“Run Like a Girl? That’s So Gay!” Exploring Homophobic and Sexist Language among Grade 7 and 8 Students in the Toronto District School Board

By

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Abstract

Homophobic name-calling abounds in schools, especially at the high school level. Driving much of this research is the negative impact of anti-gay language and epithets on lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) identified students, students with LGBT parents and guardians, and students overall. Studies in the US, UK, and Canada report regular use of phrases such as ‘that’s so gay’, ‘faggot’, and the word “gay” itself to denote something or someone with little to no value. However, a dearth of research looking at the prevalence of homophobic language at the middle school level exists. Furthermore, there is even less research looking at the relationship between homophobic and sexist language use.

Using a mixed methods explanatory sequential design, this three-paper dissertation explored homophobic and sexist language use in middle school, specifically investigating, among other things, how often and under what conditions grade seven and eight students use these types of language. A stratified random sample of middle school students (n=488) completed a survey that included the Homophobic Content Agent Target Scale (HCAT). The
newly developed *Sexist Content Agent Target Scale* (S-CAT) explored sexist language. Students reported their frequency of homophobic and sexist language use in five relationship domains including friends, strangers, and antagonists. As well, five focus groups explored more deeply students’ perceptions and understandings of homophobic and sexist language use at school.

A number of important findings were produced including the prevalence of homophobic name-calling prior to high schools as well as the strong association between homophobic and sexist language use. These empirical findings join the literature that has long conceptually linked sexism and homophobia, whereby their interlocking nature manifests in name-calling experiences of middle school students. Students (boys in particular) as either agents or targets of sexist language had increased likelihood of being agents or targets of homophobic language. Given the often contentious nature of anti-homophobia education, the hesitancy of school staff to intervene regularly (even in the presence of this language), the findings presented here suggest anti-sexist education as another means to address homophobic language, thereby contributing to creating and maintaining more positive learning environment for all students.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Problem: Homophobic and Sexist Language in Schools

Homophobia

Defined as a combination of prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination, homophobia targets lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, as well as those perceived as non-heterosexual; homophobia is manifested as negative attitudes, ideas, and actions (e.g., name-calling). Homophobia affects lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) students, students with LGBT parents (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004; Gregory & Ray, 2001) and students in general (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2003; Purohit & Walsh, 2003; Renold, 2003; VanEvery & Wallis, 2000). Common and prevalent homophobic name-calling, put-downs, and antigay slurs among secondary school students have been investigated in the UK (Thurlow, 2001), the U.S. (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006), and Canada (Taylor, Peter, Schachter, Paquin, Beldom, Gross, & McMinn 2008). In 2005, a GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Educators Network), survey of 1,732 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students 13 to 20 years of age revealed that over 50% reported hearing homophobic (antigay, antilesbian, antiqueer) remarks or put-downs by other students. Further, over two thirds reported hearing other students make comments, such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay,” which conveyed a pejorative meaning for the word “gay.” Almost all (92%) of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students reported hearing homophobic remarks frequently or often (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). Distribution of the survey was done through the GLSEN website and 39 LGBT youth-serving organizations across the United States.
Sexism

Sexist language used in schools has received less attention in the literature. In one of the few studies, Kosciw and colleagues (2012) found that nearly 75% of students (the majority in high school) hear sexist remarks often or frequently at school. Nearly two thirds of participants in this study were white students. According to Glick and Fiske’s model of ambivalent sexism (1996), there are two types of sexism – benevolent and hostile. The former is constituted of patronizing attitudes stemming from a belief that the gender delineation that underpins traditional gender roles exists between boys and girls. The latter type refers to negative reactions to those who do not conform to traditional gender role stereotypes, for example, targeting a boy seen as expressing interest in activities perceived as girls’ activities (Leaper & Brown, 2014). Both boys and girls are targeted for atypical gender behaviour and expression, and they experience verbal (e.g., name-calling) and non-verbal (e.g., exclusion) pressure to conform (Jewell & Brown, 2014; Kowalski, 2007; McGuire, Martin, Fabes, & Hanish, 2007; Russell, Kosciw, Horn & Saewyc, 2010). Research conducted prior to the middle school years with younger children reveals their dynamic role in producing and reproducing particular ideas and behaviours associated with gender (Blakemore et al., 2009). The influence of peer groups is evident among younger children, whereby “children instruct their peers about the content of cultural gender stereotypes; exclude peers on the basis of gender; tease peers concerning violations of gender norms; and in extreme cases, harass and physically attack peers who are gender atypical” (Lamb, Bigler, Liben, & Green, 2009, p. 361). Since the middle school years have been identified as yet another crucial time for peer influence (Brown & Larson, 2009), it is unsurprising that research on group norms reveals that students manifest sexism by “teasing other classmates who do not conform to gender
norms” (Leaper & Brown, 2014, p. 194). Students clearly come to middle school well prepared and well versed in gender roles and stereotypes, and in their enforcement.

Sexist language covers a vast range of words and phrases, many of which are sexually derogatory; much of the language is explicitly sexually harassing (e.g., bitch, whore) and even more language has a focus on body type and size (e.g., fat bitch) (Shakeshaft, Mandel, Johnson, & Sawyer, 1997). The focus of the current study is on sexist language as it relates to homophobia. Specifically, this research focuses on language that reflects the rigid gender roles deployed in antigay sentiment (Plummer, 2001; Renold, 2003) or on what Nayak and Kehily (1996) call “the gendered dynamics of homophobia” (p. 213). The terms “sexist homophobia” and “homophobic sexism” (Daley, Solomon, Newman, & Mishna, 2008, p. 17) were coined in an attempt to capture the intersectionality of homophobia and sexism. A review of the literature found only one other writer using the term “sexist homophobia.” In the book titled Writing Prejudices: The Psychoanalysis and Pedagogy of Discrimination from Shakespeare to Toni Morrison, author Robert Samuels (2001) presents a critical analysis of efforts to challenge prejudice through the use of literary studies. He uses the term “sexist homophobia” (p. 16) to underscore his commentary on psychotherapist Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s claim that psychologists are limiting research on homophobia by seeing it only as a form of sexism. Specifically, Young-Bruehl (1996) asserts that there are upwards of eight variations of homophobia, including “males prejudiced against males perceived as feminine” (p. 150). Samuels (2001) responds by stating that “Young-Bruehl does not argue that this mode of sexist homophobia does not exist; rather, she insists that there are several different forms of homophobia” (p. 16). Such conflation of homophobia with terms laden with sexism illustrates the intricate relationship between homophobia and sexism.
Beyond Suzanne Pharr’s classic book *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (1988), the theoretical links between homophobia and sexism have been borne out by other feminist scholars (hooks, 2000; Rich, 1980); the links are described as “incontestable” by Murphy (2006, p. 209). Other areas of research include examination of the tendency of straight men to express stronger antigay attitudes than women do (Herek, 1994; Kite & Whitley, 1998) and of the correlation of antigay beliefs with traditional gender role beliefs (Walker et al. 2000; Whitley, 2001; Wilkinson, 2004). Over 60 years ago, this connection surfaced in James Baldwin’s 1949 essay, titled Preserving Innocence: Studies in a New Morality. In it, Baldwin argues that

Our present debasement of and our obsession with him [the homosexual] corresponds to the debasement of the relations between the sexes…homophobia, or the ‘ambiguous and terrible position’ assigned to homosexuals in our society, derived not just from hatred of homosexuality, but from sexism. (as cited in Fone, 2000, p. 395).

The conclusion then may be that sexism plays out differently for boys and girls, and thus there are specific types of sexism. This study focuses on homophobic language and phrases that notably map onto to gender role stereotypes and, in particular, onto the gender policing of boys deemed feminine.

**Homophobia, Bullying, and Harassment**

Across the literature, there is a variety of definitions for bullying and harassment. According to Olweus (1994),

bullying includes exposure repeatedly and over time to negative actions (physical contact or words) on the part of one or more students by way of words, physical contact or other means. Also present is an asymmetric power
relationship where one student is relatively helpless against a student or students who harass (p. 1173).

According to Warwick and colleagues (2006), homophobic bullying is “an incident which is perceived to be homophobic and can take on different forms, it can be name-calling or verbal threats” (p. 60). Harassment, specifically sexual harassment, is any unwanted verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct or behaviour of a sexual nature, and it is a form of sex discrimination (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2011). In their study of sexual harassment at school for the American Association of University Women, which involved grade 7 to 12 students, Hill and Kearl (2011) also included expressions such as “that’s so gay” as examples of sexual harassment. Specifically,

harassment based on a victim’s failure to conform to gender norms is recognized as sexual harassment. Antigay and -lesbian slurs are frequently used in gender harassment, but any student who is perceived as failing to conform to social gender norms can be the target. For example, girls may be called “lesbian” if they appear “masculine,” and boys may be called “gay” or “fag” if they seem “feminine.” (p. 6)

A growing body of literature documents the prevalence of bullying among elementary and middle school students (Bosworth et al. 1999; Boulton & Smith, 1994; Eslea & Rees, 2001; Hoover, Oliver, & Hazier, 1992; Jansen et al., 2012; Pellegrini, 2002; Pellegrini & Long, 2002). In the U.S., Juvonen (2004) and colleagues state that bullying in middle school outpaces bullying in either elementary or high school and assert: “Particularly risky are middle school environments in which students feel disconnected from others, not supported or cared for, and unsafe” (p. 61). A review of the literature on bullying reveals some attention to the role of
homophobia in the harassment (and bullying) of students (Baker & Fishbein, 1998; Fineran, 2002; Hillier & Harrison, 2004; Interactive, 2001; Mishna et al., 2008; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Stratton & Beckles, 1997). Rivers (2001) found “that a majority of the name calling was homophobic in nature” (p. 514). These findings indicate that there is a need not only to understand the extent of verbal harassment, but also to identify and make visible the content of such behaviour. In the United States, much research about homophobia (e.g., verbal and physical), has investigated the impact on LGBT students and LGBT families (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004; Douglas et al., 1999; Kuvalanka et al., 2014; Predrag, 2003; Valios 2003), but research in Canada on the prevalence of verbal homophobia is scarce.

There has been greater attention to homophobia in general and to homophobic name-calling in particular during the high school years. The research includes examination of homophobia’s role as a defense mechanism (Lewis & White, 2009), the implications for schools and parents (Espelage et al., 2008), the negotiation of heterosexual male friendships (Kehler, 2007), the relationship between homophobia and sports participation in high school (Osbourne & Wagner, 2007), suicide (Ashman, 2004), and overall safe spaces for LGBT youth (Peters, 2003). Finally, researchers have investigated teachers’ perceptions about the ways the bullying of sexual minority students is addressed (Perez et al., 2013). However, there is less research, especially in Canada, examining middle school students, who are in early adolescence, and homophobia.

Shakeshaft and colleagues (1997) identified homophobic insults as a common tool of harassment among male students. Over three academic years, 1992 to 1995, they conducted interviews with over 1,000 students in middle, junior, and high school. The research included observations of students in classes, hallways, and social settings before and after school. Findings revealed that “harassment of boys often took the form of homophobic insult, in which
In England and Wales, Thurlow (2001) also investigated homophobic pejoratives among 14 and 15-year-old students. A convenience sample of 377 Year Nine pupils (Age = 14-15) was drawn from five coeducational high schools in either of two major Welsh and English cities, with almost equal numbers of boys (n=191, 51%) and girls (n=186, 49%). The researchers concluded, “It is a disturbing fact that homophobic verbal abuse is rife in many parts of the world, and runs largely unchecked in high schools” (p. 25).

In a study of students in an all-male college prep school in the U.S., Swearer and colleagues (2008) found that students reported receiving verbal taunts related to gender nonconformity. Drawing data from a large longitudinal survey that investigated bullying and victimization, the finding was that 26% of students in grades nine, ten, and eleven (n=251), “reported that they had been bullied because others called them gay” (p. 160). In the literature, there are also reports of the targeting of gender nonconforming students with homophobic epithets (including trans-identified students) (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; McGuire et al., 2010; Rieger et al., 2010).

In Canada, Taylor and colleagues (2008), surveyed 1,700 students through both online participation (primarily social networking sites) and in school sessions in order to investigate experiences of homophobic and transphobic events. Nearly three quarters (73%) of participants identified somewhere along the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer) identity continuum. The average participant age was 20 (median age 18), but the students’ grade levels were not reported. Approximately two thirds of respondents were in high school at the time and those not in high school or post-secondary schools answered the questions based on their experiences in their last year in school. A total of 75% of the participants reported hearing
expressions such as “that’s so gay” every day in school. Of the students who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, 50% reported hearing words like “faggot,” “queer,” “lesbo,” and “dyke” on a daily basis.

Using qualitative interviews with young adults with lesbian mothers and asking about their previous experiences in school, Kuvalanka and colleagues (2014) reported that the most common form of stigma experienced by these participants “was negative comments about LGB people and use of slurs, such as ‘gay’ and ‘fag’” (p. 253).

In contrast with high school-based quantitative studies investigating homophobia (see Kosciw, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Taylor et al., 2008)), Poteat and Espelage (2005) surveyed 191 pre-high school age students (eighth grade) in order to explore the relationship between bullying and homophobic verbal content. Over 30% of all respondents, both male and female, stated that they directed homophobic language at someone they did not know during the period of a week. By examining the role of “homophobic content” in bullying among grade eight students, the research confirmed a strong presence of verbal homophobia among the other elements of bullying. One of their findings was that homophobic content was a primary constituent of expression. In order to understand the role of homophobia in the everyday speech of younger students, Athanases and Comar (2008) conducted research, using mixed methods, with 12 to 13 year olds in grade seven. Over two sessions, 133 participating students wrote anonymously about their perceptions of LGBT people and homophobic name-calling. The research included completion of Likert scale responses in order to assess the level of acceptance of those attracted to same-sex people, among other issues. As in previous research, the participants reported the pervasive use of homophobic name-calling.
While research has identified homophobic name-calling as a problem, it is necessary to articulate the impact of this phenomenon at both the individual level of students and the level of schools. Arguably, the most direct impact is on students whose sexual identities fall outside of heterosexuality and on students, whose parents have identities outside of heterosexuality (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). The impacts of homophobic name-calling include psychological distress (Espelage et al., 2008; Rivers & Noret, 2008), increased alcohol and drug use (Espelage et al., 2008; Rivers & Noret, 2008), feelings of isolation, unhealthy coping strategies, experience of increased anxiety, and depression (Swearer et al., 2008). According to Swearer and colleagues (2008), homophobic speech affects students in general and boys in particular through the enforcement of what they term the “Boy Code” (p. 170). The message to boys is that any expression outside a particular masculinity is equal to femininity and “evidence of being gay” (p. 170). They further report an association between the impact of homophobic bullying and the perception of an unsafe school environment. Athanases and Comar (2008) link an individual-level perspective on name-calling (what one student says to another) to the broader issue of a school’s climate, stating “that what gets spoken in the micro-arena of the classroom and school halls relates to the macro-level context and ways relevant issues get cast” (p. 28). Thus, the problem extends beyond LGBT youth.

Research points to the younger years as a time when students learn and use homophobic language (Plummer, 2001). The underlying presence of gender role stereotypes reflected in some homophobic language also has to be considered (Good, Thomson, & Brathwaite 2005); a significant gap exists in the investigation of homophobic and sexist language among middle school students. The 2006 Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB) Student Census revealed that 41% of grade seven and eight students reported experiencing name-calling or insults. When
compared to threats and exclusion, “name calling and insults were the more frequently reported
types of bullying behaviour” (Yau & O’Reilly, 2006, p. 21). By 2011, this number dropped,
albeit slightly, to 38%. The census did not ask about the specific type and kind of name-calling,
and thus the homophobic and sexist content of this name-calling remains unknown.

The purpose of this study is to explore middle school students’ experience of both
homophobic and sexist language and to determine the prevalence of this language use in middle
school. Wessler and De Andrade (2006) point out, “Questions remain as to the actual content
and forms of bullying and harassment in schools [and] the ways students are impacted by it” (p. 512).
Thus, this study explores the homophobic and sexist content of students’ name-calling in
middle school. Furthermore, this study will examine the conditions and circumstances under
which such name-calling and insults occur, for example, who uses the language, how often,
towards whom, where in school the language is used, whether or not a teacher is present, and
whether teachers or peers intervene in the presence of this language. This dissertation seeks to
explore these issues and remedy the gap in the literature.

By digging deeper into the phenomena of name-calling, put-downs, and insults by
naming the language as homophobic (or antigay) or sexist (e.g., devaluing women and girls),
this current study fits with the literature that examines micro-aggressions. Sue (2010) defines micro-
aggressions as

the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or
insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile,
derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their
marginalized group membership. In many cases, these hidden messages
may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment.

(p. 3)

While the original studies of micro-aggressions focused on racialized minorities, other minority groups (e.g., LGBT people) are also susceptible to daily micro-aggressions (Wright & Wegner, 2012). Micro-aggressions can range from micro-insults to micro-assaults to micro-invalidations, with name-calling as an example of a micro-assault (Sue et al., 2007), and they can be either intentional or unintentional. The survey in this study did not include questions about intention (e.g., did you mean to be homophobic or sexist when you used this language?), but students were asked what they believed were the reasons behind the use of this language.

The Ontario Ministry of Education released a report from the Safe Schools Action Team (2008) entitled, Shaping a Culture of Respect in Our Schools: Promoting Safe and Healthy Relationships - Safe Schools Action Team Report on Gender-based Violence, Homophobia, Sexual Harassment and Inappropriate Sexual Behaviours in Schools. A key recommendation of the report was the need for school boards to collect data:

Schools must conduct an anonymous school climate survey of their students, on a regularly scheduled basis, to assess perceptions of safety and to inform prevention and intervention planning. These surveys must include bullying/harassment questions on homophobia and sexual harassment. (p. 22)
This dissertation is consistent with the Ministry of Education goal named above in its investigation of homophobic and sexist language among middle school students. This research will extend the current literature and its focus on secondary schools by increasing the understanding of students’ experiences with homophobic and sexist language before they enter high school. This research will also provide a context for understanding the phenomenon of name-calling in middle schools and thus inform the process of tailoring intervention and prevention programs that address homophobia and sexism.

**Homophobia and Sexism: A Lesbian Feminist Theoretical Framework**

Homophobic name-calling, insults, and slurs, such as “that’s so gay” to denote something negative, fit within the broader framework of the intersection of homophobia and sexism. In *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, lesbian feminist writer Suzanne Pharr first articulated the relationship between these two phenomena and presented a theory that centered primarily on the effects of homophobia and sexism on all women, lesbian and heterosexual. Pharr (1997) argued that sexism deploys one dimension of its control and dominance through homophobia, whereby

Homophobia works effectively as a weapon of sexism because it is joined with a powerful arm, heterosexism. Heterosexism creates the climate for homophobia with its assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual and its display of power and privilege as the norm…Heterosexism and homophobia work together to enforce compulsory heterosexuality and that bastion of patriarchal power, the nuclear family (p. 16).

According to lesbian feminism, the institutions of patriarchy and the nuclear family are maintained and sustained with ongoing adherence to particular and rigid gender roles for women,
and, in this system, “homophobia and sexism play crucial roles in preserving traditional gender ideologies and maintaining the polarization of the masculine and feminine” (Murphy, 2006, p. 209). In addition, Pharr discussed the general effect of homophobia on lesbians as well as gay men. She noted that gay men experience fear and hatred because of their identification with women which results in not considering these mean to be ‘real men’. So ubiquitous are traditional gender ideologies that their influence is revealed in other realms, such as educational settings, and schools in particular. During my school social practice I regularly asked a classroom of middle school students what they think motivates such name-calling (a basic manifestation of homophobia), and many stated that the targeted boy may be acting “like a girl.” This way of acting thus prompts the name caller to use language highlighting his or her perception that the target is not behaving in a way consistent with expectations about how boys should act. While some examples included girls behaving outside of their expected traditional stereotypical gender roles, most examples skewed towards boys perceived to be acting more feminine. Further to this point, I note too that my positionality as a white and out gay man leading these workshops is not neutral. Consequently, students’ experiences in the workshops and examples they offered (e.g., skewing towards more male-centred experiences of homophobia) would differ qualitatively with a female facilitator. Furthermore, the use of such language is not restricted to scenarios where someone steps outside of rigid gender roles, although this perceived transgression is a key component. With boys’ transgressions, any type of perceived difference in a boy (e.g., shyness, softness, or smartness) construed as “un-masculine” can invite homophobic remarks on a regular basis (Plummer, 2001).

Another dimension of the intersection of homophobia and sexism is the role of homophobic speech in the maintenance of particular heterosexual masculinities among young
men. It is important to move beyond simple explanations of such language as mere joking banter and to analyze such speech as an imperative in the policing of rigid gender roles among males. Shakeshaft (1997) and colleagues conducted research that revealed some of the intricacies played out by seventh and eighth grade boys who perform this policing of gender roles, whereby a “homophobic club [was] wielded against boys who didn’t conform to a macho image” (p. 23). One participant reported, “If they were quiet, if they acted different in the way they walked or acted in the hall – like hyper or something... they’d get laughed about. Kids make up nicknames like gay and faggot” (p. 23). According to Nayak and Kehily (1996), the use of such language plays a key role in understanding how “homophobic practices are fused with the struggle for a particular masculinity” (p. 211). The exploration of homophobia requires paying attention to sexism, and thus it is critical to conduct research using a lesbian feminist theoretical framework, since it “posits that heterosexism acts as a weapon of sexism by enforcing rigid gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality” (Szymanski & Carr, 2008, p. 40). Figure 1 presents a conceptual diagram that represents how the framework of sexism in turn operates to fuel homophobia that leads to homophobic name-calling, among other things.

Instead of studying students’ attitudes towards lesbians and gays, this study investigates the language used in schools. According to a structural perspective, homophobia embeds itself systemically, with effects that manifest at the institutional level. Critical theorists such as Gregory Herek (2002) and lesbian feminist writers, including Rich (1980) and Kitzinger (1987), name this more aptly as heterosexism, an ideology that claims the superiority of heterosexual identity to the exclusion of all else and justifies actions and intentions to punish those who do not adhere to such an identity. Through this perspective, homophobia is understood by illuminating
the role and function of social institutions (e.g., the family, schools) in shaping the expectations placed on individuals (e.g., appropriate gender roles).
Figure 1: Relationships Among Sexism, Homophobia, and Homophobic Name-calling
Hence, neither the individual psyche of the lesbian or gay man nor the homophobic person is the dominant organizing principle in the process of understanding and/or researching homophobia. Rather, structural determinants (e.g., gender-role stereotypes) inform the behaviours, thoughts, and actions through which antigay language and homophobia are manifested “as hate-words pollut[ing] the social-psychological environment in which young bisexual, gay and lesbian people must live” (Thurlow, 2001, p. 26).

In this dissertation, the focus is on middle school students in grades seven and eight. These schools are sites where homophobic and sexist language is a regular feature in the lives of students. This language is commonly used in derogatory remarks, such as the ubiquitous “that’s so gay!” or “you run like a girl”; the latter remark targets boys in particular. This investigation includes not just naming schools as sites where homophobic behaviour occurs, but also as sites where such prejudice is actively formed and promoted. It is important to acknowledge the centrality of schools as sites of opportunity in order to challenge and address, not only the prejudices students bring with them to school, but also the complicity of schools in reinforcing and maintaining prejudice (Bergen, 2001). This dynamic implicates school staff when such remarks are dismissed or ignored outright, often to the detriment of all students. Teachers and other school staff will not participate in this study, which will explore students’ perceptions regarding the interventions of teachers or other school staff on occasions when this language is used. Failure to interrupt such language makes educators, and, by extension, schools, “complicit in the everyday cruelty of heterosexist/homophobic hegemony” (Smith & Smith, 1998, p. 309). Furthermore, although research that draws on retrospective accounts of LGBT individuals is necessary to document the hurt and harm experienced, the research is not sufficient. There is a
need for empirical investigations that take place while students, younger ones in particular, are still in school (Athanases & Comar, 2008).

**Specific Aims of the Three Papers**

The overall aim of this dissertation research, which uses a mixed methods explanatory sequential design, is to investigate homophobic and sexist language use among grade seven and eight students enrolled in the Toronto District School Board. This three-paper dissertation will use primary data (survey and focus groups). Using an exploratory cross-sectional survey (n=488) that incorporates the Homophobic Content Agent Target (HCAT) scale (Poteat & Espelage, 2005), the first paper reports on the prevalence of homophobic and sexist language use among grade seven and eight students in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The survey asked students to report the frequency of the occasions when they were either agents and targets of homophobic language during the past week in relation to a friend, a stranger, and an antagonist. The original scale also asked students about the use of this language by and towards “someone they thought was gay,” and “someone they didn’t think was gay,” but these particular items were excluded from the analysis since they were deemed not mutually exclusive in relation to the other categories, i.e., “by a friend,” “by a stranger,” and “by an antagonist.” For example, “someone they think is gay” could be the same person who was deemed an “antagonist.” With permission from the authors (Poteat and Espelage), I modified the HCAT to explore sexist language. Instead of examples such as “gay,” “that’s so gay,” “faggot,” etc., students were given examples such as “sissy,” “girl,” or “you run like a girl,” and asked to report on their frequency as agents and targets of sexist language during the past week in relation to a friend, a stranger, and an antagonist. In short, the revised scale substitutes homophobic language with particular types of sexist language that map onto boys’ perceived lack of the
prescribed norms of masculinity. This paper reports the frequency distributions of students as agents and targets of both homophobic and sexist language, as well as students’ responses regarding the locations in school where they hear homophobic and sexist language. The paper also includes students’ reports about whether teachers are present and, if so, whether they intervene or peers intervene, about the motivation for the use of these phrases and terms, and about whether students think such language use is a problem.

