

## Reduction of Stigma in Schools: An Evaluation of the First Three Years

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### Introduction

High school is a profoundly social experience for students. Having friends is central to being “visible”—to having an identity—in school (Eder, 1985). Social positioning, friendship groups, romance dramas, and the battle to “fit in” gain the attention and drain the energy of students far more than do academic pursuits. Schools are the environments in which youth “struggle to define themselves in relation to others” (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009, p. 545), and as “sexuality becomes increasingly central to identity and social relationships...schools are critical social contexts in which dominant beliefs about sexuality are played out” (546). Thus, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) youths’ social relations are fraught not only with the usual adolescent tensions, but also include fears of having their sexual or gender identity discovered, of losing friends, of being marginalized. For youth who are “out,” or who are judged by peers to fail in their performance of heterosexuality or hegemonic gender, taunting and harassment, isolation, and marginalization are daily occurrences (Adelman & Woods, 2006). A middle school teacher participating in this study reported her observation of peer dynamics:

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Now if I see a boy who I think is gay, um, I can see that those kids are ostracized starting very young . . . The guys who exhibit any kind of, um, feminine behaviors at all, and I'm not saying all guys do, because, you know, just 'cause you're gay, doesn't mean you have those kinds of behaviors, but the guys that do, they have a terrible hard time in school. It's awful. It's awful . . . They're just left out . . . Sometimes girls will take them in. You know, that happens. But they're left out most of the time from groups altogether. Guys don't even want to sit near them. (Gay) kids are ostracized and that's, that's probably the most hurtful thing, to be alone when everybody else is so together. And when you're 11 and 12 and 13 and 14, it's so important to be part of a group, and if you're not, those are the kids where, you know, school is hell for them.

Students' ability to succeed in school relies not only on quality teaching and academic resources but also on a supportive school environment that fosters their growth as individuals and affirms their worth as human beings within this social setting. LGBTQ youth rarely receive such affirmation in school (Macgillivray, 2000). Educators need to gain a clear understanding of the ways in which LGBTQ youth experience their schools, they need new ways to "see" both their own interactions and the student interactions going on around them, and they need tools for change.

In fall 2006, the Reduction of Stigma in Schools© (RSIS) program began working in the Central New York area to bring increased awareness of the LGBTQ youth experience into area schools. This innovative professional development model aims to provide school personnel with information and resources that will empower them to advocate for LGBTQ students and to disrupt institutional practices that limit these youths' access to social power in the school environment (Payne & Smith, 2010). In September 2009, the program reached the "1000 educators trained" mark. The feedback from participating educators has been overwhelmingly positive, and the study on which this article is based explored the experiences of those who participated in the RSIS program over its first three years. The overall goal of this larger research project was to discover where the program has been successful and where changes are needed as well as to develop a deeper understanding of the meaning, in terms of their professional responsibility, that teachers make of their workshop experience. The current article explores portions of the research relevant to the three stated workshop objectives and evaluative data offered by workshop participants on their experience.

### Literature Review: LGBTQ Youth School Experiences

In the U.S., the "ideal" adolescent is constructed through cultural discourse as an engaged high school student conforming to U.S. high

school “norms”: “enthusiastic participation in extracurricular activities, competent participation in curricular activities, lack of parenting or family responsibilities, lack of financial responsibility, non-coital heterosexual involvement” (Eckert, 1997, p. 7). While this image may seem outdated, the idealized construction of the American adolescent high school student continues to structure the institution of school, thus rendering “deviant” the majority of students who are actually living the high school experience (Eckert, 1997)—none more so than lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender transgressive youth. “As an institutionalization of adolescence, high school brings an institutionalization of traditional gender arrangements, heterosexuality and romance,” which both forces the narrowing of gender appropriate behaviors for boys and girls (Eckert, 1997, p. 7) and increases the visibility of youth not conforming to rigid standards of gender performance. Eckert’s work on the “heterosexual marketplace” of high school clearly articulates the ways in which students are valued by (and value themselves through) the institutionalized heterosexuality of high school and its accompanying heteronormative gender performances. This institutionalized heterosexuality is seen in a gender-based division of labor for school activities, the feminization of “supportive” roles (bake sales), the pairing of hegemonic masculine and feminine activities (football and cheerleading), social activities based on heterosexual pairing (school dances), school titles such as “queen” and “cutest couple,” and the relationship between school social status and heterosexuality.

Research consistently confirms that LGBTQ students experience fear, harassment, social isolation, discrimination, and physical violence on a daily basis (Adelman & Woods, 2006) for their failure to conform to the heteronorms of the U.S. high school. Using the standards of hegemonic gender to identify potential targets, adolescents “hunt” for and mark “the fag” as a way to publicly claim their own normative gender and sexuality and to marginalize difference (Smith, 1998). This “anti-LGBTQ environment sends an explicit message that those who are considered different or non-conforming constitute acceptable targets of bullying and harassment or simply do not belong in school” (Adelman & Woods, 2006, p. 8). Educator intervention is, at best, inconsistent, and “students learn from experience that adult support or intervention may not be forthcoming” (p. 18). Adults’ silence on this issue implies that homophobic harassment is permitted or even supported in the school environment (Adelman & Woods, 2006; Macgillivray, 2000; Payne, 2009).

