LGBTQ Kids, School Safety, and Missing the Big Picture: How the Dominant Bullying Discourse Prevents School Professionals from Thinking about Systemic Marginalization or … Why We Need to Rethink LGBTQ Bullying

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LGBTQ Kids, School Safety, and Missing the Big Picture: How the Dominant Bullying Discourse Prevents School Professionals from Thinking about Systemic Marginalization or . . . Why We Need to Rethink LGBTQ Bullying[1]

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ABSTRACT

Dominant understanding of LGBTQ students' school experiences has been shaped by discourses that reduce "the problem" to bullies who express homophobic attitudes by targeting LGBTQ peers. In turn, interventions typically focus on eliminating bullying behaviors and providing protection for victims. Within this framework, cultural privileging of heterosexuality and gender normativity goes unquestioned, LGBTQ marginalization is reproduced and re-entrenched in new ways, and schools avoid responsibility for complicity in LGBTQ harassment. This paper explores educators' stories of LGBTQ harassment and how dominant bullying discourses are shaping educators' understandings of the needs of LGBTQ students. We propose a new definition of bullying to create a more useful framework for understanding the social nature of peer-to-peer aggression and designing interventions to address the cultural roots of this aggression. Finally, we take the position that a majority of peer-to-peer aggression in U.S. public schools is some form of *gender policing*, and we believe bullying must be redefined to account for relationships between peer targeting and structural inequalities.

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In the past few years, bullying as a social phenomenon has gained greater visibility and has become a part of the public consciousness as a problem demanding immediate attention. Books on LGBTQ bullying have begun to proliferate—many authored by those without professional experience in schools or a strong social science background in understanding the marginalization of diverse student populations. Anti-bullying laws have been enacted around the country—some specifically naming LGBT students as a protected class—and television talk shows frequently pontificate on what schools "should" be doing to address the issue. The U.S. Department of Education has hosted bullying summits, further lending credence to particular ways of understanding the problem of in-schools bullying, including the experiences of LGBTQ students.[2] These conversations almost universally focus on LGBTQ students as "victims"; the correlation between victimization and negative psychological, social, and educational outcomes; and the responsibility of schools to protect these vulnerable students from their aggressive, anti-social peers. These public dialogues around in-school harassment and the marginalization of LGBTQ youth reduce the complexities of peer-to-peer aggression to "anti-social behaviour where one student wields power over [a victim],"[3] and conceptualize "the problem of bullying in terms of [the] individual or family pathology" of a singular [aggressive] student.[4] This definition of "the problem" reproduces bullying discourses, which, as Ringrose and Renold argue, "are now so accepted . . . in schools that they have gained hegemonic status."[5] In other words, bullying discourses have gained so much power in educational contexts and in public consciousness that it has become practically impossible to understand in-school violence outside "the binary logic of protection (i.e. 'victims' of bullying) and vilification (i.e. pathologising 'the bully')."[6] LGBTQ youth are perpetually painted as victims, bullies as "bad kids" with inadequate social skills or abusive homes, and schools as negligent due to their ineffective methods of intervention.

This dominant narrative depends on an inaccurate premise: It assumes schools to be neutral sites where all students have an equal opportunity to succeed and that barriers to success appear when individuals' injurious behavior or attitudes create a "negative" school climate where student safety and belonging are threatened. Understanding schools in this way does not account for institutional heternormativity, which is a fundamental organizational structure through which schools function and the people who occupy school spaces interact with one another. As Walton argues, "Framing the notion of bullying in a generic manner by focusing on the individual behavior and relational power [between individuals], rather than on the

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specific constructs of difference that underlie incidents of bullying, operates to perpetuate practices that are fostered within the grid of social regularities."[7] In other words, the dominant understanding of bullying fails to acknowledge heteronormative social systems of power that support acts of bullying targeted at LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students. Overt acts of violence against LGBTQ youth (or those who are perceived to be) are only the surface-level, explicit effects of heteronormative school cultures that privilege idealized (hetero) gender performances and create social benefits for peer-to-peer policing of nonnormative sexualities and gender expressions.[8] Those who step outside the hegemonic norm are "policed by their peers and denied access to social power and popularity, while those who do conform are 'celebrated.'"[9] We must come to understand the problem of LGBTQ student bullying differently if we are to have different outcomes in our intervention efforts.

In this article, we will briefly review the issues with the dominant bullying and school climate discourses; the problems with anti-bullying programs, "safe spaces," "gay days," and "character education" as solutions; illustrate the ways these interventions limit educators' abilities to understand the range of aggressions targeting LGBTQ students and to enact change; and, thus, why *we need to rethink bullying*. Throughout the article, we will use data from QuERI research projects to illustrate how the dominant bullying discourse manifests in educators' approaches to the problem of aggression targeting LGBTQ youth. We will challenge the taken-for-granted conceptualization of LGBTQ youths' school experiences and argue for a broader worldview that encompasses cultural systems of power—particularly along lines of gender and sexuality—that persistently privilege specific groups of youth while marginalizing others.[10] In order to shift the definition of "the problem" in this way, we must push beyond the understanding of peer-to-peer aggression that underlies the dominant discourse. It requires recognition of how aggression functions in processes of social positioning and how patterns of youth aggression are reflective of cultural norms for sexuality and gender expression. We propose *gender policing* as an alternative framework for understanding peer-to-peer aggression, which draws attention to how normative gender expectations function as tools for targeting peers, as well as the role schools and other cultural institutions play in reproducing strict rules for "normal" gender expression. This framework encompasses many forms of aggression that fall outside bullying discourses, and locates the root issue in a heteronormative and heterosexist culture that is reinforced through the institution and practices of schooling—not in individual aggressive children.[11]

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))) Methods

The data excerpts utilized in this article to illustrate the ways the dominant bullying discourses and framings of LGBTQ student experience are present in the understandings of K–12 educators are all drawn from QuERI research on our professional development model, the Reduction of Stigma in Schools© (RSIS). RSIS is a research-based professional development program that aims to provide educators with tools and knowledge for creating more affirming school environments for LGBTQ youth. The larger data set consisted of workshop evaluations, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires completed by past participants of RSIS workshops. Fuller descriptions of the research methods are available in the program design and evaluation papers.[12] Though the educators in this study were interviewed to gain insight into their experiences participating in the RSIS program, all participants also devoted significant interview time to the "state of things" regarding LGBTQ student experiences and bullying in their respective school contexts.

