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# Activating adult allies from a rural community on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer student issues in school using photovoice

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## ABSTRACT

*Purpose:* Many students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) face hostile school environments that can negatively impact their mental health and education. This study involved a photovoice project where high school students from a gay-straight alliance in the rural southeastern United States took photographs that depicted the issues LGBTQ students were facing and then exhibited their photographs and stories to individuals from the school system and local community to promote awareness, dialogue, and action. *Methods:* Twenty adults who attended the photovoice exhibit responded to an online survey about their experiences with the intervention. *Results:* Eighty-five percent of adults reported that the intervention made them think about issues they had not previously considered, including the struggles LGBTQ youths face, gender issues, and living in a rural community. Common emotions experienced at the intervention included feeling excited, concern for the youths, and proud of the youths. Furthermore, 81% of the adults indicated that they would take action or behave differently as a result of the intervention, including supporting and affirming LGBTQ students, using gender-neutral and -inclusive language, and confronting bias in themselves and others. *Conclusions:* Photovoice is a promising strategy for LGBTQ students to activate adult allies in their community.

## KEYWORDS

lesbian; gay; bisexual; transgender; queer; students; adolescents; youth; school; photovoice; gay-straight alliance

## Introduction

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) students face hostility and stressors within the school environment that threaten their mental and educational well-being (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). Hostile school environments can contribute to mental health and school-related problems among LGBTQ students, such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, absenteeism, and low academic achievement. To counter hostility in schools,

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LGBTQ students have formed gay-straight alliances or queer-straight alliances, which engage in a number of activities, including cultivating allies (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004). This article reports findings from a project spearheaded by a gay-straight alliance that focused on the issues facing LGBTQ students, with the goal of developing adult allies in the community via a photovoice intervention. The photovoice intervention involved students taking pictures to represent their experiences and then exhibiting them to adults from their school and community.

### ***School-based oppression of LGBTQ students***

The oppression of LGBTQ students manifests in multiple ways within the school environment, including through the attitudes and behaviors of members of the school community, relationships and interactions between members of the school community, school programs and policies, and physical environment of the school (Chesir-Teran, 2003). The pervasiveness of this oppression in schools in the United States has been evidenced in GLSEN's National School Climate Survey, which is currently the only large comprehensive national survey of the school experiences of LGBTQ middle and high school students (Kosciw et al., 2014). Findings indicated that 74% of students reported experiencing verbal harassment at school in the past year and 17% experienced some form of physical assault (e.g., punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon; Kosciw et al., 2014). Many LGBTQ students who are not directly harassed still experience oppression in schools. For example, 98% of LGBTQ students heard the word "gay" used in a negative way (e.g., "that's so gay"), 97% heard sexual orientation slurs (e.g., "faggot"), and 81% heard transgender slurs (e.g., "tranny") at school (Kosciw et al., 2014). When anti-LGBTQ comments were made in the presence of school personnel, 42% of students reported that these personnel did not intervene. Unfortunately, many educators may hold negative attitudes about LGBTQ people. This is evidenced by the fact that about half (51%) of students had heard anti-LGBTQ remarks (e.g., "faggot" or "dyke") from teachers and school staff, and 35% of students indicated that administrators in their school were unsupportive of LGBTQ students.

LGBTQ students not only experience harassment and offensive language at school; many also experience discrimination. For example, 37% of students reported that their schools had disciplined LGBTQ students for public displays of affection, 19% of students were prevented from wearing clothing that was deemed "inappropriate" based on their gender, 23% of students reported that they were prevented from wearing clothing regarding LGBTQ issues (e.g., rainbow flag T-shirt), and 18% were prevented from attending a school dance with a same-gender date (Kosciw et al., 2014).

