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## QUEER THEORIES AND PEDAGOGIES IN SPANISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION: CURRENT STATUS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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**Abstract:**

In the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), engagement with queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) has resulted in a proliferation of scholastic and pedagogical endeavors which seek, as part of their project, to destabilize the (re) production of cisheteronormativity. In world language (WL) education, however, there has been limited, yet increasing engagement with the insights of queer theories and pedagogies. As queer theories, pedagogies, and thinking have much to offer Spanish language education (Coda, 2018), we might be inclined to ask: how can we foster a Spanish language education that troubles commonly accepted knowledges and practices, especially in contexts in which LGBTQIA+ identities may be at stake? As such, we draw attention to the ways in which queer thinking has been engaged in Spanish language education with implications for how to extend these insights going forward.

**Keywords:** Gender normativity ♦ LGBTQIA+ ♦ K-12 ♦ Queer theory ♦ Spanish language

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## Introduction

In the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), engagement with queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) has resulted in a proliferation of scholastic and pedagogical endeavors to trouble cisheteronormativity, or the privileging of cisgender identities and heterosexuality as the norm. The literature to date has overwhelmingly relied on post-secondary educators' and adult learners' accounts of centralizing gender and sexuality at the core of teaching and learning experiences (Curran, 2006; Nelson, 1999; O'Mochain, 2006; Paiz & Zhu, 2018). The findings of these critical studies highlight the roles of teacher training (Tran-Thanh, 2020), quality resources (Kappra & Vandrick, 2006), and teacher perceptions (Dumas, 2010; Rhodes & Coda, 2017) in educators' decisions to embrace or resist queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) in classrooms. In world language education (WLE), however, and in particular, Spanish language education, there has been limited engagement with the insights of queer theories, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) despite the *World-Readiness Standards* (National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015) that recognize language as socially and culturally embedded. Further, although terminology that represents individuals in non-binary terms continues to evolve, Díaz et al. (2022) argue that

resistance from long-standing, colonial Spanish language authorities...has left many Spanish language educators without a clear sense of direction as to how to reconcile these tensions and make ethical, context-responsive decisions to create more (gender) inclusive classroom environments. (p. 2)

We agree with Nelson (1999, 2009, 2020) that queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking have much to offer WLE to destabilize cisheteronormativity and Spanish in particular as it is one of the most studied languages in the U.S. K-16 academic institutions (Looney & Lusin, 2019). Within this literature review, queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) are operationalized and used concurrently to emphasize the affordances of queer theory's aims of approaching identities as multiple as well as the destabilization of normative assumptions and categories such as gender and sexuality (Sullivan, 2003). According to Nelson (2020), queer thinking "means exploring the significance of sexual identities and sexual diversity to language, to learning, and thus to language learning—and to the teaching and research activities that support this endeavor" ( p. 1). As such, the utility of queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) can invite students to question the status quo, their potential positions of power, and their role in creating a more equitable world. In this literature review, we illuminate the ways in which queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking have been integrated in Spanish and WLE with implications for how to extend these insights

going forward in K-16 Spanish classrooms. In addition, we recognize that our own professional identities as former secondary Spanish educators, our current roles as teacher educators, and our other myriad identities influence how we engage with gender and sexuality when training our pre-service and in-service educators. Coda is a cisgender, white, gay male. Moser and Detwiler are both cisgender, white, heterosexual females. As such, this literature review serves as a point of departure to examine how we can foster a Spanish language education and WLE that troubles commonly accepted knowledges and practices, especially in contexts in which LGBTQIA+ identities are at stake.

### **Why Queer and Spanish language education?**

#### *Considering the role of identities in language education*

In TESOL and WLE classrooms, students are exposed to linguistic and cultural identities that are different from their own, providing opportunities to question normative assumptions. Some world language (WL) educators may rely on the “world of fun, food, and fiestas” (Herman, 2007, p. 231) or emphasize discrete aspects of grammar and vocabulary that are largely decontextualized from students’ lived experiences (Cahnmann-Taylor & Coda, 2019), thereby, only addressing cultural practices and perspectives as superficial, discrete factoids. Other educators integrate authentic documents created for and by members of the target culture(s) (e.g., maps, menus, images, advertisements, signs) with the goal of reaching new understandings from an emic perspective.

