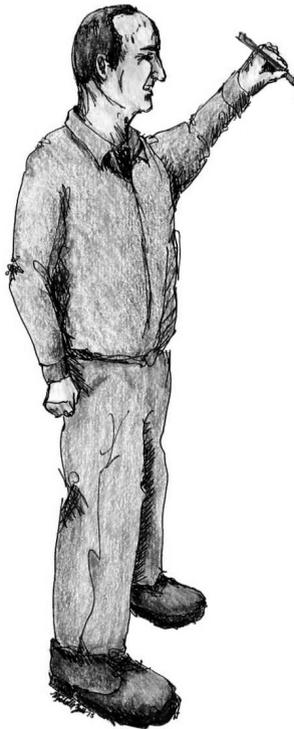


# English Education

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# Sex and Sexuality in the English Language Arts Classroom

John Wesley White and Carolyne Ali-Khan

Sex (sexual acts) and sexuality (sexual orientation and gender identity) have become common topics in the news and public discourse. Although sex and sexuality influence adolescents' experiences with school and schooling conversely shapes youth sexualities, research shows that schools do little to help adolescents make sense of their developing sexual identities. We believe that ELA classrooms are a natural fit for addressing this shortfall. Using the journey of one ELA teacher, we illustrate the ways that issues of sex and sexuality influenced and shaped students' and their teacher's classroom experiences. We seek to encourage ELA teachers to rethink the implications of sidestepping issues of sex and sexuality in their classrooms.

*Consider first what adolescents need. Arguably, they are under great pressure to be sexually active and explorative. More sex, earlier sex, peer pressure and distorted media images make it difficult for adolescents to make sense of, and cope with, their emerging sexuality. . . . Arguably sex education in schools is a pragmatic response to a social need, which is not met in any other social area or institution, and probably it is best met in schools.*

—Giami et al. (2006, p. 486)

*To date, literacy educators receive little instruction and, indeed, little research exists on facilitating critical discussions about sexuality in classrooms.*

—Ashcraft (2012, p. 597)

**S**ex and sexuality are everywhere, including in students' lives both in and outside of school. Middle school and high school students constantly explore, negotiate, and express their sexuality in myriad ways, both overtly and tacitly.<sup>1</sup> Issues closely tied to sex and sexuality sit just beneath the surface of many, if not most, student interactions with one another and with their teachers (Johnson, 2004). Because sex and sexuality are omnipresent

in our lives, they have long been major themes throughout both canonical and more contemporary literature; many canonical texts deal in some fashion with dynamics of sexual power, sexual lust, and gender relations. There is a chasm, however, between reality and the language arts curriculum, between something ever-present (sex and sexuality) and what teachers and their students are officially allowed to explore in class. Overt and tacit censorious messages from school administrators, education policymakers, parent groups, and textbook publishers have created prohibitions on when (much less *if*) and how to discuss issues related to sex and sexuality with middle school or high school students. This chasm creates a disconnect between students and their schooling, particularly in language arts classes where so much of the literature students read (and potentially the content they include in their writing) explores issues of sex, sexuality, and gender relations. Similarly, the teachers who attempt to deal with the difficult and often taboo topics associated with sex and sexuality can find themselves stumbling pedagogically or, worse, uncritically reinforcing repressive and silencing ideologies.

In what follows, we discuss the prevalence of sex and sexuality in students' lives, in schools, and in literature, to then chronicle one English language arts (ELA) teacher's pedagogical journey as he tried to navigate a complex, uncomfortable, and sometimes funny path through the largely uncharted waters of addressing these issues in an alternative high school for at-risk youth.<sup>2</sup> Informed by the lenses of new literacy studies, critical pedagogy, and critical sex education, we highlight the need for and complexity of dealing with the sensitive issues of sex and sexuality in the ELA classroom. As we invite readers through this journey, we demonstrate how navigating this terrain opened avenues for genuine discussions with students about important aspects of their lives, and conversely how the widespread tendency to ignore or repress taboo issues can place intrepid teachers in awkward and untenable positions that hinder student learning.

## Conceptual Framework

### Critical Lenses for ELA

Approaching the teaching of English language arts through the lenses of critical pedagogy, new literacy studies, and critical literacy, we examine how normalized and taken-for-granted ideas—in this instance, ideas about teaching and discussing sex and sexuality—reflect and reproduce broader structures of power. We align with critical pedagogues such as Paulo Freire (1970), Joe Kincheloe (2008), and Henry Giroux (2011) as we seek to uncover

the ways that hegemonic or broadly accepted ideas can enforce silences and reinforce both epistemic and social hierarchies. We additionally draw from new literacy studies and critical literacy—both theories are highly tied to contemporary notions of literacy teaching writ large. From the new literacy studies, we hold that language and literacy are always social endeavors; we learn through interaction (Gee, 2000; The New London Group, 1996). Thus, the meaning of texts or of any communicative event are always negotiated between participants in that event (e.g., the author and the reader, students and teachers, students and students, etc.). In this view, the meaning of a text is not static and “autonomous” (Street, 1984) but fluid and malleable to reader contexts; readers make meaning with texts and with each other rather than taking meaning *from* texts. Thus the contexts that most affect readers (in this case issues related to sex and sexuality) necessarily affect the meaning they might make in their interactions with texts. As such, texts become lenses for new interpretations and new opportunities rather than serving as tools for social reproduction (The New London Group, 1996).

We are also guided by critical literacy theorists, who seek to uncover the dynamics of power at play in the making of meaning; the positionality of an author, a reader, a speaker, etc. influences the meaning one can take from a communicative event (Freebody, 2005). Advocates for critical literacy thus seek to “involve students in asking questions about language and power and help them to read and rewrite the texts, narratives, and discourses that shape their lives” (Ashcraft, 2012, p. 600). In sum, we are keenly interested in how knowledge is shared, legitimated, or policed in schools as well as the ways that power is negotiated in classroom settings. This line of inquiry causes us to question whose knowledge counts in English classrooms (and, conversely, what knowledge is left out of the official curriculum) as well as how ELA teachers might navigate journeys through a specific kind of knowledge that schools, districts, or parents may deem illicit or taboo.

