Article

"We are often invisible": A survey on safe space for LGBTQ students in secondary school choral programs

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Abstract

This article presents data from a large-scale cross-sectional survey of LGBTQ college students ($N = 1,123$) reflecting on their middle and high school experiences in choral music. The quantitative data indicate that students felt safer in high school than in middle school and that a small majority of high school teachers voiced support for LGBTQ students. These data indicate that high school choral classrooms were perceived as safe for a majority of respondents. The open-ended responses highlight themes including: the plight of transgender students who faced difficulty navigating their gender identities in the choral environment, the importance of enumerated non-discrimination policies, and the importance of words/ semantics. Respondents discussed helpful and hurtful words and/or policies that influenced their choral experiences. A main theme was encouragement of open acknowledgement of LGBTQ identities and issues in the choral classroom. Suggestions for teaching practice and policy are provided based upon these data.

Introduction

> 'Choir was my lifeline. I wouldn't have survived my youth without the beautiful escape.' (Quote from a survey respondent)

Schools are not safe for all students. Bullying is a context-specific and devastating problem in American schools (Swearer & Doll, 2001), and victimization at school can be especially

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detrimental for LGBT(Q) (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning) youth (Higa et al., 2014; Holmes & Cahill, 2005; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Peters, 2003). LGBTQ youth, or those perceived to be LGBTQ, face frequent and injurious forms of bullying at school, causing negative effects that are both personal and academic (Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2014; Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2012). Issues of bullying and victimization vary widely depending on context, which emphasizes the fact that schools (teachers, administrators, and staff) can take steps to provide safe space for LGBTQ students.

Safe space can be a basic show of support for students or an "emerging metaphor for classroom life" (Rom, 1998, p. 398). The authors define "safe space" generally as a place in which students feel welcome expressing traits that define them as 'other.'[1] From a music education perspective, Hendricks, Smith, and Stanuch (2014) wrote that safe spaces are "learning environments in which students will be more likely to freely express themselves ... [that foster] purpose-driven student commitment, musical mastery, and a sense of self-actualization and 'flow'" (p. 36). It is possible that safe spaces in music classrooms are byproducts of the strong relationships between music educators and music students because, as music teachers may have students in their programs for multiple years, they may develop deep and abiding relationships with students (e.g., Adderley, Kennedy, & Berz, 2003; Bergonzi, 2009). Based on this premise, the authors created a survey to explore the role that secondary school choral programs played in creating safe space for LGBTQ students.

Review of selected literature

Defining the terms used throughout this article will help provide context for the present study and the reviewed literature. This manuscript examines the following sub-groups of the queer community: L (lesbian), G (gay), B (bisexual), T (trans), Q (queer and/or questioning). The L, G, and B reference *sexuality*, which 'describes how (and with whom) we act on our erotic desires. Sexuality is distinct analytically from gender but intimately bound with it, like two lines on a graph that have to intersect' (Stryker, 2008, p. 16). *Trans* (*transgender*) is a blanket term for anyone who identifies outside the gender binary (female/male). The term *transgender* originally was meant to "distinguish people who cross sexes by changing their bodies (transsexual) from people who cross genders by changing their clothing, behavior, and grooming (transgender)" (Wilchins, 2004, p. 26), but the term often is used more broadly and may include a diverse group including people who identify themselves using a myriad of terms such as genderqueer, cross-dresser, gender fluid, and gender nonconforming. The following response from the survey to be discussed in this article demonstrates the notion that gender and sexuality are related constructs, and that assumptions often are made about sexuality based on gender norms:

> I assumed I would have been bullied if I came out due to other students referencing my gender presentation (which wasn't always the most 'masculine') and equating it with my sexual orientation to think of me as weaker or less of a male.

While a full explanation of the conflation of hegemonic gender norms and sexuality is beyond the scope of this article, there is a relationship between these two constructs, both in the studies cited above and in the day-to-day experiences of LGBTQ students. Because sexuality is something that cannot be seen with the plain eye, boys may be bullied not "for being gay," but for failing to conform to socially created and sanctioned norms surrounding masculine behavior; similarly, girls are bullied if they display stereotypically masculine characteristics (Butler, 1999;

Freer, 2012, 2015; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Pascoe, 2007). According to Butler (1999):

> Gay people ... may be discriminated against in positions of employment because they fail to 'appear' in accordance with accepted gender norms. And the sexual harassment of gay people may well take place not in the service of shoring up gender hierarchy, but in promoting gender normativity. (p. xiii)

It is worth noting, however, that the link between sexuality and gender role 'performance' (gender expression) is a contested claim[2] (e.g., Fausto-Sterling, 2012; Gottschalk, 2003).

Bullying of LGBTQ youth

Many LGBTQ and questioning youth face bullying and victimization at school, causing higher rates of truancy and lower grades (Aragon et al., 2014), which may lead to increased drug use, depression, and suicide (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). In their survey study of seventh and eighth grade students ($N = 7,376$), Birkett, Espelage, and Koenig (2009) found that LGB students faced far more harassment and victimization in school than did their heterosexual peers, and that schools can play a role in reducing this persecution.

Schools can take steps to provide safe spaces in which LGBTQ students can express their identity without fear of bullying or physical harassment (Garrett & Spano, 2017; Macintosh, 2007; Mayberry, 2006; Peters, 2003). However, the reality of creating safe space in American schools is context dependent, can be challenging, and is inconsistent across school and classroom settings. For example, teachers may not feel comfortable advocating for LGBTQ students (Vega, Crawford, & Pelt, 2012). Additionally, there is an urgent need for school administrators to improve the protection and care of LGBTQ students (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2014) and for "appropriate and dedicated LGBTQ youth training for all practitioners working with young people" (Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore, & Giambrone, 2011, p. 940).

