

Article

“Shattering” Allyship: Affect, Fragmentation, and the Remaking of Pride in Schools

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Abstract

This article examines how LGBTQ+ allyship is made, felt, and negotiated within a secondary school workshop using creative, participatory methods. Drawing on affect theory (see Sara Ahmed) and feminist new materialist scholarship (see Barad, Renold, among others), the paper analyses a collaborative collage activity centered on Pride flags and symbolic materials. Rather than treating allyship as a fixed identity or a knowledge-based achievement, the study explores how it emerges relationally through encounters with materials, symbols, bodies, and digital technologies. Through close analysis of moments of uncertainty, affective attachment, cutting and shattering of symbols, and the collective naming of the final artwork, the article traces how not-knowing, pleasure, confusion, and togetherness function as generative forces for allyship. The workshop is framed as a propositional research-creation space in which phones, Google searches, bunting, scissors, and book references intra-act with young peoples’ lived experiences, redistributing epistemic authority and unsettling school-based expectations of correct knowledge. The findings contribute to existing research on LGBTQ+ inclusion and allyship in schools by shifting focus from identity labels and institutional frameworks toward the affective, material, and speculative processes through which allyship is assembled in the moment. In doing so, the paper offers an alternative conceptualisation of allyship as relational practice rather than static position, with implications for creative pedagogy and inclusive educational research.

Keywords: allyship; affect; research-creation

1. Introducing “Shatter Me”

In a school conference room in South Wales, three girls reached for a string of Pride bunting laid out across a white table. They concocted a plan and began to cut. The table filled with colour and conversation as scissors moved through familiar flags. Phones appeared alongside the paper: images searched, meanings checked, and uncertainties voiced.

This moment became “Shatter Me” (Figure 1)¹, a collage assembled by Lauren, Kate, and Becky during a creative workshop exploring gender, sexuality, and allyship. Working with the bunting as material rather than just symbol, the girls reconfigured its pieces as they talked. The process unfolded without a plan, shaped instead by curiosity, hesitation, and negotiation, allyship taking shape through hands, materials, screens, and shared uncertainty; made, unsettled, and made again.

In this article, I map how this act of creative destruction unsettled fixed meanings of LGBTQ+ inclusion and opened up new possibilities for allyship in schools. While Pride, inclusion, and allyship are closely related within school contexts, this paper focuses specifically on allyship; not as a stable identity or a tick-box school intervention, but as



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a contingent, material-discursive practice: felt, made, broken, and remade. Drawing on feminist new materialist thinking (Renold, Osgood, Zarabadi, Coleman, Pasley, among others), affect theory (Ahmed), and queer pedagogical insights, I position “Shatter Me” as both a product and process of post-qualitative research with young people; an example of what happens when we allow thinking and feeling to coalesce through art-making, uncertainty, and play.



Figure 1. “Shatter Me”. A collage of Pride flags cut up and rearranged into an abstract shape.

What does it mean to shatter the symbols of Pride? Not as rejection, but as inquiry? What kinds of knowledge become possible when young people are invited not to represent, but to reassemble? This paper explores how practices of allyship might be imagined not as linear progress or institutional compliance, but as moments of rupture, friction, and hopeful reconfiguration.

2. Allyship in Schools

The concept of allyship has gained traction across educational research as schools have sought to respond to the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ young people and promote inclusion. At its broadest, allyship refers to actions taken by individuals or groups to support the rights and wellbeing of marginalised people, often involving advocacy, intervention, and the redistribution of power (Jones 2015; Kivel 2007). Within school contexts, however, allyship has been conceptualised in multiple ways, most commonly as a set of institutional practices, professional roles, or individual commitments (Broido 2000; Reason et al. 2005). While these approaches have been crucial in establishing allyship as a legitimate focus within education, they tend to privilege relatively stable and recognisable forms of support (Formby 2015; Mayo 2014).

