

“Pull a Seat Up to the Table”: The Enfranchising Effect of Placing Queer Students in Charge of Teacher Development

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Abstract

New Zealand’s rapid social and legal liberalisation of LGBTQIA+ people’s rights and social standing has left the culture of many boys’ schools struggling to keep up. In particular, LGBTQIA+ students are significantly over-represented in national school bullying and suicide statistics. Aside from the obvious conundrum inherent in defining our institutions by the increasingly-contested category of gender, there has been a tendency for LGBTQIA+ students in boys’ schools to feel they have to conceal this part of their identity. In some cases, they and their families have elected to move to other, typically mixed-gender, schools. This project was designed to support a group of fifteen LGBTQIA+ students to challenge that belief by having them offer to faculty a series of workshops on the subject of queer identity. Whilst there was a clear potential for this to benefit the teachers in the school, the focus of this research is on the effect of this action on the students themselves. The underlying premise was that in constructing contexts within which students can act for themselves, the *agentic* state would naturally empower them. The process was very much about providing students who may feel disenfranchised access to the power structures in our school. Analysis of interviews with the students subsequent to the workshop series yielded some unexpected results, particularly in relation to the perceptions they held prior to going into the workshops about the negative view faculty have of LGBTQIA+ students. After running the action all student workshop leaders reported a significant elevation in their self-perceived status in the wider school and have since gone on to take high-profile, mainstream leadership roles. In the year following their participation in this project, the students also presented a LGBTQIA+ advocacy assembly to the whole

school where they acknowledged their own non-heterosexual orientation for the first time in the school's history. They proved that activism has the power to enfranchise students, bring them closer into the heart of their school by affirming their right-of-place—and as a result afford them the full spectrum of opportunities for growth and development that schools such as ours are so proud to provide.

Glossary

LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and allies. This ungainly acronym is used to assemble very diverse communities of people under one banner.

Queer: While this nomenclature is not universally accepted by all members of the LGBTQIA+ communities, particularly older members who have personal experience of the term's pejorative use, this word is widely used by the students in this research group to refer to themselves and each other.

Heteronormative: Heteronormativity is the concept that heterosexuality is the default mode of sexual orientation. It assumes the gender binary. Heteronormative perception leads to the presumption of cis-gendered heterosexuality.

Enfranchisement: The use of this term in the title is a reference to gaining a right, status or privilege. This usage is derived from the application of the word *franchise* as it relates to being given a vote.

“Pull a Seat Up to the Table”: The Enfranchising Effect of Placing Queer Students in Charge of Teacher Development

Single-gender schools are presently facing one of the most fundamental challenges to our *raison d'être*, perhaps since our inception: The emergence of queer identity in our young people, and its challenge to the binary constructs of gender and sexuality upon which our institutions have been founded.

This research project has its roots in my own experience as a gay student in a single-gender secondary school. Whilst there has been marked social, political and legislative change in the 35 years since then, much has also remained the same. The challenge presented to students by the process of coming to terms with their own queer identity, not to mention the minefield to be navigated when identifying as queer in our schools, is still substantial. Queerness presents an undeniable challenge to established constructs of masculinity and due to my own experience I feel a distinct obligation to bring notions of queer identity into any adult conversation about masculinity in secondary schools.

This challenge offers a significant opportunity for single-gender schools to remake ourselves in service of our students in ways that will continue to keep us at the forefront of their thriving as contributing members of our society. To do this we must show the courage it takes to face ourselves and to embrace change. The good news is that we have everything we need to capitalise on the changing social norms that surround us.

An untapped resource in the development of a more nuanced, positive, definition of masculinity is our queer students themselves. This research project explores how, by shifting the *locus of control* in our schools in the direction of our students, by bringing their own experience and expertise into play, and by affording them a position of higher status, we can develop our students' sense of belonging and, consequently, their agency.

Franchise is an old-fashioned term; however, I've used it advisedly in this report. Franchise is what Kate Shepphard was demanding in 1893 when she and her contemporaries fought for, and secured,

the right to vote for women in the first democracy in the world to allow this, New Zealand. The objective of this action research project is to increase the franchise of the queer students who participate in its execution.