Discussions that ask learners to reflect on gender and sexual identities as well as representations of all students’ identities should be commonplace in WL classrooms (Anya & Randolph, 2019). First, a glimpse into an introductory WL classroom almost immediately includes ways to introduce oneself to others. These patterns reflect cultural norms beyond language such as cheek kissing in Spanish and French or bowing in Japanese. As learners explore these culturally accepted practices, they begin to make sense of more abstract topics such as how others interpret politeness and the role of proximity to others when engaging in formal and informal communication. Learners can see and imagine examples and make comparisons with their own practices related to introductions and “reflect on their preconceived notions about the target culture and their language learning skills and practices” (Rothe, 2023, p. 26).

Other topics may pose challenges for those who aim to be more inclusive WL educators especially when teaching languages with gendered pronouns and nouns like Spanish. In contrast to languages such as Mandarin in which “ta” (he/she/it) allows for more expansive gender possibilities (Cahnmann et al., 2022), Spanish, as well as other Romance languages and beyond,

rely on a dualistic structure of masculine and feminine gender for people and objects. Therefore, a simple introduction in a Spanish class can present challenges for individuals who identify as non-binary, non-gender conforming, or transgender. Imagine, for example, a conversation between three individuals who meet for the first time in their Spanish class:

- Person 1:        ¡Hola! Me llamo José Fabio. (Hello, my name is José Fabio).  
                     *[No gender identified]*
- Person 2:        Buenas tardes. Soy Manuel y este/esta es mi amigo/amiga. (Good  
                     afternoon. I am Manuel and this is my friend).  
                     *[No gender identified for Manuel; Gender identified for the friend]*
- Person 1:        Mucho gusto. ¡Guau! Manuel, eres muy alto/alta. (Nice to meet you.  
                     Wow! Manuel, you are very tall!)  
                     *[Gender identified for Manuel]*

A simple role play like this already leads to assumptions about classmates and potentially places them in a vulnerable position. While WL teachers are expected to use language in authentic contexts ensuring that learners have accurate representations of real-world communication, scholars recognize that the language may fail to provide its users with accurate ways to represent themselves (Baros, 2022; Hord, 2016; Mitchell, 2018). English, for instance, also relies on gendered pronouns; however, a shift in discourse to support LGBTQIA+ individuals has led to new terminology ensuring that all individuals are seen, heard, and represented (Baros, 2022). Therefore, while TESOL can serve as a point of departure for changes in WLE, the absence of illustrative examples in Spanish leave “world language teachers ... with little guidance for how to ensure their classrooms are inclusive for all students” (Baros, 2022, p. 2327).

### *Justifying Queer in world and Spanish language education*

The past three years in the U.S. have focused our attention on pervasive systemic inequities that are often reinforced or created in schools. However, WL teachers can support pedagogies that democratize their classrooms by asking learners to deconstruct their worldviews and recognize their agency in fighting injustice (Carson Baggett, 2018, 2020; Wooten & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2014). These approaches grounded in social justice are critical because language is deeply embedded in its social, historical, and political contexts (Randolph & Johnson, 2017). Within the past years, learners have been exposed to attempts to restrict or deny critical race theory in schools (Schwartz, 2021), threaten LGBTQIA+ individuals’ right to marry (Mueller, 2022), and erase women’s rights to healthcare and safe abortions (Center for Reproductive Rights, 2022). This social and political unrest cannot be ignored and should remain at the core of K-16 schooling.

At the same time, educators across the country have been censored from engaging in classroom conversations about history, politics, race, gender, and sexual identity (Gross, 2022; USA Facts, 2023). Such attacks, under the guise of increasing parental rights, place inclusive and queer pedagogies well as marginalized individuals at risk. Regarding gender and sexuality specifically, McGovern (2012) identified seven states that have adopted a “no-promo-homo” or “don’t-say-gay” policy that prohibits teachers from having classroom discussions related to LGBTQIA+ issues. Most recently, as the nation grapples with yet another school shooting in Nashville, Tennessee in which three nine-year-olds were lost, the rhetoric shifted from gun safety toward vilifying transgender individuals as perpetrators of violence (Nirappil, 2023) and forcing even more queer individuals to live in fear (Levietes & Yurcaba, 2023). Many educators purposely stray from integrating LGBTQIA+ issues due to fear of personal and/or professional repercussions (Rhodes & Coda, 2017), even when they are seen as vital for providing safe environments for all learners. Therefore, while the past several decades has led to proficiency-based curricula in K-16 WLE, WL educators are called to do more to recognize and support the diverse identities in their classrooms (Coda, 2018).

