

# *co-constructing space for literacy and identity work* **with LGBTQ youth**

by **Mollie V. Blackburn**

Young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), or are perceived as such, often suffer from neglect and abuse in schools. School personnel typically ignore the issues of LGBT youth in the academic curriculum and in extracurricular activities (Gray, 1999; Owens, 1998). Youth perceived as LGBT are often called derogatory names, harassed, or physically abused (Eaton, 1993; Gray, 1999; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Owens, 1998; Rofes, 1995).

This neglect and abuse hinders the education of these youth, as suggested by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) 2001 nationwide school climate survey of 904 LGBT youth across the United States. According to the GLSEN report, 68.6 percent of these youth felt unsafe in their schools because of their sexual orientation, and 45.7 percent felt unsafe because of their gender expression (Kosciw, 2001). As a result, 31.9 percent had skipped a class, and 30.8 percent had missed an entire day of school in the month prior to the survey. Based on these findings, Kosciw (2001) concluded that the heterosexism and homophobia these young people experienced in schools hindered their academic learning.

More specifically, heterosexism and homophobia in schools impede both the literacy work and the identity work of students perceived to be LGBT. LGBT youth in schools are marginalized, according to Eli Goldblatt's (1995) definition of *marginalized* people as those "whose private lives are at odds with the dominant view of a proper public persona" (p. 152). Britzman (1997) further observes that "schools mediate the discourses of private and public work to leave intact the view that (homo)sexualities must be hidden" (p. 192). In his



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study of urban high school students, Goldblatt (1997) found that “a gap between private and public self creates an inhospitable climate for writing.... Writers who are alienated from or insecure within the institutional framework of their writing task will predictably have trouble composing texts for that institution” (p. 152). Thus, the heterosexism and homophobia that LGBT youth experience in schools is likely to hinder their literacy work.

These forms of oppression are also likely to obstruct identity work. By *identity work*, I mean the ways in which identities are formed in social evolutionary contexts and therefore, in some ways, are shaped by these contexts, as well as the ways in which individuals contribute to the work of identity formation: They have agency to interact in and with their contexts to form their identities (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). This work is particularly difficult for LGBT students because, as Britzman (1997) asserts, heterosexism and homophobia work to make homosexualities invisible in schools so that lesbian and gay students often “have no opportunities to explore their identities” (p. 190) there.

Because schools tend to be heterosexist and homophobic institutions, I chose to examine the literacy and identity work in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ<sup>1</sup>) youth engage in an out-of-school context. I studied Story Time, a literacy group in a youth-run center for LGBTQ youth called The Attic. The LGBTQ youth with whom I worked used our reading and discussions of texts in Story Time to validate their identities and to envision ways in which they might work against heterosexism and homophobia.

## The Attic, Story Time, Youth, and Texts

The Attic, founded in 1993 in Center City Philadelphia, serves LGBTQ youth ranging in age from 12 to 23. According to The Attic’s statistics at the time I was there, the youth served were 45 percent African American, 40 percent European American, 5 percent Latino/a, and 4 percent Asian Pacific Islander; the other 6 percent were of other or mixed

ethnicities. The statistics, which at that time failed to identify transgender youth, stated that 54 percent of the youth were male and 46 percent female. The participants were diverse in their gender, race, and class; almost all were from urban communities. Most had, at some point in their lives, been students in a district that, by the time they were adolescents, had a policy protecting the rights of LGBTQ youth. However, the youth with whom I worked rarely reported having experienced the implementation of this policy. In my experience, The Attic was most heavily used by African-American males. The Attic explicitly worked against heterosexism and homophobia in a variety of

ways. For example, it trained and hired youth to conduct outreach to young people and youth service providers on meeting the needs of LGBTQ youth. It also offered a wide array of services such as support groups, counseling, tutoring, and social activities.

When I first came to The Attic as a volunteer, the youth asked me to facilitate a group different from the existing support groups—something more recreational. I tried several groups—including “Out and About,” in which we did activities such as scavenger hunts outside of The Attic—but Story Time is the group that lasted. Story Time began meeting for approximately two hours once a week in the fall of 1998 and continued while I was there, through



August of 2001. After that, it was and continues to be facilitated by a youth who was an active participant. During one of my years with Story Time, July 1999 through July 2000, I formally collected data including field notes, audiotapes of two-thirds of the meetings<sup>2</sup>, and documents shared in the meetings. This data collection was a part of a larger ethnography of the ways in which LGBTQ youth use reading and writing for social change (Blackburn, 2001).

