LGBTQQ Youth Using Participatory Action Research and Theater to Effect Change: Moving Adult Decision-Makers to Create Youth-Centered Change

Laura J. Wernick, Michael R. Woodford & Alex Kulick

Published online: 29 May 2014.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 251

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 4 View citing articles

LGBTQQ Youth Using Participatory Action Research and Theater to Effect Change: Moving Adult Decision-Makers to Create Youth-Centered Change

LAURA J. WERNICK

Graduate School of Social Service, Fordham University, New York, NY, USA

MICHAEL R. WOODFORD and ALEX KULICK

School of Social Work, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Research has documented the importance of empowering lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) youth and creating LGBTQQ-focused institutional changes in schools. However, little is known about youth-centered strategies in creating such institutional changes. This study examines how participatory action research (PAR) and theater can effect change among adult powerholders in schools and contribute to LGBTQQ-youth-centered changes in schools. Findings suggest a mutually reinforcing relationship between PAR and theater in elevating youth voices and motivating adults to work toward individual and institutional change that is responsive to LGBTQQ students' needs.

KEYWORDS participatory action research, theater, transformative community organizing, LGBTQQ, youth, school climate

Growing numbers of young people are coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQQ; Williams, 2010), and schools are important sites of supporting and empowering these youth (Wernick, Dessel, Kulick, & Graham, 2013; Wernick, Woodford, & Siden, 2010). Recent developments have focused on supporting youth through Gay Straight Alliances (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, 2013; Walls,

Kane, & Wisneski, 2010) and safe zone programs; however, such initiatives do not necessarily empower youth to challenge larger issues of hetero-sexism and genderism (Currie, Mayberry, & Chenneville, 2012). Tackling systemic oppression requires working on intrapersonal, interpersonal, com-munity, institutional, and structural levels; indeed, changes on these levels actively coconstitute each other (Freire, 1986; Gutiérrez & Lewis, 1998; Pyles, 2009). Considering the institutional power held by adult administrators and educators in schools, it is critical to engage them to work against hetero-sexism and genderism (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2013); however, adults in schools can hold negative attitudes about LGBTQQ youth and perpetuate homophobic and transphobic behav-iors (Chesir-Teran, 2003). Given these realities and the unique knowledge of marginalized youth, youth-centered approaches might create the most effec-tual change (Ginwright & James, 2002; Wernick, Dessel, et al., 2013; Wernick, Kulick, et al., 2013). Although LGBTQQ young people have been leading efforts to transform their lives and communities for years (Cohen, 2005), research documenting these strategies, particularly the ways these strategies can move adult stakeholders to effect change, is lacking. This study exam-ines the use of participatory action research (PAR) combined with theater as a strategy to transform schools.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) AND THEATER TO PROMOTE SOCIAL CHANGE

Both PAR and theater for social change are powerful tools in creating multi-level change (Bagamoyo College of Arts et al., 2002; Guitérrez, Lewis, Nagda, Wernick, & Shore, 2005). PAR focuses on prioritizing marginalized voices in creating knowledge to build power and create change (Gutiérrez et al., 2005; Healy, 2000). Unlike other research methods, PAR actively involves those who are affected by an issue in conducting research that builds on their lived experiences. PAR also provides an opportunity for marginalized groups to analyze systems of oppression (Alvarez & Gutiérrez, 2001; Ristock & Pennell, 1996) through reflection, consciousness-raising, and building power (Smith, 1997). In particular, when used with youth in schools, PAR can allow greater voice for youth in evaluating school programs (Dymond, 2001).

Similarly, theater has been used to empower marginalized groups (Boehm & Boehm, 2003; Hartz-Karp, 2005; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2009). Change-oriented theater allows for opportunities to imagine new realities and promote dialogic communication that uncovers the existence and mech-anisms of oppression (Boal, 1979; Bohm, 1996; Green, 2001; Sullivan et al, 2008). Through these processes, parallel to PAR, theater for social change focuses on building the voices of marginalized groups and providing a structure for those voices to be heard. Although research has examined

the use of theater to address homophobia and tranpshobia among students (Fuoss, Kistenberg, & Rosenfeld, 1992; Wernick, Dessel, et al., 2013), the use of theater to affect adult powerholders in schools has not been examined.

RESEARCH PURPOSE

This study adds to community practice literature by examining the specific processes by which LGBTQQ youth can combine PAR and theater to effect multi-level and youth-centered change among school decision-makers.

RIOT YOUTH AND GAYRILLA: COMBINING PAR AND THEATER

The data used herein were extracted from a larger mixed-methods case study (Stake, 1995) of Riot Youth, a community-based LGBTQQ and ally (LGBTQQA) youth organization in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and the group's transformative community organizing process. Riot Youth provides a safe space for LGBTQQA youth to build community and works as a catalyst for youth-led organizing. Riot Youth participants share stories in regular meetings through informal conversations and theater games, developing an analysis of their marginalization through shared experiences (Wernick, Kulick, & Woodford, in press), such as being dismissed by adults in their schools when they raise issues of anti-LGBTQQ harassment (Wernick et al., 2010). In responding to these experiences of marginalization, particularly dismissal from adults, Riot Youth used PAR to conduct a climate survey of local high schools. The survey included questions about safety, harassment, intervention, and curriculum around sexual orientation, gender identity, race, and physical appearance (Riot Youth, 2009). Notably, among other results, their findings indicated that LGBTQQ felt uncomfortable discussing sexual orientation and gender identity with adults in schools.