Paper two draws on the same survey dataset as paper one (n=488) and builds on the findings of paper one, whereby boys, more than girls, use and receive homophobic and sexist language of the types provided in the survey. Paper two employs logistic regression to explore the relationship between gender and the use of homophobic and sexist language as well as the predictors of such language use.

Finally, paper three includes qualitative reporting on five focus groups with 26 students in grades seven and eight from four schools. The students in the focus group schools were not participants in the survey reported in papers one and two. Using deductive thematic content analysis, paper three explores the perceptions and understandings of middle school students regarding homophobic and sexist language use in their schools.

This dissertation research addresses two gaps in the social work literature. First, the exploration of homophobic language among middle school students in Canada extends the current literature, which focuses primarily on the secondary school experience. Second, by exploring homophobic language use along with sexist language use, this research reports on the empirical links between homophobia and sexism – concepts that have been long linked conceptually. While each paper is an individual piece of scholarship with distinct research
questions, the three papers taken together provide an extensive, in-depth exploration of homophobic and sexist name-calling in middle schools by investigating the gendered aspects of this kind of name-calling, and offering proposals and recommendations for intervening and addressing homophobic and sexist name-calling.
References


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Chapter 2: Paper #1: Homophobic Sticks and Sexist Stones: Investigating Homophobic and Sexist Name-Calling among Middle School Students

Introduction

The shifting definitions of homophobia over the past four decades include references to the belittling of homosexuals (Weinberg, 1972), manifestations of heterosexual hegemony (Kinsman, 1987), and denigration and stigmatization of nonheterosexual behaviour (Wickberg, 2000). In 2002, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) defined homophobia as “fear, hatred, and discrimination against the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans community or people who are believed to be LGBT. Homophobia is also made up of stereotypes” (TDSB & Elementary Teachers of Toronto, 2002, p.10). The pervasiveness of homophobia in schools, for example, antigay language, slurs, and put-downs, is well documented in the literature (Collier, Bos, Sandfort, 2013; Lalor and Rendle-Short, 2007; Poteat and Espelage, 2005; Wallis and VanEvery, 2000). Homophobia negatively impacts lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) students (Kosciw, 2012), students with LGBT parents (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004; Ray and Gregory, 2001), and students in general (Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2003; Pascoe, 2007; Plummer, 2001; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011; Renold, 2003; Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012; Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). Verbal homophobia (i.e., name-calling and put-downs) among secondary school students has been investigated in the UK (Thurlow, 2001), the U.S. (Athanases & Comar, 2008; Interactive, 2005; Kosciw, 2004; Presgraves, 2010), and Canada (Taylor, 2009). A 2004 survey (Gay Lesbian Straight Educators Network [GLSEN]) of 1,732 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students between the ages of 13 and 20 found that over 50% reported hearing homophobic (antigay, antilesbian, antiqueer) remarks or put-downs by other students. Further, that over two thirds reported frequently
hearing other students make comments such as, “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay,” which convey a pejorative meaning for the word “gay.” A recent Canadian survey by EGALE (Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere) of over 1,700 current and former high school students found that 75% of participants (LGBT and straight) reported hearing antigay remarks, such as “that’s so gay” daily at school (Taylor et al., 2008). In another Canadian study, 38% of grade nine male students and 26% of grade nine female students reported calling someone “gay,” “fag,” “dyke,” “lezzie,” or “queer,” or using similar terms at least once at school during a three month period (Chiodo et al., 2008).

Research that examines homophobia in high schools includes attention to name-calling as a psychological defense mechanism, for example, using homophobia to deflect attention from oneself (Lewis & White, 2009), to the role of schools and parents (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008), and to the negotiation of heterosexual male friendships (Kehler, 2007). Researchers have also investigated the relationship between homophobia and sports participation in high school (Osbourne & Wagner, 2007), suicide (Anderson, 2014; Ashman, 2004; Pugnière et al., 2012), and overall safe spaces for LGBT youth (Peters, 2003). The identification of the term “gay” to mean something negative has found its way into dictionaries (Yallop et al., 2005), with some literature including the pejorative use of the words “gay” and “lesbian” under the umbrella of sexual harassment of students (Gruber & Fineran, 2007) or “injurious speech” (Athanases & Comar, 2008, p. 9).

In middle schools, there has been considerable research on the prevalence of bullying among elementary and middle school students (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Eslea & Rees, 2001; Espelage et al., 1999; Espelage et al., 2000; Espelage et al., 2001; Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992; Juvonen & Ho, 2008; Swearer et al., 2008). In international rankings, Canada places near the
bottom of surveys that measure bullying and victimization, a placement that indicates that the prevalence of bullying in Canada is higher than the prevalence in a majority of countries (Craig & Pepler, 2007). In the U.S., Juvonen and colleagues (2004) assert that bullying in middle school outpaces bullying in either elementary or high school and note, “Particularly risky are middle school environments in which students feel disconnected from others, not supported or cared for, and unsafe” (p. 61). The role of homophobia in bullying also emerges in the literature (Clarke & Kiselica, 1997; Clarke & Kiselica, 2001; D’Augelli, et al., 2006; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995; Poteat & Rivers, 2010). Much of the research on homophobia in schools has been at the secondary level and at times retrospective, i.e., conducted with students after they complete high school. Experience at middle school plays a crucial role and is a critical time in the lives of students; in 2006, the TDSB reported that 41% of grade seven and eight students experience name-calling (dropping slightly to 38% in 2011). Given the dearth of research on homophobic language use among younger students (Athanases & Comar, 2008), there is a need for empirical investigations that occur while middle school students are still in school, specifically “while they are in the midst of it” (p. 15). The current study directly addresses this need.

The TDSB Student Census, which defined verbal put-downs as insults or injurious name-calling rather than innocuous banter, revealed that 41% of grade seven and eight students, and 31% of grade nine to 12 students reported being called names or insulted. Relative to threats, exclusion, and physical bullying, “Name calling and insults were the more frequently reported type of bullying behaviours” (Yau & O’Reilly, 2007, p. 21). The census did not ask students in grades seven and eight to identify their sexual orientation, while students in grades nine to 12 were. Emergent literature examining the experiences of LGBTQ students and families in middle
school (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011; Wickens & Wedwick, 2011) suggests that it is important to dig deeper into the reported 41% of students who told about name-calling and to explore the role of homophobia. While this figure (41%) is important to recognize, it is only a starting point. There is a need to investigate the actual words and phrases used in name-calling, their prevalence, and the conditions under which they are used. Wessler and De Andrade (2006) point out, “Questions remain as to the actual content and forms of bullying and harassment in schools [and] the ways students are impacted by it” (p. 512). The study reported in this article addresses the gap in the literature and is, as far as I know, the first of its kind to examine the prevalence of homophobic and sexist name-calling among middle school students in Canada.

Method

This study employed an exploratory, cross-sectional survey design to investigate the prevalence of homophobic and sexist language among grade seven and eight students in the TDSB. The study received approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board and the External Research Review Committee (ERRC) of the TDSB.

Sample

To achieve as representative a sample as possible of middle school students in the TDSB, this study employed a stratified random sampling design whereby the school was the sampling unit. Four geographic regions comprise the school board – North West (NW), South West (SW), South East (SE), and North East (NE). The ERRC approved contacting a maximum of twelve schools to participate in the survey. Proportional representation across the quadrants was sought; thus, the proportion of middle schools per quadrant was calculated (for 12 schools, the resulting proportion is NE – three schools, NW – two schools, SE – four schools, and SW – three schools). The statistics software SPSS version 17 generated a random list of schools for each quadrant. Of
the 12 schools contacted, nine agreed to participate; three declined, citing reasons such as participation in other research and very busy schedules due to school events. The resulting number of schools by quadrant was NE – three schools, NW – one school, SE- two schools, SW – three schools. The nine schools agreeing to participate represent a total of 2,384 grade seven and eight students across 80 classrooms. This represents approximately 7% of all grade seven and eight TDSB students. These nine participating schools represent 5% of all TDSB middle schools.

All teachers in the targeted grades of selected schools invited their students to participate by describing the research and distributing the information and consent forms. Students who returned signed parental consent forms participated in the survey. A total of 501 students returned signed consent forms, and the final number of surveys completed was 488, since 13 students were absent the day of the survey. The response rate across the nine schools was 21%, with the NW quadrant at 8%, NE at 20%, SE at 27%, and SW at 25%. No data were collected from nonparticipating students.

This study sample reflected the 2011 TDSB student census, with 70% racialized and 30% nonracialized students participating. Gender representation skewed towards girls (63% vs. 37%), an outcome that corresponds to the literature reporting that active consent results in the underrepresentation of male students (Dent et al., 1993; Pokorny, Jason, Schoney, Townsend, & Currie, 2001; Schuster, Bell, Berry, & Kanouse, 1998; Unger et al., 2004). Although the gender split of all grade seven and eight students in the school year of this study was 52% male and 48% female, across the nine participating schools the ratio was closer to 45% male and 55% female.
It is important to contextualize the study’s response rate in terms of the requirement for active consent. With active consent, parents/guardians must explicitly provide consent, whereas, with passive consent, parents/guardians are informed but provide a written response only to indicate that the student will not participate. Active consent procedures can require considerable resources, including sending out follow-up letters, organizing information meetings for parents/guardians, and increasing time demands for school staff. This study was limited to one meeting with teachers per school; at these meetings, the research was explained, and the information and consent forms were distributed. In survey research with youth in schools in the U.S., passive consent response rates can range from 80 to 100% (Ellickson & Hawes, 1989; Esbensen et al., 1996; Fendrich & Johnson 2001; Kearney, Hopkins, Mauss, & Weisheit, 1983; Lueptow, Mueller, Hames & Master, 1977; Severson & Ary, 1983; White, Hill, & Effendi, 2004). In contrast, the need for active consent involving parental/guardian consent results in response rate ranges of 30 to 60% (Tigges, 2003), with some as low as 17% (Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010) and still others reported to be as low as 10% (MacGregor & McNamara, 1995). One concern with low response rates in school-related survey research is that the results may not be representative of the population under study, especially because of underrepresentation of some minority groups (Dent et al. 1993; Esbensen et al., 2008; Kearney et al., 1983; Unger et al., 2004). Arguably, survey response rates are less important than the representativeness of the response, although the response rate is important if it affects representativeness (Cook, Heath, & Thompson, 2000). In this study, the overall response rate of 21% includes a representation across ethno-racial identities that is consistent with the TDSB student census (See the demographics in the Results section).
Procedure

A total of 45 grade seven and eight students in the first participating school piloted the survey in order to check for clarity, format, and length. These surveys were included in the final sample. I administered a paper survey for all the students participating during school hours, and the survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participating students received a pen to complete the survey and to keep as a token of appreciation.

For the full dataset, frequency distributions of all variables were used to describe students as agents and targets of homophobic and sexist language. Chi square analysis explored the relationship between students’ experience with sexist language and their experiences with homophobic language. Factor analysis tested the reliability of the scales that were measuring homophobic and sexist language use.

Measures

The survey included general questions about the students’ socio-demographic characteristics, how often they used and were labelled by homophobic and sexist words during the last week, where in school they hear homophobic and sexist language, whether teachers were present at the time such language was used, and, if so, whether teachers and/or peers intervened, the reasons for using such language, and whether they felt the use of such language was a problem. Finally, students were given space to write any other words / language that they felt was similar to the examples of homophobic and sexist language provided in the survey.

Socio-demographic characteristics. The questions related to grade, gender, age, length of time in Canada, racial identity, and language spoken at home.
**Homophobic Content Agent Target Scale (HCAT).** Poteat and Espelage (2005) developed the HCAT in their study investigating the verbal homophobic content of middle school students. The survey asked how many times during the last week they (1) used homophobic language and (2) were labelled by homophobic language. Each dimension (using and being called) included five items specifying the particular relationship involved: a friend, someone they did not know (a stranger), someone they did know but did not like (an antagonist), someone they thought was gay, and someone they did not think was gay.  

Students were asked to indicate the frequency of using or being labelled by homophobic language (never, once, twice, three to four times, five to six times, or seven times or more). The words used to identify homophobia were – “gay,” “lesbo,” “fag,” “faggot,” and “queer.” The survey did not define these words or phrases as homophobia, but rather began with the statement that some kids call each other names, such as gay, lesbo, fag, etc. From this dataset, the Cronbach’s alpha for the HCAT was $\alpha = 0.81$.

**Sexist Content Agent Target Scale (S-CAT).** To investigate the use of sexist language, the HCAT was modified, and homophobic words and phrases were replaced with sexist ones. The name and acronym S-CAT was developed specifically for this study. Drawing on this writer’s professional experience leading workshops on homophobia with middle school students, the words and phrases used to identify sexism, particularly as they apply to boys’ perceived behaviours, were “sissy,” “wuss,” “you run like a girl,” and “you throw like a girl.” This sample of words and phrases corresponds to the literature discussing the underlying gender role stereotyping that fuels homophobic speech (Plummer, 2001; Swartz, 2003). The survey did not define these words as sexist. From this dataset, the Cronbach’s alpha for the S-CAT was $\alpha =$

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1 The survey items asking about the frequency of use of homophobic language towards “someone I thought was gay” and “someone I didn’t think was gay” were excluded from the analyses since they are not mutually exclusive of the first three items (a friend, a stranger, and an antagonist).
0.87, offering evidence that the set of items used to measure the underlying construct of sexism has a relatively high internal consistency.

**Where in school homophobic and sexist language is heard and how often it is heard.**

Students were asked to indicate how often (never, once, twice, three or four times, five or six times, seven times or more) homophobic and sexist language was heard in six places at school during the past week, namely, the classroom, the hallway, the cafeteria, the schoolyard, the gymnasium, and the change room.

**Reasons for using homophobic and sexist language and how serious they believe the use of such language is.** Students were asked about homophobic and sexist language separately, and they were given a list of four reasons why someone might use homophobic and sexist language. The reasons were ranked from the most used reason to the least used reason. The four reasons listed were: 1. Joking, just for fun, 2. A put-down based on gender, 3. A put-down meant to cause harm or abuse, 4. A put-down meant to hurt lesbian or gay people. Students were then asked what they thought about the use of this kind of language, and were also asked to choose from three items: 1. It is not serious at all, 2. It is somewhat serious, and 3. It is very serious. Finally, students were given space to write other examples of language that they felt was homophobic and sexist.

**Results**

**Demographics**

More girls than boys participated in the survey (63% vs. 37%). The sample (N=488) comprised 58% grade eight students and 42% grade seven students. Participants ranged in age from 12 to 14 years of age. Slightly more than half of the sample (52.7%) were 13, .6% were 11,
21.5% were 12, and a quarter (25.2%) were 14. The average age of the sample was 13.

Participants comprised diverse ethno-racial backgrounds. Compared to the 2011 TDSB student census (Yau et al, 2011) for grades seven to 12, ethno-racial representation in this study was closely achieved with six groups: (30% vs. 28% White, 5% vs. 5% South East Asian, 5% vs. 6% Middle Eastern, 1% vs. 2% Latin American, .6% vs. .4% Aboriginal, and 9% vs. 7% Mixed Background), overachieved with one group (26% vs. 17% East Asian), and underachieved with two groups (8% vs. 13% Black, and 11% vs. 22% South Asian). Overall, the sample closely matches the TDSB census proportion of racialized students (70%) to non-racialized students (30%). Nearly two thirds (63%) of participants were born in Canada (71% from the TDSB 2011 census, grades seven and eight). A total of 15% have resided in Canada under five years, and 22% have resided in Canada more than five years. For 65% of participants, English was the language spoken at home, and the remaining 35% spoke a language other than English. From the 2011 census for all students in the TDSB, 66% of students reported English and English plus another language spoken at home. Of the top five non-English languages spoken at home reported by the 2011 census (for all students), representation in this study was exactly achieved with Chinese (11% vs. 11%), closely achieved with Bengali (2% vs. 3%) and underachieved with Urdu (1.4% vs. 5%), Tamil (3.3% vs. 6%), and Gujarati (.4% vs. 2%). The response rate across the nine schools ranged from a low of 8% to a high of 32%, with an average of 21%. By geographic region, the response rate of the NW was 8%, the rate of the NE was 20%, the rate of the SE was 27%, and the rate of the SW was 25%.
Prevalence of homophobic and sexist language use among grade seven and eight students in relation to friends, strangers, and antagonists.

Slightly more than half the students report never using homophobic language towards a friend during the past week. Twice as many students (31% vs. 15%) report using homophobic language towards a friend at least twice during the past week, as compared to only once. Similarly, an almost equal proportion of students reported themselves as targets of homophobic language at least twice during the past week by a friend, as compared to only once (29% vs. 14%). Over a third of students (35%) reported using sexist language at least once during the past week towards a friend, while 29% reported being targeted with sexist language at least once during the past week by a friend (See Table 1).

Relationship between students' experience with sexist language and their experience with homophobic language

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between students as agents of homophobic language to a friend and students as agents of sexist language to a friend. The relationship between these variables was significant, $X^2 (4, N = 488) = 57.09, p<.000$. Students as agents of sexist language twice or more during the past week were more likely to be agents of homophobic language, as compared to students who never said something sexist to a friend (67% vs. 25%).

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between students as agents of homophobic language to an antagonist and students as agents of sexist language to an antagonist. The relationship between these variables was significant, $X^2 (4, N = 488) = 49.18, p<.000$. Students as agents of sexist language to an antagonist twice or more during the past...
week were more likely to be agents of homophobic language to an antagonist, as compared to students who never used sexist language to an antagonist (55% vs. 32%).

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between students as targets of homophobic language by a friend and students as targets of sexist language by a friend. The relationship between these variables was significant, X2 (4, N = 488) = 69.14, p<.000. Students targeted with sexist language by a friend at least twice during the past week were more likely to be targeted by a friend with homophobic language, as compared to those never targeted by a friend (65% vs. 20%) (See Table 2).

Where and how often in school homophobic and sexist language is heard.

Over three quarters of students (77%) reported hearing repeated homophobic language (two or more times in a week) in the school hallway (of those students, 29% reported hearing homophobic language seven times or more). A total of 70% report the schoolyard as the place in school where they heard such language at least twice (of those students, 31% reported hearing such language seven times or more). The third most reported location for hearing homophobic language at least twice was the classroom (64%) and, of those students who reported hearing this language in the classroom, 14% reported hearing homophobic language in the classroom seven times or more during the past week. The schoolyard was the most reported site of heard sexist language, with 43% of students hearing something sexist twice or more in a week, followed by the hallway (34%) and the gymnasium (33%) (See Table 3).

School Staff and Peers: Who is around, and do they intervene?

Students reported that a school staff member was not present 29% of the time when they heard homophobic language (as compared to 37% of the time for sexist language).
Approximately 60% stated that a school staff member was sometimes present when homophobic language was heard (50% in the case of sexist language). A staff member was reported as present in almost equal amounts in relation to most of the time and always for homophobic and sexist language (11% homophobic language and 12% sexist language, most of the time; 1% and 2%, always present). Students reported that when a staff member was present at least some of the time, 25% never intervened in cases of homophobia, and 41% never intervened in cases of sexism. For those who did intervene, more intervened in cases of homophobia, as compared to sexism (46% vs. 35%, some of the time; 20% vs. 16%, most of the time). A staff member who was present and intervened all of the time addressed homophobia and sexism equally (8% for both). Regarding interventions by peers, students reported that over half (51%) never intervened in cases of homophobia and still more never intervened in cases of sexism (58%). In comparisons of peers who intervened some of the time, more interventions were reported in cases of homophobia than in cases of sexism (39% vs. 34%); those who intervened most of the time and always did so in almost equal amounts in cases of both homophobia and sexism (9% vs. 7% respectively; 1% vs. 2% respectively) (See Table 4).

Reasons for using homophobic and sexist language and seriousness

When asked to rank the reasons why students use this language, a significant majority of students (87% for homophobia; 71% for sexism) stated they used this language “just for fun, or just joking.” Conversely, nearly two thirds of students (62%) ranked “put-down to hurt lesbians and gays” as the least relevant reason for use of homophobic language, as compared to 70% citing that reason for using sexist language (See Table 5).
Seriousness of homophobic and sexist language

When asked how serious a problem they think homophobic and sexist language is, more students report homophobic language as a somewhat or very serious problem, as compared to sexist language (84% vs. 70%). Nearly twice as many students report homophobic language as a very serious problem, as compared to sexist language (25% vs. 13%). Twice as many students report that sexist language is not a problem, as compared to homophobic language (27% vs. 14%). An almost equal percentage of students report both homophobic and sexist language as a somewhat serious problem.

Homophobia and Sexism by another name

The survey asked students to write in other examples of language, in addition to the homophobic and sexist words and phrases offered in the survey. Each set of words/phrases was separately uploaded to Wordle.net, an on-line tool designed by Jonathan Feinberg. Wordle creates a word cloud, whereby the frequency of a word determines its prominence in the image. What follows are two word clouds, one for students’ other examples of homophobic language, the other for students’ examples of sexist language.
Factor Analysis – Homophobic Content Agent Target Scale (HCAT) and Sexist Content Agent Target Scale (S-CAT)

A principal axis factor analysis was performed on the 10-item HCAT and the 10-item S-CAT with a Varimax rotation. In this study for the HCAT, an examination of the scree plot of Eigen values supported a three-factor scale structure (See Table 5 and Table 6). The first factor (Agent) accounted for 33.87% of the variance and included four of the agent items with factor loadings ranging from .50 to .75, with one cross loading of .40 on the third factor. The second factor (Target) accounted for an additional 11.4% of the variance and included four of the target items, with factor loadings from .56 to .71 and with one cross loading of .40 on the third factor. The third factor (“friendly homophobia”) accounted for an additional variance of 9.2% and included one of the agent items and one of the target items (towards a friend and by a friend respectively), with factor loadings of .75 to .77 and with one cross loading of .4 on the first factor (See Table 6). For the SCAT developed for this study (based on the HCAT), an examination of the scree plot of Eigen values supported a two-factor scale structure. The first factor (Agent) accounted for 28.31% of the variance and included the five agent items, with factor loadings ranging from .50 to .79 and with no cross loadings over .4. The second factor (Target) accounted for an additional 26% of the variance and included the five target items, with factor loadings ranging from .51 to .78 and with one cross loading of .41 on the first factor (See Table 7).

Discussion

This study constitutes the first investigation of the prevalence of homophobic and sexist language among middle school students in the Toronto District School Board and possibly among this age group anywhere in Canada. According to the 2006 TDSB Student Census, 41% of grade seven and eight students reported being called names or put-downs; however, the
Census did not specifically include questions regarding homophobic and sexist language. The current study with middle school students deepens understanding of this kind of language by specifically examining both homophobic and sexist name-calling. According to this study, homophobic and sexist language use is pervasive. This study extends the literature in North America and the UK that documents homophobia in high school (Baker & Fishbein, 1998; Fineran & Bolen, 2006; Hillier & Harrison, 2004; Interactive, 2005; Lipson, 2001; Mishna et al., 2009; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Stratton & Backes, 1997; Thurlow, 2001; Chiodo et al., 2009) to earlier grades, notably middle school.

The problem of homophobic language in high schools has been documented in Ontario. In a study of grade nine and 11 students in Ontario high schools, 38% of grade nine boys and 26% of grade nine girls said something homophobic to someone, while 34% of grade nine boys and 22% of grade nine girls reported being called something homophobic by someone (Chiodo et al., 2009). The research did not specify a relationship between the agent and target of such name-calling (e.g., said to a friend, said by a friend, etc.). Using the period of the previous three months, the researchers classified none and one instance of this name-calling as absent (or no experience), and classified two or more experiences as present. The current study adds to the literature with evidence that the problem of homophobic language use in high schools does not begin at that point in time, but rather is a continuation of the problematic phenomenon now evidenced in middle schools. Furthermore, it helps to end the dearth of research addressing sexist language use.

According to the literature, bullying in general typically occurs during middle school years (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011; Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2012). Thus, it is unsurprising that homophobic bullying is present in middle
school (Espelage et al., 2012), and LGBT middle school students are more likely than high school students to experience victimization based on sexual orientation and gender expression (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). In particular, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that 91% of LGBT middle school students reported hearing "gay" used as a put-down (frequently in the form of “that’s so gay”) often in school, and 82% of LGBT middle school students reported hearing homophobic language such as "faggot" or "dyke" used frequently by students in school. The current study corroborates these findings; students in this study reported that they use and hear significant levels of homophobic language in school.

While the current study did not ask students to identify their sexual orientation, the substantial use of homophobic language (heard in classrooms, hallways, and the schoolyard) is consistent with GLSEN’s and EGALE’s findings. In other words, saying homophobic language to a friend, stranger, or antagonist could conceivably be taken as harassment by those on the receiving end of the language (either as a student not “out” about his/her sexual orientation or a student not taking it as a joke). The bullying literature identifies middle schools as sites of harassment at a rate that outpaces both high schools and elementary schools (Juvonen, 2004). According to EGALE (Taylor & Peter, 2011), 70% of high school students (in their Canadian study) reported hearing homophobic language such as “that’s so gay” every day in school, and nearly half reported hearing homophobic language such as “faggot” and “dyke” every day.

In the current study with middle school students, nearly 80% report hearing homophobic language at least once in the classroom, 90% at least once in the hallway, and 84% at least once in the school yard during the past week. Even in cases when students perceive the use of homophobic language as a joke or innocuous banter between friends, it is highly unlikely they
are exchanging these terms in private and exclusive settings. On the contrary, the reported sites where students hear this language are very public with built in audiences, for example, the classroom, hallway, cafeteria, and schoolyard. In such school spaces (with the exception of the classroom), which Astor and colleagues (2001) characterize as “undefined” (p. 131), adults may perceive a lack of responsibility. These spaces are significant sites of homophobic and sexist name calling and are sites where middle school teachers may believe that intervention is someone else’s responsibility.