Language is a powerful and ubiquitous weapon for targeting and policing gender non-conformity. Hate speech produces a social, not just an individual, effect. As argued by Thurlow (2001), “the perpetual degradation of [homophobic] terms as hate-words pollutes the social-

psychological environment in which young bisexual, gay and lesbian people [and those perceived to be] must live” (p. 26). Through the hate speech act—“faggot,” “dyke,” “homo,”—both the individual targeted and the larger group of gender and sexual non-conforming students are positioned within social hierarchical structures. The “injury” is not only in the verbal abuse itself but also in the social positioning that is its product. It is an act of “structural domination” that relegates the target and, by extension, all similarly non-conforming others to the “subordinate position” (McInnes & Couch, 2004, pp. 435-436). This social positioning “through hate speech turns the subject away from communion, communication, and belonging” in the school environment (p. 436). Those targeted in school are at higher risk for dropping out of school and poor academic performance (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009).

Recent research on the usage and prevalence of verbal gender policing provides insight into the persistent and often overlooked ways that youth use the narrow confines of hegemonic gender to position themselves and others in the social hierarchy (Payne, 2010). Thurlow’s (2001) research asked adolescents to list as many pejorative labels as possible and to mark the “worst” ones to “establish the prevalence of homophobic verbal abuse reported by young people themselves, and the quality they attached to this kind of abusive language” (p. 27). The findings indicated that homophobic hate speech acts “constitute one of the most predominant categories of abusive language among young adolescents” (Thurlow, 2001, p. 32) and that youths use this abusive language casually, with little forethought. Boys reported using significantly more homophobic epithets than did girls, and both groups chose homophobic terms that predominantly targeted male homosexuality. The data indicate that, despite their frequent and unconsidered usage of these terms, boys “are very aware how reputation-damaging these pejoratives can be . . . [and] they fear being the recipient of such abuse precisely because they regard these people so poorly” (Thurlow, 2001, p. 35). Although the participants in Thurlow’s research did not explicitly connect homophobic language to hegemonic masculine ideals, the boys *did* have an instinctual understanding of the social consequences of being labeled *gay*.

Eliasson, Isaksson, and Leflamme (2007) explored 14- and 15-year-olds’ use of abusive language through interview and participant observation, and found that “verbal abuse is intertwined with discourses of gender, toughness and heterosexuality. Young people’s gender identities, sexualities and scope for social interaction are regulated through verbal abuse” (p. 602). The participants’ policing of one another’s gender performance “simultaneously constructs gender and produces

power relations” (p. 589) that reward gender-conforming students. Specifically, boys earned social stature through toughness, while girls reported negotiating a fine line because “both using verbal abuse and being the target of it can lead to unfavorable positioning” (p. 602). Both studies draw attention to social behaviors that typically go unchecked or unnoticed in the context of a typical school day. Students in these studies are explicitly regulating their peers’ gender performance, but these practices are normalized in such a way that the resulting patterns of social privileging and marginalization, based on hegemonic gender performance, are barely visible.

The expectations to conform to heteronorms in schools are both explicit—through the harassment and marking of sexual and gender non-conforming students and through the gender policing of all students—and implicit through the “pervasive heteronormative discourse and symbols of appropriate gender and sexual relations displayed through classrooms, peer groups and extracurricular activities” (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009, p. 543). The combined effect of these explicit and implicit messages is that heteronormative expectations are constantly circulating throughout the school environment, which makes every student a potential victim of policing actions (Chambers, Tincknell, & Van Loon, 2004).

It is important to recognize that youth are not necessarily explicitly targeting those claiming LGBTQ identities for harassment and marginalization. Chambers et al.’s (2004) study on peer regulation of heterosexuality found that victims were targeted for a wide variety of reasons: “because they deviated from some other physical, behavioural or attitudinal norm such as being overweight, shy, thin or perceived to be ‘nerdy.’ Accusations of homosexuality were used, then, to police all aspects of behaviour” (p. 404), relying on the cultural relationship between idealized hegemonic gender performance and heterosexuality (Payne, 2007). Thus, peer regulation through heteronormativity restricts how all students are “allowed” to operate in their school environments.

Shakib’s (2003) study on the school experiences of female basketball players illustrates how “girls’ and boys’ experiences with their own gender identity are constrained by limited notions of femininity and masculinity that set the parameters of the peer group gender expectations” (p. 1419). In this study, the girls felt pressure to conform to a traditionally feminine gender performance for fear of being labeled a lesbian due to their competitiveness and athletic ability. The girls also reported that, even when their teams were extremely successful, “they [were] held in lower social regard than [were] the girls who displayed more traditional feminine characteristics” (p. 1415). The implication is that successful female athletes are not institutionally rewarded in the

same way as are their female peers who “successfully” perform their gender and heterosexuality, thus marginalizing these female athletes from their school’s social scene (Payne, 2007).

The strict regulation of difference produces a school climate in which sexual and gender minority youth (and those perceived to be) are at risk for marginalization, exclusion, violence and harassment. Until educators are better able to understand the effects of a heterosexist culture on all members of a school community (Sherwin & Jennings, 2006), these patterns will continue. The RSIS professional development program was designed with the intent to teach educators to recognize the patterns of violence and marginalization, both visible and invisible, that are constantly circulating through their schools and to provide them with tools to enable the creation of more affirming school environments.

RSIS focuses on three objectives: (a) to establish an understanding of the operation of stigma in schools and the relationship between stigma and risk for LGBTQ youth; (b) to provide education and tools for creating more positive learning environments for all students; and (c) to actively create opportunities for dialogue and change in support of LGBTQ students. This article explores the ways in which participating educators addressed these objectives in their feedback about the program as well as their evaluation of the program’s overall effectiveness in helping them feel more knowledgeable about and confident in the work of creating more affirming environments for LGBTQ students. We conclude with reflections on the barriers to creating sustainable change and provide recommendations for interventions that aim to address the systemic marginalization of sexual and gender-non-conforming youth.

