Radical heterosexuality: Straight teacher activism in schools

Does ally-led activism work?

Leigh Potvin

T he vast majority of schools in Canada are dominated by unsafe spaces and experiences for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth [1] who continue to experience higher rates of suicide, depression, isolation, harassment/bullying, and self-harm compared to their straight peers[2]. Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs) and other LGBTQ-inclusive groups exist in schools with the goal of mitigating and working against homophobia. Most often in Ontario (Canada), straight teachers lead these groups[3]. Because of the pervasive role straight teachers play in GSAs and other anti-homophobia initiatives in schools, there is a practical need to analyze the role and experiences of straight teacher ally activists working with LGBTQ students and the overall effectiveness of anti-homophobia efforts under their purview.

Here, I explore the efficacy of straight teacher allies, the importance of understanding straight privilege, and the significance of radical heterosexuality for straight people doing

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[1] EGALE, 2011; GLSEN, 2011
[2] O'Conor, 1995; Pascoe, 2007; Walton, 2006
[3] Kitchen and Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2015; Russell, 2011

LGBTQ activism. Relying on queer theory and decolonizing/Indigenous queer theory, I argue that it is necessary for straight teachers to acknowledge their straight privilege in order to challenge homophobia's companions: heterosexism and heteronormativity. In addressing the latter two covert forms of oppression in schools, teachers and students could shift into deeper, more effective resistance measures.

Personal connection and grounding

I have spent most of my adult life and teaching career guided by activist sensibilities rooted in a desire for social justice. A common paradox for privileged people like me (being white, straight, cisgender woman, middle-class, able-bodied, well-educated) lies in the fact that while I feel it is my social responsibility to work toward greater equity, I come to that disposition with the luxury of choice. In other words, my experiences of privilege mean that I have the luxury to "opt in" to struggles for liberation, rather than experience life from a marginalized or oppressed position. I have worked with students and colleagues as part of GSAs in schools, marched with my teacher's union in Toronto's Pride Parade, and more informally, supported LGBTQ colleagues, friends, and students in the face of their oppression in schools. I believe conversations about LGBTQ activism in school should include the radical politicization of straight teachers and their teaching practice. What I mean by 'radical' in this context is a movement toward recognizing the political nature of anti-homophobia activism in schools instead of sanitizing them as generic, anti-bullying activities. My own experience as an ally reflects the fallibility when allyship is assumed as a static identity.

The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013

Three quarters of the way through my first doctoral seminar, I found myself in proverbial hot water. Over the weekend, I

tweeted something that I intended to be funny (and it was funny, in context and amongst friends), but out of context, could only be interpreted as homophobic.

I was a confident ally.

It was from this position of confidence, which I now cannot help but think of as arrogance, that I wrote the tweet that will forever ring out in my mind as *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013*. While spending time with some queer friends, I tweeted a portion of our discussion of favourite childhood movies. My friend's gay, male roommate stated that his two favourite movies were *Mean Girls* and *The Notebook*. He burst out laughing, along with the rest of us. I wrote: "'Mean Girls and The Notebook are my favourite movies'. That's the gayest thing I've heard today." Unbeknownst to my friends and I, classmates in the program read the tweet and were shocked and upset by its content. One responded, not by tweeting a response, but by informing my doctoral supervisor without initially identifying me as the offender. The student eventually told my supervisor that I was the tweeter. I received an email from him a day later highlighting my transgression and the concern of my classmates. He urged me to apologize, in a sincere and responsible way, citing other well-known public figures, like Jason Alexander and, more recently, Jonah Hill, who made similar errors in judgment.

I did.

I issued a 6-tweet apology (sometimes 140 characters is not enough, other times, it's too much). It is difficult to convey in words the distress I felt as a result of this incident. My entire identity as a compassionate educator, activist, and ally was shaken. After a couple of days, when I thought things had died down a bit, a student from one of the other cohorts approached me to explain the effect of my tweet. She relayed that students in her cohort had been discussing it in class and while I had not

been mentioned by name, my identity as the offender seemed to be a well-known fact. I was mortified and horrified at myself. I managed to get through the conversation before I burst into (more) tears. *Didn't people read the apology tweet? Did people really think I was a homophobe? Didn't they know the kind of work I did?*