In terms of the school curricula and visibility, data suggest LGBTQ people and issues are often neglected. Nearly 70% of students indicated that LGBTQ history, people, and/or events were excluded from class lessons (Kosciw et al., 2014), and about one-quarter (24%) of students were discouraged from discussing or writing

about LGBTQ topics for class assignments and projects. In addition, visible supports for LGBTQ students are lacking in schools. Almost 60% of students reported that there were no openly LGBTQ teachers or staff at their school (Kosciw et al., 2014), and 70% of students had not seen a LGBTQ “safe space” sticker or poster in their school.

Schools may also have formal or informal policies that do not extend rights and protections to LGBTQ students. For example, despite the fact that schools that receive federal funding must allow students to form LGBTQ-related clubs like other student clubs (Zirkel, 2005), 18% of students had been hindered from forming a LGBTQ student club, such as a gay-straight alliance (Kosciw et al., 2014). In addition, despite the high rates of bullying experienced by LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2014) and enumerated protections extended to other social classes (e.g., race, national origin, sex/gender, and disability status) in anti-bullying policies (Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011), 30 states do not have laws that prohibit bullying based on sexual orientation and gender identity in schools (Human Rights Campaign, 2015a). Similarly, despite documentation of the presence of discrimination against LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2014), only 14 states have laws that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in schools (Human Rights Campaign, 2015b).

### ***Negative outcomes facing LGBTQ youths***

Oppressive school environments can contribute to mental and educational problems among LGBTQ students. Research shows that compared to their cisgender and heterosexual peers, LGBTQ students are more likely to feel unsafe at school, feel disconnected from school, skip or miss school, and perform poorly (Burton, Marshal, & Chisolm, 2014; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Rostosky, Owens, Zimmerman, & Riggle, 2003; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). Harassment and discrimination at school are directly related to educational problems among LGBTQ students. Evidence shows that LGBTQ students who experienced considerable harassment or discrimination at school were more likely to have missed school, had lower GPAs, and had lower aspirations for postsecondary education (Kosciw et al., 2014). Research also shows that LGBTQ students who experienced more frequent or severe harassment or discrimination were more likely to report lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression (Kosciw et al., 2014).

### ***Gay-straight alliances or queer-straight alliances***

A number of intervention approaches have been pursued in recent decades to improve the school climate and experiences of LGBTQ students, including the formation of gay-straight alliances or queer-straight alliances (GSAs/QSAs). GSAs/QSAs are student-run organizations that allow for both socialization among

and activism by LGBTQ youths and their allies (Currie, Mayberry, & Chenneville, 2012; McCormick, Schmidt, & Clifton, 2014; Poteat, Scheer, Marx, Calzo, & Yoshikawa, 2015). GSAs/QSAs have executed various activities to improve the school climate, including Day of Silence and Ally Week (Poteat et al., 2015). The development of allies within the school community has been a primary focus of GSAs/QSAs, and these efforts have resulted in the cultivation of allies among student peers and school personnel (e.g., teachers, administrators, counselors, social workers, and psychologists; Currie et al., 2012). Only recently have GSAs/QSAs begun to also cultivate allies among parents and adults in the local community. However, there is virtually no research on how ally development interventions conducted by GSAs/QSAs impact parents and adults in the community. This study aims to help fill this gap.

### ***Purpose of the current study***

The current study centers on a photovoice project that was initiated by a GSA in a high school in a rural area of a Southeastern U.S. state—North Carolina. The project involved students taking pictures of LGBTQ-related issues in the school context and then sharing these photos and quotes with adults from the school system and local community in an exhibition event, which was an intervention strategy to cultivate adult allies. The purpose of this study was to examine responses from the adults who attended the photovoice exhibit regarding how the event influenced them as well as quality and satisfaction related to the event. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions: Did the GSA photovoice intervention affect school personnel and adults in the community cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally? What were the strengths and limitations of the intervention event, and how could it have been improved?