## Sex and Schooling

### *Structural Silence and Media Noise*

Sex and sexuality have become increasingly common topics in American media, news, and public discourse. Not surprisingly, sex and sexuality are ever-present in the lives of today’s middle school and high school students. It is infused in the television they watch, in the music they hear, on the billboards they see, and in their interactions with others. Issues related to sex and sexuality influence adolescents’ experiences within schools and schooling and conversely shape youth sexualities in profound and sometimes

unintended ways (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2004; L'Engle, Brown, & Kenneavy, 2004). Despite this, schools do little to help adolescents make sense of their developing sexual identities (Ashcraft, 2008; Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Today's students are inundated with messages about sex and sexuality in ways unimaginable to prior generations, yet they are far less likely than their predecessors to receive comprehensive and unbiased guidance on sex and sexuality-related issues in their schools (Haberland & Rogow, 2015; Stranger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Federal funding and state policies since 1981 have strongly favored—and in some cases mandated—abstinence-only approaches to sexual education (Rabbitte & Enriquez, 2019). Begun in tandem with Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign to end drug abuse, abstinence-only programs tout individual choice ("chastity and self-discipline") and use unsubstantiated claims, such as "sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects," to scare students away from having sex (Planned Parenthood, 2019). In addition to the fact that abstinence-only programs ignore the realities of today's youth (i.e., that the central message is simply not to have sex), this approach is also problematic in that it is deeply heteronormative and focuses almost solely on reproduction and pregnancy, thus ignoring many of the other experiences with and issues around sex/sexuality that infuse students' lives (Kohler, Manhart, & Lafferty, 2008). Finally, by medicalizing sexuality (i.e., constricting it to the physical or medical while ignoring the psychological and social), schools using abstinence-only programs implicitly refuse to provide guidance to students who are trying to navigate the complexities of sexual behavior beyond pregnancy prevention. Sadly, despite decades of evidence that abstinence programs do not prevent youth from engaging in sex (or drugs), they remain the mainstay of sex education programming across the United States (Ashcraft, 2008; Planned Parenthood, 2019). Rather than being educative, abstinence programs are in reality a form of structural silencing.

The silencing of honest discourse about sex and sexuality is further reinforced by district, state, and federally mandated high-stakes accountability measures that have served to reduce the number of nonessential academic courses and electives open to students. An increasingly myopic focus on test scores in key content areas has allowed public schools to avoid the topics of sex and sexuality by eliminating health classes wherein these issues are most likely to be addressed (Giami et al., 2006). The increasing nationwide practice of basing school accountability—including teacher evaluation and salary—largely on students' test scores has also narrowed the curriculum in the core academic areas. ELA, social studies, math, and science teachers face increasing pressure to show fidelity to the curriculum

they are given so as to ensure alignment between content covered and content tested (White, 2012). Thus, there tends to be little space in most districts' centrally controlled core curriculum for supplemental material, especially when that material may prove controversial. In addition, pressures from conservative state legislatures, state departments of education, and parent groups who object to content they deem inappropriate for schools result in many school districts overtly discouraging if not prohibiting teachers from addressing issues such as sex and sexuality in classrooms (American Library Association, 2018; Koutselini, 2012).

### *Literature, Sex, and Sexuality*

The pressure to avoid discussing sex and sexuality holds true even in English classes, one of the few places in schools where students would otherwise be likely to encounter such issues in literature (Agee, 1999; Moje & MuQaribu, 2005). Issues related to sex and sexuality—if not thinly veiled references to sex itself—are interwoven throughout canonical literature. The earliest of English literature references sex; *Canterbury Tales* includes “motifs and themes of courtship, marriage, premarital and extramarital affairs, sexuality, ideal love (‘courtly love’) and tensions between genders” (Rall, n.d., para. 2). Shakespeare, a mainstay in most high school English curricula, is replete with sexual themes, sexual innuendo, and double-entendres. Edmund Spenser explores seduction in *The Faerie Queen*; James Joyce alludes to homoeroticism in *Ulysses*. As time has passed, literary references to sex, sexuality, and even to sexual violence have become more prevalent in canonical literature. Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* centers on a claim of rape, miscegenation, and hints at the possibility of incest. Holden Caulfield sees the loss of his virginity as the key to manhood in J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. And references to sex and sexuality are prevalent in the stories that students are most prone to read—young adult literature. Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* is about the rape of the protagonist; John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* includes the teen protagonists losing their virginity to each other; Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* includes instances of rape, abortion, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.

Our point is that sex and sexuality are central to both canonical literature and to more contemporary literature, yet texts like these and the sex/sexuality discussions they might engender too often remain taboo within many ELA classrooms. The mere fact that sexual content is the most commonly cited reason why parents, special interest groups, and school or district administrators challenge and/or ban books from schools highlights the thorniness of choosing possibly contentious texts for classroom uses

(see American Library Association’s “About Banned and Challenged Books” [2012]). Fearful of a repressive curricular climate and unsure of how to negotiate taboo topics when they arise in the classroom, many teachers understandably choose avoidance—of instances of sex and sexuality in texts and of entire texts themselves—as the path of least resistance: “Many teachers do not feel comfortable dealing with controversy and almost instinctively want to avoid the conflict and the risk involved” (Philpott, Clabough, McConkey, & Turner, 2011, pp. 32–33). Thus, on both the macro and micro levels, education about sex and sexuality has been largely relegated to the null (i.e., silent and unofficial) curriculum (Eisner, 1994). Such silence—especially within schools—produces a void that, in turn, is readily filled by sources for which there is little editing or accountability.

Because schools tend to shun open and honest explorations of issues related to sex and sexuality, today’s students address their curiosity about these issues by turning to pop culture and the Internet (L’Engle et al., 2004; Simon & Daneback, 2013). A plethora of information and misinformation is broadly accessible to anyone with an Internet connection and the merest of technological savvy. In contrast to the medicalized definitions of sexuality in school health classes or the sexuality-related content in literature, sex/sexuality in these online public spaces is unmediated; in a free-for-all online world, pornographic content abounds, and discussions of consent, abuse, desire, homophobia, and transphobia infuse news outlets, social media, and the blogosphere.