This story is an important part of my experience as an ally. It plays a formative role in my learning and work to mitigate the effects of privilege in my life. Stories about so-called successes in my ally experience are easier to tell, especially in such a public forum. However, I find myself tiring of the stories that privileged people tell about themselves and "the good" they are doing for other people in the name of social justice and equality. Not that these stories are void of significance or importance, they have value. I question the motivation of telling stories that make us (privileged allies) seem important, benevolent, and therefore, good. It seems to me that good stories emphasize the perceived benevolence of the experiences of privileged people and run the risk of further alienating the marginalized folks with whom alliances are sought. And so, I propose that people who are interested in being allies start telling their bad stories; their stories of transgressions and failures to complicate and challenge the idea that an ally identity is a static, unchanging identity. In order for allies to be most effective, their role and social location needs to be problematized. Here, I use queer theory [4] and theories of decolonization [5] to help shape a conception of allies as people who are respectful, self-reflective, and willing to live in humility instead of seeking accolades and recognition for their work. Accolades and recognition (rather than respect and humility) as motive for being an ally, the results will be inauthentic, misguided, with great potential to reinforce the negative impacts of oppression.

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[4] Britzman, 1995; Foucault, 1978; Halperin, 1997
[5] Battiste, 2005; Battiste, 2013; Root, 2009; Tompkins, 2002

For some, discussing allies and the nature of allyship is tiresome. An ally is someone who is kind to others possessing traits that are assumed inherent and cannot be learned or taught. For others, allies are seemingly well-intended, but ultimately self-important people looking to alleviate the guilt associated with their privilege. I am particularly interested is transcending these kinds of arguments "for" or "against" allies because it seems to me that where there are social movements, there are allies. I acknowledge that there are many arguments for or against allies and their role. Here, I focus on allyship as a useful concept in facilitating equity particularly when it is attended to in critical ways.

Relevant terms and concepts

Straight teachers can be important *allies* to LGBTQ students. Bishop emphasizes the importance of allies exercising their power in ways that support social movements rather than reinscribing oppression[6]. In order to do so, allies must take an inventory of their own experiences of oppression as well as the benefits of their privilege in society. Allies are "people who recognize the unearned privilege they receive from society's patterns of injustice and take responsibility for changing these patterns"[7]. The dual actions of recognizing and taking responsibility suggest that straight allies are afforded *privilege* in society on the basis of being heterosexual, at the expense of LGBTQ people. Privilege is a form of dominance afforded to a group over others that perpetuates inequities[8], in this case against LGBTQ people. Straight privilege manifests itself in commonplace ways that can be hard for straight people to see and acknowledge. It is the assumption or set of assumptions that the experiences of heterosexual people are the only

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[6] Bishop, 2002
[7] Bishop, 2002, p. 1
[8] Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012

experiences[9]. For instance, most straight people can hold hands with their partner in public without fear of provoking a response from others, we can put a picture of our opposite sex partner in our office, and we can rest assured that the majority of media will validate our life experience. One way that some straight teachers acknowledge their privilege is through LGBTQ ally and activism work. In school contexts, for instance, some straight teachers are active supporters of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs), which are student-led anti-homophobia groups in schools, often supported and supervised by ally teachers[10]. The overarching sociological forces at work in schools, like other institutions in society are *heteronormativity* and *heterosexism*. *Heteronormativity* refers to the normalization of heterosexual privilege[11], evident in school dances and health/sex education curriculum, among other aspects of school life. Heterosexism presumes the superiority and naturalness of heterosexuality[12].

Why straight teachers?

Straight teachers play a significant guiding role in equity movements in Ontario schools[13]. I discuss and problematize ally identities within queer movements and suggest that radical heterosexuality is a more viable and respectful positioning. I seek to understand the ways that straight teacher allies experience privilege as they do activism work with LGBTQ students and colleagues. Many teacher leaders of GSAs and other pride organizations, as indicated above, are straight (predominantly female) teachers[14]. The role of straight teachers, despite their prevalence in these roles, is not often studied, particularly in Canada and Ontario[15]. The majority of student-

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[9] Callaghan, 2007; Nicholls, 2013; Meyer, 2007; Rich 1980
[10] Russell, 2011
[11] Driskill et al., 2011
[12] Finley, 2011; Walton, 2006
[13] Goldstein and Davis, 2010; Kitchen and Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2015
[14] Kitchen and Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2015
[15] Eichler, 2010; Kitchen and Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2015; Russell, 2011

allies in Goldstein and Davis' study of heterosexual allies on a college campus were "white, female, politically-liberal, and religiously inactive, social sciences and humanities majors"[16]. The homogeneity of this group, according to the authors, sits in contrast to otherwise diverse student bodies, further reinforcing the importance of understanding the role that privilege plays in the lives of allies of LGBTQ people.