To disseminate their findings, Riot Youth wrote a research report (Riot Youth, 2009), created a theater group called *Gayrilla Theater*, and developed a performance for adults in schools that combined survey results with their own stories, focusing on issues related to safety, harassment, isolation, and marginalization. The performance and the executive summary of the climate survey report included a call to action and recommendations for change. Performances concluded with a question-and-answer session for adults. Scripts were used for the performance and only one rehearsal was needed to perform to allow for representation by students from differing experiences and schools. Riot Youth has since developed performances aimed at students to develop allyhood and bystander intervention skills among their peers (Riot Youth, 2013; Wernick, Dessel, et al., 2013).

METHODS

Riot Youth participants and alumni were involved in designing and executing the study, including developing research questions and analyzing the data. Data analyzed for this study include participant observation and organizational documentation, semistructured focus groups and interviews with Riot Youth participants and Gayrilla performers, and open-ended questions from surveys conducted with adult audience members. For a summary of the data sources, see Table 1. Data triangulation helped us consider multiple perspectives and develop a comprehensive understanding of the case (Stake, 1995) and foster analytic trustworthiness (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The analysis of qualitative data allowed us to draw out the *how* and *why* (Scholz & Tietje, 2002) of the impact of theater and PAR. Throughout the study, the research team used principles of community-based and PAR research, allowing for a greater depth of inquiry (Alvarez & Guitérrez, 2001), particularly in studying marginalized youth (Minkler, 2005). The University of Michigan Institutional Review Board and Riot Youth's host organization approved the study.

Participant Observation and Organizational Documentation

Two of the authors conducted participant observation between fall 2008 and spring 2012. The lead author served as an adult advisor to the program during this time and attended regular Riot Youth meetings, meetings with school officials, performances, and trainings given to school personnel. The second author also participated in and observed retreats, meetings, and performances. The third author was a participant in the program between fall 2008 and spring 2009. In addition to participant observation, organizational documents were collected and reviewed, including internal reports and presentations, as well as Gayrilla scripts.

Focus Groups and Interviews

Two focus groups were held with Riot Youth members and Gayrilla performers. The first was held during a Riot Youth meeting in spring 2009. All participants in the first focus group had performed in or viewed at least one Gayrilla performance and were involved in the development of the performances and the PAR climate survey project. Demographic information was not collected from participants to respect the safe space of participants during their regular meeting. Approximately 25 youth participated, as well as the Gayrilla adult advisor. The second focus group ($n = 8$) was conducted in the winter of 2009 with Riot Youth members who had performed in at least one Gayrilla performance with an adult audience. Participants had performed for administrators, teachers, counselors, health workers, school board members,

TABLE 1 Summary of Data Sources

Method	Source of Data	n	Characteristics	Timeframe
Ethnographic observation	Participant observation	—	Two members of the research team served as researcher-practitioners; one member of the research team was a youth participant in the program	Fall 2008–Spring 2012
	Organizational documentation	—	Research team members reviewed and analyzed organizational documents, including internal reports, presentations, and scripts	Fall 2008–Spring 2012
Semistructured focus groups	Riot Youth participants and adult advisor	~251	Conducted during a regular program meeting; demographic information was not collected; youth approximately age 14–18	Spring 2009
	Riot Youth participants/Gayrilla performers	8	**Age:** 15–19 years **Race:** White ($n = 7$), Asian ($n = 1$) **Gender:** Cisgender men ($n = 2$), cisgender women ($n = 3$), and trans* people ($n = 3$) **Sexual orientation:** gay ($n = 2$), lesbian ($n = 4$), queer ($n = 1$), and straight ($n = 1$)	Winter 2009
Semistructured interviews	Riot Youth participants/Gayrilla performers and recent alumni	8	**Age:** 16–22 years **Race:** White ($n = 6$), Mixed/inter-racial ($n = 2$) **Gender:** Cisgender man ($n = 1$), cisgender women ($n = 5$), and trans* people ($n = 2$) **Sexual orientation:** bisexual ($n = 1$), gay/queer ($n = 1$), lesbian/queer ($n = 4$), and queer ($n = 2$)	Fall 2009
Surveys	Adults in schools who viewed Gayrilla and participated in Q & A	66	Teachers, counselors, administrators, nurses, school board members; only open-ended responses were analyzed	Spring 2009

51

and local and state elected officials. This focus group allowed for a more specific examination of the process of performing Gayrilla and youth's perceptions of its impacts on adults in schools. Participants' ages ranged from 15 to 19 years and most participants were White ($n = 7$). The group was nearly evenly split between cisgender[1] men ($n = 2$), cisgender women ($n = 3$), and trans*[2] people ($n = 3$).

