re)imagine how we might learn, while still technically following mandates. They were, as reflected in the paper dolls complementing these narratives, ways to affirm queer and trans people and concepts, as and alongside rural-specific explorations, in educational spaces that seemed otherwise restrictive. An example from my classroom leveraged the administration’s requirement of a daily warm-up activity that incorporated standardized testing skills. While I initially bristled at this activity, I found that it was a wonderful opportunity to invite students to read and discuss ranges of texts that were otherwise impossible. Our conversations were not limited to LGBTQ+ issues but were expansive and centered rural communities. We read news stories about livestock illnesses affecting our county, essays about poverty and hope in rural communities, and, I ensured, ranges of texts that included diverse representations of queer and trans people, particularly within rural communities. Students had been surprised to learn of large concentrations of queer families across the U.S. South and of small-town hospitals that defied state legislation to provide gender-affirming care. I ensured that accompanying questions focused on items like vocabulary, grammar, and critical reading skills, so that they were easily defensible to any who might object.

On this day, students walked in to find a news story about a rural school district that had canceled prom because a young woman wanted to bring her girlfriend. I prompted students to analyze the rhetorical word choices that the author made. Students also considered how they would feel if something similar happened in their school.

One offered, “Look. Prom is a big deal, man. It’s one of the few things that happens for teenagers here. I’d be mad. Just meet up with your girlfriend after prom.”

Another student responded, “Nuh-uh. This isn’t on the student. This is the school. They could let them come. I’ve gone with girls who are my friends, and it was fine. Why’s this gotta be a big deal?”

At the end of class, one student stayed behind, shuffling her feet and staring determinedly at the floor. I cleared my throat, asking, “What’s up? What’s wrong?”

She grimaced and said slowly, “The news story today. Did you know that girls are required to wear dresses to prom?” She paused. “I want to wear a suit. Why can’t I?”

Unsure of how to answer, I reviewed the prom dress code and found that although “girls will wear dresses” was the way that the teacher prom committee articulated the policy, the actual language was, “Students shall wear attire that is fitting for the occasion, not too revealing, and teacher approved.” I shrugged and looked at her, “I mean, I approve you wearing a suit.” Her eyes lit up, and she nearly skipped to her next class.

On the day of prom, I dug out a tuxedo that I had worn to a friend’s wedding. Tying the silver bowtie, affixing my sparkly silver hair clip, and tying my shoes, I set out to supervise the punchbowl and teenagers. Assuming my position near a decorative cardboard waterfall, I saw the prom committee chair rushing toward me. I was prepared to be asked to deal with kids making out, but instead she hurriedly said, “One of the girls is in pants, and she said that you said that she could wear that?!?”

Several students whom I taught were nearby getting snacks and drinks, and I peripherally saw them begin to subtly listen to this drama. Looking my colleague in the eyes, I responded, “Yeah. I read the policy, and based on what’s written, she’s fine. I approved her attire. I mean,” gesturing to my own tuxedo, “I can’t very well take issue, can I?”

Her eyes widened as she took in my outfit. “This isn’t what they’re supposed to wear! That’s why we have a dress code!”

I shrugged, “Okay. That’s certainly your position. But the dress code doesn’t say that she can’t wear what she has. I read it. Have you read it? Where are you getting these requirements that you’re describing?”

She spun on her heels and stormed away, muttering “I know the policy,” but did not reapproach the student in question. As that student walked over, she spun with her arms outstretched so that I could see her prom attire. I smiled and applauded, as several of her previously eavesdropping peers joined us.

One laughed, “Hey. Ms. Shelton just had to fight with Mrs. Township [pseudonym] about your clothes!”

The student looked at me, immediately concerned, and I shook my head. “Nah,” I told her. “There was no ‘fight,’ just me telling her that the policy said you were fine.”

One of the other students put their hands on the tuxedoed student’s shoulder and said, “Yeah. Ms. Township thought she was gone argue with Ms. Shelton about reading something, and Mrs. Township ain’t had *nothing* to say back. She ain’t said nothing to you since, either.”

Another student nodded and said, “Yeah, see, that’s why we read for those gray spaces, ain’t it? Because of stuff like this and people trying to change rules that don’t exist. We gone stay in these gray spaces, ain’t we?” We all laughed and agreed that we would.

As they walked away to dance, I adjusted my bowtie and considered the ways that my queer(ing) of self had opened new spaces not only for me but others, and the ways that blurring and rupturing norms and expectations had empowered both students and me.

“This,” I reflected, “is how all of those layers of a queer teacher-self matter and, necessarily, shift rural school spaces.” Figures 4 and 5 draw on these layers, as Figure 4 situates my paper doll self at a decidedly queer

prom, including a “Prom Quee(r) sash” and fracturing of the traditional prom dress. Figure 5 again “blurs” LGBTQ+

celebratory images to visually represent the “gray spaces” of doing this work in potentially challenging contexts.

Figure 4

My Queer Teacher-Self, Layered at Prom with a Rupturing/Cutting of a Dress to Wear a Suit



Figure 5

My Queer Teacher-Self, Layered on Top of Figure 2, With a Rupturing/Cutting of a Dress to Wear a Suit, but With LGBTQIA+ Symbols, Such as an LGBTQ+ Flag and “Prom Queer” Sash “Blurred” to Represent “Gray Spaces” as Discussed in This Piece



My existence as a queer teacher was layered with complexities and uncertainties, but also community and connections. Numerous studies accentuate the challenges of queerness in rural spaces, and those are important discussions, but they are not complete pictures of queerness in rural education. The playfulness and joy—in my connections with students, my engagements with the paper dolls, and my reflections on these moments—also shape

schooling in important ways that work to empower students and educators.

As I watched my students admired their peer’s tuxedo, they turned together as a group to the dance floor and joyfully bounced to House of Pain’s “Jump Around” in the school cafeteria. They would have to finish the festivities by 9 p.m., so that the local Farm Extension Office could use the same space, but for now there was joy and celebration.

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