Unlearning straight white/settler privilege

Kumashiro's anti-oppressive pedagogy provides a mechanism to address privilege in schools and classrooms. Anti-oppressive education as a framework provides a platform for educators who seek to end sexism/heterosexism, racism, classism, ableism (and other forms of oppression) within their classrooms and schools. He posits that a failure to "work against the various forms of oppression [racism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, classism] is to be complicit with them" [17]. Kumashiro reminds educators that, in order to work toward ending oppression, they must be able to name it. Naming oppression requires seeing inequity and/or relations of power playing out in a systematically disadvantageous way for individuals or groups in a school or classroom. Changing oppressive dynamics rooted in these power inequities requires what he calls *disruptive knowledge* not as an end, but rather as "a means toward the always-shifting end/goal of learning more" (p. 34). Kumashiro's (2004) framework provides a solid foundation from which straight teachers can advocate for a queering of schools instead of reactionary, surface-level strategies that are often the limit or extent of anti-homophobia efforts. One such effort to combat homophobia in schools is made through creation of safe spaces.

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[16] Goldstein and Davis, 2010, p. 488
[17] Kumashiro, 2000, p. 29

Delpit posits that, within schools, a *culture of power* exists that benefits dominant groups to the detriment of the marginalized groups, like LGBTQ students and/or students of colour. In line with Foucault's work on relations of power, Delpit argues that power is enacted in classrooms, establishing rules for participants that reflect the culture of the dominant, most powerful group[18]. For the less powerful, learning the rules of the dominant culture could help acquire power, yet maintain existing systems rather than erode them. Individuals or groups who have power in a culture are "frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence"[19]. This pattern, I argue, can be applied in understanding sexuality and gender diversity in schools. Delpit indicates, for example, that, for educators who consider themselves progressive or radical in nature there is discomfort in acknowledging their social power. She argues that discomfort is necessary in order to mobilize resistance movements[20]. Inaction on the part of privileged teachers only solidifies their dominance. Fortunately, educators, she says, can use their position within educational institutions for resistance and change. A teacher can "agitate for change— pushing gatekeepers to open their doors to a variety of styles and codes"[21]. These gatekeepers are allies[22]. Teachers who choose to agitate for change must accept a complete reworking of the current culture in schools from which they benefit[23].

There are two aspects of my social privilege that I have worked to address over the last decade: my white/settler and straight identity. Both elements of my life experience situate me in a position of privilege relative to racialized and/or queer people. The intersection of my whiteness, straightness, and cisgender

[18] Delpit, 1988; Foucault, 1978
[19] Delpit, 1988, p. 282
[20] Delpit, 1988
[21] Delpit, 1988, p. 292
[22] Bishop, 2013
[23] Delpit, 1988

woman identity enable me to leverage my privilege as an ally. These privileges can run amok as evidence by The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013. The intersections of privilege in my own identity can also lead to further marginalization of those I seek ally myself with if my privilege is left unchecked. Much of my own learning about my privilege as a cisgender, white, straight woman stems from the work of many Indigenous and queer scholars who articulate the need for privileged people to understand the space they occupy in society (and classrooms). Here, I explore some concepts that emerge from decolonizing and queer literature that help elucidate an argument for the necessity of recognizing and analyzing privilege, after which I construct an argument for respectful allyship.

Unlearning settler privilege

Finley relies on queer and Indigenous/decolonizing literature to construct a critique of sexism and patriarchy as components of colonialism[24]. I situate this work within a framework of decolonization because of my own work as a white/settler person to understand the ways in which the land, people, and systems where I live (Canada) experience ongoing colonization. Part of this decolonizing journey is unlearning the normalized hierarchies under colonialism[25]. This work is situated within the context of North America and connected understandings and experiences of colonialism, however, the importation of heterosexism and Euro Western patriarchal practices extends into other parts of the colonized world. In other words, sexuality, gender, and race are sites of regulation within the colonial enterprise that continue to have daily impact in regulated social life. Finley outlines that heterosexism and the structure of the nuclear family as part of a "colonial system of violence"[26]. Oyewumi emphasizes a similar process amongst the

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[24] Finley, 2011
[25] Battiste, 2005
[26] Finley, 2011, p. 32

Yoruba in Nigeria where "kings and men have been created from oral traditions which were originally free of gender categories"[27]. Furthermore, she argues "men and women have been invented [under colonialism] as social categories, and history is presented as being dominated by male actors" [28].