During fall 2009, two Riot Youth participants and one recent alumnus conducted semistructured interviews with Riot Youth members who had performed Gayrilla for adults ($n = 8$). The interviewers were trained in semistructured interview techniques and research ethics. Engaging Riot Youth participants as researchers increased the theoretical sensitivity of data collection and facilitated rapport among participants (Alvarez & Gutiérrez, 2001). These interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and served as a compliment to the focus groups. At least six of the youth participated in interviews, as well as at least one focus group. Four of the interviewees were current Riot Youth members and Gayrilla performers and the other four were recent alumni. Ages ranged from 16 to 22 years, most identified as cisgender women ($n = 5$), with one cisgender man and two trans* people. Self-reported sexual orientation included one bisexual, one gay/queer, two queer, and four lesbian/queer. Most interviewees were White ($n = 6$); two participants identified as mixed/interracial. For the first focus groups and all interviews, informed consent was obtained from participants over 18 and informed assent from those under 18. The University of Michigan Institutional Review Board approved the use of informed assent without parental/guardian consent because many youth were not *out* to their parents/guardians and obtaining consent from them could pose a greater risk than the minimal risk involved in the focus group and interviews. Moreover, Riot Youth's host organization has procedures in place to ensure that parental support is received to come to the organization, including handling situations of self-harm and criminal activity, which were followed by the focus group facilitators and interviewers. For the second focus group, informed consent/assent with parental/guardian consent was obtained, because all participants were *out* to parents and the organization video-recorded the focus group for their own purposes.

Surveys of Adults in Schools

Surveys were administered to adults in schools who viewed Gayrilla performances and participated in the following question-and-answer sessions

---

[1]   Cisgender refers to individuals whose gender identity matches the one associated with their birth sex (i.e., men/boys born male, women/girls born female).
[2]   Trans* refers to a range of gender identities that fall outside of the binary prescriptions of cisgender men/boys and women/girls.

during the spring of 2009 ($n = 66$). Informed consent was obtained. These surveys were web-based with the exception of those used at a counselor in-service, which were administered manually and data later entered electronically. Surveys included both quantitative and open-ended items. Analysis of the responses to the open-ended items is included herein. Survey questions evaluated respondents' learning from Gayrilla, including the impact the performance had on them and their intended (if any) actions.

Data Analysis

Audio recordings of the focus groups and interviews were transcribed and reviewed by one of the authors for accuracy. One of the authors and a research assistant coded the transcripts, field notes, and organizational documents using open and axial coding (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in Atlas.TI. Themes were identified based on the research purpose and preliminary analyses of the focus groups, interviews, and participant observation data. Codes were reviewed, revised, and added throughout using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The research team discussed and reached consensus on the final codes. As part of the commitment to PAR and community-based research, the research team engaged in member checking throughout data analysis (Erlandson et al., 1993) through one-on-one and group dialogues with the youth and adults involved in the program. These strategies helped foster methodological rigor (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002).

RESULTS

Power of Performances with PAR Findings

Riot Youth participants wrote and distributed a comprehensive report of findings from their PAR project, including recommendations for change; however, they also understood that the report alone was insufficient to move educators to change. Given the pushback they had already experienced from adults in schools when they tried to raise their concerns (Wernick et al., 2010), they used theater to both speak from their own experience and to communicate their PAR findings. This combination allowed youth to both claim and communicate their own experiences and to speak on behalf of a larger group of LGBTQQ youth. For instance, one set of lines in the script communicated issues of safety and harassment:

> When I told administrators that the bathrooms were an unsafe place for me, they told me to use the nurse's bathroom on the other end of the school. Like I was the problem./A bunch of hockey players followed me out of school and ran me off the road. I skipped school for a week

after that./ Queer students feel significantly less safe in school, and in
public restrooms than their nonqueer counterparts, based on their sex-
ual orientation, gender identification and gender expression. They were
also physically and verbally harassed significantly more than non-queer
students.

As explained by one Gayrilla performer and an author of the report, a White
queer cisgender man, combining the PAR findings with the theatrical perfor-
mances created a considerable and unique impact in conveying the need for
change:

> You have these really emotional things coming out of one person's voice
> and then you have the statistic saying, "This is true for many people." . . .
> You take this one voice and you give it all of this extra power. There are
> people out there who are gonna start bawling the second you start telling
> your story. . . . But, I think that a lot of people who are in positions of
> power in our community are a lot more skeptical. . . . You need to put
> power behind that statement, so I think that that survey data really did
> put power behind that statement.

The PAR findings allowed Gayrilla performers to develop a symbolic con-
nection between themselves and the larger group of marginalized youth for
whom they spoke. In particular, youth participants often pointed to the use
of data that were collected in local schools as being particularly important
in this process. One Gayrilla performer, a White lesbian cisgender woman,
explained this deeper impact: "[Adult audience members] not only see the
number, but see a student, who chances are, is very affected by it and
feels the harm it causes." Survey findings and comments made during the
question-and-answer sessions indicated that it was important for the adult
audience members that the climate data were collected locally, because
it prevented them from assuming that national data would not reflect the
situation of a supposedly liberal and accepting place like Ann Arbor.