During this year, the group met 45 times; 93 youth attended at least once. Because the group was open, youth came and went as they chose, so that attendance was quite varied. A meeting of Story Time could include two young people or 18, but an average of nine youth came to each meeting: some quite regularly, others sporadically, and still others only once. The most regular participants were four youth who came to more than half of the meetings, and six more who came to over a quarter of the meetings. Of these, six self-identified as African-American male, three as African-American female, and one as white female.

Typically I began meetings by inviting youth to share any texts they had brought. Over the year of formal data collection, the youth shared texts at almost half of the meetings (47 percent). If they had not brought texts, I described the texts that I had brought and asked the group whether they would like to read any of them. Usually I had copies for all so that we could read the texts together; I often prepared them to be read as readers theatre (see Tierney & Readence, 2000), in which people in the group assume the roles of characters in the story and read the appropriate dialogue. I shared texts at 82 percent of the meetings. If the group seemed uninterested in reading the texts I had brought, I suggested that the group talk or use a book of questions to serve as a catalyst for conversation. We shared no texts, other than the stories we told about our lives, at three (7 percent) of the meetings.

Of the texts that the youth shared during the year of formal data collection, about two-thirds (67 percent) were written by the youth and one-third (33 percent) by someone outside The Attic. One text was a combination, a video created by a youth based on two published texts (see Blackburn, 2002–2003), and another was a love letter to one of the young men in the group. Of the texts that I brought, most (80 percent) were published by someone outside The Attic; 13 percent were either data or drafts related to this research. I also shared a few poems that my partner wrote and one piece from my journal.

### Places exist in and of themselves, but spaces are those places brought to life.

Though the texts included a wide range of genres, most were traditional alphabetic texts. Of the 83 unique texts the youth shared, 67 were alphabetic, including poems, journal entries, excerpts from books, letters, short stories, a magazine, an excerpt from a poem, a commercial script, and an excerpt from the Bible. Non-alphabetic texts included song lyrics, audiotapes, videotapes, a piece of art, a photograph, and a scrapbook. I shared 43 unique texts, of which 33 were alphabetic: poems, short stories, articles in periodicals, excerpts from novels, vignettes, written data, a book of questions, and a 'zine (a magazine written, produced, and distributed by a young

person for young people). Other texts I shared included audiotapes, videotapes, picture books, and an excerpt from a graphic novel. Race and/or sexuality were central to many, but not all, of the texts we read and discussed at Story Time, as will become apparent in

my description of a particular meeting. In the supportive environment of The Attic, the youth and I co-constructed a unique space in which to engage in literacy and identity work.

### Conceptualizing Space

*Space* is a living, breathing context characterized by complexities and often by conflicts. Susan Talburt (2000) points to de Certeau's distinction between *place* and *space*, in which he asserts that *space* is a "practiced place" (p. 19). Talburt describes *spaces* as "emergent, incomplete, and unpredictable" (p. 19), as opposed to *places*, which she understands to be "an order of distributed relationships, location, and fixity, such as a given culture to be transmitted, an interpretation to be learned, or defined skills and methods of reasoning to be acquired" (p. 19). *Places* exist in and of themselves, but *spaces* are those places brought to life. I include in the concept of *space* the people within a place and the ways in which that place brings people to life. In other words, *space* is a dialogic between place and people.

Talburt acknowledges that "Certain discursive spaces encourage certain articulations of the self" (p. 17). I would add that when a particular space does not allow for a particular articulation of the self or performance of identities, then that place stops being a space for that articulation or performance. For example, The Attic is a place that makes space for LGBTQ youth to perform their sexual identities, while school may not be. School often offers these youth space to be students of a particular race or gender, such as African-American female, while not providing space for them to be students with sexual identities, such as lesbian. Thus, it is not that there simply is or is not space; rather, it is that there may be space for some aspects of individuals

and not for other aspects. Space can be squelched by the assumption that everyone shares a particular perspective, such as a heteronormative one. If a space does not allow for difference and controversy, then it is no longer space.