**Fearful of a repressive curricular climate and unsure of how to negotiate taboo topics when they arise in the classroom, many teachers understandably choose avoidance—of instances of sex and sexuality in texts and of entire texts themselves—as the path of least resistance.**

### *Sex Matters*

Despite official messages not to have sex and the perpetuation of fear and guilt surrounding premarital sex, today’s students are sexually active. Data from the Centers for Disease Control (2017) show that by the time American students are in the 12th grade, 59 percent of them have engaged in sexual intercourse (numbers do not account for students who are sexually active in ways other than sexual intercourse). This constitutes a sizable percentage of students who currently have little or no formal school-based guidance on how to navigate this often confusing terrain. This lack of school-based sex education means that many—if not most—of these students do not get comprehensive sexual health education from *any* reputable source. Research on sexual health education shows that while vocal parent advocacy groups often

claim that sexual education should be the purview of parents rather than schools, the default for many parents is simply to reinforce the abstinence-only message so prevalent in schools or to forego actually addressing the issues at all (Shtarkshall, Santelli, & Hirsch, 2007).

A wealth of data also reveals that far too many teens have been or will become victims of sexual assault. Current statistics show that 25 percent of girls and 16 percent of boys in the United States will be sexually abused before they turn 18 years old—a trend that only worsens when these students reach college age (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, n.d.). Having collected data from more than 4.4 million high school students since its inception in 1991, the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017) confirms the significance of sex and sexual violence in the lives of youth. Students participating in the survey self-reported that 7.4 percent of them had been forced to have sex, 8 percent experienced physical dating violence, and 6.9 percent experienced sexual dating violence. It is important to note that the vast majority of sexual assaults (youth and adult) go unreported (Taylor & Gassner, 2010; Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). Silence around sexual assault in our schools—and in the avoidance of literature in which it is sometimes addressed—only serves to reinforce such silence.

Finally, far too many students continue to be hurt by their peers' intolerance and ignorance as well as by teachers who are inadvertently complicit in perpetuating ignorance, intolerance, and normative ways of thinking (GLSEN, 2017). Despite judicial determination of marriage equality and the popularity of LGBTQ culture (as evidenced in the ratings of such shows as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, RuPaul's *Drag Race*, and the remake of *Will and Grace*), the bullying of students perceived to be a part of the LGBTQ community still remains a significant problem in schools. Although an increasing number of Americans are coming out and doing so at earlier ages (Pew Research Center, 2015) and correspondingly an increasing number of secondary students come from households with same-sex parents, students are often not represented and many are shamed by classroom discussions and school content that normalize traditional family structures (Higa et al., 2014). Recent data clearly show that the school climate for LGBTQ students remains hostile with harassment and verbal and physical abuse, and teachers often do little to stop this even when such actions are visible to them (GLSEN, 2017). In sum, the sexual orientation and gender identity of students and their families affects what happens to them in schools.

## Methodology

In this article we use creative analytical process (CAP) ethnographies to represent our data (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008). Methodologically we “move outside traditional qualitative writing” to “invite people in and open spaces for thinking about the social” (p. 427). We do not aim to produce a text that fits with value-free epistemology portraying an objective social reality but rather one that aims at interpreting and unpacking the circulation of power in a social—in our case educational—space. Under the CAP umbrella, we begin with autoethnography (e.g., Ali-Khan, 2016; Warren, 2011) as we dig into a teacher’s teaching journals and personal reflections. From this we—two former U.S. high school teachers who now work together as teacher educators—integrate our shared understandings via vignettes constructed from the experiences of the first author (John) when he was an English language arts (ELA) teacher at a public high school for “at risk” adolescents. The second author (Carolynne) was a teacher for a similar population and involved in 20 years of HIV education; she contributed to the theoretical framing and analysis as well as the write-up.

Our analysis began with a review of the journal notes and recollections John collected over a two-year period. John, having completed his PhD in education prior to taking a job at the school, kept detailed teaching journals in hopes of later chronicling his experiences in a book. On an almost daily basis John typed out field notes about what had transpired in his ELA classroom and his reflections on those events. Not having audio-recorded classroom sessions, he did his best to capture the essence of what students had said (when possible in the vocabulary and tone they had used). He also kept a “block book” that contained outlines of his lesson plans for each term, artifacts from lessons (handouts), and artifacts that students had allowed him to keep.

After our initial separate and combined analysis of John’s notes, looking specifically for issues that most closely associated with examinations of sex and sexuality writ large, we then identified patterns and codes using the “assertion” and “concept-indicator” analysis models (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We discovered that the interactions in these pedagogical journals largely fell into four categories: (1) outside moments, the times in which students initiated discussions related to sex and sexuality in nonclassroom contexts, primarily in the form of seeking individualized advice; (2) extemporaneous moments, the interactions between groups of students (with or without the teacher’s input) referencing events in the school or local community that related to sex and sexuality; (3) structured moments, when issues of sexuality emerged as the result of a planned dis-

cussion, lesson, or curricular unit where the learning goal was to examine issues of sex and sexuality; and (4) semistructured moments, when issues related to sex and sexuality emerged from assignments designed to elicit students' personal reflections but that had not been designed to target sex/sexuality. For the purposes of this article, we have chosen to focus on the last two categories, structured (planned) and semistructured (spontaneous) moments, as these most closely relate to John's pedagogy and preparation (or lack thereof) for tackling the ways in which difficult, intense, or taboo topics related to sexuality arose in class. For each category we offer examples that illustrate the content and context as we explore how John attempted—with good intentions but sometimes without success—to address sex and sexuality as they arose in his classroom.

Our joint analysis of John's journey has allowed us to create a sustained reflexive space to dive in between observer and observed. The act of co-writing this article has also afforded us space to use the "power of narrative to reveal and revise the world" (Holman Jones, 2008, p. 211). We take methodological cues from England and Brown (2001), who position co-constructed teacher narratives as a space where educational researchers can delve deep. Our aim is to present reflections on a set of experiences as a heuristic through which readers can compare their own experiences and from these delve into broader pedagogical questions.

The grades 10–12 high school where John worked was located in a large mountain western city in the United States. Ninety-five percent of the school's students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and the student body was 47 percent black, 39 percent Hispanic, 5 percent Asian, and 8 percent white. Classes were offered in English, social studies, mathematics, and science. A single "enrichment" class offered art, music, and study skills. The school did not offer classes in health education, physical education, art, foreign language, drama, etc. All classes, including the English classes, served students ranging in age from 16 to 20 years old, the age at which state and local K–12 funding stopped. While the content of courses followed the state's content standards, teachers had significant curricular and pedagogical autonomy in the planning of their units and lessons. There were no curricular guides or pacing guides.

