

LGBT bullying in school: perspectives on prevention

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WICKED PROBLEMS FORUM: FREEDOM OF SPEECH AT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES



STIMULUS ESSAY

LGBT bullying in school: a troubling relational story

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School bullying is an oppressive mode of interpersonal conflict that rattles the bodies and beings of young people. While no youth is exempt from being bullied, some populations tend to be more vulnerable and at greater risk than others. For instance, the recent study from the National Center for Education Statistics (Musu-Gillette, Zhang, Wang, Zhang, & Oudekerk, 2017) demonstrated that in 2015 a “higher percentage of self-identified gay, lesbian, or bisexual students than of self-identified heterosexual students reported that they had been bullied on school property during the previous 12 months” (p. iv). Similarly, many LGBT students continue to experience a climate of dis-ease and violence at school with respect to their sexual identity (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014), a reality that has become even more distressing since the recent 2016 U.S. Presidential Election (see Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2017). While bullying continues to trouble students, educators and staff, and schools, many LGBT youth are also performing outwardly in ways that resist bigotry and discrimination over LGBT rights (HRC, 2017). In turn, this advocacy is happening in a historical time when more people than ever self-identify as LGBT, and more people are accepting of LGBT people (GLAAD, 2017).

An international and interdisciplinary community of scholars has examined bullying for the last three decades. Although there is no one unitary definition of the concept of “bullying,” researchers tend to agree on certain attributes. For example, bullying entails the deliberate victimization of a student, repetitively and over time, by one or multiple other students (Olweus, 2010). Also, bullying relies on a power imbalance between communicators that makes it difficult for youth who are bullied to defend themselves physically, psychologically, emotionally, and/or relationally.¹ In addition, bullying that takes place electronically, such as through social media, chatrooms, SMS/text messages, and instant messaging, is commonly known as “cyberbullying.” Cyberbullying is particularly complicated as it often entails anonymous aggressors and is more public as a result of its online presence, thus making it even more difficult for those who are being bullied to defend themselves (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012, p. vii).²

Much of my research over the last several years has examined bullying in terms of communication and identity. For instance, in *Bullied: Tales of Torment, Identity, and Youth*

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(Berry, 2016), I use autoethnography and personal narrative to examine bullying and identity, primarily the symbolically formed interactions, relationships, and identities constituted, and reconstituted, within bullying performances. The groundwork for this book is a research study I conducted in conjunction with the students enrolled in an undergraduate interpersonal communication course I taught several years ago at USF. For their final projects, students wrote first-hand stories in which they vulnerably conveyed their lived experience with bullying from middle school and/or high school—their accounts, and my own stories of bullying from my youth, are the focal points of the book.³ The students produced vivid stories of bullying, and many of the accounts stay “with” me today. Take, for instance, Iman, a Black American woman who was bullied because of the “abject” (to her aggressors) ways in which she performed herself racially. Being bullied led Iman to experience extensive suicidal ideation and participate in the self-harming practice of cutting. On finding something to use to cut herself, Iman writes:

I looked all over the house for the right blade, and I knew right where to look: my dad works on houses, and so he had all sorts of blades and construction tools. While looking for his tools I stumbled across a very sharp paper opener, or maybe it was an envelope opener—I’m not sure the correct terminology for the device. The blade was sharp, and so after that night, the opener became my tool of relief. (p. 32)

Or take, for instance, Jessi’s story about friendship, deceit, and betrayal, and the cyberbullying that resulted from these relational issues. Her friends bullied Jessi, but she bullied them in return. She portrays their cyberbullying in terms of an out-of-control “battle” that ultimately took the form of “pure evil entertainment” (p. 54). Jessie uses her story to reflect mindfully on the mindless impact of cyberbullying:

It was just so easy to say horrible words online without consequences. None of us ever had the guts to say anything to each other in person. We threatened each other physically online, but none of us said those same words to each other at school. Online you forget there is a person on the other side. You don’t see their emotions, or their physical reactions. It’s easy to forget your humanity, and to decipher right from wrong, especially when you are young and still learning, especially when you aren’t face to face to see the impact of your choices. (p. 55)

Taken together, Iman’s and Jessi’s stories, and all of the stories in *Bullied*, demonstrate the intrinsic relationship between communication and bullying, and the stigmatizing identities youth negotiate within bullying performances. These accounts also speak to the one-of-a-kind potential in autoethnographic stories to put “meat on the bones,” so to speak, on examinations of confounding cultural and relational issues.

My research on bullying has also examined other conceptual and methodological issues, including performances of resilience by LGBT youth who are bullied, and the ways in which their performances serve to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions concerning “victim” subjectivities (Berry, [forthcoming](#)); challenges that stem from conducting research that works with others’ personal stories to study situations of considerable hardship, e.g., suicide that results from bullying (Berry, 2017); and bullying within the family context (largely the ways stories on LGBT bullying help to challenge normative cultural prescriptions that legislate family relationships as being involuntary; see Berry & Adams, 2016).

Researchers have recently begun to engage more with LGBT bullying, a mode of aggression based on the LGBT identities, or perceived identities, of those who are victimized (see, for example, Rivers & Duncan, 2013). This research has focused on a diverse number of

issues including multicultural experiences with bullying (Arroyo & Gómez, 2013), uses of the word “fag” in high school (Pascoe, 2007), and bullying regarding “coming out” as gay (Adams, 2011). Also, the inaugural issue of *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* (see Morris & Nakayama, 2013) examines a range of issues on LGBT bullying. Additionally, my stories in *Bullied* focus on the confounding nature of coming to terms with one’s gayness as a young boy, as a result of bullying and a homophobic, hyper-masculine U.S. culture. While more work on LGBT bullying exists, this issue is underrepresented in the research literature (Espelage & Low, 2013). We need more inquiry, especially as it pertains to the impact LGBT bullying has on students’ identities, well-being, and schooling experiences generally.

I am honored to write this “stimulus essay” on LGBT bullying in schools, which I organize in these ways: I first describe assumptions and other aspects of my phenomenological lifeworld (everyday reality) that guide my orientation to this problem. I then turn to two recent surveys to explore the prevalence and meaning of bullying for LGBT youth as it pertains to issues of relational communication and LGBT identities, primarily the identities of victimized persons. Holistically, I aim to convey these ideas in ways that shine a light on the corrosive nature of bullying as it pertains to LGBT students’ ability to freely relate, be themselves, and flourish in school.

According to Schrag (1997), “All starting points are contingent. One could always choose another beginning” (p. 2). Phenomenologically speaking, I “start” here by reflexively situating my work in this current article in terms of my being a gay man, and a scholar who uses critical interpretive approaches to research and teaching on relational communication and cultural identity. I next describe these influences.

My experiences as a gay man who experienced bullying during my youth further informs the ways I investigate this problem (see Berry, 2016). Because I experienced hostile climates and bullying in my youth, the surveys I explore below implicate me; that is, I am hermeneutically self-implicated by (Schrag, 2003), and am “in” these reports. This resonance, which feel, to me, to be deep and lasting, leads me to understand LGBT bullying as being real, common, impactful, and not to be minimized. In another and more general sense, being gay enables me to identify the ways in which LGBT bullying is symptomatic of larger cultural issues. For instance, I intimately know about the ways homophobia and heteronormativity continue to work against queer people, tirelessly organizing, evaluating, and legislating against opportunities for living a free and full participatory life; the ways LGBT folks, in spite of recent advances for our civil rights (e.g., marriage equality), are often still “othered,” and, as a result, relegated to second class citizenship; and, in contrast, the inspiring ways in which so many queer people I know or have witnessed tend to consistently perform as strong, fabulous, and peaceful and gentle warriors for social justice in the face of this oppression.⁴ These dimensions are interrelated and open-ended factors that shape the ways I engage with LGBT bullying at school.

I orient to this project also assuming that LGBT bullying is fundamentally a process of relational communication (Berry, 2016). According to Carey (1989), communication is “a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (p. 17). That is, communication is a practice within which persons form, continue or perpetuate, mend, and make anew human understanding (“reality”). Extending on this definition, relational communication is a jointly accomplished process in which conversation partners use linguistic and embodied (“verbal” and “nonverbal”) messages to

symbolically co-constitute, and reconstitute (make and remake), share, and use meaning (Berry, 2016). In addition, these partners are always and already interdependent, displaying and relying on our mutual influence as we interact. Each partner brings to interaction unique needs, impulses, and desires, influences that inform relating, and does so from the unique vantage point of our lived experience. In these ways, relational communication is a dynamic, tensional, and often uncertain process.