## **Methods**

### ***Intervention description***

Photovoice is a community-based participatory research method in which participants use photography to explore problems that affect their community and develop action steps to address those problems (Wang & Burris, 1997). An important component in photovoice is ensuring that participants play an active, as compared to passive, role throughout the entire process. This is important for adolescents who can be perceived as lacking the ability to make responsible and constructive decisions. This also provides the opportunity for youths to make decisions about how information about their lives is constructed and shared with adults who have authority and influence over the lives of adolescents.

A goal of the photovoice project was to engage GSA members in identifying the unique problems and challenges that impact LGBTQ youths in their school. Thus, a central question guided the project: “What do I wish people knew about my

life as an LGBTQ or ally student at this high school?” Each GSA student received a camera so that they could take pictures that represented their answers to this question. GSA members participated in a photography workshop conducted by a local photographer, which covered technical photography skills (e.g., framing, flash, and lighting), ethics of photography, and how participants could frame pictures to emphasize different meanings and messages.

Over the course of four weeks, students met, shared, and discussed their photos. Two social workers were the facilitators and guided discussions of the pictures using a specific discussion method called SHOWED, which involves discussing a picture literally, how a picture relates to relevant problems, and actions that could address the problems (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). SHOWED questions included the following:

- What do you See here?
- What is really Happening here?
- How does this relate to Our lives?
- Why does this situation Exist?
- What can we Do about it? (Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

With the consent of the participants and the approval of the institutional review board at the authors' university, each photo discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed by one of the authors.

Throughout the photovoice discussions, participants developed a list of problems that LGBTQ and ally students experienced at their school, such as reinforcement of gender norms, homophobic and transphobic bullying, little to no representation of diverse sexual and gender identities, and the perception that school personnel do little to address the problems that LGBTQ and ally students experience. A common theme in the photo-discussions was how homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia were used at the school to reinforce strict gender norms and the gender binary. Another common theme was the lack of responsiveness by educators and administrators in dealing with harassment and bullying that LGBTQ students faced in the school. The two social work facilitators initially identified themes based on the transcripts of the discussions and then member-checked the themes with the GSA students who confirmed the themes.

Photovoice is not just a research method, but also an intervention because it is aimed at improving conditions affecting the community by influencing key leaders, stakeholders, and change agents. Indeed, one of the goals of photovoice is to disseminate the information that was learned from the project to stakeholders and policymakers that the participants identify as having influence in their lives (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997). For this project, the GSA decided to hold a public, gallery-style exhibit to share the results from their photovoice project with school personnel, other students, family members, and community members. For youths in particular, these events provide an opportunity for intergenerational dialogue and to build relationships with influential people they may otherwise not be able to access (Wang, 2006). The GSA members chose a series of quotes from the transcripts and pictures that they felt best represented the key points they wanted to



**Figure 1.** “The blue flowers represent all of the of the queer and trans\* students who aren’t out here at [our high school]. The green is everyone else. The one dandelion is the one person who is out. This can be a sign of pride by being out, but it can also be isolating. Other students don’t want to be out because they see the one person who stands out experience more discrimination and harassment for being out. People are afraid of other students and their parents finding out. This is a small town and a lot of the teachers went to school with the parents [of current students].”

share (see [Figure 1](#) for an example). The exhibition event was held at a local coffee shop and art gallery.

### ***Study design and data collection***

This study was a one-group posttest-only design. At the photovoice exhibit, attendees were asked to sign in with their name, affiliation (e.g., student, parent, school employee, or local resident), and e-mail address. In the months following the exhibit, all of the non-student or adult attendees were e-mailed about participating in an online survey about their experiences with the exhibit. Of the 62 adults invited to take the survey, 20 (32%) did so. Respondents were entered into a drawing for a gift card as an incentive. The survey was designed by two of the authors, a researcher and a social worker in the community who assisted the students with the photovoice project. The questions and items assessed the adults’ personal experiences with the intervention event and how it may have influenced them, as well as their perceptions about the event itself (see [Table 1](#)). The survey included quantitative fixed-choice questions and responses, as well as open-ended questions, which allowed participants to enter qualitative comments.