   The communication of stories that were generalized to a population
of youth but also localized in the community contributed to the process of
moving adult stakeholders to feel compelled to take action. For instance,
focus group participants explained that it prevented the stories as being
viewed as "just being anecdotes. . . . That's just a problem for a few people.
It's like, no it's the problem of exactly 10.6% of your school's population"
(White queer trans* person); "they would suddenly realize that this is actually
a huge problem and it needs to be taken seriously" (White trans* person).

   The use of storytelling combined with the quantitative data enabled
Gayrilla to reach adult educators both on an emotional and empathetic level
and to tap into a sense of responsibility in their roles as educators. This
process allowed Riot Youth to reach a wide range of adults who entered

the performances with a variety of motivations (or lack thereof), and also had a compounding impact on adults in developing them toward supporting LGBTQQ youth.

Many adults seemed to enter the performances resistant to, or apathetic about, the issues facing LGBTQQ youth. One youth respondent described how administrators seemed more interested in eating their sandwiches than the performance and were dozing off during the performance. However, resistant audience members would have their attention caught by the script lines that communicated violent and direct forms of harassment: "'He pushed me up against a wall and asked me if I wanted him to turn me straight.' . . . People [audience members] were just like 'Whoa . . . they're actually being assaulted, I should do something about that'" (White queer cisgender woman interviewee). Alongside these attention-grabbing lines that focused on direct harassment and bullying were stories of the everyday experiences of LGBTQQ youth, for instance, what it was like to have to withhold physical affection from a same-sex partner while their straight peers were openly affectionate at school. One survey response from a school administrator reported how the stories and the expression of raw emotion were "extremely effective in making the audience have a better understanding of what these youths go through on a daily basis." In displaying these dynamic realities of dramatic incidents of harassment and ongoing, daily challenges, the performances also mixed heavy and light-hearted stories. Another administrator described: "I laughed, I cried, I was very moved." The emotional appeal of the theater and PAR findings were built on communicating youth's marginalization, but also by the ways that youth claimed their experiences as full human beings.

Based on the youth's perceptions and participant observation, not all audience members developed an emotional motivation to actively support LGBTQQ youth. However, some of these audience members were compelled to see the issues in terms of LGBTQQ youth as students, particularly around concerns related to academic achievement and wellbeing. This did not happen on accident; issues of curriculum and academic wellbeing were purposefully included in the PAR climate survey report and the performances. For instance, in describing the series of microaggressions that LGBTQQ youth might experience before and after interacting with adults, the youth used the line: "By the time I get to your office, I have so much buried inside, I feel like I am going to explode, collapse, go crazy. And you wonder why my grades are slipping" (Gayrilla script). This appeal by the youth moved beyond describing their marginalization, and linked these experiences to adult audience members' roles and responsibilities as educators. The program's theater coach, an adult advisor, described how youth advocating for their own needs *as students* moved audience members who might be homophobic and/or transphobic to feel an obligation to act:

> There's one line in the performance that says, "We are an at-risk popu-
> lation." . . . How do you ignore a teen talking about how, "Oh, I'm not
> safe?" or "I had a Bible thrown at me on the school bus?" It's a way to
> connect them with that language of, "Do we care about student safety?"
> Yeah. "Do we care about the achievement gap?" Yes. So we have to care
> about these issues of this population even if we don't understand or
> agree with their issues or agree with their lives. "These are issues that we
> can connect with as educators, that we might just put at the bottom of a
> big stack of papers." But not from a teen saying, "I need you to help me"
> . . . Especially since it's youth advocating for themselves.

Her comments demonstrate the power of youth advocating for themselves as
a group of students. They also suggest that although the emotional and prag-
matic appeals of youth might have spoken to different motivations among
adult audience members, they also appeared to have a compounding effect.
In the process of putting their own voice and face on the calls for action they
were making, Gayrilla performers appealed to audience members' empathy
while also demanding changes that would support them as students.

Motivating Adults to be Change Agents and Allies

In addition to developing a connection between the youth and adult educa-
tors, the Gayrilla performances also contributed to many audience members
directly taking action as allies to the youth. This process began, in large part,
in the question-and-answer sessions following performances. The dialogic
setting allowed adult educators to openly ask questions of, and learn from,
the youth performers. Youth were often struck by how honest and vulner-
able school administrators, teachers, and counselors were about what they
did not know. Many adults were forthcoming with their lack of knowledge
about how bad it was for the youth, their lack of strategies to deal with issues
when they arise, and they honestly expressed "how obnoxiously ignorant we
can be with the things we say" (Counselor). The youth started to realize that
many adults wanted to do the right thing, but did not know how they could
help, how they could effectively intervene and how they could better sup-
port LGBTQQ youth. One Gayrilla performer, a White queer cisgender man
described: "They are asking questions and they wanna hear more . . . and I
think it has started a process. . . . They began to understand what it might
be like to be a queer youth." When adults would ask specific questions
about how to support individual students that they really or hypothetically
were dealing with, the youth often encouraged audience members to con-
tinue to take on a more open and vulnerable role by asking the individual
students they were working with what *they* needed as individuals. Within
these question-and-answer sessions, youth primed adults for the long-term
process of continuing to serve in the role of an ally to youth change agents,

specifically focusing on how adults can center their approaches to LGBTQQ youth on the experiences of youth themselves.