LGBT bullying, much like bullying generally, is decidedly communicative because each phase of this aggression relies on, and speaks to, communication practices (Berry, 2016; Pörhöla, Karhunen, & Rainivaara, 2006). Relational messages—the words used and actions embodied, how they are performed, how they are received, interpreted, remembered, and used—serve as primary means through which bullying and responding to bullying happens. In fact, bullying would not be possible, or exist in the first place, without these means of relating. In a time when more mindfulness would benefit communication and communicators, bullying is typically quite mindless; that is, youth who bully others do so to purposefully harm them, not to convey compassionate and nonjudgmental regard. Indeed, this aggression essentially capitalizes on people’s interconnectedness, exploiting the relationality that is foundational to students’ lived experience for their gain and victimized students’ losses, not out of an effort to seek peace and love, but to instigate and perpetuate chaos over time.⁵

I also “arrive” to this work assuming that LGBT bullying relies on and reshapes identities of difference. At the very least, the concept of “identity” speaks to self-understanding, or who one understands oneself to be. In turn, identity formation is a social process wherein people perform, or constitute, identity (identities, actually) with others relationally. As Schrag (2003) writes, “No ‘I’ is an island entire of itself; every subject is a piece of the continent of other subjects, a part of the main of intersubjectivity” (p. 125). A closer look at this co-constitutive process would suggest identities are not only formed but *negotiated* within interaction and relationships. As a matter of negotiation, identities are contested phenomena that are informed, and sometimes governed, by social constraints, such as power. Some identities are more contested than others.

Whereas messages are the primary means of bullying, LGBT identities are often its central focus (Berry, 2016), a factor of this aggression I see working in at least two ways. On one level, LGBT bullying relies on the identities of youth who dwell on social margins, outside of the normatively conceptualized “center” of relational contexts, including schools. These youth live with, and through, stigmatized, or “spoiled” identities (Goffman, 1963). They are “others” who perform “abnormal” and “objectionable” subjectivities, which attract those who bully, and, in turn, fuel bullying practices. Yet, on another level, participation within bullying constitutes the identities of participants. Pertaining to those who are bullied, bullying further stigmatizes these youth, rendering them unworthy and subject to attack. In this sense, LGBT who are bullied emerge having been shaped in damaging and often lasting ways.

Hostile climate/bullied LGBT students

*Hostile school climate*⁶

The Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Education Network (GLSEN) 2013 National School Climate Survey engaged 7,898 students between the ages of 13 and 21, from all 50 U.S. states

and the District of Columbia, and from 2,700 different school districts. This survey is valuable to the current discussion because it describes communicative behaviors that illustrate bullying, a diverse number of climate issues that create a context for bullying, characteristics and effects of hostile school climates, and available LGBT-related school resources.

On a more general level, safety at school is (remains) a significant issue for many LGBT students. For instance,

- “55.5% of students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 37.8% because of their gender expression” (GLSEN, p. 4).
- “30.3% of LGBT students missed at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, and over a tenth (10.6%) missed four or more days in the past month” (p. 4).
- “Over a third avoided gender-segregated spaces in school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (bathrooms: 35.4%, locker rooms: 35.3%)” (p. 4).
- “Most reported avoiding school functions and extracurricular activities (68.1% and 61.2%, respectively) because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable” (p. 4).

Feeling safe is, to me, an essential state of being, a way of orienting to the world that works as a precursor to the ways LGBT students will, or will not, perform at school (i.e., how they “do” schooling and “be” students). The number of LGBT students who feel unsafe speaks to students who engage with school frightened and already at a disadvantage. In turn, their dis-ease is consequential, for instance, in terms of school attendance. Folk wisdom from my lived experience would lead me to believe many youth will do anything they can to get out of going to school. For them, maybe school is boring, or they would rather be playing with friends or watching television at home. In contrast, the LGBT youth who are represented in and/or who resonate with the GLSEN survey work experience an alternate reality: they stay home out of a fear that, should they go to school, their well-being would be in danger. When they make it to school, these youth work to remain vigilant about where they physically are and are not, and where they should and should not be, again, as a result of their feeling unsafe.

Anti-LGBT remarks are an additional dimension comprising a hostile school climate for LGBT students. Take, for instance,

- “71.4% of LGBT students heard the word ‘gay’ used in a negative way (e.g., ‘that’s so gay’) frequently or often at school and 90.8% reported that they felt distressed because of this language” (GLSEN, p. 4).
- “64.5% heard other homophobic remarks (e.g., ‘dyke’ and ‘faggot’) frequently or often” (p. 4).
- “56.4% heard negative remarks about gender expression (not acting ‘masculine enough’ or ‘feminine enough’) frequently or often” (p. 4).
- “A third (33.1%) heard negative remarks specifically about transgender people, like ‘tranny’ or ‘he/she,’ frequently or often” (p. 4).
- “51.4% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff, and 55.5% of students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff” (p. 4).

School culture tends to bombard LGBT students with epithetical language regarding their own, or someone else's, sexual orientation and gender expression, and this discourse, in turn, requires them to respond. This process entails trying to reconcile blatantly homophobic (“dyke” and “faggot”) and transphobic (“tranny”) language. Yet, and more frequently, it also means needing to endure an onslaught of microaggressions (“that’s so gay”) (see Nadal, 2013).⁷ Taken together, this discourse implicates LGBT students’ identities: they are the abject “dykes,” “faggots,” “tranny,” and/or “gays” about whom others are speaking negatively and harmfully. In addition, participation in this way of relating by teachers and school staff—the adults these youth are supposed to trust, who are supposed to know and do better, and who are supposed to be models of inclusive and violence-free climates and protectors of students, especially the most vulnerable ones—essentially legitimizes anti-LGBT remarks and, in doing so, further imperils students.

Harassment and assault also contribute to a harsh climate for LGBT students. For instance,

- “74.1% of LGBT students were verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 55.2% because of their gender expression” (GLSEN, p. 5).
- “36.2% were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 22.7% because of their gender expression” (p. 5).
- “16.5% were physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 11.4% because of their gender expression” (p. 5).
- “49.0% of LGBT students experienced electronic harassment in the past year [i.e., they were cyberbullied]” (p. 5).
- “56.7 of LGBT students who were harassed or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff, most commonly because they doubted that effective intervention would occur or the situation could become worse if reported” (p. 5).
- “61.6% of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response” (p. 5).

LGBT students clearly have a reason to feel unsafe at school: violence in several forms consumes and stigmatizes their academic lives and selves. As a result, for those who choose to bully them, LGBT identities are “asking” to be challenged and critiqued, generally, and policed and harmed, more particularly. In turn, the involvement of “traditional” and cyberbullying speaks to the cunning and resourceful nature of those who bully. In these ways, many LGBT students continue to face violent interactions and bonds while at school that result from, and rely on, their difference. It is no wonder many feel the need to remain silent rather than reporting that they have been bullied.

Oppressive policies and practices

Discriminatory school policies and practices also inform this hostile climate and bullying. According to the GLSEN survey, “55.5% of LGBT students reported personally experiencing any LGBT-related discriminatory policies or practices at school ... and almost two

thirds (65.2%) said other students had experienced these policies and practices at school” (Kosciw et al., 2014, p. 5). More specifically,

- “28.2% of students reported being disciplined for public displays of affection that were not disciplined among non-LGBT students.” Similarly, “18.1% of students were prevented from attending a dance or function with someone of the same gender” (p. 5).
- “17.8% of students were restricted from forming or promoting a GSA [Gay/Straight Alliance extracurricular club].” In terms of curriculum, “17.5% of students were prohibited from discussing or writing about LGBT topics in school assignments” (p. 5).
- “15.5% of students were prevented from wearing clothing or items supporting LGBT issues [and] 9.2% of students reported being disciplined for simply identifying as LGBT” (p. 5).