With calls to engage with the diverse gender and sexual identities in TESOL and WLE and to trouble the cisheteronormative status quo, the insights of queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking have been emphasized (see Coda, 2018; Knisely & Paiz, 2021; Nelson, 2009, 2020; Paiz, 2019). While queer theory and pedagogies encompass diverse understandings of what queer is or could be, in this manuscript, we take up Sullivan’s (2003) notion of queer as “making strange” (p. vi) as well as Britzman’s (1995) notion of troubling our commonly accepted reading practices and assumptions. Moreover, the influence of poststructuralism on queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking is apparent in the notion of identity as not a stable attribute of Descartes’ (1637/1993) cogito, but instead approached as multiple (Plummer, 2011). In TESOL, Nelson’s (1999) seminal work introduced the notion of queer inquiry from the insights of queer theory to encourage language educators to “problematize the production of all sexualities” (p. 376). Since Nelson’s study and call for queering language education, there has been a proliferation of queer-related scholastic and pedagogical endeavors with the aim of destabilizing cisheteronormativity (e.g., Curran, 2006; Paiz, 2019).

This literature review pertains to the emergence of queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) in WLE and Spanish language education. In conducting this literature review, we employed the following research questions: a) How has research regarding gender and sexual identities and issues in language education been taken up?; b) What insights have queer theory, pedagogy, and queer thinking offered language education research on gender and sexual identities and issues in the classroom?; and c) What are the implications for classroom practice

in language education? For this literature review, we employed Maxwell's (2006) conception of a literature review as an "essential tool" (p. 30) as well as the notion of relevance for a particular study. Therefore, the articles that we have selected are an "essential tool" that will help us as we engage with the topic of gender and sexual identities as well as queer theory, pedagogies, and thinking (Nelson, 2020) in WLE and Spanish language education, with implications for WLE, Spanish WLE, and language education globally.

## **Methods**

To begin searching for gender and sexual identities and queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) in TESOL and WLE contexts, we utilized ERIC (at Ebscohost) where we searched for gender and sexuality and "second language". While in ERIC (at Ebscohost), we did not select the option of full text. Additionally, the search terms only included texts in English. Both of these filter settings could have possibly eliminated articles that might be pertinent to the literature search. Next, we explored the Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstract (LLBA) to search for gender and sexuality and "second language" and "instruction or teach". After, we utilized gender/sexuality AND "second language instruction" to search for other resources. In both the ERIC (at Ebscohost), as well as the LLBA, many of the same studies were yielded in the results. To analyze the articles and develop themes, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis, which specifies the following: 1) familiarizing yourself with the data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes.

## **Destabilizing cisheteronormativity in TESOL and WLE**

The following literature is organized into three interrelated areas in TESOL and WLE scholastic and pedagogical endeavors: gender normativity, LGBTQIA+ identities, and engagement with queering language education. In our first section, we describe the literature in relation to gender in the fields of TESOL and WLE. Following this section, we highlight literature related to LGBTQIA+ language educators and students' identities. In our last section, we conclude with how queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) has proliferated in pedagogical endeavors as well as studies of educators' perceptions and experiences related to issues of gender and sexual diversity. The findings highlight the need to position the TESOL and WL classroom as a space where cultural assumptions can be compared and challenged thereby opening a space to affirm diverse identities and challenge cisheteronormativity as well as other forms of normativity that affect educators and students.

## How issues of gender and sexuality have been taken up in language education

### *The necessity of attending to gender normativity*

As teachers may impose cisheteronormative assumptions on students and may reify gender norms, the centrality of gender in language education teaching and research is paramount. In a review of literature pertaining to gender in second and foreign language education, Pavlenko (2004) suggested three areas where gender is central to language teaching and learning: gendered inequalities in access to material and symbolic resources, the gendered nature of linguistic interaction, and sexual harassment as a discursive and social practice (p. 56). Using insights from feminist poststructuralism, Pavlenko acknowledged how gender inequalities in language teaching and learning can be rectified by addressing the needs of learners, engaging in classroom discussions and activities that center on gender inequalities, and understanding the challenges learners may face in attaining education. The implication for classroom practice is that language educators could explore the social aspects of gender in the languages they teach. However, opportunities to question gender norms are also left unsaid as language educators questioning techniques often rely upon dichotomous gendered positions which are based upon teachers' reading practices of students' identities (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004). Therefore, as Davis and Skilton-Sylvester suggested, it is important for current and future teachers to be cognizant of their questioning techniques to avoid essentializing gender, while also approaching learners and teachers as active in the construction of their identities (Schmenk, 2004).