School interventions. Though many non-LGBTQ educators express support for this population, others express less empathy and fail to intervene when LGBTQ-related bullying occurs (Anagnostopoulos, Buchanan, Pereira, & Lichty, 2009; Perez, Schanding, & Dao, 2013). Anagnostopoulos et al. (2009) reported that "gender-based bullying"[3] is the "most common form of school violence in the United States" (p. 519); their interviews with 15 faculty and staff revealed that, although the school had a formal policy regarding gender-based bullying, that teachers "emphasized the gay and lesbian students' responsibility for their own victimization" (p. 540). These results are cause for concern and indicate that school professionals who should be looking out for the wellbeing of LGBTQ students may instead be blaming them. Music education researchers Wright and Smith (2013) wrote, "Certainly, non-LGBT educators can be caring adults for LGBT youth in the school setting, but few have had professional development related to LGBT students' needs and LGBT students need LGBT role models" (p. 2). These data indicate the need for a better understanding of the role music educators play in the lives of LGBT students.

Schools as a whole can establish a culture in which bullying and harassment of LGBTQ youth are reduced or eliminated. School-wide anti-bullying programs can be effective. In their meta-analysis of 44 bullying intervention programs, Ttofi and Farrington (2011) found that "on average, bullying decreased by 20–23% and victimization decreased by 17–20% ... More intensive programs were more effective, as were programs including parent meetings, firm disciplinary methods, and improved playground supervision" (p. 27). Freitag (2013) explored two

urban high schools with a radical commitment to social justice and to providing safe spaces for queer youth, arguing that it is possible to "queer" school spaces, a process she describes as "a direct form of resistance, and not rebellion" (p. 92). In addition to school-wide efforts, purposeful and decisive action by teachers and administrators to create safe space for LGBTQ youth can improve a school's culture (Clark, 2010; Peters, 2003). Teachers play a significant role in creating safe space in their classrooms (Fredman, Schultz, & Hoffman, 2015; Graybill, Varjas, Meyes, & Watson, 2009; Poynter & Tubbs, 2008; Smith, 2012; Swearer & Espelage, 2012). If music educators do indeed have the potential to create safe space for queer youth, it is imperative that music education researchers explore if and how this occurs.

Music programs and safe space. School music programs can play an important role in creating safe spaces for LGBTQ students in secondary schools. Six of ten LGBT students in Kosciw et al.'s (2012) national survey reported being members of high school music ensembles—the most popular extracurricular activity among respondents. Wright and Smith (2013) explored whether LGBT educators must themselves feel safe and supported in order to demonstrate support for queer students. Using a national survey ($N = 351$), the researchers discovered that 59% of respondents worked in a school with no anti-homophobic bullying policy, and that "77% of schools have harassment policies but only 50% specifically mention sexual orientation" (p. 8).

The music education community rarely has addressed the needs of the LGBTQ community directly. Music education research lacks a body of scholarly literature about LGBTQ issues in general (Freer, 2013; Nichols, 2013), though since 2009, Allsup and Sheih (2012), Bergonzi (2009), Carter (2011), and Taylor (2011) have provided guidance in practitioner journals on addressing bullying, heteronormativity, and social justice issues in the music classroom. Some in the music education research community are exploring LGBTQ issues with increased frequency, due in part to recent LGBT in music education research symposia held at the University of Illinois (e.g., DeNardo et al., 2011). Though gay and lesbian community choruses have become increasingly prominent in American society (Gordon, 1990; Hayes, 2007; Taylor, 2014), research on LGBTQ issues in school choral music education still is sorely lacking.

A small number of music education studies have explored safe space. Though not focused specifically on LGBTQ students, Rawlings's (2015) investigation of aggression, connectedness, and victimization in a middle school band setting compared the rates of victimization and bullying among students enrolled in a secondary school ensemble with those who were not. Rawlings discovered that "non-ensemble students in this sample perpetrate aggressive behaviors, on average, more frequently than do music ensemble students" (p. xiv) and that "participation in a music ensemble class during middle school impacts the relationship between the perceived feelings of school connectedness and self-reported experiences of peer victimization and perpetration of bullying behaviors" (p. 146).

Choral programs as safe space. Spano (2014) interviewed GALA (gay and lesbian chorus association) chorus members ($N = 12$) who reflected on their high school musical experiences; 8 of these 12 participants were choral students:

> Participants: (1) described a more hyper-masculine band culture as opposed to choral culture; (2) indicated positive experiences in high school music ensembles ... (3) perceived music ensembles as safe zones for them to learn and to express themselves musically and socially, as most were bullied in high school; (4) hid their sexual identities (if they were aware of it) or distanced themselves from 'known' or 'peer-perceived' sexual minorities even though they felt the music ensemble to be a safe zone. (para. 5)

Although most felt safe in their high school music ensembles, seven respondents chose not to "come out" within the context of their high school music program. However, "all individuals saw that musical participation was indeed a vehicle for coming out" (para. 9). The participants mentioned the desire to utilize LGBTQ composers and their material as a teaching tool and as a symbolic gesture.

Especially lacking in music education are studies about if and how music educators can create safe space for LGBTQ students. To that end, the authors created a survey that asked collegiate students who identify as LGBTQ to reflect on their middle and high school choral experiences. The following research questions drove the study: (a) What was the role of school choral programs in providing safe spaces for LGBTQ singers in middle and high school? (b) What were the lived experiences of LGBTQ singers who participated in middle and high school while negotiating their sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression? (c) Did participation in secondary choral music impact the "coming out" processes of LGBTQ singers? (d) What do participants suggest about how choral music educators can create safe space?