One prominent strand of research focuses on institutional mechanisms associated with inclusive school climates (Kosciw et al. 2022; Stonewall 2017). Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), Pride groups, and similar student clubs are among the most extensively studied examples. Participation in GSAs has been linked to enhanced academic engagement, reduced disaffection, and improved school belonging for LGBTQ+ students (Kosciw et al. 2013; Marx and Kettrey 2016; Toomey et al. 2011), particularly where young people take on leadership roles and are supported by responsive advisors and peers (Griffin et al. 2004; Russell et al. 2009). Comparable findings emerge from UK-based research on Pride Groups, where such spaces are associated with emotional wellbeing and broader inclusion, while also revealing tensions around membership, visibility, and the negotiation of safety (Formby

2017; DePalma and Atkinson 2009). In this body of work, allyship is largely understood as something facilitated through structured, collective spaces (Marx and Kettrey 2016; Poteat et al. 2013).

A related body of literature shifts attention to the role of educators and school staff in enacting allyship. Studies of teachers and counsellors highlight practices such as creating safe spaces, establishing support networks, promoting cultural competency, and advocating for systemic change, even within challenging sociopolitical contexts (Allen 2003; Meyer 2009; Payne and Smith 2014). Research also explores how educators conceptualise allyship, identifying tensions between framing it as a moral obligation or as a political act, as well as barriers that arise when staff avoid explicit LGBTQ+ supportive practices due to fears of conflict or misunderstanding (DePalma and Atkinson 2009; Rasmussen 2010). While this work provides important insight into the conditions that enable or constrain allyship, it tends to centre adult perspectives and institutional responsibilities.

Alongside these institutional and role-based approaches, some scholarship conceptualises allyship as a form of individual development or identity. Within this framing, allyship—be it for LGBTQ+, racial, or other marginalised identities—is understood as something that is cultivated over time through reflection, learning, and accountability, rather than achieved through discrete interventions (Formby 2017; Jones 2015). However, critiques of ally identity models caution against treating allyship as a stable or attainable endpoint, emphasising instead its ongoing, uneven, and context-dependent nature (Edwards 2006; Kivel 2007). Such critiques draw attention to the limitations of framing allyship as a personal attribute, even when this attribute is understood as developmental (Accapadi 2007; Patton and Bondi 2015).

Taken together, these strands of literature have been vital in legitimising allyship within educational research and practice. However, they also share a tendency to locate allyship within relatively fixed structures, roles, or identities (Rasmussen 2006; Talburt 2004). As a result, less attention has been paid to how allyship is negotiated in the moment, particularly among young people themselves (Bragg et al. 2018; Kjaran 2017), foregrounding what allyship is or should be, rather than how it is felt and co-produced through everyday interactions. Emerging post-qualitative and feminist new materialist scholarship in gender and sexualities education offers a different set of sensibilities, foregrounding affective intensities, material encounters, and collective world-making as constitutive of social life (Coleman and Osgood 2026; Pasley 2022; Renold 2018, 2019, 2024a, 2024b, 2025; Renold and Ringrose 2019; Truman 2022, 2026; Zarabadi 2023). While these approaches have begun to reshape how educational practices are understood, they have rarely been brought explicitly to the study of LGBTQ+ allyship in schools. Addressing this gap, the present paper attends to the affective, material, and collaborative processes through which allyship is made and remade in situ.

3. Research Context

This paper draws on data from my doctoral study, which explored the construction of gender and sexuality in school settings, in the context of the new Relationships and Sexuality Education curriculum in Wales (Welsh Government 2022). Conducted over eighteen months at a single school site, nine participants were invited to take part in workshops on the theme of Relationships and Sexuality, following the implementation of the new curriculum in Wales. These participants had initially expressed an interest in the project after information booklets were disseminated at the school, and later organised themselves into friendship focus groups. Early workshops began with a discussion of participants' experiences of the new RSE curriculum; given the breadth of the curriculum, discussions around consent, menstruation, safe spaces, and more emerged. At the same

time, art materials (clay, felt pens, coloured paper, scissors, wooden mannequins) were available to the participants, and they were encouraged to engage with themes and activities of their choice and in ways to which they were most drawn. As discussed below, this approach—inviting participants to propose activities and themes—allows them to express and make their worlds without expectation of what those worlds *should* look like.