In these ways, the infrastructure (school policies) and the ways in which this system is enacted (its practices) serve as an additional context that creates a negative (i.e., homophobic and heteronormative) climate and, in effect, enables bullying issues for LGBT students and their friends or peers. Instead of creating a comfortable atmosphere for LGBT to grow and flourish as they are, and wish to be, this approach establishes and maintains barriers that mandate them to carefully manage how they perform with/for others. More specifically, such barriers create the conditions that make it necessary for them to be someone other than who they are, or rather, others’ versions of who they should be. It speaks to an ongoing process of negotiating that confines LGBT students to a practice of translating what they “naturally” wish to do (e.g., hold hands, wear particular clothing, participate in social events with boyfriends or girlfriends) into some way of performing that will be acceptable to others, which, in turn, means not being able to comfortably be themselves. These policies and practices essentially compel students, presumably at the risk of social sanction (e.g., punishment by school and/or peers, bullying), to try to “hide” who they are, “pass” as straight or cis-gendered, or, at the very least, “cover,” or tone down and make less visible their difference (Yoshino, 2007).

School policies regarding transgender students, in particular, also contribute to this hostile climate:

- “42.2% of transgender students had been prevented from using their preferred name (10.9% of LGBT students overall)” (GLSEN, p. 5).
- “59.2% of transgender students had been required to use a bathroom or locker room of their legal sex (18.7% of students overall)” (p. 5).
- “31.6 of transgender students had been prevented from wearing clothes considered inappropriate based on their legal sex (19.2% of students overall)” (p. 5).

“Be yourself.” “Don’t let others affect who you are.” These stock messages are commonplace to the social interactions and larger cultural messages I regularly observe. However, similar to LGB students, the demands placed through these actions on transgender students are, to me, vivid and concrete instantiations of telling someone to be who they aren’t and don’t want to be. For example, names are some of the most personal and intimate aspects of one’s lives and are proscribed by society as important and needing to be performed on the ground. They follow us through and organize our lives. To readers of

this article: Think of how cold or marginalizing it felt when someone you knew repeatedly forgot your name. For these transgender students, others are disregarding their chosen name, doing it on purpose, and telling them about their intentions to put them under erasure in this way. In addition, transphobia is such a reality that transgender students are often not even allowed to excrete waste in ways that allow them to feel comfortable. While I find each of these issues terrible in their own right, I shudder to think about the everyday realities comprising the lives of transgender persons of color in schools, an issue that merits more thorough engagement and advocacy than is possible in this article.⁸

Effects on education

The GLSEN survey also reports on the effects of hostile climates and concludes “a hostile school climate affects students’ academic success and mental health. LGBT students who experience victimization and discrimination at school have worse educational outcomes and poorer psychological well-being” (Kosciw et al., 2014, p. 6). For example, LGBT students who endured victimization missed more school than those who had not, had lower grade point averages than students who were harassed less frequently, showed less interest in pursuing postsecondary education, and suffered from more depression and lower self-esteem. In addition, LGBT who endured LGBT-oriented discrimination missed more school than those who had not been discriminated against, had worse grade point averages than others, and lived with more depression and less self-esteem than those who had not faced discrimination.

Although most of the GLSEN study speaks to negative realities, it also reports on promising possibilities concerning LGBT students’ schooling experiences. For instance, students at schools that offered Gay–Straight Alliances experienced less homophobic remarks, had school staff who more frequently intervened in response to witnessing homophobic comments, felt safer as LGBT within school climate, suffered from less victimization, and felt like they were more a part of the school (Kosciw et al., 2014). In addition, LGBT students in schools that provided LGBT-inclusive curriculum tended to experience fewer homophobic comments, felt unsafe less frequently due to their being LGBT, were absent less often, and had peers that were more likely to accept students. Finally, LGBT students who had numerous staff who were supportive at school felt safer, attended school more, achieved higher grades, and felt more like a part of the school.

Trumping progress

HRC (2017) surveyed more than 50,000 U.S. youth ages 13–18, of which 56% self-identified as LGBTQ+⁹, to learn about “the lived experiences, fears, and convictions” (p. 3) they have experienced related to 2016 national election cycle. The outcomes of the survey are troublesome and put into question the progress that has been made in recent years with respect to LGBT civil rights (e.g., overturning of the ban against transgender people who wish to serve in military; GLAAD, 2017). According to the HRC survey,

- “Almost half of youth reported feeling nervous most or all of the time during the past 30 days, and fully one-third of youth reported feeling hopeless during most or all of that period. Twenty-six percent reported a pervasive sense of worthlessness” (p. 2).

- “Seventy percent of respondents reported witnessing bullying, hate messages or harassment during or since the 2017 election. Of those, 79% said such behaviors have been occurring more frequently since the onset of the presidential campaign” (p. 2).
- “Among young people who reported seeing bullying and harassment, 70% had witnessed incidents motivated by sexual orientation, 59% had seen incidents motivated by immigration status, and 55% had witnessed incidents motivated by gender” (p. 2).
- “More than a quarter of LGBTQ youth say they have been personally bullied or harassed since the presidential campaign began, compared to 14% of non-LGBTQ youth. Forty-six percent of LGBTQ youth reported muting their self-expression or re-thinking their plans for the future in light of the election—nearly double the percentage of non-LGBTQ youth who did so” (p. 2).
- “Despite widespread post-election fear and anxiety, young people say they are more committed than ever to supporting others who are targeted for discrimination and harassment. Fifty-seven percent say that since Election Day, they more frequently feel motivated to help people in their community” (p. 2).

The Trump Administration—led unapologetically by Trump himself—has persistently stressed and underscored the corrosive nature of LGBT bullying, directed hate speech at people who perform with other types of difference (e.g., immigration status, sex/gender, ability status), and exemplified how these distressing ways of performing speak to identity. The above statistics suggest these actions have made an impact: LGBT students continue to be rattled by bullying. Many have opted to modify their ways of relating and being —“muting their self-expression or re-thinking their plans for the future in light of the election”—and, in doing so, intensify their identity negotiation practices. The prospect of being bullied and overall worries about safety disrupts youth’s ability to comfortably be themselves. The relational move suggests it is better to be safe than sorry (i.e., further shamed, marginalized, bullied). At the same time, those who respond via increased advocacy for social justice demonstrate a different sort of negotiation. For them, allowing bullying to win (and the larger societal forces that encourage this lack of concern for vulnerable bodies of difference) falls outside the realm of ethical ways of performing. While impressive and needed, this way of responding also puts youth in harm’s way, as their advocacy makes them more visible and, thus, subject to bullying. Overall, the HRC (2017) survey tells us the U.S. is in unprecedented territory, wherein the Trump administration’s behavior essentially legitimizes aggression and gives tacit permission (and encouragement) for others to bully.

In sum, being lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender remains a stigmatized and stigmatizing social location for youth to negotiate. As a result, many LGBT students continue to face harsh school climates and persistent bullying. Also, schools and schooling experiences, while ostensibly warm, enriching, and inclusive in some ways and for certain people, continue to be risky and violent spaces regarding LGBT realities and for LGBT students. The extent to which LGBT students are able to be themselves safely, and to identify themselves and the stories of their unique lives within curricula and school policies, is fueled by this bullying, which variably renders teachers, school staff, and administrators and school board members complicit in bullying and its impact. Granted, the surveys I have explored demonstrate the ways inclusive and affirming pedagogy and teachers and other school staff often lead LGBT students to feel safer in school and to thrive

academically. In turn, just as there are likely unreported cases of LGBT students being bullied, there are also likely schools and teachers, school staff, etc., who live and put their bodies on the line for students of difference. Nevertheless, these optimal ways of engaging relationally with LGBT students are not the norm. Indeed, the relational story of harm, and potential harm, stemming from LGBT bullying, persists.

As a phenomenologist who most often uses autoethnography and ethnography in my research and teaching, I emerge from my process of writing this article eager to hear more from the voices of the sexual (and gendered) minorities represented in these surveys. I want them to tell me, and us, their personal stories, sparing no detail as they help us to understand what it has been like for them to endure bullying because of something so basic and fundamental to being human as the sex of the person to whom they are attracted, whom they like or love, and/or who they are as gendered beings. Also, I want to hear the personal stories of those who have bullied others, and educators who are on the front lines at schools, to tell me, and us, their own vulnerable stories. The same goes for the parent/s of those who have been bullied, or who have bullied, as a result of their LGBT identity, as well as leaders whose communities are pervaded by bullying in school. Also, I would love to hear more stories of the successes achieved in terms of creating and assuring schooling experiences that are more inclusive and equitable. Even more, I would love to bring these people, and their stories, together, so we can learn from them and allow them to complement and expand on the statistical information leading these surveys.

