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Analyzing Talk in a Long-Term Literature Discussion Group: Ways of Operating Within LGBT-Inclusive and Queer Discourses

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have argued for reading and discussing children's and young adult literature containing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or questioning (LGBTQ) characters and related themes with youths. Yet, we know very little about how to do this among LGBTQ people and their allies. This study examined 18 transcripts of talk from a literature discussion group of 32 adolescents and adults, including the authors, using 24 texts over 3 years in an LGBTQ youth center. The goal was to identify the nature of the talk and the ways it was liberatory and/or oppressive. A Foucaultian analysis of the talk, combined with ethnographically collected information, was conducted, identifying discourses, uses, and ways of operating to reveal possibilities and limitations of LGBT-inclusive and queering discourses. Findings suggest a complex, reciprocal process among texts, talk, and context in which no discourse is monolithically liberatory or oppressive. Complementary and competing discourses in conversation with each other around diverse texts and in complex contexts, however, provide opportunities for conflicts and potential for change.

Recently, scholars have argued for expanding texts in schools to include children's and young adult literature with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT)[1] characters and themes, and for including gay readings of more traditional literature as a means for discussing and countering homophobia and heterosexism in schools (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Gallo, 2004; Moje & MuQaribu, 2003; Reese, 1998; Vetter, 2010). Moreover, some scholars have documented teachers' efforts, sometimes their own, at doing just that (Athanases, 1996; Carey-Webb, 2001; Hamilton, 1998; Hoffman, 1993; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003). Most of these studies document the use of a single text in a larger unit or several texts in a single lesson, with the general assumption that all students are heterosexist if not outright homophobic (Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Clark & Blackburn, 2009). Some argue, however, that such efforts at LGBT inclusivity may simply exacerbate or reinforce the prevailing normalization of heterosexuality in schools (Martino, 2009). As an alternative, scholars suggest queering texts in an effort to interrogate heteronormativity in classrooms (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Martino, 2009; Sumara & Davis, 1999; Winans, 2006). These suggestions, however, have little empirical support (Linville, 2009), and the little that exists is mostly from out-of-school contexts that are predominantly if not entirely comprised of LGBTQQ people (Blackburn, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2005b).

We are interested, then, in the nature of talk that focuses on many LGBTQ-themed texts, takes place over an extended period of time, and is among LGBTQQ people and their allies.[2] We are interested in what people do or have done to them through language, especially as this intersects with issues of power. Moreover, we are interested in what a close analysis of such talk can tell us about liberatory and oppressive discourses. Because of these interests, we use discourse analysis, coupled with other ethnographically collected information, to analyze discussions of a group of LGTQ youths and adults who met together for three years to talk about LGBTQ-themed literature. This empirical analysis allows us to address the following questions: What is the nature of talk that focuses on many LGBTQ-themed texts, takes place over an extended period of time, and is among LGBTQQ people and their allies? In what ways is this discourse liberatory and in what ways oppressive?

Through our analysis, we aim to understand "discursive formation" (Foucault, 1972, p. 31) and, in particular, the possibilities and limitations of LGBT-inclusive and queering discourses.

Related Literature

Since the late 1990s, some scholars have studied the reading and discussion of LG(BT)-themed[3] literature in classrooms. Carey-Webb (2001), for example, describes the work of Pankop, an English teacher in an ethnically mixed, inner-city U.S. high school who engaged in a read-aloud of Bruce Coville's short story "Am I Blue?" as part of a unit on the theme of fear. Hoffman (1993) taught Harvey Fierstein's play *Torch Song Trilogy* to his high school creative writing students in Houston, Texas. Hamilton (1998) taught A.M. Homes's young adult novel *Jack* to New York City middle school students in response to an eighth grader's letter to the faculty complaining about the problem of homophobia in the school. Also, Kauffman (Schall & Kauffmann, 2003), who was a teacher in an elementary, multiage, structured English-immersion classroom in a large Tucson, Arizona, school district, introduced literature with gay and lesbian characters to her students in a one-day literature study.

Finally, in a more comprehensive, multiyear, empirical study of teachers' uses of ethnic literature, Athanases (1996) described students' reading of a gay-themed text in a high school English class in the San Francisco Bay area. He focused on Liu, a teacher in a multiethnic urban high school, and her students' reading of and responses to Brian McNaught's essay "Dear Anita: Late Night Thoughts of an Irish Catholic Homosexual," a text that although gay themed, was taken up in part because of the Euro-American ethnicity of its writer. All of these studies across these various contexts ultimately argued for LG(BT) inclusivity, that is, to include readings of LG(BT)-themed literature in classrooms to make schools more welcoming for LGBTQQ students and counter homophobia more generally, an argument that we value and recognize as liberatory, at least in its intent.

Implied, however, in a commitment to LG(BT) inclusivity may be a positivist or structural theoretical framework, in which identity is singular and stable; that is, people either are or are not lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (mostly not), and there is a solution to a problem without any significant attention to the sociocultural and sociopolitical influences on the problem. In this case, the problem of homophobia can be addressed in isolated lessons in individual classrooms. Thus, a structural approach conflicts with our conceptions of both identities, which we understand to be

multiple and variable, and literacy, which in keeping with new literacy studies, we understand as ideological rather than autonomous, as we discuss further in our theoretical framework.

Moreover, these studies documented pedagogies and curricula in which teachers positioned readers and writers as homophobes and limited their LG(BT) focus to a single day or text (Linville, 2009). We understand that these pedagogical moves are related to the reality that most schools are at least heterosexist if not outright homophobic (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008), distinguishing the school as a particular kind of space, but we also recognize that they had the unintended results of restricting the range of discussion possibilities and representations available to students (Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Clark & Blackburn, 2009). In fact, Britzman (1995) critiqued such an approach, calling it "a sentimental education that attempts to be anti-homophobic" by offering so-called "authentic images of gays and lesbians and introduc[ing] them into the curriculum" (p. 158).

Such an education responds to heterosexuals' fear of gays (literally, homophobia) by offering representations of gay and lesbian people that erase differences, making them seem just like straight people, while offering patronizing representations of gay and lesbian people to queer students who, as subjects, are never really allowed to be fully present in classrooms. This "double remedy" (Britzman, 1995) fails, in part because it exacerbates and/or reinforces the prevailing normalization of heterosexuality and heterosexism in schools by failing to interrogate notions of normalcy as these relate to sexuality and gender identity labels. Similarly, Martino (2009) suggested that taking a solely LGBT-inclusive approach to sexual diversity in schools will continue to exclude or "other" queer youths and privilege "normal" constructions of gender and sexuality unless (hetero) normalization is named and addressed. In other words, some queer theorists, like Britzman and Martino, assert that the LGBT-inclusive approach is not as liberatory as it is intended to be and, as an alternative, offer a queering approach.

There are few queer theorists, though, who focus on reading and discussing literature among youths and adults. Jill Smith (2008) referenced how she used queer theory in discussing Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and William Shakespeare's sonnets with her high school students and described how she used queer theory in discussing Larry Watson's novel *Montana 1948* in her English classroom to name, make visible, and complicate that which is sexual in the novel. Greenbaum (1994), as a closeted teacher, queered canonical works of literature through the examination of gay and lesbian subtexts in novels and plays such as J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Sumara and Davis (1999) conducted a study of teachers, parents, and elementary-age students who participated in discussions of the young adult novel *The Giver* by Lois Lowry to understand how opportunities for naming the sexual might be woven into the school curriculum. Blackburn (2002, 2005a, 2005b) drew on queer theory in her analysis of a multiyear discussion group of readers and writers in a youth-run center for LGBTQQ youths as they actively experimented with their sexual and gender identities and struggled with homophobia and heterosexism in their lives. Theoretically, we are more aligned with scholars taking a queer approach rather than an LGBT-inclusive approach, as we subsequently discuss.

Theoretical Framework

The queering approach clearly comes out of queer theory, which shapes, in part, our theoretical framework. New literacy studies is the other significant contributor to our framework. Queer theory and new literacy studies are compatible in that they both understand the significance of social, cultural, and political dynamics. Queer theorists (Butler, 1999; Jagose, 1996; Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1993) apply this understanding to their thinking about behaviors and identities, particularly those that are related to sexuality and gender. This focus is not only limited to individual behaviors and identities but includes also the rules and regulations imposed on people by what Butler calls "the heterosexual matrix" (p. 9).

According to Butler (1999), the heterosexual matrix comprises the omnipresent and invisible rules and regulations that rely on and reify dichotomous notions of males and females, men and women, and masculinity and femininity and demand that desire be experienced across these dichotomies, that is, between men and women. New literacy studies scholars (Gee, 1996; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002; Street, 1993, 1995, 1999) apply their understanding of the importance of social, cultural, and political dynamics to their conceptualizations of literacy events and practices, and thus, they too recognize that societal rules and regulations confine individuals who are forced to function within them. In terms of literacy, this is apparent when a single language or even a single version of a language is deemed more valuable than any others, even though many others exist.

In other words, both queer theorists and new literacy studies scholars name and interrogate the fact that there are socially, culturally, and politically constructed "hegemonic regimes of...power" (Kamberelis & Dimitriades, 2005, p. 61) that marginalize some people and privilege others. Moreover, both queer theorists

(Gamson, 2000) and new literacy studies scholars (Gee, 1996; Street, 1993, 1995, 1999) understand that these regimes of power "are produced by and act back upon the whole constellation of specific local strategies and relations of power that constitute the micropractices of everyday life" (Kamberelis & Dimitriades, 2005, pp. 46–47), which include but are not limited to language. Language, as it shapes and is shaped by power structures, is the focus of this study.

Previously and again here, we draw on Kamberelis and Dimitriades (2005), because they described a logic of inquiry, or in their words, "a chronotope of qualitative inquiry" (p. 24), in which our theoretical framework fits. This chronotope, which they label "power/knowledge and defamiliarization" (p. 44), is distinctive from the other chronotopes (i.e., "objectivism and representation"; "reading and interpretation"; "skepticism, conscientization, and praxis"; p. v) not in its attention to the social, cultural, and political, or even its attention to language, but in the relationship among these and knowledge and power. That is, research within Kamberelis and Dimitriades's chronotope of power/knowledge and defamiliarization shares the assumption that socially, culturally, and politically constructed and constructing language, knowledge, and power are always already intricately intertwined. This is certainly an undergirding assumption of this study. Such an assumption implies a Foucaultian understanding of discourse:

> Discourses are not linguistic and textual alone but involve habituated and largely unconscious ways of thinking, talking, feeling, acting, and being. Discourses are practical "grids of specification" (Foucault, 1977, 1996) for classifying, categorizing, and diagramming the human subject in relation to the social....These classifications are almost always also classed, raced, and gendered. (Kamberelis & Dimitriades, 2005, p. 48)

We argue that these classifications are also almost always sexualized. Through our examination of language, we came to understand the approaches named in the related literature, LGBT-inclusive and queering, as discourses, that is, as ways of thinking, talking, feeling, acting, and being that are both linguistic and textual. As such, we came to understand them as "function[ing] to produce what we believe to be true" (Kamberelis & Dimitriades, 2005, p. 52) and thus not dialogic as much as "forged collectively, in the fiery heat of struggle" (Feinberg, 1996, p. ix). This emerging understanding of LGBT-inclusive and queering discourses ultimately became the organizing structure of the findings of this study as they are reported here.

Method

Within this logic of inquiry, the goal of studying discourses is not to trouble one discourse and replace it with another, better one but instead "to expose the possibilities and consequences of various discourses, with their attendant ideologies, practices, and preferences" (Kamberelis & Dimitriades, 2005, p. 53)—in the case of this study, to make visible the possibilities and limitations of LGBT-inclusive and queering discourses.

We came to do this study, with the particular people described throughout, because of our history of collectively working with other educators committed to combating homophobia in classrooms and schools through the use of literature and film. As cofounders and ongoing members of a teacher inquiry group, the Pink TIGers, we met and continue to meet regularly with educators from throughout central Ohio to discuss, problem-solve, share, analyze, and disseminate our work for social justice in the lives of LGBTQQ people (Blackburn, Clark, Kenney, & Smith, 2010). This shared history and these commitments shape this current inquiry. Our history of advocacy work gave us both "some strong attachments to particular ways of looking at the world" (Lather, 1988, p. 576); as researchers, we were and are *interested* (Lee, 1992).