John had become immersed in critical pedagogy and New Literacy Studies during his doctoral studies and hoped to use his time in a diverse urban school to engage in praxis. Central to his teaching philosophy was a focus on education as a form of social justice; he aspired to engage his students in better understanding some of the ways in which oppression worked against them, both within and outside of the school, and to be better

equipped to fight against racial and economic injustices. He also believed that the school's alternative designation might allow for greater curricular freedom than would be present in more traditional public schools (both authors remain deeply concerned that schools can be agents of hegemony). As we chronicle below, while John came to his teaching in the school with good intentions, he was largely unprepared for the cultural differences he was to face therein or how those differences might manifest themselves around controversial issues. Having grown up in a white, middle-class, and well-educated household in the South, John enjoyed many overt and tacit privileges that few of his students could imagine. He had also developed a strong philosophical perspective that, while well meaning, was deeply rooted in the theoretical rather than in the lived experiences of students different from himself.

## Findings

Sex and sexuality were not just ever-present in the lives of the students within John's classroom (in the curriculum, in unanticipated learning moments, and in students' spontaneous utterances); they proved significant enough to shape classroom interactions and ultimately the curriculum itself. The issues surrounding sex and sexuality as they arose in the classroom also highlighted important parts of John's identity, beliefs, and assumptions and illustrated how he had normalized liberal mainstream views and used these views as standards against which he sometimes responded to students. The experiences described below shed light on how assumptions about culture, sex, and sexuality so often lay dormant and prevent teachers from having authentic discussions about these issues with students. This research furthermore highlights how normative understandings of (and silences about) sex and sexuality can reduce a teacher's preparation for and effectiveness with fostering open and nonjudgmental discussions.

## Structured Moments

Structured moments to discuss sex/sexuality emerged as the result of a discussion, lesson, or curricular unit wherein the teacher specifically intended to engage students in examining issues of gender and sexuality as a part of the ELA curriculum. For example, over the course of two years John chose two books for literary analysis in which sexuality, gender, and even sexual violence were prevalent; in other lessons, he incorporated poetry, rap music, or media analyses that would allow for critical discussions of sex/sexuality.

### *Alice Walker's The Color Purple*

As part of a literature unit on novels, students read Alice Walker's (2003) *The Color Purple* aloud in class (sometimes via volunteers, sometimes via a popcorn approach, and sometimes following along as John read). John chose Walker's novel primarily because the central themes include sex, sexuality, and sexual abuse and because the book had cultural relevance to the majority of the students in the class. Celie, the main character, narrates her story through letters to her sister. In these letters, she reveals some of the darkest moments of her life, including that she was repeatedly raped by her father and produced his offspring (whom he then stole from her). Celie also reveals that she had engaged in a sexual relationship with her female friend Shug Avery, a powerful force who helps Celie find her own voice and empowers her to take a stand against her abusive husband.

As part of the popcorn reading process, John routinely chose moments to stop reading to engage in discussions about specific issues related to Celie's story; many of these were directly related to sex, sexuality, gender dynamics, and oppression. John attempted to engage the class in discussions on rape, incest, spousal abuse, and same-sex sexual relationships—all central themes in the novel. For example, when John asked students about the importance of the prevalence of sexual violence in the novel, one student asked why the author put incest in the book and referred to this as “nasty.” John saw this comment as a segue for a discussion about the reality of sexual abuse in families, in the past and the present, and how it can affect a person's self-esteem. He asked students why they felt that the author should not have written about such a traumatic event. Beyond some students' feelings that such content was distasteful and thus uncomfortable, their biggest objections to the content was the belief that such kinds of abuse were extremely rare, suggesting that this part of Walker's story was implausible (interestingly, a view voiced only by male students). Students seemed to remain unconvinced by the teacher's claim—using general statistics that one in four females will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime—that such instances are far more common than they would like to admit. The conversation turned, however, when a number of female students spoke up and said that they knew of people who had suffered sexual abuse at the hands of a relative. For instance, one student—who had in an earlier autobiographical assignment revealed that she had been sexually abused by an uncle—said in an unequivocal manner that she “knew someone” who had had an experience not unlike Celie's. Comments such as these and the passion and surety with which they were made challenged skeptical students to rethink their assumptions and rec-

ognize a different reality, in this instance that incest and sexual abuse were more common than they had initially wanted to admit.

As Celie describes her abusive husband, numerous students questioned why Celie would continue to suffer abuse rather than run away. This part of the text and students' responses to it presented an opportunity to talk not only about history and women's oppression but also about how sexual abuse affects a person's decision-making. Attempting to get students to better understand Celie's reality, John asked them about what resources a poor and poorly educated black woman might have in the South in the early 1900s. Students went back and forth about scenarios that might have been open to Celie. They ultimately came to the conclusion that Celie's opportunities to escape would have been limited. John then tried to connect the novel to contemporary issues by asking why many people today do not flee abusive situations. Initially, most students expressed the belief that there was "no reason" for a woman to stay in an abusive situation. A few students, however, responded with personal stories that shed light on the difficulty of leaving a family home and long-established relationships. Students' personal anecdotes about abusive households and continued economic disadvantages for people of color and/or in poverty (with "no way to make money") added contexts that many students had never considered. John's experience exploring this issue in *The Color Purple* largely mirrors the experience of Jackett (2007) teaching the novel *Speak* with his students in that the discussion of difficult topics around issues of sexuality encouraged students to dig into assumptions about choice and empowerment.

In another instance, a few students complained that Celie's sexual relationship with Shug was inappropriate and felt that Walker should not have included it in the novel. This comment also spoke to some students' discomfort with homosexuality. Even though the Celie-Shug relationship was one of great nurturing and proved empowering to Celie, some students—especially male students—found it discomfiting. These students' comments about the relationship prompted John to question why such a relationship was so distasteful to some students, particularly when they had not complained much about the brutal treatment Celie received from her husband. It was only after several female students spoke up, saying that they felt that the relationship was appropriate, that their peers' objections seemed to dissipate. Some of the most vocal female students argued that Shug had helped Celie feel better about herself and that whether the relationship was sexual was not important. The "sex part," they argued, just helped Celie feel attractive to someone she trusted, and that made her feel stronger.