According to bell hooks (1994), space is:

a context where we can engage in open critical dialogue with one another, where we can debate and discuss without fear of emotional collapse, where we can hear and know one another in the difference and complexities of experience. (p. 110)

Although hooks is talking specifically about space among women, her notion is more broadly applicable. In this article, when I talk about *space*, I am talking about the space, or lack thereof, that LGBTQ youth find—or make—to explore their identities, particularly their sexual identities, in ways that often conflict with the heteronormative. Whether or not a space is safe enough for this kind of identity work can be determined only by a particular individual at a particular time. What is safe for me may not be safe for a young person, and what is safe for that young person may not be safe for another; further, what is safe for one person at one time may not be safe at another time. When I say that a space is safe enough for a given kind of identity work, I am not asserting that such space is necessarily characteristic of the place; rather, I am describing what an individual can accomplish in that place at a particular time.

### Co-Constructing a Safe Space in Story Time

A close look at a single meeting of Story Time provides an illustration of this concept of a safe space. This meeting was representative of many others in terms of attendance, participation, and structure, but it was unique in that it was

particularly text-rich; we read and discussed a wider array of texts than usual. While I could draw from many meetings to create a collage of images of the literacy and identity work in which we engaged in Story Time, this single meeting offers a range of such images in a cohesive form.

### Description

This meeting included ten youth, another adult staff member, and me. Seven of the youth and the adult staff member attended Story Time regularly. Of the three youth who were not regulars, one came both to Story Time and to The Attic sporadically during the study, another came only twice, and the other came once.



We began with a few announcements, and then I asked whether anyone had brought anything to share. Thunder<sup>3</sup>, a regular in the group, began talking about his collection of poems—some of which he had written, some of which were by other people. He read aloud one of his own poems from this collection. Entitled “In the heat,” the poem was gay male erotica. The group discussed the poem’s sexual nature, its powerful sensory images, its use of metaphor, and its similarity to a poem we had read in a previous meeting. Thunder then read another of his poems, “It is coming,” which was about revenge. The group

laughed and joked about the content of the poem. I affirmed his writing, saying it was “fabulous,” and pointed out his use of assonance, explaining what the term means. Thunder responded by saying that he got the technique from Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven.” One of the youth said that he was thinking of that poem while Thunder was reading, and so we talked briefly about Poe.

Next, Karen spoke of a poem she had written about Mary, her sister who had died two months earlier of complications resulting from sickle cell anemia. She prefaced



her reading by saying that the poem was an incomplete draft and that she was not ready for critical feedback. I asked about the catalyst for the poem, and she told me that she wrote it because she was “feeling some kind of way.” She read the poem aloud. It was powerful in its evocation of Mary’s life, death, and funeral, and of the life Mary did not have. One of the youth commented on how “real” the images seemed, focusing on the images of life. We did not discuss Mary’s death.

Thunder invited another youth to share, but he declined. Karen talked about some of her poetry and read a poem she had shared before at Story Time. Next, Theo talked about his poetry and read aloud his poem “Stranger,” an account of a brief interaction between two people who run into each other at a coffee shop long after a one-night stand. He performed the poem’s dialogue and sang an excerpt from a song that was part of the poem. His word play was delightful, including such phrases as “traipse trippingly” and “feel our fickle fingers tickle our tongues.” He played with cliché by ending his poem with, “That which does not kill us makes us”—here he inserted a long pause—“stranger.” After he read, he told the story behind the poem. I pointed out the word play that appealed to me, as did others in the group.

Thunder invited me to share, and I told the group that I’d brought a children’s book by Chris Raschka (1999), *Like Likes Like*. It’s about a cat who is lonely in the world of “Two by two, he and she” until “Look! In luck. Looks like like likes like. Oh. How lucky.” I read it aloud and then asked whether group members thought the cats were gay. Karen said, “I think they’re homosexual kittens,” and Thunder said, “I think they’re kitties with homosexual tendencies.” I told them what one of my academic mentors had told me, that Raschka said that he wrote the book to honor same-sex relationships. Several people expressed their interest in the book.