Research Context and Participants

In the spring of 2006, we invited Pink TIGer teachers and their students, particularly those in their schools' Gay–Straight Alliance groups (GSAs), to join us at our midwestern university's multicultural center. We selected the 10th annual National Day of Silence (April 26, 2006), which "has become the largest single student-led action towards creating safer schools for all, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression" (Info about the Day of Silence, n.d., para. 1), and we held the gathering as a "Breaking the Silence" event. We ate pizza and debriefed on how Day of Silence events went at the various schools represented. Then, the adult participants gave brief talks on LGBTQ-themed literature and surveyed youths to find out whether anyone would be interested in participating in a literature discussion group and, if so, which text they might want to read first. After selecting an initial text, David Levithan's (2003) *Boy Meets Boy*, we ordered and distributed books to youths via our teacher network (for a chronology and brief annotations of the texts we selected, read, and discussed, see Table 1). Participants agreed to read the first book over the summer and meet again in autumn once the school year had begun. Our first literature discussion was held on October 16, 2006,

Table 1. Chronology of Readings in a LGBTQ Literature Discussion Group of Adults and Adolescent Students

Meeting time frame	Focal texts	Annotation
October 2006 to May 2007	Levithan, D. (2003). *Boy meets boy.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.	The book is about what the world might be like if homophobic values were greatly diminished and how the friendships and romantic relationships of Paul, a gay high school student, unfold in such an imaginary world.
	Chbosky, S. (1999). *The perks of being a wallflower.* New York: MTV/Pocket.	Written as a series of letters from the main character, Charlie, this popular young adult novel chronicles his life in high school, including his friendship with Patrick, who is gay, and his sister, Sam, with whom Charlie falls in love.
	Watts, J. (2001). *Finding H.F.* Los Angeles: Alyson.	H.F. lives with her very loving, Christian grandmother, and Bo, her best friend, lives in an overtly homophobic household in rural Kentucky. Both teenagers come to understand themselves as gay in this novel.
	Babcock, J. (2002). *The tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers.* New York: Carroll & Graf.	Erick leaves his Catholic high school and family and experiments with drugs, alcohol, sex, and gender before maturing into a confident gay man.
	Wallace, K. (2004). *Erik and Isabelle: Freshman year at Foresthill High.* Sacramento, CA: Foglight.	This is the first in a series of four books about two best friends, both of whom are gay. Erik is academic, athletic, and being raised in a homophobic household. Isabelle's family, in contrast, is open and accepting of her lesbian identity. Across these two books, Erik and Isabelle support each other as they endure homophobia and fall in and out of love.
October 2007 to June 2008	Wallace, K. (2005). *Erik and Isabelle: Sophomore year at Foresthill High.* Sacramento, CA: Foglight.	This is the second book in the same series.
	Sedaris, D. (1997). *Holidays on ice.* New York: Little, Brown.	This is a collection of short stories related to Christmas. Many of the stories are autobiographical accounts by the out gay author.

(continued)

Table 1. Chronology of Readings in a LGBTQ Literature Discussion Group of Adults and Adolescent Students (continued)

Meeting time frame	Focal texts	Annotation
October 2007 to June 2008	Plum-Ucci, C. (2002). *What happened to Lani Garver*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.	Lani Garver, a gender-variant high school student, moves to the isolated Hackett Island and becomes friends with Claire McKenzie, a popular girl at the school. Lani is subject to devastating abuse.
	Peters, J.A. (2003). *Keeping you a secret*. New York: Little, Brown.	Holland loses her boyfriend, friends, and family when she falls in love with Cece, an out and proud lesbian.
	Bauer, M.D. (Ed.). (1994). *Am I blue? Coming out from the silence*. New York: HarperCollins.	This anthology, among the first of its kind, includes 15 lesbian- and gay-themed short stories written by some of the best authors of young adult fiction in the field.
	Moore, P. (2007). *Hero*. New York: Hyperion.	Thom Creed struggles with his special powers, his infamous father, and his sexuality in this fantasy novel.
	Bechdel, A. (2006). *Fun home: A family tragicomic*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.	This graphic memoir focuses on the author's coming out as a lesbian and coming to terms with her father's death in rural Pennsylvania.
September 2008 to July 2009	Smith, B. (2007). *Selfish and perverse*. New York: Carroll & Graf.	Nelson Kumker, an aspiring writer in Los Angeles, and Roy Briggs, a fisherman and student from Alaska, fall in love in this novel.
	Sanchez, A. (2007). *The God box*. New York: Simon & Schuster.	This young adult novel is a rather didactic exploration about the relationship limitations and possibilities between Christianity and homosexuality as they are embodied by two teenage boys.
	Tamaki, M. (2008). *Skim*. Toronto, ON, Canada: Groundwood.	This graphic novel is set in a Catholic girls high school in Canada and focuses on Skim, an Asian, goth Wiccan who develops a crush on one of her female teachers.
	Newman, L. (1988). A letter to Harvey Milk. In *A letter to Harvey Milk: Short stories* (pp. 25–28). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand.	Harry, an elderly Jewish man, writes a letter to his friend, the late Harvey Milk, and a love story about two men in a concentration camp.
	Walker, A. (1982). *The color purple*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt.	This highly acclaimed epistolary novel centers around Celie, an African American woman in rural Georgia in the 1930s, and includes her intimate relationship with another woman.
	Flagg, F. (1987). *Fried green tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*. New York: Ballantine.	This novel is both a love story between two women in the 1920s and the story of a burgeoning feminist in the 1980s, both in Alabama.
	Goldman, S. (2008). *Two parties, one tux, and a very short film about The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: Bloomsbury.	This young adult novel is told from the perspective of Mitchell Wells, a straight high school student, as he comes to terms with his best friend's coming out as gay.
	Hartinger, B. (2003). *Geography club*. New York: HarperCollins.	A group of high school students who feel like outsiders because of their sexual orientations form an after-school club where they can socialize without being vulnerable.
	Chopin, K. (1976). The awakening. In B.H. Solomon (Ed.), *The awakening and selected stories of Kate Chopin* (pp. 1–125). New York: New American Library. (Original work published 1899)	Edna Pontellier embodies her womanhood in unconventional ways, relative to the social norms of the late 19th-century U.S. South, by rejecting her roles as wife and mother and embracing a younger lover.
	Winterson, J. (1992). *Written on the body*. Toronto, ON, Canada: Vintage International.	This British novel tells the love story between the narrator, whose gender is never revealed, and a married woman.
	Capote, T. (1975). *Other voices, other rooms*. New York: Vintage International. (Original work published 1948)	When Joel Knox is 12 years old, he moves from New Orleans to an isolated Louisiana community where he encounters a cast of characters fitting for a southern gothic novel, in this case, a semiautobiographical one.
	Aarons, L. (1995). *Prayers for Bobby: A mother's coming to terms with the suicide of her gay son*. New York: HarperCollins.	The book tells the story of Mary Griffith grappling with her son's coming out, his suicide, and the role of religious intolerance, including her own, in his life and death.

at a local center serving LGBTQ youths ages 12–20, and we met regularly as a group through July 10, 2009.

Across our years of meeting, 32 people participated in the group, 22 youths and 10 adults. Of these participants, 22 were female, 8 were male, and 2 were transgender (female to male). Sixteen participants identified as straight, 8 as gay, 6 as lesbian, and the 2 transgender participants both identified as female-attracted. Twenty-six of the participants were white, three were African American, and three were biracial. Table 2 is a list of all literature discussion group participants and some key characteristics, as well as the number of meetings that each attended. Both here in the text and in Table 2, we use identity markers in reference to group members, even though doing so fails to capture the complexity and fluidity that we witnessed and experienced with the members of the group and is incompatible with queer theory, which values the suspension of classifications. We do so because we believe the identities that those markers represent matter in the material lives of group members and therefore provide significant information in coming to understand them. The identity markers, however, are just a sort of shorthand to provide a sense of group members rather than definitive statements about them.

All but one of our literature discussion group meetings took place at the LGBTQ youth center. Located on a main thoroughfare connecting the campus community to downtown, and directly across the street from the university, the center was an eclectic building with a mix

Table 2. LGBTQ Literature Discussion Group Participants' Characteristics

Name	Youth or adult	Sexual identity	Gender	Race	Meetings attended
Alana	Youth	Lesbian	Female	White	3
Alice	Youth	Straight	Female	White	1
Amy	Youth	Straight	Female	White	2
Anna	Youth	Straight	Female	Biracial (Mexican/white)	10
Anita	Adult	Lesbian	Female	Biracial (African American/white)	1
Brendan	Adult	Gay	Male	White	1
Brittany	Youth	Straight	Female	White	2
Debbie	Adult	Straight	Female	White	16
Elaine	Adult	Straight	Female	White	1
First author	Adult	Lesbian	Female	White	20
Isaac	Youth	Gay	Male	White	7
Jack	Youth	Gay	Male	White	2
Jane	Adult	Straight	Female	White	6
Jason	Youth	Gay	Male	White	6
Joan	Adult	Straight	Female	White	5
Julius	Youth	Gay	Male	African American	1
Kim	Youth	Lesbian	Female	White	1
Laura	Adult	Lesbian	Female	White	4
Lisa	Youth	Straight	Female	White	1
Liz	Youth	Lesbian	Female	White	9
Lynn	Youth	Straight	Female	White	3
Marcus	Youth	Gay	Male	African American	1
Mary	Youth	Straight	Female	White	1
Melissa	Youth	Straight	Female	Biracial (African American/Middle Eastern)	17
Rebecca	Youth	Straight	Female	White	5
Sam	Youth	Female attracted	Transgender (female to male)	African American	3
Sarah	Youth	Straight	Female	White	9
Second author	Adult	Straight	Female	White	20
Shawn	Youth	Female attracted	Transgender (female to male)	White	1
Shelby	Adult	Straight	Female	White	1
Thomas	Youth	Gay	Male	White	2
Travis	Youth	Gay	Male	White	6

Note. All names are pseudonyms.

of meeting rooms, offices, a kitchen, lounge areas, and a computer space. The building had the hybrid feeling of a one-time house converted to a storefront then reconverted into its current use. The front door and brick face of the entry porch were painted in a bright, rainbow-colored mural, and the inside spaces were similarly decorated with youth-made artwork, signs, and posters. The front door was always locked and monitored via intercom. There was a rule that no one over the age of 21 was allowed to enter the building unless accompanied by a young person, 12–21 years old, and this rule was vigilantly enforced after an incident involving a parent coming to get his child from the literature discussion group and youth center. The one meeting held outside of this space took place in a meeting room in a building on campus where our offices were. Youth participants found this to be less welcoming and, in one young person's terms, "creepy," perhaps because it lacked the warmth, personality, and safety of the center.

During the school year, meetings were held after school, often on Fridays and generally around 4:00 or 4:30. During the summer months, meetings were arranged to fit around schoolwork, jobs, and other commitments but were also often in the late afternoons. Relative to both context and participants, it is important to understand the nature of the relationships that were built over time as youths and adults participated in this group and in these spaces. For many of the youth participants, attending meetings at the center was an opportunity to come to a more central part of the city, giving them access to stores, galleries, and other cultural spaces beyond their school and neighborhood communities. Youths often came to meetings after first stopping at the campus coffee shop, and adult and youth members frequently brought food to share. Most meetings started with a discussion of events that were happening in other parts of our lives.

Several of the youths were involved in drama, slam poetry, and other school-based activities, as well as GSAs, and they generally shared updates on when events were happening, how performances had gone, or what was happening in these other spheres of their lives. Likewise, adult participants shared events and happenings from their lives. Mollie (first author), for example, was expecting her second child during one of our years of meeting, and updates on her due date and delivery were a regular part of our discussions. On a few later occasions, her infant was present at our meetings. Across youths and adults, we celebrated birthdays and graduations, and in the case of Jason, a youth participant, we marked his departure from the group and move to another state. Understanding the nature of our meetings and relationships helps contextualize our group and our discussions of these texts, which is the focus of our analysis here.

Data Collection and Procedures

Across the three years, we met 20 times to discuss 24 texts, most of which were novels. Focal texts were always selected collaboratively. Both youths and adults brought recommendations for readings to the groups. Frequently, someone in the group—youth, adult, or both—had already read a text and thought others might enjoy it. In all cases, however, adults deferred to the youths' text selections. Attendance was noncompulsory, and subsequent meeting dates were determined together at each meeting. Time between meeting dates was anywhere from three weeks to two months, and all meetings were audiotaped. At five of our meetings, we discussed two texts, and one text was discussed across two meetings. Two meeting tapes failed, giving us a total of 18 transcripts for analysis. Table 1 provides a full list of our focal texts as well as our meeting time frames across the three years of data collection. Data included the 18 transcripts of literature group discussions, field notes from these meetings, and the texts that were shared at the meetings.