))) Breaking Down the Bullying Discourse

The Construction of "Bullying"

Both the popular discourse and the dominant research on bullying reflect cultural myths about who bullies are, what they look like, and whom they target. Bansel, Davies, Laws, and Linnell argue, "The predominant trend in bullying research, and current interventions arising from that research, tend to conceptualize the problem of bullying in terms of individual or family pathology."[13] Research on bullying often aims to identify factors that increase students' risk for engaging in bullying behaviors, and intervention goals designed in light of this research typically involve managing the aggressive behavior and changing the attitudes of students who are identified as bullies.[14] This body of work is predominantly shaped by a bully/victim binary in which "power is conceptualized mostly as the capacity of an individual student for abusing another who is perceived by the bully as being weaker or deficient in some way."[15] Olweus defines bullying as a specific type of aggressive behavior characterized by intent, repetition, and an imbalance of power between bully and victim.[16] His definition is frequently used in bullying scholarship and often in survey instruments.[17] Other researchers have added to this baseline definition: Students who bully are

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also understood as individuals who exhibit anti-social behavior,[18] report low levels of empathy,[19] and/or have been affected by adults (e.g., family members) and other environmental factors (e.g., a violent home) that have inadvertently supported the development of aggressive behavior.[20] These conceptualizations of bullying assume an individual-to-individual relationship between bully and victim—one child imposes power over another, and the victimized child suffers psychosocial consequences.

This binary construction of bullying carries powerful implications for possible interventions: bullies need rehabilitation, victims need protection, and schools can lay blame for the problem outside their walls because the aggressive children bring the problem with them into the school environment. When QuERI research participants describe the LGBTQ targeting that happens in their schools and speak about the overwhelming task of eradicating it, they reproduce this discourse by deflecting the root causes of in-school aggression to cultural forces outside the school. They argue that students learn aggressive behavior and biased attitudes from family and mainstream media, and these influences are so powerful that the school will never be able to solve the problem. The data excerpts below are from two different school professionals.

> I think that, no matter what programs you have instilled, you are going to have kids in a school environment that come from homes that are, um, racist, um, that are prejudiced against types of differences.

> And I think it's the same way with all this other stuff about attitudes of tolerance and, you know, of anything, that it comes from somewhere out here in society and I think that our kids pick up on that real easily and depending on how your family is and how, you know, people are viewed in your family, you know, what's talked about and are people, you know, is there a joke that's been made in your family, and people laugh about some gay/lesbian joke or whatever, or racist joke or whatever it is. You know, I think kids pick up on that attitude and then they live it. And I think our school has some problems with that.

Both participants' descriptions of LGBTQ bullying claim that students learn bias from their families, which places schools in the difficult position of fighting cultural and familial values in the interest of greater tolerance between youth. Neither educator acknowledges the possibility that school culture could be reproducing and reinforcing those same biases. Interpreting LGBTQ bullying in this way severely limits the possibilities for successful intervention because all the attention is focused on correcting bad behaviors that individual students learn elsewhere and bring into the school rather than critically examining what exactly

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the *school* is teaching students about difference and identity, who belongs and who does not.

Expanding the Bullying Discourse

Some researchers have attempted to complicate the simplistic understanding of bullying that focuses on overt aggression, is overly dependent on the bully-victim binary, and/or presumes that peer-to-peer aggression is always anti-social behavior. Areas of inquiry broadening bullying research include relational bullying,[21] bullying roles (i.e., bystanders),[22] bullying norms in individual school contexts,[23] gender differences in experiences with bullying,[24] and the social purposes or advantages of bullying.[25]

Significantly, Faris and Felmlee speak directly against "psychological literature on aggression, which views [aggression and bullying] as a reaction to psychological problems, social insecurities, or troubled home lives,"[26] and they argue that anti-bullying programs need to "adopt an expanded view of aggression" and "consider how aggressive behaviors are rooted in status processes"[27] in order to be successful. We agree. This study stands apart from other recent work on bullying and aggression because it rejects the psychological paradigm and examines in-school aggression in a way that does not require the identification of an *aggressor.* Instead, this study advocates for further examination of in-school aggression as a social phenomenon that finds its purpose in students' battles for social power. Anti-bullying interventions are not designed to do such complex work. Instead, anti-bullying interventions[28] are designed merely to manage behaviors, not disrupt cultural patterns of power, privileging, and marginalization.

LGBTQ-Specific Bullying and Harassment

The dominant body of research on LGBTQ youths' school experiences positions this group of students as victims within the bully/victim binary. The central questions unifying this research literature are: In what ways are LGBTQ students "at risk," and what are the environmental factors that have the potential to alleviate/reduce that risk? Building from this starting point, these studies seek to identify individual and environmental variables that (1) predict negative psychosocial consequences; and (2) either mediate these negative effects or eliminate them altogether. Poteat and Espelage investigated the specific effects of homophobic victimization on middle-school students' experiences of anxiety, depression, distress, and sense of school belonging.[29] Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer examined LGB students' reports of suicidality and victimization as it related to their perceptions of school safety and

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the presence of GSAs, staff training about LGBT youth, or inclusive school policies.[30] Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, and Koenig studied the "degree to which . . . parental communication and support and a positive school climate . . . influence psychological outcomes for students who are questioning their sexuality . . . [or] identify themselves as homosexual."[31] Murdoch and Bolch investigated the relationship between various environmental elements (experiences with victimization and/or social exclusion, teacher support) and "three indicators of school adjustment: school belonging, school disruptive behavior, and academic achievement."[32] Birkett, Espelage, and Koenig's research aimed to illuminate how school contextual factors are related to negative outcomes for LGBT youth such as bullying, victimization, drug use, suicidality, and truancy.[33] The collective findings of these studies draw attention to the negative social and psychological effects LGBTQ students may experience when they are victimized in their school, and they introduce the possibility that stronger support networks (e.g., family, teachers, Gay Straight Alliances) could reduce risk and lead to more positive school experiences for these students.

When QuERI research participants spoke about the work that needs to be done in their schools' to better support LGBTQ students, they predominantly focused on the observable behavior they felt conveyed "intolerant" attitudes. Teachers expressed concern that hearing homophobic language throughout the school put LGBTQ students at risk for emotional or psychological distress and increased their risk for absenteeism, social isolation, drug and alcohol use, and suicide. They believed teachers should play an active role in reducing this risk by consistently intervening when they observe homophobic language because doing so teaches students that verbal expressions of bias—even when it is careless or unintentional—can cause significant harm to a LGBTQ peer. One teacher described how convincing the entire faculty to commit to this work has been a struggle in her school:

> I think, pretty much, people do kind of see it [homophobic language] as a normalized, you know, behavior. That, I don't know if anybody's ears go (*makes a surprised sound*). You know what I mean? Like profanity, they would. You know? Umm, and not [to] say that they like it or accept it or say that that's okay, but I just don't know if people would go out of their way to go over to somebody that they don't know [and correct them]. Now if they know the kid, they might say something to 'em, but, you know, would they turn around in the hall to a kid they don't know? I would (*laughs*). And, umm, you know, just say something. I just don't know if they [other teachers] would.

This teacher attributes her school's inconsistency in addressing homophobic language to lack of understanding about the injurious effects of homophobic language.

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Normalization of this language means that teachers perceive it to be neutral, non-harmful, or "no big deal." In contrast, it is clear to all that profanity is socially inappropriate and should not be allowed in the school environment. This teacher believes the potential harm is significant enough to "go out of [her] way" to stop students from saying things like "that's so gay" or "no homo." She, and many other teachers in our research studies, see interrupting anti-gay speech as an important risk reduction strategy for LGBTQ students, are deeply committed to gaining cooperation from fellow teachers in these intervention efforts, and many—though acknowledging the impossibility of achieving it—believe that eradication of such language in the school environment would "solve" the problem.