We owe it to LGBT students to do better with this troubling problem. Their identities, education, and lives depend on it.

Notes

1. See Bishop Mills and Muckleroy Carwile (2009) for an examination of the distinctions between bullying and teasing. With respect to the current essay, none of the ideas I explore are representative of teasing.
2. Statistically speaking, between 40% and 80% of youth are bullied, and 7% of youth experience more severe bullying (Glover, Gough, Johnson, & Cartwright, 2010). Yet rates of prevalence vary based on the study. See Berry (2016) for additional statistics, as well as a description of the ways bullying impacts youth.
3. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of South Florida (Pro00014179).
4. Homophobia, heteronormativity, and Trump's election and presidency (see below) serve as larger social forces (see Martocci, 2015) that enable the bullying culture I know and have lived.
5. See Berry (2016) for a more detailed investigation of the interconnections between mindfulness, mindlessness, and bullying, and the "mindful imperative" that informs the research I conducted for and conveyed in my book.
6. GLSEN's survey reports on climate and bullying issues regarding performances of sexual orientation and gender identity. Yet, these performances often also interrelate or intersect with other factors of one's social location (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, religion, ability status, geographic location). I hope my work here will spark further discussion and inquiry on the relevance of these factors to LGBT bullying.
7. Nadal (2008) defines "microaggressions" as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups" (p. 23).

8. My thanks go to Jay Brower (Western Connecticut State University) and Tony E. Adams (Bradley University) for their feedback on my work in this article.
9. Throughout this article I have used the same acronyms that appear in the original surveys that I reference. Differently here, HRC uses “Q” to signify “queer” and “+” to illustrate any other variations related or inclusive to LGBT.

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CONNECTIONS TO COMMUNICATION, TEACHING, AND LEARNING



LGBT bullying in school: perspectives on prevention

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KEYWORDS LGBT bullying; homophobic bullying; transphobic bullying; bullying prevention

You are not alone. You didn't do anything wrong. You didn't do anything to deserve being bullied. And there is a whole world waiting for you, filled with possibilities. There are people out there who love you and care about you just the way you are. And so, if you ever feel like because of bullying, because of what people are saying, that you're getting down on yourself, you've got to make sure to reach out to people you trust. Whether it's your parents, teachers, folks that you know care about you just the way you are. You've got to reach out to them; don't feel like you're in this by yourself.

—Barack Obama, “It Gets Better” Video, 2010

LGBT students, and those who are questioning their sexual orientation, report higher levels of victimization leading to truancy, depression, and suicidal feelings (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009).¹ Our colleague Keith Berry bravely shared his own experiences being bullied and offered a phenomenological perspective on LGBT bullying today. We spent considerable time reflecting on how to respond, and, to be transparent, we struggled. Although we did receive our share of teasing and verbal aggression, neither of us identifies as gay, bisexual, or transgender, and we do not remember being bullied on a regular basis. Given that we could not respond from an experiential lens, our cisgender perspective is limited but informed by our ongoing scholarship to address bullying in K-12 schools. We conduct social science research on bullying across a variety of contexts due to our belief that it is perhaps the single most destructive, yet avoidable, communication problem facing our schools.

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Our work, from a sociopsychological perspective, highlights the traits and motivations for bullying behavior and its unfortunate consequences: students who believe inequality should exist between groups are more likely to bully (Goodboy, Martin, & Rittenour, 2016a), students higher in sexism, classism, and sexual prejudice are more likely to bully (Goodboy, Martin, & Rittenour, 2016b), and students who are bullied in high school report less motivation and adjustment in their first semester of college (Goodboy, Martin, & Goldman, 2016). Taken together, these studies point out how bullying, as a communicative process, is deeply shaped by the psychological profiles of the perpetrator.

In this essay, we respond by offering two potential solutions to LGBT bullying in schools, but we recognize that these are not easy solutions nor are they implementable for every school district. Our purpose is to continue this conversation by highlighting research suggesting that continuing education and training for K-12 teachers, coupled with the formation and preservation of gay-straight alliances (GSAs) in schools, offers two ways to address LGBT bullying.

K-12 teachers: continuing education and training

We believe that education is one of the most effective ways to prevent and deter LGBT bullying in schools. After all, student (mis)education is a principal cause of homophobic and transphobic bullying; some adults teach prejudiced beliefs (e.g., when adults teach kids in religious settings that it is wrong or immoral to be gay) and impart heteronormative ideologies to children, who then enforce traditional gender norms among other students (e.g., when young male bullies embrace masculine ideology beliefs and target other boys who act feminine; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2013). Indeed, education is at the heart of the LGBT bullying problem (as well as being part of the bullying solution): students who are less educated adopt more heteronormative practices that privilege heterosexuality, including LGBT nonacceptance; yet their more educated student counterparts are more likely to reject negative attitudes toward LGBT peers (Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). Additionally, some adults, especially parents, perpetuate LGBT bullying behavior when they teach their children to adopt similar ideological attitudes that include their own antigay prejudices (Meeusen & Dhont, 2015). Fortunately, K-12 teachers can counteract this miseducation.

Our K-12 teachers have the power and ability to shape the culture of their classrooms, and subsequently entire schools, by teaching their students perspective-taking, empathy, respect, caring, and inclusion of the LGBT student body (Porter, Plog, Jens, Garrity, & Sager, 2012). Yet to do so, it is crucial that these teachers receive the proper training on diversity and inclusion to be able to effectively communicate (and feel more confident about their ability to communicate) with students about LGBT issues. K-12 teachers must serve as inclusive role models for all students, and many of them want to, but some of them require continued education on cultural sensitivity and sexuality (Lovaas, 2009). O'Donoghue and Guerin (2017) found that teachers report a lack of training and unfamiliarity about bullying as the largest barriers for addressing homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools. Teachers who received training on the topic, however, felt more efficacious in addressing bullying and reported that the training resulted in a positive impact on their schools. Westheimer and Szalacha's (2015) research on the "Welcoming

Schools” program, which was implemented in 11 public elementary schools, revealed that K-12 teachers valued their training on diversity, gender inclusiveness, and biased-based bullying, and wanted more. Although teacher training programs like “Welcoming Schools” are offered in many school districts, most do not prepare K-12 educators for multicultural competencies beyond an isolated course experience, including concepts related to gender, sexuality, gay/lesbian rights, and privilege (Ngai, 2004). If teachers are not trained to be sensitive to LGBT issues and do not teach curriculum in ways that recognize and support multicultural diversity with their students, the problem of LGBT mistreatment among students will fester.

In some schools, the problem is festering right now. Some K-12 teachers, who might otherwise be effective educators, are unaware of their biases and microaggressions against LGBT students. McCabe, Dragowski, and Rubinson (2013) reported that 11% of the school psychologists overheard school staff, including teachers, support staff, and administrators communicate homophobic slurs and biased statements about their own LGBT students (e.g., teachers talking in disrespectful ways about effeminate boys perceived to be gay). Rivers (2011) pointed out that up to 25% of students who had experienced homophobic bullying, believed they had been bullied by a teacher because of their perceived or actual sexual orientation, and they felt that approaching a staff member or teacher for help was risky in a school culture that seemed unsupportive of LGBT youth. Children deserve to feel safe in their schools and to feel accepted and valued by their teachers.

Our position is that K-12 teachers should serve as inclusive role models for their students and can deter LGBT bullying by receiving continuing professional development that enables them to do the following:

Develop knowledge, comfort, confidence, commitment and an inclusive and confirming framework to understand and position these issues ... to ensure they are not reinforcing traditional and discriminatory notions of gender and sexuality and are equipped to effectively address homophobia, sexism, and other forms of gender based violence. (Ollis, 2013, pp. 150–151)

In the end, diversity and inclusion training may ultimately make a significant difference in how competently a K-12 teacher communicates with a bully or target of LGBT victimization, a parent or administrator, or within the community in general. But if they have never received the training they need, we cannot expect K-12 teachers to know how to serve as inclusive educators, how to communicate with bullies, victims, or bully-victims involved in LGBT mistreatment, or how to even begin to understand the daily and long-term issues that LGBT students face at school or elsewhere.