It is important to recognise that the majority of queer people's identity is not shared with their family. Schools are often the place where queer students first begin to express their identity. The relationship of the school community with queer identity informs these students' perceptions of themselves. Schools have a special responsibility to our queer students.

Background

Christ's College has a small Queer Straight Alliance (QSA). At the beginning of the project, this group was meeting privately, acting as a social support group as well as a forum for discussing social action within the school. The students were largely keeping their queer identity concealed within the wider school context. At the inception of this project, the students expressed an interest in acting to challenge some of the social norms in classrooms that they felt were in conflict with the safe expression of queer identity. They concluded that there was a strong call for teachers' inclusive practice to be improved.

Research Question

Whilst the objective of developing teachers' efficacy in inclusive practice is a worthy goal, it was not the goal of this study, which concentrates on the effect of the action on the students themselves. This gave rise to the following research question: *How does student-led professional development in modern masculinity develop a sense of franchise in queer students?*

Action Research Methodology

With a small group of students, a unique question, the imperative to shift the locus of control towards the students in this project, and the proposition that the outcome of the project was to create a shift in the students sense of *franchise* in their school community, action research methodology was the only reasonable choice. As opposed to quantitative research methods, the intention of this research was

simply to support the growth and development of a distinct group of young men in a particularly rarefied environment. This research effort allowed me to develop a project that:

- Drew upon established theories supporting student agency in secondary education;
- Informed these with my own prior experience working with QSA groups in other settings;
- Embodied the driving principle of student enfranchisement by co-constructing the process with the students for whom it was intended to benefit.

Action research provided a robust framework for the testing and evaluation of an original invention, offering a mechanism that allowed me to investigate a dimension of my own practice that kept the participants safe throughout, informed future practice and that produced an outcome where the benefit could be evaluated.

Literature Review

Situating a professional development project that sought a collaboration with LGBTQIA+ students under the dual banners of *masculinity* and *boys' schools* entered contested territory. The very idea of queerness brings with it a frisson in a school context that is defined by sex. Instead of retreating from that challenge, this project sought to offer some first steps to finding a way forward.

The imperative is clear. The Identify Survey, a nationwide survey for rainbow young people conducted in 2021, found that 37% of 2045 queer secondary school students had experienced bullying at school at least once in the prior 12 months. “Most schools had rainbow diversity groups or queer-straight alliances and displayed pro-rainbow messages.” “However, the majority of rainbow students said that they did not feel belonging and supported at school.” (Fenaughty et al., 2022)

Understandably, much is made by the International Boys' Schools Coalition, IBSC, under whose umbrella this research is run, about the uniqueness of boys. The IBSC have adopted a term, "boyology," originally coined in the book *Boyology: Or, Boy Analysis*, (Gibson, 1922), as a way to focus their pro-boy stance. The challenge to this binary gender identity inherent in working to empower a self-identified group of queer students in our school community cannot be resolved in one small project, but I do acknowledge it. As part of this, I have chosen to use gender-neutral terms when referring to the students at our school. Equally, I have made the broadest possible definition of masculinity, asserting here that anything that empowers these students' identities is a valid proxy for what would otherwise be the affirmation of a cis-gendered boy's masculinity.

Far from hampering these students, their non-conforming sexuality and the challenges inherent in operating in a heteronormative environment are very likely to have been strengthening factors. Scholars suggest that "gay male youths develop strengths that enable them to successfully cope with the challenges and stresses associated with their overall development" (Anderson, 1998). These youths "... had positive self-esteem and an internal locus of control comparable to, or better than, youths overall" (Anderson, 1998).

There was a very tidy alignment between these references to the concept of the *locus of control* and the principals of *student agency* that guided the co-construction of this project. As McIntyre et al. (2005) argued, "It cannot tenably be claimed that schooling is primarily intended to benefit pupils if pupils' own views about what is beneficial to them are not actively sought and attended to" (p. 150). Rotter divided the concept of locus of control into two sub-categories: "People with a high internal locus of control feel that they have control over things that happen in their lives while people with a high external locus of control feel that the events are beyond their personal control" (Rotter, 1966). This suggested that the project's goal must necessarily be to support the students to *act for themselves* in pursuit of having a positive effect on the school culture and its attitudes about them as queer people.