DePalma and Jennett caution against this common practice of understanding "the problem" of LGBTQ student marginalization solely in terms of homophobic and transphobic language and aggression. They argue that it "reflects a shallow understanding of the social processes underpinning these phenomena" and ignores the subtle and complex ways in which schools themselves are complicit in sustaining these social processes beginning in the early years of schooling.[34] The problem of LGBTQ students' negative school experiences has been shaped by a discourse of bullying that "focus[es] on psychological typologies of bullies and victims"[35] and neglects research that examines "the situational and socio-cultural dimensions of power" along the lines of gender, and sexuality,[36] as well as the dynamics of the social "hierarchies that young people must somehow manage."[37] Reducing "risk" through intervening in anti-LGBTQ language is critical for the well-being of LGBTQ students, but that alone does not "solve" the problem—the problem remains the reduced social capital held within school culture for those who do not conform to normative expectations for gender and sexuality and it is that reduced social capital and marginalized position within the school that puts these students "at risk" for targeting and its consequences. Further, to be positioned as a "victim" is to be further marked out as "deviant" within the normative contexts of school, and for boys, to be a bullying victim is to be seen as "sexually deviant," weak, and "feminised" and therefore an "abject subject,"[38] further marginalizing them and reducing social capital.

))) Addressing Bullying In Schools

Anti-Bullying Interventions

Given that anti-bullying initiatives are common responses to the problem of homophobic/gender-based harassment, identifying the goals, processes, and

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assumptions of these programs provides insight to how school leaders, policy makers, and educators understand the "problem" of the marginalization of LGBTQ youth. Most anti-bullying programs contain four components: (1) assessment of how much bullying is happening; (2) direct responses to active bullies and targets; (3) whole-school education for educators, parents, and students; and (4) a system of monitoring where all members of the community are expected to report possible bullying activity.[39] The bullies themselves are imagined as students who are attracted to aggressive behaviors or lack the ability to empathize with others' feelings[40] or fail to accept peers from diverse backgrounds.[41] This focus on attitudes and beliefs places the "problem" on individual students, and the "solutions" are primarily focused on changing how kids interact with their peers and behave in the school environment.

Throughout the United States, schools are becoming increasingly attracted to "whole-school" programs that promise to decrease bullying and improve school climate. There are countless anti-bullying models available, but the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is arguably the most famous and widely used anti-bullying program in the United States and Europe, and it is particularly significant because its designers hold an authoritative position in the academic conversation about what bullying is and successful strategies for decreasing bullying behaviors.[42] OBPP asks schools to implement new policies and procedures at the institutional, classroom, student, and community levels in order to establish consistent messaging and buy-in from all stakeholders for the mission of eliminating bullying. The intent is for all members of the community to raise their awareness of bullying, have a shared understanding of what bullying is, learn how to have more positive interactions that reflect acceptance and empathy, and to make a collective effort to report and intervene.[43] Evaluations of OBPP (many executed by Dan Olweus and his team) have measured its effectiveness according to students' self-reported experiences of bullying or being bullied. A review of two decades of evaluation studies produced the conclusion that "bullying can, in fact, be considerably reduced through systematic school-wide efforts that reduce the opportunities and rewards for bullying and build a sense of community among students and adults."[44] Other researchers are more cautious in their endorsement of the Olweus model. Smith, Schneider, Smith, and Ananiadou's review of studies evaluating OBPP concluded, "It is clear that the whole school approach has led to important reductions in bullying . . . but the results are simply too inconsistent to justify adoption of these particular procedures to the exclusion of others."[45] Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, and Hymel question the validity of reliance on "self-report indices of bullying and victimization,"[46] and they call

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attention to the failure to account for factors such as race, disability or sexual orientation in how they define the problem of *bullying*.

When searching for "solutions" to the problem of creating supportive environments for LGBTQ young people, conversations typically focus on interventions such as these whole-school programs that purport to be able to eliminate bullying in school settings. Public discourse about bullying implies that it "is something that can be observed, discovered, found, analyzed, reported, and ultimately stopped."[47] One middle school teacher in our research noted the expectations that accompanied anti-bullying in her school: "If you see bullying, uh, you are supposed to write kids up, you're supposed to send them to the office. It's, it's serious. There's to be no bullying . . . . I think they're [the kids are] more careful about what they say and do if for no other reason, they know that they'll quickly get in trouble." The success of school interventions is typically evaluated by measuring the frequency of reported bullying behaviors or student perceptions of safety. However "reduction [of bullying] is a measurable outcome . . . [that] merely *contains, regulates, and manages* violence rather than *addresses* it."[48] When the absence of reported bullying functions as *the* indicator of a safe or inclusive school for LGBTQ students, we fail to account for "the social processes underpinning [homophobic bullying] and the subtle ways in which schools are complicit in sustaining them."[49] Further, anti-bullying programs' focus on "statistics, characteristics, psychological profiles, and measurable events"[50] fails to question why the same groups of students are targeted decade after decade. Anti-bullying programs are more often pushing violent behavior underground than they are calling systemic privileging and marginalization into question. They do not get to the "root" of the problem.

Just Be Nice: Character Education

Embedded within anti-bullying programs are narratives about the value of civility, kindness, and decency, the beliefs and attitudes of "good" students, *who* such programs think a bully is, and the kinds of school environments that allow bullying to take place. According to Rigby, "Probably the most common way of responding to bullying in schools is to assert the importance of certain values or ideals that should govern interpersonal relationships between students."[51] Anti-bullying programs often address this issue by including "character education" components in their behavior management systems. *Character* is "the complex set of psychological characteristics that enable an individual to act as a moral agent,"[52] and character education aims to "help children learn the character attributes that enable them to become caring and

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responsible adults."[53] Students who do not act morally—who do not express care and responsibility—are considered to lack "sociomoral competency"[54] and are in need of specific instruction in order to "develop a structured system of values, ethics and morals."[55] Bullying programs that include character education components are, therefore, attempting to compensate for the deficiencies in students' values and belief systems that are leading them to act aggressively toward or impose power over their peers. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program includes activities intended "to help build empathy and perspective-taking skills."[56] The Steps to Respect program asks students to take a pledge to resist bullying—asking them to make the morally "right" decision to keep one's promise.[57] Bully-Proofing Your School aims to develop a "caring community," where social power is held by the "caring majority."[58] The Bully Busters program "is predicated on the assumption that aggression and bullying are behaviors borne of social skills deficits, lack of skills for taking others' perspective or a failure to empathically relate with others, and a moral or value system that denigrates others."[59] Although these programs do not take identical approaches to bullying, they *do* share similar assumptions about the relationship between student aggression and individual students' values, beliefs and morals. In short, students who have "good" character will express respect, tolerance, and empathy toward their peers, not aggression. This approach defines the problem of peer-to-peer aggression in terms of psychosocial deficiencies in individual students and neglects both educational institutions' role in supporting bullying behaviors and the underlying value system that allows some students to be targeted based on difference.