Heteropatriarchy "disciplines and individualizes communally held beliefs by internalizing hierarchical gendered relationships and heteronormative attitudes toward sexuality. Colonial systems needs heteropatriarchy to naturalize hierarchies and unequal gender relations"[29]. In other words, heteropatriarchy is the marriage of hetero/sexism and patriarchy a system that reinforces the dominance of straightness and maleness in society. Along with heteronormativity, they are key "logics of colonialism" [30]. Heteronormativity is a system of ordering central to colonialism, propping up heteropatriarchy. Finley points to "purposeful deconstructions of the logics of power" in order to end colonial dominance for Indigenous people [31]. Colonial sexualization, the way sexuality is prescribed and defined by colonialism, constructs Indigenous peoples as "incapable of self-governance without a heteropatriarchal influence"[32]. Finley provides insights into the pervasive nature of oppression that exists within a colonial system. Resistance to colonialism and heteropatriarchy are inherently bound together.

Battiste, Root, and Tompkins urge white educators to face their privilege head-on within a Eurocentric, colonized system [33]. White educators must, Root says, be ever mindful of cultural appropriation in pursuit of decolonizing: "it is equally important for us [white educators] not to retreat from the

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[27] Oyewumi, 1998, p. 264
[28] Oyewumi, 1998, p. 264
[29] Finley, 2011, p. 34
[30] Finley, 2011, p. 33
[31] Finley, 2011, p. 34
[32] Finley, 2011, p. 35
[33] Battiste, 2005; Root, 2009; Tompkins, 2002

colonial problem"[34]. Decolonizing, the unlearning of white privilege under colonialism, is messy work because it challenges white/settler people (like me) to excavate our minds, habits, and beliefs so that learned oppressive assumptions can be forged into respectful relationships, while the pain and damage brought on by the collective experience of colonization heals. Decolonizing journeys are deliberate experiences whereby non-Indigenous people undertake a process of unlearning their white privilege and the ways in which their lives and minds have been colonized along with the Canadian landscape. The process of decolonizing for white/settler people is similar, I argue, to a process straight people should undertake to unlearn and/or recognize their heterosexual privilege.

Tompkins emphasizes the need for dominant groups to unlearn their privilege. She points out that oppression is grounded and perpetuated in the privileged life experiences of dominant groups[35]. By critically assessing privilege in their own lives, members of dominant groups (white folks, straight people) take a key step toward understanding the ways that racism, power, and privilege operate in society. Often, white/settler people mistakenly understand their worldview as a universally acknowledged truth; one through which all people view and understand the world. Tompkins suggests a radical overhaul through rigorous self-reflection of Eurocentric epistemologies; to unlearn and relearn the way(s) white settlers and Indigenous people alike understand and see the world. Her argument advocates acknowledging and working towards a proliferation of epistemologies, similar to arguments made by queer theorists. Moving away from ways of knowing and understanding the world that emphasize one, singular set of experiences (those of straight and/or white folks) to the detriment of others (queer and/or Indigenous people) is a key component for people with privilege who are interested in allying themselves with marginalized people.

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[34] Root, 2009, p. 108
[35] Tompkins, 2002

Unlearning straight privilege

Like Indigenous scholars who articulate experiences of all people in colonized systems, queer scholars seek to understand sexuality/gender experiences under patriarchy. Colonization and patriarchy, both hegemonic systems of ordering people and their experiences, work together amongst these two theoretical frameworks. Privilege, and its unlearning is an essential component of queer theory and theories of decolonization.

Queerness and queer politics seek to resist social norms and dominant ways of being and knowing. Beyond a framework that seeks acceptance of the queer or generic "celebrations of diversity," queer politics seek to transgress and even rewrite social norms, only to transgress them and rewrite them again in perpetuity, seeking spaces and realities where a multiplicity of ever-changing norms exist. Such transgression and upending of norms, however, are rarely evident or experienced in educational settings. Straightness, and therefore queerness, is highly regulated in school life most often through homophobic acts and heterosexist expectations within a heteronormative framework. Freitag identifies that movement towards the creation of safe spaces for queer students may also increase safety for straight ones and argues that "schools should be queered, and not only with exclusively queer-identified subjects" in mind [36].

