HOW THEATER WITHIN A TRANSFORMATIVE ORGANIZING FRAMEWORK CULTIVATES INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT AMONG LGBTQQ YOUTH

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) youth experience oppression in their schools and communities, which creates barriers to their healthy development. Emerging research documents strategies to support LGBTQQ youth, but little is known about developing LGBTQQ youth empowerment. This study extracts qualitative data (key informant interviews, n = 8, and a focus group, n = 8) from a larger case study of an LGBTQQ youth organization that uses theater within a transformative organizing model to make their schools safer and more inclusive. Findings suggest that theater–both theater games used within the group and scripted performances for adult stakeholders–uniquely contributed to developing individual and collective empowerment through an iterative process of building community, cultivating critical consciousness, and providing opportunities to effect change. Encouraging creative expression alongside developing LGBTQQ youth's capacity to create change can contribute to the positive development of LGBTQQ youth. © 2014 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) youth experience heterosexism and genderism (i.e., oppression of transgender people; Hill & Woughby, 2005) in their day-to-day lives, including at school (Grant et al., 2011; Higa et al., 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Among a national sample of LGBT middle and high school students ($n = 8,584$), 81.9% reported being verbally harassed at school in the past year, 63.5% reported feeling unsafe due to their sexual orientation, and almost one-third skipped school for at least one day in the past month because they felt unsafe (Kosciw et al., 2012). A national survey of transgender and similarly identified adults ($n = 6,450$) reports similarly jarring findings: 78% of respondents who were out as transgender during K-12 reported harassment and 15% left school because of it (Grant et al., 2011).

Experiences of bullying, discrimination, and a hostile school environment can impede the healthy development of LGBTQQ youth (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Grant et al., 2011; Kosciw et al., 2012; Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore, & Giambrone, 2011; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012; Woodford, Krentzman, & Gattis, 2012). Fostering LGBTQQ youth's ability to effectively resist these oppressive systems can foster positive youth development as well as responsive social change (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Higa et al., 2012; Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005; Sherriff et al., 2011; Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2013). While LGBTQQ have been actively working to undermine heterosexism and genderism for at least 50 years (Cohen, 2005), only recently have researchers begun to document, understand, and work toward addressing the needs of LGBTQQ youth communities (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003).

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) have emerged as a popular strategy to support LGBTQQ youth and work toward safer schools, and emerging research demonstrates the associations between these types of groups and positive outcomes (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Kosciw et al., 2012; Lee, 2002; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009; Toomey & Russell, 2013; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010); however, researchers have called for a greater investigation of the processes of youth leadership and empowerment among LGBTQQ youth both within and outside of GSAs (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Griffin et al., 2004; Russell et al., 2009). Community-based theater is a well-documented strategy for developing empowerment (Boehm & Boehm, 2003; Ehrensaft-Hawley, 2010; Hammock, 2011; Howard, 2004; Sanders, 2004), but this strategy has not been thoroughly investigated among LGBTQQ youth. In the present study, we interrogate how existing understandings of theater as a tool to create change can be used by LGBTQQ youth to cultivate individual and collective empowerment, when used within a transformative community-organizing model.

This study utilizes qualitative data from a mixed-methods case study of a group of LGBTQQ youth called Riot Youth. Riot Youth participants use a transformative organizing model, including theater, participatory action research, dialogue, community building, and other advocacy tools (e.g., lobbying), to make their schools and communities safer and more inclusive. This study examines how, within this model, their use of scripted theater performances delivered to adult stakeholders and theater games within the group cultivate youth empowerment. The affect on the school system is reported elsewhere (Wernick, Dessel, Kulick, & Graham, 2013; Wernick, Kulick, & Woodford, in press).