## Methods

The data presented here are part of a larger evaluation study of the first three years (fall 2006 to early fall 2009) of RSIS. The entire dataset includes data from semi-structured interviews with 13 educators, written evaluations completed at the end of each workshop, follow-up questionnaires completed by 11 key participants, field notes recounting all meetings with school personnel, phone and email exchange records for all school contacts, and the content delivered for each RSIS presentation. Interview participants represented 10 RSIS workshops, and their interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. The interview sample is limited in that all interview participants reported being committed to supporting LGBTQ students before they attended a RSIS training, and the first year of the program (2006-2007 academic year) is under-represented. Workshop evaluation forms included seven Likert-scaled

and two open-ended questions that asked attendees for their perspectives on the effectiveness of the facilitator, workshop format, and content. Of the attendees for 14 sessions, 60-90% completed the forms, for a total of 322 evaluations. Follow-up questionnaires, consisting of 13 open-ended questions on the experience of attending an RSIS professional development training and workshop, were sent electronically to 23 participants for whom we had contact e-mails. Of these, 11 completed questionnaires were returned. Field notes were compiled by three RSIS graduate student interns and served as the program's detailed record of meetings with administrators and teachers in which the interns explained the program and its educational relevance, or of planning meetings that preceded workshops. The notes also represent interns' experiences as facilitators for the RSIS workshops.

Likert-scaled evaluation questions were analyzed to determine the overall mean scores for the entire set. Then evaluations were sorted and analyzed according to length of presentation (0-30 minutes, up to 60 minutes, over 60 minutes). For purposes of this paper, all qualitative data were coded using predetermined codes based upon the stated workshop objectives as well as "overall effectiveness" and "facilitator effectiveness."

## RSIS

The RSIS program is an unfunded exploratory effort to create research-based professional development training in support of LGBTQ youth that would be relevant to educators and fit within the limited professional development opportunities offered by schools. Our initial goals included facilitating school climate change, but with no budget and a struggle just to get access to most schools, we recognized that we were limited in what we could do. The program design of RSIS was based upon published research (mostly sociological and qualitative) documenting the LGBTQ student experience, rather than research on in-service training efficacy or other LGBTQ training models. The initial content was targeted at the high school level, but as the program grew, workshops were created specifically for middle schools and an increasing amount of transgender content was added. The process of reviewing the research and responding through program adjustment has been ongoing, although the general template for the training has remained stable.

Five basic principles provide the foundation for RSIS design: (1) the use of the educator-to-educator model; (2) bringing information into the schools where all educators, not just "the choir," have access to the information; (3) bringing information into the schools as facilitating connection of content

to that school environment; (4) training content should be research-based and relevant to that school or participant group; and (5) with adequate workshop time, most teachers will try to make the application to practice. As the design developed, two additional elements emerged as vital. First was the choice to house the program in the Syracuse University School of Education; second was our policy of making initial school contacts with top administration in each school, rather than relying on networking connections to gain access to the school. Research pertaining to these key components in the RSIS design is discussed elsewhere (Payne & Smith, 2009, 2010).

## Findings

### *Overall Effectiveness*

Participant feedback on the effectiveness of RSIS workshops has been overwhelmingly positive, with one veteran school counselor reporting that it was “by far one of the best workshops I have ever been to . . . I was very energized by it. I was hopeful. Um, I mean, I felt grateful [to be there].” Workshop participants were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the workshop, and the overall mean score for all returned evaluations was 4.14 on a 5-point scale. During the first three years of the program’s existence, workshop lengths varied from 30 minutes to 3 hours, and participants’ reported satisfaction varied according to the length of the workshop attended, with participants experiencing the least overall satisfaction with their workshop experience in the 30-minute sessions (3.84 versus 4.21 for 1-hour sessions and 4.68 for sessions lasting more than two hours).

Significantly, the program format varies in accordance with the amount of time that the school allots for it, with longer workshops including more time for discussion and workshop activities designed to aid participants in developing strategies for implementing workshop content in their schools. It is, therefore, not surprising that the written feedback for the shortest workshops (30 minutes) included requests for more discussion time and indicated less satisfaction with the experience than with longer workshops. It is notable that feedback from all workshop lengths included requests for additional time to discuss strategies and to ask questions about the process of implementing changes in participants’ schools, indicating that educators were willing to further engage with the topic.

Participant responses to short-answer evaluation questions and follow-up questionnaires indicated that they felt that the RSIS workshops were informative and performed the function of raising awareness about



the school experiences of LGBTQ students. One interview participant addressed the “argument” being made through the workshop content:

. . . just the way it was presented, it was hard to argue with, you can't argue, I mean you really can't. It makes an absolute wonderful case for changing the way we do things in schools, and the way we think about kids, and the way we act and behave, and, you know, in a very non-threatening way.

This educator's comments reflect the overall theme of the written evaluations: RSIS content is informative, important, and relevant, and draws attention to a group of students who are traditionally not supported by their schools. One participant commented, “I think it's a great program. I think people can ‘hear’ it.”

Workshop evaluation respondents consistently provided positive feedback for the workshop content, describing it as “effective,” “realistic,” “informative,” “valuable,” “educator-friendly,” “fact-filled,” “powerful,” “educational,” “interesting,” “comprehensive,” and “thorough.” Evaluation data also indicated that participants believed that the workshop effectively raised awareness (both their own and their colleagues') about LGBTQ student issues as educational issues. One participant stated:

[The workshop] dealt with why this is an educational issue for all people who work in schools. I think that was a key. Um . . . how it impacts the actual learning, and if you talk with school administrators and teachers, that you can't deny. And that, so, whether or not you, as a human being, feel accepting or whatever, it's the educator's role to behave differently.