Alongside building adult educators as allies for LGBTQQ youth, the structure of the performances also began to develop accountability between and among adult educators. As a focus group one participant explained, "Just handing people the report and presenting on it and then saying 'done!' wouldn't have had . . . that positive peer pressure." This participant continued on to explain that:

> On an individual level, people can have their prejudices and not have to talk to anyone about it, not see what other people are thinking and there's no sense of action being necessary on their part. . . . Talking to them in a more direct way and them being able to ask questions within a group of their peers, I think that allowed for a lot of change.

The performances themselves, thanks to the question-and-answer sessions, became nascent forms of ongoing structures youth had imagined for how to transform their schools. Within this process, adults were able to recognize their role as allies on two levels: as individuals, and as contributing to or working against homophobia and transphobia on a systemic level in schools.

Individual Awareness and Action

The adult audience members demonstrated a variety of motivations both in how they approached the performances and in the questions they asked. The starting points of adults included: wanting to more effectively support LGBTQQ youth, being unknowingly hostile or unwelcoming, being actively homophobic and/or transphobic, and being resistant to Riot Youth and Gayrilla. Gayrilla performances were able to reach adult audience members at their own starting points and move adults within their own individual roles' as educators in schools to more effectively support LGBTQQ youth.

One member of the school board mentioned that they had been interested in addressing issues related to climate, sexual orientation, and gender identity/expression individually, but had been unsure how to best support LGBTQQ youth, and had not found the time or resources to carry out these intentions. As one participant, a White queer trans* person, described, at one of their first performances, a school board member expressed, "Yeah, we've been wanting to . . . do climate-based stuff for years, and now we're finally getting a shot." Through Gayrilla and the dissemination of the PAR climate survey findings, these audience members were then motivated by the urgency of prioritizing these issues, thanks to the power of the performance. They were also provided with a perspective that allowed them to see that they did not have to have the answers, but had to listen to LGBTQQ youth to better understand the action steps they could take.

Other audience members had been seemingly neutral toward supporting LGBTQQ youth in their schools, but they were able to learn through the performance the ways that they might be inadvertently marginalizing LGBTQQ students. For instance, multiple youth participants reported a story of a counselor who came up to a group of youth after a performance and said, "'I have a Bible on my desk and I don't want people to think that I'm not friendly, because I try to serve all the students that I have'" (as reported by a youth interviewee, a White queer cisgender man). This same participant explained the impact this had: "Because she was asking us a question . . . and she wanted to help and she wanted to learn more . . . These performances are about opening a door to a bigger conversation." This particular counselor suggested putting a rainbow sticker on her Bible, instead, and although the youth asked her to remove the Bible from her desk entirely, the performances created an important first step in promoting change.

Likewise, there was a principal at one of the larger schools where Gayrilla performed who was seen by many participants as intimidating and unreceptive prior to attending a Gayrilla performance. One participant, a White queer cisgender woman, noted, though that this principal "seemed to be taking in some of the information and asking fairly good questions. . . . We talked with him after the performance and I really felt like we made a difference." One of the other Riot Youth participants noted that this same principal started greeting him in the hallways at school. It appears that for some adults, like this principal, the performances helped them to realize the importance of building relationships with and actively supporting LGBTQQ students

At another of the larger schools where Gayrilla performed, there were a series of LGBTQQ-related incidents of harassment, as well as ongoing resistance from the principal to having Gayrilla perform. After much negotiation, including successful performances at other schools, the principal finally agreed to a performance. Following the performance, teachers asked honest and engaging questions and had an opportunity to explore issues that they both did not understand and had not felt able to explore. Although incidents of harassment continued at the school, in the weeks that followed teachers made announcements in class that anti-LGBTQQ and other forms of harassment would not be tolerated. Youth participants also reported that teachers were approaching youth who were openly LGBTQQ and expressed a desire to more effectively support them. In this situation, the individual principal might not have become a proactive ally to LGBTQQ youth or even a willing ally, but by agreeing to the performance taking place and attending, was able to allow Gayrilla to do its work and have a positive impact.

Recognition of System Failings

Riot Youth not only targeted adults in school because of their roles as individuals in interacting with students but also because of the power and authority they held in the school as a system. Gayrilla was able to also motivate these powerholders, particularly administrators, to address the issues facing LGBTQQ youth as a systemic problem. This process required overcoming the perception that Ann Arbor was an accepting place and moving administrators toward a proactive approach, in a way that was still accountable to LGBTQQ youth.

A common point of resistance among adults was the false belief that there were not many issues facing LGBTQQ youth because Ann Arbor was perceived to be a tolerant and accepting environment. Riot Youth and Gayrilla emphasized that persistent issues of harassment and bullying existed even in this liberal environment and pushed adult educators to consider changes that went beyond tolerance (e.g., inclusion of LGBTQQ content in curriculum, creation of gender inclusive bathrooms). This seems to have worked, as audience members described in their survey responses; one adult audience member described recognizing that "it is not easy to be a LGBT youth in Ann Arbor schools, something that really surprised me. I had assumed that the schools were very tolerant, given Ann Arbor's reputation." For these adult audience members, they were struck by the need to be proactive. One administrator wrote about how the performances developed a deep sense of responsibility to take on his role as an adult in making changes that will improve the lives of LGBTQQ students. Another administrator explained:

> I know the LGBTQ students were often large[ly] invisible as compared to other marginalized group[s]. Understandably, they may not self-identify and their parents are not in advocating for them either. Faculty and administration need to be proactive on their behalf, they need to feel the support of the community.