Transformative Community Organizing and LGBTQQ Youth Empowerment

Transformative community organizing models assert that creating meaningful social change requires working at individual, collective, institutional, and societal levels

(Bradshaw, Soifer, & Gutierrez, 1993; Freire, 1986; Pyles, 2009; Social Justice Leadership, 2010). Within this framework, empowerment is an individual and collective process wherein marginalized groups build power to achieve shared social change goals, which develops through the iterative processes of building critical consciousness and the skills and confidence to translate consciousness to action as well as taking action itself (Bradshaw et al., 1993; Christens & Dolan, 2011; Freire, 1986; Guitérrez & Lewis, 1998; Hoyt & Kennedy, 2008; McKenzie, 1999; Parker, Fook, & Pease, 1999; Pyles, 2009; Russell et al., 2009; Zimmerman, 2000).

In regard to marginalized youth, including LGBTQQ youth (Wernick, Woodford, & Siden, 2010), some have described the process of developing empowerment as *transformative resistance* (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Solarzano & Delgado-Bernal, 2011). Evidence suggests that marginalized youth can be effective change agents in making their schools and communities safer (Cohen, 2005; Ginwright, 2010; Mitra, 2009; Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2013; Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2013); however, only a small body of literature has investigated empowerment among LGBTQQ youth (Russell et al., 2009; Wernick et al., 2010). Russell and colleagues (2009) document self-reported definitions of empowerment among LGBTQQ youth leaders involved in GSAs.

In earlier work, we described how youth–adult partnerships within the context of participatory action research facilitated LGBTQQ youth empowerment (Wernick et al., 2010). This literature provides important insights; however, research is needed to understand the processes that facilitate individual and collective empowerment among LGBTQQ youth. This is particularly true given the specific barriers facing LGBTQQ youth, including invisibility, compulsory silence, lack of self-efficacy, and sexual/gender identity development in a heterosexist/genderist society (Dessel, Woodford, & Warren, 2011; D'Augelli, 2006; Russell et al., 2009).

Community-Based Theater as a Strategy for Empowerment

Social change-oriented theater modalities can be an effective strategy for developing empowerment among marginalized groups and effecting change (Boehm & Boehm, 2003; Ehrensaft-Hawley, 2010; Hammock, 2011; Howard, 2004; Sanders, 2004); however, their use among LGBTQQ youth to realize such outcomes has been scantly addressed in the literature. Much of the research examining change-oriented theater is based on Theater of the Oppressed, Popular Theater, and subsequent iterations of these models that examine issues related to power, injustice, and social identities (Bates, 1996; Boal, 1979; Howard, 2004; Sanders, 2004). This work suggests that theater and storytelling sustained over time can be used by marginalized groups to build trust, gain new skills, develop interpersonal connections, overcome isolation, and learn strategies to effectively navigate oppressive structures (Boehm & Boehm, 2003; Faigin & Stein, 2010; Halperin, 2001; Hammock, 2011; Leeder & Wimmer, 2007).

Through theater, marginalized youth, in particular, can develop healthy understandings of their identities, gain a sense of belonging, develop a productive outlet for feelings like anger and frustration, and increase civic engagement (Ball & Brice-Heath, 1993; Dutton, 2001; Halverson, 2005; Sanders, 2004). A small body of research suggests that theater can facilitate outcomes that might contribute to LGBTQQ youth empowerment, specifically (Ehrensaft-Hawley, 2010; Halverson, 2005). For instance, storytelling can help LGBTQQ youth understand their personal experiences within heterosexist/genderist structures, connect with others who have similar experiences, and imagine new possibilities for themselves (Halverson, 2005). Nascent research among marginalized youth,

including LGBTQQ youth, also suggests that using theater to effect macro change can have a positive effect on empowerment for individual youth (Ehrensaft-Hawley, 2010). However, based on our review of the literature, no studies have specifically examined the processes of developing individual and collective LGBTQQ youth empowerment through theater.

In the present study, we seek to fill this gap in the literature. Using qualitative data extracted from a mixed-method case study of an LGBTQQ and allied youth organization, we conduct an in-depth examination of how theater functions as a catalyst for empowerment among LGBTQQ youth within the context of a transformative organizing model.