### ***Participants***

As previously noted, 20 individuals participated in the study. Respondents were connected to the school through diverse avenues: 46.7% were local residents, 26.7% were employees at a local community agency, 13.3% were parents of enrolled students, 6.7% were both parents and local agency workers, and 6.7% were employees of

**Table 1.** Survey items and response options.

Survey Question or Item	Response Option
Did the event make you think about issues that you had not thought about before?	Yes or No
If "yes": Please describe the issues that the event made you think about.	Open-ended
What were some of the emotions or feelings that you experienced during the event?	Open-ended
Do you plan to take action or behave differently as a result of attending this event?	Yes or No
If "yes": Please describe actions you plan to take or behaviors you plan to change.	Open-ended
Please rate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements:	Disagree, Disagree
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The event was interesting and engaging.</li> <li>● The event was relevant and meaningful.</li> <li>● The event helped me better understand the school experiences and challenges for LGBTQ students.</li> <li>● The event helped me reflect on what I can do to improve the school climate for LGBTQ students.</li> </ul>	Somewhat, Neutral, Agree Somewhat, or Agree
What, if anything, made this event unique, special, or influential?	Open-ended
What are your suggestions about how the event could have been improved?	Open-ended
Would you recommend attending an event like this to a colleague, counterpart, or peer in another area?	Yes or No

the school system. In terms of race/ethnicity, most respondents identified as White (85.7%), with others identifying as Asian (7.1%) or Hispanic (7.1%). In terms of gender, 66.7% identified as female, 26.7% identified as male, and 6.7% identified as transgender/genderqueer. Some participants identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer (21.4%); however, most respondents identified as either heterosexual (54.3%) or mostly heterosexual (14.3%).

### **Data analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with SPSS (version 21) to generate percentages. Qualitative data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis with a conventional approach, which aims at describing phenomena and allowing themes to emerge from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This analytic approach involved several steps taken by three of the authors who were not involved in planning and implementing the exhibit. First, the authors independently read, wrote memos, and open-coded qualitative responses by labeling relevant segments of text. Second, the group met and compared notes, discussed codes, and derived a final coding scheme. Third, the authors independently reread the qualitative responses and coded text data using the established coding scheme. Fourth, the group met to compare the results of their coding and resolved a few discrepancies through negotiated consensus. The authors also set a threshold so that a theme would be reported in the results if at least two participants' responses reflected the same code. The number of participants whose responses reflected a theme is reported in parentheses.

A number of strategies for rigor were used to help ensure that our findings were valid and trustworthy. First, several forms of triangulation were used: investigator or analytic triangulation (e.g., three authors coded and analyzed the data), interdisciplinary triangulation (e.g., the three coders represented the disciplines of

psychology, social work, and education), and methodological triangulation (e.g., use of open-ended questions, discrete-choice questions, and Likert-type rating scale items; Padgett, 2012; Thurmond, 2001). In addition to triangulation, peer debriefing and support were used where members of the research team, as well as one qualitative researcher outside the team, met to discuss challenges related to the data and coding, provide feedback, and offer new ideas or alternative perspectives (Padgett, 2012). Finally, to promote fair interpretation of the data, negative case analysis was used to actively search for discrepant or contradictory responses and report them in the findings (Padgett, 2012).

## Results

### ***Research question 1: Did the photovoice intervention influence adult attendees cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally?***

#### ***Issues engaged by the event***

Results showed that 85% of the participants reported that the intervention made them think about issues they had not considered before. The most common issues prompted by the event related to the struggles of LGBTQ youths ( $n = 7$ ), including feeling “isolated” and “judged” because of their identity, facing hostility at a young period in life, being rejected by friends or family members, and having internal struggles about their identity. The adults’ levels of emotional engagement with these issues varied and were categorized as either sympathetic ( $n = 4$ ) or empathetic ( $n = 3$ ). Sympathetic responses entailed participants thinking about the issues that LGBTQ youths face intellectually, without emotionally connecting to the experiences. For example, one participant reported considering “how the issue of gender identity announces itself long before people are into the adult world.” Alternatively, empathetic responses involved participants taking the perspectives of the youths and emotionally engaging with the issues. For example, one participant pondered “what it might be like to be LGBTQ in our rural community,” and another lamented that they had “never considered the pain that gay/lesbian students feel.”