In addition to developing an imperative among adults to proactively change the environment of local school systems, Gayrilla also maintained the centrality of LGBTQQ youth's experiences throughout this process. This was accomplished through youth claiming expertise in the performance process and the report of PAR survey findings. One Gayrilla performer, a White lesbian cisgender woman, explained how this process developed within the performances:

> Administrators . . . would often admit they had no idea what we were going through as students . . . They couldn't empathize with our lives; they didn't really know how our day-to-day life was, even though they ran the school. . . . On the other hand, they were asking questions about

> [our experiences]. "So we don't know this, so why don't you tell us."
> . . . They kind of treated us as experts on our own lives . . . taking our
> opinions into consideration for creating change within the school they
> ran.

This Gayrilla participant reflected on how, although the responsibility for
running the schools and effecting change fell with the administration, the the-
ater performances created space in which youth could become consultants
and experts in this process.

Adult audience members, in their survey responses, also reported
changes they now actively recognized and planned to take action to achieve.
One school administrator exclaimed, "That teachers, administrators, and
counselors are not supportive is truly outrageous." Another administrator
explained that they needed to

> first, help equip teachers and schools to address issues around climate
> and negative action toward LGBTQ students when they arise. Second, to
> help schools figure out ways to be more inclusive in the curriculum for
> bringing out LGBTQ history, education, important figures.

Notably, these changes directly reflect the recommendations that Gayrilla
made in their performance and that are contained in the executive summary
of PAR climate survey findings.

Changes in Schools

The changes that occurred following the performances with adults hap-
pened both on the institutional and individual levels. Early on, members
of the school board became some of the youth's greatest allies, moving
the board to change policies and set a tone of change for LGBTQQ youth
throughout the school district. Within months of the earliest performances
with the school board, as Riot Youth recommended, the district added gen-
der identity and gender expression to its nondiscrimination policy, which
had already included sexual orientation. Another local school district fol-
lowed suit soon after by adding gender identity to its nondiscrimination
policy. In addition, following the youth's presentation to the school board,
the superintendent agreed to meet with the youth, and subsequently decided
to use his institutional authority to support schools and teachers to include
LGBTQQ curricular content, and to more actively enforce the district's policy
on anti-LGBTQQ verbal and physical harassment. This was a critical outcome
in that it allowed teachers to take action to support LGBTQQ youth without
fear of losing their job due to parent or student backlash.

The school board and superintendent also supported Gayrilla and Riot
Youth in enacting other changes in schools, including gaining access to

performing for adults and, more important for the youth, to educate their high school peers and middle school students about LGBTQQ identities and issues. The success of the early performances with the school board facilitated the process of Gayrilla accessing the schools, including participating in districtwide trainings and individual school trainings for staff. These performances with adults were what eventually lead for the program's ability to perform Gayrilla and conduct dialogues with other youth in schools. Moreover, some schools also built new gender-neutral restrooms and/or converted existing single-stall bathrooms to be gender inclusive.

As indicated earlier, another major shift following the performances was Riot Youth being recognized as experts on issues of school climate. Riot Youth members were asked to provide input on districtwide strategic planning on school climate and antibullying policies. The resulting media coverage (e.g., in local newspapers, LGBTQQ press, and national media) from the performances also generated a wide interest among other schools, as well as other programs that work with youth (e.g., sexual health programs) to perform Gayrilla and provide input and build capacity around supporting LGBTQQ youth. The youth's influence spread to the state and national levels, engaging in statewide teacher trainings and performing for state legislators who were debating enumerated antibullying legislation, as well as participating in national coalition work. In addition to being seen as experts and consultants by institutional and organizational actors, individual educators often approached youth on how to handle anti-LGBTQQ incidents as they occurred.

DISCUSSION

Our findings demonstrate the outcomes of marginalized youth combining PAR with theater to create change in their schools and communities. The mutually reinforcing tactics of PAR and theater for social change created a platform for LGBTQQ youth to tell their stories while invoking a collective voice of, as put by the youth, '10% of their schools.' Riot Youth's use of PAR allowed the group to develop knowledge and build power within their own community; however, it was the combination of PAR with theatrical performances with adults that moved powerholders to take action and create change. This assertion of youth's own expertise, as well as the communication of their own stories moved adult audience members to connect to their needs, and moved them directly to effect change within their roles in schools. While adults in schools traditionally hold disproportionate power over youth in setting and enforcing policies, even within youth-adult partnerships (Mitra, 2009; Wernick et al., 2010), Riot Youth was able to move adults to participate in a change strategy that continued to focus on youth as experts, and to enact a youth-centered agenda that was created by Riot Youth participants.