Lauren, Kate, and Becky were aged 13 to 14; Lauren and Becky identified as heterosexual, and Kate identified as a lesbian. Throughout the project, they proposed different activities, usually focusing on the theme of allyship. A prideful octopus and a tampon-box toilet block were other examples of their creative work. In this workshop, Lauren, Kate, and Becky identified LGBTQ+ flag bunting as a stimulus for creative activity, openly discussing Kate's sexuality and Lauren and Becky's support for her. The girls suggested cutting up the flags to create a new Pride flag based on allyship and togetherness, and named "Shatter Me", after a young adult book series (Mafi 2011).

4. Creative Methods and Research-Creation

Creative methods have long been recognised as particularly conducive to participatory and propositional research approaches, offering ways for both participants and researchers to unsettle and rework dominant norms of qualitative inquiry (Muñoz 2009; Hickey-Moody 2013). Within research with young people, participatory approaches frequently draw on creative techniques such as diary- and story-writing, spider diagrams, and visual or arts-based activities, designed to work with young people's developing skills and modes of expression (Punch 2002; Barker and Weller 2003). However, the use of such methods is not without tension. While often framed as inviting playfulness and creativity, approaches that lean too heavily on "play" can risk disengaging adolescents who experience them as infantilising or misaligned with their sense of self (Pimlott-Wilson 2012).

Rather than assuming creative methods are inherently engaging, research suggests their value lies in how they reconfigure the research encounter itself. Creative approaches have been shown to support young people's comfort within unfamiliar research settings (Prosser and Burke 2011; Pimlott-Wilson 2012), facilitate rapport between participants and researchers (Punch 2002; Pink 2007; Pimlott-Wilson 2012; Del Corral et al. 2014; Joy and Numer 2017), and enable more collaborative and less hierarchical research relationships (Kindon et al. 2007). For researchers, these methods also generate forms of data that are attuned to complexity, offering textured ways of engaging with abstract, affective, or difficult-to-articulate phenomena, including relationships, sexuality, and belonging (Kindon et al. 2007; Bowling et al. 2018).

Arts- and craft-based activities, in particular, have been used to support forms of expression that move beyond the limits of verbal articulation (Pimlott-Wilson 2012). Such methods are especially valuable when working with topics that are abstract, contested, or shaped by contradictory cultural discourses. Barker et al. (2012), for example, found that participants' experiences of polyamory and non-monogamy were difficult to articulate within dominant narratives of fidelity and intimacy, but could be expressed more readily through illustration. Pimlott-Wilson's (2012) use of rainbows and clouds to explore young people's positive and negative feelings further illustrates how material forms can hold emotional complexity without requiring immediate resolution.

While many creative approaches position art-making primarily as a means of representing research findings, research-creation shifts the emphasis toward the empirical and theoretical practice of making itself (Springgay and Truman 2019). In doing so, it explicitly troubles what counts as data, foregrounding creation as a mode of inquiry rather than a step toward interpretation (Coleman and Osgood 2026; Renold 2018, 2019, 2024a, 2024b, 2025; Renold and Ringrose 2019; Renold et al. 2021; Truman 2022). Through research-creation,

researchers are called to empirically attune (Stewart 2014, 2017) to young people's experiences as they unfold, opening spaces in which "new ways of knowing and methods of doing. . . education might flow" (Stewart 2014, 2017; Renold et al. 2021, p. 541).