Attendees illustrated their own heightened awareness by reporting that they “learned a lot” and that they found the research on the school experiences of LGBTQ youth “startling,” “enlightening,” and “surprising.” A number of participants drew attention to the fact that information about sexual and gender diversity is new for a lot of educators. Comments such as these from two different participants—“It was great to get background in the subject matter because I personally have not been exposed to a lot of the content” and “An important issue. First time for me to hear the alarming stats”—were frequent in the evaluation responses. One participant wrote, “I didn't realize that this was such a problem in middle school,” referencing a common misconception that LGBTQ issues are only high school issues. Ultimately, RSIS evaluations indicate that the workshop content is effectively making the case that educators need to be mindful of their LGBTQ students' school experiences to support their well-being and academic success.

### ***Presenter Effectiveness***

One of the core design premises of RSIS is the educator-to-educator model. This means that all RSIS workshop facilitators have significant in-school professional experience and use their experience to speak to how workshop content is relevant to the day-to-day operations of schools (Payne & Smith, 2009). Participant feedback about the quality and effectiveness of the RSIS workshops consistently identified the presenter as one of the program's greatest strengths. The effectiveness, knowledge, preparedness, style, and delivery of the presenters were highly scored on the workshop evaluations, at 4.48 on a 5-point scale. The most frequently occurring descriptor for the RSIS facilitators in the evaluations was "knowledgeable;" presenters were also characterized as "enthusiastic," "prepared," "professional," "open," "comfortable," "organized," and recognized for displaying "energy," "commitment," and "compassion."

One of the strongest themes emerging from the short-answer evaluation questions was participants' perception that LGBTQ issues might be difficult, sensitive, or unwelcome in a professional development workshop. One participant thanked the presenter "for keeping your presentation neutral. You did a great job not showing bias toward religious people who might have different views." Others praised the presenter's skill working with "an obviously very difficult concept to tackle" and "a topic that can be difficult for some to talk about." Workshop attendees expressed appreciation for the presenters' openness to "conversation" and "to other points of view," and one participant wrote, "you seem like you are talking 'with' and not 'to' or 'at'" the educators attending the workshop.

Collectively, this feedback implies assumptions or fear that professional development about LGBTQ issues has the potential to be uncomfortable or that the individual presenting the information could use a threatening tone or discourage contradictory points of view. Participants reported that the presenters were able to counteract that fear or discomfort and "share the information in a non-threatening, non-judging, engaging and professional way." Further, evaluation forms indicate that the presenters were able to use their experience as K-12 educators to establish credibility and trust with their audience:

I felt that [teaching experience] was an important reason for the staff's positive reaction to the presentation. She was able to join with the teachers and help them realistically see how they could bring the topic into what they are already doing. She came from the perspective that they are part of a support network for LGBTQ students and not from the blaming perspective.

Having the 'teaching experience' brought credibility to the presenta-

tion. Teachers appreciate someone who really knows what goes on in the classroom.

Since the presenter was a former teacher, she spoke to and with the audience. Our staff was open to listening to her because she could not be labeled as someone who had no idea what it is like as a teacher.

From these data, we can conclude that a presenter who can frame the program content in the day-to-day realities of classroom practice is effective in helping workshop attendees understand LGBTQ issues as *educational* issues, rather than religious, political, or legal issues. These findings also indicate that the educator-to-educator element of the program model is an important element in the program's success in creating opportunities for dialogue (Objective 3, discussed below).

***Objective 1:  
Understanding Stigma and the Relationship  
between Stigma and Risk***

All RSIS professional development workshops review the most current educational research on the school experiences of LGBTQ youth. This portion of the workshop includes statistical data illustrating the ways in which stigma operates in the school environment and LGBTQ youth's high susceptibility to risk, including dropping out, substance abuse, high-risk sexual activity, relationship violence, and suicide, as well as descriptions of the ways in which they experience social stigma in the home and in the larger culture. Risk is not the primary focus of this or any section of the workshop, but we feel that reviewing the statistics is necessary to help educators make the connection between stigma, school harassment, and the difficulties faced by a disproportionate number (as compared to their heterosexual peers) of LGBTQ young people.

This portion of the workshop is structured with the intent to show educators that LGBTQ youth are not at risk *because* of their sexual and/or gender identity. Rather, they are at risk because LGBTQ people are stigmatized and marginalized by a heterosexist culture, and schools play a part in this "othering" of LGBTQ youth. Additionally, this section of the workshop draws extensively from qualitative research to help educators begin to "see" the operation of systems that normalize and marginalize student identities within the school.

When asked how they understand the relationship between social stigma and risk for LGBTQ students, participating educators described their understanding of how stigma functions in school in multiple ways. Several participants defined social stigma in terms of society's negative

messages about being LGBTQ, and they correlated these persistent messages with youth's vulnerability to violence and risk:

LGBTQ youth are at risk due to the social stigma places [sic] on them. Our society doesn't often embrace those that do not follow the norm and this creates an unsafe environment for the LGBTQ youth.

I guess in its simplest form, stigma has a profound affect on one's perceptions of self. You feel as a human being essentially flawed, something is profoundly wrong with you, when in fact it is the stigma around you that is wrong.

If there is a stigma for LGBTQ youth then youth who identify in this group (even if no one knows that) could experience issues with their self-esteem. If it is thought to [sic] wrong/bad/a problem then I must be wrong/bad/a problem.

I think the students are discriminated against and picked on who are gay and students lose respect among the majority of their peers for their lifestyle. Kids who are gay are a [sic] much higher risk for drugs or alcohol to cover up their feelings. They also commit suicide at a much higher rate than other students. Since everyone sees how kids are treated who are gay, a lot won't tell anyone they are gay for fear of being treated the same way.

