

Richard Benjamin Trust - End of award report

From fact to fiction: Reducing the adverse impact of homo-negativity among adolescents through real-life drama.

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Abstract

This project integrated psychology, education and drama in order to produce a powerful intervention to combat prejudice and promote acceptance toward Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and other (+) (LGBTQ+) adolescents. The intervention was conducted in two phases. Firstly, the impact of real-life stories played back through theatre was assessed on LGBTQ+ adolescents' resilience to sexual orientation-related stigma ($N=4$). The results of the intervention met the objectives, with participants describing their experience as 'beautiful', 'eye-opening', 'transformative', 'helpful', making them 'feel better' about themselves and 'providing a new perspective'. Phase two was conducted using an experimental repeated measures design across schools in Merseyside. A play was derived from the lived experiences of participants in phase one. The impact of these real-life dramatisations was evaluated on perspective-taking and acceptance toward LGBTQ+ adolescents, among non-LGBTQ+ school-aged children ($N=166$) who took part in phase 2. The primary aim of the second phase was to reduce stigma and to increase acceptance and perspective-taking ability, among non-LGBTQ+ young people for their LGBTQ+ peers. Results showed significant and positive attitude change following the performance. The results also demonstrated that empathy was significantly associated with attitude change, particularly moderate empathy. Results offer insights into the potential benefits of community-based initiatives involving psychology and education in increasing the wellbeing of young people who identify as LGBTQ+, and in improving attitudes of their non-LGBTQ+ peers.

Overview

Research has shown that LGBTQ+ individuals are at risk for poor school experiences, mental health difficulties, and suicide (Keuroghlian et al., 2014; McAllister & Noonan, 2015; McConnell et al., 2015). The Fact to Fiction

project aimed to give LGBTQ+ individuals the opportunity to increase their wellbeing through telling their narratives, and through seeing them re-enacted in the form of Playback Theatre. Also, to provide safer school environments for them by improving the understanding and consequently the attitudes of their non-LGBTQ+ peers. Whilst LGBTQ+ individuals are becoming more accepted, there is still an associated stigma and a need to educate pupils about the consequences of homo-negativity in relation to social identity, specifically gender identity and sexual orientation. The current initiative aimed to fill this gap by increasing acceptance, improving perspective taking ability, and in contributing to the reduction of prejudice including discrimination, harassment, and violence. A further gap in the research to date is the focus given to transgender individuals, the current project aimed to bridge this gap by giving direct attention to the experiences of transgender individuals. The play, whilst incorporating stories from LGBTQ+ individuals, was mainly focused on the lived experiences of the transgender young people. The strengths of this project also lie in the collaboration between psychology, pedagogy and drama, allowing the creation of a powerful intervention that was theoretically sound, reliable, ecologically valid, and impactful.

Method

Design and participants: To achieve the first objective a focus group was conducted with the LGBTQ+ adolescents ($N=4$) to tap their lived experiences as members of LGBTQ+. Participants' resilience, self-acceptance, self-esteem and well-being was reflected on directly following the intervention and then two months later.

To achieve the second objective, namely assessing the impact of the play, two schools in Merseyside served as the intervention schools. Repeated measures analyses were used to assess initial baseline levels of empathy and existing attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals. Attitudes, including levels of prejudice and acceptance, were also measured directly following the play to determine if any attitude change occurred as a consequence of the intervention (play).

The play that was used as the intervention was based on a set of diverse scenes from the playback session. Psychological techniques inducing perspective-taking and prejudice-reduction were integrated into the play.

Materials: For phase 1, focus groups were recorded and transcribed, with the participants' informed consent. For phase 2, validated self-reports were used to measure empathy and attitude.

Procedure: Playback Theatre sessions were facilitated by mentor II. Focus groups were facilitated by the PI and transcribed by the research assistant. The data was entered by the research assistant (Mr Neil Edwards) and analysed by the main researcher. The play was written by Mr Neil Edwards.

Ethics: The study was designed in accordance to the British Psychological Society (2011) Guidelines for Research in Psychology, and approved by the Liverpool John Moores University Ethics Committee.

Trained counsellors were available throughout both phases so that the young people had someone to talk to following the sessions, and they were provided with contact details if they wanted to talk to them in confidence.