In other literature related to gender, Schmenk (2004), for instance, encouraged educators to identify their own gender stereotypes beginning with assumptions that gender is a binary concept. Appleby (2014) described the impact of gender in language classrooms, which as Liddicoat (2009) described in relation to sexual identities, are framed by the cisheteronormative trajectories of language educators. As Fogle and King (2015) found in their data from two separate contexts of a Russian adult English language learners' classroom and an all-immigrant high school in the United States, gender was a critical aspect of the participants' self-perceptions and interactions in the target language. Knisely's (2022a) empirical study illuminated "empirical evidence of the value of gender-just pedagogies for linguistic competence development" (p. 662), while Miller and Endo's (2016) scholastic endeavor emphasized how queer literacy and challenging gender normativity in one's practice can provide possibilities for destabilizing students' gendered assumptions. With gender impacting students' lives, the language classroom offers students the possibility of "imaginary worlds" (Pavlenko, 2004, p. 55). In this imaginary world, students can learn about the ways in which gender differs among languages and cultures, opening a space for students and teachers to

discuss and challenge gender norms in both the students' own language and culture and the target language and culture.

*The centrality of LGBTQIA+ identities in TESOL and WLE*

In relation to sexuality in TESOL and WLE, Nelson's (2009) large-scale study of sexual identities in TESOL illuminated teachers' perceptions surrounding LGBTQIA+ students in their classrooms and emphasized the necessity of more research related to issues of sexual diversity as well as LGBTQIA+ teachers and students' experiences. Regarding LGBTQIA+ teachers' and students' experiences in language education, there has been more work to date in TESOL. Concerning LGBTQIA+ students, King (2008) examined the experiences of three adult gay Korean English language learners and maintained that language education is often heteronormative and does not often attend to the diverse sexual identities found in the classroom. Moreover, King called for research in language education to focus on power relations between language learners and their interlocutors as it relates to identity construction and language learning. In Moore's (2016) interview study of six LGBT-identified individuals learning English, Moore drew attention to the ways in which an LGBTQIA+ centered class was more inclusive of the students' identities than the mainstream class but was also constraining related to the content. In a similar study, Kaiser's (2017) interviews with four LGBTQIA+ learners emphasized how their ESOL classroom did not affirm their LGBTQIA+ identity. In another interview study with two queer language learners of Japanese, Moore (2021) described the influence wielded by institutions on queer students' identity construction. In WLE, Baros' (2022) study of three transgender students in Spanish language courses illuminated the erasure of non-binary students' identities in such classes.

In our review of the established literature within TESOL and WLE, we noted how some research has stressed the role of teacher feedback that led to erasing student identities. Liddicoat's (2009) study of the interactional trajectories of world [foreign] language classrooms illuminated how teachers' positioned students as heterosexual in the corrective feedback related to nouns, such as in the case of a participant, Sam, who was corrected by the teacher when using "novio" [boyfriend] instead of "novia" [girlfriend]. Kappra and Vandrick's (2006) study of three adult English language learners who identified as LGBTQIA+ recounted the espoused neutrality of the students' teachers, which as Kappra and Vandrick described, reflects the silence surrounding LGBTQIA+ identities in TESOL. Nelson's (2010) study of a gay immigrant's experiences in a language class drew attention to the teacher's refusal to continue a discussion with another student related to gay issues, which the student perceived to be a silencing act. Moore (2019) examined the interpersonal factors related to queer students'



identity disclosure and their use of “salient indicators, insider evidence, and explicit statements” (p. 439) related to their identities in heteronormative classroom contexts. Evripidou’s (2020) study of gay English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in Cyprus described the effects of heteronormativity from the students’ teachers as they reflected on the silence and refusal by their teachers to incorporate LGBTQIA+ issues. In Cao’s (2021) case study of Xixi, an adult queer migrant to Canada, the intersections of biphobia, standard language ideology, and heteronormativity were entangled in the exclusion that Xixi encountered as a migrant and language learner. In Spiegelman’s (2022) research with a non-binary adolescent, Ari, in a high school French class, Ari reflected on misgendering that transpired in the classroom and how this foreclosed possibilities for agency. Concomitantly, Nguyen & Yang’s (2015) case study of a transgender Korean individual learning English illustrated how the participant, Han, had to “fight to be heard” (p. 237). Other research underscored the lack of representation or models for non-binary individuals. In a study of three transgender Spanish learners, Baros (2022) revealed that they felt misrepresented in their Spanish classes and “unable to express their identity and perspectives” (p. 2343). As such, these findings illustrate the need to modify practice to reflect the sociocultural nature of language and its connection to identity and power (Coda, 2018; Glynn & Wassell, 2018; Osborn, 2006).