In addition to the struggles of LGBTQ youths, participants also reported that the intervention prompted them to consider gender issues ( $n = 7$ ), including gender identity, expression, and non-conformity. One respondent reported thinking about the use of “pronouns in everyday speech.” Another considered “gender variances along a continuum.” According to another attendee,

Our youth are struggling with issues around gender and the systems that are trying to force them into a binary category, without allowing for the multiple ways gender and sexual orientations express themselves.

Other issues raised related to the rural community context for the LGBTQ students ( $n = 4$ ). Some participants commented about the experiences of the LGBTQ students living and attending school in a small town in the rural South, which may be particularly difficult. One participant commented that the “openness and

**Table 2.** Emotions experienced during the photovoice intervention event.

Theme	<i>n</i>	Illustrative Quote
Excitement	9	"I felt excited that such an event was taking place in [the small town] where I live."
Concern	7	"I was sad and worried about the struggles they are going through."
Pride	6	"I felt so proud of the youths involved. That kind of honesty is courageous."
Hope	3	"I felt a same sense of hope and awe at the strength of the students who put this event together."
Curiosity	2	"I was able to candidly ask questions of students and mostly other attendees about life and explore [issues related to sexuality]."
Disappointment	2	"I wish the students had dug a bit deeper into or beyond the feeling of being 'different.'"

support for gay students at a high school in [a small town] ... would not have been possible only a few years ago." Finally, when asked if the event helped adults better understand the school experiences and challenges for LGBTQ students, 66.7% agreed, 20.0% agreed somewhat, and 13.3% felt neutral.

### ***Emotions experienced during the event***

Of the 20 participants, 70% noted emotions that they experienced during the intervention. Feelings related to excitement were most commonly reported, followed by concern, and feeling proud of the youths (see [Table 2](#)).

### ***Planned actions resulting from the event***

Results showed that 81% of the participants stated that they planned to take action or behave differently as a result of attending the intervention. The most common theme involved adults being more supportive or affirming of LGBTQ youths moving forward ( $n = 6$ ). For example, one participant stated,

I want to be more involved with supporting the LGBTQ+ youth in [this county] who are doing this groundbreaking work in their community. I plan to come to their events in the future and encourage people I know to do the same.

The intervention also led several participants ( $n = 3$ ) to consider the use and impact of language related to gender, such as gender pronouns used by LGBTQ individuals and language that is gender-neutral or -inclusive. In addition, several participants ( $n = 3$ ) also noted that the intervention prompted them to reflect on and confront their own biases related to sexuality and gender, as well as confronting bias within others. According to one participant,

The event encouraged me to continue taking the tiny actions I take in my everyday life, using gender-neutral terms, avoiding making heteronormative assumptions, and challenging others to examine how their language and behaviors might be further marginalizing others. That may not seem like a big deal, but it's so important for those who are marginalized ....

When asked if the intervention helped adults reflect on what they could do to improve the school climate for LGBTQ students, 46.7% agreed, 33.3% agreed somewhat, and 20.0% felt neutral.

## **Research question 2: What were the strengths and limitations of the photovoice intervention, and how could it have been improved?**

### **Unique or special characteristics of the event**

When asked if the event was interesting and engaging, 80.0% agreed, 13.3% agreed somewhat, and 6.7% felt neutral. When asked if the event was relevant and meaningful, 93.3% agreed and 6.7% agreed somewhat. When asked open-endedly about what made the event unique, special, or influential, five themes emerged from participants' responses. First, many participants ( $n = 7$ ) found the photovoice event's rural community context unique, citing both high levels of attendance and demonstrated support as positive elements. According to one participant,

For me, what stood out was simply the location of the event—in my small town where most people are either quite reluctant to support the LGBTQ community or are outspokenly against it.