Data Analysis

Working from a knowledge/power and defamiliarization logic (Kamberelis & Dimitriades, 2005), we used discourse analysis coupled with ethnographically collected information in an effort to expose the possibilities and limitations of LGBT-inclusive and queering discourses. To do this, we looked at talk, specifically the transcripts of our meeting discussions of LGBTQ-themed texts, examining what happens when such talk occurs over time and among LGBTQQ people and their allies. We drew on a Foucaultian notion of discourse, as described in our theoretical framework, to attend to what people do with or have done to them through language as they worked within and against the heterosexual matrix in the space of our literature discussion group.

Because our study occurred over three years, our framework and analysis evolved over time. In choosing to read LGBTQ-themed texts, we were already introducing a discourse of LGBT inclusivity into the group, although we did not name this as such at the outset of this study. Eventually, group members were pulled into a more queering discourse both by the texts selected together and the ways that the texts were interrogated by group members. It was not until we examined the data that we noticed when group members were being LGBT-inclusive, when group members were queering, how group members were doing these things, what made them possible, what they made possible, and what was limiting about them. In these ways, analyzing the group's talk helped us name and understand these discourses. Naming them helped us, in turn, better

understand the group's talk. In this way, we recognize both the interestedness (Lee, 1992) and partiality of our perspectives. Although we clearly brought theories into the field with us, we worked to "maintain an open mind, and deliberately put those theories into dialectical relationship with [our] experiences in specific situations in the field and with the theories of daily life that are held by people there" (Bloome, 2006, pp. 143–144).

In our first pass through the data, we independently read the transcripts. Given our focus, we intentionally looked for places where homophobia, heterosexism, sexuality, sexual identity, or other LGBTQ-related topics were in the fore. Likewise, we paid attention to what was happening in and through language, that is, how participants were using talk to accomplish particular things related to these topics (Bloome & Clark, 2006). Each of us highlighted portions of the data and began identifying topics and uses that we had noticed in our readings of the transcripts. Next, we came together to compare the topics and uses that we had each identified, discussing overlaps and discrepancies in what we noticed and identifying specific clusters of talk within transcripts that related to specific topics and/or uses.

Clusters varied in quantitative terms; that is, some clusters included a single line by a single speaker, and others included many lines and multiple speakers. There were many clusters within each transcript, but there was also talk that remained outside of clusters, because it was not related explicitly to our aforementioned focus in this analysis. Through the process of independently and then jointly identifying and discussing clusters, we began to construct initial categories for organizing clusters across all of the transcripts. Six initial categories of data were developed, all of which related to uses of talk relative to focal topics. These categories were talk that (a) combated homophobia, (b) reinforced heteronormativity, (c) universalized experiences of queer people, (d) interrogated heteronormativity, (e) interrogated homonormativity, and (f) foregrounded sexuality.

As we continued our analysis, we looked for variability and consistency across coded clusters and found that some of our codes collapsed into each other. We collapsed the categories of reinforcing heteronormativity and universalizing the experiences of queer people into one category, because it seemed to us that universalizing the experiences of queer people was one way of reinforcing heteronormativity. Similarly, we noticed that talk that interrogated homonormativity was another way of interrogating heteronormativity, since both worked to disrupt dichotomies and question what counts as "normal," again collapsing these into one. Ultimately, we identified four categories of clusters, all of which focused on uses, that is, what group members were doing and accomplishing through talk. These

categories were (a) combating homophobia, (b) reinforcing heteronormativity, (c) interrogating heteronormativity, and (d) foregrounding sexuality. We counted clusters of discourse related to each use to get a gross sense of the amount and kinds of talk that occurred across our years of meetings (see Table 3 for complete counts of uses of talk across text discussions). These clusters of discourse from across our full corpus of data became the primary focus for our continued analysis, in that they all pertained specifically to LGBTQ-related topics as we understood them, and they all allowed us to focus on how participants were using talk to accomplish particular things related to these topics.

We continued our analysis by examining data from each of the four categories, looking for patterns, and triangulating by contrasting our categories with the theoretical perspectives and related literature that frame and orient this study. We connected combating homophobia with reinforcing heteronormativity, and interrogating heteronormativity with foregrounding the sexual. As we continued to characterize these connections, we found ourselves relying on the language we knew from related literature. More specifically, we found ourselves articulating the tension between LGBT-inclusive and queer approaches. As a result, we came to understand the first pair of uses of talk (i.e., combating homophobia, reinforcing heteronormativity) as resembling our understanding of the LGBT-inclusive approach and the second pair (i.e., interrogating heteronormativity, foregrounding sexuality) as resembling the queering approach. However, in our group discussions, these were not pedagogical approaches as described earlier in the related literature. Rather, these were ways of talking together and linking language, knowledge, and power; these were discourses.

Next, we deliberately studied our uses of talk in more fine-grained detail to look at the effects of what was happening through our talk within each of these discourses, LGBT-inclusive and queer, in order to understand the possibilities and limitations of each. De Certeau (1984) suggested attending to "'ways of operating'" (p. 30), such as ways of reading, speaking, and producing, to identify different movements that draw on people's plurality and creativity as they, and we, make use of the constraints experienced every day. He characterized ways of operating in terms of being strategic and tactical. He argued that strategies are moves made that, whether deliberate or not, reinforce hegemony, whereas tactics are moves made within and against hegemony. Tactics, de Certeau asserted, are full of promise in that they are not defined by strategies. Instead, tactics "make use of the cracks that…open in the surveillance" (p. 37) by institutions where strategies flourish, and tactics use these cracks as opportunities for pleasure and subversion. Thinking about strategies

Table 3. Counts of Clusters in a Study of a LGBTQ Literature Discussion Group of Adults and Youths

Focal texts (listed in the order they were read and discussed)	LGBT inclusive		Queer	
	Combating homophobia	Reinforcing heteronormativity	Interrogating heteronormativity	Naming the sexual
Levithan, D. (2003). *Boy meets boy.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.	4	4	3	1
Chbosky, S. (1999). *The perks of being a wallflower.* New York: MTV/Pocket.	7	2	4	7
Watts, J. (2001). *Finding H.F.* Los Angeles: Alyson.	18	13	14	5
Babcock, J. (2002). *The tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers.* New York: Carroll & Graf.	3	2	4	3
Wallace, K. (2004). *Erik and Isabelle: Freshman year at Foresthill High.* Sacramento, CA: Foglight.	1	1	3	0
Wallace, K. (2005). *Erik and Isabelle: Sophomore year at Foresthill High.* Sacramento, CA: Foglight.	1	3	6	3
Sedaris, D. (1997). *Holidays on ice.* New York: Little, Brown; and Peters, J.A. (2003). *Keeping you a secret.* New York: Little, Brown.	4	1	4	2
Plum-Ucci, C. (2002). *What happened to Lani Garver.* Orlando, FL: Harcourt.				
Peters, J.A. (2003). *Keeping you a secret.* New York: Little, Brown; and Bauer, M.D. (Ed.). (1994). *Am I blue? Coming out from the silence.* New York: HarperCollins.	5	0	2	0
Moore, P. (2007). *Hero.* New York: Hyperion; and Bechdel, A. (2006). *Fun home: A family tragicomic.* New York: Houghton Mifflin.	3	1	0	4
Smith, B. (2007). *Selfish and perverse.* New York: Carroll & Graf.				
Sanchez, A. (2007). *The God box.* New York: Simon & Schuster.	11	1	3	0
Tamaki, M. (2008). *Skim.* Toronto, ON, Canada: Groundwood; and Newman, L. (1988). A letter to Harvey Milk. In *A letter to Harvey Milk: Short stories* (pp. 25–28). Ithaca, NY: Firebrand.	3	1	2	2
Walker, A. (1982). *The color purple.* Orlando, FL: Harcourt.	2	0	2	1
Flagg, F. (1987). *Fried green tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe.* New York: Ballantine.	5	2	3	5
Goldman, S. (2008). *Two parties, one tux, and a very short film about* The Grapes of Wrath. New York: Bloomsbury.	3	3	7	0
Hartinger, B. (2003). *Geography club.* New York: HarperCollins; and Chopin, K. (1976). The awakening. In B.H. Solomon (Ed.), *The awakening and selected stories of Kate Chopin* (pp. 1–125). New York: New American Library. (Original work published 1899)	4	1	0	1
Winterson, J. (1992). *Written on the body.* Toronto, ON, Canada: Vintage International.	0	1	10	7
Capote, T. (1975). *Other voices, other rooms.* New York: Vintage International. (Original work published 1948)	1	1	2	2
Aarons, L. (1995). *Prayers for Bobby: A mother's coming to terms with the suicide of her gay son.* New York: HarperCollins.	1	1	3	2
Total	**76**	**38**	**72**	**45**

Note. Shaded rows indicate meetings when the audiotape recording failed.

and tactics in these ways influenced our interpretation of the ways of operating that we identified.

We identified 11 ways of operating within our corpus of data:

1. Considering the impact of homophobia
2. Constructing allies
3. Universalizing the experiences of queer people
4. Policing gender norms
5. Considering the impact of heteronormativity
6. Broadening notions of family
7. Being open to diverse attractions
8. Interrogating homonormativity
9. Dealing with discomfort in discussing sex
10. Studying characters and scenes that depict sex
11. Struggling with stereotypes related to sex

Four of these are part of what we call LGBT-inclusive discourse; of these four, two are used to combat homophobia (i.e., considering the impact of homophobia, constructing allies), and two are used to reinforce heteronormativity (i.e., universalizing the experiences of queer people, policing gender norms). The other seven are part of what we call queering discourse, including four that are used to interrogate heteronormativity (i.e., considering the impact of heteronormativity, broadening notions of family, being open to diverse attractions, interrogating homonormativity) and three that are used to foreground sexuality (i.e., dealing with discomfort in discussing sex, studying characters and scenes that depict or discuss sex, struggling with stereotypes related to sex).

Figure 1 shows how ways of operating and uses of talk were categorized in terms of the specific discourses, LGBT-inclusive and queer. The bidirectional arrows reflect the recursive way that we analyzed the data, that is, moving from paying particular attention to discourses in relationship to uses, then paying attention to ways of operating in relationship to uses, and back and forth, again and again. The arrows also reflect how we have come to understand language use within our group: language shapes and is shaped by power structures.

Findings

The remainder of this paper addresses each of our two research questions sequentially. First, in the findings, we explore the nature of talk that focuses on many LGBTQ-themed texts, takes place over an extended period of time, and is among LGBTQQ people and their allies. The findings are organized first by LGBT-inclusive and queering discourses; then within

each of those, by their uses; and then within the uses, by their ways of operating. Our analysis, therefore, is Foucaultian in that we are attempting to locate "'discursive formation' (Foucault 1972): ideological regularities, located in language use amongst people, that produce discourses" (McLaren, 2009, p. 1). Then, we address our second research question in the discussion by examining the possibilities and limitations of LGBT-inclusive and queering discourses and how these were sometimes liberatory and sometimes oppressive, often in complex and, at times, contradictory ways.