The literature on bullying also suggests that teachers’ reticence to intervene stems from their own attitudes about the situation, for example, whether they thought it was serious (Blain-Arcaro, Smith, Cunningham, Vaillancourt & Rimas, 2012). It may also be the case that teachers fear becoming targets themselves and are concerned about not having the support of school administration (Perez, Schanding, & Dao, 2013). If teachers see this language as “just joking,” then that perception too may be behind their decision to intervene or not. While students reported that teachers and school staff intervened at least sometimes when they heard this language, the finding was that a quarter of staff members were present but did not intervene with homophobic language, and 41% of staff did nothing when they heard sexist language. Among peers, students reported that 51% did not intervene in cases of homophobic language, and 58% did not intervene in cases of sexist language. In the literature, it is evident that an increase in the likelihood that a student will intervene when another student expresses homophobic (and sexist language) occurs when the student sees other students do the same (Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2013). Teachers then can play a crucial role by initially role modelling effective methods of interrupting this language for their students, who in turn become role models for their peers. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that students may actually want to speak up
and address homophobia (and sexist) language, but may “lack tools and language to respond effectively” (Athanases & Comar, 2008, p. 23). Information from EGALE and GLSEN indicate that 70% of gay high school students hear expressions of “that’s so gay” every day. The findings of this study confirm this work, given the extremely high levels of homophobic and sexist language used by students in middle school. The data point to earlier grades as foundations for antigay and sexist language. Thus, the finding that 70% of gay students in high school hear expressions of “that’s so gay” every day is supported by the current study, in which a majority of students report using such language in middle school. Then this use carries forward.

“Friendly” Homophobia

A significant amount of homophobic and sexist language manifests among friends and, indeed, accounted for the majority of homophobic and sexist language use. Friends’ use of homophobic language with each other (46% to a friend, 42% by a friend) and sexist language with each other (32% to a friend, 30% by a friend) is notable. In the bullying literature, relationships characterized as friendships are common sites of bullying, although students struggle to discern whether such behaviour is bullying to them, or is actually meant “in fun” (Mishna et al., 2008, p. 564). The current study confirms this data with the finding that 87% of students stated the main reason for using this language as “just joking” or “just for fun.” Such ambiguity in the intention of the language use reported in this study seems clarified by some literature that distinguishes between “just joking” and more pejorative meanings. In particular, McCormack and Anderson (2010) call attention to the difference between “gay discourse” and “homophobic discourse” among university athletes. The banter among friends may be understood in terms of the former, with the use of “homosexually themed language without the intent to stigmatize” (p. 920), whereas the latter and the use of similar language to and by
antagonists is meant, “to subordinate another person with its usage” (p. 922). This distinction may assist in understanding how 87% of the students in this study say the main reason for the use of this language is “just for fun,” while, at the same time, 86% state that the use of this language is somewhat or very serious. Arguably, the stranger and antagonist relationships are seen as serious issues, while the friend relationships are not. This suggests a cognitive dissonance between students’ perceptions of their use of this language in banter between friends and their sense that this language is not really about joking. Although the use of this language between friends appears not to be perceived as pejorative in the moment, when students were asked to reflect later, the language seemed to resonate as actually something serious.

In the places in school where homophobic language is heard (classroom, hallway, cafeteria, schoolyard, gymnasium, and change room), over 50% of the students reported hearing homophobic language at least once during a week. Specifically, nearly 80% of the students heard it in the classroom at least once, 90% reported the hallway, and 85% named the schoolyard. The public nature of the spaces where this language is used extensively increases the likelihood that these conversations between friends are not exclusively private and may in fact be heard by others (in the hallway, in the classroom, in the schoolyard), albeit at times when teachers are not present (Athanases & Comar, 2008). Regardless of the intent of the language use between friends, these other students might themselves identify as lesbian or gay, or have parents/guardians and other family members who so identify, and thus be negatively impacted (Clarke et al., 2004; Collier et al., 2013; Frosh et al., 2003; Ray & Gregory, 2001; Lalor & Rendle-Short, 2007; Plummer, 2001; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Purohit & Walsh, 2003; Renold, 2003; Wallis & VanEvery, 2000).
Further to the examination of the friendship dynamic, the HCAT in this study revealed a third factor, “friendly homophobia,” in addition to the two factors (agent and target) determined by Poteat and Espelage (2005). Based on these results, it is suggested that students’ perception of the use of this language “between friends” is qualitatively different from the other instances involving a stranger or an antagonist, whereby the latter kinds of cases involve a specific intent to use this language to harm or hurt, for example, to bully, harass, or put-down. This factor may account for the large number of students (87%) who reported that the main reason for using this language is as a joke or just for fun. What needs to be further determined is whether the intent of homophobic language within friendships is to harm or whether it is truly in fun. While this issue is likely to be complicated to tease out (Mishna, Weiner, & Peplar, 2008), it is also important to acknowledge the impact this language has, regardless of its intent.

Limitations

While the sample of students in the study is quite similar to the overall TDSB population in its important demographics, the low response rate across all the schools (including the very low 8% response rate in the NW quadrant) and the underrepresentation of boys limit the generalizability of these findings, as does the range of response rates by quadrant. The school in the NW with the lowest response rate (8%) is also the school in the sample with the highest Learning Opportunities Index (LOI) ranking of the nine schools in the sample. The LOI is a “relative measure of external challenges affecting student success. The school with the greatest level of external challenges is ranked number one and is described as highest on the index” (TDSB, 2011). It is possible that such external challenges (family income, family education level, and family structure) have some effect on students’ ability to participate. The response rate issue arises partly due to the challenges posed by the active consent process, which the
literature shows as resulting in lower participation rates (in contrast with passive consent) and the lower participation of boys. A need to obtain passive consent in future research would immensely improve the response rate overall and possibly result in better representation of boys. As such, these results should be viewed as preliminary. However, the student sample in this study closely mirrored the ethno-racial profile of middle school students in the board.

Both the HCAT and S-CAT scales have an inherent male bias that requires some discussion. The sample words in the HCAT skew towards antigay epithets (“fag”, “faggot”, “gay”) with only “lesbo” specific to antilesbian put-downs. As well, the words and phrases in the S-CAT tap a particular kind of sexist language that targets boys perceived to be stepping out of their expected gender roles (“sissy”, “wuss”, “run like a girl”, and “throw like a girl”). Future iterations of both scales should be more inclusive of antilesbian epithets (for example, “dyke” in the HCAT) and language that taps perceived gender role transgressions of girls (for example, “tomboy” and “act like a lady”).

The treatment of the scale variables of the HCAT and SCAT as continuous also requires mention. The HCAT and S-CAT scales were ordinal and, for the purposes of statistical analysis (factor and reliability analysis), treated as interval, assuming that the scale items represent normally distributed latent continuous variables. According to Grimm & Yarnold (2000), “It is routine to treat them [numerical rating scales] as interval scales in statistical analyses, however, and no harm seems to have resulted from that practice” (p. 58). However, future use of these scales should allow participants to indicate the actual number of times they acted as agents and targets of homophobic and sexist language, for example, “In the space provided, please write how many times you called (or were called) homophobic language in the last week.” This would allow the variable to be truly continuous, as responses could range from zero on up, thus
allowing for additional statistical analysis. It would also be useful to ask students specifically whom they are targeting and who is targeting them, e.g., name-calling between boys, between girls, or between boys and girls.

**Implications**

On a continuum of severity regarding manifestations of homophobia, ranging from name calling, antigay language, and “just joking,” to explicit discrimination and physical assault, homophobic name-calling arguably registers as less severe. On a continuum, however, attention must be paid to the interconnectedness of each level of expression, whereby less severe behaviours, if left unchecked, can lead to more severe behaviours (Faulkner & Cranston, 1998; Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Espelage, Basile, De La Rue, & Hamburger, 2014). In the bullying literature, indifference on the part of school personnel to bullying behaviours can be traced as far back as the early 1990s (Hoover & Hazler, 1991). From this study of middle school students, it is abundantly clear that homophobic language use is pervasive and turns up in many places in school, and that staff do not routinely address it. This finding is consistent with research that indicates that such non-intervention gives students the tacit message that homophobic language is acceptable, and further condones the attitude that disparaging language about lesbians and gays is acceptable. Such an attitude possibly leads to more severe manifestations of homophobia (Horn & Nucci, 2003).

The current research calls attention to the need to engage meaningfully with students about the connections among words, power, and the impact of hurtful language, regardless of the speaker’s intention. Educators must bridge the gap between “just joking” and the way this language can and does shape attitudes, ideas, and actions towards LGBT students. By unpacking this language with middle school students, role modelling effective interruption of this language,
discussing how it operates to maintain homophobia (and reinforce the underlying sexism), and
connecting the language to more severe expressions of homophobia, students can be helped to
develop critical skills to interrupt their own use of this language, and hopefully their peers’ use
as well.

Conclusions

Regarding homophobic language such as “dyke,” “faggot,” “sissy,” and “that’s so gay,” Schrader and Wells (2004) pose the question, “Are these ‘just words’ and harmless banter?” (p. 1). Is “friendly homophobia” still homophobic? Students in the current study reported the main
reason for such language use is “just joking” but also, quite ironically, considered such language
as somewhat or very serious. The findings of this study suggest that both responses reflect
students’ reality. Perhaps this language is expressed and meant as “just a joke” when they
themselves are using it. However, when they come to consider the language and words overall,
students see the language use as very problematic. This study, which to my knowledge is the
first of its kind in Canada with middle school students, provides important knowledge that delves
underneath the generic label “name calling” and specifies the problematic role of homophobic
and sexist language in the social relations of grade seven and eight students.
References


Eslea, M., & Rees, J. (2001). At what age are children most likely to be bullied at school?. *Aggressive Behavior, 27*(6), 419-429.


1111 Sixteenth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036: AAUW Educational Foundation.


### Table 1

Frequency Percentages of HCAT and SCAT 1

**Agent of Homophobic language in past week to a:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Once</th>
<th>Twice or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>263 (54%)</td>
<td>72 (15%)</td>
<td>153 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>391 (80%)</td>
<td>39 (8%)</td>
<td>50 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antagonist</td>
<td>307 (63)</td>
<td>69 (14%)</td>
<td>105 (22%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Agent of Sexist Language in the past week to a:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Once</th>
<th>Twice or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>332 (68%)</td>
<td>84 (17%)</td>
<td>72 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>423 (87%)</td>
<td>31 (6%)</td>
<td>31 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antagonist</td>
<td>387 (79%)</td>
<td>41 (8%)</td>
<td>56 (12%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Target of Homophobic Language in the past week to a:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Once</th>
<th>Twice or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>280 (57%)</td>
<td>66 (14%)</td>
<td>140 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>419 (86%)</td>
<td>30 (6%)</td>
<td>32 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antagonist</td>
<td>363 (74%)</td>
<td>46 (1%)</td>
<td>72 (15%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Target of Sexist Language in the past week to a:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Once</th>
<th>Twice or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>340 (70%)</td>
<td>78 (16%)</td>
<td>65 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stranger</td>
<td>434 (89%)</td>
<td>28 (6%)</td>
<td>19 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antagonist</td>
<td>390 (80%)</td>
<td>44 (9%)</td>
<td>45 (9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2

Frequency Percentages and Chi Square of Sexist and Homophobic Language use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Homophobic language said:</th>
<th>Sextist Language said:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a friend</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>207 (62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1x</td>
<td>50 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2x or more</td>
<td>75 (23%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2$ (4, $N = 488$) = 57.09, $p<.000$

| To an antagonist          |                        |             |              |
|---------------------------|                        |             |              |
| Never                     | 267 (70%)              | 22 (54%)    | 18 (32%)     |
| 1x                        | 55 (14%)               | 6 (15%)     | 7 (13%)      |
| 2x or more                | 60 (16%)               | 13 (32%)    | 31 (55%)     |

$\chi^2$ (4, $N = 488$) = 49.18, $p<.000$

| By a friend               |                        |             |              |
|---------------------------|                        |             |              |
| Never                     | 230 (68%)              | 34 (44%)    | 13 (20%)     |
| Once                      | 43 (13%)               | 12 (15%)    | 10 (15%)     |
| Twice or more             | 65 (19%)               | 32 (41%)    | 42 (65%)     |

$\chi^2$ (4, $N = 488$) = 69.14, $p<.000$
### Table 3

Where in School Homophobic and Sexist Language Heard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Where in School</th>
<th>Homophobic Language</th>
<th>Sexist Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>never (21%)</td>
<td>once (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>classroom</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hallway</td>
<td>47 (10%)</td>
<td>64 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cafeteria</td>
<td>220 (47%)</td>
<td>54 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schoolyard</td>
<td>74 (15%)</td>
<td>71 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gymnasium</td>
<td>226 (46%)</td>
<td>89 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change room</td>
<td>218 (45%)</td>
<td>76 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>309 (64%)</td>
<td>372 (77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>208 (43%)</td>
<td>339 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>167 (35%)</td>
<td>191 (39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>128 (27%)</td>
<td>163 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>98 (21%)</td>
<td>207 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>158 (33%)</td>
<td>101 (21%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4

Presence of School Staff, Intervening, Peer Intervening

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff present when you hear:</th>
<th>Homophobic Language</th>
<th>Sexist Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>never</td>
<td>140 (29%)</td>
<td>177 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sometimes</td>
<td>285 (59%)</td>
<td>239 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>most of the time</td>
<td>53 (11%)</td>
<td>56 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>always</td>
<td>6 (1%)</td>
<td>9 (2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If staff present, do they intervene re:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Homophobic language</th>
<th>never</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>most of the time</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>91 (25%)</td>
<td>168 (46%)</td>
<td>73 (20%)</td>
<td>30 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist language</td>
<td>140 (41%)</td>
<td>119 (35%)</td>
<td>56 (16%)</td>
<td>29 (8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do peers intervene re:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Homophobic language</th>
<th>never</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>most of the time</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>244 (51%)</td>
<td>185 (39%)</td>
<td>42 (9%)</td>
<td>5 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist language</td>
<td>271 (58%)</td>
<td>160 (34%)</td>
<td>33 (7%)</td>
<td>7 (2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

Reasons for using Homophobic and Sexist Language, How Serious an Issue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason behind homophobic language, ranked most to least</th>
<th>most</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>3rd</th>
<th>least</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joking, for fun</td>
<td>422 (87%)</td>
<td>36 (7%)</td>
<td>7 (1%)</td>
<td>19 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put-down based on gender</td>
<td>17 (4%)</td>
<td>195 (41%)</td>
<td>190 (40%)</td>
<td>77 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put-down to cause harm/abuse</td>
<td>28 (6%)</td>
<td>197 (41%)</td>
<td>156 (33%)</td>
<td>97 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put-down to lesbians/gays</td>
<td>18 (4%)</td>
<td>42 (9%)</td>
<td>123 (26%)</td>
<td>296 (62%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason behind sexist language, ranked most to least</th>
<th>most</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>3rd</th>
<th>least</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joking, for fun</td>
<td>339 (71%)</td>
<td>85 (18%)</td>
<td>23 (5%)</td>
<td>32 (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put-down based on gender</td>
<td>73 (15%)</td>
<td>224 (47%)</td>
<td>136 (29%)</td>
<td>43 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put-down to cause harm/abuse</td>
<td>41 (9%)</td>
<td>136 (28%)</td>
<td>215 (45%)</td>
<td>85 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put-down to lesbians/gays</td>
<td>19 (4%)</td>
<td>27 (6%)</td>
<td>96 (20%)</td>
<td>334 (70%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason behind an issue is:</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>somewhat</th>
<th>very</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homophobic language</td>
<td>67 (14%)</td>
<td>287 (60%)</td>
<td>124 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexist language</td>
<td>133 (27%)</td>
<td>280 (57%)</td>
<td>63 (13%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6

HCAT Factor Loadings: Three Factor Solution - Principle Axis Factoring with Varimax Rotation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factor 1: Agent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some kids call each other names such as gay, lesbo, fag, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many times in the last week did you say these things to:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I did not know</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I knew but did not like</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I thought was gay</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I did not think was gay</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 2: Target</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many times in the last week did the following people call you these things:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I did not know</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I knew but did not like</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I thought was gay</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I did not think was gay</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor 3: Friends “just joking,” “friendly homophobia”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You said to a friend</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A friend said to you</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eigenvalue</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% variance</td>
<td>33.87</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-efficient alpha</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 7**

S-CAT Factor Loadings: Two Factor Solution – Principle Axis Factoring with Varimax Rotation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor Loadings</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factor 1: Agent</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some kids call each other names such as sissy, wuss, you run like a girl, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many times in the last week did you say these things to:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Friend</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I did not know</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I knew but did not like</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I thought was gay</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I did not think was gay</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Factor 2: Target</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many times in the last week did the following people call you these things:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A friend</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I did not know</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I knew but did not like</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I thought was gay</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I did not think was gay</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eigenvalue</strong></td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>% variance</strong></td>
<td>28.31</td>
<td>26.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Co-efficient alpha</strong></td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Name-calling, verbal taunts, and put-downs are pervasive in the social lives of children and youth (Aboud & Joong, 2008). According to the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) (Yau et al., 2011) student census, 41% of middle school students (grades seven and eight) reported experiencing name-calling. This number is concerning, but alone it offers no particular understanding regarding the type of name-calling the students report. Homophobic name-calling and put-downs are well documented among high school students (Athanases & Comar, 2008; Interactive, 2005; Kimmel, 2009; Kosciw, 2004; Kosciw et al., 2012; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Presgraves, 2010; Taylor, 2009; Thurlow, 2001), with some research extending back to middle school students (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Poteat & Espelage, 2005). Recent research examining sexism has focused on gender stereotypes and attitudes (Heinze & Horn, 2014; Meyer, 2009), including attitudes among young children four to 10 years of age (Pahlke et al., 2014). According to Kosciw and colleagues (2012), 74% of students 13 to 20 years of age reported hearing sexist remarks either frequently or often at school. Middle schools are sites where students pay specific attention to gender roles and where “peer cultures take on an active role in enforcing these roles” (Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000, p. 76). There is a dearth of research, however, that examines sexist name-calling and put-downs among middle school students; there is an even greater dearth of examinations of sexist and homophobic language together. To date, there is very little, if any, research in Canada investigating the prevalence of sexist language.
among middle school students and the empirical relationships between homophobic and sexist language use. The study reported here seeks to address this gap.

Close examination of the actual words used in homophobic speech often reveals underlying gender-role stereotyping. Among boys, giving and receiving terms such as “sissy,” “pansy,” “gay,” and “you run like a girl” occur frequently. In these expressions, the combination of sexist and antifeminine sentiment, with over-masculinized expectations, is evidence of the close association between homophobia and sexism (Swartz, 2003). Put another way, when a boy steps out of (or seems to step out of) a particular form of masculinity, other boys quickly react with negative remarks. Good, Thomson, and Braithwaite (2005), highlighting this connection among homophobia, masculinity, and sexism through name-calling, assert, “Underscoring the salience of socialization into appropriate masculinity, boys are often called derogatory names referring to girls or homosexuals if they express signs of personal vulnerability” (p. 700). While the use of homophobic language can indicate antigay bias (Burn, 2000; Franklin, 2000), the research also implicates violation of traditional gender norms as an underlying factor (McCann, Plummer, & Minichiello, 2009; Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Pascoe, 2003; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Plummer, 2001; Renold, 2002; Stoudt, 2006). Such conflation of homophobia with sexism-laden terms makes visible the intricate, complex, and dynamic relationships among homophobia, sexism, and masculinity and what Pascoe (2011) argues is the “centrality of homophobic insults and attitudes to masculinity especially in school settings” (p. 53). On this last point of school settings, while retrospective research, which asks former students to reflect and report on their experiences with name-calling, bullying, and harassment, is necessary and important, it is not sufficient; therefore, this study asks students currently in school about these experiences.
Learning and adopting homophobic language occurs among young children (Plummer, 2001), and, similarly, research into sexism among young children reveals the early learning of cultural gender stereotypes (Blakemore, Berenbaum, & Liben, 2008; Powlishta et al., 1994). It is not surprising that there is an underlying presence of gender role stereotypes reflected in some homophobic language. There is a significant gap in the investigation of homophobic and sexist language together among middle school students. This study addresses the gap by examining the prevalence of homophobic and sexist language among middle school students and the relationship between these two types of language.

Method

In order to explore homophobic and sexist language among grade seven and eight middle school students in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), this study used a cross-sectional survey design. Ethics approval for this study was received first from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board and then from the TDSB.

Sample

The TDSB comprises four geographic quadrants – the North West (NW), South West (SW), South East (SE), and North East and, with the school as the sampling unit, this study employed a stratified random sampling design. The TDSB approved contact for a maximum of twelve schools. Based on the population of middle school students in each quadrant and the achievement of as representative sample as possible, proportional representation across the quadrants was sought, with three schools in the NE, two schools in the NW, four schools in the SE, and four schools in the SW randomly selected and contacted for participation. The statistics software SPSS version 17 generated the random list of schools for each quadrant. Nine schools ultimately agreed to participate, with three in the NE, one in the NW, two in the SE, and three in
the SW. Three of the 12 schools contacted declined due to busy schedules and/or participation in other research studies. The total population of the middle school students in grades seven and eight in the nine participating schools was 2,384, representing 80 classrooms. These nine schools represent 5% of all middle schools, and the 2,384 students represent 7% of all TDSB middle school students.

Following a meeting with all homeroom teachers in grades seven and eight of the selected schools to explain the study, teachers distributed the information and consent forms to their respective students. A total of 501 students returned with signed parental consent to participate in the survey, and, overall, 488 surveys were completed, since 13 students were absent the day of the survey. No data were collected from nonparticipating students. The overall response rate was 21%, with variation across the quadrants – 8% in the NW, 20% in the NE, 27% in the SE, and 25% in the SW.

The study sample comprised 70% racialized students and 30% non-racialized students, mirroring the 2011 TDSB student census. While more girls than boys participated (63% vs. 37%), the literature reveals that active consent procedures result in underrepresentation of male students (Dent et al., 1993; Pokorny et al., 2001; Schuster et al., 1998; Unger et al, 2004). Looking to the gender split of all nine participating schools, the ratio is 55% female to 45% male.

Some discussion of active vs. passive consent is in order. On one hand, active consent, as required by the TDSB, involves parents’ provision of explicit permission for their children to participate. To maximize participation using active consent, considerable resources are necessary, including follow-up letters for students to take home, the organization of subsequent information sessions as needed, etc. This study was limited to one meeting with teachers per
school for the purpose of describing the study and distributing the information and consent forms for them to pass on to their students. Passive consent, on the other hand, involves only informing parents about the study details, and about the fact that their children will participate unless the parent or guardian provides explicit instructions that they should not. The use of each procedure has implications for the response rate. Survey research with young people in schools in the U.S. using passive consent gives response rates in the range of 80 to 100%. (Ellickson & Hawes, 1989; Esbensen et al., 1996; Fendrich & Johnson, 2001; Kearney et al., 1983; Lueptow et al., 1977; Severson & Ary, 1983; White, Hill, & Effendi, 2004). Active consent, in contrast, results in lower response rates in the range of 30 to 60% (Tigges, 2003), with some at 17% (Mishna et al., 2010), or even lower, at 10% (MacGregor & McNamara, 1995). Low response rates in school-related survey research raises concerns about underrepresentation of the population being surveyed, especially underrepresentation of minority groups (Dent et al. 1993; Esbensen et al., 2008; Kearney et al., 1983; Unger, et al., 2004). As Cook and colleagues (2000) note, however, low survey response rates may be less important than representativeness, as long as the response rate does not affect said representativeness. In this study, the response rate of 21% includes representation across ethno-racial identities that are consistent with the TDSB student census (see demographics in the Results section).

Procedure

To check for the survey’s clarity, format, and length, 45 students in the first participating school piloted the survey. The final sample includes those surveys. Students completed the paper survey under my supervision and during school hours, using pens that I provided and that they kept as a token of appreciation. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete.
Frequency distributions and cross-tabulations of all demographic variables were used to describe students’ use of homophobic and sexist language as both agents and targets. Chi-square tests (N=488) explored bivariate associations between students’ demographic characteristics and variables measuring students as agents and targets of homophobic and sexist language, and explored how serious students thought the use of such language was. Logistic regression analyses were performed to measure the relationships among each of the following variables: grade, gender, age, length of time in Canada, racial identity, language spoken at home, and roles as agents and targets of homophobic and sexist language.

Measures

On the survey, students provided responses about their socio-demographic characteristics (age, grade, gender, ethno-racial identity, length of time in Canada, language(s) spoken at home). Students also answered questions about how often they used (and towards whom) and were targeted by (and by whom) homophobic and sexist words in the last week, where in school they hear homophobic and sexist language, whether teachers were present at the time such language was used and, if so, whether teachers and/or peers intervened, the reasons for using such language, and whether they felt the use of such language was a problem. The survey offered space for students to write any other words / language they felt was similar to the examples of homophobic and sexist language provided in the survey.

Homophobic Content Agent Target Scale (HCAT). Developed by Poteat and Espelage (2005), the HCAT investigates the verbal homophobic content of middle school students. The scale asked how many times in the last week a student (1) used homophobic language, and (2) was called something homophobic. Each dimension (using and being called) included five items specifying the relationship involved (a friend, someone they did not know [a stranger], someone
they did know but did not like [an antagonist], someone they thought was gay, and someone they did not think was gay). Students then indicated the frequency of using or being targeted by homophobic language (never, once, twice, three to four times, five to six times, or seven times or more). The words used to identify homophobia were – “gay,” “lesbo,” “fag,” “faggot,” and “queer.” The survey did not define these words or phrases as homophobic, but rather began with this statement: “Some kids call each other names, such as gay, lesbo, fag, etc.” From this dataset the Cronbach’s alpha for the HCAT was $\alpha = 0.81$.