METHOD

The Case

Riot Youth is an LGBTQQ and allied youth group based out of the Neutral Zone, a youth-driven teen center in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Riot Youth provides a safe space for building community among high school-aged youth and engages in leadership development and advocacy. Theater games, including improvisational skits, creating "sculptures" with participants' bodies, and role-playing fictional scenarios and real-life experiences, are used in regular meetings to facilitate dialogue and peer support. Riot Youth participants established a theater group called "Gayrilla Theater" in 2009 as part of a strategy to disseminate the findings of their participatory action research project, which investigated climate in local public high schools (Riot Youth, 2009, 2013). Youth participants and an adult advisor collaboratively developed the script, which included stories collected through theater games, climate survey findings, and the group's recommendations for change. Youth performers speak from scripts during the performance and are only required to attend one rehearsal prior to performing, allowing for a diverse group of youth performers with a variety of theater experience, time commitments, and memorization skills.

During the period of data collection for the present study, Gayrilla performances followed by question-and-answer sessions were conducted with adults in schools (e.g., administrators, teachers, and school board members) and community stakeholders (e.g., parents, health workers, elected officials). Following data collection, Riot Youth has continued to perform for adult decision makers and for their peers in high schools and middle schools (Wernick, Dessel et al., 2013; Wernick et al., in press), and published a practical guide for using these and similar tools to support LGBTQQ youth (Riot Youth, 2013).

The research team for the present study was as follows: a researcher–practitioner who served as both a university partner and a program advisor; a Riot Youth alumni who served as an interviewer and undergraduate research assistant; an adult faculty partner (authors); one Riot Youth alumni and one current participant who conducted interviews; and one graduate student research assistant.

Data Collection

Key informant interviews and a focus group were held with Gayrilla performers as part of the mixed-methods case study of Riot Youth and its transformative organizing model. The University of Michigan institutional review board approved the larger study.

Key informant interviews. Semistructured interviews were conducted with Gayrilla performers ($n = 8$) to explore youth's experiences with Gayrilla and theater games, the effects

of these experiences on their development, and its effects on the community. Four informants were current Gayrilla performers, and the four others were alumni who had been involved within the preceding year. All current and former Gayrilla performers were invited to participate in the interviews ($N = 10$); the two who did not participate were alumni of the program who had moved away. Given the high response rate, we expect there is only a minimal threat of selection bias. Informants' ages ranged from 16–22 years; most were White ($n = 6$), and the others identified as mixed race/inter-racial. Self-reported sexual orientation identities were bisexual ($n = 1$), gay/queer ($n = 1$), queer ($n = 2$), and lesbian/queer ($n = 4$). Five individuals identified as cis(cisgender) women/female, one identified as male, and two identified as transgender or genderqueer. Informed consent/assent (assent for those younger than 18 years of age) to participate in the interview was obtained at the beginning of each interview. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Riot Youth participants and recent alumni were trained in qualitative interviewing and conducted the interviews. Youth interviewers were recruited to allow for the collection of data that utilized youth's understanding of the program. The three interviewers were selected to maximize diversity across race, gender, and range of experiences with Riot Youth and Gayrilla Theater. Interview training included an introduction to the overall principles of research ethics, qualitative research and interviews, including the researcher as primary research instrument (Guba & Lincoln, 1981), as well as practice interviews with peer and researcher feedback and self-reflection.

Focus group. A focus group ($n = 8$) was conducted with Gayrilla performers to examine emerging themes from key informant interviews (Schutt, 2004), namely, participants' experiences in Gayrilla and how performances for adults contributed to empowerment and community change. Current Gayrilla performers were invited to participate through regular announcements at Riot Youth meetings and program alumni were invited through e-mail messages, including all interview participants. Based on our knowledge of the program, nearly all of the current performers and about half of the program alumni participated in the focus group. All participants had been performers in at least one Gayrilla performance for adult stakeholders. Three of the focus group members participated in the key informant interviews. Ages ranged from 14–18 years; most participants were White ($n = 7$). Sexual orientation identities were gay ($n = 2$), lesbian ($n = 4$), straight ($n = 1$), and queer ($n = 1$). Gender identities among participants were nearly evenly split (cisgender men, $n = 2$; cisgender women, $n = 3$; and transgender/genderqueer people, $n = 3$). A research team member (researcher–practitioner who served as Riot Youth's program advisor and research partner) and Riot Youth's Gayrilla advisor co-facilitated the group. Informed consent/assent (assent for those under 18) was obtained from participants prior to the beginning of the focus group. The focus group lasted 105 minutes.