Procedure

To explore the research questions, the authors crafted a cross-sectional online survey (Liu, 2008) of collegiate singers who self-identified as LGBTQ. The survey yielded both quantitative and open-ended responses via true/false, Likert-type, and four open-ended questions exploring perceived levels of safety and support within students' secondary school choral programs. Rossman and Wilson (1985) suggested that surveys utilizing both words and numbers can aid in a rich explanation of a phenomenon or question.

The online survey sought data only from a purposive sample (Palys, 2008) of collegiate students who identified as LGBTQ. In September of 2014, the survey link was sent to most choral professors in the United States and Canada through the College Music Society faculty list (College Music Society, 2014); these choral professors were asked to forward the link to all students currently enrolled in their choral programs. The survey link was posted later on the blog and Facebook page of prominent choral composer Eric Whitacre. The following regions of the United States and Canada were represented by survey respondents (the percentage of the total sample is shown in parentheses): U.S. Midwest (24.90%), U.S. Northeast (23.12%), U.S. Southeast (16.55%), U.S. Southwest (6.29%), U.S. West (19.56%), Atlantic Canada (0.68%), Central Canada (2.74%), Western Canada (2.74%), not listed (5.34%).

In total, 1,345 respondents took the survey. We discarded responses from individuals who identified as both heterosexual and cisgender,[4] leaving 1,123 responses from the identified LGBTQ population. This response rate may be sufficient to generalize about the experiences of many LGBTQ university students: "even though these [online] surveys are not representative for the total population of Internet users, non-probability samples can be valuable as they may be representative for a subgroup of the total population" (Selm & Jankowski, 2006, p. 439). However, as the survey was distributed in the United States and Canada exclusively, generalizability may not transfer outside North American contexts. The survey yielded nearly 100 single-spaced pages of data in response to the open-ended survey items, and a content analysis was conducted on these prose responses. Quantitative data were analyzed by calculating percentages for the True/False items and means and standard deviations for the Likert-type scale items. These quantitative data are presented in Tables 1 and 2. We coded open-ended responses using a combination of structural and in vivo coding, the latter of which utilizes direct quotations from participants. While coding, we searched for emergent themes by grouping small units of data, then sorting them into larger themes (Saldaña, 2013). During structural coding,

Table 1. True/False responses (percentages).

Question $N = 1, 123$	True	False	N/A
1. I had at least one middle school choir teacher who, in class, encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people.	21	55	24
2. I had at least one high school choir teacher who, in class, encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people.	52	41	7
3. I had at least one middle school choir teacher who, outside of class, encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people.	25	49	26
4. I had at least one high school choir teacher who, outside of class, encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people.	58	33	9
5. I shared my LGBTQ identity with at least one of my middle or high school choir directors while I was their student.	19	70	11
6. I encountered bullying and/or harassment from other choral students in the middle or high school choral classroom (or during other choral activities such as festivals, all-state choir, extra rehearsals).	22	69	9
7. I encountered bullying and/or harassment from other choral students in my middle or high school at times when I was not involved in choral activities (at lunch, after school, in other classes, between classes, etc.).	37	55	7
8. My middle school choir teacher(s) had rules against hate speech toward LGBTQ people.	22	57	21
9. My high school choir teacher(s) had rules against hate speech toward LGBTQ people.	41	51	7
10. If I had a friend at my former middle school who was questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, I would suggest they speak with the choir teacher.	12	68	20
11. If I had a friend at my former high school who was questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, I would suggest they speak with the choir teacher.	30	63	7

Results from the Likert-type items are included in Table 2. Response options were: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), neutral (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5).

we grouped responses together based on commonalities in theme or message. Though a large number of themes emerged from this content analysis, we grouped the most prevalent and compelling quotes by topic (e.g., the experience of trans students, quotes dealing with geographical and/or religious contexts).

Quantitative data

The authors wondered how a teacher might facilitate safe space in the music classroom; an obvious show of support occurs when educators openly discuss their support of LGBTQ individuals. As can be seen in Table 1, approximately one fifth (21%) of respondents agreed that they had at least one middle school[5] choral teacher who spoke openly in class of their support for LGBTQ students; 55% disagreed (24% chose 'not applicable'). In terms of their high school experience, 52% of respondents reported having a teacher who spoke openly of their acceptance in class; 41% did not (7% chose 'not applicable'). Similarly, 22% of respondents reported having a middle school teacher who had explicit rules against hate speech toward LGBTQ people, and 51% of respondents reported knowing of such a rule at their high school.

Table 2. Likert-type scale responses.

Question and *N* (number of numerical responses)	Mean	Standard deviation
1. Prior to my enrollment in my middle school choral music program, I perceived the program as a place where I could be safe as an LGBTQ student. *N* = 611	3.02	1.09
2. Prior to my enrollment in my high school choral music program, I perceived the program as a place where I could be safe as an LGBTQ student. *N* = 769	3.66	1.13
3. My middle school was, in general, accepting of LGBTQ students. *N* = 773	2.69	1.21
4. My middle school was, in general, accepting of LGBTQ teachers. *N* = 761	2.74	1.22
5. My high school was, in general, accepting of LGBTQ students. *N* = 828	3.37	1.35
6. My high school was, in general, accepting of LGBTQ teachers. *N* = 809	3.28	1.32
7. My middle school choir teacher(s) openly discouraged hate speech toward LGBTQ people. *N* = 678	2.74	1.17
8. My high school choir teacher(s) openly discouraged hate speech toward LGBTQ people. *N* = 797	3.21	1.29
9. I felt safe expressing my LGBTQ identity within my middle school choral program. *N* = 601	2.22	1.19
10. I felt safe expressing my LGBTQ identity within my high school choral program. *N* = 761	3.22	1.42
11. My middle school choir room (the physical space) was a place at school where I felt safe as an LGBTQ student. *N* = 611	2.89	1.21
12. My high school choir room (the physical space) was a place at school where I felt safe as an LGBTQ student. *N* = 772	3.73	1.23
13. I had at least one middle or high school choir director with whom I felt I would be safe if I shared my LGBTQ identity. *N* = 733	3.42	1.43
14. I had at least one middle or high school choir teacher who established an environment where LGBTQ students felt welcome and safe. *N* = 779	3.43	1.34

Note: Because Likert-type responses on the online survey were not required, not all respondents answered every question. It is possible that this is due to the sensitive nature of the questions: "Information about a participant's income, relationship abuse, substance use, mental health concerns, and *sexuality* are considered sensitive and tend to be left unanswered by survey takers" (Keith, Kays, & Broughal, 2013, p. 158, emphasis added).