While the aforementioned scholastic endeavors have centered on LGBTQIA+ students’ identities, there has been attention to LGBTQIA+ teachers’ identities in TESOL with limited attention in WLE (Coda, 2023). In TESOL, Lander’s (2018) semi-structured interviews with three gay male English language teachers in Colombia as well as Lin et al.’s (2020) study of a queer-identified English as a Foreign Language Educator (EFL) explored the intersections between their professional teacher identities and their queer identity. In relation to LGBTQIA+ educators who have taught internationally, Mizzi et al (2021) and Mizzi (2022) used interviews to understand their experiences as well as their understandings related to cultivating inclusivity in their contexts. Focusing on their queer identity, Trinh (2020) used queer walking meditation to explore intersectionality in relation to being in a white, gay world.

In WLE, and more specifically, in Spanish WLE, there are few studies related to LGBTQIA+ educators and/or teacher trainers. While Cahnmann-Taylor and Coda’s (2019) work related to Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) centered on participant observation of adult language classrooms regarding how that method can queer language teaching and learning, the interviews with queer-identified language educators in the study illuminated the constraints placed on them in their schools by heteronormativity. In research in the Southeastern U.S, Coda’s (2021) interviews with K-12 language educators utilized a queer and intersectional analysis to examine the intersections between place and sexuality that can

potentially constrain teachers' identity performances. Diaz et al. (2022) reviewed extant literature on the misalignment of the traditional Spanish language classroom with the societal desire to advance towards more inclusive non-binary language, and the effects that such tensions could have on the current student body, particularly those who identify as gender non-conforming. Finally, Coda's (2023) interviews with K-12 LGBTQIA+ language educators in the Southeastern U.S. underscored how the Spanish language classroom can be a space for destabilizing cisheteronormativity through the target languages, cultures, and cultural products as well as teachers' own resistance cisheteronormativity in their pedagogies.

*Engagement with Queer in TESOL and WLE and its utility for troubling cisheteronormativity*

In our review of research related to queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) in the language classroom, we found literature pertaining to instructors' accounts of how they queered their practice, language methods for queering language education, teachers' perceptions of issues and gender and sexual diversity, and the utility of queering the language classroom. In TESOL, there are numerous accounts of teachers' reflecting on the ways in which they troubled or upheld cisheteronormativity. Curran's (2006) reflection on a moment in an adult ESL classroom in which heteronormativity was upheld rather than troubled, Curran described how reframing questions related to gays and lesbians using Nelson's (1999) work could have been productive. In an EFL classroom, O'Mochain (2006) also detailed the utility of life history narratives to destabilize heteronormativity and provide expansive language related to gender and sexuality. In a similar vein, Paiz and Zhu's (2018) account of queering the classroom described how a queer-themed book and articles were employed to trouble heteronormativity. More recently, Lawrence and Nagashima's (2021) account of their integration of LGBTQIA+ issues in a Japanese university classroom highlighted the necessity of cultivating inclusive classrooms "with more sexually diverse spaces." (p. 159).

In WLE, there is a paucity of accounts across contexts and languages related to queering one's practice or methods for queering. De Vicenti et al. (2007) described their attempts at queering French, Italian, and Japanese higher education courses, but they also underscored the challenges related to the languages, context, and materials inherent in such attempts. In other research endeavors related to the necessity of queering WLE, Coda (2018) provided teachers' accounts of how they troubled heteronormativity through the insights of Foucault (1978/1990) concerning discourse and power/knowledge in the classroom. Regarding WLE and TESOL methods for queering the classroom, Cahnmann-Taylor and Coda (2019), Coda et al. (2021), and Cahnmann-Taylor et al. (2022) described how TPRS can be a method for upending how languages are taught as methods often focus on discrete aspects of vocabulary and grammar

that are often decontextualized from students' lived experiences. Moreover, this research underscored how co-constructed stories between the students and instructor in TPRS classrooms can provide a space for troubling cisheteronormativity, thereby queering the world language classroom; however, attempts at destabilizing cisheteronormativity are largely dependent on the instructor. In sum, educators who make conscious decisions to engage in inclusive practices such as queer pedagogies can guide students to “upend and challenge normative notions surrounding gender and sexuality in the target language and culture as well as in the students' language and culture” (Coda et al., 2021, p. 92).

While the literature in this section thus far has described instructors' accounts of queering the classroom as well as methods for queering the classroom, the literature in TESOL and WLE also pertained to instructors' perceptions of issues of gender and sexual diversity. Dumas' (2010) interviews with teachers concerning LGBTQIA+ issues found a dearth of attention in instructors' practice. In a similar vein, Rhodes and Coda (2017), Tarrayo and Salonga (2022), Tran-Thanh (2020), and Wadell et al. (2011) illuminated the uncertainty that instructors may have in relation to addressing LGBTQIA+ issues as well as the dearth of models or professional training for doing so. In contrast, Longoria's (2021) study of a high school teacher's intentional inclusion of LGBTQIA+ issues drew attention to how inclusion should be supplemented with criticality. Finally, Güney's (2021) research related to teachers and students in Saudi and Kuwaiti communities described the strategies that were employed to address issues of sexual diversity that centered on inclusionary practices and disruptions to homophobia.