Our organization follows the chronology of our analysis. We recognize that this may suggest a simplification of these concepts and categories; however, this is not our intent. Rather, our aim is to show the complexities and contradictions in both of these discourses, how "we are all subsumed by the 'truth claims' embedded within discourse; we participate in them, we perpetuate them and sometimes we resist and/or rebel against certain discourses" (McLaren, 2009, p. 2).
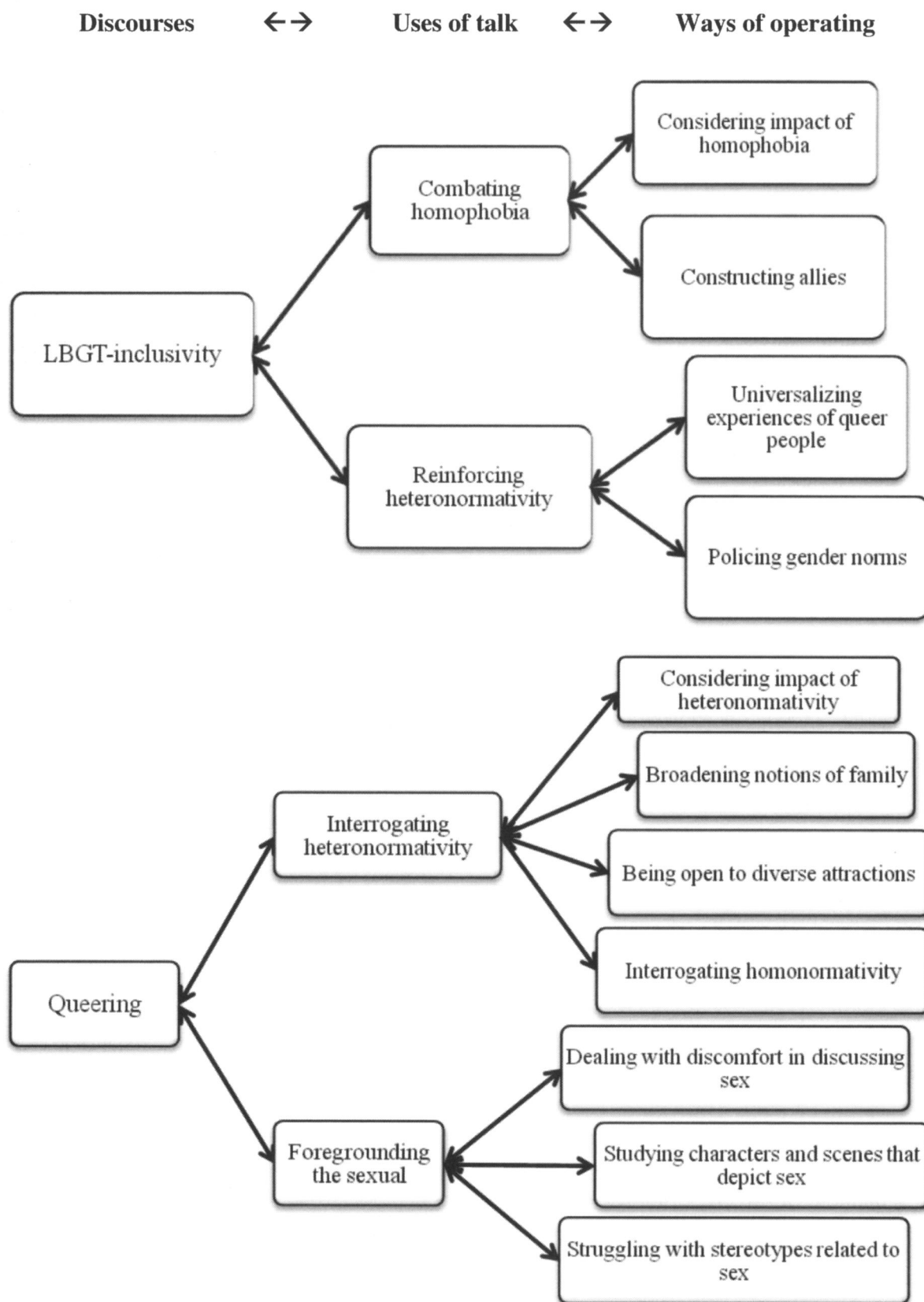
LGBT Inclusivity

We were clearly an LGBT-inclusive group, as half of our members identified as such, we met in an LGBTQ youth center, and we read literature with LGBTQ themes across three years. In addition to this material inclusivity, we carried mindsets that were shaped by this discourse. Like scholars who argue for including LGBT-themed texts in schools, we believed that this work could counter homophobia and heterosexism, and we were interested in how our talk, over time, might make this visible. In our analysis, we noted two primary ways that our group used talk to establish this discourse, one that combated homophobia and one that reinforced heteronormativity. Next, we discuss both of these and the ways of operating within them.

Combating Homophobia

Unsurprisingly, we used talk to combat homophobia within LGBT-inclusive discourse. A significant amount of our talk together around the texts worked to accomplish this. As a group of LGTQ and ally youths and adults, we came together with a shared commitment to fighting homophobia, and our literature discussion group, to some extent, was a form of and forum for this work. We expected our analysis to show evidence of combating homophobia in our talk, and we found a lot of it—more than any other kind across our transcripts. Nearly all of the texts that we read afforded us opportunities to talk about combating homophobia. Within this use, we identified two particular ways of operating: considering the impact of homophobia and constructing allies.

Discourses ←→ **Uses of talk** ←→ **Ways of operating**

LBGT-inclusivity

Combating homophobia

Considering impact of homophobia

Constructing allies

Reinforcing heteronormativity

Universalizing experiences of queer people

Policing gender norms

Queering

Interrogating heteronormativity

Considering impact of heteronormativity

Broadening notions of family

Being open to diverse attractions

Interrogating homonormativity

Foregrounding the sexual

Dealing with discomfort in discussing sex

Studying characters and scenes that depict sex

Struggling with stereotypes related to sex

Considering the Impact of Homophobia

Considering the impact of homophobia in the lives of LGBTQQ people was a regular focus in much of our talk. It generally involved LGTQ participants making clear to ally participants how dangerous homophobic acts are to LGBTQQ people. In this way, it worked to combat homophobia within the group by further raising the awareness of ally participants about homophobia's particularly damaging impacts. This way of operating is closely related to one that we discuss later as a part of queer discourse and the ways we used talk to interrogate heteronormativity, considering the impact of it on LGBTQQ people. This way of operating is distinct, however, in that the focus of this talk is on the threat of violence faced by LGBTQQ people. Much of this talk occurred through discussions of what people who are perceived as LGBTQQ do and how they navigate the world to live in homophobic contexts and avoid physical attacks. Yet, this danger was described in ways that were also emotional and social, revealing how these impacts reflect the habituated discourses that shape and maintain them.

Often, this talk was triggered by characters or incidents in specific texts, which led the LGTQ youths and adults to share their own experiences with homophobia. For example, in a discussion of the book *Finding H.F.* by Julia Watts (2001), Mollie and Isaac discussed the character Bo, a gay youth growing up in rural Kentucky:

Isaac: From the beginning, it kind of seemed like, that he didn't want to admit it, but as you go on and you learn more about him, you see that he knows who he is, but he's just not about to admit it.

Mollie: Right, he's being strategic. Yeah. How do you think he got so wise, and don't you know people like that?

Isaac: Probably just from everything he's been through with his parents, the football team, and everything else. It's kind of hard to try and still remain ignorant when you're going through so much.

Mollie explicitly raised the issue of a queer character navigating homophobia, wondering aloud how the character "got so wise." Isaac's response seemed to draw on both the character's experiences as well as his own (Galda & Beach, 2001), locating Bo's experience in the past tense (things that he has "been through") but also drawing on his own, present experiences ("when you're going through so much"), making it clear that he, too, has been impacted by homophobia.

Later, during a discussion of *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers* by Joe Babcock (2002), Mollie brought up how queer characters in the book discuss their conscious choice to take cabs, which cost more and deplete their already limited incomes, instead of public transportation:

Mollie: Yeah, it was interesting to me when they chose to get a cab versus public transportation. How they would talk about was it worth getting their asses kicked over.

Jane and Debbie, adult allies, both agreed, saying, "Definitely," and "Right, for safety," respectively. Mollie affirmed this, saying, "Yeah, yeah, for safety."

At that point, Alice, a youth ally, entered the conversation, asserting, "Better than walking." Mollie, however, as a lesbian adult who had more experience in negotiating homophobia, responded by making it clear that this is not only about walking but also decidedly about people perceived to be lesbian or gay and gender-nonconforming people protecting themselves from the impacts of homophobia that could lead to physical abuse:

But I liked, the thing I appreciated is that it wasn't just about walking or not walking, it was about protection. That kind of thing that I feel like you have to do all the time, deciding when to be how, where, just like the everydayness of it. Oh yeah, that's definitely true. I don't know, it just felt real to me. (Mollie)

Her response helped show that what felt common and understood across readers, LGTQ and straight, was distinctly more threatening and dangerous to a queer person and, hence, about the specific impact of homophobia on LGBTQQ people to her as a lesbian reader. In this way, her response helped make the ideology of homophobia accessible and apparent to nonqueer participants and also countered a move to universalize the experiences of queer people, a way of operating that we discuss later in this section.

Later, in discussing the same book, Jason, a gay youth, commented on how one's voice and "the way you talk, yeah, the flamboyancy," can make someone a target of homophobia. He shared how he has responded to this kind of threat in his own life, making clear how he has learned to deal with the impact of homophobia as well as the tremendous effort and energy that this has required:

Caroline: And do you think, and you also said, that's the hardest thing.

Jason: Yeah, it's really hard.

Caroline: Do you feel like you have to change your speech patterns in—?

Jason: No, not anymore. I remember when—

Debbie: You're quiet, though, sometimes.

Jason: Yeah, sometimes I don't even talk. I just let people say whatever they want, but other than that, I don't feel I have to hide my voice that much. I really don't, but when I did, it was the hardest thing to do, like it was just, God, totally against what I had to do.

Thus, LGTQ youths and adults used literature as a springboard for talking about the impact of homophobia in their own lives, particularly how they dealt with the potential physical harm that comes with being gay, or perceived as gay, in a homophobic society. This, in turn, helped combat homophobia within the group by further raising the awareness and extending the understanding of ally participants, a significant way of operating within the talk of the group that we understand as distinct from considering the impact of heteronormativity, which we discuss later.

Constructing Allies

Another way of operating that we identified when we used talk to combat homophobia were instances when participants shared what it meant to be allies. This kind of talk occurred in two ways. One of these was when participants would comment on how a character acted like a good ally would or should. For example, Jason and Isaac, both gay youths, pointed to an episode in Stephen Chbosky's (1999) *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* when Charlie, the straight narrator, walks in and finds Patrick, Charlie's good friend, and Brad, a closeted gay character, kissing. Jason commented, "I like the scene where he walks in on Brad and Patrick." Isaac responded, "Oh yeah, I like that one, too," and Jason concluded, "Yeah, that was pretty cool the way he like reacted and stuff." In the scene from the novel, it is clear that Charlie understands that Brad and Patrick's relationship and their sexuality are theirs to tell (or not), not Charlie's. Jason and Isaac both recognized this, too, and affirmed it as part of what it means to be a good ally.

Later in the same discussion, participants talked about another scene in which the gay character, Patrick, kisses the straight character, Charlie, and how Charlie responds. Mollie asked, "What did you think about them getting together?" and Melissa, an ally, responded, "I think Charlie was just kind of letting Patrick. It's his friend, so he was just kind of just saying that, because he was trying to help him feel better, so he just let him." Here, Melissa made it clear that she felt like Charlie's actions were part of what a good friend would do and that being an ally is, in part, being a good friend. After Brittany and Alice confirmed again that Charlie is straight, Mollie said, "And actually one of the things I really like about that scene is that he doesn't freak, because you always hear people say, 'Well, that's fine as

long as you don't hit on me,' you know, or that kind of thing." Here, Mollie extended the construction of ally from being a friend to being someone who is supportive and does not react negatively or "freak" when a gay person expresses attraction to a straight person.

Later in the same discussion, the group again returned to talk about this scene:

Mollie: I kind of felt myself rooting for [Charlie] to be gay. I wanted him to be a gay protagonist, then I kind of liked it, you know. I told you that I liked when he and Patrick kissed, and Charlie didn't like panic about it or whatever. So, I liked—

Alice: He kissed him back.

Mollie: Yeah, and that was good.

Anna: I like how he was so comfortable with it.

Debbie: He's comfortable.

Mollie: Yeah.

Isaac: I did like the fact that—

Anna: It didn't matter to him.

Here, Mollie again praised Charlie's ally behavior, the fact that he did not panic. In this portion of the discussion, many allies, youths and adult alike, recognized and affirmed his actions as an ally. Alice and Anna, both ally youths, and Debbie, an ally adult, all understood the importance of Charlie's comfort with the kiss and used it to extend their own constructions of ally. In these ways, through our talk, we shared our expectations of how allies ought to behave, constructing these understandings based on both our ideological commitments to LGBT inclusivity and how we saw the characters enacting these expectations in the text (Galda & Beach, 2001).

At other times, constructing allies was evident as a way of operating in our talk when participants shared personal examples of having been or being an ally. Again in our discussion of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, for example, Mollie asked Isaac how long it took him both to know he was gay and be comfortable with that, which led into a discussion about how people in his family have been allies. He replied,

> Around sixth grade is when I came out with my mom. I remember, because my family doesn't—it's not that it's taboo in my family, it just never was really talked about. So, at first, my mom had a few reservations about it, but then the rest of my family was kind of like, "We already knew." It was a bit easier for me to come out than a lot of people were. And I have a lot of people in my family that support me, and my parents take me to Gay Pride every year....I've changed, and I don't want to say it's all credit to me, but people that have come around me, I've changed their opinion of a lot of people. To some, I'm kind of like the stereotype of what

a gay guy is, but there's a lot more to me than that. And my cousin's boyfriend, she's like my big sister as a matter of fact, he was really homophobic before he came around. And then he met me, and now he's just completely cool with it, you know. We hang out all the time. It's kind of nice knowing I can challenge people and change their minds.