Because bullying can be detrimental to secondary students who identify as LGBTQ or are questioning (Aragon et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2012), the authors wondered how these experiences of safety (or lack thereof) played out in the secondary choral classroom, and asked respondents about experiences with bullying inside and outside the choral environment: 22% of respondents agreed that they had experienced bullying or harassment from other choral students in the middle or high school choral classroom (or during other choral activities such as festivals, all-state choir, and extra rehearsals), and 35% experienced bullying from choral students outside the choral environment. Over half (58%) of high school teachers were reported to have expressed their support for LGBTQ students outside class. Students reported that a

majority of middle and high school teachers (57% and 51%, respectively) did not have a policy barring hate speech against LGBTQ students.

These Likert-type response data indicate that secondary school choral programs are perceived as being neutral for LGBTQ students—responses yielded an average rating between "neutral" and "agree" (3.02 and 3.66 for middle and high school, respectively), meaning that many respondents recalled perceiving high school choral programs as safer prior to enrollment. While not all students remembered their teachers speaking openly about their support of LGBTQ students, a majority of respondents felt safe as an LGBTQ student in the physical space of the choral room; the high school choral room was perceived as being safer than was the middle school choral room. The highest mean (3.73) was for the choir room (the physical space) being a safe place for queer high school choral students. Many respondents reported being comfortable sharing their LGBTQ identity with their choral teacher (3.42) and having at least one teacher who provided an environment in which LGBTQ students felt safe (3.43). Even though these responses were more positive than neutral, none of the means reached 4 or 5, the ratings for "agree" or "strongly agree," and the standard deviations were high enough to indicate that there were students who did not feel safe or accepted in their choral environments.

Open-ended responses

The survey included four free response questions asking for more specific stories and information about the experiences of students as they navigated their gender and/or sexual diversity in the school choral environment. The rich open-ended responses gave depth and new meaning to the quantitative data presented above. One question was purposefully vague, asking "Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as an LGBTQ singer in middle or high school?" Several main themes arose from analyzing the open-ended responses, including: (1) The Power of Words; (2) Immersion in the Musical Experiences; (3) Places and Religion; and (4) Transgender Students in the Choral Classroom.

The power of words

The choice between open acknowledgement of, or silence surrounding LGBTQ issues in the choral classroom was a topic of many responses. Many respondents spoke positively about the safe space created in their secondary choral programs. In fact, choral experiences proved more powerful than one might expect. One respondent wrote, "I was one of the suicidal singers you are hoping to help. My choir director saved me. I hope your research can save more." In other classrooms, this was less true. The overwhelming message from the open-ended responses was that the singers wanted choral conductor–teachers to acknowledge and/or discuss LGBTQ issues in the choral music classroom. Because gender identity and sexuality are traits that are not visible, participants believed that if choral educators did not discuss these matters in a culture and schools that are heteronormative and cisgender-centric, that they were not open and accepting:

> There was never any talk of exclusion of the LGBTQ community. No one asked and no one told. Something as simple as just stating at the beginning of the choir that it is a LGBTQ friendly place would have been enough to make me feel welcomed and safe.

Some respondents spoke about how LGBTQ issues were not discussed in their schools or in the context of their secondary choral programs. This silence can diminish feelings of safety.

> We are often invisible—especially when there is no safety outside of the closet. This does not mean that we don't exist or that we aren't watching. Thus, it is important for an educator to behave with sensitivity even in the absence of any overt signs of having GLBTQ students.

Students were apt to assume that teachers were not supportive if they did not openly express their support, as evidenced by the following: "Talk about the issue. Generally if they [choral teachers] don't talk about it I assume they won't be friendly towards us." Another respondent wrote that teachers could be more supportive: "Everything that was 'taboo' was swept under the rug and not discussed and had a blanket 'no-bullying/zero tolerance' policy with no specifics."

This silence about LGBTQ issues sometimes took the form of lack of intervention when anti-LGBTQ language was used: "Most of my directors were indifferent to homophobic slurs which is something that needs to be amended." As exemplified in these quotes, silence can signal erasure.

> There was never any mention of LGBTQ people at all, and any bullying went unchecked—overall there was an erasure of the LGBTQ identity. The first step would be acknowledgment of the identity and then to have rules specific to that identity against bullying in order to facilitate acceptance and to create a safe space.

Many respondents expressed the importance of enumeration—of teachers having policies that specifically mention groups of people that are protected. "Our programs could've more openly discussed LGBTQ students or students of other minorities and their right to feel safe and accepted within our programs. A simple acknowledgement of the issue goes a long way."

Support from choral music educators often came in the form of actively and purposefully dealing with anti-LGBTQ hate speech:

> Whilst there was often no clear support from the music faculty that LGBTQ students were supported, we knew teachers wouldn't allow for students to be horrible people. Also, there were very few times that students would in fact say anything awful because other students, as well as teachers, would condemn their views [as] bigoted, homophobic and/or transphobic. It was a very safe environment.