Walton focuses on strategies to equip K – 12 teachers and administrators with the tools they need to adequately address homophobic bullying in schools. The three concepts that Walton outlines as significant to this process are homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity or *H-cubed*[37]. Identifying and naming these phenomena can help educators understand the broader sociological forces at work within school-based bullying and address it, instead of shying away for fear of

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[36] Freitag, 2013, p. 125
[37] Walton, 2006

conversations about sex with teens, particularly the specter of gay sex. As Walton points out, understanding heterosexism and recognizing heteronormative assumptions are the key to addressing harassment in schools that arises within the matrix of sexuality and gender. While sexuality is a legitimate terrain of discussion in age-appropriate ways, addressing homophobic bullying is, in fact, not tantamount to teachers having conversations with students about sex or sexual activity, a reason often claimed for failure to address homophobic harassment[38]. Despite efforts of LGBTQ activists and their allies in schools, straightness maintains its dominance. Addressing heteronormativity and heterosexism by highlighting straight privilege (a by-product of these more covert forms of homophobia) is crucial in order to upend the system of gender/sexuality dominance in schools.

Regulating straightness in schools

Social construction and regulation within schools often mirrors the norms, values, and goals of broader society, but schools are also unique cultural settings in and of themselves[39]. They are not completely autonomous outside of the influence of broader society, meaning government, family influence, and economic forces, but schools are also not completely dependent, having some autonomy in shaping school culture and the broader culture in which the school is situated. Jones identifies that schools may, in fact, constitute the "Borderlands" in society; a place where "two or more cultures edge each other"[40]. As I discuss above, heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia are typically a highly salient part of school life[41]. Schools as institutions and in many cases, their staff and

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[38] EGALE, 2011; GLSEN, 2011
[39] Wotherspoon, 2004
[40] Jones, 1999, p. 299
[41] Eyre, 1993; Nicholls, 2013; O'Conor, 1995; Walton, 2006

students, construct and regulate heteronormative ideals [42]. Despite good intentions straight teacher allies can also participate (consciously or unconsciously) in these oppressive dynamics. These good intentions can, Jones identifies, be met with resistance by marginalized students[43].

Explicitly oppressive and regulatory policies prohibiting homosexuality and reinforcing conventional gender norms no longer exist in most schools, as they did historically[44]. Despite this, implicit and often explicit forms of homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity continue to be salient and prevalent forces in schools[45]. In some cases, they may be more covert, but in other ways, such as school-based violence and bullying, their effects are still quite overt. Research shows that the vast majority of schools in Canada are dominated by *unsafe* spaces and experiences for LGBTQ youth who continue to experience higher rates than their straight counterparts of suicide, depression, isolation, harassment and bullying, and self-harm[46]. These data, collected from schools across the country, are troubling for educators who support equity initiatives for LGBTQ students because it calls into question the efficacy of the policies and practices in place in Ontario (and Canadian) schools. O'Conor articulates that heterosexism "is a salient force in schools because curricula continue to reflect heterosexist assumptions, homophobic slurs are commonplace, and the school system has failed to support lesbian and gay students and teachers"[47].

Yet, while heterosexism remains alive and well in schools, Rasmussen, Rofes, and Talburt point out that "liberal understandings of complex matters, such as identity, tolerance,

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[42] EGALE, 2011; GLSEN, 2011
[43] Jones, 1999, p. 300
[44] Blount and Anahita, 2004
[45] EGALE, 2011; GLSEN, 2011
[46] EGALE, 2011
[47] O'Conor, 1995, p. 274.