Setting the tone of a youth-centered change process began in the structure of the performances themselves. The youth-centered strategies began in the process of creating the performances, and conducting and analyzing the PAR climate survey, developing Riot Youth participants' and Gayrilla performers' sense of confidence and self-efficacy as change agents (Wernick et al., in press), which prepared them to claim their role as experts and to assert their needs as marginalized youth and as students. The performances also reinforced the sense of confidence and self-efficacy among youth, in being validated by adults (Wernick et al., in press). Although this iterative process served to empower LGBTQQ youth, it also shifted the power dynamics between youth and adults in setting the agenda for effecting change for LGBTQQ youth in schools. During the performances, as youth told their stories in their own terms, the physical layout of having the youth (and no adults) on stage, and particularly answering questions from this location, represented a visual shift between the roles of *youth* and *adult* in that youth were physically situated as experts. In this process, the adults accepted (at least momentarily) the role of listener and learner, and youth claimed their own stories and demands for change. In flipping these roles, Riot Youth was able to shift the discourse and practices in local schools from one that silenced and/or ignored the needs of LGBTQQ youth to developing ongoing norms where LGBTQQ youth—including Riot Youth members and other youth in schools—were seen as experts in their lives and served both as consultants and decision-makers to adult educators and policy decision-makers.

Among some adults, this meant moving them from being apathetic or potentially resistant to beginning the conversations with youth, as well as exerting influence over them to at least allow the youth to take action. For other adults, particularly those who were interested in effecting change but felt unprepared or unsupported to do so, the performances helped move them into a *champion* role, in partnership with LGBTQQ youth. These champions were key in effecting policy and institutional changes, in particular.

Of course, the short-term set of interventions described did not completely transform the school system in the course of just a few months or years. However, the nature of the combined impacts of PAR and theater demonstrated how these strategies might provide a critical foundation, including increasing LGBTQQ youth's access to and influence over adult powerholders in schools.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The impact of Riot Youth's use of theater and PAR was, in large part, dependent on these strategies developing organically among Riot Youth

participants. Given the specificity of our findings to the present case, we hesitate to generalize broadly; however, we suggest that adult practitioners and researchers focus on scaffolding youth capacity (Wernick et al., 2010), building and developing youth's talents and interests, and encouraging youth to combine creative and research-based advocacy strategies in novel ways. In addition, drawing on our own findings and guidelines put forward by Riot Youth participants (Riot Youth, 2013), we offer the following insights to adult practitioners and researchers specifically interested in implementing PAR and theater:

1. *Center youth leadership to encourage innovative approaches.* Both theater and PAR can include highly technical processes (e.g., script writing, statistical analyses) that might seem most efficiently completed by adult mentors. However, encouraging youth leadership in all steps in the process can build youth capacity and foster innovative tactics that can effectively reach school powerholders.
2. *Guide theater and PAR processes in accessible ways.* Establishing accessible practices in theater and PAR processes can foster participation among youth with a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, which is vitally important when working with marginalized youth. For example, accessible practices might include: keeping language and movements used in theater performances simple, allowing youth to hold scripts during performances, and preparing developmentally appropriate trainings in research design and data analysis.
3. *Develop a range of flexible tactics to reach a range of powerholders.* Using theater and PAR together sets youth up to develop a range of communication tools (e.g., reports, talking points, performances) to reach diverse adult powerholders, which can each interweave storytelling and research findings. In addition, the degree to which each of these tools can be flexible (e.g., Gayrilla performances can be held in spaces ranging from classrooms to the rotunda of the state capital building) will allow youth to reach an even wider range of powerholders.

CONCLUSION

Theater and PAR, particularly when combined, are promising strategies for supporting and empowering LGBTQQ youth to create institutional change in their schools, especially in the degree to which youth take ownership over these processes. In conclusion, we leave our reader with the lines that conclude Gayrilla performances for adults:

"You have heard some of *our* stories, but there are many more out there/
It is your job to find them./ Talk to a student;/ ask them about their

stories./ Help us thrive in school;/ help us connect to resources./ Give us your time;/ give us your protection./ Help make schools safe for us;/ help make everywhere safe for us./ Help create a caring community." (Gayrilla script)

FUNDING AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Alvarez, A. R., & Gutiérrez, L. M. (2001). Choosing to do participatory research: An example and issues of fit to consider. *Journal of Community Practice*, *9*(1), 1–20.

Bagamoyo College of Arts, Tanzania Theatre Center, Mabala, R., & Allen, K. B. (2002). Participatory action research on HIV/AIDS through a popular theatre approach in Tanzania. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, *25*, 333–339.

Birkett, M., Espelage, D. L., & Koenig, B. (2009). LGB and questioning students in schools: The moderating effects of homophobic bullying and school climate on negative outcomes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *38*, 989–1000.

Boal, A. (1979). *Theater of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Theater Communications Group.

Boehm, A., & Boehm, E. (2003). Community theatre as a means of empowerment in social work: A case study of women's community theatre. *Journal of Social Work*, *3*, 283–300.

Bohm, D. (1996). *On dialogue* (L. Nichol, Ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Chesir-Teran, D. (2003). Conceptualizing and assessing heterosexism in high schools: A setting-level approach. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *31*, 269–279.