Another respondent shared, "My high school choir teacher was very accepting of all students. She was protective and she would always listen to [us] if we needed to talk. She would always defend us. No one messed with her students." Consistent with findings from Spano (2014), for some respondents, choir provided safety and encouragement that aided the disclosure ('coming out') process:

> Choir was that safe space that helped give me the courage to come out to people. I knew I was gay when I was about 10, and I never told anyone until I was 14 because I was scared I would get bullied more than I already was. To be honest, I was bullied less when I actually came out because I became a more confident person. I wouldn't have been able to be comfortable with who I was without the comforting atmosphere of my choir teacher and classes.

The words and actions of choral educators can be extremely powerful, as evidenced by the following response: "Just having an authority figure who accepted all people was life changing. It's part of the reason I'm going into music education. I want to be that person for somebody because of who my choir teacher was for me."

"Out" students and teachers

Many singers who responded to the survey identified a secondary school choir teacher who disclosed their gender-sexual diversity at school. One respondent wrote, "My choir director was gay himself and was very open about the struggles of being in the LGBTQ community and how important it was [to] make the space safe for each other." Another revealed:

> My high school choral director was openly gay. It was common knowledge and casually mentioned in everyday conversation as if homosexual relationships were an acceptable norm at my private Christian day school. We never had any issues with hate speech or bullying in choir and my senior year I was the first student at my school to publicly come out. My close relationship with my choral director made me feel safe to do so.

Many respondents spoke about teachers and students who were 'out' within the context of a school program. For many of them, this precedent served as a form of encouragement. Some teachers also "came out" as allies for LGBTQ students: "It might sound silly, but the 'safe space' sticker makes all the difference in the world. Even if you don't talk about it to that teacher, knowing they won't tolerate any negativity about that makes a world of emotional difference."

Stickers can signal safe space, and so can inclusion of LGBTQ topics in the choral curriculum. One student wrote,

> For one, there were many students who were out of the closet prior to me and were never discriminated against by students or teachers. Additionally, my teachers would always publicize that the classroom was a safe place for any LGBTQ students and that they were always open to talk about it. In fact, one of my choral teachers texted me upon finding out that I had come out as gay telling me she was proud of me.

While this can be seen as encouraging, it is also an indication of the heteronormativity inherent in schools (e.g., would a teacher text a straight student after disclosing their heterosexuality?). Another respondent noted:

> I wasn't the only gay student, and the other students knew who was gay and who wasn't, and in chorus I think people were more accepting. The teacher made it clear that bullying (etc.) were unacceptable and if we had any issues we could talk to her.

Discussion of LGBTQ composers/lyricists

As discussed by Spano (2014), several respondents expressed that choral educators should mention the gender-sexual diversity of composers being studied in class. One respondent wrote that "[teachers could] specifically mention when a composer was non-hetero normative." The following response demonstrates the need for choral music education to be relevant for the students in that particular class—a concept known as culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2011).

> Relating diversity of music to the diversity of people within the choir would have been a good addition. Also, mentioning LGBT composers while singing their music would show other people who were in the same boat as myself.

This show of support can be symbolic and influential:

> When a piece by a queer composer is done, or if the text is written by someone queer, mention it. Show queer youth that, yes, this beautiful work was written by someone who is queer. Allow their dreams to be as infinite and indestructible as non-queer kids.

In addition to formal discussions of LGBTQ-related curriculum, informal interactions and dialogues proved influential for many survey respondents.

Helpful or Hurtful Words/Semantics

Many respondents spoke of word choices—small and large—that made a substantial difference in their experiences as LGBTQ students in choir. For example:

> One time in our select women's choir, we were singing a love ballad and he [the teacher] was trying to get us to feel the music better. "Just imagine how you feel when you're with that person you love," he said. "Think about how much you feel about that guy, or girl, or whoever you love. Just imagine the emotions." For him to not go to that automatic, [heteronormative] idea of girls liking guys almost made me cry, I felt so safe there.

In a heteronormative and cisgender-centric society, LGBTQ students may feel excluded from experiences and conversations in which they do not see themselves represented.

Words carry important meanings and can make a large difference in how choral students feel. They can also help create a feeling of community:

> Choir is a place already where unity and listening to one another is taught. By simply having the conversation about inclusion of everyone (race, sexual orientation, etc.) as an extension of the concept of unity and listening and respect in choir would have been very helpful.

In addition to rehearsal language, of choral texts carry messages that LGBTQ students may internalize:

> Heteronormativity in songs is very troubling. And the way that traditional worship songs and outdated homophobia are linked together made singing worship songs very uncomfortable for me. I voiced a bit of concern to my teacher but I don't think she took me seriously. I felt silly for saying it.

This response demonstrates that LGBTQ students can feel silenced or stifled when they bring up LGBTQ issues in the choral context.

Explicit anti-bullying policies

Some respondents wrote of the lack of an explicit, enumerated policy barring bullying and/or hate speech against LGBTQ students:

> I think my middle and/or high school choral experience could have created a safer space for me as an LGBTQ singer by having the teacher address issues such as bullying and discrimination openly to all of the choirs. It seemed as though a "no bullying" policy was implied but never broken down as to what constituted bullying, harassment, and discrimination. As technology advanced, there was a wider range of means of communication that was not covered in a teacher's syllabus. There was a rule that talking behind someone's back was not allowed, but it didn't include Facebook, Snapchat, group texts, etc. Also, most preteens/teenagers don't even know what it means to be LGBTQ so they automatically

associate it with negative thoughts and prejudices based off of what they've heard others say. Maybe having a guidance counselor come in for a day and make a presentation so that everyone would've gotten the same information and not be as biased.

Not only does this quote exemplify the need for teachers to stay current with technology and cyber-bullying, it also highlights the potential problems with blanket 'acceptance policies.'