Participants also described their understanding of stigma and its relevance to the school environment in terms of a need to eliminate it to create a safe school environment:

When we allow social stigma to stick around, especially in a high school setting, we are leaving our LGBTQ youth very vulnerable to low self-esteem, high-risk behavior, and failure in many ways. We need to be a supportive environment which starts at the top with administration and teachers speaking up and speaking with knowledge about being part of a minority group in our society. We all need more knowledge, I think, about what it feels like to be part of the minority.

It's [stigma and risk] directly related and the safer we make it the safer the students are both physically and emotionally.

Until we create an environment where LGBTQ youth feel safe and welcome, we have a group of kids at higher risk of feeling alienated with the potential of hurting themselves.

Additionally, educators articulated their understanding of the relationship between stigma and risk as they were describing what they know about the experiences of LGBTQ students in their own schools. One participant, a middle school teacher, equates social stigma with

not fitting in to the school's social culture and explained that this kind of exclusion has effects on academic performance:

I think there's a lot of kids, and it's not just gay and lesbian kids, it's, it's lots of kids, don't fit in. And lots of kids go to school, and they're square pegs that have to fit into this circle, and they're never, ever, ever gonna fit. And there's no place for them. And every day is hell. Every day at school. And they need something that they love, you know, if it's one thing, during the day or after school, whatever, you need one reason to be there so they can learn some math and science and English and social studies and get through the day because school, especially at that age, is not about what you're learning, it's about your social life.

Several participants drew from stories about families to articulate the correlation between stigma and risk. One teacher referenced her own family to make her point:

You know, you need support at home, and you need [the] support of a teacher, and you need [the] support of your peers to help you come together and feel like an okay human being . . . And that's hard to find. It's hard to find. If you don't get it, you have to find it yourself somehow and hopefully, today, with drugs as prevalent as they are, I think it's easier to go the drug route and . . . 'cause that's, that's what my one brother did that was gay. He went the drug route, and he's, he was, he's an alcoholic.

Another told a story of the stigma that one of her students has been experiencing in his family:

I have a kid right now I'll use as an example. His parents are divorced. He lives in a house where his father is a born-again Christian. I think he's remarried. And his father is constantly preaching to the kid, and he hasn't told his father that he's gay . . . But he hasn't told his father he's gay; his father just thinks he is different or whatever, but um, it brings about a ton of anxiety for him . . . But that's just a good example of a kid who . . . so think about that conflict every day, and how, and he's not doing well academically. He's one of the examples. He's struggling.

The data for this study indicate that while most educators participating in the workshops were able to make the connection between social stigma and the risks experienced by LGBTQ youth, fewer workshop participants articulated an understanding of the school's role—as an institutional setting—in reproducing and reinforcing LGBTQ stigma and valorizing heterosexuality and gender conformity. Evaluation responses frequently focused on the inclusion of the risk statistics in the presentation, without direct comment on the context in which the statistics were

framed: “It was short but not too short to leave out vital stats. The stats were startling but effective.” “Very thorough—good job backing up the info w/statistics.” Likewise, interview participants often reported the presence of the statistics as the specific workshop content element that they most recalled, although they did not recall the specific statistics included.

The participants framed risk statistics as important justification for anti-stigma work, but their primary focus for that needed work was on peer-to-peer harassment intervention. Participants acknowledged the presence of student cliques, bullying, harassment, violence, social exclusion, or students just being unkind to one another as harmful to the targeted students, and some expressed awareness of harm to the entire school community. They frequently noted the need for school staff to intervene consistently, but they did not seem to take up the larger issue of institutional practices that marginalize sexual minority and gender-nonconforming youth and that limit their full participation in school life.

Based upon participating educator reports, they appear to be framing the “problem” as the verbal and physical violence itself, rather than the violence as an indicator of the problem, implying that, if the violence is gone, the stigma is gone. While the brevity of the workshop experience could not easily engage educators in conversations of larger systems change, the consistency with which educators primarily remembered the risk statistics, focused solely on the interruption of verbal harassment, and used the youth-at-risk language has led to further data analysis and program revisions in RSIS.

***Objective 2:  
Provide Tools and Education for Creating  
More Positive Learning Environments***

RSIS program content aims to provide teachers with knowledge and skills that they can take back to their classrooms and apply toward creating more affirming school cultures. We encourage educators to think about schools in a different way, as cultural sites where hegemonic gender norms are privileged and students who do not conform are limited in their capacity to participate in their school environments. Workshop attendees learn about the ways in which schools actively reproduce heterosexism and heteronormativity, thus privileging hegemonic gender performance and allowing the marginalization of those who do not conform. The workshop illustrates how educational institutions implicitly endorse this marginalization through curricular silencing and rewarding “correct” heterosexual performance (e.g., homecoming royalty, “cutest couple” awards). The workshop also draws attention to the implicit messages that schools communicate to students when they

fail to address homophobic bullying and gender policing. This content is supplemented with video clips from area students telling stories about their school experiences. RSIS workshops end with recommendations for strategies to begin disrupting the patterns that marginalize LGBTQ youth as well as time for attendees to share stories or ask questions about their experiences with supporting LGBTQ youth.

The strategies and tools taken up by workshop participants were in line with their strong recall of the risk statistics. Educators utilizing the LGBTQ youth “at-risk” language remembered the ideas presented in the workshop for interrupting peer-on-peer harassment and spoke with commitment about the importance of stepping in to interrupt verbal violence. Strategies offered for examining the ways in which schools are heteronormative institutions and deny LGBTQ youth access to social power and prestige, and for potentially creating new avenues to school visibility, were not mentioned by any interview participants. The tools that they reported taking up from the workshop can be roughly categorized into new “ways-of-thinking” and “ways-of-acting” tools.