**Sexist Content Agent Target Scale (S-CAT).** To investigate the use of particular sexist language, a modified HCAT replaced homophobic words and phrases with a selection of sexist ones. The name and acronym S-CAT were developed specifically for this study. Drawing on this writer’s professional experience leading workshops on homophobia with middle school students, the words and phrases used to identify sexism were “sissy,” “wuss,” “you run like a girl,” and “you throw like a girl.” It is noted and will be discussed later that these phrases map specifically onto the gender policing of some boys’, rather than girls’, perceived behaviour. This sample of words and phrases corresponds to the literature discussing the underlying gender role stereotyping that fuels homophobic speech (Plummer, 2001; Swartz, 2003). The survey did not define these words as sexism. From this dataset, the Cronbach’s alpha for the S-CAT was $\alpha = 0.87$, offering evidence that the set of items used to measure the underlying construct of sexism has a relatively high internal consistency.

**Where in school and how often homophobic and sexist language is heard.** The survey asks how often - never, once, twice, three to four times, five to six times, seven times or more --

---

2 The survey items asking the frequency of use of homophobic language towards “someone I thought was gay” and “someone I didn’t think was gay” were excluded from the analyses, since they are not mutually exclusive of the first three items (a friend, a stranger, and an antagonist).
homophobic and sexist language was heard in six places at school during the past week. These places included the classroom, the hallway, the cafeteria, the schoolyard, the gymnasium, and the change room.

**Reasons for using homophobic and sexist language and how serious a problem students consider such language.** Asked about homophobic and sexist language separately, students were given a list of four reasons why someone might use homophobic and sexist language, and the reasons were ranked from the most used reason to least used reason. The four reasons listed were: 1. Joking; just for fun, 2. A put-down based on gender, 3. A put-down meant to cause harm or abuse, 4. A put-down meant to hurt lesbian or gay people. Students were then asked what they thought about the use of this kind of language. They were asked to choose from three evaluations, which included: 1. It is not serious at all, 2. It is somewhat serious, and 3. It is very serious. Finally, the survey provided space for students to write in other examples of language that they felt was homophobic and sexist.

**Results**

**Demographics**

The survey sample comprised 488 participants, 63% female and 37% male. The students ranged in age from 11 to 14 years old, with 13 years (52.7%) the largest age group and the average age, followed by 25.2% of 14 year olds, 21.5% of 12 year olds, and 0.6% of 11 year olds. The participants represented diverse ethno-racial backgrounds and, compared to the TDSB student census in 2011, representation in the study was closely achieved with six groups (White, South East Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American, Aboriginal, and Mixed background), over-achieved with East Asian, and under-achieved with Black and South Asian. With regard to the proportions of students categorized as racialized vs. non-racialized, this study closely mirrored
the TDSB census, with 70% racialized and 30% non-racialized students. As stated earlier, the overall response rate was 21%, ranging from a low of 8% in one school to a high of 32% in another. Measured by quadrant, the response rate was 8% in the NW, 20% in the NE, 25% in the SW, and 27% in the SE.

Agent and Target of Homophobic and Sexist Language

Relationship between gender and being the agent and target of homophobic and sexist language

Agent of Homophobic Language (to a friend, a stranger, an antagonist)

A total of 65% of girls vs. 36% of boys reported never applying homophobic language to a friend. The same percentage (15%) of boys and girls reported using homophobic language only once. However, when using homophobic language twice or more, the difference increased, with 50% of boys, compared to 21% of girls, using the language repeatedly towards a friend. The use of the language repeatedly (twice or more) towards a stranger is about the same (10% for girls, 12% for boys), but twice as many boys as girls (32% vs. 16%) use the language repeatedly towards an antagonist (See Table 8).

Target of homophobic Language (by a friend, a stranger, an antagonist)

More than twice as many boys as girls (45% vs. 19%) reported being repeated targets of homophobic language by a friend during the past week. Strangers targeted boys with homophobic language (twice or more) over four times more than they targeted girls (13% vs. 3%) during the past week. A total of 25% of boys were targets of homophobic language twice or more by an antagonist during the past week, compared to only 9% of girls (See Table 8).
Agent of Sexist Language (to a friend, a stranger, an antagonist)

A total of 74% of girls and 59% of boys reported never using sexist language to a friend. Roughly, the same percentage of boys and girls (15% vs. 18%) reported using sexist language once to a friend. However, repeated use of sexist language (twice or more) is over three times higher for boys than for girls (26% vs. 8%). Use of sexist language towards a stranger and an antagonist revealed no difference between genders (See Table 8).

Target of Sexist Language (by a friend, a stranger, an antagonist)

At least once during the past week, a friend targeted twice as many boys as girls (20% vs. 10%) with sexist language. The same ratio held for being targets of sexist language by a stranger (6% vs. 3%), and almost the same ratio was reported for being targeted by an antagonist (13% vs. 7%), all during the past week (See Table 8).

Intersectionality - Agent of Sexist AND Homophobic Language (to a friend, to an antagonist)

Almost twice as many girls as boys never used sexist and homophobic language (57% vs. 38%) towards a friend. Equal proportions of boys and girls (22%) used sexist and homophobic language once during the past week towards a friend; however, boys used both types of language towards a friend almost twice as much as girls (40% vs. 21%). Twice as many boys as girls (32% vs. 16%) used sexist and homophobic language twice or more frequently towards an antagonist during the past week.

There were no significant differences between students born in Canada and those born outside Canada, between racialized and non-racialized students, and between those who speak English and those who speak another language at home (See Table 9).
Logistic Regression Analyses

Democratic variables and four S-CAT variables (said to a friend, said by a friend, said to an antagonist, and said by an antagonist) were used as predictors of each of the four HCAT variables (said to friend, said by a friend, said to an antagonist, and said by an antagonist) in a forward selection logistic model. Since this study is exploratory, the forward method of logistic regression is suitable. Four models were ascertained (one for each HCAT variable predicted), with each model having two significant predictors. Gender and the S-CAT variables (to a friend, by a friend, to an antagonist, by an antagonist) were significant in each model as predictors of agents and targets of homophobic language (see Table 10). The following variables did not contribute significantly in any of the models: age, grade, length of time in Canada, racial identity, and language spoken at home.

Boys were over three times more likely to be agents of homophobic language towards a friend at least once during the past week than girls were. Boys were two and half times more likely to be agents of homophobic language towards an antagonist at least once during the past week than girls were.

Boys were over three times more likely to be targets of homophobic language by a friend at least once during the past week than girls were. Boys were nearly three times more likely to be targets of homophobic language by an antagonist at least once during the past week than girls were.

Students who were agents of sexism towards a friend at least once during the past week were two and half times more likely to be agents of homophobic language to a friend, as compared to students who never said anything sexist to a friend during the past week. Students
who were agents of sexist language towards an antagonist at least once during the past week were over three times more likely to be agents of homophobic language towards an antagonist at least once during the past week, as compared to students who never used sexist language towards an antagonist.

Students targeted by sexist language by a friend at least once were nearly four times more likely to be targets of homophobic language, as compared to students not targeted at all with sexist language by a friend at least once during the past week. Students targeted with sexist language at least once by an antagonist during the past week were five and half times more likely to be targets of homophobic language at least once during the past week by an antagonist.

The variable in relation to how serious students consider the use of homophobic and sexist language was re-coded as 0 = not serious at all, and 1 = somewhat or very serious. The demographic variables were entered into a regression model along with the variable of how serious students consider the use of sexist language (0 = not at all, 1 = somewhat or very serious). Gender was significant, with boys two and a half times more likely to report that homophobic language was not serious at all than girls. In addition, the analysis revealed a significant correlation between homophobic and sexist language use on one hand, and on the other hand, whether students take such language seriously. Specifically, students who reported taking sexist language seriously were 17 times more likely to take homophobic language seriously (See Table 11).

Taking Homophobic and Sexist Language Seriously

More boys than girls reported homophobic language as not serious at all (23% vs. 9%). More girls than boys (91% vs. 77%) reported homophobic language as somewhat or very
serious. No significant differences arose in relation to language spoken at home or racial identity with respect to how seriously homophobic language is considered.

More boys than girls stated that sexist language was not a serious issue (38% vs. 22%), while more girls than boys (78% vs. 62%) thought it somewhat or very serious. Compared to students whose home language was English, a smaller percentage of students with another language at home reported sexist language as somewhat or very serious (81% vs. 68%). More racialized students reported sexist language as somewhat or very serious than nonracialized students (76% vs. 63%) (See Table 5 for details. See Table 12).

Discussion

Boys and Homophobia

Consistent with the literature reporting males’ extensive use of homophobic language (Burn, 2000) as agents of homophobic language (McMaster et al, 2002; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010) and as targets (Chiodo, et al., 2009; McMaster, et al., 2002), this study reveals that, by all accounts, boys significantly outpaced girls in relation to calling others homophobic language, and also being called homophobic language. This finding also held true for boys as both agents and targets of sexist language. While nearly half of all participants (46%) reported using homophobic language towards a friend at least once during a week, with 42% reporting being called something homophobic at least once in a week by a friend, that number is significantly greater for boys (65% towards a friend, 52% by a friend at least once). For sexist language used twice or more involving a friend in the past week, this study reveals a significant difference between genders. Boys as agents and targets were at significantly higher rates than girls (26% of boys vs. 8% of girls as agents towards a friend, 20% of boys vs. 10% of girls as targets of a
friend). Homophobic and gender-based put-downs figure prominently in the friendship
dynamics and social lives of boys.

Overall, a significant gender difference occurred across all except one of the Agent and
target variables. This is consistent with the study’s odds ratios results, which reveal boys as
three times more likely than girls to be agents of homophobia to their friends and almost two and
a half times more likely to say something homophobic to an antagonist. The literature indicates
that boys’ experience with homophobia ties closely to gender role stereotypes, masculinity, and
the use of homophobia and homophobic speech to establish one’s status with male peers (Good,
Thomson, & Brathwaite, 2005; Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Martino, 2000; McCann et al., 2010;
Nayak & Kehily, 1996; Plummer, 2001; Renold, 2003; Swartz, 2003; Tharinger, 2008; Whitley,
2001). Thus, boys’ greater use of the language reported here echoes the literature. In particular,
boys’ use of homophobic language employed as name-calling is tied to the adoption of
normative masculine beliefs (Kimmel, 2004; Pleck, Sonestein, & Ku, 1994), to proof of
heterosexual identity (Korobov, 2004; Pascoe, 2011; Phoenix et al., 2003), and to imposition of
gender normative behaviour (Pascoe, 2011; Phoenix et al., 2003). In contrast, corresponding
gender norms for girls carry a lesser requirement for homophobic attitudes or behaviours (Poteat,
O’Dwyer, & Mereish, 2012). These judgments are consistent with this study’s findings that girls
act less as agents and targets of homophobia, relative to boys, and that girls are two and a half
times more likely to take homophobic language seriously. There is significant amount of
literature linking gender role stereotyping and homophobia, whereby boys acting feminine are
charged with being gay and thus called homophobic names (Good, Thomson, & Braithwaite,
2005; Murphy, 2006; Pascoe, 2011; Pharr, 2007; Plummer, 2001; Renold, 2005; Swartz, 2003).
Sexist Language and Homophobic Language

By asking students about both homophobic and sexist language concurrently, this study gathered some important preliminary empirical evidence linking particular verbal manifestations of sexism (e.g., “sissy,” “run like a girl”) with homophobic language predominantly targeting boys. Specifically, the use of sexist language at least once in the past week towards both friends and antagonists was a significant predictor of the subsequent use of homophobic language at least once towards friends and antagonists. Thus these two types of name-calling are closely entwined; where the use of one type of name calling is found, the other is not far behind, or, as McCann et al. (2009) remark, homophobic and misogynistic language “are often drawn on the same breath” (p. 203). Of particular note, students targeted with sexist language were five and a half times more likely to be targets of homophobic language. Furthermore, students acting as agents of sexist language towards an antagonist were over three times more likely to be agents of homophobic language, as compared to students who never used sexist language towards an antagonist.

Research into homophobic attitudes reveals that traditional gender role beliefs, as well as sexist beliefs and attitudes are recurrent predictors of homophobic attitudes (Epstein, 1997; Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000; Phoenix et al., 2003). It would not be a stretch to expect such attitudes to manifest in verbal expressions of sexism and homophobia. In other words, conventional and rigid gender role beliefs give rise to verbal taunts or expressions of sexism that in turn lead to homophobic language. This study extends the literature by investigating these phenomena at the middle school level, with the additional result that the use of sexist language significantly increases the likelihood of the use of homophobic language. In particular, relationships involving friends and antagonists were significant. Among friends, students who
used sexist language towards a friend were two and one half times more likely to say something homophobic to a friend (as compared to students who never used sexist language towards a friend). Students targeted with sexist language by a friend were nearly four times (3.79) more likely to be targets of homophobic language (as compared to students never targeted with sexist language by a friend). Between antagonists, the likelihood of sexist language predicting homophobic language is even higher. The findings show that students targeted with sexist language by an antagonist were over five and one half times more likely to be targets of homophobic language during the previous week. In all of these instances, male students, as compared to female students, were much more likely to be agents and targets of both sexist and homophobic language. It is important to keep in mind the study’s use of particular examples of sexist words and expressions that reflect boys’ perceived transgressions of traditional masculine norms.

As Espelage et al. (2014) note, ‘heterosexual masculinity is the norm in most middle schools” (p. 4), which is maintained and sustained by students, in this case, boys, who are actively seeking to prove both their heterosexuality and nonfemininity. In other words, sexist ideologies necessary for heterosexual masculinity also fuel homophobic behaviours such as name-calling. This fits with Pascoe’s (2011) argument that homophobia is crucial for adolescent males’ development of masculinity rooted in traditional, rigid gender roles and behaviours; therefore, the deep implication for boys comes as no surprise in this study, which reveals boys as the dominant agents and targets of both homophobic and sexist language. As Kimmel (1994) states, the “feminization of homosexuality” (p. 125) sets the stage for boys and men to actively avoid any association with either femininity or homosexuality; hence, the overwhelming use of homophobic language by boys is a means of distancing themselves from most things feminine
or gay. However, as a first case of the examination of homophobic and sexist language together, this study offers an empirical link to join with the conceptual link between sexism and homophobia. This study demonstrates that sexist language, for example, “you run like a girl,” which is arguably based on sexist ideologies, may lead to heightened risk of using or receiving homophobic language, for example, “that’s so gay.”

The results regarding the seriousness of homophobic and sexist language provide some additional empirical links, whereby students who think sexist language is somewhat/very serious were 17 times more likely to think that homophobic language is a somewhat serious issue. This surprising finding not only underscores some empirical links, but also suggests an important avenue to pursue in addressing homophobic language. If the ranks of students who take sexist language seriously are increased, say, by addressing the explicit and implicit manifestations of sexism (e.g., antifeminine language, gender stereotypes limiting girls and women), and the way sexism affects women specifically and everyone generally, some headway in addressing homophobia is possible.

**Can AntiSexism Act As a Weapon of AntiHomophobia?**

Over three decades ago, Suzanne Pharr deftly articulated the interlocking relationship between sexism and homophobia in her classic book, *Homophobia a Weapon of Sexism*. Specifically centring on all women’s experience of homophobia (lesbian and heterosexual), Pharr offered a theory of sexism and homophobia whereby the system of patriarchy, supported by a framework of sexism, deploys economics, violence, and homophobia to limit and control all women. In addition, she named homophobia to be a weapon of sexism which when joined with heterosexism and underlying rigid gender role stereotypes, gives rise to compulsory heterosexuality. Within this framework, Pharr noted how men perceived to be less masculine (or
“not real men,” p. 18) were consequently seen as more feminine (and therefore gay), with fear and hatred fuelling homophobic responses. When a boy is seen transgressing traditional masculine behaviour, others may perceive him as acting “like a girl.” This kind of perception fuels the misconception that, since “gay” means someone attracted to a member of the same gender (e.g., male/male), therefore, one person must take up the feminine role as per heteronormativity. Thus, in a perpetrator’s mind, a boy seen as more girly or girlish must be gay, and this perception leads to targeted with homophobic language. Here, the use of homophobic language as a means of calling out gender nonconforming behaviour can be seen. The professional experience of this writer conducting workshops that explore homophobia in middle schools affirms Pharr’s argument. During these workshops, students shared particular stereotypes of gay men and lesbians that were saturated with nonconformity to traditional gender roles. Specifically, students stated that gay men were more likely to act or behave in (traditional) feminine ways for example, have higher voices, wear clothes not associated with masculinity, etc. Conversely, students listed traditional masculine traits as lesbian stereotypes, e.g., short hair, not wearing dresses or skirts, etc. In short, gay men were like women, and lesbians were like men. As will be discussed in the Implications section, efforts to address homophobia require that sexism and gender role stereotyping be critically addressed, so that antisexism efforts will fuel antihomophobia efforts.

Limitations

While the sample of students in the study is quite similar to the overall TDSB population in important demographics, the low response rate limits the generalizability of these findings. This is due in part to the challenges posed by the active consent process. As such, these results should be viewed as preliminary. Future research should dig deeper to ascertain not only with
whom students use this language (friend, stranger, and antagonist), but also who is targeting whom, for example, are boys, as agents, targeting other boys or girls? Do girls target other girls or boys? This information will allow for further analysis of the gendered dynamics of homophobic and sexist name-calling. While the current research focused mainly on those students who participate in sexist and homophobic language use, future research needs to examine more closely those students who use neither sexist nor homophobic language. Specifically, why do they not engage in this type of name-calling? How might we increase the ranks of these students? The male bias of both the HCAT and S-CAT scales should also be noted. The language examples used in both scales skew towards antigay (fag, faggot) and antifeminine (sissy, run like a girl) sentiment and therefore are less inclusive of antilebian language (with “lesbo” as the singular epithet for lesbians) and language that captures perceived gender transgressions by girls (e.g., “tomboy,” “act like a lady”). Finally, cross-sectional surveys offer only a snapshot of the phenomenon and thus do not permit inferences about temporal direction; as such, causal relationships remain unknown.

Implications

One of the key findings of this study is the relationship between the use of sexist language and the use of homophobic language. As stated earlier, students using sexist language at least once in the past week were 2.55 times more likely to use homophobic language towards a friend and 3.29 times more likely to use homophobic language towards an antagonist than students who never use sexist language. With this in mind, it is imperative for school staff to pay closer attention to and take more seriously the sexist language used by students. The results reported in Paper 1 (chapter two) reveal that, while 64% of students indicate the presence of school staff, at least sometimes when sexist language occurs, 41% of these same students report
that school staffs never intervene. This would seem to indicate that students deem such language as not serious, and perhaps regarding it as what Thornberg (2011) calls “low-level bullying” (p. 264) to be ignored, not recognized, and thus not addressed. Similarly, if teachers do want to address it, do they feel that they know how to do so? This question relates to the research on bullying that also notes that teachers hesitate to intervene and that reticence to intervene can stem from teachers’ own attitudes about the situation, e.g., whether they think the situation is serious (Blain-Arcaro et al., 2012). If teachers see this language as “just joking,” that perception may underlie their decision to intervene or not and may explain students’ similar “just joking” reasons for using the language. Thus, attention to school staff members’ reasons to intervene or not is needed. One reason offered in the literature raises the issue of challenging the idea that curriculum is only about the lessons and material to cover. Meyer (2008) uncovers this challenge perfectly in interviews with teachers conducted in order to understand their perception of homophobic (and sexist) name calling: “Sometimes as a teacher I just want to ignore it. There are times that I ignore it. I’m not perfect. There’s so many times when I have TOO much to do, like we gotta get through this lesson.” (p. 560). If school staff members take sexist talk more seriously, the results of this study indicate that there may be a tremendous pay off; students who think sexist language is a serious problem are 17 times more likely to think homophobic language is a serious problem. Similarly, if teachers fear backlash for directly addressing issues of homophobia, the possibility of addressing issues of sexism provides an additional pathway forward. The challenge then is to increase the ranks of students who take homophobic language seriously (rather than seeing it as “just joking”) by having them take sexist language seriously; teachers who are seen to be taking sexist language seriously may possibly enhance this shift. Furthermore, closer attention needs to be paid to the specificity that connects homophobia to
sexism in order to better engage with students, who may then make the connection between seemingly innocuous banter (sissy, run like a girl) and anti-gay epithets that negatively affect a myriad of students (and school staff for that matter).

Thus, the link here is to staff members who visibly role-model interventions in instances of sexist language and thereby give important support to students to do the same. Linking this study’s findings to research that explores the connection between homophobic teasing and later engagement in sexual harassment perpetration (boys engaged in homophobic teasing were 1.66 times more likely to engage in future sexual harassment [see Espelage et al., 2014]) may give rise to efforts to interrupt sexist language. These efforts may play an important role in prevention of such language. This process requires engagement in meaningful discussions with students about connections between homophobia and sexism. These discussions need to underscore the power of language. Explicit and consistent efforts to address sexist language, an important task in its own right, will be witnessed by students and thus will advance antihomophobia work. Such increased attention to sexism pays off in many ways. As Espelage and colleagues (2014) note, “Not surprisingly, gender equity or intolerance of sexual harassment and positive teacher-student relationships were associated with less bullying, victimization, and aggression and a greater willingness to intervene” (p. 301).

Conclusions

It is important to note that more and more schools are seeking to address homophobia, as they recognize it as a barrier to making education more inclusive and welcoming to all students. School-wide efforts, such as gay-straight alliances reflect this shift. However, on the day-to-day level in the classrooms, hallways, and playgrounds, the social lives of students continue with the use of language and terms that reflect rigid and traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Left
unchecked, these phenomena continue to fuel homophobic name-calling and put-downs. Given the recognition that educators may be uneasy addressing homophobia specifically (Norman, 2004), the findings here point a way forward. In the process of addressing sexism and gender role stereotypes, which is a critical effort in its own right that perhaps presents a less contentious topic, relative to homophobia, such antisexist work may also contribute to addressing homophobic language. As a result, explicit anti-sexist work may be engaged through challenges to sexist banter and language. The prevalence of homophobic language is thus undercut, and antisexist work is made into a weapon of anti-homophobia work.
References


Poteat, V. P., O'Dwyer, L. M., & Mereish, E. H. (2012). Changes in how students use and are called homophobic epithets over time: Patterns predicted by gender, bullying, and victimization status. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 104*(2), 393.