Donna, a high school teacher, demonstrates this idea in her discussion of students' repeated use of homophobic language in her school and her attempts to address it:

> I mean, I can sit and try to tell kids how it is, you know, and like, say, you know, 'suicide rates higher' and all that kind of stuff, but I think the general kid is like, "Oh well. Too bad." You know what I mean? Like, they don't understand and they don't, they don't have that empathy and I think that probably, that empathy would be important to our kids.

Donna's definition of "the problem" and vision for solving it reflect messages within the bullying discourse that claim that students who engage in aggressive behavior do so because of individual negative attitudes or poor social skills learned from family and other cultural sources.[60] Her reasoning for encouraging kids to be more empathetic is the higher LGBTQ youth suicide rates—i.e., risk reduction. Further, her claim that an absence of empathy is to blame reflects a

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belief that the problem of bias and violence in schools is one that only has effects on the feelings and self-worth of individual victims who may be personally injured—either by being directly targeted or by hearing the language circulating in their environment. This interpretation of the issues fails to acknowledge the constant reproduction of heterosexuality and hegemonic gender norms occurring through the "normal" usage of biased speech. Homophobic speech used in reference to something students deem abnormal or unpleasant implicitly cites heteronormative discourse—which defines heterosexuality and stereotypical gender roles as normal[61] and other genders and sexualities as deviant. Her interpretation does *not* account for the power of language in the systematic marginalization of all LGBTQ youth or valorization of heterosexuality. This language reproduces social categories of stigma and reinforces cultural beliefs about who is acceptable and who is not. She believes that if kids are just "nicer" to one another, the problem will be solved. Niceness cannot erase the stigma—it merely asks students in the dominant majority not to be unkind to those they deem deviant.

))) Conflating "School Climate" with "School Culture"

A high incidence of bullying is often assumed to be the cause of a negative school climate, not the iteration of the values and beliefs of the larger school culture. Gendron, Williams, and Guerra claim, "school climate [is] the most frequently studied school characteristic linked to bullying," because of the common belief that "a comprehensive understanding of bullying requires the identification of how student and school characteristics interact."[62] Climate research intends to identify "the mediating variables between the structural features of the school and the outcomes for pupils and teachers."[63] Climate assessment tools measure student and faculty perceptions of factors such as school attachment, school involvement, clarity and fairness of school rules, parental involvement, safety, respect between students and staff, strength of leadership, student and staff morale, and clarity of educational mission.[64]

A major tension in the climate research is the uncomfortable relationship between *climate* and *behavior*. Connecting the two means identifying concrete, measurable elements that are indicative of the overall quality (whether positive or negative) of an organization's environment and linking these (often implicitly) to student and staff behavior. This research evaluates climate through school community members' collective perception of the quality of the environment. For example, Welsh utilized

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a climate assessment that asked for perceptions of school safety, clarity of rules, fairness of rules, respect for students, student influence on school affairs, and planning and action.[65] Stewart's research on the relationship between "school-level characteristics" and misbehavior collected data addressing students' perceptions of school attachment, school involvement, belief in school rules, association with positive peers, parental school involvement, and compared schools according to size, "school social problems," and "school cohesion."[66] Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, and Gottfredson measured school climate using student perceptions of fairness and clarity of rules, and teachers' perceptions of "organizational focus," "morale," school-wide strategies for problem solving, and "administrative leadership."[67] Such measurements (e.g., "fairness," "morale") establish a normative standard for what the school environment should be, and they ask participants for their general perception of how the school measures against these standards while implicitly assuming that all respondents hold the same standard for concepts such as "fair" or "not fair." The implication is that if there are deficiencies, the structural features of the school will need to be altered in some way to "fix" the climate. It is, therefore, unsurprising that anti-bullying and school climate interventions often go hand-in-hand, as many school safety studies argue a linear, causal relationship between decreases in violent behavior and a more positive school climate. Anti-bullying programs become a possible "fix" for the climate issues.

This link between climate and anti-bullying divorces climate from culture, continues the limited focus on visible signs of a deeper cultural problem, and eliminates the possibility to gain understanding of how students use social norms as tools to battle for position in the social hierarchy. Culture and climate are both prevalent concepts in discussions about institutional beliefs, values, and attitudes, and they are often conflated in educational discourse, collapsed under the umbrella of *school climate.*[68] However, "researchers concentrating on *culture* maintain that culture may offer a more profound insight into an organization, because ultimately climate is nothing more than 'a surface manifestation of culture.'"[69] In other words, culture represents the system of values and beliefs that give an organization identity and shape how it (and the people in it) function, and climate is created through individuals' interactions within that organization based upon those values and beliefs.[70] In terms of students' school experiences, one can conceptualize climate "as the way school culture affects a child's sense of safety and acceptance, and consequently is a critical determinant of their ability to focus on the task of learning,"[71] whereas culture encompasses the systems of knowledge and belief that are available within a given context for people to use in making meaning of their experiences of marginalization. The impetus to target students with harassment based upon their gender or sexual difference lies in the values

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and belief system of the school and larger culture. Marginalized students' interpretations of what this targeting "means" about them as people and members of that school community draws from the same value system.

"Positive" School Climate for LGBTQ Youth

Research focusing on climate—as opposed to culture—is currently dominant in defining and offering "solutions" to "the problem" of LGBTQ students' school experiences. For example, Toomey, McGuire, and Russell conducted research to assess "students' perceptions of the school climate as safe for gender nonconformity" and "how the visibility of safe school strategies . . . may be associated with greater perceptions of safety."[72] This study discussed a relationship between heteronormativity and school climate, but ultimately their conclusions were focused on correlating specific interventions—inclusive anti-harassment policies, GSAs, professional development—with students' feelings of safety rather than with indicators of strict heteronormative values. Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, and Greytak "examined simultaneously the effect of school climate on achievement and the role that school-based supports for LGBT students may have in offsetting this effect."[73] Like Toomey, McGuire, and Russell, they reported that the presence of in-school supports such as GSAs and supportive educators were indicators for a less hostile climate and fewer incidences of victimization. Research studies such as these are attractive to political and educational leaders because they support the assumption that climate is a measurable phenomenon and, therefore, it is possible to prove the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of specific interventions.

Notably, these studies and many others[74] measure school climate with student reports of *feelings of safety* and *incidents of victimization*. In other words, climate is either positive or negative, depending on the presence or absence of reported violence. This body of research is attempting to identify specific structural elements that when addressed will help LGBTQ students feel safer, but these interventions are primarily focused on raising awareness of LGBTQ bullying and providing spaces in the school where students do not feel the threat of victimization. These interventions are undoubtedly important, but they do not address *school culture*: the institutional value systems that privilege gender conformity and heterosexuality. Research on school culture and heteronormativity should ask questions about institutional beliefs and values, school rituals that elevate the status of heterosexuality and gender conformity, and policies and practices that reinforce the gender binary. These are questions that will provide insight to how school culture is contributing to how students police one another's identities, expressions, and behaviors.