Isaac constructed ally in two ways. First, he named concrete actions and events that make someone an ally (e.g., being supportive, attending Gay Pride events in support of LGBTQQ people), and second, he claimed a role for himself in helping construct allies by being in personal relationships that helped "challenge people and change their minds" about LGBTQQ people.

In a discussion of the book *Keeping You a Secret* by Julie Ann Peters (2003), a youth ally and an adult ally further constructed what it means to be an ally through participation in their schools' GSA:

Anna: Yeah, it's like I'm straight, and the people are like, "Oh, you're in that GSA thing. You're a lesbian," and I'm like, "No, I'm not." And then I feel like I have to let them know that I'm not, but I shouldn't have to.

Mollie: Right, right.

Jane: A lot of my students say that to me.

Mollie: How do they deal, how do people deal with it?

Jane: Sometimes, they just don't come anymore because of this. I mean I've got some that are like really, I don't know, they're just—

Mollie: Yeah.

Jane: They're able to handle it, but some just are like, you know, to heck with it.

Here, Anna shared that one way she constructed herself as an ally was through her membership in the GSA; this often caused people to label her as a lesbian, which she denied but felt she should not have to. Jane, a GSA advisor at a different school, confirmed that her own students in the GSA shared this experience.

Their exchange reflects the tensions around how ally gets constructed, particularly as it relates to combating homophobia. Even as Anna worked to construct herself as an ally, to some degree, she reinforced heteronormativity and enacted homophobia by protecting herself against it when she actively repositioned herself as straight, a move she recognized as problematic. Indeed, it might be possible to interpret her response as another way of operating within LGBT-inclusive discourse, one that considers the impact of homophobia on allies, similar to considering the impact of homophobia on LGBTQQ people. Such talk, however, was always about specific ways of being an ally. Moreover, the threat implied in Anna's being positioned as possibly a lesbian is not framed around physical violence, a key factor in how we understand considering the impact of homophobia on LGBTQQ people as a way of operating.

So, although combating homophobia was a significant way that we used talk within LGBT-inclusive discourse, and constructing ally is an important way of operating within that discourse, we acknowledge the tensions and contradictions within this discourse and recognize ways that LGBT inclusivity is limited in its capacity to attend to both homophobia and heteronormativity (Martino, 2009; Quinlivan & Town, 1999), as we discuss next.

Reinforcing Heteronormativity

Addressing and combating homophobia were often central to our readings and discussions of LGBT-inclusive texts, so it was not surprising that this was a significant way that we used talk within LGBT-inclusive discourse. What was surprising, however, was the considerable amount of talk that reinforced heteronormativity within this discourse and that this emerged as something we were also accomplishing through our talk in this group. We knew from our review of the literature that a risk of including LGBT-themed texts in schools was the oversimplification of homophobia to individual acts without affording attention to contexts and systems that continue to reinforce heteronormativity (Martino, 2009), but we did not expect that this would be so evident even in this group of LGTQ and ally readers.

Our analysis showed that instances of reinforcing heteronormativity occurred in almost as many discussions as combating homophobia did (16 vs. 18) but not as frequently (38 clusters vs. 76 clusters). We also noticed that we reinforced heteronormativity in our discussions the most when participants seemed to be making an effort to include LGBTQQ people and perspectives, but in doing so, group members universalized the experiences across LGBTQQ people and straight people or reinforced gender norms, which are the two primary ways of operating that we found we were using talk to reinforce heteronormativity.

Universalizing Experiences of Queer People

Frequently, and especially early on in our meetings, heteronormativity was reinforced when participants' talk served to universalize the experiences of queer and straight people by making claims that all people are the same, a response that others have documented in reading and discussing multicultural literature, particularly addressing race, in schools (Lewis, Ketter, & Fabos, 2001). Our first literature discussion shows several clear examples of this talk as we discussed the novel *Boy Meets Boy*:

Mary: And I like [LGBTQ-themed books], because they're just like straight books except for they have gay characters or like gay/lesbian/bisexual characters.

Shelby: Yeah, that's one of the things I noticed a lot, too, is that I'm straight reading this book. And because the narrator was male, you know, it was a book about homosexuals, but it could have just as easily been a female. I didn't really notice any difference, you know. It wasn't challenging for me to sympathize with the love story, because it didn't really make a difference whether or not it was a boy.

Here, Mary and Shelby praised the book because of the way it normalizes the characters and their relationships and makes them seem just like straight people and, hence, sympathetic and relatable to them as straight allies.

Indeed, Shelby, an adult ally, went further and appreciated that it "wasn't challenging" for her as a straight person to connect to the story, suggesting that a positive quality of LGBT-themed literature, or at least this book, is when the characters are made more accessible and less challenging to straight readers. Later in the same discussion, Anna, an ally youth, made a similar move:

For someone who's like, like they disapprove of gay people, if like you get past it just being about gay people, like you find out it's an actual love story. Like it says right here, "Noah is right on time, he brought me flowers, I want to cry. I'm such a sop right now, I'm so happy." Like you could think that even if they are gay, like they can still have feelings, and they still love people, and I just like that.

Here, we see Anna also universalizing the experiences of queer people, but in a way that is more complicated than in the prior example. Through her talk, she was attempting to understand how a homophobic person might view the book, and from that perspective, she felt like the book would help such readers see that gay people experience love just like everyone else. In some ways, her way of operating could be interpreted as one in which she is attempting to construct how one becomes an ally, making this part of that way of operating. So, we could interpret this as her using talk to combat homophobia within LGBT-inclusive discourse. However, to construct ally in this way relies on the universalizing of experience and the normalizing of queer people, a way of operating that, although subtle, allowed heteronormativity to go unchallenged in our group. So, although she was an ally, and one who was clearly antihomophobic, Anna's interpretation of how the book might combat homophobia also served to reinforce

heteronormativity and encourage gay assimilation, and hence, we see her talk as this way of operating.

Such ways of operating were not limited to ally participants. In fact, in our third meeting, during a discussion of *Finding H.F.*, Isaac made more moves to universalize the experiences of queer people than any other participant. Throughout the discussion, he framed the book and the experiences of the lesbian and gay characters as common, noting, for example, "Usually sometimes when you're reading books like this, we see them as lesbians in the story, but when you're reading this, it really doesn't matter, because we've all been there." Here, and repeatedly in this discussion, Isaac declared that "we've all been there," "you've all been there," and "everyone has felt that way before" in describing a feeling or experience of one of the gay or lesbian characters.

For example, Melissa selected a section of the book to read aloud that she especially liked, one in which Bo, a gay youth, longs to leave his rural, homophobic town in Kentucky:

Melissa: [reading from text] "I don't want to be like that, H.F., a little bitty person down there living a lonely life." His eyes are as blue and lit up as the sky. "I want to live me a great big life, not the kind where you just scrape to put some bologna and white bread on the table, and the rest of it sitting in front of the TV. I want a life with music and friends, and I don't know what all."

Mollie: I love that part.

Isaac: I really like that part. Everyone can relate to that part, because everyone wants to get out and do big things and have a little money and fame.

Isaac's response to Bo's longing for a "big life" was to generalize it to what everyone wants, whether one is gay or straight.

Seeing how apt we were to reinforce heteronormativity, particularly in our early meetings, sheds light on why Isaac might have employed this way of operating so frequently in these discussions. Because of our time spent in this group over three years, as well as our relationships with educators from Isaac's school through the Pink TIGers, we know that Isaac had been openly gay since middle school and, perhaps more than any other participant in the group, exposed to the rampant homophobia of schools. We speculate that his moves to universalize the experiences of gay characters in these initial discussions reflected similar kinds of "safe" discussion moves that he had made in school. That is, rather than drawing attention to how gay characters were (and he was) different, his most practiced, self-protective moves were, perhaps, to universalize queer

characters relative to other characters to show how we are all the same.

Policing Gender Norms

Another way of operating that served to reinforce heteronormativity in our discussions was the policing of gender norms, as if these were unrelated to the homophobia that we were trying to combat. In our second meeting, in a discussion of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, for example, Brittany commented on when the main character, Charlie, cries, asserting, "It made me mad. I was like, stop crying. Be a strong man." It is clear that she saw crying as both weak and unmasculine, and she was angry at the male character for exhibiting such weakness.

Later, in a discussion of the short story "A Letter to Harvey Milk" by Lesléa Newman (1988), gender was policed and reinforced in much more subtle, complicated ways. The story is set in San Francisco in 1985. The main character, Harry, is enrolled in a writing course for adults; his teacher is a young, out lesbian. Harry shares a story with her about spending the night with his friend, Izzie, a Holocaust survivor who had shared a story about the death of his male lover at the hands of the Nazis. In this section of the discussion, Caroline raised a question about why the night Harry spent with Izzie is so momentous, and Debbie responded, "There's the man statement. Is that what you're thinking? I need to state myself as the man, as the husband?" Although Caroline and others rejected this suggestion, Debbie stated her interpretation again later, saying, "But don't you think that level of intimacy for a man is hard to express or hard to understand, especially if they [men] don't understand most of that anyway?" Her interpretation is based on an understanding of men as independent and stoic and, thus, unable to care, communicate, and connect. It is, then, rooted in and reinforcing of heterosexist assumptions about gender. We revisit this discussion later.

Using language to reinforce heteronormativity, as evidenced through these particular ways of operating, was the most infrequent kind of talk in our group. Moreover, our tendency to say things that reinforced heteronormativity lessened over time. For example, in our first year (the first 5 of 18 transcripts), we found 22 clusters of talk in which heteronormativity was reinforced. This count was greater than that over the next two years combined (16 clusters of talk in which heteronormativity was reinforced). Eventually, when heteronormativity was reinforced in our discussions, such talk was typically countered through queer discourses, including ways of operating that directly interrogated heteronormativity, which we discuss further in the next section.

Queering

Scholars informed by queer theory argue that queering curricula and pedagogy can counter the reinforcement of heteronormativity not only by interrogating it but also by acknowledging the sexual in people's everyday lives (Martino, 2009) rather than seeing sex as something taboo, if not perverse. In our analysis of talk in the literature discussion group, we identified when speakers used language in ways that interrogated heteronormativity and acknowledged the sexual and thus engaged in a queering discourse, as we discuss next.

Interrogating Heteronormativity

We found in our data that members of the literature discussion group engaged in talk that we recognized as interrogating heteronormativity almost as much as that which we recognized as combating homophobia (72 counts of interrogating heteronormativity as compared with 76 counts of combating homophobia). We found that the group used language to interrogate heteronormativity in four ways:

- Talking about how heteronormativity impacts the lived experiences of LGBTQQ people, in particular
- Broadening conceptualizations of families
- Being open to the range of attractions among us
- Interrogating homonormativity

We discuss each of these four ways of operating next.

Considering the Impact of Heteronormativity

In the previous section, we talked about how considering the impact of homophobia on LGBTQQ people among LGTQ and ally youths and adults is a way of combating homophobia. The seemingly slight shift from homophobia to heteronormativity actually points to a subtle but significant variation. To distinguish these two ways of operating, it is important to distinguish the terms unique to each category first. Homophobia is a "socially produced form of discrimination...against homosexuals" (Murray, 2009, p. 3). Heteronormativity, however, is the understanding of straight and gender-normative people as normal and others as not. We see the former as more overt, more aggressive, and more deliberate. We see the latter as more implicit, more subtle, and more unintentional. So, whereas talk in which group members considered the impact of homophobia on LGBTQQ people focused on the threat of violence against them, talk in which group members considered the impact of heterosexism on LGBTQQ people focused on the rules and regulations that some LGBTQQ people find themselves playing by

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to survive in the heterosexual matrix. We recognize the intimate relationship between the two ways of operating but see the distinction, although blurry, as important. Therefore, here, we focus on talk that group members used to consider the impact of heteronormativity on LGBTQQ people.

This way of operating was apparent in our discussion of Steven Goldman's (2008) *Two Parties, One Tux, and a Very Short Film About* The Grapes of Wrath, in which Travis, Caroline, and Mollie noticed how David, a gay, athletic character in the book, seems to perform his identity differently in different situations:

Travis: Yeah, it was just—

Caroline: It was almost like split personality.