Table 8

Frequency Percentages and Chi Square Analysis of HCAT and S-CAT by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agent of Homophobic language in last week to a:</th>
<th>Target of Homophobic language in last week by a:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>friend</td>
<td>stranger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Girls | never | 198 (65%) | 245 (81%) | 218 (72%) | 211 (69%) | 283 (93%) | 250 (82%) |
| once  | 45 (15%) | 28 (9%) | 37 (12%) | 36 (12%) | 12 (4%) | 27 (9%) |
| 2X or more | 63 (21%) | 29 (10%) | 47 (16%) | 58 (19%) | 9 (3%) | 27 (9%) |

| Boys | never | 65 (36%) | 146 (82%) | 89 (50%) | 69 (38%) | 136 (77%) | 113 (64%) |
| once  | 27 (15%) | 11 (6%) | 32 (18%) | 30 (17%) | 18 (10%) | 19 (11%) |
| 2X or more | 90 (50%) | 21 (12%) | 58 (32%) | 82 (45%) | 23 (13%) | 45 (25%) |

χ²=48.122  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p<.000\)

χ²=1.847  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p=.397\)

χ²=25.965  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p<.000\)

χ²=48.172  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p<.000\)

χ²=27.266  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p<.000\)

χ²=25.868  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p<.000\)

| Boys | never | 225 (74%) | 268 (88%) | 251 (83%) | 231 (76%) | 277 (91%) | 254 (84%) |
| once  | 56 (18%) | 20 (7%) | 26 (9%) | 44 (15%) | 17 (6%) | 26 (9%) |
| 2X or more | 25 (8%) | 17 (6%) | 27 (9%) | 29 (10%) | 9 (3%) | 22 (7%) |

χ²= 28.315  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p<.000\)

χ²=.936  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p=.626\)

χ²=5.808  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p=.055\)

χ²=14.429  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p=.336\)

χ²=2.181  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p=.087\)

χ²=4.892  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p<.001\)

| Boys | never | 107 (59%) | 155 (86%) | 136 (76%) | 109 (61%) | 157 (88%) | 136 (77%) |
| once  | 28 (15%) | 11 (6%) | 15 (8%) | 34 (19%) | 11 (6%) | 18 (10%) |
| 2X or more | 47 (26%) | 14 (8%) | 29 (16%) | 36 (20%) | 10 (6%) | 23 (13%) |

χ²=.28315  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p<.000\)

χ²=.936  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p=.626\)

χ²=5.808  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p=.055\)

χ²=14.429  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p=.336\)

χ²=2.181  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p=.087\)

χ²=4.892  \(\text{df}=2\)  \(p<.001\)

| p<.000 | p<.001 |
Table 9

Frequency Percentages and Chi Square Analysis of Homophobic AND Sexist Language Users

Sexist and Homophobic Language said in past week to:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A friend</th>
<th>An Antagonist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Girls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>159 (57%)</td>
<td>218 (72%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>60 (22%)</td>
<td>37 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2x or more</td>
<td>58 (21%)</td>
<td>47 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boys</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>48 (38%)</td>
<td>89 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>28 (22%)</td>
<td>32 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2x or more</td>
<td>51 (40%)</td>
<td>58 (32%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2 = 18.459$  
$\text{df}=2$  
$p<.000$  

$\chi^2 = 25.965$  
$\text{df}=2$  
$p<.000$
### Table 10

Binary Logistic Regressions – Correlates of Homophobic Language towards and by a friend, towards and by an antagonist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlates of Homophobic Language towards a Friend</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>agent of sexism to a friend</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>never (ref.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1x or more in past week</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>2.55*</td>
<td>1.67, 3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Gender</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>female (ref.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>3.07*</td>
<td>2.05, 4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>model accounts for 65% of the variance</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Correlates of Homophobic Language towards an Antagonist</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>agent of sexism to an antagonist</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>never (ref.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1x or more in past week</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>3.29*</td>
<td>2.02, 5.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Gender</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>female (ref.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>2.48*</td>
<td>1.64, 3.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>model accounts for 67% of the variance</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Correlates of Homophobic Language by a Friend</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>target of sexism by a friend</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>never (ref.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1x or more in past week</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>3.79*</td>
<td>2.44, 5.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Gender</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>female (ref.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>3.22*</td>
<td>2.13, 4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>model accounts for 68% of the variance</em></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Correlates of Homophobic Language by an Antagonist</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variable</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>target of sexism by an antagonist</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>never (ref.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1x or more in past week</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>5.55*</td>
<td>3.30, 9.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Gender</em></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>female (ref.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>2.7*</td>
<td>1.68, 4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>model accounts for 77% of the variance</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ref. = reference group, CI=confidence interval for odds ratio (OR). *p<.001
Table 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>grade</td>
<td>-.202</td>
<td>.433</td>
<td>.817</td>
<td>.35, 1.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female (ref.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-.935</td>
<td>.339</td>
<td>.393*</td>
<td>.20, .76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.486</td>
<td>.548</td>
<td>.615</td>
<td>.21, 1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length in Canada</td>
<td>-.981</td>
<td>.406</td>
<td>.375</td>
<td>.170, .83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial ID</td>
<td>.166</td>
<td>.398</td>
<td>1.181</td>
<td>.54, 2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking sexism seriously</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all (ref.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat/very</td>
<td>2.853</td>
<td>.366</td>
<td>17.333*</td>
<td>8.46, 35.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Model accounts for 86% of the variance

Note. ref. = reference group, CI=confidence interval for odds ratio (OR). *p<.001

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Homophobic Language</th>
<th>girls</th>
<th>boys</th>
<th>English at home</th>
<th>Other lang. at home</th>
<th>Racialized</th>
<th>non Racialized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>not serious</td>
<td>27 (9%)</td>
<td>40 (23%)</td>
<td>43 (14%)</td>
<td>24 (15%)</td>
<td>44 (13%)</td>
<td>23 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somewhat/very serious</td>
<td>277 (91%)</td>
<td>134 (77%)</td>
<td>271 (86%)</td>
<td>140 (85%)</td>
<td>291 (87%)</td>
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<td>χ²=18.273</td>
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<td>p&lt;.000</td>
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<td>p=.779</td>
<td>p=.363</td>
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| Sexist Language           |       |      |                |                    |            |                |
| not serious               | 67 (22%) | 66(38%) | 102 (33%) | 31 (19%) | 81 (24%) | 52 (37%) |
| somewhat/very serious     | 237 (78%) | 106 (62%) | 212 (68%) | 131 (81%) | 254 (76%) | 87 (63%) |
| χ²=14.554                 |       |       | χ²=9.457      | χ²=8.520          |           |                |
| df=1                      |       |       | df=1          | df=1               |           |                |
| p<.000                    |       |       | p=.002        | p=.004             |           |                |
Chapter 4: Paper #3: That’s So Gay – “It’s like the worst thing ever... It is as common as saying ‘hello’.” Sexist homophobia and middle school students’ perceptions of homophobic language use

Introduction

The phenomena of name-calling, put-downs, and teasing figure prominently in the school lives of children and youth. In the 2006 Toronto District School Board (TDSB) student census, 41% of grade seven and eight students, and 31% of grade nine to twelve students reported experiencing name-calling or insults. Relative to other forms of bullying, such as threats, exclusion, and physical bullying, “Name calling and insults was the more frequently reported type of bullying behaviour” (Yau & O’Reilly, 2006, p. 21).

Greater and growing attention is being paid to the experiences of middle school LGBTQ students and families (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011; Wickens & Wedwick, 2011). One such experience would include exposure to homophobic name-calling and put-downs. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the prevalence of homophobia in middle schools. A question arises then about what role homophobia plays in the name-calling reported by 41% of students. According to Plummer (2001) boys’ “early homophobic references seemed to be rooted in gender” (p. 22) whereby, calling to mind terms and phrases that note when a boy is seen to step outside expected masculine norms e.g. “sissy” and “pansy”, and “you run like a girl”. This combination of sexist and antifeminine sentiment with over-masculinized expectations is an indication of the close association of homophobia and sexism (Swartz, 2003), as evidenced in the language used; the combination is referred to in this paper as “sexist homophobia.” Good, Thomson, and Braithwaite (2005) connect homophobia, masculinity, and sexism, stating: “Underscoring the salience of socialization into appropriate masculinity, boys are often called
derogatory names referring to girls or homosexuals if they express signs of personal vulnerability” (p. 700).

This connection between antigay language and the devaluing of femininity underscores some of Suzanne Pharr’s (1997) argument about homophobia as a weapon of sexism. Pharr’s thesis, centred on homophobia’s effect on all women (lesbian and heterosexual), is that homophobia cannot exist or flourish without a foundation of sexism. Within Pharr’s theory of sexism and homophobia she pointed out that strict adherence to rigid gender roles (a pillar of sexism), for example, expecting boys and girls to act in specific ways, is maintained in one way through antigay language targeting boys and girls who are perceived to transgress such gender roles. The professional experience of this writer, who conducted workshops that explore homophobia, particularly in middle schools, affirms this aspect of Pharr’s argument. It is important to point out that, as an out white, gay male leading these workshops, my particular social identity and use of self in the workshops, influences what students offered when discussing stereotypes. Consequently, a workshop led by an out lesbian for instance, would provide a different context in which students would respond when asked about ideas and attitudes regarding lesbians and gay men. Students offered particular stereotypes of lesbians and gay men saturated with nonconformity to traditional gender roles. Specifically, students stated that gay men were more likely to act or behave in (traditional) feminine ways, for example, to have higher voices and to wear clothes not typically associated with masculinity. Conversely, students listed traditional masculine traits as stereotypical of lesbian women, including, for example, short hair and not wearing dresses or skirts. Thus, gay men were described as being like women, and lesbians were depicted as being like men. Sexism and homophobia are therefore not just interlocking. Rather, this interlocking manifests itself in language that
combines to give rise to, in many instances, “sexist homophobia,” a particular type/form of homophobia motivated by and rooted in perceived violations of gender role stereotypes and traditional gender role norms and behaviours (Daley, Solomon, Newman, & Mishna, 2007). Daley and colleagues assert that sexism is misogyny towards women and that, through homophobic sexism, their femininity is policed; this assertion is particular to lesbians/queer women. On one hand, this type of homophobia is conveyed in part through sexist slurs and sexually charged language, e.g., seeing lesbian sexuality as incomplete and existing only to serve male fantasy. On the other hand, homophobia is misogyny towards gay men since they are attracted to some other men, and thus may be seen by some people as more like women. In this instance, sexist homophobia operates to police masculinity through gendered stereotypes, attitudes, and actions. It is this last point, sexist homophobia, which this paper focuses on in order to understand the perceptions of middle school students. This type of homophobia can be differentiated from other forms of homophobia, such as religious homophobia (Reygan & Moane, 2014), which is fuelled by faith-inspired views of sin, and racist homophobia (Vaught, 2004), which uses racial stereotypes to minimize or negate same-sex sexuality (in other words, gay is a white thing). Arguably, “sexist homophobia” comprises upwards of eight variations that reflect different positionalities in relation to the agent’s sex and gender identity and the target’s sex and gender role. For example, the homophobia may involve “males prejudiced against males perceived as feminine” and “males prejudiced against males perceived as masculine” (Young-Bruehl, 1996, p. 150). As will be presented in the findings and discussion, the former type (males prejudiced against males perceived as feminine) seems to undergird the focus group participants’ perceptions of particular homophobic language use; in this case, ‘sexist homophobia’.
According to Wessler and De Andrade (2006), “Questions remain as to the actual content and forms of bullying and harassment in schools, [and] the ways students are impacted by it” (p. 512). Since students occupy the front lines of exposure to name-calling and other forms of verbal aggression and harassment in school, they are uniquely situated to comment and offer their perceptions and understandings of homophobic and sexist name-calling at school. The study reported in this article addresses the gap in the literature by engaging, for the first time in Canada that I know about, with middle school students in order to explore their perceptions of both homophobic and sexist language at school, the reasons behind such language use, and the role and reaction of teachers. The findings of the paper presented here focus specifically on homophobic language.

Methodology

This study employed theoretical or deductive thematic analysis (TA) to investigate students’ perceptions and opinions regarding homophobic and sexist language and name-calling used at school. TA allows for exploration of the data in order to identify and analyze patterns and meaning (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The use of theoretical/deductive analysis reflects this researcher’s theoretical interest (and professional practice) in the area of homophobic and sexist name-calling (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given that there is a great deal of attention paid to bullying in general and to homophobic bullying among secondary school students in particular, the choice of TA allowed for investigation of middle school students’ perceptions and opinions of homophobic and sexist language use. To explore and understand students’ perceptions of homophobic and sexist language use, I utilized the focus group format, defined as a “carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment” (Kruger, 1994, p. 6). Furthermore, Horner
(2000) argues that children “are more relaxed and willing to share perceptions when discussions are held with a group of peers” (p. 510). In both Canada and the United States, very little qualitative research with middle school students (approximately 12 and 13 years old) has been conducted to date that addresses homophobic language, and even less that explores sexist language. This study received ethics approval from the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board and from the External Research Review Committee (ERRC) of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB).

Participants

Students recruited from grades seven and eight in four middle schools in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) participated in the focus groups. Purposively selected from each of the four geographical quadrants of the TDSB (northeast, southeast, northwest, southwest) the schools were chosen based on the researcher’s professional relationship with the schools. This convenience sample comprised schools where I facilitated anti-homophobia workshops in my role as a school social worker. Following ethics approval, principals received emails and invitations to participate. Upon securing agreement from the principal, I presented to all interested grade seven and eight teachers, who, in turn, provided their students with an information package and consent form to take home. The parents/guardians of participating students provided signed consent, and then participating students provided verbal assent at the outset of the focus group. A larger response in terms of consents in one school led to the organization of two focus groups within that school. In the remaining three schools, there was one focus group per school.
Data collection and analysis

I facilitated the focus groups, and each lasted approximately one hour. Students were advised that the facilitator would maintain strict confidentiality, but it was pointed out that other participants present in the focus group would know their identities, and what they spoke about. I strongly urged students to maintain the confidentiality of all participants and their respective comments. The use of mixed gender focus groups has been cited as offering the richest findings, given the difference in opinions and experiences among boys and girls (Davis & Jones, 1996; Heary & Hennessy, 2002).

Without reference to the words “homophobic” or “sexist,” students were given examples of name-calling such as “that’s so gay” and “you run like a girl.” The questions posed included how often participants hear language and terms like the examples provided, under what conditions this language was used, e.g., what was going on when this language was used, whether teachers/school staff were present, and, if so, how teachers responded. Students were also asked their opinions about whether such language was a problem and about possible reasons behind the use of this language. Students were explicitly told that the focus groups were not about their personal experiences with name-calling. Following the constant comparative method (Creswell, 1998), the focus group questions were reviewed and updated following each focus group and prior to the next one. The researcher reviewed the audio files after each focus group, made notes based on the responses, and revised the focus group guide to include questions based on the participants’ responses.

The focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to ensure participant and school confidentiality. This resulted in approximately 150 pages of transcripts. Substantial literature exists that identifies and describes the phenomenon of
homophobic name-calling in secondary schools (Kosciw, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006) and, to a lesser extent, in middle schools (Poteat & Espelage, 2005), whereas there is very little or no literature on sexist name-calling. With this in mind, focus group questions were developed in order to explore both homophobic and sexist name-calling with middle school students and to elicit their perceptions and understanding of this topic. The choice of theoretical thematic analysis was kept in mind to anticipate “cod[ing] for a quite specific research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 12). The transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 10 software, and initial codes were generated from each focus group. Guided by questions from the semi-structured interview guide, initial codes were generated, reviewed, analyzed, and sorted into broad areas of discussion and emerging themes. All key coded text was pooled, and this process led to specific coding for one question (prevalence), the identification of themes within two other broad areas of discussion (reasons for homophobic language and teacher responses/reactions), and one emerging theme (homophobia and sexism).

Results

Participants

There were five focus groups with 26 students in grades seven and eight, comprising 10 males and 16 females. The groups were group 1: N=6, three boys and three girls; group 2: N=6, three boys and three girls; group 3: N=5, one boy and four girls; group 4: N=5 two boys and three girls; and group 5: N=4, one boy and three girls. The age range of participants was 12 to 14 years old, and the average age of participants was 13.

Using qualitative methodology, the purpose of this study was to explore middle school students’ opinions, perceptions, and understanding of homophobic and sexist language. The following areas were identified: (1) the pervasiveness of homophobic language at school, (2) the
reasons for using homophobic language, with drop down themes emergent within, and (3) teachers’ reactions and responses to homophobic language, with drop down themes emergent. The fourth area is more accurately defined as an emerging theme: (4) homophobia and sexism.

**Pervasiveness of homophobic language at school**

The first area of discussion across all the focus groups was the pervasiveness of homophobic language at school. Participants commented that phrases like “that’s so gay” and “faggot” are pervasive. According to the participants, this language is uttered regularly, if not daily, at school, reporting, “it’s like an everyday thing” (female, Focus Group [FG] 2), with one student saying it is heard “a hundred times a day” (female, FG 3). Besides commenting on the frequency of hearing homophobic language, participants observed that these words and phrases embed themselves in conversations to the point that “it’s almost a part of normal conversation” (male, FG 2). One student (female, FG 3) characterized the frequency and pervasiveness of the language this way: “It’s as common as saying ‘hello.’” Participants reported hearing homophobic language in the schoolyard, and hallways and washrooms were also cited as places where homophobic language occurs. Along with homophobic graffiti written on washroom walls (or sometimes carved into the wall, as noted by one participant), sometimes students’ names were attached to the graffiti, according to the students. As one student (female, FG 2) said, “they don’t just put words, they put words and names after it so they single out people…about being lesbian or gay.” While students acknowledged that other material is also written on the washroom walls, one student (female, FG 2) commented that antigay words stood out in particular, noting, “The homophobic ones are usually bigger.”
Reasons for using homophobic language

A second area of discussion in the focus groups was the participants’ beliefs about the reasons for the use of homophobic language at school. Participants discussed this at length. The reasons offered by the participants broadly fell into three sub-themes: (a) an individual level generic insult not meant to be homophobic, (b) an insult indicative of homophobia, and (c) violation of gender norms and expectations, especially by boys.

Individual level generic insult not meant to be homophobic

While some participants acknowledged that use of the word “gay” and the phrase “that’s so gay” was homophobic, others did not necessarily believe homophobia was the intention. Many participants said that some of these words and phrases, given their everyday occurrence, are now more “generic,” thus not referring to gay people per se, but to something considered “boring,” “disliked,” “stupid,” or “any bad sort of thing” (male, FG 5). According to one participant (male, FG 1), for instance, someone “would call them a faggot for acting like an idiot.” According to another participant (male, FG 3), “If someone touched someone’s balls, they’d call the guy a faggot or something.” To justify the “generic” status of these words and phrases, one participant (male, FG 3) said, “I heard people say things are gay, not because it is a homophobic thing, right. It’s because it’s boring or they don’t like it.” A further explanation was that students say that this sort of language is something that was taught to them, and that it has become a “habit.” Across all the focus groups, students generally agreed that “gay” is used regularly to insult disliked people and things. They acknowledged, however, that “gay” equates with different and that different equals bad.
Indicative of homophobia

In contrast with some participants who argued that homophobic language used as put-downs is not homophobic, others regarded these words as linked to broader ideas devaluing gay people. One participant (female, FG 1) explained, “It’s kind of like saying you’re being brought down levels, that you are worse than us, that you are not as good as straight people,” while another (female, FG 2) stated that this language is used “because some people don’t think gays are right.” For one participant, the regular use of homophobic words is a sign of homophobic views and furthermore indicates that the student does not care whether a teacher is around to hear it.

Violation of gender norms and expectations (especially by boys)

The perception that a boy is acting like a girl emerged as a widespread reason for the use of homophobic name-calling. Many participants recalled that situations that elicited homophobic language involved cases where so-called feminine traits and/or behaviours were attributed to boys. Such accounts included references to certain fashions, activities, and specifically the colour pink. According to one participant (female, FG 2), “People will think he’s gay for liking fashion or if a guy does ballet,” while a male in the same FG 2 stated, “If a guy is around girls but more acting like the girls and talking with them about fashion and laughing, they’re more thought of to be gay.” Another noted this to be the case “when guys wear pink” or “wear skinny jeans” (male, FG 5). Yet another participant emphasized the equation of so-called femininity, fashion, and being gay, saying, “When people have a really good sense of style or they dress really nice, they are gay because they know how to dress and they don’t just come to school in sweatpants and a wife-beater” (female, FG 1). A number of participants emphasized situations that involved “hanging out with girls” as prime motivators for homophobic name-calling. A
homophobic reaction was not necessarily forthcoming, however, given the different interpretations of social scenarios that involve boys hanging out with girls. One participant (female, FG 2) commented,

If it is seen as the girls hanging out with the guy, they are attracted to him, but if the boy’s doing more of the talking, then people will think he’s gay because he’s either talking more…doing more hand movements…acting more like the girls…but if the girls are talking more, or flirting, people will think he’s just really good with girls.

In addition, another participant (male, FG 2) stated succinctly, “If a guy hangs with a lot of girls, isn’t that the opposite of gay?” Thus, the interpretation by other students of the circumstances that involve a boy hanging out with girls seems to determine whether a homophobic remark is deployed.

Participants also spent some time discussing the topic of physical displays of friendship and affection, particularly hugging. The interpretation of this phenomenon seemed to be affected by other factors, such as popularity and social capital or the lack thereof. For example, on one hand, “Like if they’re hugging their guy friend people might say that’s so gay because guys don’t normally do that… [instead they] have like a handshake, like a pat on the back” (female, FG 4). On the other hand, if the boy in question possesses positive social status, it seems to mitigate or even eliminate the risk of becoming a target of a homophobic remark in these situations. As one participant (female, FG 1) said, “If a popular guy likes to hug that is okay, but, if the weird guys hug, it’s like the worst thing ever and they’re called gay forever.”
Teachers’ reactions and responses to homophobic language

A third major area of discussion related to teachers’ roles and reactions. While several participants noted that students’ use of homophobic language often occurs in the absence of teachers and school staff (“teachers are not around”), they discussed at length what happens when teachers are present. Participants witnessed several types of reactions and responses and offered their perceptions regarding the effectiveness and impact of teachers’ interventions. The responses of teachers fell into four broad sub-themes: (a) telling them to stop, (b) trying to do more, but giving up, (c) hearing the comment(s) and ignoring it, or hearing it but not taking it seriously, and (d) tacit or explicit endorsement of homophobic language.

*Telling them to stop*

Some participants described teachers’ efforts to address homophobic language in the moment, often expressed as a quick verbal response, as limited at best. According to one participant (female, FG1), “My homeroom teacher would say ‘that’s rude, and you shouldn’t say that’… yeah, that’s pretty much it.” Another account of a limited response was, “They’ll just give the student a dirty look and walk away” (female, FG 1).

*Trying to do more, but giving up*

Participants commented that some teachers appear to want to address this language and do something about it, but the participants also had the sense that, because of the pervasiveness of the language, the teachers tended to give up on their efforts. According to one participant (female, FG 1), “they’ll start to say something, but then if it’s repeating, then they’ll just give up,” and, according to another, “teachers just give up; they don’t care anymore… so it just continues in the classroom” (female, FG 1). Still another participant thought that teachers’ decisions to give up might have something to do with how difficult teachers believe this work to
be: “The first few times they try to tell them to stop… but they keep going and going over again, and they just ignore it because it’s too hard to handle… there’s nothing they can do, that’s what they think” (male, FG 1).

Hearing it and ignoring it, or hearing it but not taking it seriously

Participants discussed examples of occasions when teachers were present when homophobic language occurred, but they seemed to ignore it, or they heard the language, but did not seem to take it seriously, or they even pretended not to hear. On one occasion when a teacher could hear a student make a homophobic comment in class, a participant (female, FG 1) said of the teacher: “She did not say anything and it was obvious like she could hear it.” Another participant (female, FG 1) noted that one of her teachers might try to address the issue sometimes, but “then, other times, he just doesn’t hear it.”

Several participants commented on the “just joking” reason used by students to excuse their use of homophobic language in front of teachers, for example: “People use it in front of teachers but try to talk their way out of it by saying ‘oh we are just joking’” (male, FG 2). One participant (female, FG 3) talked about how teachers may interpret homophobic language use as not serious, as perhaps just a joke between students saying, “The teachers notice it, but they don’t bother to respond because they think it’s like an inside joke.” Similarly, another participant (female, FG 5) commented, “I do think that some teachers do hear it, and it’s not that they don’t care... or maybe some of them don’t, but they sometimes think it’s just jokingly said, and they think it’s okay.” Still another participant (female, FG 5) offered an example of a classmate using homophobic language among friends in class and the teacher “thinks he’s just joking around and maybe if some of his friends are laughing it’s okay, because it’s like an inside joke... unless they’re disturbing others there’s no reason to like interfere and like stop them.”
The decision by a teacher about whether to intervene, based on some kind of criteria, as noted in the above example, was explicitly described by another participant. The participant (female, FG 4) thought teachers might compare this language to other matters and noted, “When it is used, teachers don’t really mind because it’s not the worst think people say in school.”

**Tacit and explicit endorsement of homophobic language**

Participants discussed their perceptions and understanding of the impact of teachers’ reactions and responses to homophobic language (or lack thereof). In some instances, they remarked on lack of action, which leads to continued use of homophobic language, while others noted explicit comments by teachers that the students felt endorsed homophobic language. One participant (female, FG 1) said, for example, “When they hear this, they don’t really do anything, and they just let it go, and so the student will do, will say the language more often.” Another participant (female, FG 5) detailed the role of some teachers during a school-wide effort to address homophobia where,

> We had to wear purple bracelets to support not saying remarks about like gay people and I think that triggered things even more… and like there were some teachers that said that this is strange, like “why are we even doing this?”

For the same student, an even more explicit endorsement of homophobia came from teachers who “refused to wear the bracelets because they thought it was stupid, and so like why should the students pay attention to what the teachers are saying, because that’s what they’re thinking” (female, FG 5).
Homophobia and Sexism

While the semi-structured interview guide included questions regarding examples of sexist language, and several participants mentioned the use of sexist language and put-downs such as “run like a girl,” or boys being called “girl,” there were few examples that related exclusively to this kind of name-calling. Even so, an emerging theme was identified (homophobia and sexism), whereby many participants discussed how sexist and homophobic name-calling often turned up in tandem in ways that suggested a connection between sexism and homophobia, especially related to boys. One participant (female, FG 1) said, “Well he gets called gay but it is also said about him that ‘he sings like a girl’ because his voice isn’t broken yet.” Recalling earlier discussions of gender norm violations and expectations that give rise to homophobic name-calling, a number of students discussed how gender role stereotypes embed homophobia. For instance, a participant commented that “Some people think that gays are more feminine so when guys are more feminine acting they think they’re gay and they start using comments ‘you’re like a girl’ or ‘you sing like a girl’” (female, FG 1). Another participant (female, FG 1) echoed this sentiment, but also offered a challenge to sexist stereotypes of gay men, saying,

Because people always think that all gay people are feminine, they’re feminine, they look feminine, they act like that, and they act like a girl… that’s not right at all because I know many people that are gay that… you would never guess that he was.

According to still another participant (female, FG 1), the connection between homophobic and sexist name-calling becomes apparent: “Now that I look at it, like, most people who get called ‘oh you act like a girl’ or all that stuff, they’re normally the ones targeted for saying ‘oh like you’re gay and stuff’.” A participant (female, FG 2) also referred to situations
involving girls transgressing gender norms, such as how they may dress in so-called masculine clothes with no attendant name-calling. She noted: “Sometimes when boys act like girls, it seems weird or gay, but when a girl acts like a guy or dresses like a guy, it doesn’t mean anything.” In fact, in such cases, “she’s just normal” (female, FG 2); the participant recalled such an example of a girl dressing like a boy. A few participants noted a connection between the colour pink and homophobic name-calling. According to one participant, “They think all gay people wear pink and, if you wear pink, you’re gay and stuff” (female, FG 1), while another (male, FG 4) suggested this might also have something to do with early learning about “girl things” and acceptable colours and toys for boys and girls, whereby,

boys who call other boys who do girl things, gay, because when they were younger they were taught what normal boys like, like the colours blue, black, brown, and green, and not red, yellow, orange, and pink, and boys are supposed to play Power Rangers or football and play with other boys and not girls.

A different perspective was provided by one participant (male, FG 1) who disagreed with the stereotype automatically linking femininity with homosexuality. In reference to himself, he pointed to how homophobic language may also impact heterosexual students who engage in some gender nonconforming behaviours, and stated: “Just because they act like girls doesn’t mean that they’re just gay because that’s why people call me gay sometimes.” On another level, one participant (female, FG 5) suggested that homophobia and sexism are deeply rooted in the traditional idea that romantic interests are solely heterosexual and should remain so, stating,
They compare gays to girls because I guess that they just think because, if a man is interested in another man, that makes them [sic] a girl because only girls are traditionally supposed to be interested in men. And that’s kind of what I think where the gay and homophobia comes from is that people are so traditional, and they don’t want anything to like change.