Data Analysis

The interviews and focus group were audio-recorded and transcribed, and transcriptions were reviewed for accuracy. An a priori thematic coding scheme (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) was developed based on the research aims and was bolstered by in vivo coding as well as revision and clarification of codes based on the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Two research assistants coded the transcripts; one research assistant was an undergraduate and alumni of Riot Youth, and the other was a graduate student with no previous affiliation with the program, All initial codes and concomitant data

were reviewed by the researchers, and consensus was reached to resolve differences in coding. Thereafter, through axial coding, initial codes were grouped and regrouped to develop themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Our analyses are strengthened by the theoretical sensitivity arising from the authors' multiple subject positions, including as a youth participants and adult advisors to Riot Youth and Gayrilla, as well as university researchers (McCracken, 1988). Member checking was also used throughout data collection and analysis (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

RESULTS

All of the participants directly or implicitly related their participation in Gayrilla to the context of their experience of oppression(s) as LGBTQQ youth. This was often revealed in their description of their motivations to participate in Riot Youth and the experiences of isolation and powerlessness they felt prior to their participation. Feelings of isolation stemmed from (a) having no or very few friends (often because others were afraid to be associated with them), (b) having some "accepting" friends but feeling uncomfortable discussing their identities with them, (c) not having their identity as LGBTQQ represented in school curricula, and (d) a lack responsiveness by school personnel when seeking help. Alongside isolation, participants often felt unable to express and explore their identities and to change the environment that was creating their feelings of isolation and cultivating a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness.

Notably, none of the participants indicated that they had entered the program as a means to create change or become activists; rather, they were primarily interested in meeting other LGBTQQ young people. However, within Riot Youth, theater was a crucial intervention that served to create community, build critical consciousness, and effect change, which ultimately developed both youth's individual and collective empowerment.

Theater as Storytelling: Creating Community, Building Consciousness, and Effecting Change

Storytelling breaks down isolation and builds community. While meeting and working with other LGBTQQ-identified youth was an important step in breaking down the isolation experienced by participants, it was specifically the process of theater-based storytelling that moved the youth from isolation to a sense of community. Through the process of informal storytelling in theater games and structured theater performances with adults in schools, participants were able to develop connections through shared and similar experiences of marginalization, develop close personal relationships, and connect to the experiences of other LGBTQQ youth beyond Riot Youth.

Through the process of theater-based storytelling, youth were able to both share and hear the experiences of discrimination and harassment that were affecting their peers and themselves in a participatory environment. Prior to participating in the program and related to their experiences of isolation, youth often felt that they were the only person like them and experienced their marginalization as an individual problem. The use of theater games allowed them to share their experiences in a way that connected them to a collective struggle in which they developed individual and group connections that helped them better understand their own experiences and identities. Through these processes, youth were able to develop a sense of how their experiences of oppression affected their sense of self, relationships with others, and their well-being.

Participants were also able to build positive personal connections out of these experiences that moved beyond the pain of marginalization into a space of healing and building community power by telling their stories together in order to create change. Building on the community they felt within the program, the experience of performing Gayrilla together for adult audiences helped solidify the feeling of community they felt and the connections they had to their fellow performers. A White lesbian/queer cisgender woman participant poignantly captured this experience:

> Part of the whole process was finding a community and ... it was so nice to have all these people all being nervous together, all working on this together, all sharing their experiences, all, you know, I dunno, just talking about things which normally we just sort of ignore.

The process of engaging in theater together helped participants come closer together and to overcome feelings of self-consciousness and self-doubt borne out of their experiences of marginalization as LGBTQQ youth. As this participant reported, Riot Youth and Gayrilla were often one of the only spaces–if not the only space–where they had an opportunity to openly share and claim these stories as LGBTQQ youth. Moreover, these individual connections were further developed and solidified by participants' involvement in the theater as well as their other involvements in Riot Youth. The following quotation reflects the development of a caring community committed to making change and one another.