safety, and equity" dominate discourse about youth and sexuality in schools[48]. In other words, liberal understandings miss the obvious, which is that social norms based on such understandings dictate that so-called "good" young people are, more often than not, presumed straight until they disclose otherwise, or until their gender performance is perceived as transgressive. This perspective doubly stigmatizes LGBTQ youth (and those perceived as such) because they are perceived as declaring themselves anti-normative, both queer and sexual, instead of the normalized expectation that, especially straight girls/women should be straight and asexual or sexually inexperienced and timid. While the authors support the role of allies and caution that they can lead to a desexualization and normalization that "can drive out the 'queerest of the queers'"[49]. Further effects of such normalization include the possibility of entrenching genders and sexualities as static, fixed identities, the very enterprise queer politics is or *should be* trying to resist. They argue that queer youth in America have been, and continue to be, largely excluded from broader societal conversations about queer issues. Anti-homophobia efforts are well intentioned in their naming of, and resistance against, homophobia, but can be limited in their effectiveness because they operate within the same political discourse. Because of this shared paradigm, anti-homophobia efforts are ineffective because they fail to proactively shift discourse. Instead, they are reactionary[50]. Elsewhere, Rofes argues that much of the work of Gay/Straight Alliances (the primary host of anti-homophobia work in schools) focuses on the trope of LGBTQ youth as target-martyr-victim even if in the form of resisting them[51]. While these tropes may be invoked with good intentions, they fail to transcend the traditional binary of sexual identity wherein straights are assigned subjectivity and queer youth remain objectified and victimized. To put it another way, anti-

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[48] Rasmussen, Rofes and Talburt, 2004, p. 2
[49] Rasmussen, Rofes and Talburt, 2004, p. 5
[50] Rasmussen, 2004; Rasmussen, Rofes and Talburt, 2004
[51] Rofes, 2004

homophobia efforts are necessary but insufficient in the work of shaping cultures in schools that are inclusive and supportive, normatively, of LGBTQ identities, relationships, and families. Malmquist, Gustavson and Schmitt also highlight the role that straight people can play in queer experiences in school[52]. Straight allies are poised to help others collectively unlearn their privilege, but claiming an ally identity does not ensure that greater equity will become a reality in schools.

GSAs and safe spaces: Is anti-homophobia enough?

A recent study that explores the role of GSAs in Ontario (Canada) schools and the role of advisors found 73% of GSA advisors in this study were female, the majority of whom are also straight. 75 % identified as activists, engaging in days of action that did a majority of advocacy for LGBTQ students[53]. Membership in GSAs is predominantly female, with advisors identifying that the majority of participants are straight, something that is reiterated in Goldstein and Davis' [54] comprehensive study of heterosexual allies on a college campus. The allies in their study are a much more homogeneous group in comparison to the diverse population on the rest of the campus. The majority of allies in this study are, like me, "white, female, politically liberal, and religiously inactive social science and humanities majors"[55]. Most joined the alliance because of friends/family, a commitment to human rights issues, and wanting to know more about LGBTQ people. The authors claim that motivations to become an ally are rooted in the social justice values of would-be allies. Interestingly, their study found that despite commitments to social justice, there was considerable fear amongst the straight ally participants' of being perceived as LGBTQ. While straight allies were eager to learn

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[52] Malmquist, Gustavson and Schmitt, 2013
[53] Kitchen and Bellini, 2013, p. 21
[54] Goldstein and Davis, 2010
[55] Goldstein and Davis, 2010, p. 489

more and participate in events where they would be identified as political and social allies with LGBTQ people, their discomfort with being labeled LGBTQ suggest a lack of self-awareness and perhaps even unchecked latent homophobia. This fear of being perceived LGBTQ seems to carry some insidious and unchecked prejudice. Perhaps it stems from the experience of relative safety that comes from the social privilege straight people experience. Is it acceptable and good to be a friend to LGBTQ people, but not to be perceived as such by others? This is one of the perils of unexamined straight privilege. One possible implication this fear may have is on the nature of the leadership straight teacher allies provide to GSAs or other equity groups. Straight teachers who fear being perceived as LGBTQ may not lead in a way that celebrates queerness and difference.

Challenging heterosexism and heteronormativity

Ngo[56] explores interventions and awareness raising campaigns in an American high school. Ngo challenges work that attempts to address the oppression of LGBTQ youth in schools and problematize impact it is having. The study found that despite interventions to promote inclusion of LGBTQ youth; homophobic, heterosexist, and heteronormativity are often reinscribed. In an effort to retell or re-present LGBTQ youth and their identities as unique and different, they are still being compared to a norm. Students in the school, they report as often being "hassled because they *look* gay, for saying the wrong things, for wearing the wrong clothes, or for wearing their clothes the wrong way"[57]. Notably, despite ideas about their own proactivity, staff often shied away from addressing homophobia and heterosexism in their curriculum. Like Kumashiro, Ngo indicates that teachers often reinscribe