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Research participants across the QuERI research projects (unknowingly) referenced the role of "culture" in their efforts to rid their schools and classrooms of homophobia. Most educators understood homophobic language as the symbol of their school's level of tolerance and indicator of "climate" making it *the* problem to solve. However, educators felt schools' capacity to eradicate homophobic language was limited because students failed to see anything "wrong" with that language.

> Oh, I think our high school is probably like so many others where we get so frustrated with, um, you know, the fag word, the gay word on a regular basis and so many kids would say, "Oh I don't mean anything by it, it's just I use that term" . . . . Um, so, I think we are like any other high school where that still is . . . I, I, it's still prevalent. Kids still use that term, "You're so gay." I mean, it's a formative time in their lives when some kids are so, especially boys, are so homophobic, so we definitely are still battling, battling that. We have not overcome that.

According to this educator, telling students not to use the language is not changing how students think about the language, and she sees this as a problem that affects all high schools. In her experience, boys are especially likely to use homophobic language either carelessly or to purposefully police other boys' masculinity. They are resistant to educator interventions because they think using homophobic epithets is an acceptable or normal way to speak and it coincides with their value system—targeting people for gender transgression and casually categorizing gender and sexual others as deviant is normalized behavior for them. This educator's experience is a good example of how behavior management is ineffective if it is done without also coming to understand how the school culture is contributing to students' definitions of "normal" gender expression and "normal" modes of peer-to-peer interaction.

))) School Responses to the Conflated Climate/Culture

Safety, Safe Spaces, and GSAs

When discussing bullying and anti-bullying efforts for LGBTQ students, educators often rely heavily on the language of "safety." LGBTQ students need to be "safe" in school and they need designated "safe spaces" in which to "be themselves"—where it is "safe" to be openly LGBTQ. In our experience, teachers' thinking about "safe spaces" is closely aligned with Stengel's argument that "educators take for granted the need to protect [marginalized] students . . .

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from apparently threatening social circumstances."[75] Further, "safe space" is code for the argument that it is an educators' responsibility to "create positive conditions for learning and growth"[76] and—therefore—separate students from the possibility of harassment. So, while our research participants believe in the power and necessity of such spaces (as do the authors), most described visible "safe spaces" as signs of success for their schools and failed to recognize how the safety rhetoric paints LGBTQ students as victims in need of protection[77] and fails to "elevate the status of LGBT[Q] people from a protected class to a valued group in the school community."[78] As Youdell explains:

> [S]ubtle or implicit hierarchies and everyday injustices [in school] often have their origins in institutional and educator judgments about "who" students are. These judgments inform practice both explicitly and implicitly as they are taken up by educational institutions and educators to predict and explain what students can or cannot do, how they will or will not behave, the futures that are or are not open to them. This "who" is drawn on by educators as they forge different relationships with differently positioned students and as they explain and constrain the relationships that these differently positioned students can and cannot make and sustain. These everyday judgments have massive implications for students' experiences of education, shaping and constraining how students understand themselves and the opportunities, relationships and futures they see as being open to them.[79]

The LGBTQ student "who" that is institutionally created and recreated through the pervasive safety rhetoric is synonymous with "victim" and vulnerable "at risk" student.

In our data, "safety" was most often represented as a designated time or space, marked by a scheduled meeting or a "safe space" sticker. Having safe spaces where students feel that they can have a temporary reprieve from harassment is important, and many students have spent significant portions of their high school days in the library or a supportive teacher's classroom seeking that reprieve.[80] However, the establishment of these spaces, rather than being an answer to the problem, should only make the problem more apparent. The real problem is that students do not experience the entirety of their school as "safe" and therefore require these zones.

QuERI research participants have been nearly unanimous in their belief that LGBTQ students need a place to *go* where they can escape the possibility of hostility in the school environment. Donna, a high school health teacher, explained her understanding of what posting a Safe Space sticker symbolizes:

> I think . . . that it just means in my classroom, you're safe here, and nobody's going to pick on you, say something, and if somebody does say something that's,

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> you know, derogatory, judgmental, or whatever, that I'm gonna say something about it. You know, I'm not gonna tolerate that. So you're safe in my room . . . . If they're having a, you know, if they see the sticker and they want to say something to you then yeah, you're there to support them and help them in some way that you can.

Donna's description is representative of the teacher interpretations of "Safe Space" that occur throughout our data: educators who display these stickers are promising that homophobic language will not occur in their classrooms or offices, but if it does it will be addressed immediately. Further, the stickers are meant to show kids where they could safely tell a teacher about their LGBTQ identity or seek help if they are experiencing any kind of distress in relation to their gender or sexual identity. Research participants understood the need for Gay Straight Alliances and similar student groups in much the same way, with the addition that they saw a need for LGBTQ students to have a formalized time and space to share experiences with their peers. However, some were concerned that such student groups gained a reputation as the "gay club" which could actually contribute to continued marginalization. The stigmatization of LGBTQ identities also limited student participation in the group:

> But I think there are people who, I don't know, I'd like to be able to have kids have the experience that can come with the Acceptance Coalition meetings and not feel like that's where the gay kids go, and, so if you are with them [the gay kids], you are one of them [gay] and if you are one of them [gay], that's bad, you know? I wish there was a more open, um, environment.

This club advisor is noting that some students assume that anyone who attends the Acceptance Coalition meeting is LGBTQ, "one of them," and that being "one of them" is "bad." Although the club has successfully provided a "safe space" for students to connect with peers and adults, the group itself is marginalized, stigmatized, and isolated in the school environment—and this stigma likely prevents many kids who are seeking support from attending meetings. So, while the participating students may feel a greater sense of connection and belonging in their school, the larger social hierarchy continues to marginalize queer kids in the school and the act of attending a meeting potentially produces more marginalization.