Travis: Totally separated. It talked about how he would act differently about—

Caroline: Like here's his jock self and here's his—

Mollie: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Travis: At the party—

Liz entered the discussion and pointed to the ways that David's actions are much like how one of her classmates negotiated school:

Liz: Which is, are you like saying that's not realistic or—?

Caroline: No.

Liz: Because I totally see it as in a high school or whatever.

Caroline: Like a covering move.

Liz: Yeah. I mean, I've known people who, I mean, I know somebody who basically is like that.

In the very next group meeting, Liz came back to this issue in a discussion of another gay, male athlete, Russel, the main character in *Geography Club* by Brent Hartinger (2003):

Liz: It's like kind of, like if you have to live that sort of like double life.

Mollie: Right, right.

Liz: Of like this is how you are on the team, and this is—. Well, like, I do have a friend who plays baseball, and he said that's kind of how it is for him. He's a baseball player, and then he's everything else that he is.

Travis: Like in *Tuxes* [sic]. He was a baseball player, and he was very open with his friends.

Liz: But they didn't know he was gay.

Together, Liz, Mollie, and Travis, all of whom identify as lesbian or gay, affirmed that this kind of "double life" is real for many lesbian and gay people, as Mollie did in response to Liz, who connected it to behaviors that they have seen among gay peers. Travis connected to behaviors that they have seen in gay characters in other texts when he referenced the earlier discussion of the character in *Two Parties, One Tux, and a Very Short Film About* The Grapes of Wrath. Liz, however, made it clear to him that this character was exhibiting an awareness of the heterosexual matrix and a certain degree of savviness in being able to navigate a double life by not letting his teammates know he was gay, much like her friend who leads a double life navigates spaces defined significantly by school and athletics.

Although at first glance, this idea of a double life might seem to resemble DuBois's (1903/1994) profound notion of "double-consciousness" (p. 2), it is a problematic parallel for two reasons. First, the DuBoisian notion of double consciousness is about race and nationality rather than sexuality and gender. Paralleling complex identities and related oppressions is very limited, if not impossible, in its potential. However, if we wished to pursue the limited potential in this case, it would fail, because according to DuBois, double consciousness is based on the desire of an African American person to merge two identities, African and American, that others, specifically white Americans, perceive as incompatible but that the African American knows are not. In other words, the person experiencing double consciousness knows from experience that the seemingly incongruent identities are indeed congruent. It is in this way that what group members are calling a double life is indisputably distinct from double consciousness. Liz's classmate and the characters David and Russel experience the two identities in question, straight and gay, as incompatible. There is no attempt to merge them. Rather, the characters are deliberately performing identities that are at least different, if not mutually exclusive, depending on context, to stay safe.

Later in this same discussion on double lives, Rebecca, a youth ally, called into question how unique such experiences are: "But doesn't everyone play double lives? Because you are a different person when you're with your friends, you're a different person at home." Rebecca's rhetorical question had the temporary effect of smoothing over differences by suggesting that all of us, regardless of our sexual and gender identities, are alike in that we behave differently in different contexts. This comment had an assimilationist effect. (Recall our earlier discussion of universalizing the experiences of queer people.) Liz, however, rejected this suggestion by saying that what she was talking about is "more extreme, like a degree" of what Rebecca was talking about. There was then a brief discussion of the quality of writing and

then a return to the topic of double lives, wherein Mollie said,

> I'm interested in the idea of everybody living double lives thing, because I do think, because I agree when you [Rebecca] are saying that, I'm thinking, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, I agree." And then you [Liz] say, "It's different. It's more intense," I agree.... And I'm trying to figure out what feels different to me about it, like something about more like fear based or protection oriented or something.

Liz and Mollie's responses to Rebecca decidedly rejected the idea that LGBTQQ people experience heteronormativity—in this case, as it is shaped by athletics—in just the same way that straight people do. Instead, Liz and Mollie asserted that heteronormativity impacts LGBTQQ people in ways that are qualitatively distinct, or in Liz's words, "more extreme," thus making this way of operating visible. If universalizing the experiences of queer people reinforces heteronormativity, as we asserted previously, then questioning such universalizing ways of operating, as Liz and Mollie did, interrogates heteronormativity.

Broadening Notions of Family

Broadening conceptualizations of families was another way of operating when we used talk to interrogate heteronormativity as it took shape in these literature discussion groups. Group members interrogated heteronormative conceptions of family, in which a man and a woman are married and parents of their biological children, in our discussion of *Finding H.F.* Debbie pointed us to an excerpt that Melissa underlined in her book where the protagonist says,

> I've always hated that expression ["just friends"]. It makes it sound like friends don't mean nothing compared to family, but I don't think that's true. I mean, I love Bo better than any real-life brother I could've ended up with. (Watts, 2001, p. 99)

In response, Isaac said, "Yeah, because there's a whole lot of friends that you have in your life that you consider family." Melissa agreed, and Mollie said,

> Well, you know the whole "We Are Family" [referencing the Sister Sledge song], you know, gets stereotypically associated with gay people or whatever. I think that has a lot to do with that, too. Some people, and I think it's less so now than it used to be, but like people getting kicked out of their families of origin, creating families that are loving families.

In this interaction, participants expanded the notion of family from the narrow heteronormative notion into one that includes a person's support network more broadly.

Being Open to Diverse Attractions

Participants also communicated an openness to a wide range of attractions, both in terms of characters and themselves as a way of using language to interrogate heteronormativity. For example, when we discussed "A Letter to Harvey Milk," which we described previously, Caroline said, "the way in which he [Harry] lay in the bed with his wife, that kind of paralleled the way in which he was laying in the bed with Izzie." Then, Marcus agreed and made the sexual parallel more explicit:

> I understand what you're saying. This doesn't seem like it makes much [sense], and it confuses me a little because of the fact that you make it almost sound really supersexual in a way, and it's just like, you know, if you're just holding someone, whether here or it's a different story from being with your wife, and it would really make no difference in between it.

Marcus offered an interpretation that suggested Harry and Izzie had sex that night. If the discussion had concluded there, then we would have likely coded this cluster of talk as sexualizing, but the discussion continued when Caroline countered Marcus's interpretation:

> I wonder if it's in that moment that he *gets* what it means to be gay. That it's not about sex. That it's about more than that. That it's about—I don't know. Is that what he's troubled by? That he can imagine the possibility there because of the connection?... So, nothing happened. But something happened, but something where it became possible for him to imagine that possibility, that kind of intimacy. And, I don't know. That's what's shaking him up.

Then, Marcus replied, "Ohh, I see what you're saying."

One might understand this interaction as sexualizing, as we mentioned previously, and then dealing with discomfort by shifting the focus away from sex, but we understand this interaction to be more about love than sex. We saw Caroline and Marcus working together to understand Harry as a man who had been married to and in love with a woman for 42 years, as described in the story, but who also experienced intimacy, even if not sex, with another man. Thus, we interrogated the notion of Harry as straight, not by imposing the notion that he was gay but by suggesting that he, as a person, can be intimate with other people, not just his wife as representative of women more generally. In this way, we interrogated the heteronormativity implied by heterosexual marriage.

Group members also rejected heteronormativity in their lives by being open to diverse attractions as a way of operating. One youth, across multiple clusters of talk in two discussions, conveyed her attraction to a variety of people. In our discussion of *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers*, Alice, a youth ally, referenced her

attraction to older men, described a bisexual male character in the book as "hot," and talked with a friend about their gay male teacher in this way:

Alice: He's a fox.

Brittany: He is. We tell him every day, "You look so good today, Mr. Green."

In this discussion, it seems that Alice is attracted to all men, regardless of whether they might be attracted to her as a young woman, or any woman at all. Yet, in an earlier discussion, she asked whether we had seen the film *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Babbit, 1999), a satirical romantic comedy about Megan Bloomfield, a high school cheerleader who has a boyfriend but also is vegetarian, loves Melissa Etheridge, and stares longingly at the other cheerleaders. Megan is therefore suspected of being lesbian and ultimately comes out as such. In reference to the actress playing the main character in the movie, Alice said, "I'm not like a lesbian, but the girl in there is so hot, like oh my God." Although her conversational contributions might be interpreted as her repeated efforts to assert her straightness by talking about being attracted to men and stating clearly that she is not a lesbian, such an interpretation is troubled by her attraction to not only straight men but also bisexual men and even gay men and by her attraction to an actress playing the role of a lesbian. Thus, Alice conveyed an openness to a wide range of attractions, which in turn effectively interrogated the heteronormative idea that girls must be attracted to boys or men, particularly those who are heteronormative.

Interrogating Homonormativity

Group members also used language in ways that interrogated homonormativity, or the embracing of heteronormative values, such as matrimony, monogamy, procreation, binary gender roles, and the rejection of alternative, queer ideals by LGBTQQ people (Duggan, 2003). Some may argue that undergirding homonormativity is internalized homophobia. As such, interrogating homonormativity functions alongside interrogating heteronormativity in combating homophobia. In this study, we found that the interrogation of homonormativity was a way of operating in our discussions of the various ways people perform their queerness.

In our discussion of *Erik and Isabelle: Freshman Year at Foresthill High* by Kim Wallace (2004), Laura, an adult lesbian, appreciated that Erik is portrayed as gay and athletic, not as "weak, as feminine, not athletic," and Isaac interjected, "Like me," suggesting that he was weak and feminine, not at all like Erik. Then, when we discussed the sequel, *Erik and Isabelle: Sophomore Year at Foresthill High*, Laura was not present, and Isaac expressed his frustration with how "all the gay guys in the

book are extreme jock...kind of guys." Caroline agreed, saying, "I think they're all gorgeous and buff. That's a given, like they all work out and look great," to which Isaac replied, "Obviously, I do not work out," again distinguishing himself from more athletic men.

Isaac further rejected masculinity and asserted femininity in our discussion of *Finding H.F.*:

Just in the way they describe Wendy's mom, I think of those old '50s detergent commercials with her mom in a big dress and everything. And then she talks about going outside to water the flowers, so I can just imagine her crouching down with a wine glass in the one hand and watering flowers with the other hand. I was like, that's me.

In doing so, Isaac challenged the group to interrogate homonormative assumptions about gay men being athletic and in other ways masculine. He also interrogated the idea that young gay men are or should be virtually indistinguishable from their straight peers. Alternatively, it might be argued that his comment reinforced stereotypes of gay men as being feminine. Although we recognize this interpretation, we do not believe such an interpretation negates the queering effect of the comment. In other words, even if his comment reinforced a homophobic stereotype of gay men, it simultaneously interrogated a homonormative one.

In an earlier discussion about *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Isaac distinguished himself from Jason, another young gay man at his school and in the group discussion. When Jason proudly said he stood up and was recognized for being a part of the GSA, Isaac stated,

I kind of feel like a walking advocate for GSA, because everyone knows that I'm out there, and I'm here. Like when I stood up at GSA for the first meeting, it's like, "I'm here because I'm queer." Everyone knew from the very first day that I started at [my high school] that I was gay, and I didn't care what anyone had to say about it. So, I try my hardest to be a good advocate.

Isaac effectively distinguished himself as someone who was proud not only to be associated with the GSA but also to be representative of the *G* in the GSA. In these conversations, he interrogated homonormative notions of gay men, captured here by athletic and masculine gay men, like Erik, and gay men who try to pass as straight men, like Jason, by embracing his lack of athletic prowess, asserting his femininity, and performing his identity as an out gay man. Thus, Isaac led the group in interrogating the homonormative ideal that gay men are athletic, masculine, and just like straight men.

In doing so, though, Isaac reinforced a different dichotomy between feminine gay men and masculine gay men. In fact, his attention was reserved almost exclusively for the former, as evident in this interaction:

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Isaac: I don't know. I don't pay very close atten-
          tion to the other actors that are not gay. I
          always pay attention to the gay ones. Other
          than that, I don't really care. I don't know.

Debbie: You do also with your reading. You always
          kept not just the gay one but the most vi-
          brant character and followed that character
          all the way through.

Isaac: They're just in the background. They're in
          the background.

Here, we understand "vibrant" to be a euphemism for
something more like flamboyant. By reinforcing the
dichotomy between masculine and feminine gay men,
Isaac restored the homonormative value of the gender
binary, which resulted in erasing LGBTQQ people who
do not fit into one of these two ends of this gay male
continuum.