Taking this further, “People with higher optimism and sense of control experience higher meaning in life, better satisfaction with life and less depression and anxiety” (Sofi, 2021).

The top three rungs on Hart’s *ladder of participation* offer a useful definition for the highest degree of student agency in any corporate action. The ultimate position in this taxonomy is defined as “child-initiated, shared decisions with adults” (Hart, 2013). To achieve its objective, this project must afford the students the autonomy entirely to construct and deliver the professional development programme. My role, and that of other adults must be secondary, and on the students’ terms.

Boyology still played its part, and, reading around the cis-gendered and heteronormative presumptions in Cox et al.’s (2018) work, I remained able to extract valuable guidance about the value of “building an alliance” in this work with the students. The view that “there can be no compromise when it comes to authenticity, because without it boys are lost,” (Cox et al., 2018) further supported the path of supporting the students to develop means to assert the right to inhabit their own authentic selves in the school context. And what a context it is.

Research Context

Christ’s College is an independent Anglican all-boys’ boarding and day school located in the centre of Christchurch, New Zealand. Established in 1851, and modelled on the public schools of England, it opened in the same year the city of Christchurch was established by colonial settlers. Christ’s College is the only independent boys’ school in the South Island of New Zealand and operates under the motto *Bene tradita, bene servanda*, Good traditions, well maintained. The 21st century has seen a more modern interpretation of this venerable injunction with the addition of the slogan *Each boy at his best*. This, combined with an emphasis on biculturalism, Christianity, positive psychology, and a robust set of character virtues, positions the school in its good intention to serve the needs of the whole student.

Christ’s College’s 172 years of operation have not always been plain sailing. New Zealand’s Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care is looking at what happened to children, young people

and vulnerable adults in State and faith-based care in Aotearoa New Zealand between the years 1950–99. As part of its support of the kaupapa (principle or purpose) of this inquiry, Christ's College has acknowledged the survivors of abuse that did occur at the school. This reckoning with the darker side of the English private school tradition has led to a vigorous commitment to the safety and wellbeing of today's students. This research project contributes to this commitment by placing queer students, a particularly vulnerable group, in a position of elevated status, offering them a vehicle to influence the culture and practices of the school so that they better meet the needs of members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

The participants in this action research project were eleven students aged 15-17, all of whom were members of the school's first Queer-Straight Alliance (QSA) group which was inaugurated in May 2021. Three students performed the action. The small number of final active participants was a function of their being the only three students willing to declare their queer identity to faculty. The group met weekly during the research period with the three workshop facilitators meeting more frequently in the three-week lead-up to the action itself. I received permission from the students and their families to reproduce all audio, video and transcribed data derived from the video interviews run after the completion of the workshops they facilitated.

The students were at a crucial moment in their lives where they were developing the desire to move from engaging socially with each other, in the privacy of their group meetings, to taking action within the school community to create cultural change in respect of attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ people. The QSA had previously organised a range of visibility-raising exercises such as library displays. Their discussions often returned to the challenge of moving on from such exercises that the students considered tokenistic.

The students identified the classroom as one of the key contexts where negative bias, prejudice and harassment often went unaddressed. They saw the teaching staff both as key allies in confronting this,

whilst simultaneously recognising that faculty often didn't always have the knowledge, experience or confidence adequately to do so. In fact, the students agreed that they had a lot more expertise in relation to queer identity than many of the adults in the school.

The Action

Three students volunteered to run workshops for faculty on the subject of LGBTQIA+ identity in the classroom. We agreed to the following parameters for the workshops:

- The workshops were run in the form of discussion fora;
- Each student nominated a member of faculty to act as their buddy, whose role was to provide the student with advice and guidance about running the workshop and be available to intercede if the discussion went off track;
- In collaboration with their buddy, each student prepared a set of discussion topics which they would present to the assembled faculty. The students' role was to facilitate the discussion and offer their input and expertise;
- I remained absent from the discussion groups to afford the students a heightened experience of their own agency;
- The workshops were advertised to faculty across a range of time slots and they were invited to register. A limit of 12 faculty members per workshop was established;
- The students were provided with a list of registered faculty before the date of their workshop.