Despite the increasing numbers of character education and anti-bullying programs, schools are still experienced as hostile environments by LGBTQ students and families.[81] Addressing this problem by focusing on safety issues is comfortable for most staff, and even for most communities, as safety practices reflect the "moral self-image that most people have of themselves."[82] Like

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anti-bullying programs, the establishment of Safe Spaces is vital to the school success of LGBTQ students; however, it fails to address the heteronormative system that privileges heterosexuality and hegemonic gender. Research indicates that being called "gay," "fag," or "dyke" are among the worst of possible pejoratives in high school[83] and that to be "called 'gay' by others was among the most psychologically disturbing form of sexual harassment" to students.[84] Safe Space programs and Gay Straight Alliances are attuned to the injurious effects of this language, but they do not expose or challenge the value system that positions "gay" as such a horrible way to be or that provides popularity and prestige to the harasser.[85] They fail to address how and why students are systematically excluded through "apparently mundane and everyday practices inside school."[86] In other words, anti-bullying programs, Safe Space stickers, Gay-Straight Alliances, and other such interventions fail to be disruptive, and LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students' position in the social hierarchy remains largely marginalized and unchanged and the systems of power that put them there remain intact.[87]

Gay Days[88]

Schools often mark their commitment to diversity and positive school climate through one-time events intended to heighten the visibility and recognition of marginalized identity groups within the school community. These events are typically organized around themes like "appreciation," "celebration," or "tolerance" of those who are not the "norm," i.e., not White, American born, and heterosexual. This approach to multicultural education has been used to address the lack of representation of many types of difference in school life. Critiques of multicultural education have pointed to the dangers of relying on such events as strategies for creating an inclusive school. Ngo argues that events like multicultural fairs or "Diversity Day" often lead to "the simplification of difference into discrete, essentialized categories,"[89] while failing to "engage students in a critical examination of diversity."[90] So, although "celebration" events may raise awareness around the experiences of socially marginalized groups, they also "leave oppressive structures intact, and neutralize the harsh realities of education, economic, and political disempowerment."[91] They "ignor[e] the persistent (discursive) constitution of race/ethnicity [e.g., gender, sexuality] as axes for differentiation and stratification, eras[e] historical and contemporary exploitations and subjugations, and [fail] to note, let alone challenge, the enduring supremacy of the majority."[92] Those represented by the multicultural event remain firmly in the position of *the*

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Other because giving marginalized groups isolated and short-term access to voice and visibility does nothing to threaten the privilege of the dominant group. These approaches are merely engaging in the "superficial accommodation of difference."[93] So, although such events have potential educational value—they may shift or expand a few individuals' worldview—it is critical to examine what exactly they do and do not do in the interest of pursuing equity in educational contexts.[94] It is important to ask questions such as: Who benefits from "tolerating" or "accepting"? What really changes about the culture of the institution and the experiences of those being "tolerated" or "accepted"? Has the distribution of power shifted in any way? Wendy Brown argues:

> When, for example, middle and high schoolers are urged to tolerate one another's race, ethnicity, culture, religion, or sexual orientation, there is no suggestion that the differences at issue, or the identities through which these differences are negotiated, have been socially and historically constituted and are themselves the effect of power and hegemonic norms, or even of certain discourses about race, ethnicity, sexuality, and culture. Rather, difference itself is what students learn they must tolerate.[95]

Acceptance or tolerance is limiting because it does little more than tell LGBTQ kids—or any marginalized groups—that they have permission to show themselves. Within these frameworks, someone must always *be tolerated* by the dominant group, which makes it inevitable that "objects of tolerance are marked as deviant, marginal, or undesirable by virtue of being tolerated."[96]

Celebration approaches to inclusion of LGBTQ groups within the heteronormative curriculum and life of schools reinforce gender and sexual difference as both "exotic"[97] and dangerous. While celebration approaches to multicultural education are tokenizing to all groups so represented, LGBTQ youth are further marked by the sorts of events chosen for commemoration. It is not gay civil rights events or the achievements of LGBTQ individuals that are celebrated in most schools. Educators in our research have described events like Day of Silence,[98] World AIDS Day,[99] Transgender Day of Remembrance,[100] a reading of *Laramie Project,*[101] or involvement in "anything related to AIDS" as ways to proclaim their support as a school for LGBTQ students through one day visibility. This pairing of LGBTQ identities and experiences with school harassment and invisibility, disease, death, physical violence, and murder continue to mark LGBTQ people as deviant and as victims. As Hackford-Peer argues, this "systematic inclusion . . . functions to include discussions about queer people, but only in a negative connotation. When this kind of inclusion is in place, queer people are only present in the school and the curriculum through discussions about dangerous

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pathological behaviors."[102] These forms of "celebration" call on a safety and risk discourse by equating LGBTQ identity with significant danger. Further, the rationale for needing the LGBTQ multicultural events in the first place is the persistent targeting of LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students—the logic being that LGBTQ students are being victimized and the school needs to take measures to save them. Christy, a high school guidance counselor, describes this connection:

> So, I think that continuing to do the Day of Silence [is helpful for addressing homophobia and harassment], um, and, actually, this year we did a Transgender Day of Remembrance, we did that too! So we had posters around talking about the different, the people who were killed for various reasons. So, um, yeah, it's still an ongoing struggle [to stop LGBT student harassment] in my opinion.

This school poster campaign—a common multicultural celebration approach—focuses attention not on the contributions of LGBTQ people to literature, history, science, or politics, but on murder for gender noncomformity. This practice again positions LGBTQ students as victims, calls attention to the severe sanctions served against those who challenge gender expectation and focuses its audience's attention on the danger of nonnormative gender expression. The assumption is that raising awareness about the tragic deaths of gender nonconforming people will build empathy (i.e., character) in students and end discriminatory behavior. Students are being asked to feel empathy for victims of violence, but heteronormative policies and practices of the school are not being called into question. Setting aside one day events where people can show support and then return to the "heterosexist norm is problematic,"[103] not only because it fails to produce change, but because the end result may be an entrenchment of Othering the exotic[104] and at-risk LGBTQ person. These events, although calling for tolerance, do not increase awareness of the cultural systems that allow some students to be targeted for harassment while others gain social capital through their violent behavior. "So, while many educators identify decreased violence and 'celebration' events as indicators of improved school climate, they are not critically examining how their schools might be perpetuating the marginalization of LGBTQ students."[105]

Understanding Bullying as Gender Policing

The majority of bullying research has been "gender blind"[106]—failing to look at the sociocultural context of bullying and the ways in which many bullying

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behaviors are rooted in reinforcing the "rules" for "appropriate" gender behavior. The scant bullying research that has attended to gender comes largely from the field of developmental psychology and has served to reinforce gendered stereotypes and "essentialised" norms of masculinity and femininity[107] rather than exploring the policing of gender boundaries as a primary social function of bullying behavior. We propose (as have others) that bullying behaviors are not anti-social but rather highly social acts deeply entrenched in the perpetuation of cultural norms and values—significantly, those norms that require a fixed relationship between (hetero) gender, sex and sexuality and the maintaining of "gender coherence"[108] through this "constellation."[109]

Every student's speech, behavior, dress, etc. are always being regulated by the cultural rules about the "right" way to exist in the school environment, and youths' everyday gender policing practices often fail to draw adults' attention because these behaviors largely align with the institutional values of school. Young people's attitudes about difference are partially formed in a school-based social scene that rewards conformity. Children learn "'their place' in the U.S. political and social order through their public school experiences,"[110] and school is a primary cultural site where young people learn the rules about who men and women are "supposed" to be. Youth regularly regulate and discipline the boundaries between "normal" and "different" along the lines of sex, gender, and sexuality (and their intersections with race, class, ability) and this process is a mechanism for acquiring and increasing social status.