Through our literature discussions, we interro-
gated the heteronormative notions that LGBTQQ
people are some mythical unified other, that fam-
ily comprises a husband, a wife, and their biological
children, and that men are masculine and attracted
to women, and women are feminine and attracted to
men. Moreover, we interrogated the homonormative
notion that gay men are athletic, masculine, and in
all ways, aside from their attraction to men, just like
straight men. In doing so, we were able to engage in
more nuanced discussions about the lived experiences
of gay men, including the significance of living double
lives, of constructed families, as opposed to families of
origin, of a wide range of attraction possibilities, and
of diversity among gay men.

Foregrounding the Sexual

We found in our data that members of the literature
discussion group engaged in talk that we recognized
as foregrounding sexual behavior, as distinct from
intimacy or attraction, just a bit more often than that
which we recognized as reinforcing heteronormativity
(45 counts of foregrounding the sexual vs. 38 counts of
reinforcing heteronormativity) and not nearly as often
as talk that we recognized as combating homophobia or
interrogating heteronormativity. In looking at our uses
of language around sexual behavior, we identified three
ways of operating: dealing with discomfort in discuss-
ing sex, studying characters and scenes that depict sex,
and struggling with stereotypes related to sex. We next
discuss each of these three ways of operating.

Dealing With Discomfort
in Discussing Sex
We expected to find stiff, awkward, and maybe even
stifled interactions related to desire, pleasure, and

sexuality (Sumara & Davis, 1999), but we also expected
that over the course of the years, these discussions might
have become more relaxed and perhaps more devel-
oped. What we found, though, was that the discomfort,
at least as identifiable by our talk, rested mostly within
the adult participants, as is hinted at in the aforemen-
tioned discussion between Caroline and Marcus about
whether Harry and Izzie had sex. Finders (2005) found
a similar dynamic in her work. However, we found that
one way of sexualizing, particularly for the adults, was
to deal with the discomfort by trying to own, experi-
ence, and overcome it. For example, Mollie initiated
the topic of her discomfort while reading scenes in *The
Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers* that focused on sexual
encounters, which prompted others' experiences read-
ing those same scenes:

Mollie: So, some of those sex scenes I skipped
          through, because they totally stressed me
          out.

Alice: Oh really? I liked it.

Mollie: You did?

Alice: Yeah.

Mollie: No, that's good.

Debbie: The sex scenes, they didn't bother me. I
          thought they did a natural, good job with
          it.

Alice, a youth ally, was not only comfortable with
the sex scenes but also enjoyed them, as did Debbie, an
adult ally. That the two participants most open about
their comfort with the same-sex sex scenes in *The
Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers* were not LGBTQQ
people raises the question of whether straight people
are more practiced at, and thus more comfortable with,
the sexualizing of LGBTQQ people, as this is some-
thing that people often do, that is, think immediately
about sex rather than relationships when thinking about
LGBTQQ people. Likewise, it may point to the effects
of the heterosexual matrix on how we are all habituated
to think about the sex act as part of what it means to be
gay or lesbian.

Still, Mollie made a weak attempt at supporting
Alice's pleasure and then tried to rationalize her own
discomfort:

Mollie: I think I'm bringing like my own Catholic
          training into it, you know, just like anxious
          about sex scenes.

Joan: Talking about sex scenes with someone
          else's kid.

Mollie: Right.

Here, Joan, an adult ally, offered another possible explanation for Mollie's discomfort, one that likely undergirds many teachers' reasons for not wanting to name and explore sexuality in classrooms: that it is, at least for some adults, including Mollie and Joan, uncomfortable to talk about sex with children who are not their own.

Joan, however, worked to overcome her discomfort by joining in the continued interaction. When Debbie referenced feeling slightly uncomfortable with a sex scene between a young adult character and a significantly older character, Joan said, "I read the thing about the old guy, and I thought, 'Oh yeah, I remember that,'" explicitly referencing an intergenerational relationship of hers. This prompted a brief jocular interaction among the youths, which began much like those in which youths talk about their attractions but continued and thus became a sexual innuendo:

Alice: Doesn't everybody like older men?...

Youth
participant: You cannot beat the older men.

Brittany: Alice does.

The shift in Joan's two comments represents one that adults make across years of discussions; that is, adults work to overcome their discomfort with discussions about sex. The playful interaction between the two youths represents what we saw among youths across the years of discussion, that is, their comfort with talking about sex. Moreover, it effectively answers the question raised earlier about whether Alice was more comfortable sexualizing LGBTQQ people than straight people, revealing that she, at least, was just comfortable talking about sex—same-sex activity, heterosexual activity, and intergenerational sexual activity—even among adults, at least in this space.

That is not to say that there were no exceptions to this. Although we imagine most of the participants' discomfort with talking about sex came in the form of silence and thus is mostly invisible in our transcripts of audiotaped discussions, there was the use of euphemisms that suggested to us at least one youth's discomfort in talking about sex perhaps in front of adults, including her teacher. This was in our discussion of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* by Fannie Flagg (1987) when we were talking about the character Eva. Even after Caroline and Mollie explicitly said that Eva has sex with many of the characters in the book, Sarah asked not whether another character, Buddy, lost his virginity to Eva but whether she "deflower[ed]" him. Surprised by Sarah's word choice, Mollie asked her to repeat what she said, and again, Sarah said "deflower." In other words, she did not take that opportunity to restate in less euphemistic terms, even in this space.

We recognize that such discomfort would be magnified in schools, as evidenced by Anna's description of reading Alison Bechdel's (2006) graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* in school:

> Oh God, I was reading the intimate parts, and I was in school, and I was like done with my exam, and I was like.... My friend Nick actually, he was like, "What are you reading?" And I was like, "This book for book club." He was like, "Oh, that's cool." And I was like, "Right, almost to the part [where there is a drawing of two women having sex]," and he was like, "Whoa, what's this?" And I was like, "Um, book club."

This account suggests that it was mildly uncomfortable for Anna to be reading and looking at, although not discussing, a sex scene in school when a friend recognized what was happening in the text. It may be that the visual component of the graphic novel heightened the youth's discomfort, if in no other way, by making the text more accessible to those around her.

Studying Characters and Scenes That Depict Sex

As a group comprised of current high school students and current and former English teachers, it is unsurprising that more "schoolish" (M. Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p. 21) discussions of literature were taken up in our group. However, the sexual nature of these schoolish discussions was perhaps surprising. In fact, the studying of characters and scenes was a distinctively schoolish way of foregrounding sexuality. For example, in our discussion of *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1982), prompted by the character Shug having sex with both men and women, when Caroline asked about Shug's sexual identity, several youths responded:

Caroline: So, what about Shug? Is she bisexual?

Anna: I think she is a woman of the times.

Liz: I think she's just sexual.

Several: Yeah, sexual.

Sam: Yeah, sex is great.

[laughter]

Caroline: I love her explanation of sex. At the end where she just, "God wants you to have lots of sex."

[laughter]

Sam: They're like pot-smoking, sexual beings. It's great.

In this interaction, participants come to understand a character in a more developed way, even if not a generically sanctioned way, as a result of engaging in a discussion that does not prohibit the sexual.

Attending to the sexual also resulted in evaluations of particular scenes in the texts. For example, in our discussion of *Erik and Isabelle: Sophomore Year at Foresthill High*, Debbie and Anna referenced a prior conversation between them in which they compared the book of focus at this meeting with one from a previous meeting, *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers*. Debbie said that they were "talking about the Maxine scene with the horses," which prompted much laughter and overlapping talk, then a more focused discussion:

Mollie: The barn scene where they fool around?

Debbie: And the horses, the "nickering" horses, but we looked up the, it's not "nickering," it was—

Isaac: It was softly neighing.

Debbie: Neighing is the definition of the word. They're "nickering softly." So, we looked it up, and it meant neighing, is how we looked it up as nickered.

Isaac: That seemed kind of—

Caroline: What did you, OK—

Isaac: It made me wonder about one of those cheesy romance novels and the stables and the horses. I mean I can—

Caroline: Stirred by the "fever."

Mollie: Their love scene does seem a little bit too smooth for like a—

Isaac: It either seems like a really bad romance novel or a really, really bad adult film. In the barn, on the hay—

Debbie: But didn't we also comment—

Anna: What page is it?

Debbie: Anna, it's 130. We were talking about whether or not we thought they actually did, it says, "lovemaking." Go ahead.

Melissa: It also says something like having their first climax together.

Isaac: Oh yeah.

Caroline: Yeah. Well, that's where I think, that's why she has to use the "nickering" horses.

[laughter]

Caroline: Because in all those scenes, she moves into like the description of the "fever filled barn."

Isaac: I guess if we really think about it, we're not expecting her to describe what's happening in detail.

Debbie: Yes, right, in *Geneva Flowers* we were ready for it.

Isaac: Yeah, with *Geneva Flowers*, it was all out there.

In this discussion, participants varying in age and sexual, racial, and gender identities scrutinize word choice, quote specific lines, and engage in intertextual analyses in ways that both clarify their understandings of the scene and allow them to evaluate the writing of that scene, thus practicing ways of operating more typically associated with secondary English classrooms within the rarely school-sanctioned use of language to foreground sexuality.

Struggling With Stereotypes Related to Sex

Another way of foregrounding sexuality was struggling with stereotypes, particularly those related to LGBTQQ people. Here, we focus on stereotypes about LGBTQQ people that are related to sexual behavior rather than gender performances, as we mentioned in the section on interrogating homonormativity. In our discussion of *Finding H.F.*, for example, we disrupted the stereotype that same-sex relationships are about (perverse) sexual behaviors in isolation from intimate relationships when Anna said,

> I love how [H.F.] like talks on, I think she tells Bo [H.F.'s best friend] she's like never been intimate with anyone [before], but the way, at the beginning of Chapter 8, "in a way I hate getting into the tub, washing off all the places Wendy touched me. Part of me would like to keep her marks on me, so I could dust myself with fingerprints and find the places that were touched on me." But it's so like genuine.

Then, several of us in the group agreed that this is a "beautiful part." Isaac, a young gay male, said, "It's beautiful in a kind of bittersweet way, because you know what happened, and you feel bad, but you know how much she likes her." Even in this brief interaction about a tiny bit of text, this diverse group characterized the sexual behavior between two girls not as perverse but as beautiful and contextualized both the sexual behavior and the girls in a fuller relationship. Thus, the group discussion served to disrupt stereotypes about lesbians as either not sexual or only sexual for the purpose of entertaining straight men.

In another discussion, though, we struggled to understand the stereotype of gay men as promiscuous. We were talking about *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers*, and Anna stated that she asked Isaac, prior to his coming to the literature discussion group, whether the sexual promiscuity in the book was an accurate representation of gay male communities as he experienced them. She went on to say, "He was like, 'Yeah, like I remember, I don't know. It seems like they're [gay men are] not looking for a real connection.'" Debbie

explained that Isaac was talking about this in terms of a struggle, like how he longed for real connection. Then, Mollie offered a defense of why making this connection might be so difficult:

> I associate the kind of promiscuity [that we're talking about] with people who are being told their sexuality is bad, so everything is undercover. Everything is not allowed to be named or discussed or talked about so that when it gets suppressed, then their promiscuous behavior kind of goes along with it.

Alice hypothesized, "You have to hide relationships so like that they won't last long, because they'll hide it, and it'll get out, and they'll have to find someone else." Then, Alice brought this dynamic home by naming a local park "where the guys meet up in the car": "I was driving, and there were just these guys. There were probably twelve of them just in their cars. It was odd, but it's sad that they have to hide out."

Although this discussion reinforced the stereotype that gay men are promiscuous, it also provoked a sort of thinking through why things may be the way these young people were experiencing or perceiving them. In this way, this conversation prompted participants to consider the impact of homophobia on, in this case, gay men. As such, this way of struggling with stereotypes related to sex could also be understood as considering the impact of homophobia, which we saw as a way of combating it and therefore as a part of LGBT-inclusive discourse.

It may seem that all of our talk in this category was focused on sex between men or between women rather than heterosexual sex, and most of it, but not all of it, was. Focusing entirely on same-sex desire and behavior and not at all on opposite-sex desire and behavior is problematic, because it fails to draw attention to the sexual nature of straight people to counter the hypersexualization of LGBTQQ people. Thus, such talk might actually serve to reinforce the hypersexualization of LGBTQQ people and the heteronormative notion that people who are not straight are not normal.