The voluntary nature of the workshops was vital to the students. They were acutely aware of the fact that they are part of a community that is considered to be the epicentre of Christchurch conservatism, and that positioning themselves in the expert role was already a significant departure from the norms of the school's culture. Thirty-two members of the teaching faculty attended a workshop. The school's executive principal also attended.

For each workshop, discussion points were established on the broader exhortation to encourage faculty to act deliberately and visibly. The discussion cues presented the following general themes:

- Leaning in to difficult conversations, avoiding the silencing of LGBTQIA+ topics that arise;
- Using inclusive language and discourse;
- Attending to bullying by stealth: proxy questioning that exposes vulnerable individuals;
- Affirming diverse sexual orientations and gender identities;
- Respecting privacy of students' queer identity, including in relation to their families;
- Deliberately modelling acceptance;
- Developing an inclusive curriculum;
- Paying attention to the 'vibe';
- It's okay to get it wrong, an effort will be recognised.

Data Collection

Data were collected in four forms. I maintained field notes throughout the development and implementation phases of the student action, a colleague attended all the student-run workshops and kept notes on the key ideas and discussions, I spoke to each of the students' workshop buddies, and I filmed a comprehensive 1:1 interview with each student facilitator subsequent to the completion of the workshop series. Anecdotal feedback received from participants also informed some of my broader conclusions.

Data Analysis

All the data I collected for this action research project was qualitative. I used an inductive approach to formulating conclusions that was informed by Grounded Theory. At each stage of the data collection process, I transcribed, coded, analysed and refined my conclusions, each time selecting codes and focussing questions informed by the themes emerging in the prior analysis. As a result of this iterative process, the tag codes developed from a larger set that delineated a wide range of themes to a small set

that concentrated on three themes of *status*, *locus of control*, and *franchise*. I coded the transcripts of the final interviews against categories that formed subsets of those three themes.

During the data collection process, I paid close attention to the fact that this research had as its focus the changes in their sense of *franchise* experienced by the students. This focus required particular discipline because the workshop project also had a significant secondary intended impact, which was outside the scope of this action research project. While the students were attempting to affect the culture of the school in relation to queer identity, this research was attempting to affect the students themselves. As tempting as it was, no attempt was made to measure the impact of the workshops on faculty.

To ensure the rigour of the data collected, I polyangulated through the use of multiple sources and types of data retrieval. These ranged from third-party observation, researcher note-taking, informal discussion and the recording and transcription of extended 1:1 interviews with all three students. This approach to data gathering and analysis enabled depth and nuance in the insights derived from the research project. The freedom the students had to answer in the extended discussion in their own terms also added credibility to the data derived from these conversations.

Limitations to the validity of the data come from three distinct vectors:

- The possibility that the close relational proximity of the students to me as the interviewer and project leader may have influenced their answers. They may have adjusted their responses in the discussion to offer what they believed I wanted to hear from them;
- The $n=3$ size of the sample group;
- The absence of any quantitative data to use as a reference point.

To guard against the incidence of confirmation bias in my thematic analysis I employed an additional code when analysing the final transcripts to capture parts of the students' narrative that might have contradicted the conclusions I was looking for. This is noted below.

Embracing the now, I also ingested the raw data of the final interviews into the Large Language Model of Chat GPT (Version 4) and instructed it to perform a range of keyword and thematic analysis tasks. The themes it discerned were strikingly similar to those which I extracted through the recursive data coding practice. The reassuring results of this exercise are included as an appendix to this report.

Discussion of Findings

This project gave students and teachers the opportunity to explore the subject of LGBTQIA+ identity in the context of our single-gender secondary school. The goal was materially to enfranchise these students through a process that inverted the usual school power dynamic between teachers and students, and supported the students to engage in direct action in affirmation of their own queer identity. The project revealed a profound shift in the self-perception of all participants, in ways which extended well beyond its intended effect. The recursive approach to data collection and analysis also threw up unexpected precursors to this. The revelation that the participants were primarily concerned with the impact of their queer identity on their social status led to an even stronger affirmation of the decision to shift the locus of control during this project in their direction. The outcome of this action was so significant to the students that they were caused to recognise a former level of disenfranchisement that had not previously been apparent to them.