These patterns of aggression occur constantly throughout the school, producing and reproducing systems of value based on gender conformity, though often at lower levels of visible violence than that deemed "bullying," and they often occur *within* friendship groups,[111] making it all the more difficult to see and to intervene. Boys' regular misogynistic teasing and sexual harassment of girls, girls' verbal policing of one another's appearance and sexual reputations, and boys' frequent homophobic teasing are examples of verbal aggression that constantly circulate within peer groups, police the boundaries of acceptable gender, but fall outside dominant discourses of bullying.[112] In addition, some forms of aggression are considered "normal" based on cultural expectations for gendered behavior, for example, "for boys to be heroically and 'playfully' violent and for girls to be repressively and secretly 'mean.'"[113] Youth operate within these acceptable dynamics of aggression to battle for position in social hierarchies without (much) adult scrutiny, reproducing gender norms including those for "relational aggression."[114] Students who are socially powerful are those who successfully perform normative gender and heterosexu-

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ality, and great importance is placed on youths' success in the "heterosexual marketplace"[115] through acquiring (heterosexual) dating opportunities and demonstrating attractiveness to the "opposite" sex. Those who most successfully conform to gender expectations are "celebrated"[116] in their peer groups and in school culture.

Young people who are viewed as having an inadequate gender performance or gender characteristics or a gender identity not normatively associated with their biological sex are more violently and publically "marked,"[117] and denied access to social power and popularity. These patterns of targeting indicate that youths' understanding (and marking) of their LGBTQ and gender nonconforming peers is not "based solely on sexual orientation, but rather from judgments about perceived tendencies to engage in forms of expression that run counter to gender conventions."[118] The farther youth fall from idealized forms of masculinity and femininity, the more vulnerable they are to these patterns of heightened policing as well as more severe forms of violence. LGBTQ youth are often the most vulnerable in this system. Through "the continual, vocal branding of [the] Other,"[119] students not only fight for power and establish their own positions within the social hierarchy by marking others' positions as higher or lower than their own,[120] but they (re)establish who you cannot "be." Biased speech and other verbal aggressions and "microaggressions"[121] should be understood as "citational practices"—"drawing on and repeating past articulations and perceptions."[122] Homophobic language does not need to be explained in the moment, which signifies that it is citing and reproducing cultural and historical understandings about this kind of speech, and these cultural norms are reproduced each time kids use this language to regulate one another. Hate speech acts—"faggot," "dyke," "homo," "slut"—"injure" individuals *and* the larger group of queer and nonconforming students by repeatedly placing them in "subordinate position[s]" in the social hierarchy[123] and publicly reaffirming the associated gender transgressions as deviant. However, it is only the students who are overtly, publicly, repeatedly targeted who are framed within dominant bullying discourses as the victims of bullying.

Because these escalated verbal acts of aggression draw from the same cultural system of meaning and practice as everyday gender policing—a normalized part of social life—they are not viewed as abnormal by youth. It is, therefore, possible that those who "bully" do so because they are making an "extreme investment" in a cultural system that allows them to access power through the "normative regulation of others."[124] In other words, the violence termed "bullying" is merely the heightened and visible form of aggression that circulates every day in schools and in the larger culture—aggression that

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targets appearance, personal interests and hobbies, academic engagement, bodily comportment, physical size and shape, and sexual behavior in ways that continuously reassert the "right" way to be a gendered person and affirm the expected alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Connelly notes that high school is "one of the most intensely and often violently anti-gay sites in our culture."[125] Each time a LGBTQ student is harassed, it communicates the message that "a central element of the gay student's identity is deficient, shameful, and worthy of ridicule."[126] "Student [and adult] discourses of 'normal' gender and sexuality make the school feel unsafe for [LGBTQ] students,"[127] so it is imperative that anti-bullying work focus on gaining a deeper understanding of the subtle ways that privileging of heteronormative gender performance constantly influences how students negotiate their school environments. Targeting others for their failure to "do" gender "right" is a learned mechanism for improving or affirming one's *own* social status as well as reaffirming the "rightness" of the gender "rules," and schools are participants in both teaching youth to use these tools and in privileging some groups of (conforming) kids over others. It is, therefore, important to examine the various ways in which schools institutionalize heterosexuality and silence and marginalize gender and sexual difference, thus supporting social positioning practices that privilege idealized heterosexual performance—from social rituals like prom, to elections of school queens and kings, to awards for "cutest couple," to the heterocentric curriculum, to school dress codes that affirm the gender binary. Heterosexuality and gender conformity are rewarded with a position at the top of the school's social hierarchy—visibly reaffirming the school ideal[128]—often through the awarding of crowns.

Bullying is not anti-social behavior, but rather is both intensely social and functional behavior rooted in the school and larger cultural value systems. It serves a "social purpose by reinforcing hierarchies of power and privilege" and is "a reflection of broader social inequity and prejudice." "It is a barometer of collective social, cultural, and political anxieties" and routinely "marginalize[s]" and "villifie[s] those who are seen as 'different.'"[129] A primary area of difference marked and targeted is gender (and by extension, sexuality) and schools are still complicit "in the everyday cruelties of the enforcement of heterosexist/homophobic hegemony."[130]

))) Rethinking Bullying

The literature reviewed here and the data excerpts from some of our own research represent the dominant narrative about U.S. schools' responsibilities to LGBTQ

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students. The "problem" of LGBTQ students' negative school experiences has been shaped by a discourse where "overly individualized and psychologized analyses . . . distort larger issues of inequality"[131] and that neglects research examining youths' negotiations of the social hierarchies in their peer groups.[132] A "lack of theorizing the power of social difference" perpetuates the dominant discourse on bullying[133] and its narrow focus on the bully/victim binary. "Anti-bullying" responses to this understanding of "the problem" include a need to protect individual victims and overlook "the role that schools play in the reproduction of social relations along axes of class, gender, race and . . . sexuality"[134] that privilege some and marginalize others. LGBTQ sexuality and nonnormative genders appear in the school environment only as sites of risk and vulnerability, calling for surveillance and intervention by adults, and LGBTQ youth are only acknowledged and supported as victims, or potential victims, in need of protection and care.[135] When educators understand "the problem" in this way, the cultural, systemic privileging of heterosexuality and gender normativity is never called into question, the marginalization of LGBTQ youth is reproduced and reentrenched in new ways, and schools avoid claiming responsibility for their complicity in the aggression targeting LGBTQ and gender nonconforming youth.