Immersion in the musical experience

For some respondents, it was neither the teacher nor the room that created safe space, but rather the musical experience itself.

For me, my musical education as an LGBTQ student gave me a release from pressures placed on me by other students, as well as myself, to stay secret about who I am. I wouldn't say the space did anything but allow me to express myself when I felt I didn't know who I was, or when I otherwise didn't have a voice.

Another respondent stated:

Music was my solace and my salvation, from my first experience of myself as a queer individual forward. The spaces in which I sought music were not always friendly or supportive, but my self-worth and ability to navigate my [identity] and the challenges it brought was strengthened by music. Safer spaces (in middle school) would have made a huge difference, since I felt that I was essentially in hiding at that point in my life.

Another wrote:

Choir is a place of peace and understanding. I feel that in order for the world to be a better place, music would be the first step to get us away from a world of hate and closer to a world of everything being normal. A world with 'acceptance,' to me is still ignorant because accepting is not normal.

Unfortunately, as echoed in many previous studies about LGBTQ students, not all respondents found support within their secondary choral programs.

Places and religion

Many respondents spoke about place-specific circumstances, mostly revolving around living in a small town or attending a religiously affiliated school:

My religious K–12 Baptist school had a good choir program, but the school also expelled people for identifying as LGBTQ+. Even though my particular choral director was both religious and accepting of the spectrum of sexuality and orientation, she was not allowed to actively advocate for fear of losing her job.

Another respondent wrote:

My middle school was a religious school that taught that gays were the reason the world is falling apart, so it was not only not a safe space, it was a dangerous place. The choir was filled with boys who didn't want to be in band and they were never disciplined for their homophobic comments. I think the conductor was scared of getting fired for being pro-LGBTQ.

Yet another student wrote about how place-based issues can become internalized: "It was just never talked about. And being in the Bible Belt, I was under the impression that I had a problem." This internalized stigma may be even more detrimental for those who identify as non-cisgender.

Transgender[6] students in the choral classroom

Data from Beemyn and Rankin (2011), Grossman and D'Augelli (2006), and Grossman, D'Augelli, and Salter (2006) indicate that trans youth are coming out at a much earlier age than in previous generations. This means that an increasing number of secondary choral teachers will encounter trans students in their programs. Again, adjusting language used in class is an important step in making trans students feel comfortable, as demonstrated in the following survey response:

> A trope that has become standard choral parlance of referring to TB voices as 'men' and SA voices as 'women' is EXTREMELY CISSEXIST IN NATURE and [makes] me as a trans person singing in a choir feel very awkward and uncomfortable. While I may sing in a section of all men, I am not a man, and I don't appreciate being called one, especially when that misgendering [*sic*] has been used to diminish/disregard my identity in many facets of life. I would strongly encourage choral teachers and the greater choral educational institution to begin to abandon this antiquated vernacular. It also presents a lovely opportunity to educate younger students about the existence of trans people, which could theoretically result in the instillation of trans allyship in upcoming generations of youth, which is integral to the forwarding of social justice for trans individuals.

Some respondents worried about larger gender issues in choral music, as exemplified in the following response:

> I worry about choir being inherently cissexist. In my college the choir is divided into a mixed choir and a women's choir. I was [placed] in the women's choir even though I do not identify as a woman. I have had similar experiences throughout my singing career. I wish directors were more willing to divide by voice part than by sex or at least perceived gender.

One's voice and gender identity may be linked (Monks, 2003), but clothing choices are a much more public signal of the way one 'performs' their gender (Butler, 1999).

Gendered choir uniforms

Many transgender respondents spoke about the quandary of 'gendered' choir uniforms (e.g., dresses and tuxedos), which can be problematic for some sub-sets of the LGBTQ community. For example, some lesbians prefer not to wear dresses, and some gay men do not feel that a tuxedo accurately expresses their gender-sexual identity.

> [Choral teachers] could have allowed transgender or non gender conforming students to [choose] their clothing for performances—I was forced to wear a dress, despite identifying as male. (They did not use my chosen pronouns, either).

Another cisgender respondent highlighted the fact that this is not only a transgender issue: "I hated having to wear the dress. If you want a standard uniform, allow the members to choose which one they wear. Forcing everyone with a vagina to wear a dress is bullshit." As more and

more students question, transcend, or reject the gender binary, choral conductor–teachers will need to adapt their vocabularies, teaching practices, and uniform policies to honor these students and their gender journeys (Palkki, 2015, 2017).

Discussion and suggestions for teaching practice

The purpose of this study was to explore whether secondary school choral programs helped to create safe space for LGBTQ students. Ultimately, while not all respondents disclosed their LGBTQ identity in the context of their school choral programs, the experience created a sense of safety for many students, as evidenced by the following response.

> Well … while I never had the guts to come out to anyone in the choir (I wasn't out to anyone, and currently am only out to two) I truly appreciated the genuine acceptance and caring of everyone I met there. You all are so amazing … thank you so much, even though you might not know just how much you helped.

The quantitative data from this survey indicate that, while many of the respondents' choral music educators made their support for LGBTQ people explicitly known, most of the non-heteronormative and trans respondents did not feel safe disclosing their gender and/or sexual identity in the context of the school choral program. This may be related to the reason that a very small percentage of respondents would recommend that an LGBTQ (or questioning) person speak with a secondary choral teacher about issues of gender and/or sexuality. The quantitative data also suggest that teachers were more apt to discuss LGBTQ issues outside class. Perhaps more professional development and resources are necessary to empower teachers with strategies to 'institutionalize' support messages/mechanisms, keeping in mind that these strategies must be employed in a context-appropriate fashion.

