Title: The role of secondary school choral programs in creating safe space for LGBTQ students: A national survey

Bullying is a persistent and detrimental problem in American Schools (Swearer & Doll, 2001). Victimization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer and/or questioning (LGBTQ) youth (or those perceived to be LGBTQ) is an untiring and injurious form of bullying (Hong & Garbarino, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). The negative effects of such bullying on LGBTQ youth are both personal and academic (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). Schools should take steps to provide safe spaces in which LGBTQ students can express their identity without fear (Peters, 2003). "Safe space" is generally defined as a place in which students feel comfortable expressing traits that define them as "other." For example, teachers and administrators can signal their support through means as simple as playing a "safe space" sticker on a classroom or office door.

Six of ten LGBT students surveyed in the Kosciw et al. (2012) study reported being members of high school music ensembles-- the most popular extra curricular activity among students in this national survey. Middle and high school classrooms generally are understood to be an environment that cultivates understanding between divergent ethnic and cultural traditions. The reality of creating safe space in American schools can be fraught and is inconsistent across classroom settings. Some teachers may express less empathy for LGBTQ students, causing a failure to intervene when bullying occurs (Perez, Schanding, & Dao, 2013). Purposeful, decisive action by teachers and administrators to create safe spaces for LGBTQ youth can improve a school's culture (Clark, 2010; Peters, 2003).

The music education community rarely has addressed the needs of the LGBTQ community directly, and music education research lacks a significant body of scholarly literature about LGBTQ issues in general (Freer, 2013). Though gay and lesbian community choruses have become increasingly prominent in American society (Gordon, 1990; Hayes, 2007), research on LGBTQ issues in choral music is still lacking. In the absence of music education literature about the influence of school music programs in the lives of LGBTQ students, the authors wondered what role secondary school choral programs play in creating safe space for middle/junior high and high school students. Our study surveyed college and university choral singers who self-identify as LGBTQ (N=1,123). Respondents reflected upon their middle school/junior high and high school experiences in an effort to determine whether school choral programs provided safe space for them as they navigated their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Preliminary analysis of survey data suggests that high school choral programs were perceived as providing safe space and that choral programs were more influential in crafting safe space than were secondary schools writ large. A majority of respondents reported a high school choral teacher who openly spoke of their support for LGBTQ students in class. Despite such support, a majority of LGBTQ students did share their LGBTQ identity with their choral teacher(s). With a clearer understanding of the strategies that have worked well in creating safe spaces for LGBTQ students, we can improve choral music education for future generations of students.

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