### ***New Ways of Thinking***

The “ways-of-thinking” tools represent a new way to frame understanding of LGBTQ youth that differs from understanding held prior to the workshop. The discussions of these new ways of thinking were presented both in the first person, reflecting on the participant’s own insight, and through comments on colleagues’ engagement with the workshop content. One district administrator noted the change in her understanding of gender and sexuality: “That gender and sexual issues are different form [sic] each other and that students have gender identification at a very young age. It also raised my level of awareness in gender messages from the media and retail.” Another participant reported, “The information about the binary of male/female was something that continues to make me rethink how I see things and present things. Most people do see the world either male or female and it challenged the ways we have always thought . . . or were brought up to think.” Responses such as these indicate that workshop participants are “hearing” program content that challenges essentialized notions of gender and sexuality, although they are not yet formulating action strategies based on these new ways of thinking. Action strategies remain predominantly tied to discourses of safety.

Another new way of thinking that was prevalent in the interviews was participant reflection on their colleagues’ growth and engagement in new ways of thinking as encouraged by the workshop experience. This emerged predominantly in talk around supporting LGBTQ students in

the classroom or school context. One teacher, who has long identified as an advocate for LGBTQ students, discussed her colleagues' increased awareness of the meaning of "Safe Space Stickers."<sup>1</sup> She stated that they previously held the misconception that putting up a "Safe Space Sticker" was a declaration of one's availability to provide counseling to a LGBTQ student.

No [that's not what it means] (laughing)! You know, um, you know, and so basically people were like, I think people pretty much think [now, after the workshop] 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, 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.

Another teacher commented on reducing the stigma of the "words" (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) themselves: "Words were put out. Um, that through language, you know, the more you desensitize language, people feel more comfortable, you know, responding to, using words, and I think that happened, that occurred [in the workshop]."

Workshop evaluations also included comments on increased "awareness" and "understanding" of "language." Changes in awareness and ways of thinking precede action; therefore, the participants' articulations of their shifting thinking indicate potential for action in support of LGBTQ youth in the future and possibilities for implementing inclusive or affirming classroom practice.

### *New Ways of Acting*

Participants' reports about changes in their professional practice are aligned with reported changes in thinking, reflecting their increased awareness of and commitment to intervening in verbal harassment and increasing safety. Many participants articulated their own commitment to consistent intervention and their desire for their schools to take a stronger stance against pejorative language, and they framed this as a necessary step for making their schools safer. One teacher believed that RSIS made an effective and necessary argument for consistency and potentially convinced her colleagues to be more diligent in their intervention efforts:

I don't know if teachers understand that little things, like, just stopping a kid from saying, "You're so gay," or, you know . . . that is powerful. And just doing that little bit can really send the message in their classroom that it is a safe place, you know, and that everybody is treated equally. So if nothing else, hopefully they took something like that away from it [the workshop].



This teacher's discussion of eliminating verbal harassment and promoting safety reflects a belief in the power of *language*, as she acknowledges the harm caused when educators allow hate speech to circulate through hallways and classrooms, and a belief that eliminating such language is imperative to creating a safer school. Other participants spoke about their own and colleagues' *intent* to address instances of hate speech and their appreciation for opportunities to think through classroom scenarios and possible responses. One high school teacher, who felt confident in her ability to consistently intervene, felt that this was an important component of the RSIS workshop:

I know here that we, when someone says 'that's so gay,' or uses one of those terms, that happens a lot here, and I know teachers were, are aware of it, but they say they're not aware of it in their classrooms, or sometimes they try to handle it, and they don't handle it right, so you gave ideas about how to deal with that.

This teacher believes that a lack of confidence could be a barrier for teachers who would like to take action, and the workshop evaluations support this. It should be noted that, while RSIS is designed to empower teachers to take up the challenge to think differently about the space and culture of schools, a substantial portion of all RSIS workshops is dedicated to providing examples of curricular inclusion and specific recommendations for working with students who use homophobic language. Workshops exceeding one hour also include a discussion of scenarios and active role play to increase participant comfort with and confidence in intervention.

Nonetheless, a notable number of educators expressed impatience with the program's focus on *ways of thinking* rather than *ways of acting* and requested more "info showing appropriate teacher responses to students," "More ideas of how to incorporate this into classroom and help these students," or "More time needed for strategies on how to deal with stigma." In other words, participants seemed to be looking for specific scripts and step-by-step instructions on how to address "the problem" and resisted the idea that new knowledge about the culture of schools and the workings of stigma would give them tools to make more effective decisions in regard to supporting LGBTQ students. This feedback reflects Ngo's (2003) finding that discourses of "good teaching" call for "model practices and a level of certainty" (p. 120) when addressing LGBTQ issues in schools. Teachers' varied reports of their preparedness to take action has been of primary concern as we continue to explore questions around what is "doable" in the context and time frame of traditional in-school professional development opportunities.

Although some evaluations indicated a desire for more recommendations for specific strategies, “ways-of-acting” responses to the workshop also included stories about small but significant action that could indicate the beginnings of school change. Participants referenced increased openness to dialogue, sensitivity to the experiences of LGBTQ students, inclusive classroom and school approaches, and LGBTQ visibility as positive workshop outcomes.

The school is now more open to having the dialogue . . . which is a great place to start. When a teacher has a conversation w/a youth identified as LGBTQ they are more aware and sensitive to how to present the information. I feel the language people use and how they present information will be more planned out and neutral to include everyone.

I have seen more ‘safe space’ stickers which indicates there is a greater level of understanding for the teachers as well as a visual acceptance for the LGBTQ students to see. Through discussions teacher’s [sic] have had with me I have a greater understanding of the social stigma and how this can negatively impact a student’s academic career. The librarian and I have discussed having book displays on LGBTQ issues.