Resources for K-12 teachers and LGBT students

We recognize that most K-12 teachers are not in control of the teacher education programs, so if training is unavailable or lacks depth, there are free resources available for teachers interested in receiving training. For those teachers who do not have opportunities to receive diversity and inclusion training from districts that do not value it, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN; www.glsen.org) can help educators understand how to (a) discuss LGBT bullying, gender roles, and diversity with elementary students, (b) communicate positive representations of LGBT individuals in their curriculum, and (c)

encourage students to intervene as bystanders when they see bullying. GLSEN offers a safe space kit, lesson plans, LGBT-inclusive curriculum, webinars, and even accepts requests for professional development workshop opportunities.

Another resource is the Safe Zone project. The Safe Zone project is designed to increase educator's sensitivity, awareness, and knowledge of important issues affecting LGBT youth (Finkel, Storaasli, Bandele, & Schaefer, 2003). As faculty who have taken the Safe Zone training, we can speak to its importance in creating a culture of inclusion. For example, we learned about terms that are derogatory (e.g., hermaphrodite), and we were educated about more inclusive terms to replace them (e.g., intersex). We were taught to always address our students by their first names instead of assuming gender identity and ascribing binary gendered pronouns (e.g., he, she, him, her). Additionally, through this training, we learned the importance of acknowledging our own gender identities to students. These are just a few examples of how resources such as this can influence teaching in a department and classroom. And although diversity is part of our department and is ingrained in our policies and practices, we recognize that this is something we have to continue to work at. One training session or resource does not make any educator an authority on LGBT issues, but it can help, especially for those K-12 teachers who receive little to no training at all.

K-12 students play an important role in opposing LGBT bullying. One way they do so is by creating and maintaining GSAs,² which are student-run organizations that promote youth empowerment and advocacy to address inequalities at school. GSAs provide a space for students to seek understanding and discuss LGBT issues (Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). Most importantly, GSAs help LGBT students and allies feel supported by their school and peers, which buffers against a school culture that might otherwise disregard bullying (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011). Put simply, GSAs are successful and effective. Research demonstrates that GSAs lower the use of homophobic language at school, reduce victimization, and increase bystander interventions for LGBT youth (Schneider, Travers, St. John, Munro, & Klein, 2013). As Poteat et al. (2013) noted, "the mere presence of GSAs in schools is associated with lower suicidality, truancy, drug use, and sexual health risk behavior" (p. 84). Schneider et al. (2013) cautioned that "the ultimate values in GSAs lies in changing the social climate of the school," but that "GSAs must be visible, active, and a significant part of the school community and must be sustainable from year to year, regardless of student or staff turnover" (p. 136).

Despite the clear benefits for LGBT students and allies, some school districts face public opposition from parents, students, teachers, administrators, and community members in recognizing GSAs. Legally speaking, GSAs are protected by law under the Equal Access Act and the First Amendment of the constitution, so public schools cannot deny them, but that does not stop some schools from trying (Pratt, 2007). Mayo (2014) highlighted that in at least two cases (one in Boyd County, Kentucky and the other in Salt Lake City, Utah), schools tried to illegally ban GSAs. Other schools, such as one in Lubbock, Texas, have tried to prohibit GSAs under the guise of an abstinence-only curriculum (Mayo, 2014). We should encourage our students to create GSAs and communicate support in these spaces, especially since adolescents spend most of their time at school and this is where much of the LGBT bullying occurs (Toomey et al., 2011). While some current events and specific proposals from lawmakers are discouraging, we remain encouraged by more recent legislative changes and commitments by schools to make educational spaces safer for LGBT students (Rivers, 2018) including state laws, regulations,

and ethical codes that address the bullying of students based on sexual orientation and gender identity.³

Conclusion

As is probably clear, this problem of LGBT bullying is complex; solving the problem requires multiple, varied strategies. In addition to those approaches we have addressed thus far (focusing on teacher training and facilitating GSAs), other methods can also make a substantial difference (Jimerson & Huai, 2012; Rigby, 2012; Rivers, Duncan, & Besag, 2007). Schneider and Dimito (2008) provide recommendations focused on what schools can do (and which can also be applied to individual classrooms): (a) policy and enforcement (having a clear policy on bullying that supports the safety of all LGBT students in the school with teachers and administrators willing to carry out the policy), (b) social support (letting students know of supportive teachers who are safe contacts), (c) resources (offering pedagogical materials to infuse LGBT issues into the curriculum), and (d) visibility (making sure students are able to visibly see the resources, seek the support, and be aware of and have access to the policies that support them). The depth and breadth of these recommendations indicate the large task ahead to ensuring that LGBT students can pursue their education free from bullying.

As Kendall and Sidebotham (2004) argued, it is up to schools

to take reasonable care to ensure that students are not subject to homophobic [and we would add transphobic] abuse, whether physical or verbal, whilst at school and that steps are taken to ensure that the harms that result from anti-lesbian/gay bullying are avoided. (p. 87)

We are optimistic that school experiences have become better for some LGBT students, since “LGBT young people are coming out earlier than before and primary/elementary schools are increasingly reporting that they actively support the trans students in their care” (Rivers, 2018, p. 43). LGBT youth have witnessed progress as more schools now have inclusive nondiscrimination and antibullying policies, as well as legal protections from Title IX.⁴ Yet progress does not mean we stop working. As Dr. Cris Mayo (Director of the LGBTQ+ Center at West Virginia University) suggests, “Now more than ever LGBTQ youth need allies in schools willing to take risks to support them. They need allies willing to stop bullying, willing to advocate for inclusive policies, and willing to learn more—and teach more—about LGBTQ-related issues” (C. Mayo, personal communication, February 15, 2018).

As we end this essay, we wonder how communication scholars might study and respond to the problem of LGBT bullying, as lives are at risk. This is a gender communication issue. It is an interpersonal communication issue. It is an intercultural communication issue. It is an instructional communication issue. From communication scholarship (see Manning, Stern, & Johnson, 2018; McBride et al., 2016), we know that the classroom is an important space in which individuals discuss and disclose their sexual orientation and that students stay closeted based on how their teachers communicate with them. We know that classroom cultures can be enhanced by incorporating queer-inclusive curricula including prudently designed activities that promote trans awareness and examples that respect inclusivity. We also know that teaching with gender neutral language is a simple step in opposing homophobic and transphobic

behavior at school. There is much more to know, explore, and study, though, and we, as communication scholars, are well-situated to make important scholarly and pedagogical contributions to address the LGBT bullying problem in schools. So, we ask ourselves and you the reader, from a communication perspective, what can we offer and what are we prepared to do about a problem for which the stakes are high and the consequences are devastating?

Notes

1. By responding to the topic of this forum and focusing on bullying data from LGBT youth, we do not mean to overlook the similar struggles and challenges that students with disabilities face at school (Rose, 2011), or other forms of bias-based bullying due to race, ethnicity, and immigrant status, among others (Scherr & Larson, 2012).
2. Historically, many GSAs do not have a diverse racial membership and may privilege white students, although youth of color contend that students in GSAs recognize that the biases against them intersect with biases about sexuality and gender identity (Mayo, 2017)
3. These laws, regulations, and ethics codes vary state to state in the quality of protection for LGBT youth.
4. While LGBT youth might be better protected today than in the past, trans youth currently do not share the same protections (Mayo, 2017).

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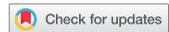
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CONNECTIONS TO COMMUNICATION, TEACHING, AND LEARNING



We, bully: on politicizing compulsory bullying

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There was a school boy whose name I forget. His mannerisms were flamboyant and unruly. I was better equipped to downplay my own queerness; he was less privileged. In an attempt to push queerness as far away from me as possible, I harassed—no, bullied—the boy. I often think of the boy whose name I forget and whose mannerisms were flamboyant and unruly: perfect.