> We went in as a bunch of people who didn't really know each other but all cared about the same thing very much, and we came out of it as ... people who cared about the project very much, but also each other. (Mixed race queer woman participant)

As this participant and others noted, through the process of working together on a shared goal and in the context of intentional community building, the theater contributed to the participants' commitment to the project and to each other.

In addition to sharing stories within the group, youth noted the effect of sharing their collective stories in Gayrilla performances with adult decision makers, and how this process connected them with a larger sense of community among LGBTQQ youth. The development of the script in tandem with the survey findings played an important role in this process. The stories that were featured in the script were told by current and past Riot Youth members, as well as reported in open-ended responses in the climate survey. In the performance of this script, participants' own stories became connected to a larger narrative of LGBTQQ youth. One participant described what it was like to hear her story told by other Gayrilla performers and the concomitant internal process:

> Strange ... comforting. Because, it's strange, because it's me. It's comforting because it could not be me. It could be them. Ah, I dunno, it's, it's like the idea that you throw everything into a pool and then it's this grand, unifying thing that really could happen to anybody once. (Mixed race queer woman).

The Gayrilla performances created a sense of being able to speak on behalf of LGBTQQ youth as a group, and the inclusion of individual participants' stories in this script connected their own lived experiences to their community's experiences.

Storytelling allows participants to politicize their experiences and build critical consciousness. Supplementing the sense of community within the group to a larger community of LGBTQQ youth, theater games and Gayrilla performances provided opportunities for youth to contextualize their experiences of harassment, discrimination, and isolation and feelings of marginalization to institutional, social, and political contexts. Building on their sense of connection to other LGBTQQ youth within and outside the group, the sharing of stories within the group and through Gayrilla performances developed pivotal connections that moved participants from an individual-level experience of pain to a critical analysis of their marginalization and oppressions. For instance, one participant reflected on the critical consciousness that developed:

> Something that the Gayrilla really made me aware of was that . . . all these different negative emotions that I was going through, that wasn't just coincidental, that was the result of this sort of bigger thing. And coming to realize that by hearing so many other people going through those same things, and then taking that and realizing that I'm not the only who's experiencing that, and that's a form of injustice, is this discomfort that people feel, you know, being at school, which is ridiculous. (White queer man).

The process of hearing other members of their community experience similar events and feelings and having the opportunity to connect with these youth led participants to understand their experiences beyond their individual misfortune and connect them to notions of injustice and oppression.

Furthermore, youth also addressed the intersections of different forms of domination and learned to connect their experiences to those of other marginalized groups. For instance, one participant discussed the incorporation of issues of race- and appearance-based bullying and harassment throughout the survey project and the performances:

> I think another really important reason why issues of race were brought up in the survey is that homophobia is racial, it is a racist issue. . . . They're things that can't be separated from each other. There is no such thing as a gay issue that is not also a Black issue, that is not also a size issue, that is not also a class issue. . . . It would have been racist to try to separate. (White lesbian woman).

In discussing and understanding these issues, their understanding of discrimination expanded beyond heterosexism and genderism to include other identities and systems of oppression.

Collective storytelling provides opportunities to act as a change agent. The scripted Gayrilla performances with adults provided a structure for youth to act as change agents and to speak on issues related to their LGBTQQ identities that were often silenced, dismissed, or ignored in schools. These performances involved a number of risks, including demanding change from adult decision makers in schools and in their communities and being openly vulnerable about their experiences of marginalization and claiming their identities as LGBTQQ.

However, it was the process of collectively telling their stories in a structured performance that provided participants with an opportunity to take these risks and communicate their stories as a means of making change. For instance, one participant described the vulnerability she felt as well as her appreciation for the opportunity to be vulnerable: "I

felt really like exposed but also really glad that since I wasn't, 'cuz I would never have told her otherwise" (Mixed race queer cisgender woman). Many participants described experiences where they had stories they wanted to tell to the adults in their schools, and the performances provided a way to do so in an organized way. As LGBTQQ youth in public schools, they often felt unable to bring up issues of sexuality and gender, and that they might be risking their personal safety if they brought them up in classrooms or at school.