Yet, there were some times when we talked about opposite-sex desire and behavior. For example, we talked about how Shug, in *The Color Purple*, becomes the lover of a younger man and about how Eva, in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, has sex with Stump, Idgie and Ruth's son. In these instances, though, our attention turned to these characters because we understood them to engage in sexual relationships, or at least encounters, with both men and women, and with the opposite sex, then with someone significantly different in terms of age. Still, we never identified these characters as bisexual, nor did we identify them as straight. Only once did we talk about the sexual desire and behavior as experienced by a straight character (or

person), and that was in response to Mitchell, the narrator of *Two Parties, One Tux, and a Very Short Film About* The Grapes of Wrath. Mitchell's attention and attraction to breasts is named repeatedly throughout the novel, a fact that we noticed, analyzed, and discussed as a way that the author all but prohibits readers from understanding the character as gay, even though his best friend is.

Although discussions about sex were sometimes uncomfortable for both the adults and the youths, and for both LGTQ people and allies, the discussions sometimes provoked conversations important both in terms of schoolish ways of operating, that is, by analyzing character development and evaluating scene writing, and in terms of working against homophobia and heterosexism by disrupting and interrogating stereotypes of LGBTQQ people. Therefore, owning, experiencing, and overcoming such discomfort is imperative, because the degree of discomfort is far surpassed by the degree of accomplishment in these discussions.

Discussion

By studying talk about LGBTQ-themed texts among LGTQ and ally youths and adults in a queer-friendly space, we identified two discourses, LGBT-inclusive and queering, and within those, four uses of language, two in each of the two discourses. Further, we identified 11 ways of operating that provide a more nuanced understanding of what we accomplished through our talk. Understanding that all discourses are a manifestation of the relationship between knowledge and power (Foucault, 1972) and, as such, work to shape and constrain how people can or must act or speak from within them, we examined the particular ways of operating as evidenced through our talk within LGBT-inclusive and queer discourses. In particular, we sought to understand in what ways each discourse was liberatory or oppressive and thus answer our second research question. Our analysis made visible the relationships among these discourses, uses of language, and ways of operating; seeing these in relationship to one another enabled us to see that neither LGBT-inclusive discourse nor queer discourse is wholly liberatory or wholly oppressive. Both discourses offer positive potential for working against homophobia and disrupting heteronormativity, although at times in complex and even contradictory ways.

In our discussion of this complexity, we turn to de Certeau (1984), particularly his notions of strategies and tactics. We examined the 11 ways of operating with strategies and tactics in mind, understanding strategic ways of operating as oppressive and tactical ways of operating as liberatory and wondering whether one discourse would comprise mostly or entirely strategic

ways of operating or whether another discourse would show the most tactical and thus liberatory potential. Although we confidently claim that all group members were striving to be tactical, in that we were striving to work within and against the heterosexual matrix, some of the ways that group members operated at times accomplished this goal, whereas others did not.

As Kamberelis and Dimitriades (2005) reminded us in their characterization of the power/knowledge and defamiliarization chronotope, "language and literacy practices are intentional, but…these intentions are always already constructed within particular games of truth in the first place and then appropriated by individuals who are themselves constructed within the same games of truth" (p. 50). Therefore, it is unsurprising that sometimes our group reinforced heteronormativity through our talk, even though we were trying hard not to, because it cannot be denied that all of us were living and learning in a heteronormative society. What is surprising is how our ways of operating, as evidenced in our talk, were not strictly tactical or solely strategic, how talk could sometimes shift from one way of operating to the other, and vice versa, and how this helped us understand the liberatory and oppressive aspects of both LGBT-inclusive and queering discourses.

We recognize talk that policed gender norms and universalized the experiences of queer people as strategic ways of operating. Certainly, policing gender norms strengthens the heterosexual matrix by forcing men, including gay men, to perform masculinity, narrowly defined, and women, including lesbians, to perform femininity, also narrowly defined. Similarly, universalizing the experiences of queer people depends on and even bolsters the heterosexual matrix by pushing queer people into a metaphorical box that was designed to hold straight people, something that was particularly evident in Shelby's talk in response to the novel *Boy Meets Boy*.

As seen in these ways, both policing gender norms and universalizing the experiences of queer people are strategic and, we contend, oppressive. At other times in our talk, however, universalizing experience was complicated in that it might also be understood as a way of constructing allies. Recall, for example, Anna talking about *Boy Meets Boy* and wondering if it might draw in a homophobic reader if they could "get past it just being about gay people." As we note in our findings, we interpret what she is saying as a move to universalize the experiences of queer people. However, we do not see this move as solely strategic or oppressive. Instead, we understand her suggestion of introducing this text to a homophobic reader as tactical insofar as it recognizes that homophobia exists, but it also shows a potential opening to work against it.

In contrast, we recognized talk that considered the impact of homophobia and heteronormativity on LGBTQQ people, broadened notions of family, suggested openness to diverse attractions, interrogated homonormativity, dealt with discomfort around talking about sex, and focused on characters and scenes that depicted sex as tactical ways of operating and, therefore, liberatory. Considering how homophobia and heteronormativity impacts LGBTQQ people results in a critique of homophobia and heteronormativity. Broadening notions of family and being open to diverse attractions destabilizes heteronormativity. Because homonormativity is an adaptation of heteronormativity, interrogating one calls into question the other.

These interrogations seem rather clear-cut in terms of being tactical, but dealing with discomfort around talking about sex and attending to scenes and characters that depict sex requires a bit more explanation. So, one way that the heterosexual matrix maintains its power is by suppressing talk of sex. The censorship of talking about sex in general allows people to believe in a fictional uniformity of sexual behaviors and desires. Silencing talk about homosexual sex supports this fictional uniformity, but suppressing talk about heterosexual sex is also important in the heterosexual matrix, because it perpetuates the homophobic inclination to think first of sex when thinking of same-sex couples and first of relationships when thinking about opposite-sex couples, an inclination that dehumanizes LGBTQQ people. The fictional uniformity of sexual behaviors and desires and the dehumanizing of LGBTQQ people both support the heterosexual matrix. Therefore, dealing with discomfort around talking about sex and finding ways to engage in such talk are ways of operating that weaken the heterosexual matrix.

As we noted previously, however, the stability in these ways of operating as either wholly strategic or tactical gets disrupted when we reflect on the remaining two ways of operating: struggling with stereotypes in relationship to sexuality and constructing the idea of ally. Our analysis of ways of operating within LGBT-inclusive and queering discourses revealed talk shifting from the tactical to the strategic and back again.

In the discourse of queering, when language was used to foreground the sexual, we saw that there were times when the group found ways to get over their discomfort and talk about sexual behaviors and desires, as when Mollie and Joan joined in the discussion of sex scenes in *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers* despite their own, named reservations. We understand this way of operating, which we call dealing with discomfort, as tactical. Yet, later in that same discussion, such tactical talk evolved into talk about the promiscuity of gay men, for example, which is strategic in that it relies on a stereotype that insists that gay men are outside of the

fictional monogamy of the heterosexual matrix. Then, even further into this same discussion, group members explored reasons why such stereotypical behavior may be embodied by gay men, that is, how gay men are impacted by heteronormativity, a way of operating that we previously identified as tactical. This talk reveals the slipperiness of identifying liberatory and oppressive talk not only in queering discourse, which is so large that there is plenty of room for slippage, but also of the small ways of operating within this large discourse.

Constructing allies as a way of operating within LGBT-inclusive discourse is similarly unstable in terms of being tactical or strategic. Earlier, we described a cluster of talk in which Anna talked about being identified as lesbian because of her participation in her school's GSA. We see her participation in the GSA as tactical in that she was supporting LGBTQQ people in a homophobic space in part by helping create a less homophobic space within the school. Yet, when she was falsely identified as, and probably accused of being, a lesbian, she denied it. Her denial was truthful but also suggested an understanding of being lesbian as a bad thing, something to be denied. This move effectively distinguished her as one who helps people, not as one who needs help or, perhaps, as one who pities rather than is pitiable. As such, it could be argued that Anna was being strategic, but then Jane reminded the group that Anna did not withdraw from the GSA, that she continued to help create a less homophobic space within the school. This interaction highlights the instability of strategies and tactics that is possible in any way of operating.

In looking closely at the particular texts that were read in this group, we find it difficult to say that any specific text afforded a certain use of language or way of operating within LGBT-inclusive or queer discourse. As Table 1 shows, we read a broad range of texts over our three years together, ranging across young adult novels, graphic novels, short stories, essays, and adult fiction. In several instances, our talk was particularly focused on the world of the text. In our discussions, especially about *Finding H.F., The Perks of Being a Wallflower,* and *The Tragedy of Miss Geneva Flowers,* we often drew directly on the behaviors or actions of specific characters, which gave us language and images that afforded us opportunities to talk in particular ways. Ian did this, for example, when he related his experiences to those of Bo in *Finding H.F.* to discuss the impact of homophobia on LGBTQQ people. Also, Ian, Jason, Alice, Anna, and Debbie did this when they examined Charlie's actions, constructing an understanding of what it means to be a good ally, in our discussion of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower.*

Over time and as we read more, we were able to bring worlds together across texts and into contact with our own worlds to make ideologies more apparent in our discussions. This was true, for example, when Liz drew from our readings and discussions of *Two Parties, One Tux, and a Very Short Film About* The Grapes of Wrath and *Geography Club* to comment on the kind of double life that lesbian and gay people live and negotiate within the heterosexual matrix. This is not to say that we did not also slip back and forth from these more positive framings to ones in which we used language to reinforce heteronormativity, for as we outlined previously, we definitely did. However, the confluence of these texts' worlds and lived worlds enabled us to use language to interrogate heteronormativity, and when heteronormativity was reinforced in our discussions, such talk was often countered through queer discourses, as described earlier.

Finally, in later literature group sessions, we delved more deeply into discussions of text worlds often quite unlike our own in terms of time and location by reading adult fiction that is set in the far past, such as *The Color Purple, Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe, The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, and *Other Voices, Other Rooms* by Truman Capote. These texts afforded us opportunities to use language in more explicit, specific, and at times, uncomfortable ways to name the sexual and discuss complex issues of desire and attraction.

It is interesting to note that much of this talk occurred around texts that might not be readily categorized as LGBT themed. One could argue, for example, that *The Color Purple, The Awakening,* and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* are not LGBT-themed fiction, as none of these texts ever directly identifies a character as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Likewise, in *Written on the Body* by Jeanette Winterson (1992), the gender of the narrator is artfully concealed so that the nature of the attraction between a female lover and the narrator is never made clear.

An in-depth analysis of these text features is beyond the scope of this paper; however, as our analysis shows, every text was discussed through the framework of both discourses, LGBT-inclusive and queering. Because neither of these discourses is solely liberatory or hegemonic, what we were able to accomplish through language, within and against each of the discourses, depended on the complex relationship between these texts, our group of readers in this context, and how we talked together about these texts, ourselves, and the world over time.

We understand that there is a complex, reciprocal relationship among texts, talk, and context. We know that these particular texts guided our increasingly complex understanding of LGBTQQ people and their experiences in homophobic and heterosexist communities if in no other way than by providing a wide range of images of these people and their experiences across times and spaces. Yet, we also know that our talk

pushed our understanding of LGBTQQ people and their experiences.

Not only did we share our unique stories and perspectives regarding related topics and issues, much like the texts did, but also we used these experiences and perspectives to interrogate the assumptions made by one another through our talk. Moreover, we did this both within a queer-friendly context of the literature group and the youth center, and the heterosexual matrix of our society. These conflicting and simultaneous contexts allowed for, provoked, and even demanded discourses that are neither monolithically liberatory nor oppressive. We suggest that no single discourse is. Rather, putting complementary and competing discourses in conversation with each other around diverse texts and in complex contexts provides opportunities for conflicts, resulting in ruptures releasing potential and promise for change.

Notes

[1]You will notice that we use acronyms, such as this one, with slight variations. Our overall intent is to be as precise and inclusive as possible. For example, we use *LGBTQ* to describe themes and *LGBTQQ* to describe people. We use the additional *Q* because people have the capacity to question, unlike themes and other inanimate things. We use these when our reference is general, but when it is more specific, we strive to be accurate. For example, we refer to group members as LGTQ, because no one in our group explicitly and consistently identified as bisexual or queer. One exception to our precise and inclusive rule is our use of *LGBT* inclusivity, which is a term we borrow from pertinent scholarship (e.g., Martino, 2009).

[2]An ally is generally a non-LGBTQQ person who is committed to combating bias and discrimination against LGBTQQ people, but the term also includes anyone combating anti-LGBTQQ name-calling, bullying, or harassment in schools; for example, a lesbian teacher can be an ally to a transgender student.

[3]The parentheses here indicate that the literature is often categorized as LGBT but typically focuses on just lesbian and/or gay themes and rarely bisexual or transgender ones.

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