I have not forgotten
 The sway in his hips, fusing my gaze
 The waves in his hair curling utopic promises
 His lisp unraveling linguistic expectancies.
 I have not forgotten
 Projecting (internalized) cisheterosexism, misogyny

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I have not forgotten
 My first queer pedagogue
 Who taught me how best to navigate; Myself.
 In exchange for a black eye.

hooks (2014) theorized, “The enemy within must be transformed before we can confront the enemy outside” (p. 12). hooks argued ending sexism begins with the self; refusal to do otherwise risks reifying the problem one seeks to challenge. We understand bullying less as individuated “bad” compulsory behavior and more as an intersectional cultural performance of/for power within relational contexts; these cultural performances “assume[...] that if one group gains power, another loses it,” fallaciously conceptualizing power as a limited resource (Tarrant, 2009, p. 20). As such, this essay leads with the internal to more effectively engage the external in critically transformative ways.

For us, bullying is a typical instantiation of oppressive power where one is vying for access to cultural power at another’s expense. “Typical” here does not refer to that which is *natural*, *normal*, *neutral*, or *necessary* (to borrow a phrase from Kristin Langellier; see Gingrich-Philbrook, 2010, p. 455), but rather refers to what one might expect to occur under oppressive conditions. Said differently and more directly, cisheterosexism orders Western culture. Expecting violences that seek to ensure cisheterosexist supremacy, thereby privileging particular bodies and identities over others, is not unreasonable, in and out of school. Similarly, and to press the point intersectionally, it is not unreasonable to assume whiteness orders Western culture, resulting in violences that seek to ensure white supremacist social orders, also privileging particular bodies and identities over others (and, so on, with other systems, such as dis/ableism, sexism, and classism). For example, The GSA Network and Crossroads Collaborative (2014) found LGBT Youth of Color (LGBTYOC) experience: (1) increased surveillance and policing (e.g., being labeled “‘messy,’ and assumed to be ‘starting trouble’ simply because of the way he [*sic*] looks” [p. 9]), (2) harsher disciplinary means and biased application of policies (e.g., “youth of color who bully are disciplined with more regularity than white youth who are bullying” [p. 10]), and (3) victim blaming (i.e., bullying as a way to secure evaluations of difference). The normative criteria against which intersectional difference is assessed is arbitrary, though the material effects of these arbitrary standards are profound.

Four sections frame this response. First, we *articulate* bullying in relation to normative individuated terms to trace cultural flows of power that animate performances of bullying. Second, Keating (2013) helps us *disarticulate* bullying through a “metaphysics of interconnectivity” (p. 30). Disarticulating opens the epistemic and ontological terrain for us to re-envision bullying in relational terms, marking our third turn where we *rearticulate* bullying as queer worldmaking (Yep, 2017). Fourth, our response closes with an invitation to perform bullying with a critical difference.

Articulating the (cisheterosexual) bully and the (LGBT) victim

Although there is no universal definition for bullying, Berry highlights attributes: *deliberate* and *repetitive victimization* that is animated through a *power imbalance*. In the

case of LGBT bullying, cisheterosexism informs the *power imbalance* through the *deliberate* targeting and *repetitive victimization* of bodies and identities that fall outside of normative gender and/or sexual criteria. For Berry, bullying is a process of relational communication where a bully/bullied dichotomy constitutes subjectivity in relation to cisheterosexism.

Four key actors constitute the cultural performance of LGBT bullying: (1) the LGBT Victim, (2) the assumed-Cisheterosexual Bully, (3) the School, including its supporting actors, and (4) the Savior. Payne and Smith (2013) argued the typical bully narrative articulates LGBT students as “perpetually ... victims,” Bullies as “bad kids with inadequate social skills” and/or who come from “abusive homes,” and Schools as neutral sites that are forced to mitigate encroaching external forces rooted in familial shortcomings and pathology (p. 2). The typical bully narrative further articulates the Bully as cisgender and heterosexual, while the LGBT Student is only ever a victim in this binary framework. Schools, understood as neutral sites forced to juggle “bad kids” (read: bullies), inevitably position faculty and staff as neither Bully nor Victim. Instead, faculty and staff are rhetorically framed as “Saviors,” expected to intervene in bullying, despite the reality that—as Berry highlights—51.4% of students endure cisheterosexist verbal assaults from faculty and staff, suggesting the majority of Saviors are Bullies too (GLSEN, 2014, p. 17). In this regard, bullying is a social performance in which multiple actors work collaboratively to institutionally deflect and individualize that which is, in fact, systemically derived and buttressed.

A primary response to bullying includes criminalization through antibullying legislation that relies on and reinforces carceral logics that instantiate criminality as a *natural, normal, neutral, and necessary* response to the individual “bad guy” Bully. Quinn and Meiners (2013) elaborated on the crux of the systemic problematic:

Without acknowledgement of the structural and institutional context—forms of state violence—the individuated anti-bullying laws and other punitive sanctions operating in schools will target those who are already suspect within national logics of race, class, gender, and other marginalizing categories. (p. 158)

To wit, a systemic perspective on bullying demands a reframe in the discourse articulating its prevalence. Locating the onus of bullying matters. For example, GLSEN’s (2014) National School Climate Survey rhetorically framed the onus of bullying: one is bullied “because of their sexual orientation” and/or “gender expression” (p. xvii). Said differently, one’s sexual orientation and gender expression are the cause of bullying; we could argue that this framing effectively blames the victim even as it purports to upend bullying. The point is made evident when we shift the onus to a systemic framework: one is bullied *because of* institutionalized and normalized cisheterosexist standards—including the material effects they leave in their wake—that are always-already intersectionally animated and that anyone can perpetuate, even and including LGBT students. These mundane institutionalized and normalized cisheterosexist standards can include, for instance,

- exclusion of queer, intersex, asexual, bisexual, pansexual, nonmonogamous, transgender, transsexual, and nonbinary voices in curriculum and hiring practices;
- archaic cisheterosexist rituals, including prom king and queen;

- events that bar and censor queer and multiple-partner relations;
- mandatory school assemblies where young men/boys (often student-athletes) dress in clothing typically attributed to young women/girls to allegedly increase “school spirit”;
- science and social studies curricula that perpetuate the colonial project of binary taxonomy;
- dress codes that frame gender non-normative expressions as “theatrical” and “fake”;
- health programs that use “women’s health” as code for “cisgender women’s health”;
- sex education curriculum that privileges reproductive, monogamous, heterosexual, and cisgender experiences.

Bullying is an everyday enactment of power that reinscribes a normative flow of power relations, privileging some bodies and identities at the expense of others. Bullying, then, is a refrain of that which is pervasive.

Disarticulating bullying through a metaphysics of interconnectivity

Keating proffered a “metaphysics of interconnectivity” derived from Moraga and Anzaldúa’s (1981, p. 30) anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back*. This metaphysics marks a coalitional strategy that seeks to complicate intersectionality theorizing through (1) commonalities, (2) interrelatedness, and (3) listening with raw openness. These three lessons provide the means by which we disarticulate bullying as individualistic and pathological, and begin to reimagine bullying in systemic and relational terms as it arises in educational spaces.

Commonalities

Keating (2013) argued intersectionality can be inadvertently deployed in colonialist terms when intersectional articulations “creat[e] arbitrary divisions and an oppositional ‘us-against-them’ mentality that prevents us from recognizing potential commonalities” (p. 36). Specifically, Keating is skeptical of intersectional work that focuses on differences at the dismissal of similarities. Shifting our intersectional lenses to commonalities need not diminish difference, but instead can press us to reconceive of difference as one vector comprising commonality. Formally, Keating understands commonalities as “complex points of connection that both incorporate and move beyond sameness, similarity, and difference; commonalities acknowledge and include difference” (p. 42). The goal is to move toward a nuanced theorizing of the ways our differences animate common experience to make “connections through difference” (p. 59). What, then, would it mean to conceive of bullying as a commonality across a variety of contexts: cyberbullying, teacher-as-bully, workplace bullying, institutional bullying, intrapersonal bullying, and so forth. So conceived, bullying-as-commonality serves as a relational tie.

As the starting point for disarticulating bullying, we implore educators to work with students to collaboratively reflect on their unique relationships to bullying in its many manifestations. Concerted focus should be granted to the ways relationships to bullying converge, diverge, intersect, run parallel, or explode into indiscernible complexity. Resisting attempts to universalize experiences through an uncritical focus on similarity at the dismissal of difference is imperative for educators. Grappling with bullying-as-

commonality includes embracing the same, similar, *and* different ways we impact and are impacted by bullying.