**Walker's book engaged this group of largely resistant readers because it was relevant to them; the enthusiasm of the discussions strongly suggest to us that this was in large part due to its open exploration of sexuality.**

Walker's novel is among the top five books in the American Library Association's (2015) list of commonly banned books and is frequently avoided as ELA curricula. For this class, however, it prompted explorations of sex and sexuality. It is pedagogically important to highlight that students' initial reluctance to read an entire novel gave way to enthusiastic anticipation for class reading time. As an example, one student whose reading level was years below the norm for the class and who had adamantly opposed John's read-aloud prompts eventually began volunteering to read passages once the class was well into the heart of the book.

The inclusion of *The Color Purple* in the ELA curriculum gave these students access to a text that would otherwise have never appeared in their official school curricula. More importantly, Walker's book engaged this group of largely resistant readers *because* it was relevant to them; the enthusiasm of the discussions (as highlighted here) strongly suggest to us that this was in large part due to its open exploration of sexuality.

#### *Speak and the Right to Say No*

Another novel that students explored also led to significant discussions about sex and sexuality. John's curriculum included Laurie Halse Anderson's (1999) *Speak*, a text that is focused on a young woman's rape and the repercussions from that experience. After having read an article about Anderson and her novel (Doll, 2009) and having completed the first three chapters of the book, students were asked to think about their views on the prevalence of rape in our culture. While some students knew that rape was a significant problem, others did not. Many students were so incredulous as to the prevalence of rape that some questioned the statistics that John brought into the discussion. Others critiqued Anderson's argument that it is important to teach students—particularly those who have not yet become sexually active—about rape. A few expressed their belief that women often make false charges of rape to hide a woman's poor choices. Citing a recent example of someone well known to them in their neighborhood who they believed had been unjustly arrested for sexual assault (as a local news story, many students knew of this), they expressed their belief that the accuser (victim) had provoked this man and was thus responsible for him having been arrested. The victim was, according to these students, drunk, flirtatious, and had dressed in a sexual and inappropriate manner. Suggesting that men were frequently victims of unsubstantiated claims of sexual assault

and even that men are incapable of stopping past a certain point, they went on to complain that the justice system wasn't fair and that the police would always believe women, regardless of what had actually happened. During these conversations many students shared stories of men getting "trapped" by women who got pregnant on purpose, and about women getting back at ex-boyfriends by making false claims of sexual assault. To these students, in many cases of claimed sexual assault, the men were the victims and women the perpetrators.

In well-intentioned but inadequate attempts to redirect students' senses of culpability, John reminded students of a woman's right to say no. They responded to this message—generally as a whole—in ways that he had not anticipated. While almost all of the students believed that a woman has a right to reject a man's sexual advances, they put major caveats onto this right. They believed—almost unanimously—that a woman has a responsibility to keep from getting embroiled in a potentially dangerous situation. This included not dressing "provocatively," drinking "too much" alcohol, or excessively flirting. The most vocal students in the class placed significant blame on whom they perceived to be a self-created victim, one who should "know better" than to put themselves into potentially dangerous situations. They argued that it is "unnatural" or simply impossible for a man to stop once sexual relations have passed some arbitrary but critical point. John attempted to reframe the debate into one of power, misogyny, and patriarchy, but the students remained unmoved; their reactions suggested that the teacher lacked an understanding of how sex power circulated in students' worlds. What is clear is that differing views of rape, consent, and assault complicated and contested interpretations of the novel. These interpretations, discussions, and debates moved far beyond traditionally sanctioned literary classroom discussions.

We believe that this example highlights the need for students to have opportunities to explore these issues and, just as importantly, for teachers to be adequately prepared when they do so. As students expressed and explored their individual and shared cultural views on men's and women's respective roles and responsibilities in sexual relationships, they were placed in a position that allowed them to potentially reflect on, clarify, and question assumptions about sex and sexuality and its impact on their lives. However, their explorations were inhibited because neither John nor his students were prepared for the depth of these discussions and the disparity of views expressed. Students argued that they could not "tell it like it really is" without fear of being judged or the need to be "politically correct." Meanwhile, John was distinctly uncomfortable with students' views about agency (or

lack thereof) with regard to sexuality and sought to challenge their views. However, in trying to assert the absolute right of a woman to say no, John was not considering some of the contexts that affected his students' views. In retrospect, it seems clear that these students' views were influenced, at least in part, by numerous examples in which people in their communities had been harassed by police and, in some cases, wrongly convicted of crimes they did not commit. John lacked the skills to push students to interrogate and reconsider these narratives without silencing their voices/beliefs and potentially discouraging further discussion. In short, John's efforts to respond effectively were themselves often culturally based, naive, and inadequate. Critical to this article is the insight that allowing students to speak freely about sex presented a moment from which students *and* teachers might reconsider assumptions; however, the novelty of this situation—to the teacher and to students—worked against pedagogical efficacy.

### *Student-Selected Poetry and Lyrics*

A later unit on poetry also proved a good segue into examinations of sex and sexuality. John encouraged students to bring to school selections of poetry (loosely defined) as a starting point for literary interpretation. Interwoven with traditional poetry found online were lyrics from popular music and a smattering of students' poetry. With the exception of the "literary" poetry students found online, almost all of the poetry that the class examined were song lyrics interspersed with issues of sexuality. As such, they brought about numerous teachable moments. These works presented opportunities to address—individually and as a class—how a large demographic of popular music and pop culture in general portrays women. Some of the lyrics were full of overt sexual imagery and misogyny. This, in turn, led to numerous discussions about some artists' proclivity for using derogatory or demeaning terms to refer to women. Throughout these lessons, John questioned students about why women were presented in this manner and whether such terms were misogynistic (and the word *misogyny* was assigned as part of the weekly vocabulary list). In particular, John directly questioned students about the frequent use of *ho* and *bitch* in song lyrics.