Status

Status Risk

The students who delivered the workshops to faculty spoke in chorus about their concern about the impact on their status of being seen as inhabiting a queer identity. One student said, “I think that other people, especially older people, probably especially older men, view that as an inferior aspect of myself.” This particular concern about the possible harm to their status in the eyes of *older people* was unexpected to me. Another student added, “I think when you kind of come out as gay, especially in early phases, you kind of think that you've lost a lot of your inherent respectability.” The implication of this status risk was

that queer students typically harboured a low self-image that exempted them from the affirmation their school community otherwise affords them. This suggests to me that the invisibility of their queer identity in heteronormative cultures may lead to their discounting praise, recognition and acknowledgement on the basis of the students' misapprehensions about the faculties perception of queerness, as indicated by another student "Everyone who I've talked to has reinforced in the fact that coming out as gay reduces you in some capacity in the eyes of, especially, adults." Consequently, queer students will often compartmentalise their identity. One student shared, "Before coming into this, I did not really feel like my identity mattered within a school space. Like, previously, I'd felt like they were quite separate."

This fragile situation strongly reinforces the sensitivity of queer students to the words and actions of faculty around the subject of LGBTQIA+ identity. This project, by placing the students in a high-status position in relation to faculty, allowed the students to demonstrate their expertise and competence. They adopted the position of the educator. It follows that this upending of the typical power dynamic meant that the students were protected from the risk that faculty, who are typically inexperienced in the domain of queer identity and representation, could inadvertently undermine the queer students' identity. All three students believed that their queer identity would compromise their other positive attributes in the eyes of faculty.

Status Repair

The students' surprise at the degree to which the teachers were interested in learning about the lived experience of queer students was a strong theme. "They genuinely wanted my opinion on something.," offered one student. "The teachers asking questions of you, as opposed to the other way around, does kind of show a certain level of, like, respect." Another student noted that the locus of control was an important factor for them: "I think how your status changes depends on how those aspects of yourself are revealed. Like for our workshop, where I was in the highest status position, that revelation was quite empowering for me. And put me in a really positive space." I note that this particular

constructive response may have been further supported by the fact that faculty attended these workshops of their own volition.

There are clear implications that follow from these observations. The positive effect on the students' sense of their own efficacy of placing them in a position of high status is very likely to be generalisable. I am eager to explore how students from other groups in the school might also benefit from engaging with faculty in similar ways.

Locus of Control

The inherent shift in the locus of control that having students run teacher development had a significant empowering effect on the students. One student showed some empathy in this respect, "I know that teachers are probably just as just as, kind of, as nervous to be there as I was, because it's a position that they're not really put in." Another student acknowledged that "it was just an inversion of the normal kind of classroom experiences."

It was particularly striking to me to note that the students also acknowledged the courage and spirit of shared endeavour embodied by the teachers who attended the workshops. One student shared, "Creating the spaces to allow people who want to influence change, to be a part of that change, rather than them feeling like they need to be swept up in the norms of Christ's College has been really important." Whilst this shift in the locus of control was intended to strengthen the safety of the students, the student workshop leaders very quickly transcended that by taking into consideration the motivations of the faculty in being there.

Franchise

Explaining to a minority who has never experienced being part of the "norm," even within one's own family, what it feels like to be enfranchised is next to impossible. In the spirit of the inverse, their experience came to me to read like the opposite of the aphorism: You *don't know what you've got until it's gone*. These queer students *didn't know what they didn't have until they discovered it*. One student

revealed, “It made me realise that my identity and my comfort within the spaces that I am being made to exist is vitally important.” They also went on to note that the experience also promoted their own development: “It was very affirmative, but also probably pushed me along a little bit. That's the first time I've ever been in a position of knowledge in terms of gay things.”

The students were consistently surprised at the impact the project had on faculty. “The extent to which what I had to say was listened to and was taken in was discussed outside of the workshop surprised me.”