This idea that gay men act like women because of their romantic interest in other men, led to another participant’s (female, FG 2) comment about how being gay is not only about being perceived as feminine, but also about the perception that “he’s not one of the guys anymore.” Ultimately, boys in effect “become girls” when they take up what others may see as “feminine” behaviours and traits, such as certain fashion, colours, and, if they are gay, have a romantic interest in some other boys. As one participant (male, FG 5) noted, if “a man does what the woman does, all of sudden he’s a woman… if he does something that the woman does, then he’s gay.” Another participant (male, FG 5) summed up the connection between homophobia and sexism by saying, “Men are to women what heterosexual people are to homosexual people… I think for the main part I think homosexual people and women would be sort of the main target of discrimination”.

Discussion

The results of this study provide a deeper understanding of homophobia and sexism from the perspectives of grade seven and eight students and are consistent with research findings in the literature. The purpose of this study is to explore grade seven and eight students’ perceptions, opinions, and understanding of homophobic and sexist name-calling at school and how these types of name-calling coalesce as sexist homophobia. It became evident through analysis of the data that homophobic name-calling is ubiquitous in the school life of middle
school students. One consequence of the current study is a deeper and richer understanding of the TDSB census results on name-calling in middle schools. The findings of the TDSB census are consistent with the findings of Paper 1 in this dissertation and of the extant literature, which reveals that homophobic name-calling is commonplace in middle schools (Espelage et al., 2012; Espelage et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2012).

According to the literature’s findings, not only are students regularly exposed to homophobic name-calling and language, they are also reporting its presence throughout the school, from hallways and classrooms out into the schoolyard. In a follow up to their ground-breaking study on the prevalence of homophobic harassment in schools for the American Association of University Women in 1993 (the first quantitative study of this problem), Lipson (2001) identified these very sites (classroom, hallway, and playing field) as the most common areas of the occurrence of homophobic harassment. Naming the school washroom as a site of exposure to homophobia, Ingrey (2013) identifies this space as a contributor to student learning, in this case learning about homophobia, and depicts the “school washroom as a site within the school environment that comprises the conditions of learning” (p. 188). The findings reported in the current study regarding homophobic washroom graffiti mirror the literature identifying this space in particular as a site where homophobia occurs (Espelage et al., 2012).

Analysis of the focus groups suggests that reasons for using homophobic language are complex and go beyond the often-mentioned “just joking” excuse, although that reason is prominent. The students presented a variety of situations or conditions that regularly seem to elicit homophobic comments, including the use of some words as generic insults, particularly the word “gay” as a pejorative expression that reflects the devaluing of gay people. Such language is used in response to a violation of gender norms and expectations, especially by boys. The fact
that some participants observed the use of homophobic words and phrases as not meant to be homophobic, but rather as everyday insulting expressions standing in for “stupid,” “boring,” or simply disliked, corresponds to the literature that indicates that both young students (Guasp, 2012) and young adults seem unaware of the language’s homophobic implications (Jewell & Morrison, 2010). Many participants noted “just joking” as one reason for students’ use of homophobic language. This observation is also consistent with the literature that reveals how students may explain their use of antigay language by arguing that they did not mean it in a homophobic manner (Burn, 2000; Burn, Kadlec, & Rexer, 2005).

A prominent subtheme that emerged was the pinpointing of violations of gender norms and expectations, especially by boys, as a prime condition for the deployment of homophobic language. Based on how a boy may dress, speak, walk, and act, participants extensively discussed how any perceived trait or behaviour associated with femininity exhibited by a boy often, if not always, can lead to a homophobic remark directed at him. Returning to the concept of “sexist homophobia”, this equation of all things feminine, ascribed to a boy, with an automatic accusation of being gay, surfaced numerous times, with particular attention to the colour pink, interest in fashion, and the very act of hanging out with girls. These findings reflect the extant literature, which links homophobia and heterosexism with rigid gender role stereotypes. These attitudes are manifested in homophobic name-calling, which “creates an environment that promotes hegemonic masculinity” (Espelage et al., 2014, p. 14). As some participants noted, an underlying belief that all gay men are feminine gives rise to the homophobic name-calling, which in turn maintains the rigid gender role expectations that boys feel they must conform to, if for no other reason except to avoid becoming targets of
homophobia. As Pharr (1997) reminded readers, gay men are not seen as “real men” since their loving of other men identifies them with women.

A striking finding in this study was the deeper analysis of social situations that involve a boy hanging out with a girl. While hanging out with girls would often result in a boy being targeted with a homophobic remark, a closer examination of the dynamic involved in “hanging out with girls” revealed that a boy’s social status was a factor either preventing or provoking a homophobic remark. Specifically, if the boy is deemed popular with the girls (in a romantic or dating way) and if the girls seem to be doing more of the attention giving (for example, flirting), the boy would not be seen as gay, but as ostensibly heterosexual, given the attention paid to him by the girls. Thus, his heterosexuality and masculinity are proven and maintained when this behaviour is seen as straight. This very same situation, however, can lead to homophobic targeting of a boy who is seen to be “like the girls” rather than to be “good with girls.” These findings are supported by the considerable literature that links masculinity, homophobia, and gender role stereotypes, a combination that gives rise to homophobia and its manifestation, homophobic remarks (e.g., boys acting like girls), and that shapes boys’ behaviours in order to avoid such targeting (Good, Thomson, & Braithwaite, 2005; Murphy, 2006; Pascoe, 2011; Pharr 1997; Plummer, 2001; Renold, 2005; Swartz, 2003). These perceptions need to be contrasted with perceptions of a girl who hangs out with boys. Depending on the girl’s gender expression somewhere along the feminine-masculine continuum, she will be seen either as promiscuous or a tomboy. That scenario, which is consistent with Pharr’s argument that homophobia affects all women bears out since her status as a girl in either circumstance is central to the harassment she receives, regardless of her sexual orientation.
Participants made it clear that teachers were often present during occurrences of homophobic language. Whether and how teachers responded gave rise to another major theme, comprising the role, reactions, and responses of teachers. The subthemes related to telling students to stop, trying to do more but giving up, hearing and ignoring or not taking the language seriously and at times tacitly or explicitly endorsing homophobic language use reveal the crucial implications for teachers. In a way that was consistent with the literature that explores teacher intervention or lack thereof, the students’ sharing of examples of teachers often shutting down the offensive language with little more than variations of “don’t say that” may be unsurprising. A recent study by Hillard and colleagues (2014) that analyzes survey and focus group data with middle and secondary school students (both members and nonmembers of Gay-Straight Alliances) in Seattle included a comment by one participant, who noted, “They’ll say, ‘oh stop it, that’s not right’… but they won’t… stop and explain to them like what they’re doing wrong” (p. 7). The observation by some participants that they perceived teachers’ reticence to intervene or to pursue intervention “because it’s too hard to handle” suggests that teachers may lack the necessary tools to address instances of students’ use of homophobic language effectively. This lack of intervention by teachers mirrors the literature that reveals that homophobic harassment is less likely to receive attention by teachers, as compared to other forms of bullying and harassment (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Lipson, 2001; Norman, 2004; O’Shaughnessy et al., 2004).

Literature that addresses teachers’ reticence about intervening in cases of indirect bullying reveals that teachers feel ill equipped to step in and get involved (Mishna et al., 2005). Adding the dimension of homophobia to the issue of name-calling that involves antigay language suggests some specific factors that may be unique to this type of indirect bullying. For example, if teachers themselves see such language as harmless banter, then they may respond with little to
no intervention, thinking that they either run the risk of looking “uncool” (Hillard et al., 2014, p.7) or being perceived as over-reacting (Guasp, 2012). In either case, teachers are role-modeling for students that homophobic language is not serious (DePalma & Jennett, 2010) and, further, that it is okay to use such language.

These passive or almost passive types of responses (response by omission) contrast with a striking finding in this study, whereby some students perceived and concluded that teachers were at times displaying an active endorsement of homophobic language. In one focus group, participants reported about some teachers’ vocalization of their opposition to a school-wide campaign to address the very issue of using “that’s so gay” as a put-down (specifically, the act of wearing purple bracelets to support antihomophobia, and some teachers’ refusal to do so).

Albeit an individual incident, this occurrence serves as a reminder that one’s personal beliefs and values can and do surface while a person is occupying a role of authority, and, in this instance, students may have received contradictory messages. For example, the school may stage an event marking an important issue, but some teachers may voice an opposite opinion. As one participant said, “they [teachers] thought it was stupid and so like why should students pay attention?” In addition to the impact on students, teachers’ behaviours and expressed attitudes could have important implications for teaching colleagues who may have felt that this work becomes that much more difficult if other teachers fail to or refuse to address this issue, with a resulting lack of consistency in adherence to school policies (Meyer, 2008). Such findings underscore the need to work diligently and meaningfully with teachers and to understand the influence they have on students through both their acts and omissions.

The findings presented here offer middle school participants’ perceptions of homophobic and sexist language. They offered significantly fewer examples and instances of sexist language
at school, as compared to homophobic language and name-calling. This difference occurred partly due to focus group questions that offered examples skewing towards boys’ experiences (e.g., the use of only one specific anti-lesbian epithet, i.e., “lesbo”, and more male-centred language, such as “fag”, “faggot”, “gay”, and “run like a girl”). However, the students engaged in rich discussions about how homophobia and sexism relate and interconnect with each other (Pharr, 1997).

As mentioned earlier, boys’ violations of traditional gender norms and expectations frequently elicited homophobic remarks. This violation included acting in ways deemed “feminine” in relation to fashion, activities, and the colour pink. The groups in this study move from discussing certain situations that lead to homophobic remarks, to sharing how they view homophobia and sexism (and the related verbal put-downs such as “that’s so gay” and “you’re like a girl”). As such, the study’s findings are consistent with the considerable body of scholarship examining the interlocking relationship of sexism and homophobia (Markowitz & Puchner, 2014; Pascoe, 2007; Pharr, 1997; Plummer, 2001). On the basis of the focus group data, it appears that the enduring and powerful gender and gender role stereotypes continue to infuse the ways students understand and respond to gender nonconformity and homosexuality. As such, homophobic remarks may flourish in a social and cultural framework that values heterosexual masculinity, devalues femininity, and actively polices and punishes violators of these rigid norms, particularly boys. Thus, traditional gender norms, heterosexism, and sexism, acting in concert, lead to the phenomenon of “boys acting like girls” being problematized, verbally mocked, and ridiculed with homophobic remarks. As Connell (2005) states, “from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, gayness is easily assimilated to femininity” (p. 78). The fact that this viewpoint pertains particularly to boys is consistent with literature that links gender
roles, masculinity, fear of homosexuality, and homophobic language (Carnaghi et al., 2011; Connell, 2005; Markowitz & Puchner, 2014; Martino, 2000; Slaatten et al., 2014).

Students in this study offered their perceptions and understanding of what may motivate the use of homophobic language, noting that the presence of feminine traits and attributes in boys contributes to homophobic remarks. For examples, if boy 1 calls boy 2 “gay,” it is not enough just to explain that boy 2’s “feminine” behaviour seems to confound prescribed gender norms. There must already be present a pre-existing framework that pictures such behaviour as devalued and worthy of a mocking remark. In other words, all things feminine are marginalized thus when a boy metaphorically “picks up” something from that group of behaviours or traits, the subordination transfers to him, regardless of his actual sexual orientation. As one participant noted, the boy is automatically considered gay, “because all gay people are feminine.” In other words, the homophobic phrase “that’s so gay” has travelled a considerable discursive distance to be pejorative and at the same time to not be considered problematic language at all. The following is just one example; “I heard people say things are gay not because it is a homophobic thing, right. It’s because it’s boring or they don’t like it.” Merely calling this phenomenon name-calling and leaving the discussion there leads to ineffective interventions such as “stop that” or “I do not want to hear that.” It is necessary to name and address specifically the homophobia that populates these verbal exchanges. A specific challenge to such antigay epithets, while important and necessary in its own right is insufficient. The backdrop that makes such phrases “speakable” and that denotes something negative needs to be contested, namely, the sexist ideas and rigid gender role stereotypes that Pharr deftly argued nearly three decades ago with her theory of sexism and homophobia. These ideas and stereotypes give rise to this facet of homophobia.
The findings presented here suggest an opportunity to name the homophobia in the circumstances described by these students more specifically as “sexist homophobia.” The term “sexist homophobia” distinguishes a particular form of homophobia. In contrast to homophobia motivated by certain religious interpretations or racial stereotypes, this form of homophobia is driven primarily by underlying gender role stereotypes and manifests itself through language, often used towards boys and by boys, that denotes someone “not acting masculine enough”; such behaviours are conflated with stereotypes of gay men (Daley et al., 2007). This stereotype may also explain the surprised response to some gay individuals who come out, namely, that they do not “look gay.” As one participant noted, “Because people always think that all gay people are feminine, they’re feminine, they look feminine, they act like that, they act like a girl… that’s not right at all because I know many people that are gay that… you would never guess that he was.”

This combination of homophobia and sexism has been documented in research exploring the work lives of LGBTQ adults and their experience with harassment, albeit referencing heterosexism rather than homophobia. As Rabelo and Cortina (2014) report, “Gender harassment – both sexist and policing subtypes – rarely occurs absent heterosexist harassment, and vice versa” (p. 378). This concept of “sexist homophobia” allows the necessary naming of homophobic language and behaviours, but goes further to be sufficiently inclusive of the underlying sexism that fuels homophobia, thus pointing to the need for additional action to address sexist attitudes. This naming and pointing may inform strategies to address homophobia arising from sexism in general and gender role stereotypes in particular. Furthermore, it may contribute to the goal of creating and maintaining safer and more welcoming schools for all students, or, as stated by Warwick and Aggleton (2014), “promoting a school ethos or climate that took to heart ideas of inclusivity and equal opportunities” (p. 169).
Limitations

This study obtained the participants’ perspectives using qualitative methodology; therefore, the results cannot be generalized beyond the experiences of the middle school students in this sample. It is unknown to what extent their understanding applies to grade seven and eight students in different schools or geographic locations. The existing research on homophobic name-calling and language, however, provides support for the present findings (Collier et al., 2013; Kosciw, 2012; Lalor & Rendle-Short, 2007; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Kosciw, 2012). Another limitation is that this research did not elicit the students’ own experiences with homophobic name-calling beyond what they witnessed or heard. Due to the sensitive nature of name-calling, which is a form of bullying, and of this particular form, homophobic, students mostly spoke in general terms about homophobic name-calling and the experiences of their school peers. As noted earlier, questions in the semi-structured interview guide skewed more towards boys’ experiences with homophobia and sexism. Future research needs to incorporate other language or phrases, such as “tomboy” or “act like a lady,” in order to explore students’ perceptions of girls’ experiences with homophobia and sexism (homophobic sexism). In addition, further study is necessary in order to obtain the perspectives of middle school students who are directly involved in homophobic name-calling, either as agents or targets, or as both.

Implications for practice, policy, and research

The findings of this study correspond with the literature documenting the pervasiveness of homophobic name-calling in schools. Importantly, this research offers deeper understanding of middle school students’ perceptions of homophobic language, the reasons motivating this language, the role of teachers, and the interlocking relationship of homophobia and sexism. The research offers an opportunity to be more specific in discussions of homophobia and its various
forms, in this case a gendered form of harassment directed at boys in the form of sexist homophobia. By engaging with middle school students, this study builds upon and extends the substantial research in secondary schools. Sustained attention is being paid to the issue of homophobia in schools; reporting from middle school students adds impetus to the need to remain vigilant about this language and serves as an important reminder that antigay language occurs prior to high school. Attention to only the verbal manifestations of homophobia, such as name-calling, put-downs, and epithets, albeit important, is insufficient without attention to the underlying theme of gender role stereotypes, gender conformity, and sexist ideology that Pharr called attention to and that provides the very conditions that make this language “speakable” (Monk, 2011, p. 190) in the first place.

School-wide efforts to address homophobia must include tackling the underlying matrix of rigid gender conformity that fuels many of the verbal homophobic manifestations used by students. Accordingly, prevention programs in school that address bullying and equity require a combined effort to name homophobia and sexism together as systems of oppression that operate in tandem, i.e., sexist homophobia as discussed here. Further research with younger grades (kindergarten to grade six) will enhance understanding of homophobic language use, sexist homophobia, and perceptions of gender roles. Such research can perhaps offer some insight about the early processes of socialization into a gender regime that privileges a particular form of masculinity, devalues things feminine, and strongly encourages the policing of children’s gender expression, much of the time by other children. The literature on elementary school work that addresses homophobia will support this effort (Solomon, 2004).

These findings also point to the critical role played by teachers. It is troubling that, according to students, some teachers do not respond to situations involving homophobic
language. While some research has documented the challenges facing teachers in situations involving homophobic language and the reasons why they hesitate or do nothing (Meyer, 2008), the findings reported here are a reminder that students can and do pay attention to what teachers do or say. Consistent with the findings regarding students’ understanding of the interlocking relationship of homophobia and sexism, teacher training and ongoing professional development needs to involve exposure to these student narratives, so that teachers may pay closer attention to the dynamics of gender role stereotypes and homophobic name-calling, and also increase their efforts to interrupt and address it. It is imperative that students see less teachers’ inaction and more teachers in action.

Conclusion

Nearly three decades ago, Suzanne Pharr clearly articulated the interlocking relationship between sexism and homophobia in her classic book, Homophobia as a weapon of sexism (1997). Her theory of sexism and homophobia conceptually revealed how the underlying rigid gender role stereotypes of sexism give rise to homophobia. While her work focused directly on all women’s experience with homophobia, she noted that men perceived as less masculine are consequently seen as more feminine (read: gay), a perception that in turn leads to homophobic responses as a means to mark and devalue gay men. Thus, a boy’s transgression in relation to traditional masculine behaviour is perceived as the boy “acting like a girl.” This perception is also fuelled by the mistaken notion that, since “gay” means that someone can be attracted to a member of the same gender (for example male/male), one person must take up the feminine role. Consequently, a boy seen to be more like a girl must, in the perpetrator’s mind, be gay, and this conclusion is followed by homophobic language directed towards him. Thus, sexist homophobia
is revealed in the use of homophobic language as a sexist means of calling out gender nonconforming behaviour.

The persistent use of “gay” as a put-down by middle school students goes beyond the mere substitution of the word for “stupid,” “boring,” or “disliked.” The idea of simple substitution masks the underlying sexist stereotypes that continue to impact boys and girls. The pervasiveness of this kind of name-calling must be consistently and meaningfully addressed, interrupted, and hopefully eliminated by both students and teachers alike. Middle school students are not themselves inventing this problem, but they are manifesting the broader social and cultural discourse of sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia in their everyday speech. Simultaneous direct intervention with students that interrupts homophobic and sexist language and also broader education about how some words convey both implicit and explicit ideas that are harmful (that is, feminine = gay = undesirable) are needed to address sexism and undermine homophobia in schools. In order to challenge homophobia and its various manifestations in a meaningful way, work is clearly needed to address the underlying sexist framework that shapes the school lives of students. Increased attention to the use of homophobic epithets and name-calling is welcome, and it is necessary both to call out homophobic language and to make the use of “that’s so gay” unpopular, but that work is not sufficient. To be sufficient, dismantling of the enduring but seemingly invisible sexist framework of rigid gender roles and stereotypes is required in order to eliminate the very conditions that make “gay” as a put-down so common and “like the worst thing ever.”
References


Chapter 5: Conclusion

In a series of three papers, using a mixed methods explanatory sequential design with a cross-sectional survey and focus groups, this dissertation examined homophobic and sexist language use among grade seven and eight students in the Toronto District School Board. This research marks some of the first investigations of homophobic and sexist language use at the middle school level in Canada, and it builds on existing bodies of knowledge on homophobic name-calling and language in secondary schools (Collier et al., 2013; Kosciw, 2012; Lalor & Rendle-Short, 2007; Poteat & Espelage, 2005; Taylor, Peter, Schachter, Paquin, Beldom, Gross, & McMinn et al., 2008; Taylor & Peter, 2011). Poteat and Espelage’s (2005) Homophobic Content and Agent Target scale (HCAT) was used to inform the study questions. Through the substitution of homophobic words/phrases for sexist words/phrases, a modified HCAT (S-CAT) explored sexist language in addition to homophobic language. Both the HCAT and S-CAT looked to particular relationships between students to explore the frequency of homophobic and sexist language use. The particular relationships included those between friends, strangers, and antagonists.

The Unique Contributions of Each Paper

Paper 1 reveals that homophobic and sexist language use figures prominently in the social lives of middle school students. This usage is important to consider in light of the emerging literature exploring the experiences of LGBT middle school students and families (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011; Wickens & Wedwick, 2011). While these types of language may be expected to be heard frequently in less supervised spaces such as the schoolyard (70% reported hearing it at least twice in the past week), the language also turns up regularly in spaces assumed to be more supervised, such as the classroom (64% reported hearing it at least twice
during the past week). In hallways, those connecting spaces between the schoolyard and the classroom, over three quarters of students heard something homophobic at least twice during the past week. Paper 1 also revealed that relationships involving friends and antagonists figure prominently in homophobic and sexist language use among middle school students. In particular, the concept of “friendly homophobia” emerged, a concept that may help explain “just joking” as the overwhelming reason that the students invoke as a motivator for the use of this language. Overall, Paper 1 extends to middle school the extant literature that documents the well-known wide-spread use of homophobic language in high school.

Paper 2 builds on the findings of Paper 1 with an examination of gender differences. Consistently boys, to a much greater degree than girls, reported being both agents and targets of homophobic and sexist language. Among friends, 50% of boys, in comparison to 21% of girls, engaged in repeated homophobic language (at least twice) during the past week; for sexist language, the divide was almost three times as great, at 26% for boys, compared to 8% for girls. The empirical connection between homophobia and sexism begins with the finding that twice as many boys as girls used both types of language towards either a friend or an antagonist. Overall, boys demonstrated a more significant likelihood of being agents of homophobic language to a friend (three times more likely than girls) and an antagonist (over two times more likely than girls). Further, logistic regression revealed the use of sexist language as a significant predictor of homophobic language use for all students towards a friend (two and a half times more likely than a student not using sexist language) and towards an antagonist (over three times more likely than students not using sexist language). In addition, Paper 2’s finding that sexist language being taken seriously leads to homophobic language being taken seriously contributes another empirical link between homophobia and sexism, namely, students reporting that they consider
sexist language as somewhat or very serious were 17 times more likely to report that they consider homophobic language as somewhat or very serious. These findings suggest that school-based efforts to address homophobia must include anti-sexist efforts in order to increase the number of students taking sexist language seriously. These students will then subsequently also probably consider homophobic language a serious issue. The assumption is that, if language is taken seriously, then perhaps it is used less. Regarding students’ use of homophobic or sexist language, paper 2 revealed no significant differences between racialized and non-racialized students and between students born in Canada and outside Canada.

Paper 3 offers rich insights about middle school students’ perceptions of homophobic language use at school and further develops the concept of sexist homophobia. While Paper 1 provided quantitative findings regarding the presence of and/or interventions by school staff when homophobic and sexist language is used, Paper 3’s theme of teacher reactions provided a more detailed picture of students’ perceptions of their teachers’ role. While the findings of Paper 3 are not generalizable beyond the focus groups, participants provided vivid examples of teachers’ varied reactions to dealing with homophobic language, ranging from (1) telling students to stop, (2) trying to do something, but giving up, (3) hearing but ignoring or not taking the language seriously, and (4) tacit and explicit endorsement of homophobic language. Beside noting particular actions taken by teachers (#1 and #2), the participants also offered the meanings they ascribe to these actions (or lack thereof), namely, #3 and #4. At the level of student-to-student interaction, participants provided insight about some the nuances involved, e.g., how students read particular social dynamics that may or may not give rise to homophobic reactions, for example, how some boys hanging out with girls are targeted with homophobia, while others are not, depending on the perceived role the boy plays in that situation. Specifically, boys seen
receiving attention from girls are perhaps read with a heteronormative lens (i.e., girls flirting with them), while boys seen giving attention to girls are read as less masculine, an interpretation that leads to perceptions they are gay, and thus gives rise to homophobic remarks by other boys.

Combined Contributions of the 3 Papers

Paper 1 reported on the pervasiveness of both homophobic and sexist language use among middle school students (n=488), where in school students hear these types of language, whether staff members are present and intervene, whether peers intervene, the reasons for using these types of language, and whether students think these types of language are serious. Reliability and factor analysis of the HCAT and S-CAT revealed a Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha= 0.81$ and 0.87 respectively.

Using the same dataset, Paper 2 provided an examination of the gender differences, with more boys reporting than girls, in relation to being agents and targets of both kinds of language. In addition, Paper 2 examined the relationship between homophobic language use and sexist language use and studied how student use of one kind of language leads to the use of the other. For example, students as agents of sexist language were more likely to be agents of homophobic language. Using thematic content analysis, Paper 3 is a qualitative exploration of students’ perceptions of homophobic and sexist language use at school conducted through five focus groups including 26 middle school students. Taken together, the three papers provide a quantitative and qualitative understanding of middle school students’ experience with homophobic and sexist language at school.

Paper 3’s themes and subthemes provide a rich context for understanding the results of Papers 1 and 2. The main areas were: (1) the pervasiveness of homophobic language at school,
(2) the reasons for using homophobic language, (3) teachers’ reactions and responses to homophobic language, and an emerging theme (4) homophobia and sexism. Theme #2 (reasons for using homophobic language) was further refined to three subthemes: (a) an individual level generic insult not meant to be homophobic, (b) an insult indicative of homophobia, and (c) violation of gender norms and expectations, especially by boys. Students’ perceptions of the pervasiveness of homophobic language at school reported in paper 3 echo the findings of paper 1. The subtheme of gender norm violations (as a reason for homophobic language) in paper 3 is re-enforced by the findings in paper 2, which revealed the role of gender in the process of understanding how boys experience both homophobic and sexist language as agents and targets. Furthermore, paper 3’s theme of homophobia and sexism connects to the empirical links between homophobia and sexism revealed in paper 2. As stated previously, one participant remarked, “Now that I look at it, like, most people who get called ‘oh you act like a girl’ or all that stuff, they’re normally the ones targeted for saying ‘oh like you’re gay and stuff’.” This link reinforces a finding from Paper 2, whereby students who used sexist language were more likely to use homophobic language.