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[56] Ngo, 2003
[57] Ngo, 2003, p. 118

heteronormativity in their complicity[58]. The author suggests that to authentically challenge homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity in school settings requires a commitment from staff to "creative and innovative ways of teaching" and to "transform conventional discourses" that inform the ways that people think about the world around them[59]. Similarly, Griffin and Ouellett contend that "although GSAs can play a vital role in making schools safer and more inclusive places for all students, GSAs are only part of the bigger picture"[60]. The authors call for broader institutional and policy changes because as "individual students and staff come and go. Without a change through a school's organizational setting, the gains of one year may be lost"[61]. Critical to the process of changing the over-arching school setting is the support of the principal/administrator. Often the pressure to shift school culture comes from a dedicated group of students and teacher allies, but a larger scale shift in school culture is required. An administrator may have greater longevity and certainly more influence in terms of policy development to ensure longer-term, macro shifts in school culture.

If *queering* school culture[62], rather than implementing anti-homophobia efforts, is the "what" of working against heterosexual privilege and heteronormativity in schools, another important question arises: Who is the "who"? In other words, who are the people who lead or guide the process? For Short[63], this should include people outside of the school system. Often, the leaders of social change in schools are students and staff. Many LGBTQ youth and adults work towards greater equity in schools as part of GSAs, on administrative or policy-developing

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[58] Kumashiro, 2000; Ngo, 2003
[59] Ngo, 2003, p. 123
[60] Griffin and Ouellett, 2002, p. 2.
[61] Griffin and Ouellett, 2002, p. 2.
[62] Goldstein, Russell and Daley, 2007
[63] Short, 2013

committees[64]. There are also many straight-identified staff and student allies who participate in GSAs[65]. While the efforts of straight teachers as queer advocates yield benefits, especially for GSA members, our (straight peoples') participation is not entirely unproblematic.

When I problematize such legitimacy, I do not mean to suggest that allies are not important in the work of shaping schools into more equitable spaces for LGBTQ students. On the contrary, allies are important figures in struggles to end oppression, including the challenging and difficult personal journey for allies themselves as they unpack their privilege alongside persons more marginalized. Freire cautions allies of liberation movements against positioning themselves as "executors of the transformation"[66]. Put differently, allies can forget that they carry privilege and inadvertently reassert their dominance while trying to work against oppressive mechanisms. *Unlearning* oppressor culture is essential for allies. It is also work that is never total or complete. It is, and should be, an ongoing process requiring responsiveness and adaptability. Freire's emphasis on rigorous self-reflection and unlearning is an essential component for privileged persons who choose work against oppressive mechanisms in schools and society. I turn now to what I believe is a viable stance and position for straight allies to most effectively leverage their privilege for greater equity in school environments.

Radical heterosexuality

Another way for allies to demonstrate the ways they have and are unlearning oppressor culture is in the disposition or stance

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[64] Griffin and Ouellett, 2002; Kitchen and Bellini, 2013; Ngo, 2003; Schneidewind and Cathers, 2003

[65] EGALE, 2001; Eichler, 2010; GLSEN, 2011; Kitchen and Bellini, 2013; LaPointe, 2015; Russell, 2011

[66] Freire, 1968/2011, p. 60

they take in doing ally work. Thomas conceptualizes the possibilities for straight allies to work productively and respectfully on *queering* projects. Challenges for straight allies, he says, are more about privilege than social practices: "less heterosexuality, than heteronormativity" [67]. He argues that despite being perceived as monolithic and unchanging, heterosexuality is "constantly set about trying to prove itself, assert itself, insist on itself" [68]. It is a series of repetitive performances that can lead to reified oppression on the part of well-intentioned straight allies. Thomas suggests that *radical heterosexuality* or "self-conscious straightness" acknowledges queerness within its identification, while also keeping privilege ripe for rigorous self-reflection for straight people [69]. "Straightness with a twist" (as Thomas refers to it) works to "mitigate, or militate against those institutional, compulsory ideals, those compulsory performances" [70]. Thomas' construction of a self-reflective radical heterosexual constitutes a thoughtful and powerful ally for change, one who engages in respectful praxis and dialogue without becoming a co-opter of a social movement. It is helpful to conceive of the straight ally, rooted in the reality of straight privilege. Acknowledging straight privilege does not reify that privilege and uphold heteronormativity, nor does it ignore the unearned benefits ally people often fail to recognize in their lived experiences. Instead, it allows radical heterosexuals the opportunity to disassociate themselves with the oppressive mechanisms of heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia.