The theater performances allowed youth a safe context in which to take these risks and to be recognized as experts in their own lives with important contributions to make. One participant described how the physical layout of the performances facilitated this process:

> What I felt was so empowering about it … was the format of it. The situation of like me being on stage; I am saying these things, these are important, I am being taken seriously by, you know, this group of … counselors and school administrators. I was in a scenario where I had power and they didn't. Where they didn't have the ability to, you know, say I was crazy and make me go away. That kind of assertion of myself, I think it was a really big deal for me. (White lesbian transgender woman).

These experiences of being treated as experts help build youth's confidence in their ability to speak truth to power and to create change in their schools. In the question-and-answer sessions and following the performances, youth were also able to witness concrete changes in their schools on individual, community, and policy levels, including more open conversations with parents and friends, developing relationships with administrators in their schools, greater commitment to addressing LGBTQQ issues in classrooms, and the changing of antidiscrimination policies to include gender identity and expression. As the theater provided an opportunity for them to make their voices heard, the affect of the theater on their schools and communities allowed them to see themselves as capable of effecting change.

Moreover, youth also discussed how these experiences of creating change together also iteratively contributed to their sense of community and attachment to the group:

> It was the experience of many people and it gave more weight to the things that I was saying … because I knew it wasn't just me…. All of these people had gone through these things or were going through these things, and it made me feel more validated in my stories and it made them easier to tell. (White gay/queer genderqueer male).

While storytelling uniquely contributed to the development of community and consciousness and feelings of creating change in distinct ways, these processes continued to reinforce each other.

Development of Individual and Collective Empowerment

In addition to describing the mechanisms of how storytelling cultivated their experience of empowerment, participants described how their participation in the program and in the theater contributed to their individual empowerment. This occurred vis-à-vis their self-confidence and courage to advocate for themselves in their day-to-day lives. In addition, it

was bolstered by their experiences of collective empowerment developed through creating change as a community with Gayrilla performances.

Developing self-confidence and individual empowerment. The practice of telling stories in theater games and in Gayrilla performances provided participants with practical skills and confidence that they were able to translate into making individual-level changes in many areas of their own lives. Many reported an increased sense of confidence after participating in Gayrilla. For instance, another participant discussed how the public speaking skills gained grew into other forms of creative expression:

> So it started with me doing public speaking and Gayrilla and that kind of thing because I felt that I had to, and then it kind of transitioned over into me becoming more confident with just like everything, and now I'm performing in poetry slams. And a couple of years ago, I wouldn't be doing any of that, and it started with Riot Youth, so, yeah, it definitely changed me a lot. It made me more confident. (White queer transgender participant).

While these feelings of confidence were related to participants' sense of self-worth in general, it was also often particularly related to their ability to share their stories about feeling marginalized and their identities as LGBTQQ youth. In addition, participants specifically identified that they gained more confidence and courage to talk to family, friends, and adults in schools who were not accepting or not actively supportive of their marginalized identity(ies). As many participants indicated, they often were not able to have these conversations prior to their participation in Gayrilla:

> I gained the tools that I needed and also the language that I needed to really talk about these issues with people in positions of power … I could never have gone to my counselor like I did earlier this year and said, "My calculus teacher … doesn't like me because I'm gay. Let's fix it." (Mixed race queer cisgender woman).

The experiences of speaking their stories and identities in the Gayrilla performances, as well as the development of a set of language and vocabulary to talk about LGBTQQ issues, as fostered through theater games and participation in Riot Youth, youth participants developed the ability to advocate for themselves and other LGBTQQ youth in their day-to-day lives. These experiences often included participants' multiple identities, in addition to LGBTQQ issues. For instance, one inter-racial participant described how participation in Riot Youth and Gayrilla allowed him to discuss LGBTQQ issues, race, and gender:

> I'm more willing to … speak my mind about certain issues that are affecting me or … involve people that I know, especially issues that deal with the … LGBTQQ community, as well as discrimination with race and gender…. This project itself has made me more willing to speak up about those certain issues … as well as just become more comfortable within my own being. (Inter-racial queer man).