Since Nelson's (1999, 2006, 2009, 2020) calls for queer inquiry and thinking in language education, other scholars in the fields of TESOL and WLE have also advocated for such inquiry to be present within scholastic and pedagogical pursuits. In Spanish as a Heritage Language, Cashman and Trujillo (2018) called upon the field to engage with queering as destabilizing heteronormativity “constitutes good pedagogical practice.” (p. 124) Similarly, Rhodes (2019) and Paiz (2019, 2020) both advocated for integrating the insights of queer theory and pedagogies into educators' practices to be inclusive of LGBTQIA+ identities and to trouble cisheteronormativity. Gray's (2021) work emphasized the usefulness of literature for addressing issues of gender and sexual diversity. More recently, Diaz et al. (2022) illuminated how paramount non-binary language is in the Spanish as a world language classroom, which Knisely (2022b) also underscored in the French classroom. With the intersections of gender and sexuality being discussed within the literature, the notion of intersectionality in language education has highlighted the necessity of attending to the mutually inflecting axes of oppression (Cashman, 2015; Paiz & Coda, 2021). However, Kubota (2023) described that while

there has been increased attention to race, class, gender, sexuality, and other categories as well as queer pedagogies and intersectionality, we still have work to do.

### **Implications: New directions to improve WLE**

As our review of the literature thus far has pertained to our first two research questions regarding gender and sexuality in language education and the insights of queer theory, pedagogies, and thinking (Nelson, 2020), we now turn towards the potential implications for classroom practice in WLE. To begin, stakeholders invested in WLE have the responsibility to ensure that all students are represented in the curricula used to support language proficiency. Though much of this work might begin with teachers, creating inclusive schools and communities does not rest solely on their shoulders. The following serves as a point of departure to advance discussions and actions that might support a more equitable learning experience for all students. Although our initial focus is on the Spanish classroom, given the greatest likelihood of offering Spanish as WL at both the K-12 and post-secondary level when compared to other languages (Looney & Lusin, 2019), our suggestions are applicable to any WL.

#### *World language teachers*

Identifying ways in which schools can improve begins with educators who engage in active reflection about their roles, learners, teaching, and learning (Greene & Jones, 2020). Teacher agency has been directly linked to reflection on beliefs about schooling (Bonner et al., 2020; Gu & Day, 2013). WL teachers specifically have been described as agents of change in their schools and communities (Fogle & Moser, 2017; Moser & Wei, 2023). Teacher change agents are critical in building and maintaining safe environments for all learners especially when the gender and sexual identities of many are under attack. A report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) (2021) found that nearly one in five K-12 learners experienced bullying due to their sexual identities, an increase from previous years, and approximately one-quarter reported discrimination due to their gender. LGBTQIA+ individuals are at a higher risk for depression, anxiety, and suicide (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, n.d.). When teachers work to validate LGBTQIA+ students and their identities, they are responding in line with the U.S. Department of Education's Equity Action Plan (2022).

Agentic educators are also empowered as they “can continually reflect on the past, work to change their present context, and have the capacity to affect the future” (Balgopal, 2020, p. 4). Engaging with queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020), however, will require WL educators to learn about and feel confident tackling topics such as gender and sexuality in their classrooms. Studies on agentic teachers affirm that teachers make conscious

decisions related to their instructional practices and resist when their beliefs are not in line with pedagogical reform (Bonner et al., 2020). As a result, WL educators should consider how their own identities merge with their beliefs and practices (Bonner et al., 2020; Gu & Day, 2013).

Though we argue that there is always room for WL educators to integrate queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) in instruction, we also acknowledge the fear that might lead teachers to ignore such topics in the classroom. As a result, it is critical that WL educators identify potentially less overt ways to reach all learners including:

- Learning how to be an ally to LGBTQIA+ students. This step might include initiating or supporting a club for students or creating events to empower learners. It can also include simple steps such as selecting print materials for the room that celebrate diverse identities or changes in language. Additionally, cultivate a classroom context for LGBTQIA+ and other students by illustrating how the classroom is supportive of all identities but also is a space for questioning and exploring identity.
- Reflecting carefully on the curriculum. WL educators should pay attention to the examples they use in class that might unintentionally reify cisheteronormativity. They can also reflect on the images and authentic materials selected to ensure that they are not reinforcing gender and other assumptions.
- Dissecting classroom discourse including the feedback given to students during classroom activities and beyond.
- Engaging in training to learn about how identities are socially constructed (including gender and sexuality) and how to integrate inclusive pedagogies as well as queer pedagogies that upend students' normative assumptions, especially in contexts that may not be amenable to LGBTQIA+ issues.