Creative methods also offer particular ethical and pedagogical affordances. Following Renold et al.'s work on response-able and pARTicipatory research (2021, 2022), attention was given to the relational conditions of the workshop, including trust, responsiveness, and the co-construction of a space in which participants could move between certainty and not-knowing. In this sense, the ethical value of the approach lies not only in facilitating participation, but in enabling young people to encounter difference, uncertainty, and one another through collaborative, reflexive, and open-ended processes.

Embracing this relationality, this research comprised propositional methods. Propositions are not intended as a set of directions or rules, but as invitations: proposals of what the research might become (Springgay and Truman 2019). Rather than moving participants toward predetermined outcomes, propositional methods make space for emergence, allowing participants to express and make their worlds without expectation of what those worlds should look like. In this sense, participants do not simply respond to research activities and instructions; they step into the research apparatus itself (Barad 2007), shaping what becomes possible through their engagements with materials, ideas, and one another. This approach requires a willingness to reach into mess, chaos, and uncertainty, to stay with it (Haraway 2016) rather than resolve it, and to embrace the speculative as a legitimate mode of knowing and inquiry (Pasley 2022).

In practice, this meant that the methods for this project were not fixed in advance, nor did they follow a linear sequence. Instead, each workshop was oriented around a loose collection of materials and stimuli placed in the room. Among them, a string of Pride bunting, books, pins, a Welsh flag, and an assortment of craft materials such as pipe cleaners, coloured paper, pens, and clay. Participants were free to move between materials, to work individually or collectively, to talk, to make, to pause, or to abandon an idea altogether; they were made available as things to be picked up, ignored, rearranged, questioned, or transformed.

The stimuli, then, functioned as an entry point; material actants whose affective energies shaped both the direction of the research and the forms of allyship that took shape in that room at that time, rather than simply prompts to be interpreted or tasks to be completed. In this sense, allyship was not introduced as a concept to be understood, nor was there any expectation that the final collage should communicate a coherent vision. What mattered was what the making *did*; the workshop did not use creativity to reinforce an already-defined understanding of allyship, but to trouble and recompose it in real time.

Crucially, this fluidity acted as a reorientation of traditional methodology, rather than a rejection or withdrawal of it. The absence of prescribed outcomes foregrounded relational responsiveness and so the direction of each session emerged through the intra-actions (Barad 2007) of bodies, materials, conversations, and affects in the room. What mattered was not whether participants engaged with the "intended" stimulus or activity, but how particular materials came to matter in that moment, and what they enabled participants to do, feel, or imagine.

Further, this analysis deliberately resists representational readings of the collage or reductive accounts of what the girls "learned." Instead, it draws on affect theory and feminist new materialism to attend to what happened in the workshop: how meanings, relations, and possibilities emerged through entanglement. This positioning reflects a commitment to research-creation and propositional methodologies, which foreground process over product and remain open to uncertainty (Springgay and Truman 2019; Renold 2018, 2024a; Renold and Ringrose 2019).

I, too, was involved in these research intra-actions. I was seated at the same table, observing, responding, and making decisions about when to speak and when to remain silent. When Lauren asked to use her phone and Google, my “yes” authorised a shift in epistemic practice. When the scissors first moved through the flags, I ignored a brief flicker of uncertainty and chose not to halt the action. These minor decisions were part of the research moment, the “Shatter Me” experience. The research encounter was shaped as much by what I withheld as by what I introduced; I was “becoming-researcher” (St. Pierre 2011), entangled in the apparatus (Barad 2007) I had helped to assemble.

By focusing on affective intensities and intra-action (see below), the article moves away from evaluative frameworks that seek to measure inclusion or allyship as outcomes. Such frameworks risk reproducing the very norms they aim to challenge, privileging legibility, coherence, and certainty. In contrast, affect and new materialism offer tools for thinking allyship as always in process, contingent, relational, and responsive to the specificities of context.

