



Factors associated with teachers discussing and intervening against homophobic language

V. Paul Poteat^{a,*}, Hilde Slaatten^b, Kyrre Breivik^b

^a Boston College, Campion Hall 307, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill, MA, 02467, USA

^b Uni Research Health, Regional Centre for Child and Youth Mental Health and Child Welfare, Bergen, Norway

HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers have a responsibility to counteract homophobic behavior in schools.
- Teachers' attitudes, support for one another, self-efficacy, and training were related to reported intervening.
- The factors above can be targeted to engage more teachers to address homophobic language.

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ABSTRACT

Students report that teachers often do not intervene against homophobic language. Among 283 teachers in 16 Norwegian schools, several factors distinguished which teachers reported more consistently intervening and more frequently discussing homophobic language with students. Women, but not men, who more strongly believed that homophobic language should not be allowed and who believed it was harmful reported more consistent intervention. Women and men who reported greater self-efficacy to intervene reported more consistent intervention. In a second model, teachers who reported receiving education on homophobic bullying and who reported greater self-efficacy to intervene more frequently discussed homophobic language with students.

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1. Introduction

Many sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth experience homophobic harassment and discrimination at school, with a wide range of health and academic consequences (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016; Russell & Fish, 2016). Although much of this research has been conducted in the United States, these concerns also have been documented in multiple European countries such as Belgium, England, Netherlands, Norway, and Spain (Slaatten, Anderssen, & Hetland, 2015; Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013; Galán, Puras, & Riley, 2009; Hooghe, 2011; Rivers,

2011). Disparaging comments about SGM individuals are among the most common forms of homophobic behavior reported by SGM youth: in one U.S. national survey, 98% of SGM youth reported hearing homophobic language and 85% reported experiencing verbal harassment at school (Kosciw et al., 2016).

In Norway—the location of the current study—population surveys reveal that attitudes toward SGM individuals generally are positive (Anderssen & Slaatten, 2008, 2013), yet homophobic language remains commonly heard in schools. In one study, 46% of male youth and 27% of female youth reported hearing homophobic language within a one-week period (Slaatten, Anderssen et al., 2015). In 2005, the government and several major school organizations (The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, The Union of Education Norway, and The National Parents' Committee for Primary and Lower Secondary Education) signed an anti-bullying proclamation which stated that schools should

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: PoteatP@bc.edu (V.P. Poteat), hisl@norcerearch.no (H. Slaatten), kybr@norcerearch.no (K. Breivik).

address homophobic behavior as part of anti-bullying strategies (The Norwegian government, 2006). Also, in 2006 Norwegian schools went through a knowledge promotion initiative (Kunnskapsløftet) where efforts were made to make SGM perspectives more pronounced and better integrated in education (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006). Still, SGM youth are at greater risk of being bullied and exposed to violence than their heterosexual peers in Norway (Moseng, 2007; Roland & Auestad, 2009). With the exception of a few qualitative cases (Røthing & Svendsen, 2010), there remains limited empirical data on Norwegian teachers' attitudes and behaviors toward SGM students.

Many SGM youth as well as heterosexual cisgender youth report that their teachers do not intervene when this behavior occurs (Berger, Poteat, & Dantas, *in press*; Kosciw et al., 2016). Teachers have an important role in creating safe and welcoming schools for SGM youth (Dessel, Kulick, Wernick, & Sullivan, 2017). However, there has been limited attention to factors that might prompt teachers to intervene when they hear homophobic language used among students (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014) or for them to discuss homophobic harassment with students in their classes. To address this, we consider multiple factors that could account for which teachers report more consistently intervening when they hear homophobic language and who report more frequently discussing this issue with their students.

2. The role of teachers from an ecological perspective

The importance of teachers in counteracting homophobic behavior among students can be understood within ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). As noted by this theory, individuals are situated within various contexts ranging from proximal (e.g., the microsystem, including immediate settings such as families or schools; the mesosystem, which reflects the overlap and interaction between these microsystems) to distal (e.g., the macrosystem, encompassing the larger society and its institutional structures and laws). Based on this framework, people's behaviors are not only attributable to their own characteristics or beliefs, but also can be influenced by the people and norms in their social contexts. Bullying research has used an ecological framework to show that students are involved in various roles when bullying occurs, such as the primary aggressor, students who reinforce the primary aggressor, and bystanders (Espelage, 2014; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011). There has been a growing focus on bystanders and individual and social predictors of who intervenes against bullying (e.g., Cappadocia, Pepler, Cummings, & Craig, 2012; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012; Simons, Hutchison, & Bahr, 2017).