Students across all the focus groups made clear the pervasiveness of homophobic language in school. From it is an “everyday thing” to “hearing it a hundred times a day,” the focus group students’ narratives underscore paper 1’s findings that 43% of middle school students were targets of homophobic language by a friend at least once during the past week (26% by an antagonist). Although there are different time frames, and there is not a direct comparison, these findings are similar to research across Ontario high schools. According to Chiodo and colleagues (2009), 38% of grade nine boys were targets of homophobic language (which they describe as a type of sexual harassment) at least twice during the past three months
(they counted one incident and no incident as zero). This data suggests either no change or a possible increase in the experience of homophobic language from middle school to high school.

Paper 1 revealed that, both in and out of the school building, homophobic language permeates multiple sites, underscoring the “everyday thing” narrative of students noted in Paper 3. A total of 79% of students reported hearing homophobic language at least once during the past week in the classroom (64% hearing it twice or more). A total of 90% reported hearing it at least once in the hallway (77% hearing it twice or more), and 85% reported hearing it in the schoolyard at least once in the past week (70% hearing it twice or more). The findings regarding staff presence and/or intervention when this language is used (70% of students reporting staff members as present some or most of the time, but a quarter of those staff never intervening) supports paper 3’s subtheme of teachers hearing but ignoring homophobic language. With two thirds of students reporting hearing something homophobic at least twice during the past week in the classroom, the conclusion may be drawn that teachers are present most of the time, but, based on the information in paper 3, they do not consistently intervene.

Paper 3’s subtheme of gender norm violations, especially for boys under the broader theme of reasons for using homophobic language, relates to paper 2’s findings that boys are, not surprisingly, more likely to be agents and targets of homophobic language. In particular, boys more than girls are agents of homophobic (and sexist) language talk at least twice the rate with friends (50% vs. 21% for homophobic language, 26% vs. 8% for sexist language) and antagonists (32% vs. 16% for homophobic language). This is consistent with the research noting boys’ extensive use of homophobic language (Burn, 2000; McMaster et al., 2002; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010). These findings suggest that boys’ violation of gender norms results in at least some kind of verbal response, in the form of homophobic language. Boys’ greater
participation than girls in the use of homophobic language comes as little surprise, given the focus group participants’ almost exclusive focus on boys policing students’ (arguably, other boys) behaviours, including perceptions of gender expression. Further, students’ perception of the conceptual link between homophobia and sexism (e.g., boys seen to be acting as girls) connects again to paper 2’s finding of a strong empirical relationship between these types of language, whereby students who see sexist language as a problem are 17 times more likely to see homophobic language as a problem. This last point offers a way forward in addressing homophobic language.

Limitations

Before discussing the policy and practice implications of this dissertation’s findings, several study limitations, as discussed in each paper, must be noted. First, the low survey response rate limits the generalizability of the findings in papers 1 and 2. Active or opt-in consent, as used in this study, regularly results in lower response rates, as compared to passive consent. Active consent in school-based research can also affect the participation of boys, resulting in the lower participation of boys. This is consistent with the fact that more girls than boys participated in the survey (63% vs. 37%). While the response rate was low overall, the sample was consistent in terms of language spoken at home and ethno-racial identity, with the TDSB’s student census of 70% racialized and 30% non-racialized (White) students. It is also worth considering whether the topic of the research had any effect on boy’s participation; there is a possibility that some boys may hesitate to participate in anything related to homophobia.

The HCAT and S-CAT scales also have an inherent male bias as currently constituted. The examples of language in both scales skew towards antigay (e.g., “fag”, “faggot”) and antifeminine (e.g., “sissy”, “wuss”) language that usually targets boys. Both scales are currently
less inclusive of antilebian terms (using just “lesbo” in the HCAT) and expressions that call out girls’ gender norm violations (e.g., tomboy, act more like a lady). In addition, the dependent variables of both scales were ordinal and, for the purposes of statistical analysis (factor and reliability analyses), treated as interval. This treatment has implications for assumptions of normality for the variables. According to Grimm and Yarnold (2000), “It is routine to treat them [numerical rating scales] as interval scales in statistical analyses, however, and no harm seems to have resulted from that practice” (p. 58). In this study, the HCAT and S-CAT scales do offer more items with some meaningful distance between the items (0, 1, 2, 3-4, 5-6, and 7-8), compared to the classic Likert scales often cited in the literature contesting the treatment of ordinal data as continuous (Allen & Seaman, 2007). The future use of these scales should allow participants to indicate the actual number of times they acted as agents and targets of homophobic and sexist language. Furthermore, it would be useful to ask students specifically whom they are targeting and who is targeting them in terms of gender in order to more fully understand whether the behaviours comprise name-calling between boys, between girls, or between boys and girls. While the current research focused mainly on students participating in sexist and homophobic language use, future research is needed to examine more closely those students who use neither sexist nor homophobic language, and, specifically, to ask why they do not engage in this type of name-calling. This examination may inform strategies to address problematic behaviour. As with all qualitative research, the results in Paper 3 are not generalizable beyond the experiences of the middle school students in this sample, since it is unknown to what extent their understanding applies to grade seven and eight students in different schools or geographic locations. Another limitation is that this research did not elicit the
students’ own experiences with homophobic and sexist name-calling, beyond what they witnessed or heard. Overall, these results should be viewed as preliminary.

**Implications for Social Work Policy and Practice**

Notwithstanding these limitations, the findings of this dissertation may help to inform social work knowledge and practice, particularly in schools. First, the papers provide a greater understanding of middle school students’ experience and perceptions of homophobic and sexist language use and add to the knowledge about it by revealing middle schools as active sites of homophobic and sexist language, suggesting important empirical links between homophobic and sexist language use, and overall providing a deeper understanding of the complexities of homophobia. It is abundantly clear from the quantitative findings that homophobic language use is prevalent among students across multiple sites in school and is not often addressed by school staff. In some instances, the lack of intervention, which may be interpreted by students as arising from teachers’ lack of belief that it is a serious issue, may then give tacit approval to these types of language. First of all, greater vigilance and response by teachers are required to prevent both the perception that such language is acceptable (silence=consent) and further escalation to more severe forms of homophobia (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Faulkner & Cranston, 1998; Horn & Nucci, 2003). Second, the finding that sexist language use is a significant predictor of homophobic language use requires that school staff intervene when students make sexist remarks. As such, it will be critical to address teachers’ reasons for not intervening or hesitating to intervene in order to increase their interventions. By taking sexist language more seriously, teachers can role-model this intervention for students (i.e. responding to incidents of sexist put-downs) and perhaps increase the ranks of students doing likewise. As Paper 2 reports, students
who take sexist language seriously are 17 times more likely to take homophobic language seriously.

There is important work for school staff, including teachers and school social workers, to engage with students about the power of language and that every word has an idea attached to it. Key to this is an explicit discussion with students of intention versus impact. As presented several times throughout this thesis, the reason of “just joking” may very well be taken at its word as the intention, but nevertheless, the very real and negative impact of this language on LGBT students and families must be made clear. Work with middle school students to address homophobic language is important, but, given the interlocking relationship with sexism, as pointed out in paper 2, school-based programs addressing harassment and bullying need to be upstream, addressing the underlying sexist gender role stereotypes that fuel much of the homophobia examined in this study. According to Espelage and colleagues (2014), boys engaged in homophobic teasing were 1.66 times more likely to participate in future sexual harassment perpetration. The findings reported here linking sexist language use to the increased likelihood of homophobic language use highlight the importance of interrupting these behaviours early, and suggest a role in the prevention of more serious future issues. Additionally, it is important for school social workers to engage in meaningful discussions with students about the links between homophobia and sexism, with particular attention to sexist homophobia, illustrating the power of language and the link between words and ideas. The social work curriculum can be enhanced to further stress the importance of intersectionality as a lens to understand more deeply how sexism and homophobia interact. The concept of ‘sexist homophobia’ brings together the unique and different experiences of boys and girls who are negatively targeted for their gender expression regardless of their sexual orientation. Finally,
programs and policies are needed to explicitly address the underlying issues of gender role stereotypes, gender conformity, and sexist ideology, which provide the very conditions that make this language “speakable” (Monk, 2011, p. 190) in the first place. Consistent with the findings regarding students’ understanding of the interlocking relationship of homophobia and sexism, teacher training and ongoing professional development require exposure to these student narratives so that teachers may both pay closer attention to the dynamics of gender role, stereotypes, and homophobic name calling, and increase their efforts to interrupt and address this behaviour. The current research calls attention to the need for meaningful engagement with students about the connections among words, power, and the impact of hurtful language. For social work education, the curriculum can be enhanced to address how sexism and homophobia interact and play out differently for boys and girls. Educators must bridge the gap between “just joking” and the way this language can and does shape attitudes, ideas, and actions towards LGBT students. The acts of unpacking this language with middle school students, role modelling effective interruption of this language, discussing how it operates to maintain homophobia (and sexism), and connecting it to more severe expressions of homophobia, can offer students critical skills to interrupt their own use of this language and hopefully their peers’ use of it.

**Implications for Future Research**

Through the investigation and exploration of homophobic and sexist language among middle school students, scholarship and research from high schools now extends to earlier grades. It follows perhaps that research into these types of language should proceed with students in earlier grades. Further study is also necessary in order to obtain the perspectives of middle school students who are directly involved in these types of name-calling, either as agents
or targets or as both. Perhaps the addition of one-to-one interviews with students, rather than just focus groups, will provide deeper understandings of middle school students’ experiences with homophobia and sexism. Utilizing a cross-sectional survey to explore homophobic and sexist language use, the current study provides only a snapshot in time. To track changes in the use of homophobic and sexist language at school, and to assess interventions that address it, longitudinal research using the HCAT and S-CAT is necessary. Teachers too must be engaged in these inquiries. Future research should include teachers’ perspectives on homophobic and sexist language use by students, explored both quantitatively and qualitatively, in order to add a critical facet to understanding of the prevalence of homophobic and sexist language in schools. In particular, additional research that explores why some teachers hesitate to intervene would be a critical component to understand and address. This research will complement the robust literature on the impact of the homophobia experienced by LGBT students (Kosciw, 2012), students with LGBT parents/guardians (Clarke et al., 2004; Ray & Gregory, 2001), and students in general (Phoenix et al., 2003; Pascoe, 2007; Plummer, 2001; Poteat et al., 2011; Russell et al. 2012; Swearer et al., 2008).

The findings of this dissertation research raise questions regarding middle school students’ pervasive use of “gay” and other epithets as put-downs and as pernicious substitutes for other descriptive terms that may be applied to something or someone devalued, denigrated, and degraded. On one hand, is this homophobic and sexist language “just words” and “just a joke” with no ill intent? Do the majority of students, who think these types of language are somewhat or very serious, also at times, think that the language can be “just joking”? Perhaps one could conclude that this is the situation, particularly if attention is paid to the fact that much of this banter occurs between friends. Accordingly, students may not consider it homophobia. On the
other hand, these findings reveal that students also deploy such language towards antagonists, with the suggestion of a negative intent. This negativity does not mean that they always believe that homophobia and sexism (negative ideas about gays and lesbians or about girls and women) are the driving forces. Nevertheless, the extensive literature documenting the negative impact on LGBT students, students with LGBT parents, and gender non-conforming students must be highlighted. While motivations may be up for debate, the current findings offer evidence that such language permeates middle schools, which include LGBT students, students with LGBT parents, and gender non-conforming students. As stated previously, these types of language surface across many public school spaces, thus impacting students for whom the word “gay” holds a great deal of importance due to their own status or that of their families. While a student might contend that using “gay” as a put-down was not “meant that way,” it would be harder, if not impossible, for the student to argue that the word was meant as a compliment or something positive. Recalling the TDSB Student Census, with 41% of middle school students experiencing name-calling and put-downs, this dissertation research suggests that, when it comes to name-calling, there is more to be considered than meets the eye.

The conceptual framework for this dissertation is lesbian feminism, a thread of which offers an integrated way of understanding homophobia within the larger, complex structure of sexism and heterosexism. The individual-level homophobia manifested as name-calling and put-downs and reported in the current study is extensive in middle school and intimately tied to sexist language use. Within the larger social script that devalues girls, women, and anything feminine, the attitude exhibited by boys of calling someone “gay” as a put-down works only under cultural and social conditions whereby being gay or lesbian represents something negative and worthy of ridicule. Such conditions include sexist ideologies that reinforce rigid gender
roles and stereotypes, and at the same time limit and punish those who express themselves outside these socially prescribed boundaries. Challenging sexist beliefs, ideas, and behaviours is therefore imperative in order to address the use of homophobic language.
References


## Student Survey Grades 7 & 8: Name-Calling & Put-Downs

### Instructions:
When completing the survey use only blue or black pen

| Shade Circles Like This: | ○ |
| Not Like This: | X |

### 1. What grade are you in?  ○ 7  ○ 8
### 2. What is your gender?  ○ Girl  ○ Boy
### 3. How old are you?  ○ 11  ○ 12  ○ 13  ○ 14
### 4. How long have you lived in Canada?  ○ I was born in Canada  ○ 2 year or less  ○ 3-5 years  ○ 5 years or more
### 5. Which of the following best describes your racial identity.  (fill in only one)
- ○ Aboriginal
- ○ Asian-East e.g. China, Japan, Korea
- ○ Asian-South e.g. India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka
- ○ Asian-South East e.g. Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam
- ○ Black-Africa e.g. Ghana, Kenya, Somalia
- ○ Black-Canada
- ○ Black-Caribbean e.g. Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago
- ○ Latin American e.g. Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica
- ○ Indian-Caribbean e.g. Guyana with origins in India
- ○ Middle Eastern e.g. Egypt, Iran, Israel, Palestine
- ○ Mixed background
- ○ White-Canada
- ○ White-Europe e.g. England, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Serbia
- ○ Other
### 6. What language do you speak at home most of the time?  (fill in only one)
- ○ Albanian
- ○ Arabic
- ○ Bengali
- ○ Chinese
- ○ Dari
- ○ English
- ○ French
- ○ Gujarati
- ○ Hindi
- ○ Korean
- ○ Ojibway
- ○ Persian (Farsi)
- ○ Portuguese
- ○ Punjabi
- ○ Russian
- ○ Somali
- ○ Spanish
- ○ Tagalog
- ○ Tamil
- ○ Urdu
- ○ Vietnamese
- ○ Others
### 7. At school some kids call each other names such as "gay", "lesbo", "fag", "faggot", "queer".
How many times in the LAST WEEK did you say any of these things to....?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A friend</th>
<th>Someone I did not know</th>
<th>Someone I did know but did not like</th>
<th>Someone I thought was gay</th>
<th>Someone I didn't think was gay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>1 time</td>
<td>2 times</td>
<td>3-4 times</td>
<td>5-6 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
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<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 8. How many times in the LAST WEEK did the following people call you names, such as "gay", "lesbo", "fag", "faggot", "queer"?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A friend</th>
<th>Someone I did not know</th>
<th>Someone I did know but did not like</th>
<th>Someone I thought was gay</th>
<th>Someone I didn't think was gay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>1 time</td>
<td>2 times</td>
<td>3-4 times</td>
<td>5-6 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Appendix 1

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155
9. Thinking about where at school you hear these words (names such as "gay", "lesbo", "fag", "faggot", "queer"), please indicate how often your heard these words in each of the following places in the LAST WEEK:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>1 time</th>
<th>2 times</th>
<th>3-4 times</th>
<th>5-6 times</th>
<th>7 times or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hallway</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cafeteria</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School yard</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gymnasium</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gym change room</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10. When you have heard these words (names such as "gay", "lesbo", "fag", "faggot", "queer"), has a teacher or other school staff member been present?

☐ Always ☐ Most of the time ☐ Some of the time ☐ Never

(If you answered “Never” please go to question 12)

11. If a teacher or other school staff was present, did they intervene?

☐ Always ☐ Most of the time ☐ Some of the time ☐ Never

12. When you hear these words (names such as "gay", "lesbo", "fag", "faggot", "queer") around your peers does another student intervene?

☐ Always ☐ Most of the time ☐ Some of the time ☐ Never

13. Thinking about why students use these words (names such as "gay", "lesbo", "fag", "faggot", "queer"), please rank the following four reasons in order from 1-4, where “1” means the reason used most and “4” means the reason used least:

☐ Joking, just for fun
☐ A put down based on gender
☐ A put down meant to cause harm or abuse
☐ A put down meant to hurt lesbian or gay people

14. Overall, what do you think about the use of these words (names such as "gay", "lesbo", "fag", "faggot", "queer")?

☐ It is very serious ☐ It is somewhat serious ☐ It is not serious at all

15. Beside these words (such as "gay", "lesbo", "fag", "faggot", "queer"), are there any other words or phrases similar to these, that you have heard at school? Please write them in the space provided here.

16. At school some kids say things like "sissy", "wuss", "you run like a girl", "you throw like a girl". How many times in the LAST WEEK did you say any of these things to...?  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>1 time</th>
<th>2 times</th>
<th>3-4 times</th>
<th>5-6 times</th>
<th>7 times or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A friend</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Someone I did not know</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone I did know but did not like</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Someone I thought was gay</td>
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<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Someone I didn't think was gay</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
17. How many times in the **LAST WEEK** did the following people say any of these things ("sissy", "wuss", "you run like a girl", "you throw like a girl") to you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>1 time</th>
<th>2 times</th>
<th>3-4 times</th>
<th>5-6 times</th>
<th>7 times or more</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A friend</td>
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<tr>
<td>Someone I did not know</td>
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<tr>
<td>Someone I did know but did not like</td>
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<tr>
<td>Someone I thought was gay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Someone I didn’t think was gay</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18. Thinking about where at school you hear these things ("sissy", "wuss", "you run like a girl", "you throw like a girl"), please indicate how often you heard these things in each of the following places in the **LAST WEEK**:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>1 time</th>
<th>2 times</th>
<th>3-4 times</th>
<th>5-6 times</th>
<th>7 times or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom</td>
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<td>Hallway</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cafeteria</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>School yard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gymnasium</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gym change room</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19. When you have heard these things ("sissy", "wuss", "you run like a girl", "you throw like a girl"), has a teacher or other school staff member been present?

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Most of the time
- ☐ Some of the time
- ☐ Never

(If you answered "Never" please go to question 21)

20. If a teacher or other school staff was present, did they intervene?

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Most of the time
- ☐ Some of the time
- ☐ Never

21. When you hear these things ("sissy", "wuss", "you run like a girl", "you throw like a girl") around your peers does another student intervene?

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Most of the time
- ☐ Some of the time
- ☐ Never

22. Thinking about why students use these things ("sissy", "wuss", "you run like a girl", "you throw like a girl") please rank the following four reasons in order from 1-4, where "1" means the reason used most and "4" means the reason used least:

- ☐ Joking, just for fun
- ☐ A put down based on gender
- ☐ A put down meant to cause harm or abuse
- ☐ A put down meant to hurt lesbian or gay people

23. Overall, what do you think about the use of these things ("sissy", "wuss", "you run like a girl", "you throw like a girl")?

- ☐ It is very serious
- ☐ It is somewhat serious
- ☐ It is not serious at all

24. Beside these things ("sissy", "wuss", "you run like a girl", "you throw like a girl"), are there any other words or phrases similar to these, that you have heard at school? Please write them in the space provided here.
Appendix 2

Invitation Letter to Principals: Student Survey

Date:
Dear (name of Principal):

I am writing to ask for your help. I am a doctoral student with the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto under the supervision of Dr. Faye Mishna, and I am conducting a survey to gain understanding of the use and receipt of homophobic and sexist language among grade 7 and 8 students in the Toronto District School Board. I am also a school social worker with the Toronto District School Board.

The Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB) Student Census revealed that 41% of grade seven and eight students reported being called names or insulted. This was the more frequently reported type of bullying behaviour. This proposed research seeks to explore more broadly the use of particular language and phrase that students hear and use at school. I am specifically interested in finding out when, where, why and how phrases such as “that’s so gay” and “you throw like a girl” are used, how often, towards whom and whether school staff is present. The purpose of the survey is to help understand this kind of name-calling and to develop strategies to address this often hurtful language. I would like to formally invite the grade 7 and 8 students of your school (name of school), to participate in this project.

I have developed a survey on the use and receipt of homophobic and sexist language that will be administered to students within the TDSB. The aim is to systematically obtain information about this kind of language, which will be utilized to inform education and prevention and intervention programs with respect to name calling. This research is for my social work dissertation. A copy of the survey is attached.

I will have arranged with the social work department for a school social worker to follow up with any students that become upset or wishes to speak to someone. There is a detachable page at the end of the survey that students can write their name if they wish to speak with someone. The strategy employed will be to notify yourself and the school social worker of any students who wish to speak with someone. I am a TDSB registered school social worker.

An information sheet and consent form (see attached) for parents/guardians has been developed and only students who receive written consent will be allowed to participate. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. If you agree, I propose to meet with your grade 7 and 8 teachers to explain the research and answer any questions. The teachers will then be given the information and consent forms to give to the students to take home. The surveys will be held in the school at a date and time that is most convenient for you, your staff, and your participating students. Participating students will receive a free pen as a small thank you as well as a copy of the TDSB Student Safety Line flyer.

Thank you for consideration to participate in this project. For additional information, please contact:

Steven Solomon, MSW, RSW, PhD (Cand) Faye Mishna
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work Professor & Dean
University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
School Social Worker, Toronto District School Board University of Toronto
T : 416-985-3749 E : steven.solomon@tdsb.on.ca T : 416-978-3255 E : f.mishna@utoronto.ca
Appendix 3

Study Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form for Parents: Student Survey

Research Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Homophobic and Sexist Language among Grade 7 and 8 Students in the Toronto District School Board

Dear Sir or Madam:
I am writing to ask for your help. I am a doctoral student with the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto under the supervision of Dr. Faye Mishna, and I am conducting a survey to gain understanding of particular kinds of homophobic and sexist name-calling. I am also a school social worker with the Toronto District School Board. Specifically, I am looking to find out more about students using and being called homophobic and sexist language among grade 7 and 8 students in the Toronto District School Board.

What is the purpose?
The Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB) Student Census revealed that 41% of grade seven and eight students reported being called names or insulted. This was the more frequently reported type of bullying behaviour. This proposed research seeks to explore more broadly the use of particular language and phrases that students hear and use at school. I am specifically interested in finding out when, where why and how language such as “that’s so gay” and “you throw like a girl” are used, how often, towards whom and whether school staff is present. The purpose of the survey is to help understand this kind of name-calling and to develop strategies to address this often hurtful language.

When and where will the study take place?
The survey will take place in your child’s school during school time. The survey will be a machine read paper questionnaire. Supervision will be provided by Steven Solomon while students complete the surveys.

Who is being asked to take part and what will they do?
I am asking students in grades 7 and 8 to participate in the survey. Your child does not have to answer any or all questions. You are under no obligation to allow your child to take part in the survey and at any point, you can withdraw your child. Your child is also free to decide not to participate or to decide to withdraw at any time without any consequence. A copy of the survey will be available at the school office for parents to read.

What are the risks and benefits of the study?
There are no direct benefits for your child. However, students’ participation will help increase our understanding of how often certain language is used, when it is used and why to address name-calling and put downs among grade 7 and 8 students in the TDSB. This research will inform development of education, prevention and intervention programs about name-calling.

There are few risks in this study and there are no physical risks. However, students may become upset completing the survey due to the topic. Students will be able to indicate on the detachable last page of the survey if they wish to speak to someone. In order to identify students who require or want to speak to someone Steven Solomon will review each completed survey to determine which students are asking to speak with someone. Steven Solomon will then meet briefly with the student (arranged with the teacher to do so discreetly) to determine whether social work follow up is wanted or needed. If it is thought to be, Steven Solomon will notify the school principal and arrange with TDSB school social worker for that school. The detachable sheet with students’ names on them will be given to the school principal. If it is believed that a child is at risk of harming themselves Steven Solomon will meet with the child (arranged with the teacher to do so discreetly) and then contact the school social worker. As the parent or guardian, you will be informed of this prior to any meeting with the school social worker. In addition, if a child indicates that an adult has hurt them physically or emotionally, if anybody has touched them in a way that has made them feel uncomfortable, or if it is believed that someone is not taking care of them Steven Solomon will be obligated to inform the appropriate authorities/Children’s Aid Society.
Is the study voluntary and confidential?
The decision to allow your son or daughter to participate is completely voluntary and will be kept completely confidential. While participating students will see other students who are participating, individual student responses will be anonymous and their responses confidential. All children who return the consent forms, whether or not they assent to participate, will receive a pen as a token of my appreciation as well as a copy of the TDSB Student Safety Line flyer. Your child can withdraw at any time without consequence. If you withdraw your child from the study, your child will continue to receive quality education from the Toronto District School Board. All the information collected will be strictly anonymous. The names of participants and their schools will not be used. All data will be kept on a secure server and access to the server will be secured by use of specific passwords known only to me and my thesis supervisor Dr. Faye Mishna. All research data will be stored in a secure, locked cabinet in my office at the Toronto District School Board. No information will be released or published that would disclose any personal identity. Only aggregate data will be released or published. All data will be destroyed 7 years after the survey is completed, in June 2018.