5. Fragmented Analysis, Barad, and Data Glow

This article does not follow a linear or exhaustive model of qualitative analysis. Instead, it works with what MacLure (2013) describes as “data that glow”: moments that arrest attention, generate curiosity, and exert a kind of analytic pull. The three fragments that structure this paper emerged through sustained engagement with the research materials, where certain encounters and material arrangements lingered, resurfaced, and demanded further thought. In this sense, selection was governed by intensity, resonance, and the capacity of moments to open up questions about allyship as it is lived and made. Fieldnotes, transcripts, and photographs were revisited, each shaping how the other could be seen and understood. This back-and-forth movement allowed particular scenes to be read as events in which bodies, objects, histories, and feelings come together in the ongoing production of meaning.

This analytic orientation is further informed by concepts drawn from posthumanist and feminist scholarship. Concepts such as intra-action and entanglement (Barad 2007) foreground how subjects, objects, and meanings do not pre-exist their relations, but emerge through them. A material-discursive approach insists that meaning and matter are always co-constituted, and the notion of apparatus draws attention to the specific configurations of research material-discursive practices that are “constitutive of the phenomena” they produce (Barad 2007, pp. 140–46). These concepts attune the analysis to the relational, affective, and material dynamics through which allyship takes shape in the workshop encounters.

The decision to present the analysis through three fragments reflects this methodological orientation. Each fragment offers a partial and situated account of allyship in the making, rather than contributing to a single, unified argument. They are not intended to build cumulatively towards closure, but to work alongside one another, mapping different dimensions of allyship as a relational and material practice. Rather than smoothing data into coherence, the analysis seeks to preserve some of its messiness and indeterminacy. Read together, they foreground the uneven, contingent, and often ambiguous ways in which allyship emerges through interaction; sites where labour, uncertainty, and the relational work of allyship become momentarily perceptible. What glows is allyship in the making: hesitant, partial, and shaped through ongoing adjustment. The fragments therefore function less as evidence of pre-existing categories, and more as analytic provocations that invite attention to the textures of practice: moments of hesitation, adjustment, misrecognition, and connection.

This fragmented mode of analysis also mirrors the aesthetic and relational logic of “Shatter Me” itself. As a collage composed through cutting and careful reorientation, the

artwork resists coherence while still holding elements in relation. The analytic fragments follow a similar orientation, remaining with partial connections, uneven proximities, and moments that do not fully resolve. Fragmentation thus acts as a methodological and conceptual commitment that echoes the practices unfolding in the workshop.

The three fragments that follow map different, interconnected moments from the workshop, each illuminating a distinct dimension of allyship as it emerges through creative practice. Fragment One attends to knowing and not-knowing, allyship and knowledge circulating in fragments rather than settling into fixed definition; Fragment Two focuses on the collage as a site where allyship was materially enacted, the flags participating in shaping how difference was encountered and negotiated; and Fragment Three turns to the collaborative and ongoing nature of allyship-in-motion. Taken together, these fragments offer a set of situated encounters through which allyship can be understood as ongoing, partial, and in motion.

6. Fragment 1, or Uncertain Symbols: Knowing and Not-Knowing

The moment “Shatter Me” came into being was marked by hesitation. As the Pride bunting was spread across the table, its colours bright against the white surface, the girls’ first engagements with the flags were shaped by uncertainty. Lauren’s initial question - “Can you tell me every single one? Because I don’t know many” - foregrounded a sense of not-knowing that lingered throughout the session. Kate echoed this almost immediately: “Why are there so many?” It would be easy to interpret these responses as dismissive; instead, they can be read as affectively charged responses to an encounter with a plethora of symbols that resisted easy categorisation or mastery. The flags themselves represented categories, but without recognition or consensus from their audience, they were rendered meaningless.