The ability to advocate on behalf of themselves as LGBTQQ youth took on particular importance given the ways that they often felt that there were no structural avenues

through which to discuss issues related to gender and sexuality in their schools and communities.

Developing leadership skills, sociopolitical self-efficacy, and collective empowerment. In addition to gaining confidence and the ability to create change in their lives, participation in Gayrilla and Riot Youth also provided participants with leadership skills and sociopolitical self-efficacy to experience and become committed to collective empowerment. Gayrilla performances and theater games provided leadership skills including public speaking and facilitation. Because youth were engaged as leaders in Riot Youth and in the Gayrilla performances, they also developed skills to lead groups of their peers and to organize change efforts through this process. One participant describes the skills she gained:

> In Riot Youth I, I learned how to, you know, corral a group into doing something, I learned how to facilitate a discussion, I learned how to engage people one-on-one. (Mixed race queer woman).

Through the process of participating in theater games, Gayrilla performances, *and* leading the Gayrilla group, participants were able to develop a broad set of leadership skills required to make change as a group of LGBTQQ youth. Many youth placed particular importance on the experience of actually being able to make change through the Gayrilla performances as helping them to recognize their own agency and instilling in them a sense of hope and determination to continue to work toward change.

Many participants stated that they had developed a long-term commitment to social justice work through this process. For instance, one participant commented, "I think [Riot Youth] was the beginning of like ... having a social justice mission in life" (White gay/queer genderqueer male). In participating in theater that engaged them personally and their lived experiences related to LGBTQQ identities, as well as actually effecting social change, the process developed not only an understanding of social justice, but also a commitment to integrate it into their future plans, both professionally and personally. One participant reflected how the experience shaped her desire to become a community organizer:

> And now I'm pretty committed to the idea of becoming a community organizer and continuing this type of work in, grass-roots organizations and, you know, like, working with the big rich queer organiz–gay organizations to create real change. (Mixed race queer cisgender woman).

This participant later discussed the nature of the long-term effect of the experience:

> I mean, we're all still learning because of this project. It started a process that ... maybe won't ever end because ... it started us caring about social justice. (Mixed race queer cisgender woman).

Through the iterative processes of developing confidence, skills, and taking action, the theater process moved these youth to plan to continue engage in these processes after their involvement in Riot Youth and Gayrilla. Notably, their commitment to social justice included LGBTQQ communities as well as issues related to race, gender, and social class.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate the process through which a group of LGBTQQ youth transformed their lives from being primarily defined by isolation and hopelessness related to heterosexism/genderism to ones that included supportive communities, critical consciousness, and individual and collective empowerment as LGBTQQ youth. Our findings add to the literature by demonstrating how theater played a central role within these processes and emerged as a poignant tool in speaking to the specific concerns and experiences of LGBTQQ youth, and by showing the importance of considering the context of participating in a larger change-making strategy in developing empowerment through theater.

As suggested by critical youth theory (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Wernick et al., 2010) and transformative organizing literature (Bradshaw et al., 1993; Freire, 1986; Guitérrez & Lewis, 1998; Pyles, 2009; Social Justice Leadership, 2010), the process of developing empowerment comprised the iterative processes of community building, developing a structural understanding of their own marginalization, and participating in theater as a change strategy. As documented among other communities, theater helped to facilitate group cohesion and trust and to develop critical consciousness through sharing experiences of marginalization (Boehm & Boehm, 2003; Ehrensaft-Hawley, 2010; Dutton, 2001; Halperin, 2001; Halverson, 2005; Hammock, 2011; Leeder & Wimmer, 2007; Sanders, 2004).

Moreover, theater was uniquely situated to cultivate empowerment through the process of actively effecting changes in schools and community (Ehrensaft-Hawley, 2010). By providing a structured form of communication with adult stakeholders via theater, LGBTQQ youth claimed access to expert status. As performers, and in the postperformance question-and-answer sessions, Riot Youth members were able to cultivate their collective power within the structure of the performance. Given the pervasive disproportionate power held by adults in schools (Mitra, 2009), which is exacerbated for LGBTQQ youth (Sherriff et al., 2011), this represents a powerful strategy toward developing equitable relationships within schools for marginalized youth. In sum, community-based theater, when used in the context of a larger change-making strategy, can be effectively used among LGBTQQ youth as a means to develop empowerment and, subsequently, healthy development (Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2013).