At this point, approximately halfway into the meeting, Karen said, “You know what we didn’t do today, Mollie? We didn’t go around and say our names.” We didn’t always introduce ourselves, but since there were several participants who did not come regularly, I was glad she suggested it. Often when we introduced ourselves, we said our names and something about ourselves, so I asked for a topic. Karen suggested that we say our names and our favorite books or authors. As we went around the room, participants named Jeanette Winterson and E. Lynn Harris, among others. Once the introductions were complete, the large group discussion dissipated into smaller conversations, until I said, “We can

talk if you want, but I want to tell you some other things that I brought just in case you want to read them.” I said that I had copies of a poem that Karen had repeatedly referred to as “the nature poem” throughout the meeting, and that I had also brought a transcript of a previous meeting of Story Time in which we had read and discussed this poem. I mentioned other options as well, but Karen said, “You know what I want to read? . . . I want to read the nature poem. . . . I want to read the transcripts too.” From previous discussions, Thunder, Karen, and I knew that the poem made Quentin uncomfortable. I asked Quentin whether he was OK with reading it, whether he’d stay for the reading, and Thunder said, for Quentin, “He *will* stay.” I asked Quentin to move so that I could see his face during the reading to see how he was reacting. Quentin moved, and I distributed copies of the poem and the transcript. The youth negotiated among themselves who would read the various parts of the transcript, and a young woman who had recently joined us agreed to read the poem.

The “nature poem” was Ellen Bass’ (1993) “For Barbara, who said she couldn’t visualize two women together.” During the reading, two of the young women responded audibly to the sexual nature of the poem, mostly with “uhmmms.” After the reading, the group responded fervently and chaotically to the poem. Then Karen began reading the transcript of our previous discussion of the same poem, in which the group talked about whether the poem was about sex or about nature. After reading the transcript, Quentin said he finally saw the poem as sexual. When Thunder said the poem got his “testosterone flowing,” Karen reminded him of the sexuality in his own poetry, and in Theo’s, by quoting poetry shared in today’s meeting.

Since it was now time for the group to end, I asked Karen to bring to the next meeting a text she had mentioned earlier, and she agreed. Again the large-group discussion dissipated into smaller conversations as people departed.

### **Analysis**

This meeting of Story Time was typical in that the youth decided whether to attend and what to do when they came. Although I had an agenda for the meeting, they did also, so that together we negotiated the space and its use. First, the youth shared the texts they had brought; after that, I introduced the texts I had brought, from which the youth selected the ones they wanted to read together. We read a wide array

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of genres, including poetry, a children's book, and data, referring along the way to other works. The texts touched on many topics, including revenge, loss, and love. The youth both represented themselves in their own writing and sought representations they could recognize or claim in the writing of others. Although our discussion of our reading was valuable in and of itself—in that it provided an out-of-school space in which these LGBTQ youth could validate their identities—it also served to help these youth imagine spaces for themselves as LGBTQ youth in schools.

Together, in *Story Time*, we juxtaposed school-sanctioned literacy work and unsanctioned sexual identity work. By talking about poetic devices such as imagery, metaphor, assonance, and alliteration in the context of (homo)sexually explicit poetry, we considered what it might be like to talk about sex—particularly non-heterosexual sex—in schools, which some naively imagine to be asexual. We confirmed that sexual texts can be analyzed in a scholastic fashion. We also did intertextual work by comparing and contrasting poems, in terms both of content and of style and structure: Karen compared the content of the Bass poem to that of Thunder's and Theo's poems, and we compared the style of Thunder's poem to Poe's. We talked about favorite authors and authors who inspired us, as Poe inspired Thunder. Although much of the literature in this particular meeting was about sex, the reading of *Like Likes Like* served to disrupt the notion that non-heterosexual identities are only about sex. The book illustrated that literature offers a way to talk about non-heterosexual identities in ways that are *not* about sex and that *are* accessible to youth, even young children. In these ways, these LGBTQ youth and I co-constructed a space in which literacy work and identity work came together.