Students almost unanimously responded to John's questioning with their belief that such terms were not meant to be derogatory; rather, students argued that rap artists were simply portraying reality by using culturally appropriate language. John then tried to test students' assertion that such talk was normal (and unproblematic) by asking female students directly how they—or their parents—would react to a man calling them a "ho," "bitch,"

or “little girl.” Though female students acknowledged that being addressed in such a way would be offensive, most nonetheless held that artists had to talk that way “to be real.” To talk more like one is supposed to talk in school (and, by default, like John talked), they repeatedly pointed out, “would just sound stupid” because it would be culturally and linguistically inappropriate. One student summarized this discussion best when he argued that music of youth (in this case rap) is supposed to have its own lexicon and, furthermore, that it cannot be judged because it uses words teachers wouldn’t use.

In this instance students were acknowledging the multiplicity of discourses in any given community and how discourses change depending on contexts. They were, in short, speaking of the need to code-switch depending on the discourse community in which one finds oneself (Gee, 2000). There is no small amount of irony in this situation as John had frequently stressed to his students that he was interested in the concept and practices of code-switching (Lin, 2008; Nilep, 2006) and that he appreciated students’ “ways with words” (Heath, 1983) in an effort to encourage them to add new discourses—namely academic discourse—to their repertoire. In this case, the students reminded John about the essence of modern theories of sociolinguistics: that discourses are not hierarchical but are instead culturally based and appropriate to communication in specific discourse communities. These students made clear that the discourses common to specific contexts, though possibly offensive to cultural outsiders, were just that—cultural and genre-specific. Deconstructing student-selected poetry and musical lyrics proved valuable by helping students see that what counts as poetry is indeed subjective. Just as importantly, the lesson provided students with an opportunity to weigh the legitimacy of culturally based uses of language against a critical interrogation of misogynistic and violent terms. And while the position that John’s students took from the lesson was not one that he had hoped for, it nonetheless reminded him that his own views on language were culturally based.

### Semistructured Moments

Discussions of sexuality also emerged in semistructured contexts (e.g., assignments specifically designed to elicit personal reflections though not necessarily targeting sex/sexuality). We label these moments as semistructured because the content and context of the official curriculum allowed for (and sometimes called for) tangential discussions about other areas including sex and sexuality.

### *Autobiographies and Confession*

In one of the ELA units, students were to use their backgrounds as prompts for research and writing. Specifically, John asked students to create family trees and then to write autobiographies encompassing information from these trees. The goal was for them to explore the creation of their identities: how they came to be where they were, who they were as individuals and as a part of a culture, and how their family backgrounds influenced how they had come to think of themselves and their worlds. This assignment brought with it unexpected challenges and surprises. These issues included—but were not limited to—nontraditional family dynamics (single parents, absent fathers, and how to represent these on a family tree), unwanted pregnancies, and even issues of sexual abuse.

Because students tended to be wary of showing vulnerability, John was surprised by the fact that many students used their autobiographies to address issues of abuse, pregnancy, parenthood, and even sexual abuse—in some cases for the first time. Although autobiography is not by definition cathartic, some students expressed it as such. Other students used their autobiography to disclose personal information that had affected them and their development. One gay and Hispanic student used the autobiography to discuss his fears of “coming out” to others, including his relatives and his peers. He wrote that his parents (and many of his peers) probably suspected his homosexuality but that they preferred to ignore it. He explained that his sexuality was a major part of his identity but that he had to keep it hidden except from a select group of gay friends. His Catholic parents felt that being gay was both a choice and a sin and he feared that they would pressure him to change—or kick him out of the family home—were his sexuality openly acknowledged. He also expressed how in school he was constantly aware that while his classmates seemed to accept his friends who were homosexual, they did so with the caveat that homosexuality never be overt. It was something that was “OK” so long as it went undiscussed. This student expressed his frustration and confusion in a format that was comfortable to him, one that allowed for confessional moments in a nonthreatening way. His autobiography also opened an avenue for later private discussions with John about the realities of college (the student hoped that by going to college he would automatically enter a community accepting of his sexuality) and resources that might be available to him.

Another student used her autobiography to explore a traumatic childhood event that had affected her upbringing. Beginning with “I’ve never told nobody this before, but . . .,” her autobiography proved to be a means

for telling what she had long found shameful: that she had been repeatedly sexually abused by an uncle. The issue was coming to the fore, she wrote, because her mother was planning a coming-home party for that uncle's release from prison (he had been convicted of sexual assault on a child). This student's situation and the stress, anxiety, and shame it caused her was at times overwhelming for her. She had become increasingly withdrawn from schoolwork and from her peers as the date of the event approached. What she expressed needing from John was not someone to fix her problems, but someone to whom she could turn for a sympathetic ear, trust with sensitive information, someone who would believe her story and remind her that she was worthy of love. In subsequent conversations, she expressed how good it felt for her to "at least be able to tell somebody." Though the case against her uncle had been adjudicated and her family was aware of the circumstances, she had continued to feel great shame and had diligently tried to keep others—especially her peers—from knowing about it. There can be no doubt that this student's willingness to confide in John had a lot to do with the trusting relationship they had developed over many months in class. Yet, we believe that this trust was enhanced both by the nature of the assignment and by the fact that the classroom had become a place for open discussions about sex, sexuality, gender roles, rape, and the myriad other things that students witness in their lives. This student found her voice because she felt safe to discuss these sensitive issues with her teacher.

Because discussions of sexuality were not off-limits in this classroom, this assignment proved to be a chance for some students to explore traumatic events and how these events affected them and their development in a private and nonthreatening manner. The assignment was both literary—obliging students to express themselves in writing—and personal; it connected the literacy curriculum with their lived experiences.

### *What Constitutes "Literature"?*

Another semistructured discussion emerged when students and John disagreed about the nature of a reading assignment and what constituted "literature." In an effort to get students to engage in reading and to improve their reading skills (their average reading level was two to four years below grade level), John asked students to bring to school and begin reading a novel of their own choosing. John's only caveats were that the books that students chose had to be novel-length, have some "socially redeeming qualities," and be appropriate for discussing in class. What quickly became apparent was that John and his students had vastly differing definitions of what constitutes an "appropriate" novel.