Second, attendees cited the student leadership and voice in the project as an influential force ( $n = 6$ ). Third, the use of creative materials and the event's creative setting, an art gallery, were referred to as making the event “effective” and “interesting” ( $n = 4$ ). Fourth, several participants felt that the intervention opened a dialogue about often-silenced issues ( $n = 4$ ). According to one participant,

This is a topic that I think is typically hush-hush in this community. I think just having the event, with such honest messages from the students involved, made it hugely influential. Having this event at all made a statement: we're here, we're part of this community, we're worthy of respect, support, and love.

Fifth, the welcoming and inclusive environment at the event were also referenced by numerous respondents ( $n = 4$ ). In the words of one participant,

Nobody who would otherwise feel out of place (including myself) could feel anything but connection to other humans. It was a fun event; even making the restrooms genderless was an interesting touch.

Finally, results also showed that 93% of participants would recommend attending a similar event to a colleague, counterpart, or peer in another area.

### **Recommendations for future events**

When asked how the intervention could have been improved, participants made several recommendations. One recommendation involved connecting students or allies with resources ( $n = 3$ ). For example, a participant recommended “more resources about how to be an ally and how to get support if you are experiencing bullying or harassment as an LGBTQ student.” Other recommendations included having the event at a larger venue ( $n = 2$ ) and including other forms of art ( $n = 2$ ). Finally, although many participants made suggestions that had implications for a future event, two participants explicitly stated the event should be repeated. One participant stated, “It was a great start! Just make it an annual event and it will get better and better each year.”

## Discussion

The results indicate that photovoice is a promising, school- and community-based intervention strategy for LGBTQ students to cultivate and activate adult allies in their local community. *Allies* are people who are typically members of a dominant group who work to end oppression by supporting, partnering with, and/or working on behalf of socially disadvantaged people (Washington & Evans, 1991). All of the adults who attended the photovoice intervention had one or more memberships in a dominant group: all were adults and most were heterosexual. These dominant group statuses entail levels of power in the context of adultism and heterosexism that are often denied to LGBTQ adolescents. Thus, allies can use their influence to help improve the school experiences and well-being of LGBTQ students.

Our results align with findings in the literature about ally development. Other studies show that intervention events that conveyed information about diversity and oppression were noted as essential, initial experiences in the ally development process (Broido, 2000; Dillon et al., 2004; DiStefano, Croteau, Anderson, Kampa-Kokesch, & Bullard, 2000; Duhigg, Rostosky, Gray, & Wimsatt, 2010). In other studies, such events were described as “critical events” (Dillon et al., 2004, p. 173), “influential events” (DiStefano et al., 2000, p. 138), and “trigger events” (Duhigg et al., 2010, p. 10). These experiences occurred in educational, occupational, and community settings, and included interpersonal contact with members of the affected group (i.e., LGBTQ people). Our findings demonstrate that the photovoice intervention prompted adults to think about the oppression facing LGBTQ youths. Awareness of LGBTQ oppression is a key factor of allies (Jones, Brewster, & Jones, 2014). In addition, some of our adult participant responses reflected empathy—taking the perspective of the LGBTQ students to understand and emotionally connect with the issues they were facing. Other studies also found empathy to be a catalyst in ally development (Broido, 2000; Dillon et al., 2004).

Emotional responses seem to accompany exposure to information about oppression and interaction with LGBTQ individuals who have been socially disadvantaged. As in our study, other researchers found negative emotions among developing allies, such as anger, sorrow, shame, and guilt around the discrimination of LGBTQ people and heterosexual privilege (Dillon et al., 2004; Duhigg et al., 2010). However, no other studies reported the presence of positive emotions, such as excitement, pride, and hope, as we found in this study. Perhaps this was the case because the photovoice exhibit included strong leadership by LGBTQ students working toward empowerment.

