



# LGBTQQ youth creating change: Developing allies against bullying through performance and dialogue



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## ABSTRACT

Research has documented heterosexism and genderism facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) students in schools, especially as it relates to experiencing bullying and harassment. However, little research addresses anti-LGBTQQ bullying interventions, and no research has examined the use of youth-led performance and dialogue in cultivating anti-bullying behaviors among students. The present mixed-methods study assesses one such intervention led by a community-based LGBTQQ and allied youth group. Repeated measures general linear modeling demonstrates a positive impact of this intervention on middle and high school students' likelihood to intervene when witnessing anti-LGBTQQ harassment and confidence to successfully do so, particularly for White students. Qualitative findings demonstrate barriers to intervention and decision-making processes of youth when intervening. Results suggest the importance of these interventions in empowering LGBTQQ youth to effect change in their schools.

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## 1. Introduction

Oppressive systems, such as heterosexism, genderism,<sup>1</sup> homophobia, and transphobia operate throughout society and profoundly shape the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ)<sup>2</sup> youth. For youth, school settings are often significant sites of marginalization as a result of these systems, as well as potential spaces for resistance and working toward transformation, justice, and equality (Wernick, Woodford, & Siden, 2010). In schools, heterosexism and genderism are often experienced through direct homophobic/transphobic verbal and physical violence (Centers for Disease Control, Prevention, 2011; Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Walls, Freedenthal, & Wisneski, 2008), subtle forms of mistreatment and discrimination (Nadal & Griffin, 2011),

and overall homo/bi/queer-phobic and transphobic environments that erase and invalidate LGBTQQ experiences and perpetuate homo/bi/queer/trans-phobic cultural norms (Nadal & Griffin, 2011; Riot Youth, 2009).

These realities negatively impact LGBTQQ students as individuals and as a community, as well as school communities as a whole (Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). Experiencing anti-LGBTQQ discrimination has been linked to higher incidence of negative mental health outcomes including suicide, substance abuse, and risky sexual behavior (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Poteat & Espelage, 2007). Anti-LGBTQQ cultural and institutional norms and expectations for young people impede the development of positive self-identity and create hostile learning environments (Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002; Graham, 2012; MacGillivray, 2004). Moreover, negative outcomes for heterosexual students are related to experiencing heterosexist harassment based on a perceived LGBTQQ identity or from witnessing heterosexist harassment (Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2008). For instance, anti-LGBTQQ harassment often relies on the enforcement of strict gender norms, which can damage straight/cisgender<sup>3</sup> individuals as well (Kimmel, 2001; Rich, 1980).

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<sup>1</sup> Genderism is used to describe the distinct system of oppression that targets trans\*/genderqueer people (Hill & Woughby, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> In this manuscript, the term transgender and trans\* are used interchangeably as umbrella terms to describe individuals who identify as transgender men (FTM), transgender women (MTF), genderqueer, gender non-conforming, or other non-binary gender identities. Queer is used in reference to individuals who identify as such in regard to their sexual orientation.

<sup>3</sup> Cisgender refers to individuals who identify with the gender associated with their assigned gender/sex at birth (e.g., individuals assigned female at birth and who identify as women).

Creating safer and more inclusive school environments is critical for the wellbeing and learning of all students. However, many communities continue to struggle with how to address the needs of LGBTQQ individuals, especially within public schools (Ciardullo, 2005; MacGillivray, 2004). Sexual and gender minority youth report that inclusive school curriculum, resources in schools, teacher/administrator willingness to support LGBTQQ students, cultivating straight/cisgender allies, and effective sanctions for discrimination are all important for meeting the social and emotional needs of LGBTQQ students (Currie, Mayberry, & Chenneville, 2012; Davis, Saltzburg, & Locke, 2009; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Riot Youth, 2009; Sadowski, Chow, & Scanlon, 2009). Given the diversity of challenges faced by LGBTQQ students across the country, strategies are needed that are specific to LGBTQQ youth and also adaptable to multiple contexts. Such strategies should empower LGBTQQ youth (Lee, 2002; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009), engage straight/cisgender youth and develop them as allies (Davis et al., 2009; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2013), foster open discussions between youth and adults in schools to address heteronormative environments, harassment, and conflict (Currie et al., 2012; Guerra & Phillips Smith, 2005; Sadowski et al., 2009), and address institutional factors, including school culture and climate (Currie et al., 2012; Dessel, 2010; Stephan & Vogt, 2004).

Using a pre-experimental, one-group, pretest–posttest design, this study sought to determine the effectiveness of a programmatic intervention developed and administered by LGBTQQ youth that seeks to increase knowledge and awareness about homophobia and transphobia as well as students' likelihood and confidence to intervene when offensive language or actions target LGBTQQ students in schools.