Some workshop participants, who had been supportive of LGBTQ students prior to the workshop experience, reported taking on the new role of advocate after the workshop. One teacher told a story about educating her colleagues about the importance of communicating a collective and consistent message to their students:

The other two teachers that teach music in my building, we’re all in one little wing together; they were not at your workshop. After the workshop, that day, I went to them and I brought them stickers. I said, ‘You gotta put these up!’ They did not want to put them up. And they were uncomfortable putting them up. They were young [OC: *untenured*]. They’re both young . . . I said, ‘We have to do it!’ And I kind of begged them to do it. I said, ‘You know, if I’m gonna do it in my place, my room, and my cafeteria, where we rehearse, if these are going to be safe spaces, your band room has to be a safe space too. I think we should be unified, you know, and it took some convincing and they finally said, ‘Okay, alright, we’ll put them up.’ So they put up, I think, one in the band room. Maybe two.

These educators are reporting that their experience attending an RSIS workshop was the impetus for their and their colleagues’ action. The participants who told specific stories about their own actions described themselves as “supportive” before attending a workshop, and after the workshop, they felt able to implement RSIS program content into their professional practice to actively change their school environments. In other words, there is reason to believe that attending school-sanctioned,

education-focused professional development around LGBTQ issues gives quietly supportive educators “permission” to take more visible action.

***Objective 3:  
Create Opportunities for Dialogue and Change  
around the Issues Facing LGBTQ Youth  
and the Children of LGBTQ Parents***

Despite research documenting that “negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people are prevalent among pre-service and licensed teachers” (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008, p. 170), few opportunities are available for educators to increase their knowledge and awareness through teacher education or professional development. LGBTQ topics are usually absent from teacher preparation programs and, when present, receive less attention than do other areas of diversity (Athanasas & Larrabee, 2003; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006). However, information alone on the LGBTQ youth experience is insufficient in supporting the personal development of more supportive teacher attitudes (Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006), and teachers need opportunities to discuss their experiences and process the workshop content. Additionally, research has shown that opportunities for peer dialogue can help teachers build the support network that they need to engage in the strenuous, and sometimes risky, work of pursuing greater equity in the classroom (Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003; Towery, 2007).

Longer RSIS workshops allow more time for both structured and unstructured discussion; therefore, it is not surprising that data explicitly addressing the effectiveness of dialogue came from participants who attended workshops that were 1.5 hours or longer. The findings for Objective 3 are closely linked to the findings for “presenter effectiveness,” with participants indicating the presenters’ experience as K-12 educators and their framing of LGBTQ issues as educational issues facilitating engagement in a discussion that some might find uncomfortable or irrelevant for educational contexts.

Presenters’ field notes recounting the workshops suggest that, although most of the attendees’ questions concerned strategies for stopping homophobic language or garnering support from school administration, RSIS workshops were successful in creating a space where educators could ask a wide range of questions and share stories about their experiences supporting LGBTQ youth. Such stories represented situations that produced feelings of anxiety or uncertainty, e.g., a student coming out to a teacher, working with a transgender student for the first time, confronting student or parent resistance to LGBTQ curricular content, struggles to implement “no tolerance” policies for homophobic language,

and they created opportunities for productive discussion. Often participants were surprised by the questions that their colleagues asked and their willingness to engage with the workshop content. One participant recounted a question asked during the workshop at her school:

A business teacher . . . asked a question when they were talking about, um, oh god [as if trying hard to remember how it went], transgendered individuals. They [workshop presenter and participant] got into this whole piece of this, um, and he said, ‘Well if one of my students is transgendered, um, what do I call it?’ He used this term ‘It!’ And I almost fell out of my chair! And I thought . . . but that’s the kind of naïveté that you are dealing with and, um, so yeah, I remember that particular question because another person and I were dying laughing later saying, ‘What in God’s name?’ But that, that’s what you are dealing with, you know? And he really asked it honestly, like he didn’t know how to deal with the situation. So, anyway, the person who did the presentation handled it very well, I thought, ‘cause I almost dropped over but, um, she answered it well.

Exchanges such as these indicate that workshop participants who are new to the content feel comfortable asking the questions that trouble them, even if these questions might be perceived by others as uninformed.

Workshop evaluations indicate that opportunities for discussion about LGBTQ issues, or any “controversial” topic, are rarely available for educators. A notable number of participants either requested more time for discussion or said “thank you” for bringing the conversation into their school. One teacher stopped an RSIS presenter (second author) after a workshop specifically to discuss how this professional development experience was different and more effective: “because it allowed for both large-group and small-group discussion, rather than me standing and lecturing” (field notes). This reaction to RSIS workshop format and content was a persistent theme throughout the dataset:

People were just like, you know, have a lot of opinions and talked so . . . you know, that, they like to share it so . . . I think it’s something people want to talk about but no one ever talks about it. You know? And so, when you bring it up, I think a lot of people have things to say about it. Um, ‘cause they just never have an opportunity, you know, to talk about it, so, when you get people together like this, it’s just a lot of random things, you know, what they’ve seen or heard, you know, things like that. You know, and stereotypes that people hold.

[J]ust being able to be in an environment where you can be with your colleagues and just even say, ‘Kids go to our school who are of other sexual orientations . . . I guess I was just glad that it came out and there was some discussion about it because we hadn’t talked about it before.

. . . I felt comfortable in this group. I don't know if I feel comfortable in any group with any people, but that group, I think we were all there because we wanted things to be better in our schools, and we support this, and we support the whole topic, and you [the presenter], and there was a little bond there that you don't usually feel in any kind of professional development. At least I don't.

