

ACTing UP¹ and Looking Forward: Resistance and Resilience in Queer and Trans Education

Ethan Coston

We are living in an unprecedented time of anti-transgender violence. There is no easier or gentler way to say it. Trans people, and what they do with their own bodies and lives, are increasingly the focus of politicians' campaigns, parents' self-help groups, and pop-culture commentary. In just the two months since I originally wrote the call for contributions to this special issue of *Voices in Urban Education*, there was more anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation introduced in the United States than in any year previously. We now stand at a moment in U.S. history in which there have been at least 515 bills introduced during the 2022–2023 legislative season (Chapman, 2023), but The Movement Advancement Project (2023) says there's been more than 650.

Terrifyingly, very often you will find trans children and youth at the center of these discussions and decisions. Currently, in the United States:

- 16 states ban best practice medication and/or surgical care for transgender youth, and 3 have made it a felony crime to provide this care.
- 21 states ban transgender students from participating in sports consistent with their gender identity.
- 8 states ban discussions of LGBTQ people or issues in school (e.g., “Don’t Say Gay or Trans”).
- 5 require parental notification of LGBTQ-inclusive curricula and allow parents to opt their children out.
- 7 states ban transgender students from using school facilities consistent with their gender identity.
- 4 states support (but do not require) and 1 state requires/forces the outing of transgender youth in schools.
- 2 states have passed laws that specifically prevent schools or districts from proactively adding LGBTQ protections to anti-bullying policies.
- 3 states are currently attempting to reinstate youth conversion therapy practices, which were previously banned.

And it's not as if this legislation has no teeth. We've already seen and heard stories from sad, angry, terrified folks on Twitter, TikTok, and Reddit, reporting everything from their own forcible detransitioning (as their access to care disappears) to their neighbors reporting them to child protective services for supporting their trans children, to the attempted censoring and removal of a democratically elected trans leader in Montana over her desire to stop the advancement of anti-trans legislation. Yes, there is no digestible or respectable way to frame what is happening in the United States today. Several scholars and historians have already confirmed that we're well on our way to the complete and total genocide of trans people (Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, 2020). Coupled with the broader “don't say gay” censorship in K–12 schools, the banning of books related to legacies of racism, white supremacy, and LGBTQIA+ history (what some have recently called the political push to ban “comprehensive U.S. history” (Alexander & Powell, 2023)), attacks

on reproductive autonomy and restrictions to abortion and contraceptive access (Guttmacher Institute, 2023), and the widening scope of power being given to militarized police forces across the U.S., despite their continued assaults and murders of (primarily Black and disabled) residents and students (Peake, 2015), it is not a stretch to claim we are living in fascist times.

But, as Audre Lorde said to the 1989 graduates of Oberlin College, “... I do have hope. To face the realities of our lives is not a reason for despair—despair is a tool of your enemies. Facing the realities of our lives gives us motivation for action. For you are not powerless” (Riemer & Brown, n.d.). Indeed, in the face of political and social repression and violence, there has been significant and powerful resistance: all over the U.S., queer and trans adults, youth, and our accomplices, are fighting back. We’ve seen educators using [students’ correct pronouns and names](#), even if it’s illegal; schools’ providing [comprehensive and inclusive sex education](#), despite federal and state-level restrictions; librarians normalizing queer stories and people by resisting book bans and [ensuring libraries are stocked with 2LGBTQIA+ narratives](#); states mandating the [positive teaching 2LGBTQIA+ history](#); and parents and adult accomplices supporting [student efforts to organize against homophobia and transphobia](#) through [gay, trans, and queer student alliances](#), [banned book clubs](#), and more.

Purpose of the Special Issue

In the disability rights lineage of “nothing about us, without us” (Charlton, 1998), this special issue of *Voices in Urban Education* focuses on queer and trans resistance to epistemic, political, and social control and violence within educational systems. The pieces ask us to *look back to think forward*, are inter- or transgenerational, feature the work/ideas/stories of youth themselves, and are attentive to the intersectional nature of oppression in the United States.

From an exploration of how music can become a radical instrument of reimagining queerness and disability in music education and teacher training (Yingling, Hughes, Morgan, and Shawish), to integrating disability access projects into middle school classrooms for queer and trans youth (Chiodos); with an inside look at collaborative arts-based educational research “Big Gay Church” put on at the National Art Education Association’s annual convention (Wolfgang et. al); including a concrete example of how to *trans* education by centering transness in co-constructed student-centered spaces to embolden youth (Peña, Daniels, and Florence); and featuring creative expressions from the voices of queer and trans youth (Arli of Galaxy Kids, and the Stand with Trans Youth Zine), authors and creators featured within this special issue aim to inspire motivation for action.

It is my sincere hope that in reading these contributions, you, too, will be moved to radically transform your pedagogical approaches, make genuine space and time for queer and trans students to express themselves and gain access to the information they desire, and/or begin to think through what kinds of strategies, policies, and/or programs may be necessary to subvert the systems that continue to censure, exclude, and attempt to eradicate our histories and voices. We must be heard and we will not be silent.

A LUTA CONTINUA [The struggle continues]²

References

- Chapman, A. (2023, April 24) [@AlliRaine22]. *When @Esqueer_ said she thought we would get up to 500 anti-queer bills this year I thought she was (just slightly) crazy*. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/AlliRaine22/status/1650505242369245186>
- Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. (2020). *The ten stages of genocide*. <https://www.hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/what-is-genocide/the-ten-stages-of-genocide>
- Alexander, T. N. & Powell, N. (2023, January 31). *The political push to ban comprehensive US history*. Medium. <https://medium.com/national-center-for-institutional-diversity/the-political-push-to-ban-comprehensive-us-history-c80fdd9b0592>
- Guttmacher Institute. (2023, March 1). *State policies on contraception*. <https://www.guttmacher.org/united-states/contraception/state-policies-contraception>
- Peake, B. J. (2015). Militarization of school police: One route on the school-to-prison pipeline. *Arkansas Law Review*, 68(195). <https://law.uark.edu/alr/PDFs/68-1/alr-68-1-195-229Peak.pdf>
- Riemer, M. L. & Brown, L. (n.d.). *Commencement address: Audre Lorde Oberlin College May 29, 1989*. QueerHistory.com. Retrieved April 26, 2023, from <https://queerhistory.com/radical-graduation>
- Charlton, J. I. (1998). *Nothing about us without us: Disability oppression and empowerment*. University of California Press.

Endnotes

¹ This is a reference to the international, grassroots, political group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), which has been working to improve the lives of people with AIDS since 1987, through direct action, medical research, advocacy, and policy change. For more history see: <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/16/1007361916/act-up-a-history-of-aids-hiv-activism>

² This is how Audre Lorde ended her 1989 Commencement Speech to Oberlin College graduates. It is part of the rallying cry used by founding president of the Mozambican Liberation Front (FRELIMO), Eduardo Mondlane, in a 1967 speech attempting to persuade freedom fighters to continue the war against Portuguese colonial control: "A luta continua; victoria ascerta" [The struggle continues; victory is certain].