Who do I speak to if I have Questions or Concerns?
If you have any questions, at any time, you can speak to Steven Solomon or his thesis supervisor Dr. Faye Mishna. You may also contact Rachel Zand, Director, Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto at Rachel.zand@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3389.

What are my Rights?
You waive no legal rights by participating in this study. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Rachel Zand, Director, Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto at Rachel.zand@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3389.

Results of the Study
A summary of the results will be made available to participating schools. Your child’s opinions are important to the study. I hope you will agree to take part.

Yours truly,

Steven Solomon, MSW, RSW, Ph.D (Cand)
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
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School Social Worker, Toronto District School Board
T: 416-985-3749
E: steven.solomon@tdsb.on.ca

Faye Mishna, PhD
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T: 416-978-3255
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Informed Consent Form for Parents: Student Survey

Research Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Homophobic and Sexist Language among Grade 7 and 8 Students in the Toronto District School

Researcher: Steven Solomon, Doctoral Candidate, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

I, ______________________________, understand that Steven Solomon, Doctoral Candidate at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto, under the supervision of thesis supervisor Dr. Faye Mishna is conducting a survey on homophobic and sexist language among grade 7 and 8 students. Steven Solomon is also a school social worker with the Toronto District School Board.

I understand that my child will participate in a survey that will take approximately 10 minutes. I understand that my child does not have to answer any or all questions on the survey.

I have been made aware of the potential risks and benefits associated with my child’s participation in this study. I understand that if my son or daughter wishes to speak with someone they will be able to indicate on the detachable last page of the survey and arrangements will be made by the principal and school social worker. I also understand that I as the parent or guardian, I will be notified and provide consent prior to such arrangements. I also understand that if it is believed that my child is at risk of harming themselves I will be notified and provide consent prior to any arrangement to meet with the school social worker. In addition, I understand if my child indicates that an adult has hurt them physically or emotionally, if anybody has touched them in a way that has made them feel uncomfortable, or if it is thought that someone is not taking care of them then Steven Solomon will be obligated to inform the appropriate authorities/Children’s Aid Society.

Any questions I have asked about the study have been answered to my satisfaction. I also understand that a copy of the survey will be available at the school office for me to read. I understand that my child’s participation is completely voluntary and that my decision either to allow my child to participate or not will be kept completely anonymous. I further understand that I can withdraw my child from the study at any time without explanation and with no consequence.

I understand that information collected for this study is strictly confidential. The names of participants will not be used at any stage of the research. All research information will be kept on a secure server and access to the server will be secured by use of specific passwords known only to Steven Solomon or Dr. Faye Mishna. Research data will be stored in a secure, locked cabinet in Steven Solomon’s office at the Toronto District School Board. I have been assured that no information will be released or published that would disclose either my child’s or my identity or the school. All data collected will be destroyed seven years after the study is finished, in June 2018.

I hereby consent for my child _______________________________ to participate.

(Please print first and last name)

_________________________________ __________________________________________
Name of Parent Signature of Parent

______________________________
Child’s date of birth

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Person who obtained consent __________________________

Signature ________________________________________

Date

If you have any questions about this study please contact:

Steven Solomon, MSW, RSW, PhD (Cand.)
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University of Toronto
School Social Worker, Toronto District School Board
T: 416-985-3749
E: steven.solomon@tdsb.on.ca

Faye Mishna,
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T: 416-978-3255
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Appendix 4
Study Information Sheet/Assent for Students, at TDSB: Student Survey

Research Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Homophobic and Sexist Language among Grade 7 and 8 Students in the Toronto District School

Dear Student:

I am writing to ask for your help. I am a doctoral student with the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto under the supervision of Dr. Faye Mishna, and I am conducting a survey to gain understanding of homophobic and sexist language among grade 7 and 8 students in the Toronto District School Board. I am also a school social worker with the Toronto District School Board.

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS STUDY?

According to the Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB), four out of 10 students in grade seven and eight students report being called names or insulted at school. This was the more frequently reported type of bullying behaviour. This study is to explore more about name-calling and the use of particular language and phrases that students hear and use at school. I am specifically interested in finding out when, where why and how phrases such as “that’s so gay” and “you throw like a girl” are used, how often, towards whom and whether school staff is present. The purpose of the survey is to help understand this kind of name-calling and to develop strategies to address this often hurtful language.

WHEN AND WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE?
The surveys will take place in your school. The survey will be a paper questionnaire. Supervision will be provided by Steven Solomon while students complete the surveys. A blank copy of the survey will be available at the school office for your parents or guardians to read.

WHO IS BEING ASKED TO TAKE PART AND WHAT WILL THEY DO?

I am asking students in grades 7 and 8 to participate in the survey.

WHAT WILL I DO?

We are inviting you to take part in the survey. It is completely up to you and you do not have to take part in the survey and at any point, you can withdraw. If you agree to take part, you will fill out the survey on your own at school. I will be there while you do the survey. You do not have to answer any or all questions on the survey. In addition, it is okay for you to change your mind at any time and decide not to participate or to decide to withdraw without any consequence.

ARE THERE GOOD AND BAD THINGS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

A good thing is that you will be helping us to understand and develop programs to stop name-calling and help kids. You may become upset because of the topic. There is a place for you to mark on the survey that you wish to speak to someone. The researcher (Steven Solomon) will go over each completed survey to see which students want to or need to speak with someone. Steven Solomon will then meet briefly with the student (arranged with the teacher to do so in a way that nobody else will know) to see whether it is a good idea to meet with a school social worker. If it is, we will tell the school principal that we will make the referral to social work. In addition, if we think you might hurt yourself we will speak with you and contact social work to make a referral. Also, if you let us know that an adult has hurt you physically or emotionally, if anybody has touched you in a way that has made you feel uncomfortable, or if we think someone is not taking care of you we will have to tell Children’s Aid.

CAN I DECIDE IF I WANT TO BE IN THE STUDY?

It is up to you if you want to be in the study. You can stop being in the study at any time. Just tell your parent or guardian that you do not want to take part. Or when you are doing the survey, it is okay to
change your mind and stop filling it out. All students who return the consent forms, whether or not they agree to participate, will receive a pen as a small token my appreciation as well as a copy of the TDSB Student Safety Line flyer.

WHO WILL KNOW ABOUT WHAT I DID IN THE STUDY?
Your parents or guardians, teacher and vice-principal/principal and other participating students will know that you are in the study. But only Steven Solomon and his supervisor Dr. Faye Mishna will see the completed surveys. The survey answers will be anonymous meaning you will NOT put your name on the survey. After the study is finished, I will destroy all information that we collect. No information will be given out or published that would in any way identify you or your school. The questionnaires will be destroyed seven years after the surveys are completed, in June 2018.

WHO DO I SPEAK TO IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?
If you have any questions, at any time, you can speak to Steven Solomon or Dr. Faye Mishna using the telephone numbers or email addresses below. Your parent(s) and/or guardian(s) will be reading about this study. They will be able to answer any of your questions. You may also contact Rachel Zand, Director, Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto at Rachel.zand@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3389

RESULTS OF THE STUDY
A summary of the results will be made available to participating schools. Your opinions are important to the study. We hope you will agree to take part.

Yours truly,
Steven Solomon, MSW, RSW, PhD (Cand.)
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
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ASSENT
I was present when (name of child) __________________________________ read this form and gave his/her verbal assent. I read the form aloud, made sure that ________________________________ understood the form and asked him/her if he or she had any questions.

(Name of child)
Name of person who obtained assent

__________________________________
Signature

__________________________________
Date

Steven Solomon, MSW, RSW, PhD (Cand.)
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Appendix 5

Invitation Letter to Principals: Focus Groups with Students

Date:

Dear (name of Principal):
I am writing to ask for your help. I am a doctoral student with the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto under the supervision of Dr. Faye Mishna, and I am conducting focus groups to gain understanding of the use and receipt of homophobic and sexist language among grade 7 and 8 students in the Toronto District School Board. I am also a school social worker with the Toronto District School Board.

The Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB) Student Census revealed that 41% of grade seven and eight students reported being called names or insulted. This was the more frequently reported type of bullying behaviour. This proposed research seeks to explore more broadly the use of particular language and phrase that students hear and use at school. I am specifically interested in finding out when, why and how phrases such as “that’s so gay” and “you throw like a girl” are used, how often, towards whom and whether school staff is present. I am conducting focus groups in order to gain an understanding of the use and receipt of homophobic and sexist language from the perspectives of students.

As this is exploratory, the focus group questions will be broad and open ended in order to lead to discussion. I will not ask about participants’ personal experiences with this kind of language, and I will monitor and guide the discussion to ensure it remains general. I will ask participants who uses the language, how often, towards whom, where in school the language is used and whether or not a teacher is present, and what reasons they believe such language is used.

I will have arranged with the social work department for a school social worker to follow up with any students that become upset. The strategy employed will be to notify the school social worker of the dates of the focus group to ensure they are aware of the situation. At each focus group, I will tell them that I will speak to anyone individually after the group. In the event of a student becoming distressed as a result of participation in the focus group, I will contact the school principal who then makes the referral to social work. I am a TDSB registered school social worker.

An information sheet and consent form (see attached) for parents/guardians has been developed and only students who receive written consent will be allowed to participate. The focus group will take approximately 90 minutes. If you agree, I propose to meet with one of your grade 7 and one of your grade 8 teachers to explain the research and answer any questions. The teachers will then be given the information and consent forms to give to the students to take home. The first six to eight students to return with signed consent will be invited to the focus group. Participating students will receive a free pen as a small thank you as well as a copy of the TDSB Student Safety Line flyer.

The focus group will be held in the school during school time that is most convenient for you, your staff, and participating students. Within the school, I will require a room to conduct the focus group. If possible, the library setting would be desirable.

I am inviting your school to participate in a focus group. All the information collected in the group will be strictly confidential. Thank you for consideration to participate in this project. For additional information, please contact:
Steven Solomon, MSW, RSW, PhD (Cand.)
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
School Social Worker, Toronto District School Board
T: 416-985-3749
E: steven.solomon@tdsb.on.ca

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Appendix 6

Study Information Sheet & Informed Consent for Parents: Focus Groups for Students

Research Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Homophobic and Sexist Language among Grade 7 and 8 Students in the Toronto District School

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am writing to ask for your help. I am a doctoral student with the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto under the supervision of Dr. Faye Mishna, and I am conducting focus groups to gain understanding of homophobic and sexist language among grade 7 and 8 students in the Toronto District School Board. I am also a school social worker with the Toronto District School Board.

What is the purpose?
The Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB) Student Census revealed that 41% of grade seven and eight students, and 31% of grade nine to twelve students reported being called names or insulted. This was the more frequently reported type of bullying behaviour. This proposed research seeks to explore more broadly the use of particular language and phrases that students hear and use at school. I am specifically interested in finding out when, where why and how phrases such as “that’s so gay” and “you throw like a girl” are used, how often, towards whom and whether school staff is present. The purpose of the focus groups is to help understand this kind of name-calling and to develop strategies to address this often hurtful language.

When and where will the study take place?
The focus groups, led by Steven Solomon, will take place in school, and during school time that is convenient.

Who is being asked to take part and what will they do?
I am asking students in grades 7 and 8 to participate in the focus groups.

What will my child do?
I am inviting you to allow your child to participate in a focus group. If your son/daughter takes part, they will attend a focus group with 6-8 other students who are in their age range. The focus group will last approximately 1-1½ hours and I will provide snacks. I will not ask the students about their own experiences with name-calling. I will ask about their thoughts on name calling, for example under what conditions and circumstances does such name-calling and insults occur (who uses the language, how often, towards whom, in school the language is used and whether or not a teacher is present), and about the form(s) the insults take. Students will not name any specific individuals during the focus groups. I will guide the discussion. You are under no obligation to allow your child to take part in the focus group and at any point, you can withdraw your child. Your child is also free to decide not to participate or to decide to withdraw without any consequence. The focus group sessions will be tape-recorded and detailed notes will be taken.

What are the risks and benefits of the study?
There are no direct benefits for your child. However, their participation will help me understand and develop education, prevention, and intervention programs about name-calling. There are few risks in this study and there are no physical risks. Although we will not ask your child about their own experiences with name-calling, taking part in the focus group may upset children due to the topic. All of the students will be reminded that the information shared during the session is confidential and is not to be repeated to anyone outside of the group. However, there is a limit to my ability to make sure there is confidentiality of information shared in these sessions.
If a student indicates that they wish to speak with someone I will then meet briefly with the student (arranged with the teacher to do so discreetly) to determine whether social work follow up is wanted or needed. If it is thought to be, I will notify the school principal and arrange with TDSB school social worker for that school. If I believe that a child is at risk of harming themselves I will meet with the child (arranged with the teacher to do so discreetly) and then contact the school social worker. As the parent or guardian, you will be informed of this prior to any meeting with the school social worker. In addition, if a child indicates that an adult has hurt them physically or emotionally, if anybody has touched them in a way that has made them feel uncomfortable, or if I think someone is not taking care of them I will be obligated to inform the appropriate authorities/Children’s Aid Society. Participating students will receive a pen as a small thank you as well as a copy of the TDSB Student Safety Line flyer.

Is the study voluntary and confidential?
The decision to allow your son or daughter to participate is completely voluntary and will be kept completely confidential. All children who return the consent forms, whether or not they assent to participate, will receive a pen as a token of my appreciation. Your child can withdraw at any time without consequence. If you withdraw your child from the study, your child will continue to receive quality education from the Toronto District School Board. All the information collected will be strictly anonymous. The names of participants and their schools will not be used. All data will be kept on a secure server and access to the server will be secured by use of specific passwords known only to me and my thesis supervisor Dr. Faye Mishna. All research data will be stored in a secure, locked cabinet in my office at the Toronto District School Board. No information will be released or published that would disclose any personal identity. Only aggregate data will released or published. All data will be destroyed 7 years after the survey is completed, in June 2018.

Whom do I speak to if I have Questions or Concerns?
If you have any questions, at any time, you can speak to Steven Solomon or his thesis supervisor Dr. Faye Mishna. You may also speak with Rachel Zand, Director, Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto at Rachel.zand@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3389.

What are my Rights?
You waive no legal rights by participating in this study. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Rachel Zand, Director, Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto at Rachel.zand@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3389.

Results of the Study
A summary of the results will be made available to participating schools. Your child’s opinions are important to the study. I hope you will agree to take part.

Yours truly,
Steven Solomon, MSW, RSW, PhD (Cand)
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
School Social Worker, Toronto District School Board
T: 416-985-3749 E: steven.solomon@tdsb.on.ca

Faye Mishna,
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Informed Consent Form for Parents at TDSB: Focus Groups

Research Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Homophobic and Sexist Language among Grade 7 and 8 Students in the Toronto District School

Researcher: Steven Solomon, under the supervision of Dr. Faye Mishna of the Factor-Inwentash, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

I, _______________________________, understand that Steven Solomon, Doctoral Candidate at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto under the supervision of thesis supervisor Dr. Faye Mishna is conducting a focus group on homophobic and sexist language among grade 7 and 8 students.

I understand that my child will participate in a focus group that will last around 1 to 1½ hours. I understand that with my permission the interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. I am aware that the researcher and his thesis supervisor will only use the audiotapes and transcripts. No other person will have access to them. The names of participants will not be used at any stage of the research. Each participant will be identified by a colour code to ensure privacy. All data will be kept on a secure computer and access to the computer will be secured by use of passwords known only to the researcher and his thesis supervisor. The completed transcriptions, audiotapes and other research data will be stored in a secure, locked cabinet in Steven Solomon’s office at the Toronto District School Board. I have been assured that no information will be released or published that would disclose either my child’s identity or my child’s school. All data collected will be destroyed seven years after the study is finished.

I have been made aware of the potential risks and benefits associated with my child’s participation in this study. I understand that if my son or daughter wishes to speak with someone arrangements will be made by the principal and school social worker. I also understand that I as the parent or guardian, I will be notified prior to such arrangements. I also understand that if it is believed that my child is at risk of harming themselves I will be notified of any arrangement to meet with the school social worker in addition, I understand if my child indicates that an adult has hurt them physically or emotionally, if anybody has touched them in a way that has made them feel uncomfortable, or if it is thought that someone is not taking care of them then Steven Solomon will be obligated to inform the appropriate authorities/Children’s Aid Society.

Any questions I have asked about the study have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that my child’s participation is completely voluntary and that my decision either to allow my child to participate or not will be kept completely confidential. I further understand that I can withdraw my child from the study at any time without explanation and with no consequence.

I understand that information collected for this study is strictly anonymous. The names of participants will not be used at any stage of the research. All research information will be kept on a secure server and access to the server will be secured by use of specific passwords known only to Steven Solomon or Dr. Faye Mishna. Research data will be stored in a secure, locked cabinet in Steven Solomon’s office at the Toronto District School Board. I have been assured that no information will be released or published that
would disclose either my child’s or my identity or the school. All data collected will be destroyed seven years after the study is finished, in June 2018.

I hereby consent for my child ________________________________ to participate.
(Please print first and last name)

_________________________________                  ____________________________
Name of Parent                                    Signature of Parent

_________________________________
Home phone # of where child lives

_________________________________
Child’s date of birth

_________________________________
Person who obtained consent                    Signature

_________________________________
Date

If you have any questions about this study please contact:

Steven Solomon, MSW, RSW, PhD (Cand.)
Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
School Social Worker, Toronto District School Board
T: 416-985-3749
E: steven.solomon@tdsb.on.ca

Faye Mishna,
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Appendix 7
Study Information Sheet/Assent for Students, at TDSB: Focus Group for Students

Research Project: An Exploratory Investigation of Homophobic and Sexist Language
Among Grade 7 and 8 Students in the Toronto District School

Dear Student:

I am writing to ask for your help. I am a doctoral student with the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social
Work at the University of Toronto under the supervision of Dr. Faye Mishna, and I am conducting focus
groups to gain an understanding of homophobic and sexist language among grade 7 and 8 students in the
Toronto District School Board.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE?
According to the Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB), four out of 10 students in grade seven and
eight students report being called names or insulted at school. This was the more frequently reported type
of bullying behaviour. This study is to explore more about name-calling and the use of particular
language and phrases that students hear and use at school. I am specifically interested in finding out
when, where why and how phrases such as “that’s so gay” and “you throw like a girl” are used, how
often, towards whom and whether school staff is present. The purpose of the focus group is to help
understand this kind of name-calling and to develop strategies to address this often hurtful language.

WHEN AND WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE?
The focus groups will take place in a school during school time that is convenient.

WHO IS BEING ASKED TO TAKE PART AND WHAT WILL THEY DO?
I am asking students in grades 7 and 8 to participate in the focus groups.

WHAT WILL I DO?
If you take part, you will attend a focus group with 6-8 other students who are in your age group. The
focus group will last about 1-1½ hours and I will provide snacks. I will not ask you about your own
experiences with name-calling. I will ask about your thoughts on name calling, for example who uses the
language, how often, towards whom, where in school the language is used and whether or not a teacher is
present), and about the form(s) the insults take. You will not use the name(s) of specific individuals when
talking in the focus group. I will guide the discussion. You do not have to take part in the focus group
and it is okay if at any point you change your mind and decide not to continue. Whether you decide to
take part or not, there will not be any consequences for you. The focus group sessions will be tape-
recorded and detailed notes will be taken.

ARE THERE GOOD AND BAD THINGS ABOUT THIS STUDY?
There are no direct benefits for you. However, your participation will help us understand and develop
education, prevention, and intervention programs about name-calling. There are few risks in this study.
There are no physical risks. Although I will not ask you about your own experiences with name-calling,
taking part in the focus group may upset you due to the topic. If you wish I will help you figure out how
to get help and connect you with a social worker at the school. All of the students will be reminded that
the information shared during the session is confidential and is not to be repeated to anyone outside of the
group. However, there is a limit to my ability to make sure there is confidentiality of information shared
in these sessions. In addition, if you say that an adult has hurt you physically or emotionally, if anybody
has touched you in a way that has made you feel uncomfortable, or if I think someone is not taking care of
you, I will have to tell Children’s Aid.
CAN I DECIDE IF I WANT TO BE IN THE STUDY?
It is up to you if you want to be in the study. You can stop being in the study at any time. Just tell your parent or guardian that you do not want to take part. Alternatively, when you are in the focus group it is okay to change your mind and stop participating. All students who return the consent forms, whether or not they participate, will receive a pen as a token my appreciation. Participating students will also receive a copy of the TDSB Student Safety Line flyer.

WHO WILL KNOW ABOUT WHAT I DID IN THE STUDY?
Your parents or guardians, teacher and vice-principal/principal will know that you are in the study. Other students participating in the focus group will also know that you are in the study. While the focus group discussion will be audiotaped, you will use a colour-coded card to identify yourself (rather than your name) and you will not name specific individuals when talking in the focus group. Steven Solomon and his supervisor Dr. Faye Mishna will keep all the information shared in the focus group confidential. After the study is finished, I will destroy all information that we collect. No information will be given out or published that would in any way identify you or your school. The questionnaires will be destroyed seven years after the surveys are completed, in June 2018.

WHOM DO I SPEAK TO IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?
If you have any questions, at any time, you can speak to Steven Solomon or Dr. Faye Mishna using the telephone numbers or email addresses below. Your parent(s) and/or guardian(s) will be reading about this study. They will be able to answer any of your questions. You may also contact Rachel Zand, Director, Office of Research Ethics, University of Toronto at Rachel.zand@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3389.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY
A summary of the results will be made available to participating schools. Your opinions are important to the study. We hope you will agree to take part.

Yours truly,
Steven Solomon, MSW, RSW, PhD (Cand)
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Appendix 8

Students! Just for You:  Student Safety Line

What is it?

The Student Safety Line is an anonymous way for you to tell someone about your personal or school safety concerns. The Student Safety Line will help make our schools even safer, fairer, and more caring learning environments for everyone.

How does it work?

When you call 416-395-SAFE (7233) or log onto www.tdsb.on.ca/safetyline, you may leave a message or submit a report with information for the TDSB to follow-up. You do not need to give your name to make a report. You can leave a message without anyone knowing or finding out who you are. Messages are checked regularly during the school day.

When should I make a Report?

You are encouraged to call whenever you hear, see or experience something that threatens the safety and welfare of anyone at your school. You can make reports about threats, suspicious activities, violence, physical assaults, weapons, intimidation, bullying, sexual harassment or anything else that worries you.

What about 9-1-1? In an emergency, you should call 9-1-1 immediately.
What if I need to talk to someone? You can contact the Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or visit www.kidshelpphone.ca for counseling support.
What if I have information about a crime? Call Toronto Crime Stoppers at 416-222-TIPS, E-mail crime@222tips.com or visit www.222tips.com.

Although we always encourage students to talk to an adult they trust, the TDSB Student Safety Line is another way to help students report school-related or personal safety concerns.

How do I find out more?

Visit www.tdsb.on.ca/safetyline

A TDSB program to make our schools safer.
Appendix 9: Focus Group Questions

1. At school, have you ever heard language/words such as ‘that’s so gay’, ‘fag’, ‘faggot’, ‘queer, and ‘lesbo’? How often do you hear this language?

2. Describe a situation at school when you have heard this language.

3. Where in school did this take place?

4. Was there a teacher or other school staff present? If so, did they do anything?

5. Why do you think students might use this language?

6. Is language like this a problem? Why or Why not?

7. If you think this language is a problem, what do you think could be done to address it?

8. At school, have you ever heard language/words such as ‘you run like a girl’, ‘you throw like a girl’? How often do you hear this language?

9. Describe a situation at school when you have heard this language.

10. Where in school did this take place?

11. Was there a teacher or other school staff present? If so, did they do anything?

12. Why do you think students might use this language?

13. Is language like this a problem? Why or Why not?

14. If you think this language is a problem, what do you think could be done to address it?
Appendix 10: Ethics Approval from the University of Toronto

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 25144

July 6, 2015

Dr. Faye Mishna
FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK

Steven Solomon
FACULTY OF SOCIAL WORK

Dear Dr. Mishna and Steven Solomon,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, “That’s so gay! An exploratory investigation of homophobic and sexist language among Grade 7 and 8 students in the Toronto District School Board”

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: July 23, 2010
Expiry Date: July 22, 2016
Continuing Review Level: 2
Renewal: Data Analysis Only

We are writing to advise you that you have been granted annual renewal of ethics approval to the above-referenced research protocol through the Research Ethics Board (REB) delegated process. Please note that all protocols involving ongoing data collection or interaction with human participants are subject to re-evaluation after 5 years. Ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your protocol. Note that annual renewals for protocols cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry as per our guidelines.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible. If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Peter, Ph.D.
REB Chair

Daniel Gyewu
REB Manager

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS
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Tel: +1 416 946-2273 ● Fax: +1 416 946-7663 ● ethics.review@utoronto.ca ● http://www.research.utoronto.ca/for-researchers/administrators/ethics/
October 29, 2010

Dear Steven Solomon,

That’s so gay! An exploratory investigation of homophobic and sexist language among grade 7 and 8 students in the Toronto District School Board

Now that you have satisfactorily addressed all our questions and issues raised in previous letters, the External Research Review Committee (ERRC) is granting final approval for you to contact and invite a maximum of three middle level schools per quadrant to participate in your student survey.

You should be aware however that ERRC approval does not obligate schools to participate and individual principals make the final decision about their school’s involvement, so it is possible you might not reach your desired target of 12 schools. For our record-keeping, it is helpful for us to maintain a list of the TDSB schools that agree to participate in your research once that has been confirmed.

In addition to the feedback and follow-up workshops you provide to the individual participating schools, ERRC also requires an electronic version and a hard copy of your summary findings upon completion. These would be sent to my attention, and expected in June 2012 as indicated on your application.

Sincerely,

Sally Edling, Chair
External Research Review Committee, TDSB
E-mail: ERRC@tdsb.on.on

2010-2011-03