One of the strong messages from the quantitative data was that students perceived the high school choral room to be a safe space, and then found their suspicion to be true. This is significant and something about which the choral music education community should be encouraged. These data also indicate that students who fall outside the gender binary (e.g., transgender, gender nonconforming, genderqueer) felt less safe than did their LGB peers—a finding that is consistent with previous studies from the general education literature (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009).

One limitation of this study is that the survey made an implicit assumption that the respondents had recognized their LGBTQ identity while in middle and/or high school. The open-ended responses made it clear that many students were not "out" before entering college/university. Thus, the data may be skewed—the numbers may indicate that school choral programs were safer than they may actually be. Another limitation is the inevitable reductionism of choosing specific quotes and themes from approximately 100 single-spaced pages of textual data from the four open-ended questions. There are undoubtedly many sub-themes and important voices that do not appear in this manuscript. While these limitations are regrettable, the large sample size and rich open-ended responses suggest that our findings are timely and necessary for the music education community.

These data suggest, similar to findings by Perez et al. (2013), that many choral educators were reluctant to intervene when anti-LGBTQ bullying occurred. Many respondents spoke of the stifling nature of the silence around LGBTQ issues in their secondary school choral programs. Many respondents assumed that if the teacher(s) did not signal their support in some way (e.g., verbal support either during or outside of class time, a "safe space" sticker on an office

door or in a choir classroom, the presence of their choral teacher at a gay–straight alliance meeting), that the teacher was *not* supportive. The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network offers free online resources for educators including downloadable safe space stickers for educators who wish to make their support explicit (see http://www.glsen.org). These survey data also indicate that policies surrounding bullying and hate speech should *enumerate* specific groups that are protected by such a policy. The following is an example policy statement from choral music educator Tim Estberg from New Trier High School in Illinois:

> If any student feels that our classroom is in any way uncomfortable, he or she is strongly encouraged to speak with me as soon as possible. Together, we will create an environment in which each of us can grow and learn in a safe place for everyone, regardless of gender, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation, class, level, or physical or mental ability.

It seems that American society may be at a 'tipping point' where trans issues are concerned (Steinmetz, 2014), as evidenced by recent coverage in the news media and trans characters on American television shows such as *Glee* and *Orange is the New Black*. Perhaps this is an indication that a larger recognition of non-binary gender identity is forthcoming. As gender identity and sexuality are related but not overlapping constructs, choral music teachers need to become educated about gender identities and expressions that are not simply binary 'male' or 'female.' Choral music educators should have a plan for how to accommodate singers who want to sing a voice part or wear a uniform that matches their gender identity (Palkki, 2017). Choral music teachers may feel unprepared for, or uneasy about, the prospect of interacting with a trans student. Research suggests that trans youth are disclosing their gender identity at earlier ages (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Grossman et al., 2006), indicating that choral teachers will need to be prepared to accommodate non-cisgender students. This may include plans for adapting details including: using the student's chosen name and pronouns, rehearsal language (e.g., avoiding statements such as "all the men sing here"), uniform policies, and dressing/hotel room assignments. The data from the present survey suggest that trans students overall did not feel as much support within secondary school choral programs as their lesbian, gay, and bisexual peers.

While re-thinking gender norms in the choral context may feel overwhelming, perhaps a less daunting task is reconsidering seemingly small semantic shifts that can make a significant difference to LGBTQ choral students. The response about the choral teacher who encouraged students to think about the "the guy or girl or whoever you love" made a tremendous difference in the life of that student. These small semantic shifts about issues of gender-sexual diversity are an easy way for choral teachers to indicate their support of LGBTQ students.

Conclusion

LGBTQ issues are present inherently in all educational settings[7] as students and adult faculty/staff negotiate their gender–sexual diversity within the educational context. Though some choral music educators may not feel comfortable openly speaking about LGBTQ issues in school, they should at least consider these issues and ways in which they can be addressed. The quantitative data from our survey indicate that while students perceived high school choral classrooms as safe, there is much more work to do in terms of teachers demonstrating their support for LGBTQ students (and people) within the context of middle and high school choral programs. The overwhelming message from the open-ended responses was that what LGBTQ choral students desired is *recognition* of their identity within the choral context. Choral educators should

be prepared to consider LGBTQ issues as they arise in the secondary choral setting. Not all choral music educators work in settings in which openly speaking about LGBTQ issues is (or seems like) a possibility. Still, providing safe space for all students, including LGBTQ youth—who may face incredibly challenging circumstances both inside and outside the choral room—should be a priority for all choral educators. As the following respondent demonstrated, the power of the choral classroom may be much stronger than most people realize:

> There was one time where another student in the choir bullied me for being gay, and throughout the year, would constantly pick on me, and threw my stuff on the floor. Every once in a while, people would crack a gay joke about me too. My choral teacher got upset when he saw this … I never felt threatened in my choir. I didn't enjoy middle school or high school a whole lot because many of the kids were truly nasty, but choir was my saving grace.

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Notes

1. Although the authors still believe in safe space for queer students, "safe people" has become the preferred term since conducting this research as Dr. Jason Nichols wrote in the Maryland Political Review, "…in some cases an open exchange of ideas can be uncomfortable, but lead to the creation of safe people rather than safe spaces. Safe spaces are stationary and stagnant. The classroom safe space stays within the walls of the ivory tower of academia. Safe people travel, carrying the message of justice."
2. Gottschalk (2003) wrote: "Theories of the aetiology of same-sex sexuality then, seem to be based on a combination of widely accepted, though unproven, assumptions. These are, an assumption of the biological nature of a same-sex sexual orientation, the assumption of an essential or biological nature of gender, the assumption of a relationship between gender and same-sex sexual orientation, and a belief in the essential or biological nature of that relationship" (p. 36)
3. "Gender-based bullying comprises threatening and harassing behaviors based on gender or the enforcement of gender-role expectations. It includes verbal and physical harassment; unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion; and insults, intimidation, and assaults based on sexual orientation" (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009, p. 520).
4. Cisgender refers to a person whose assigned birth sex matches their gender identity (non-transgender).
5. Our survey included the term 'junior high/middle school,' (generally ages 11–13) but for ease of reading, 'middle school' will be used throughout this manuscript to denote the school years between elementary school and high school.
6. Recall that *transgender* is used as a blanket term encompassing many variations of non-binary gender identity/expression, including those who identify as gender fluid, gender queer, etc.
7. In 1979 Renaud Camus wrote, "homosexuality is always elsewhere because it is everywhere."