### *School administrators*

The K-12 teaching population is overwhelmingly White and middle class, failing to reflect the growing diversity in today's schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Most literature related to the teaching workforce and Spanish as well as WLE aims at investigating how heritage learners of Spanish are stigmatized for language deficiency rather than rewarded as emergent bilinguals (Back, 2020; Morita-Mullaney et al., 2019). Regarding gender and sexuality, many schools do not openly welcome the thousands of LGBTQIA+ educators working in these spaces (Lee, 2020). However, LGBTQIA+ teachers can make school a safer place, particularly given the *2017 National School Climate Report* by the Gay, Lesbian and

Straight Education Network (GLSEN) that revealed that the majority of LGBTQIA+ students cited discriminatory policies when compared to cisgender or heterosexual classmates (Kosciw et al., 2018). Additionally, nearly half of gender non-conforming or transgender students reported policies that restricted their visibility. As such, LGBTQIA+ WL educators can serve as advocates for students who lack a voice in their educational experiences.

It is no surprise that LGBTQIA+ educators often report hiding their personal identities due to harmful discourse connecting them to hypersexuality and pedophilia (Lee, 2020). The school climate which already contributes to high emotional labor and burnout for WL educators (Acheson et al., 2016; Warner & Diao, 2022) can become even more toxic for LGBTQIA+ WL educators. Because the discipline is facing a critical crisis related to WL teacher supply (Swanson, 2010, 2012; Swanson & Mason, 2018), administrators must ensure that quality WL educators are retained. The role of supportive administration cannot be overlooked especially due to studies linking them to teachers' decisions to remain in the classroom (Moser & Wei, 2021). WL teacher retention is critical; the discipline has the highest attrition rate (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019), and most educators report poor working conditions as the primary factor leading them to exit the profession (Darling-Hammond, 2022). As a result, administrators can do the following to specifically support LGBTQIA+ WL educators and ensure inclusive school practices:

- Seek and hire teachers from diverse backgrounds.
- Support teacher initiatives related to diversity in schools and classrooms.
- Support gender-neutral restrooms (SHRM, 2023).
- Create gender-neutral policies related to teacher professional attire and/or behavior (SHRM, 2023).
- Identify and celebrate school allies (SHRM, 2023).
- Support inclusive sex education (Human Rights Campaign, 2021).

### *Teacher preparation*

Teacher preparation, including WLE, is a vital but slowly changing institution frequently criticized for its failure to reflect the realities of K-12 schooling across the country (Bernhardt & Hammadou, 1987; Hlas, 2018; Schulz, 2000). Decades of literature underscore the imbalance between the theoretical and practical experiences needed to adequately prepare future educators

(e.g., García et al., 2019). Most recently, the global health pandemic uncovered educators' lack of preparation for teaching learners via distance (Jin et al., 2021; Moser et al., 2021) renewing decades-old calls to modify teacher preparation by including virtual experiences (Archambault, 2011; Barbour et al., 2013). WL educators and their preparation programs were not exempt from such critique (Moser et al., 2021). Though emergency remote teaching is certainly distinct from planned online instruction due to the former's abrupt nature reducing teacher agency (Hodges et al., 2020; Russell, 2020), the failure to modify WL teacher preparation over the past decade provides a clear example of disciplinary inertia. After all, WL was identified as the discipline with the highest pre-pandemic online enrollment (Digital Learning Collaborative, 2019). Yet, WLE continued to assume that in-person instruction that utilized technology was sufficient (Chambless et al., 2022). As a result, during the pandemic educators reported a lack of training, low self-efficacy, and lower learner outcomes when working with online students (Moser et al., 2021; Moser & Wei, 2021).