Specifically, one student brought in one book from a popular series of sexually graphic coming-of-age novels (Zane's [2004] *Nervous: A Novel*). Having briefly examined the novel while students were silently reading their selections, John jumped to the conclusion that the novel's content and language were overtly sexual, and he took the student aside to suggest that the book was not appropriate for the assignment. The student strongly disagreed, became defensive, and challenged John in front of the class. As the discussion became public, all other classroom activities ground to a halt while other students rallied to her side. John, unprepared for debate, tried to arrest a deteriorating situation and prove his point by reading one of the less explicit but nonetheless graphic passages aloud. One can predict the results from such an ill-conceived endeavor: embarrassment by some and laughter from all. What was unexpected, however, was that this exchange led to an extended discussion on what constitutes literature and whether

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or not teachers have a right to censor such books based on their culturally based values. For the rest of the class period, John and his students were embroiled in a debate on these matters.

The implications of this debate are significant as they speak to the ways in which sex and sexuality circulate differently in teacher/adult and teen lives; when asked if they felt the content was appropriate, most students felt that it was. One of the more vocal students in class spoke up to note that even if the text was primarily about sex, such content should not exclude it from also being considered literature. Another student backed up her peer by noting that much of the art one sees in art museums (to which the students had gone on a field trip a few months before) are full of nudity yet no one questions their artistic value. The girl reading the book simply noted that it was a good book about which John had made a quick and unjust judgment (he had not read the book and knew nothing of the possible messages it conveyed). When John questioned students about the graphic language used in the book, the student responded that literature and language are relative and that the book presented language that was culturally appropriate for the contexts. She noted that while the language in her book might differ from the "all clean" language in books that John liked to read, this author was simply tailoring her language to the intended audience. Ironically, students reminded John of one of the most important things he had taught during a prior poetry unit: that "art" was both individually and culturally determined and, thus, no one had the right

to tell someone else what the *real* meaning of a piece of art is. Students also reminded John of a contention he had made numerous times in class while encouraging students to engage in code-switching: that language is not hierarchical but cultural; that different discourses are appropriate for conveying messages in different contexts (Chomsky, 1959). Here, the students successfully put these theories to the test with their teacher. Not only did the students ultimately seem to feel empowered by the success of their argument (especially once John was forced to give in), they highlighted for John that his beliefs about art, literature, sex, gender roles, etc. were at least partially based on his own culture and were thus ethnocentric. Having been acculturated to upper-middle-class white culture and having had his views of literature shaped largely by essentialist and ethnocentric views of the literary canon, John had in this assignment nonetheless ignored the validity of culturally relevant texts and his own views on the importance of culturally mediated/negotiated meaning. This circumstance helped John realize that he was making value judgments that were unfair to students and unfair to literature writ large.

This vignette highlights the opportunities that literature on sexuality can provide and exemplifies the ways that teachers and students are differently positioned in terms of race, class, gender, age, and sexuality. In turn, this positionality can lead to pedagogical ineffectiveness and, when left unaddressed by teachers, to a silencing of students' legitimate views. Allowing students to individually choose literature for a class assignment opened the door to seeing how sexuality was ever-present in disparate cultural worlds. Prior to graduate school, John had been culturally indoctrinated—like most of his teaching peers—to keep sexuality and talk of sexuality confined to the most private of spaces. This was unlike his students, who seemed from classroom conversations to be comfortably immersed in cultural spaces that did not have such prohibitions. Students appeared to see no reason for overt sexuality and discussions of sex to be taboo in certain settings (such as classrooms). In addition, they had used the freedom of this assignment to celebrate books that were relevant to their lives and that expressed ideas central to their interest in questions of behaviors, values, identities, and sexuality.

## Implications

These vignettes illustrate the pervasiveness of sexuality in teens' lives and the opportunities and complexities of addressing these through ELA classes, as well as the impact of a set of cultural and professional mores that left John without a roadmap for navigating these discussions. The vignettes serve to

illustrate students' willingness to discuss these issues openly and honestly in a safe setting, but they also shed light on the mixed messages that today's students receive. As noted earlier, one key pedagogical difficulty is how to push students to problematize dominant views of sexuality without forcing more conservative adult views upon them. However, an equally important difficulty is evident in the lack of opportunity that ELA teachers, professors, and teacher educators have to push ourselves to challenge our stereotypes, heteronormative thinking, and broad discomfort with (and lack of training for) addressing issues of sexuality. As we reflect on the meaning of this work, we are able to crystalize four major insights that we feel may be significant to ELA teachers and teacher educators who find the topic of sex entering their classroom discussions.

### Cognitive Dissonance

One of our major insights is that recognizing the contexts of discomfort—our own and our students'—is an important step toward creating a democratic space through which issues of sexuality can be explored. Even though John had anticipated the possibility of controversial and even contentious discussions about sex and sexuality during the semistructured moments described above, he was inadequately prepared for dealing with the complexities of these issues. As a result, he found himself, often in the middle of such discussions, deeply uncomfortable with the views his students expressed and uncomfortable when his own views were challenged. His reactions were, therefore, often far from ideal. It is clear to us now that John experienced significant cognitive dissonance during the times in which students, despite his input, expressed views that seemed to reflect the sorts of troubling (homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic) narratives that circulate in popular culture and popular news but are rarely worked through in the safe space of classrooms. Had John not been willing to reconsider some of his own perspectives and recognize his tacit desire to “bring students around” to his own point of view, he would have judged these lessons as failures and/or he might have negatively judged his students and their respective cultures. The structured moments, on the other hand, evoked less cognitive dissonance for John. This was, in part, because the planned moments tended to elicit student comments that were less vociferous, reactionary, and perpetuating of stereotyped gender roles (this is not to suggest that these tendencies ceased altogether). John's greater comfort in the planned moments also suggest that, because they were planned, they had allowed time for private reflection prior to the lessons—time during which John was able to anticipate student

responses and to more appropriately challenge them. Though students were ready and sometimes eager to engage in planned discussions, the academic nature of these forays into sexuality seemed to temper students' tendencies and passions. At the same time, it is important to note that planned moments allowed John and his students more space to think critically and more dispassionately about controversial complex issues; the structure inherent in formal lesson plans (as opposed to ad hoc discussions) both helped lay some ground rules for discussion and helped John be prepared to more adequately moderate the expression of strongly held beliefs (his students' and his own).