Much of the research on bystanders has focused on students; however, teachers are also a part of this social ecology and can be present when bullying occurs and when students use homophobic language (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Novick & Isaacs, 2010). As such, within the school microsystem, teachers can play an intervening role with students (Brendgen & Troop-Gordon, 2015; Yoon & Bauman, 2014). Of note, some SGM youth do not report homophobic victimization because they have seen teachers fail to intervene (Kosciw et al., 2016). Whereas a number of teachers may intervene or speak out against bullying in general, they may not do so in relation to homophobic language because it is not always tied to bullying and its negativity is at times minimized (Pascoe, 2007). However, teacher interventions can reduce general bullying by challenging hostile norms and signaling to students that bullying is not acceptable (Saarento, Boulton, & Salmivalli, 2015). Specific to homophobic bullying and name-calling, students in Norwegian schools who reported that teachers intervened more against homophobic language were less likely to engage in homophobic name-calling themselves, and less likely to hear homophobic

language among their peers (Slaatten, Hetland, & Anderssen, 2015).

Teachers have an important role in establishing prosocial classroom norms (Wentzel, 2002; Yoon & Bauman, 2014). Teachers can do so formally such as when delivering anti-bullying programs, or informally in their own conversations with students. Yet, most teachers do not allot time in their class to informally discuss bullying-related issues (Dake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2003). In the case of homophobic behavior, having conversations about homophobic language use could provide opportunities for teachers to establish norms in their class about this behavior. In sum, teachers' actions are important in broader efforts to counteract homophobic behavior and should be further examined.

3. Potential factors associated with addressing homophobic language

Building on the general bullying intervention literature and literature specific to homophobic behavior, we consider several factors that might underlie teachers' more consistent intervention against homophobic language use and their discussion of homophobic language in their classes. From an ecological frame, we consider individual teacher characteristics as well as factors that reflect perceptions of their proximal relationships and norms in the school context.

There may be gender differences in teachers' reported likelihood to intervene against and to discuss the issue of homophobic language. Among students, girls are more likely to intervene against bullying (Jenkins & Nickerson, *in press*; Pozzoli & Gini, 2013) and homophobic behavior (Poteat & Vecho, 2016) than boys. Girls are also less likely to engage in homophobic behavior than boys (Poteat, DiGiovanni, & Scheer, 2013). These gender differences have been explained based on theories of masculinities and, in particular, the socialization of hegemonic masculinity norms among boys and men. Indeed, boys who report stronger hegemonic masculinity beliefs also report more frequently engaging in homophobic behavior (Poteat, Kimmel, & Wilchins, 2011). Hegemonic masculinity beliefs represent support for placing men in a position of dominance over women, maintaining this power imbalance in society, and denigrating non-heterosexual identities among men because they are viewed as feminine (Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2004). Boys engage in homophobic behavior partly because they feel pressured to prove their masculinity (Slaatten & Gabrys, 2014; Pascoe, 2007; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003). Similarly, boys and men may be less likely to intervene against homophobic behavior because they fear that this will lead others to question their presumed heterosexuality or increase their own risk of being the target of such behavior (Poteat et al., 2013). Because many men are socialized to adopt these hegemonic masculinity beliefs over the course of their development, it is possible that male teachers may be less likely than women to counteract homophobic language either because they endorse these beliefs or because they fear negative reactions from other men (e.g., having questions raised about their own sexuality, or being ostracized or experiencing homophobic teasing and bullying from their male peers). In addition to these potential gender differences, we also consider psychological and social factors that could prompt teachers to intervene.

Permissive attitudes toward homophobic language use could be associated with intervention behaviors. Teachers are less likely to intervene against bullying when they believe it is normative and to be expected (Hektner & Swenson, 2012; Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015). Similarly, students who view bullying as more acceptable are more likely to engage in it (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). From these findings, we suspect that teachers who hold less permissive attitudes toward homophobic language use (i.e., they do not believe that students should be allowed to use it) will be more likely to

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