In addition to corroborating and translating the findings of existing transformative organizing, empowerment, and change-oriented theater literature among LGBTQQ youth, this study also revealed new insights into how theater and empowerment can function together. While participants noted the pivotal role of theater in propelling empowerment, these experiences were couched in their experiences of developing leadership skills, participation in the Riot Youth program, and effecting and witnessing institutional, cultural, and personal changes in their lives. Given the ways that theater was effective in actually moving adults to take action (Wernick et al., in press), youth were able to recognize their own agency, further contributing to their development of empowerment. Theater provided a means to develop dialogue and relationships with adults that were otherwise constrained or impossible to achieve, due to their marginalization, isolation, and the climate of public schools (Currie, Mayberry, & Chenneville, 2012).

Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for theory, research, and practice related to supporting positive development among LGBTQQ youth. First, our results

expand the current theoretical understanding of theater as an empowerment strategy by documenting the specific ways that theater can be empowering for LGBTQQ youth. Given that the oppression of LGBTQQ youth is marked by silence, invisibility, isolation, a lack of self-efficacy, and identity development needs (Dessel et al., 2011; D'Augelli, 2006; Russell et al., 2009), theater can address these immediate and ongoing needs among individuals and among LGBTQQ youth as a community. In this case, theater, as a form of structured storytelling, allowed youth to undo the silence and invisibility they felt, both within their community (Halverson, 2005) and when performing for adults in their schools and communities. Moreover, as our results indicate, when used as part of a change-making strategy, theater can allow youth to address their own needs while also working to make their communities more inclusive and accepting.

Second, our analyses highlight the importance for community-based arts practitioners and researchers to consider the context of change making as potentially mediating the dynamic relationships between community-based arts and empowerment (Ehrensaft-Hawley, 2010). Because theater was used as part of a larger advocacy campaign that resulted in considerable changes within local schools, youth were able to recognize their own self-efficacy and translate this into many areas of their lives, both on personal and collective levels. The power of theater in the context of transformative community organizing developed positive outcomes for youth that might exceed those of safe spaces alone (Currie et al., 2012; Walls et al., 2010), which is particularly important given the contemporary focus on providing safe spaces for LGBTQQ youth (Cohen, 2005; Currie et al., 2012).

As the participants reported, safe space was both an initial motivation for entering the program and an important piece of their development through the process. However, these findings suggest that theater modalities can provide a means to move youth programming from a safe space paradigm to an experience of building critical consciousness, creating change, and developing individual and collective empowerment for LGBTQQ youth.

Our findings showed that theater can serve as a powerful strategy for groups of LGBTQQ youth, and should be considered by practitioners working with these populations. Central to the success of this strategy in developing empowerment was the process of constructively claiming the experience of marginalization and using the expression of collective oppression as a means to create change. Within this framework, the process of claiming voice, speaking their truth to power, and creating change were central. Practitioners, including Gay Straight Alliance advisors, should incorporate tactics, particularly the use of creative expression and storytelling, into their work with marginalized youth. The combination of creative storytelling, youth leadership, and creating change might speak to a myriad of experiences among youth, particularly marginalized youth who might experience shared/similar forms of silence, isolation, and oppression.

Limitations and Future Research

The present study provides an investigation of just one organization that engages in LGBTQQ advocacy and social change. With regards to the present study, there is a limited threat of selection bias; however, it is more likely that any significant threats exist at the programmatic level. Future research might examine the motivations of LGBTQQ youth for opting out of participating in youth programming. Additionally, research is needed to examine the transferability of the findings, including research that explores other creative expression strategies used to develop empowerment among LGBTQQ youth. As well, further research would benefit from comparing work in different contexts and across regions. Future studies should continue to provide further depth and nuance

to understanding and employing strategies for developing empowerment and healthy development among LGBTQQ youth.

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