### Withholding Judgment

A second key insight is that it is important for the ELA teacher to be willing to step back, remain silent (and as nonjudgmental as possible), and thereby allow students the chance to openly express their real feelings and views. If teachers are able to resist the temptation to “fix” students or their views (at least in the moment), they will be better able to use students' ideas to plan discussion of these issues in conscious and pedagogically sound ways. It is clear from our analysis of the experiences described above that teachers wanting to engage students in such sensitive and power-laden discussions as these would be wise to develop and practice classroom strategies that might at least temporarily break the momentum and energy of spontaneous moments so that teachers could infuse into them elements of the more planned moments such as Socratic circles, discussion webs, jigsaw activities, think-pair-share, formal debates, etc. Bolgatz (2005) encourages these types of approaches in her study of classroom discussions of controversial issues around race, gender, class, and sexuality. Her approach is to break down “group think” by giving students probing questions that would force them to think more deeply about their initial reactions. Prompting student reflection through redirection is particularly important given the fact that discussions such as those described above can be uncomfortable for marginalized or silenced members of the class.

### Addressing Sex as Null Curriculum

A third insight from both from these vignettes and from our own experiences as teachers and teacher educators is that most teachers (including progressively minded ELA teachers) are seldom taught how to talk about sex and sexuality in the classroom. As in some of the vignettes we presented, this can lead to clumsy attempts at response and, with such responses, a reinforcement of heteronormative and ethnocentric values. One simple solution for

this is for English teacher educators (and, ideally, English professors) to assign and model for their students the teaching of literature that addresses sex and sexuality. Another solution is to provide future teachers with external resources on how to negotiate this often-difficult terrain. While it is useful for English teacher educators to advocate for the use of controversial texts in the grades 6–12 ELA classroom, it is far more useful to *provide examples and resources* for how to plan for and react to the myriad issues that such texts might elicit from students. Such resources abound. Educative organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control, Planned Parenthood, the Trevor Project, Teaching Tolerance, PFLAG, and GLSEN all have information on how to address the needs of youth on a spectrum of issues centered in or around sex and sexuality.

### Recognizing Contradictory Messages

A fourth insight is that if teachers recognize the contradictory messages schools and teachers themselves give on issues of sex and sexuality, they might be better equipped to provide more nuanced and sensitive support for students' comments. For example, what may at first appear to be oppositional views of sex and sexuality (such as the students' views regarding sexual assault) might actually sit uncomfortably close

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to official school messages about these same issues. Although the “she asked for it” narrative runs counter to official discussions in sex education (e.g., “no means no”), a far more ambiguous message is embedded in a number of adult and school discourses. For example, many if not most high schools enforce school dress codes (e.g., skirt length, neckline, midriff, etc.) that are predicated on the idea that by dressing provocatively, female students may serve as a distraction to learning. Inherent in this practice is the belief that young men and teachers cannot concentrate if certain parts of the female body are visible to them. Additionally, some school curricula (e.g., health classes) warn young women about the dangers of dressing provocatively, of drinking too much at parties, etc. Though the intent is to protect these young women from harm, the onus is again on the woman to behave in ways not to entice or invite unwanted sexual encounters; it puts responsibility for sexual assault as much on the victim as on the offender. In addition, schools that teach abstinence only education present sexual behavior as a good/bad, yes/no (and strictly heterosexual) choice; this pushes students into

simplistic understandings of human sexuality while it reinforces a range of problematic binaries. In sum, students receive mixed messages in school that combined with media images and out-of-school experiences contribute to the viewpoints they express in classes.

## Conclusion

While a major tenet of good teaching has long been to recognize the need for students to speak frankly and honestly and the need for teachers to really listen, our research illustrates that both can be more difficult and complex than clichés about speaking and listening suggest (or that we could have anticipated). We do not claim to have definitive answers about how to begin such a complex and contextual endeavor other than to openly seek them out within one's classroom contexts and curricula, to be prepared for unexpected results, and to critically examine one's initial impulse to react in ways that may perpetuate culturally based biases. We hope that our sharing and analysis of one teacher's journey, when contextualized in this cultural moment, might prompt other English teachers and teacher educators toward further exploration and discussion about sex and sexuality in the ELA classroom. We trust readers not to make grand claims from these stories or to generalize these experiences to all or even similar classrooms.

Although we believe that sex and sexuality are issues that any conscientious analysis of literature must address, the conservative social climate that continues to dominate US schools makes such examinations and discussions difficult. The ELA curriculum is now more scripted and controlled than at any time in the past (White, 2012) and reflects school administrators' fears of teachers broaching such sensitive topics as sex, rape, incest, teen pregnancy, and homosexuality in the classroom. Ironically, however, this is all the more reason why we believe that ELA teachers should engage students in these topics. In an educational environment increasingly resistant to open discussion of sensitive and controversial issues, students are left to their own devices—or to pop culture and peer relationships—to explore and understand these issues. Because these issues so directly affect students' lives, we submit that we should not be relegating them to a bevy of sources that may—and often do—present erroneous and harmful information. Now more than ever, we need to challenge the belief that talking about sexuality will send mixed messages, corrupt innocent minds, and harm students.

In both theory and in practice, the language arts teacher is uniquely positioned to contest the limiting of discourses on sexuality in their classrooms. As a part of the nature of literary texts and as an integral part of students'

daily lives, we advocate for ELA classes to be spaces where discussions about sexuality can be a primary tool for engaging students. No discussion of great works of literature can be complete when it ignores the most salient topics—including sexuality—contained therein. Thus, the inherent existence and importance of sex and sexuality in literature may even provide a relatively safe “cover” for many of these kinds of discussions. In short, the language arts classroom is the most logical place to begin reframing discussions about sex and sexuality; if we cannot do so in our classrooms, it is unlikely to happen in any official school context. ELA teacher educators are in a position to guide language arts on how and why to take on controversy—about sexuality and other issues—in the classroom. Those who do will be better able to address with their students the full range of what it is to be human. While this journey will not be easy, we believe it is one worth taking.

## Notes

1. For the purposes of this article we group sex (loosely defined as sexual acts) and sexuality together to be able to discuss the ways that gender identity, sexual expression, and sexual orientation are all silenced in schools. We acknowledge the critique that conflating these terms or using them as a catch-all umbrella potentially erases the unique subject positions/challenges of LGBTQ students.

2. This charter school was exempt from many of the district and state high-stakes assessments because it served students who had failed in or had been expelled from the district’s high schools.

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