Action is a cornerstone of being an ally and involves an array of potential behaviors. In this study, planned actions because of the intervention included supporting and affirming LGBTQ youths, using gender-neutral and -inclusive language, confronting internalized bias, and confronting bias in others. In other studies,

actions reported by allies included endorsing LGBTQ-affirmative policies, providing LGBTQ-affirmative programs, educating others about LGBTQ issues, advocating for or with LGBTQ people, confronting heterosexism in others, engaging with the LGBTQ community, providing social support, self-monitoring about one's privilege, raising one's awareness about internalized bias, and increasing one's understanding about LGBTQ issues (Dillon et al., 2004; DiStefano et al., 2000; Duhigg et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2014).

In terms of the photovoice intervention itself, the location in a rural community was the most cited unique element of the event. This was particularly salient to attendees perhaps because communities located in rural and southern states are often characterized by hostility and aggression toward LGBTQ people, isolation among LGBTQ individuals, and limited and fragmented resources for the LGBTQ community (Barefoot, Rickard, Smalley, & Warren, 2015; Boulden, 2001; Kazyak, 2011; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Oswald & Culton, 2003; Wienke & Hill, 2013; Yarbrough, 2004).

Other important aspects of the event noted by participants were inherent to the photovoice approach: student leadership and voice in the project, use of creative materials (i.e., photos), and the opening of dialogue about often silenced issues. Indeed, photovoice typically involves people who have been marginalized using images to voice or raise concerns about aspects of their environment and experiences to those who can help improve conditions and promote well-being, such as the public, organizational leaders, and policymakers.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations in this study. A one-group posttest-only design prevented us from examining change in the participants over time and comparing intervention attendees with a control or comparison group. However, the study design was necessary because the intervention event was open to the public and we did not know who would attend ahead of time in order to plan a more rigorous evaluation. There may have been self-selection bias because adults from the school and community chose to attend the photovoice exhibit or not. Those who attended may have been more open to the issues presented, and consequently, more influenced by the intervention than others in the community generally. Similarly, although every adult who attended the intervention event was invited to take the survey, only about one-third of adults completed the survey. Thus, participants' responses may not be representative of all the adults who attended the intervention. There was also a lack of educators in our sample. Many school personnel attended the photovoice intervention; however, very few decided to take the survey. Although attendees were informed that the survey was anonymous and confidential and that their responses would not be reported in conjunction with their demographics, the educators who attended the exhibit may have had concerns about identifiability and decided not to take the survey. A final limitation related to the photovoice intervention itself. Although our findings indicate that the intervention activated adults as allies to LGBTQ students, this was a one-time event. Being an effective ally is a long-term process, and

opportunities for knowledge and skill development should have followed the initial photovoice event.

### **Future research**

Given the preliminary yet promising findings that photovoice is effective in activating adult allies in educational and community settings, future research may explore alternative modes of reaching adults. For example, an online platform could be constructed with students' photovoice images and written or spoken narratives in order to increase reach and accessibility. Researchers could examine potential benefits and limitations of online and in-person formats. In addition, the photovoice exhibit could have been held at the school in the late afternoon or evening so that it would be easier for educators and students to attend the intervention. This may have maximized attendance and addressed concerns related to self-selection bias. Another direction for future work involves improved data collection. Outcomes could be evaluated longitudinally where adults are sent electronic invitations and those who indicate that they plan to attend could then be invited to take an online survey prior to the photovoice exhibit. Outcomes assessed at baseline could also be measured at immediate posttest and then again perhaps six months following the intervention. Longitudinal data collection is needed because ally development is an ongoing, lifelong process. Collecting data from participants at multiple times after the initial photovoice event could capture the extent to which adults actually followed through with ally-related actions, development in knowledge and skills related to being an ally, and factors that facilitated or impeded their ally development. Adult allies in schools and communities are undoubtedly essential to improving school climates for LGBTQ students.

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