Interrelatedness

For Keating (2013), interrelatedness highlights the ways we are intersubjectively constituted and accountable to one another. The goal is to “react thoughtfully as we engage with others; we learn to pause and self-reflect” (p. 49). In this regard, interrelatedness assumes both bully and victim are intersubjectively constituted—a point made evident in Berry’s articulation. Concurrently, interrelatedness centers reflexivity in that one is actively rendering self and/as other in terms that may and/or may not acquiesce to systemic formations. In his communication scholarship, Jones (2010) theorized “intersectional reflexivity” as a means of taking responsibility for the effects of our communicative behaviors by grappling with intersectionally derived privilege and disadvantage in relational context. However, holding oneself accountable is difficult as doing so positions one within broader cultural patterns, which work against the rampant individualism that permeates US society. Jones added, reflexivity “cuts to the bone. It implicates you. Reflexivity is uncomfortable because it forces you to acknowledge that you are complicit in the perpetuation of oppression” (p. 124). Interrelatedness implores the intersubjectively constituted bully–victim/victim–bully to explore the ways we perpetuate oppression across intersectional lines of flight including, for instance: racism, colorism, sizism, ableism, classism, and Islamophobia within LGBT space–time.

Having reflected on bullying-as-commonality, we are now faced with implication and accountability as we shift our focus to cultural scripts. To accomplish this, educators work with students to reconceive of bullying in systemic terms. That is, educators work with students to name the systemic cultural patterns animating our unique performances of bullying across intersectional lines of flight. The goal is to affirm the very real effects of our violent—even if unintentional—behaviors in terms that evade individualizing rhetorics.

Listening with raw openness

Keating (2013) described “a type of deep, self-reflective listening that takes tremendous effort, demands vulnerability, and requires a willingness to be altered by the words spoken” (p. 52). Similarly, Conquergood (1985) theorized “dialogical performance” as a critical means of approaching difference in ways that “resist[...] conclusions” (p. 9). Dialogical performance is difficult to sustain as it is constituted in and through implication—it implores one to affirm different orientations to common experiences, especially as those stories highlight power differentials that include one’s own access and/or lack of access to privilege. Drawing on Henry Glassie’s ethnographic work, Conquergood argued that *energy*, *imagination*, and *courage* are the qualities one needs to enact dialogical performances, including listening with raw openness. One needs the energy to research and imagine a complex cultural picture of a given context. Further, imagination drives empathy; that is, listening with raw openness requires one to imagine another’s lived experience as valid. Finally, one must have the courage to enact cultural performances that refuse to acquiesce to normative expectancies, including an individualistic framing

of the Bully. Listening with raw openness culminates a metaphysics of interconnectivity in that one decenters the self and meets difference differently—difference through commonality. In this, we disarticulate bullying as an individual gone “bad” in favor of a common experience that marks interrelatedness across a variety of intersecting identities and embodiments. The productivity of this framing resides in the capacity to story and audience bullying-as-commonality. To sit with and cherish stories of being bullied, to sit with and cherish stories *as* bullies across intersectional difference opens the space to rearticulate bullying differently.

Throughout the disarticulation process, educators work with students to realize a dialogical performance that centers intersectional performances of bullying derived of lived experience from a variety of vantages. Listening is imperative for successfully disarticulating bullying; doing otherwise risks slipping the discourse into individuated flights of fancy that seek to absolve the individual from intersectional performances of bullying. However, bullying-as-commonality maintains everyone is always-already implicated by bullying.

Rearticulating bullying as queer worldmaking

It is critical to remember that we face violence as youth, as people of color, as people living in poverty, as people with disabilities, as queers, as trans* and gender nonconforming people. (Gender JUST, 2013, pp. 46–47)

To envision bullying as queer worldmaking is to frame the bully as a common element in our subjective constitution as agents cast and constrained within flows of cultural power. Queer worldmaking refers to a cultural performance in which predetermined cultural expectancies are resisted in favor of cultural uncertainties that desire social transformation. According to Yep (2017), queer relationality provides the foundation for queer worldmaking through affirming “modes of recognition” characterized by “potentiality and becoming” where the individual crafts a self-determined futurity in the present (p. 120). In other terms, queer relationality is called “family of choice,” often set in opposition to “family of origin.” Families of origin can be dismissive, toxic, and violent to queer and trans folks—points too often dismissed in the dominant framing of bullying. Conversely, families of choice can provide an alternative means of survival through the agential act of naming one’s own “family.”

According to Yep, queer relationality privileges non-normative means of relating within “spheres of intimacy” that range from “fleeting to enduring” and across “spheres of desire” that range from “internally held to externally articulated” (p. 120). These spheres serve as a conduit to rearticulate bullying as queer worldmaking. These grounds focus the storying and audiencing of bullying across intersectional difference. First, “spheres of intimacy” can be ephemeral just as they can be lasting. In this way, spheres of intimacy are defined through temporal dimensions. Here we might explore temporal dimensions of bullying including long-term trauma, short-term terror, and/or persistence of bullying. Second, both internal and external dimensions mark “spheres of desire,” which allows us to think of bullying in *intrapersonal*, *intracultural*, *interpersonal*, and *intercultural* terms. These spheres help to nuance relational dynamics that emerge in and through the intersubjective constitution of self and/as other in the context of bullying across intersectional difference and space-time. The work of queer worldmaking begins by listening with raw openness to the complexity of these queer relational ties while embracing the difficulty of implication.

Queer relationality implicates the normative lens through which subjectivity is rendered “legible.” That is, we bully because we refuse to account for difference on difference’s terms of engagement. Bullying is thus antirelational in its desire to discipline bodies and identities in alignment with normative expectancies that perpetuate single-axis articulations of identification. To rearticulate bullying as queer worldmaking is to engage the ways in which we all bully, even if unintentionally, along intersectional lines. Queer worlds are grounded in uncertainty precisely because they evade normative expectancies; rearticulating bullying enacts queer worlds as a result of the improvisational labor required to unlearn hegemonic articulations of bullying. We maintain that nuanced storying *and* audiencing of different orientations to common experiences, including bullying, across intersectional difference provides a foundation for animating queer worldmaking. Queer relationalities undergirding these queer worlds are realized in a critical community of care and compassion that grapple with commitment in light of implication. The goal includes shifting the cultural performance of bullying to terms that refuse an individualizing bully/savior binary and, instead, bring all students’ attention to the ways our cultural performances resist, uphold, subvert, and perpetuate oppressive systems that enable bullying.

Examples of queer worlds emerging in our pedagogies have included

- performances of bullying narratives leading to community discussions;
- reflexive papers engaging the embodied experience of embracing implication, followed by dialoguing and debriefing sessions to bear witness to both self- and other-implicature;
- student-led accountability groups in which students name and unlearn internalized biases.

We, bully

As critical communication pedagogues (see Fassett & Warren, 2007), we are interested in questions of power in relational context. In this response, we critically engage bullying, which we understand as an intersectional cultural performance of/for power in relational context. As queer pedagogues, we offer embodied experiences as individuals who survive/d bullying, perform/ed Bully, and who perpetuate/d institutionalized cisheterosexism through curriculum and policy. Certainly, bullying holds the potential to traumatize; this is absolutely the case for these queer authors. However, rather than assuming a compulsory role of Victim, we implore both our readers and ourselves to hold steadfast to the critical labor that reflexivity demands. That is, we engage the ways we have been bullied *even as* we implicate ourselves as Bullies across intersecting lines of identification and embodiment. Doing so refuses a propensity to victimize the self as we foreclose on the ways we bully others. Holding ourselves accountable for the ways we have bullied others—even as we have been bullied—is vital reflexive labor.

When we focus on our own performance of Victim at the dismissal of our performance of Bully, Jones (2010) reminds us of the difficult work of reflexive implication, for it “forces” us to recognize that we “are complicit in the perpetuation of oppression” (p. 124). Context determines the role one might assume in a cultural performance of bullying; thus, much of this labor involves working with students to trace the contexts animating a given performance of bullying. The larger point is to begin the difficult labor of

unlearning hegemonic articulations of bullying as a compulsory cultural formation enacted by “bad” individuals as opposed to a politically charged cultural performance that carries the potential for transformation when we grapple with its pervasive presence. Only once we conceive of ourselves as conduits of cultural transmission can we begin to envision and relearn modes of relating differently in ways that ontologically grapple with difference through a common cultural performance of bullying. And thus, we close with an invitation that echoes that of Berry: in what ways do we bully?