Key results

- 1- The results of the intervention met the objectives, with phase 1 participants describing their experience as 'beautiful', 'eye-opening', 'transformative', 'helpful', making them 'feel better' about themselves and 'providing a new perspective'.
- 2- The participants in phase one said that they enjoyed the experience immensely and not only did it increase a sense of wellbeing but it brought them closer to the individuals with whom they shared the experience.
- 3- The experience increased understanding of inter-group experience, for instance participants reported that they had increased understanding of the struggles experienced by their LGBTQ+ peers. Therefore, the Playback Theatre session and intervention have both contributed to heightened acceptance and awareness of 'difference' within the LGBTQ+ community, as well as understanding from outside the community.
- 4- Improved outcomes for LGBTQ+ young people in terms of improving their subjective wellbeing (including increased resilience, self-confidence and perceived self-worth) and in terms of increasing their perceived safety with schools.
- 5- In phase 2 attitudes significantly improved following the play. Therefore, this research has made advances in improving attitudes and increasing understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ young people from their non-LGBTQ+ peers; this may initiate increased safety within schools and better mental health outcomes.
- 6- Individuals with moderate empathy were most likely to improve their attitudes following the play, however, individuals with all levels of empathy showed some improvement.
- 7- A couple of individuals found the courage to 'come out' following the play.
- 8- staff members at both schools reported their increased confidence in understanding how to best support young people who may be struggling with their identity, or experiencing conflict because of it.
- 9- A resource (play) was produced that can be used nationally and internationally, in order to develop best practice and effective strategies to enhance acceptance and well-being among adolescents with diverse sexual orientation and gender preferences, and to create safe communities for them.

10- Results will contribute to effective strategies and best practices in creating inclusive communities and societal transformation.

Lessons learned

Both the Playback Theatre intervention and the school intervention have shown to be successful initiatives. Phase 1 provided the opportunity for young people who identify as LGBTQ+ to share their stories in a safe place and to see one another's stories re-enacted. From their feedback, this increased their sense of wellbeing, their self-acceptance, and their understanding of other individuals within the LGBTQ+ community.

Phase two gave non-LGBTQ+ young people the opportunity to learn about the experiences of their LGBTQ+ peers through an imaginative and engaging play that was based on the lived-experiences of people their own age who had experienced adversity because of the gender or sexual preferences. As a consequence, safer school environments can start to emerge.

Moreover, the initiative brought about a greater sense of togetherness and strengthened relationships within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community.

Dissemination and engagement

- The progress of the project has been documented at university open days
- The project has been spoken about at a number of forums including:
 - Shared experiences with an LGBT group of 9 Polish academics, journalists, sociologists and LGBT activists
 - LJMU Together
 - LGBTQ+ Mental Health Strategy Group
 - IDAHOT event
- The project has been presented in a series of oral papers and contributions given by the PI (see outputs)
- A press release is being made available for the local press by Liverpool John Moores University press office
- Several conference papers were accepted across the globe (see outputs)
- An academic paper is being prepared for submission to the Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health.

Further Developments

Based on the success of the Playback Theatre the PI will conduct a larger Playback session with GYRO Liverpool.

Also, the play is set to be performed as part of Homotopia 2017, and there are talks about taking it to the Edinburgh Playhouse.

Outputs

Symposium contribution title: Can Psychological Interventions Reduce Outgroup Bias against Jews, **LGBTQ+**, the Physically Disabled, Muslims and Extremists (ISIS): What works? Leipzig symposium: 50th Conference of the German Society for Psychology. September, 2016.

From fact to fiction: Reducing the adverse impact of homonegativity among adolescents through real-life drama. Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP) Warsaw, Poland, July 13-16, 2016.

From fact to fiction: Reducing the adverse impact of homonegativity among adolescents through real-life drama." SPSSI/EASP sponsored Small Group Meeting, *Understanding Hate Crimes: multidisciplinary analyses, Canada* (July 11-13, 2016).

Outputs (in preparation)

- From fact to fiction: Reducing the adverse impact of homonegativity among adolescents through real-life drama. *Journal of gay and lesbian mental health*.

The PI would like to thank Dr Masi Noor, Mr David (Lew) Llewellyn, and Mr Neil Edwards for their valuable contributions. The PI would also like to extend their thanks to all the participants and the actors without whom the project would not have been possible.