Radical heterosexuality is an important stance for straight allies because it emphasizes the intention that is (or should be) part of being a respectful ally. It involves going against the grain of the normalized and constantly reinforced forms of straight sexuality

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[67] Thomas, 2000, p. 17
[68] Thomas, 2000, p. 28
[69] Thomas, 2000, p. 30
[70] Thomas, 2000, p. 31

in classrooms, families, and social life[71]. Heterosexuality becomes radical when straight people acknowledge the unearned privilege afforded to them in a heteropatriarchy. For straight people to resist heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia in schools and their lives from a stance of humility and respect is indeed a radical act. One of the ways radical heterosexuals can demonstrate their allyship and activism is rooted in humility is to listen to the people with whom they are aligned, to talk about (and experience) stumbling and fumbling in their allyship, and when they do lead and speak to tell (and learn from) their bad stories, not only the good ones[72].

Telling uncomfortable stories

Drawing upon personal experiences, and my situatedness in the content, I challenge those undertaking anti-homophobia initiatives to look at more covert forms of oppression rooted in heterosexism and heteronormativity in schools. Reaching out to critical race theory and Indigenous decolonizing perspectives to inform radical heterosexuality, I highlight the importance of understanding the role that privilege plays in sweeping oppression under the rug. Privilege and the experiences of the privileged often determine social norms and can be used as a level against oppression or a mode of ignoring injustice. Straight teachers that seek to leverage their privilege in order to alleviate the oppressive experiences of their students need to start with themselves and the systemic advantages they experience. In order to address gender and sexuality-based marginalization and oppression in schools, educators must seek out initiatives that push the boundaries of anti-homophobia education. Resisting homophobia is a good start, but equity measures should address straight privilege (heterosexism) and the normalizing of straight experiences (heteronormativity) in order to ensure safe and healthy school environments particularly for

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[71] Bryson and de Castell, 1993
[72] Margaret, 2010

LGBTQ youth. Mitigating destructive outcomes resultant from homophobia in schools would improve daily life for all students, particularly those who identify as or are perceived as LGBTQ. Educators guided by a queer pedagogy can also learn from the critique of colonial, white privilege elucidated by Indigenous scholars. In fact, many scholars[73] articulate queer Indigenous critiques which focus on the way that heterosexism and heteronormativity was constructed and reinforced by Euro Western colonialism. Significantly, queer theory and Indigenous decolonizing theories emphasize the importance of analyzing privilege and its normalizing effect amongst the dominant group (straight and white).

Three years have passed since *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013*, a time when my allyship could have been characterized as brash, overconfident, and riddled with unchecked privilege. Too much confidence in allies now makes me nervous and uncomfortable because I fear the ways in which their privilege maybe co-opting the efforts of those with whom they seek to align themselves. My ally identity (and the actions I take) now means more listening and reflecting before speaking, working to ensure space for marginalized voices, not simply claiming space for my own. I try to participate in activities organized by LGBTQ people, instead of organizing them myself. In social activism, I often follow instead of lead. Much of this is uncomfortable for me, it often feels inadequate. The ability or desire to avoid discomfort, I think, is rooted in my privilege. I do not ignore oppression when I see or hear it. I use my privilege to start critical conversations about homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity in classrooms and in the community. I no longer present my voice (filled with privilege and good intentions) as a definitive authority on LGBTQ activism. I am frequently asked to give public lectures and workshops about homophobia in schools where I identify my ally position in order to acknowledge the privilege of my social

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[73] Driskill et al., 2011; Finley, 2011; Morgensen, 2011

location. I frequently tell my story of struggling and failing as an ally: *The Great Twitter Debacle of 2013*. For me this story represents a cautionary tale of privilege run amok and the learning that can emerge from acknowledging and admitting those transgressions. My current ally identity is rooted in an invitation to learn, to challenge oppression, and to hold people with privilege (including myself) to account.

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Leigh Potvin is a doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. A former secondary school teacher and self-identified activist, she is interested in the intersections of critical gender studies, queer studies, and Indigenous/decolonizing scholarship.