The pandemic forced stakeholders across the country to recognize the pervasive inequities in schools, leading educational scholars across the country to challenge traditional teacher preparation. Much of the criticism at the onset of the pandemic was related specifically to how some learners had access to resources and technology while others were further disenfranchised. Though we recognize that stakeholders must pay attention to how poverty adversely affects learning, we also draw attention to how understanding diversity surpasses socioeconomic status. Ladson-Billings (2021), for instance, urged educators to reconceptualize education with a focus on diverse learners and their unique needs. For the purposes of our paper, diversity, then, includes gender and sexual identities that are relegated to the periphery. Moreover, Ladson-Billings' (2021) suggestion reminds us to question how schools can be used to support or thwart justice, and how WL teacher educators are vital for preparing WL teachers to engage with critical instructional approaches. We argue that at the very least WL educators need training in anti-bias education beginning with the social justice standards (Learning for Justice, n.d.). Moreover, WL educators must also learn about their own students, their unique identities, and the funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) they bring to learning contexts. The following action steps might be used to advance social justice in WL classrooms:

- Provide WL training related to gender and sexuality. Post-secondary institutions frequently include opportunities for faculty and students to learn about key terminology and hear from members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Some scholars have reported on the benefits of service-learning in training related to LGBTQIA+ learners (Coulter et al., 2021).

- Rely on virtual collaborations to allow WL teachers to interact with target language speakers to explore how LGBTQIA+ issues are addressed in various contexts.
- Create assignments that ask learners to reflect on and use language that reflects diverse genders and sexualities. WL teachers might explore ways to use diverse pronouns and non-binary adjectives. We argue that assignments should not mandate perfection but rather celebrate conscious attempts to diversify language.
- Engage educators in discussions about school policies and ways to overcome local constraints that threaten democratic classrooms. For example, WL teachers might create and share materials that integrate sexual and gender identities but ground these in their language learning standards.
- WL teacher educators should conduct systematic research that explores the lived experiences of K-16 LGBTQIA+ WL educators and students and instructional approaches that empower them.
- WL teacher educators must advocate for changes in the standards used to prepare future WL teachers (ACTFL/CAEP, 2013) by moving toward emphasizing the role of language, identities, and power. There are many ways that these standards can evolve to address diverse learners' needs and the ways that teachers can select resources that represent all students.

## **Conclusion**

As Nelson (1999, 2006, 2009, 2020) reminds us, queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking can provide a way of questioning all commonly accepted practices and assumptions, especially related to the preponderance of cisheteronormativity in WLE. Concomitantly, the ascendance of decolonial efforts to trouble Western, modernist notions imbued in “racial, sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, and linguistic forms of dominance” (Gurney & Demuro, 2022, p. 505) have also called such aspects into question in language education. As such, queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) and the insights from scholastic endeavors related to decolonial efforts which have resulted in calls for the “emancipatory potential of translanguaging” (Gurney & Demuro, 2022, p. 502) can be productive as they call dualisms into question that are pervasive within WLE.

As this literature review has examined, issues related to gender and sexual identities as well as challenges to cisheteronormativity in TESOL and WLE are salient as learners are always in the process of identity construction and negotiation in the classroom (Nelson, 2009). While TESOL



has engaged more with issues of gender and sexual diversity and WLE has only recently attended to such issues, we are reminded of the paucity of attention in Spanish WLE (Coda, 2023). As language researchers and educators, we are tasked with ensuring that our WL classrooms, materials, practices, and research endeavors are inclusive of all identities so that we do not perpetuate what Nelson (2006) described as a monosexual classroom. Moreover, WL classrooms should be spaces where students feel comfortable exploring their identities as well as their “becoming” (Cahnmann-Taylor & Coda, 2019) in the target languages and cultures. Thus, WLE should strive to encourage equitable spaces for all students where normative assumptions are challenged. Moreover, it is imperative that WLE engages more with queer theory, pedagogies, and queer thinking (Nelson, 2020) as well as issues of gender and sexual diversity to foster language learning and teaching that destabilizes cisheteronormative and other assumptions related to race, class, ethnicity, language, and beyond. Although WL educators are tasked with producing linguistically proficient students (Coda, 2018), it is necessary to attend also to the multiple identities of the students in the classroom and trouble students’ assumptions so that historical inequities are not perpetuated. If WLE continues to eschew attention to gender and sexual diversity as well as engaging with a critical language education (see Kubota & Miller, 2017), we might be inclined to ask: will WLE continue to replicate dominant discourses that serve to alienate and marginalize groups such as LGBTQIA+ and other students? As researchers and educators in TESOL and WLE, we are reminded of Kubota’s (2023) assertion that we need to “continue to explore how the status quo can be transformed.” (p. 13) Therefore, to be fully inclusive of all identities and destabilize the cisheteronormative status quo, we call on WL educators and researchers to continue to trouble cisheteronormativity and all forms of normativity that cause exclusion of learners and educators within our fields and beyond to cultivate criticality and praxis (Kubota & Miller, 2017).

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