Cohen, S. (2005). Liberationists, clients, activists: Queer youth organizing, 1966–2003. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, *2*(3), 67–86.

Currie, S., Mayberry, M., & Chenneville, T. (2012). Destabilizing anti-gay environments through Gay-Straight Alliances: Possibilities and limitations through shifting discourses. *Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, *85*(2), 56–60.

Dymond, S. K. (2001). A participatory action research approach to evaluating inclusive school programs. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, *16*(1), 54–63.

Erlandson, D. A., Harris, E. L., Skipper, B. L., & Allen, S. D. (1993). *Doing naturalistic inquiry: A guide to methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Freire, P. (1986). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans). New York, NY: Continuum.

Fuoss, K. W., Kistenberg, C. J., & Rosenfeld, L. B. (1992). "OUT ART": Reducing homophobia on college campuses through artistic intervention. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *12*, 349–361.

Ginwright, S., & James, T. (2002). From assets to agents of change: Social justice, organizing, and youth development. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *96*, 27–46.

Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network. (2013). *Tools & tips: Student resources*. Retrieved from http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/student/index.html?state=tools&type=tools

Green, S. L. (2001). Boal and beyond: Strategies for creating community dialogue. *Theater*, *31*(3), 47–61.

Gutiérrez, L., & Lewis, E. A. (1998). A feminist perspective on organizing with women of color. In F. G. Rivera & J. L. Erlich (Eds.), *Community organizing in a diverse society* (pp. 97–116). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Gutiérrez, L., Lewis, E. A., Nagda, B. A., Wernick, L., & Shore, N. (2005). Multicultural community practice strategies and intergroup empowerment. In *The handbook of community practice* (pp. 341–359). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hartz-Karp, J. (2005). A case study in deliberative democracy: Dialogue with the city. *Journal of Public Deliberation, 1*(1), Article 6, (1–15). Retrieved from http://services.bepress.com/jpd/vol1/iss1/art6.

Healy, K. (2000). *Social work practices: Contemporary perspectives on change*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Minkler, M. (2005). Community-based research partnerships: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Urban Health*, *82*(2 Supplement), 3–12.

Mitra, D. (2009). Strengthening student voice initiatives in high schools: An examination of the supports needed for school-based youth–adult partnerships. *Youth & Society*, *40*, 311–335.

Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *1*(2), 13–22.

Pyles, L. (2009). *Progressive community organizing: The roots of social change*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Ristock, J. L., & Pennell, J. (1996). *Community research as empowerment: Feminist links, postmodern interpretations*. Ontario, Canada: Oxford University Press.

Riot Youth. (2009). *The* Riot Youth *climate survey of Ann Arbor public high schools: Report of findings*. Ann Arbor, MI: Neutral Zone.

Riot Youth. (2013). *Becoming visible: A project of Riot Youth at the Neutral Zone*. Ann Arbor, MI: Neutral Zone.

Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to identify themes. *Field Methods*, *15*(1), 85–109.

Scholz, R. W., & Teitje, O. (2002). *Embedded case study methods: Integrating quantitative and qualitative knowledge*. Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage.

Smith, S. (1997). Deepening participatory-action research. In S. E. Smith, D. G. Willms, and N. A. Johnson (Eds.), *Nurtured by knowledge: Learning to do participatory-action research* (pp. 173–264). New York, NY: Apex Press and International Development Research Center.

Smokowski, P. R., & Bacallao, M. (2009). Entre dos mundos/Between two worlds youth violence prevention comparing psychodramatic and support group delivery formats. *Small Group Research*, *40*(1), 3–27.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage.

Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sullivan, J., Petronella, S., Brooks, E., Murillo, M., Primeau, L., & Ward, J. (2008). Theatre of the oppressed and environmental justice communities a transformational therapy for the body politic. *Journal of Health Psychology*, *13*, 166–179.

Walls, N. E., Kane, S. B., & Wisneski, H. (2010). Gay-Straight Alliances and school experiences of sexual minority youth. *Youth & Society*, *41*, 307–332.

Wernick, L. J., Dessel, A. B., Kulick, A., & Graham, L. F. (2013). LGBTQQ youth creating change: Developing allies against bullying through performance and dialogue. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *35*, 1576–1586.

Wernick, L. J., Kulick, A., & Inglehart, M. H. (2013). Factors predicting student intervention when witnessing anti-LGBTQ harassment: The influence of peers, teachers, and climate. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *35*, 296–301.

Wernick, L. J., Kulick, A., & Woodford, M. R. (in press). How theater within a transformative organizing framework cultivates individual and collective empowerment among LGBTQQ youth. *Journal of Community Psychology*.

Wernick, L. J., Woodford, M. R., & Siden, J. Y. (2010). Youth-lead participatory action research: Fostering effective youth—adult partnerships: A case study. In L. Harter, J. Hamel-Lambert, & J. Millesen (Eds.), *Participatory partnerships for social action and research* (pp. 165–186). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Williams, R. (2010, November 15). People coming out as gay at younger age, research shows. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/15/gay-people-coming-out-younger-age.