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Appendix 1: Survey tool

Sexual orientation (who you are attracted to):
    [ ] heterosexual (straight)
    [ ] gay

[ ] lesbian
[ ] questioning
[ ] bisexual
[ ] not listed

Gender identity (how you identify or express your gender):
[ ] cisgender female (i.e., you were born female and you still identify as your birth gender)
[ ] cisgender male (i.e., you were born male and you still identify as your birth gender)
[ ] transgender
[ ] intersex
[ ] gender non-conforming
[ ] questioning
[ ] not listed

True or false

1. I had at least one **middle/junior high school** choir teacher who, in class, encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people.
2. I had at least one **high school** choir teacher who, in class, encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people.
3. I had at least one **middle/junior high school** choir teacher who, outside of class, encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people.
4. I had at least one **high school** choir teacher who, outside of class, encouraged acceptance of LGBTQ people.
5. I shared my LGBTQ identity with at least one of my middle/junior high or high school choir directors while I was their student.
6. I encountered bullying and/or harassment from other choral students in the **middle/junior high *or* high school** choral classroom (or during other choral activities such as festivals, all-state choir, extra rehearsals).
7. I encountered bullying and/or harassment from other choral students **in my middle/junior high *or* high school** at times when **I was** not involved in choral activities (at lunch, after school, in other classes, between classes, etc.).
8. My **middle or junior high school** choir teacher(s) had rules against hate speech toward LGBTQ people.
9. My **high school** choir teacher(s) had rules against hate speech toward LGBTQ people.
10. If I had a friend at my former **middle or junior high school** who was questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, I would suggest they speak with the choir teacher.
11. If I had a friend at my former **high school** who was questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, I would suggest they speak with the choir teacher.

Likert-type scale questions

Rate the following statements on the following scale:
N/A = not applicable
1 = strongly disagree
2 = disagree
3 = neutral
4 = agree
5 = strongly agree

1. Prior to my enrollment in my **middle or junior high school** choral music program, I perceived the program as a place where I could be safe as an LGBTQ student.
2. Prior to my enrollment in my **high school** choral music program, I perceived the program as a place where I could be safe as an LGBTQ student.
3. My **middle or junior high school** was, in general, accepting of LGBTQ students.
4. My **middle or junior high school** was, in general, accepting of LGBTQ teachers.
5. My **high school** was, in general, accepting of LGBTQ students.
6. My **high school** was, in general, accepting of LGBTQ teachers.
7. My **middle or junior high school** choir teacher(s) openly discouraged hate speech toward LGBTQ people.
8. My **high school** choir teacher(s) openly discouraged hate speech toward LGBTQ people.
9. I felt safe expressing my LGBTQ identity within my **middle or junior high school** choral program.
10. I felt safe expressing my LGBTQ identity within my **high school** choral program.
11. My **middle school or junior high school** choir room (the physical space) was a place at school where I felt safe as an LGBTQ student.
12. My **high school** choir room (the physical space) was a place at school where I felt safe as an LGBTQ student.
13. I had at least one middle/junior high or high school choir director with whom I felt I would be safe if I shared my LGBTQ identity
14. I had at least one **middle/junior high *or* high** school choir teacher who established an environment where LGBTQ students felt welcome and safe.

Free response

If your middle and/or high school choral experience provided safe space for you as an LGBTQ student, please describe the ways in which this safe space was facilitated.

In what ways do you feel your middle and/or high school choral experience could have created an even safer space for you as an LGBTQ singer?

Are there specific choral pieces (repertoire titles) that gave you solace, courage, or helped you in some way as you navigated middle and/or high school as an LGBTQ student?

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as an LGBTQ singer in middle, junior high or high school?

Demographic information

Your current year in school (at the time you complete this survey)
  [ ] freshman   [ ] junior   [ ] graduate student
  [ ] sophomore   [ ] senior   [ ] post-graduate student
Your current age: _____
Region of the USA in which you attended middle/high school:
If you lived in more than one region during this time, select the region in which you spent the longest amount of time.
  [ ] US Midwest – IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI
  [ ] US Northeast – CT, DC, DE, MA, MD, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT

[ ] US Southeast – AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV
[ ] US Southwest – AZ, NM, OK, TX
[ ] US West – AK, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY
[ ] Western Canada – BC, AB, SK, MB
[ ] Central Canada – ON, QC
[ ] Atlantic Canada – NB, PE, NS, NL
[ ] Northern Canada – YT, NT, NU
[ ] not listed

I attended a high school that was:
[ ] private secular/independent
[ ] private religious/parochial
[ ] public
[ ] homeschooled
[ ] military
[ ] other:_____

The city/town in which I attended middle and high school can be described as:
[ ] very small (less than 20,000 inhabitants)
[ ] small (20,001–200,000 inhabitants)
[ ] midsize (200,000–499,999 inhabitants)
[ ] large (500,000 or more inhabitants)

The city/town in which I attended middle and high school can be described as:
[ ] rural
[ ] suburban
[ ] urban
[ ] other:_____

The high school I attended had a graduating class of:
[ ] less than 100
[ ] 101–400
[ ] 401–700
[ ] 701–1,000
[ ] more than 1,000