### 1.1. Allyhood development

Studies of allyhood development have examined the role that people with privilege can play in working for social justice. These studies examine models of allyhood development in general (e.g., Broido & Reason, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Goodman, 2000), as well as toward specific groups, including LGBTQQ communities (e.g., Broido, 2000; Brooks & Edwards, 2009; Duhigg, Rostovsky, Gray, & Wimsatt, 2010; Jordan, 2012). These studies emphasize the experiences that motivate individuals to be allies, including: personal connections and empathy for individuals, or “allyhood for self-interest”; acting as an ally for moral or other value-based reasons, or “ally for altruism”; and acting out of self-interest for collective liberation, or “ally for social justice” (Edwards, 2006; Goodman, 2000; Jordan, 2012). As these studies underscore, a primary tenet of allyhood is the motivation for people with privilege to interrupt oppressive systems and respond to instances of discrimination – that is, their desire to act as an ally. These motivations are interwoven with developing individuals' knowledge and awareness of anti-LGBTQQ discrimination and oppression, as well as heterosexual and cisgender privilege (Duhigg et al., 2010; Jordan, 2012). Lastly, a critical piece in the development of allies is providing opportunities to take action (Broido & Reason, 2005) and to learn from and reflect on those actions (Duhigg et al., 2010; Jordan, 2012). In order to translate allyhood motivations into ally behaviors, it is necessary to develop allies' confidence (Broido & Reason, 2005) to disrupt the dominant norms that fuel anti-LGBTQQ harassment and discrimination (Nadal & Griffin, 2011).

The existing literature on allyhood development is almost exclusively theoretical (Jordan, 2012) or focuses on retrospectively understanding the development of those who have already developed as allies (e.g., Duhigg et al., 2010). No studies have empirically tested how these models can be used to develop new allies (Jordan, 2012). The present study addresses this gap by testing the impact of participating in a programmatic intervention that intentionally engages and develops allies by increasing their knowledge and awareness of LGBTQQ oppressions, teaching them skills to address anti-LGBTQQ

harassment in their schools, and providing them with examples of when intervention is necessary and appropriate in their day-to-day life.

### 1.2. Anti-bullying strategies

Despite the well-established literature documenting the need to address bullying of sexual and gender minority youth (Kosciw et al., 2010; O'Shaughnessy, Russell, Heck, Calhoun, & Laub, 2004), research on implementation of school-based strategies to do so is minimal (Hansen, 2007; Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). There are numerous challenges to addressing these issues in schools that require specific strategies and programs. Tackling anti-LGBTQQ bullying requires addressing issues around sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression, and in particular, addressing gender expectations and masculinity with young men and boys (Horn, 2007; Swearer et al., 2008). Anti-LGBTQQ bullying is fueled by a climate of biased language use and subtle discrimination against sexual and gender minorities (Nadal & Griffin, 2011; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010), e.g., name-calling with words like “fag” or “tranny”, which is also linked to physical harassment (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Nadal & Griffin, 2011). Moreover, anti-bullying strategies and research on these issues rarely address or include trans\* students (McGuire et al., 2010).

Anti-bullying programs are needed that handle the complexity of these issues. Some strategies that have been suggested are educating students about LGBTQQ experiences, providing meaningful relationships between straight and cisgender people and LGBTQQ students, creating space for perspective-taking and empathy, helping potential allies understand the impact of anti-LGBTQQ language and other forms of subtle discrimination, and cultivating the skills and efficacy needed to directly intervene when seeing anti-LGBTQQ bullying (Heinze & Horn, 2009; Poteat, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2013; Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Swearer et al., 2008). Research suggests that utilizing youth's leadership and knowledge, and peer-to-peer education can effectively accomplish these goals (Wernick et al., 2013), but to the best of our knowledge, no research has assessed a programmatic intervention of this type in regard to anti-LGBTQQ bullying.

### 1.3. Theater, dialogue, and social change

Brazilian activist Augusto Boal (1979) pioneered the use of theater to promote social activism. Boal developed Theater of the Oppressed to engage viewers of social justice performances to participate as actors in promoting dialogic communication that grapples with racism and other social oppressions (Green, 2001). The presentation of personal narratives in the form of theatrical performance, interwoven with an examination of the influence of power and prejudice, can challenge the presumption of essentialist dominant paradigms (Saltzburg, 2008). Integration of theater with dialogic communication is an innovative approach to resolving social identity conflict and empowering youth. Co-creating reality through dialogic engagement can lead to new perspectives and action (Bohm, 1996; Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006), and participation in intergroup dialogue has been shown to promote civic engagement (DeTurk, 2006; Hartz-Karp, 2005; LeBaron & Carstarphen, 1997; Pan & Mutchler, 2000). More specifically, aspects of dialogic methods such as personal engagement, emotional involvement, and the complexity of holding multiple perspectives promote empowerment and alliance building (Comerford, 2003; Nagda, 2006), including among heterosexual students around LGB issues (Dessel, Woodford, routenberg, & Brejjak, 2013).

The empowerment literature (e.g., Gutiérrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998) and burgeoning scholarship concerning the use of arts as part of the empowerment process assert that positive outcomes are indeed possible using theater and dialogue and theater strategies, but research is needed concerning the specific means by which this

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