These reflections on participants' experiences attending RSIS workshops support a major assumption that we hold in our approach to design and execution of RSIS workshops: Educators *want* to talk about LGBTQ issues and, given sufficient knowledge, opportunity, and support, will translate these conversations into action (Payne & Smith, 2010). This kind of dialogue allows hesitant or resistant educators to learn from their colleagues' stories about advocating for LGBTQ youth as well as provides supportive educators the opportunity to assess their colleagues' stances on LGBTQ issues and to think about their overall school environment, rather than just their own classroom. These conversations rarely are given place in schools, but when they occur, they open doors for colleagues to collectively engage in the work of improving their school climate.

As a result of the evaluation work on the first three years of the program, we are currently expanding our design to include extended opportunities for regular facilitated dialogue in interested schools. This series of *critical dialogues* is being designed to give teachers the opportunity to reflect upon their own positionality and heterosexism, to "center" (Daniel, 2009) conversations about the ways in which the heteronormative structure of their own schools marginalizes LGBTQ youth, and to develop strategies to afford greater equity and opportunity to these students. Creating opportunities for small groups of colleagues to engage in critical reflection and analysis of their school environments may allow communities of allies to form, thus allowing teachers to feel safe enough to "leave their comfort zones and engage in critical reflection" (Garmon, 2005, p. 282) and to use their new knowledge to create change in their classrooms.

## Discussion and Conclusions

### *The Limited Impact of One-Time Training*

Research has demonstrated that one-time LGBTQ professional development training does have an impact (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010). Although potentially raising awareness and laying a foundation for future work toward change, as well as potentially contributing to short-term change, such training does not, however, provide sufficient disruption

of habitual patterns of thought or action to allow for new patterns to develop (Hirschfeld, 2001). Participants recounted that, immediately after training, teachers were more attuned to LGBTQ harassment, and intervention was more frequent. Then, “they kind of forget” and “need reminding.” Follow-up training, ongoing dialogue, and additional opportunities to revisit the information and think through the application of information to their daily practice are needed. As long as stopping LGBTQ harassment is one more item on the long teacher “to-do” list, it will not be consistently enforced. While it is an important first step for LGBTQ young people to actually make it onto the teacher “to do” list, in order to consistently interrupt LGBTQ harassment and create affirming environments for LGBTQ students, supporting these young people must move from an item on the list to a professional way of “being” for educators.

Insufficient workshop time and a need for follow-up, both to cover the content and to discuss it, emerged repeatedly across all the data and in all lengths of workshop presentation.

I think we need, the more, the longer, the longer time period to present to staff and remind them, and that’s what I . . . even if you got another 15 minutes [of additional training], a couple of months later [after RSIS] to remind them, or to follow-up that discussion.

I think we need awareness throughout the year, not just one day or one afternoon, but they [staff] need awareness all the time about what you do . . . how do you address it [homophobic language].

Um, there was a lot of chatter that day [of the RSIS training], not so much after.

After your thing in November [RSIS training], I know, um, teachers were aware of it [anti-gay harassment] for a while, but then they kind of forget.

I think there needs to be reminders ‘cause after a meeting you forget, or it’s been two months, and I can’t even remember what you talked about. Or just ways to break down into smaller groups and talk about it, or prevention, or ways to help you cue and remember or be more heightened to things that are going on.

These requests for specific scripts and strategies are indicative of the limited amount of time that schools are willing to dedicate to LGBTQ education issues. Educators know that it is unlikely that they will revisit this topic; they want quick and efficient answers about what they need to *do* when they return to their classrooms. Ideal professional development on gender and sexuality would take place over an extended period of time, with repeated opportunities for educators

to explore their own prejudices and their (often) privileged positions in terms of normative gender and sexuality, to begin to “see” the workings of the heteronormative system in schools and to have a dialogue with colleagues and discuss possible strategies for creating affirming school environments where youths’ possibilities are not limited by gender or sexuality (Towery, 2007). But the extensive demands on schools today do not allow for dedication of that time to LGBTQ issues, even if the schools were willing. RSIS continues to imagine the ideal while trying to think through the “possible.” The evaluation research process over the past year has led to several changes in the program content and workshop length, although the format and design remain the same.

As we continue to explore the possibilities for empowering teachers to understand and interrupt the marginalization of LGBTQ youth, we have found that a critical next step is a more in-depth investigation of the ways that educators are framing “the problem” of LGBTQ harassment in schools and why they are, on the whole, resistant to thinking about it differently. Our analysis of the RSIS evaluation data has led us to conclude that educators’ focus on issues of bullying, safety, and tolerance places the “blame” for unsafe school environments on students who are intolerant or lack empathy and that they understand the source and cause of these students’ beliefs as outside the school, believing that students are emulating their parents’ belief systems and/or reflecting values pervasive in the larger culture. Efforts to insert “awareness” and “tolerance” events, such as Day of Silence, into the school environment do little to address the fact that “acts of bullying are . . . reiterations of the dominant order . . . rather than acts that run counter to that order” (Bansel, Davies, Laws, & Linnell, 2009, p. 66).

Eliminating visible harassment does not, therefore, eliminate stigma because the systems of power that marginalize and threaten the safety of LGBTQ students, as well as their peers who do not conform to hegemonic gender expectations, remain undisturbed. Further research is necessary to identify how educators are using discourses of *safety* and *multiculturalism* to make meaning of LGBTQ students’ school experiences. Deeper understanding of this process will provide insight to how professional development can be further utilized to help schools take on the task of sustainable cultural change.

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### Note

<sup>1</sup> “Safe Space Stickers” mark a classroom or other space not only as a harassment-free zone for LGBTQ students but also as a supportive space. Stickers symbolize a person’s or institution’s belief that LGBTQ people are entitled to the same rights and privileges as heterosexual, gender-conforming people. Many of our participants use these stickers in their offices and classrooms to mark themselves as allies.

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