Constructing such a space involved safety and risk. When Karen stated that she was not prepared for critique of her poem about her recently deceased sister, the group honored her need for safety by responding primarily to the content of the poem and responding to the form only with praise. Karen communicated that she was vulnerable, and the group responded in a supportive manner. Further, after reading and discussing this poem, she shared another poem, one that the group had praised on a previous reading. In these ways, Karen constructed a safe space for herself, with the help of the group. Still, the group could be as

risky as it was safe. When Karen asked to read a poem that she knew made Quentin uncomfortable, and Thunder insisted that Quentin stay for the reading, both were challenging Quentin, all but demanding that he sacrifice his comfort in order to expand his notion of what was acceptable. This challenge was a risk, but in the end it was worth it, as Quentin came to a new understanding of a poem that initially caused him discomfort. Thus, in *Story Time*, we worked together to co-construct a space where the youth felt safe enough to take risks.

## Considering School

The *Story Time* space, where youth engaged in literacy and identity work in ways that were both safe and risky, offers a vision of what schools could be like for LGBTQ youth. By engaging in sexual identity work via school-sanctioned practices, the youth could imagine that such work might be possible in school. The balance of safety and risk showed them what it would take to make engaging in sexual identity work in schools possible: It would take a safe place where youth could communicate their vulnerability and expect to be supported. Simultaneously, it would also take a space for pushing and pulling, a space where LGBTQ youth could challenge the heteronormative by expanding the curriculum to include their identities. It would take acknowledging people's discomfort and asking them to listen, to hear, and to try to understand.

In the first meeting of *Story Time*, after we read "Am I Blue?" (Coville, 1994) a short story about a young man who is abused because he is perceived to be gay, I asked the youth to imagine what it would be like to read this story in school. Star said, "It'll make me feel comfortable to let everybody else read what people like me go through and everything, so, like, they could get a better understanding" (audiotape, October 1998). The following summer, after we read "For Barbara," (Bass, 1993) the lesbian love poem mentioned earlier, Star said that he wanted a copy: "I'll give it to my English teacher, and say, 'What do you think about this?'" (audiotape, August 1999). Although Star did not give the poem to his teacher and probably never intended to, he was able to imagine doing so as a possibility. By offering a model of one school-sanctioned way of engaging in literacy and identity work, *Story Time* helped youth to imagine doing similar kinds of work in school that would help them make space for themselves as LGBTQ

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youth. They began to see ways that they could be agents *against* heterosexism and homophobia, agents *for* social change. Though they could not necessarily enact these possibilities while they were still coping with the heterosexism and homophobia of most schools, they did learn to imagine how school could become a safe space for them.

## Implications for Afterschool Practice

Afterschool programs can nurture such imaginings and facilitate their actualization by creating space for LGBTQ youth to engage in the kind of literacy work sanctioned by schools while simultaneously engaging in the unsanctioned work of developing their sexual identity. This space, remember, is not merely a room in a building, but rather a place in which people allow for complexity, conflict, and difference; promote debate and discussion; and “encourage certain articulations of the self” (Talbert, 2000, p. 17). These “articulations of the self” must include those that are marginalized in other places, such as school classrooms. In order for a space to accomplish the kind of work I am advocating, it needs to include people who understand and value the kind of literacy work that is valued in schools, such as discussion of various genres of literature and specific literary devices. At the same time, these people also need to understand and value young people and the kinds of identity work in which they are likely to engage, including, but not limited to, non-heterosexual identity work. Creating such a space may require anti-heterosexism and homophobia training, in which facilitators come to know the experiences of LGBTQ youth and have opportunities to ask questions of such youth—the kind of training The Attic hired its youth to offer to youth and youth service providers, including adult facilitators in afterschool programs. When they understand literacy and identity work, adult facilitators in afterschool programs can co-construct a space with LGBTQ youth in which the youth can validate themselves and work against heterosexism and homophobia through their reading and discussion of texts.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I began this article using the acronym *LGBT* because it is the one most often used in the literature. Here I add *Q*, for *questioning*. I use *LGBTQ* unless referring to a source that uses *LGBT*, in which case I respect the author's choice of acronym.

<sup>2</sup> I was always prepared to audiotape Story Time, but there were times I did not: when there was a new youth whom I perceived to be uncomfortable or when I thought the group dynamics were tenuous and worried that taping would stifle rather than stimulate conversation. I also lost two audiotapes to technological errors.

<sup>3</sup> All names of people in this article are pseudonyms.