“Anointed Leaders”

The queer students in this project noticed that their status shifted in the school community. All three students observed that faculty now related differently to them. They noted that members of faculty, notably including the senior leadership of the school, now greeted them by name. They noticed that they were now able to enter into informal conversations with a range of different teachers. This was likened to what they have observed between faculty and sports people and prefects: “I think one of the things that the “anointed leaders” get in a school is, to some extent, an opportunity to get into a conversation with the adults.”

Conclusion

The teacher workshop series devised and delivered by members of the LGBTQIA+ student group moved our school towards a more nuanced appreciation of its responsibilities to its queer students. As straightforward as it sounds, these students simply taking the status risk of showing up as their authentic selves served to demonstrate why it is important to embrace our students’ diverse identities. This particular action, where the students took the lead, achieved an impact that went far beyond the tokenism that beleaguers many such projects. This, by contrast, was authentic and present.

The impetus for this entire project came from my intuition that true cultural change will occur in organisations when those for whom it is most needed take the lead. Boys’ schools famously provide their

students with a complex array of carefully calibrated leadership roles designed to aid their development into young leaders. The students involved in this project mirrored this approach, and created a place for themselves as leaders in the development of the school's cultural conversation. In doing this they truly gained status within the school and their actions since have proven this.

“So many different teachers have told me, “Oh, you did, you did so well. That was amazing.” I've heard about it from three or four other people.”

Following this project, these students applied for, and gained, significant prefect and leadership roles in the school. They have continued their LGBTQIA+ advocacy work, including sharing the delivery of an assembly speech which elevated the status of queer old boys, challenged some of the queer-phobic norms in the present student population, offered support to their queer peers and presented a vision for the future of the school where diversity in gender and sexuality will no longer present a status risk to students. The commentary after this event framed the students as “courageous.” Whilst this was undoubtedly true, focusing on that also misses the larger point. These students were pulling the LGBTQIA+ seat up to the table, reminding the school of our ongoing existence and no longer settling for silence as a response. For the first time in Christ's College's 173-year history, queer students spoke in public for themselves.

Reflection

The most striking finding for me that arose from this project was the profound nature of the students' perception of the risk to their status that their queer identity entailed. Undiscovered by this study is the extent of the impact on this, not only in respect of the high incidence of negative mental health statistics around LGBTQIA+ young people, but in respect of the extent to which they may withhold themselves from positions of status or esteem. Their lack of franchise may lead to their withdrawal from many facets of school life. In light of this, it seems unlikely to be a coincidence that all seven current members of our QSA group were also members of my English extension tutorial group and that QSA students comprised over 50% of our successful University Scholarship candidates.

Another matter that I often reflect on when working with LGBTQIA+ students is that in the majority of cases, these young people do not share their differing identity with their family. This fact amplifies the role of school in the lives of queer people because it is to school that they are most likely to turn as they embark on their journey of self-knowledge. The messages their school sends them about who they are will have lifelong implications, we simply cannot afford to leave these unspoken, expecting the students to infer the nature of our support for them. As the findings of this project suggest, if we do that, in our silence they will infer that we disapprove of them and keep silent. In this they lose access to the affirmation of themselves that they are entitled to from their school, moreover, we miss out on their fulfilling their full potential with us. How many boys' schools like ours have a sector of their population of up to 25% keeping their endeavours on a low light?

In the words of one of the students, "It'll be a big memory, I guess, knowing that I did something."

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Appendices

Chat GPT Summary

From the text, it appears that the student gained several things from the experience:

- The opportunity to discuss their experiences as a gay person with their teachers and promote greater understanding of LGBTQ+ issues in the school community.
- A sense of affirmation and validation from being able to share their perspective and ideas with teachers, and the feeling that their opinions were respected and valued.
- A greater awareness of the impact that teachers can have on students' lives, both positively and negatively.
- The chance to participate in a personal conversation with teachers, and to hear their opinions and perspectives on LGBTQ+ issues.
- A feeling of empowerment and a desire to become more involved in LGBTQ+ organizations and activities in the future.
- Improved relationships with some teachers, who may now have a better understanding of the student's experiences and perspectives.