There’s a boy whose name we forget

whose mannerisms were flamboyant

unruly

Perfect.

And we called him Faggot.

Even now, our memory is augmented through a power imbalance in which we performatively reconstruct him as our perpetual target and we his perpetual bullies.

For we, bully.

And we venture to suggest,

so too do

You.

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“Yes, and ... *”: continuing the scholarly conversation about anti-LGBT bullying in K-12 education

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Someone got sent home from camp today.
Why?
Bullying.
What happened?
You know, bullying ... they made someone else feel like a nobody ...

This was a conversation I (Dannels) had with my daughter. And yet, I would venture a guess that it is an archetypal conversation that many parents have with their children in various forms, in various contexts, and at multiple different times. Kids learn early on what bullying is—either by watching it, enacting it, experiencing it, or hearing about it. From the two-second name-calling incidents on the playground to adolescent teasing in gym locker rooms to long-term harassment in neighborhoods and communities—kids learn. They learn how to build someone up and how to tear someone down. They learn what counts as being popular and what does not. They learn how to value and devalue other people. And at times, unfortunately, they learn that some human lives count less than others; that some get brushed aside, hurt, and sometimes killed for being a “nobody” in someone else’s eyes. Kids learn, no doubt. The question is: what are we, as a society, teaching?

Wait ... me? I do not teach kids in K12 settings. I teach college students. And that aside, most bullying happens outside the classroom. How could I intervene?

As educators, we are responsible for facilitating learning contexts, within and outside the traditional classroom. As educators who focus on communication, we are responsible for looking at how communication, teaching, and learning intersect in multiple contexts within and outside the traditional classroom. We can think of few communicative phenomena that have as devastating effects as bullying. Although the effects of bullying are multifaceted and contextual, the process of bullying is one that we have all (as participants and victims) experienced. It will influence all of us, by the nature of our networked interactions that occur as a function of our daily lives. Regardless of where and when bullying happens, we will (knowingly or not) feel its shocks and aftershocks. There is no way for us *not* to. So yes, it is our responsibility—regardless of where and who we teach. Yes, we should intervene.

* * *

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*A central rule for improv—to not stop the flow of the performance—is to respond with “yes, and ...” (instead of “no” or “yes, but”) to lines that comes before you. The idea is to create an environment where all become involved in keeping an idea or storyline alive and evolving; encouraging players to make associations and to connect things in innovative ways (Liu & Noppe-Brandon, 2009).

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The often-heard childhood mantra that “sticks and stones break bones, but words will never hurt me” is belied by the complex, interlocking systems that are articulated by bullying behaviors, demonstrating its fit as a “wicked problem” (Rittel & Webber, 1973).¹ In particular, the realities that many LGBT youth—particularly those at the intersections of race, disability, and poverty—face in their daily lives are the product of hundreds of years of sexuality and gender enforcement, rooted in religious and political bigotry. Societal prejudice against LGTBQ people (i.e., hetero/cis-sexism), manifests in a range of daily activities, including overt (e.g., cyber bullying, name calling, physical violence) and covert (e.g., ostracism, microaggressions, and invalidation) actions. Suicide, depression, anxiety, and eroded quality of life are just a few of the outcomes that many LGBT youth face as they navigate the hostile cultural climate that often characterizes U.S. society and schools.

It is important to point out the institutional practices that reinforce, legitimize, and perpetuate a culture of anti-LGBT bullying. GLSEN (n.d.) shows that seven states currently have laws that suppress LGBT-inclusive curriculum (colloquially known as “no promo homo laws”). For example, Alabama current statute declares, “Classes must emphasize, in a factual manner and from a public health perspective, that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under the laws of the state” (Alabama State Code, 2016 s. 16-40A-2[US]). This statute, in addition to referencing antisodomy laws that were overturned through the 2003 U.S. Supreme Court case *Lawrence v. Texas* case, perpetuates the notion (both in the language of the law and in its effect on classroom curriculum) that LGBT youth are immoral, indeed criminal, for their sexuality or gender identity.² Even without state laws that support bigotry, administrators and teachers may be emboldened to tacitly support bullying against LGBT students (or engage in it themselves) or simply not address students’ sexuality or gender out of fear of reprisal when placed in an anti-LGBT environment. For example, South Lyon’s Centennial Middle School superintendent William Pearson put teacher Susan Johnson on three days’ suspension (with two days without pay) for allowing a student to play Macklemore’s song, *Same Love* (the punishment was later dropped due to public outcry, Queer Voices, 2012). As she stated, “It’s been really difficult to go to work every morning and have this hanging over me, this anxiety.” Schools, then, often play a pivotal role in disseminating ideologies that promote anti-LGBT hatred (legitimizing discrimination) and attack LGBT youth’s self-concept (causing depression, anxiety, and suicide).

Essays within this forum grapple with the multilevel ways that anti-LGBT bullying manifests within educational spaces. Berry’s essay begins with an overview of the cultural systems that frame and reinforce bullying as a relational practice. Drawing upon phenomenological theory and (inter)personal research, he provides a detailed portrait of the communicative processes that LGBT youth utilize when navigating bullying and bigotry. As he notes, U.S. schools and society are at a crossroads—after decades of activism and the beginnings of inclusion in some parts of society, there is the real possibility for a reversal in public opinion and the legitimation of the Trump administration’s anti-LGBT policies. If actualized, it could precipitate a decades-long backlash, much like the history of feminism and civil rights activism. Goodboy and Martin draw upon social scientific research from within and beyond the communication discipline to describe the types of sociopsychological attributes that correlate with bullying behaviors. They point out the need for

systematic, sensitizing training for teachers and administrators in order to realize an inclusive educational space as well as detail the types of school organizations (e.g., Gay Straight Alliances) that can cultivate this type of institutional culture. Finally, LeMaster and Hummel offer an important corrective to mainstream narratives of bullying that contain clear heroes, victims, and villains by asking readers to explore the complex, intersecting ways in which we all bully. Their call for reflexivity opens into an articulation for queer worldmaking—a utopic vision for society that foregrounds togetherness without suffocating difference.

The essays for this forum provide a clear articulation of the wicked problem of LGBT bullying while also offering clear pedagogical advice for how instructors can change themselves, their institutions, and society to be more inclusive. No student—indeed no person—should be the victim of bullying behavior, and it is incumbent upon all members of society to identify, intervene, and stop bullying practices when they occur. As communication and instruction scholars, it is incumbent upon us to provide the pedagogical and theoretical tools necessary to accomplish this goal. It is critical to note, as well, that these tools will likely need to reach beyond the traditional classroom walls. That said, they can also inform the teaching that happens within more traditional classrooms. As such, we draw upon Craig's (1999) seven traditions of the communication discipline to encourage questions for future scholars and teachers to pursue:

- (1) How does public discourse (e.g., court decisions, legislation, and media) frame, exacerbate, protect against, or reinforce anti-LGBT bullying behaviors?
- (2) How can students, instructors, and administrators create shared systems to help them identify the unique characteristics of bullying behaviors?
- (3) How can instructors resist bullying relationships by promoting ethics of dialogue and other-orientedness as communicative ideals?
- (4) How can institutional members create clear, consistent messages to students, instructors, and administrations about what constitutes bullying and how to address bullying behaviors?
- (5) How can information concerning students', instructors', and administrators' socio-psychological traits provide strategies for identifying and intervening before bullying happens?
- (6) How does contemporary understanding of bullying take up, resist, subvert, and perpetuate shared systems of cissexism, heterosexism, homophobia, homohatred, and trans-exclusion?
- (7) How can instructors understand bullying behaviors as ways to socialize LGBT persons into silence, fear, and alienation; then act to disrupt those hegemonic practices?

Yes, and ...

Notes

1. By definition, wicked problems are those that are complex and resistant to linear or reductionist answers, and therefore difficult and at times impossible to solve (Rittel & Webber, 1973)
2. As Segal (2017) notes, “antihomosexuality” is an outdated term insofar as it references both sexuality (e.g., same-sex attraction) and gender (e.g., transgender).

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