The bullying discourse is rarely questioned because it aligns with the cultural mythology of the K–12 school experience. This mythology has a socially unifying force—anyone who has been educated in U.S. public schools can provide a recognizable narrative of "the bully," and while there is a collective desire for the bully to be eliminated, there is also an acceptance of the bully's presence as a rite of passage or a "normal" part of the K–12 schooling experience. The problem of pervasive and persistent targeting and harassment of LGBTQ students fits easily into this collective memory of schooling. However, this meaning making of LGBTQ harassment fails to address why LGBTQ students have historically been hyper-visible figures of "deviance" in the school environment (and thus the targets), and why for decades homophobic epithets like "fag" have served as such powerful tools for marking any student who falls outside social norms.[136] Traditional bullying discourses do not account for the social norms that dictate who students are "allowed" to be in the school environment, or who has access to power and prestige in the social culture of school.[137] What is needed is an understanding of bullying as more than "autonomous acts, free-floating from their histories and contexts that can be accounted for through the character of one faulty individual."[138] "Generic" anti-bullying policies—though "masquerading as providing protection for all"—do not address the "specific ways that particular children, and not others, are continual targets of peer violence."[139]

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Violence targeting LGBTQ students is embedded in and reproduces "normative power structures [which] discursively organize ideals of masculinity and femininity."[140] Thus, acts of LGBTQ harassment are "reiterations of the dominant order"[141] that normalize the marginalization of students who do not conform or meet the standards of hegemonic gender in some way. Bullying LGBTQ students is an act of social violence not only against an individual, but against gender and sexual difference. And in that way, bullying is a political act.

The educators we cite here from our research data are interpreting their LGBTQ students' experiences and their school climates through a lens that allows them to "see" overt acts of sexist and homophobic violence but not the ways in which "schools play a part in structuring adolescent selves . . . including relations of power, labor, emotion, and symbolism."[142] Although the participants recognize the presence of homophobia in their schools, they lack insight on how social stigma and marginalization work "in the most mundane moments everyday inside schools,"[143] or "how school processes act unwittingly to exclude particular students from the educational endeavour."[144] Furthermore, as Ringrose and Renold argue, "the dominant 'bully discourses' employed to make sense of and address [peer-to-peer] conflict offer few resources or practical tools for addressing and coping with everyday, normative aggression and violence in schools." These "normative cruelties" are "exclusionary and injurious practices" that are taken for granted as normal gendered behavior.[145] Our research participants' perspectives on peer-to-peer aggression reflect this argument that social interactions such as girls' gossiping, boys' rough housing, or "playful" exchanges of insults like "slut" and "fag" are rarely considered to be overtly aggressive behavior. Therefore, such low-level aggressions—which actively reproduce normative expectations for gender and sexuality—are rarely noticed, let alone monitored.

We propose a new definition of bullying that aims to address the issues described above and that will provide a more useful framework for (1) understanding the social nature of the aggression that occurs between peers; and (2) designing interventions that will address the cultural roots of peer-to-peer aggression. Further, we wanted to develop a definition that challenges the bullying discourse and draws attention to the daily violence that often fades into the landscape of "normal" adolescent behavior. We argue that it is imperative to keep this subtle aggression in the foreground because it reflects the cultural norms embedded in a given context—like a school or community—and is the mechanism through which youth regulate the boundaries between "normal" and "other." Finally, we take the position that a majority of peer-to-peer aggression in U.S. public schools is some form of

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gender policing, and we believe bullying must be redefined to account for relationships between peer targeting and structural inequalities:

> Bullying is overt verbal, physical, or technology-based ("cyber," text messaging, etc.) aggression that is persistently focused on targeted person(s) over time. This behavior is visible aggression that has escalated from a larger system of low-level or covert normalized aggression that polices the boundaries between "normal" and "different" in a specific social context. Targeted person(s) are victimized because they are perceived to be outside the boundaries of "normal" as culturally defined within a peer group. This aggression is a tool for acquiring higher social status in a peer group because by targeting others as "different," the aggressor claims a higher position in the social hierarchy and reinforces the social "rules" of acceptability. Peer-to-peer aggression typically replicates structural inequality, and therefore patterns of targeting are likely to reflect systemic marginalization along lines of gender, sex, sexuality, race, (dis)ability, and class. Bullying frequently reinforces gender norms—ideas about "correct" and "normal" masculinity and femininity. Students who are viewed as having non-normative gender (and by extension, sexuality) are frequent targets. Not all aggressive behaviors between students can be termed "bullying"—some are the result of individual conflict or personality differences.

By redefining bullying in this way, we hope to disrupt the cultural mythology of bullying as a taken-for-granted, coming-of-age experience in U.S. K–12 schools. This definition is meant to create emphasis on the cultural roots of "the problem" of peer-to-peer aggression, which will ultimately drive interventions that focus on shifting cultural norms.

"The hegemony and ultimate stranglehold of the bully and anti-bully discourses over educational research, policy and practice is in much need of a critical overhaul."[146] Moving forward, research on and a reenvisioning of in-schools aggression must address the "socio-cultural dimensions of bullying and aggression"[147] and the "intense" social competition[148] and gendered expectations central to what it means to be a gendered subject within school contexts. We are looking for ways to achieve sustainable change, and for any change to be sustainable, school interventions must take on the task of cultural change alongside violence intervention. The anti-bullying paradigm does not offer the tools to accomplish this goal because, "[b]y using vague terms such as bullying and name calling, [it] avoid[s] examining the underlying power dynamics that such behaviors build and reinforce, [which] effectively reinforce[s] the status quo."[149] What is needed are interventions that see schooling "as being shaped by the ongoing deployment of available discursive strategies" and believe "the school is also a material location."[150] It is important to understand schools on a macro-

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and micro-sociological level because that accounts for both the lived experience of the students and the cultural processes of elevating hegemonic gender performance and heterosexuality to a position of prestige in the school environment. Ultimately, this lens provides a richer understanding of how students are stigmatized in school—and this understanding is imperative for designing interventions that have any hope of creating sustainable change.

NOTES

1. Some portions of the argument in this article were previously published as Elizabethe Payne and Melissa Smith, "Rethinking Safe Schools Approaches for LGBTQ Students: Changing the Questions We Ask," *Multicultural Perspectives* 14 (2012): 187–193; and Elizabethe Payne and Melissa Smith, "Safety, Celebration, and Risk: Educator Responses to LGBTQ Professional Development," *Teaching Education* 23 (2012): 265–85. Some other portions are awaiting publication under Melissa Smith and Elizabethe Payne, "Educator Evaluations of School Climate for LGBTQ Students: A Reiteration of the Bullying Discourse," in *LGBTQ Voices in Schools,* ed. Anna Wilson and Veronica Bloomfield (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, n.d.).
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The Queering Education Research Institute© is an independent think-tank, qualitative research and training center currently affiliated with Syracuse University School of Education. QuERI began in 2006 with the Reduction of Stigma in Schools, a research-based educator professional development program, and expanded in 2009 to become a comprehensive research center. The purpose of the Queering Education Research Institute (QuERI) is to bridge the gap between research and practice in the teaching of LGBTQ students and the creation of LGBTQ youth-affirming schools. Primary QuERI activities include: qualitative research on LGBTQ Issues in Education; creating and delivering research-based professional development trainings; research-based approaches to creating supportive environments for LGBTQ youth and the children of LGBTQ families; State Policy work in support of LGBTQ students; undergraduate and graduate coursework in LGBTQ Issues in Education; opportunities for graduate students to work and research in schools addressing these issues. QuERI is currently unfunded and operates as a volunteer effort. More information about QuERI research and programs is available at http://www.queeringeducation.org.

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