Their uncertainty was significant. Within school contexts, LGBTQ+ inclusion is often framed through discourses of awareness and knowledge: learning the right terms, recognising the right symbols, “keeping up.” Yet, as Kate later reflected, this expectation can itself be overwhelming: “I just don’t want to be pressured to learn all the flags. . . if someone asked me to name all the flags, I would panic a bit.” Here, the weight of inclusion becomes tangible and affective. For a young lesbian like Kate, inclusion is not simply a matter of recognition or pride; it carries the burden of representational competence. This did not seem to be the case in this group, with these friends, who seemed to enjoy the process of knowledge-making alongside their queer friend. However, Kate seems to fear being positioned as someone who *should know*, who *should be fluent* in the expanding lexicon of identity, and the possibility of not knowing risks becoming a failure of authenticity. This potentially exposes how inclusion discourses can re-inscribe pressure, particularly for those they claim to affirm. The expectation to “know all the flags” transforms symbols of diversity into tests of legitimacy, signalling how allyship, when framed primarily as knowledge acquisition, can produce anxiety and self-surveillance.

The fluid, propositional character of the workshop created conditions in which not-knowing did not signal failure. There was no expectation that the girls arrive equipped with the “right” knowledge, nor that the materials on the table be handled in prescribed ways. Instead, the space unfolded through their movements and decisions. As the cutting began and questions surfaced about unfamiliar flags, Lauren paused and asked, “can I Google it?” The request to take out her phone, followed by my affirmative response, reconfigured the apparatus of the research encounter (Barad 2007). The workshop was not bound by the usual rules of classroom knowledge production, in which the phone might represent an interruption; it became part of it. Her phone and Google functioned as an additional material-discursive participant within the unfolding inquiry; another

resource through which meaning was accessed and made. Rather than positioning me as the authority, or a curriculum as the source of legitimate knowledge, understanding was pursued otherwise. The girls moved between bunting fragments and search results, between tactile experimentation and digital inquiry.

Importantly, Googling was not treated as evidence that participants should have known more in advance. Instead, it became a way of working through uncertainty in real time. Definitions were read aloud, debated, sometimes accepted, sometimes shrugged off. Knowledge did not precede participation; it emerged through these intra-actions of voices, materials, and digital traces. In this sense, the inclusion of phones and online searching reimaged the research space as distinct from the evaluative priorities of schooling, a space where not-knowing was generative.

As Lauren moved between the bunting and her phone, she tentatively matched images on screen to fragments on the table, talking her way through the symbols: “That’s bisexual, that’s lesbian, that’s queer, that’s transgender. Did they make a new one? I think this one is like that one. . . that one might be asexual.” Becky followed with recognition rather than certainty: “I’ve seen that one before.” Knowledge circulated in fragments rather than settling into fixed definitions. This mode of engagement aligns with research-creation approaches that privilege emergence over resolution, and attunement over mastery (Coleman and Osgood 2026; Renold 2018, 2019, 2024a, 2024b, 2025; Renold and Ringrose 2019; Renold et al. 2021; Springgay and Truman 2019; Truman 2022). The value and glow (MacLure 2013) of the moment lay not in arriving at the “right” answer, but in the collective work of wondering.

7. Fragment 2, or Shattering Flags: Reconfiguring Pride and Allyship

The physical act of cutting the flags intensified these dynamics. Scissors moved through stripes and chevrons, breaking apart symbols that are often treated as coherent and fixed. This act carried risk. Cutting Pride flags could be read as violent, a desecration of symbols of visibility and resistance. In other school contexts, such an act might have been halted, disciplined, or interpreted as disrespectful. Pride symbols carry histories of struggle and reverence. That the cutting was permitted and encouraged speaks to the particular relational and institutional conditions of this workshop. The generative nature of “Shatter Me” depended on trust, on the absence of immediate correction, and on a shared sense that experimentation would not be punished. As Becky remarked while arranging pieces, “It’s wonky. That’s okay.” Kate responded playfully, “Did you want it to be straight?” a joke that simultaneously acknowledged heteronormativity and refused it. The wonkiness, the riskiness, was constitutive of “Shatter Me” and its becoming.

Kate had reached for the lesbian flag: “I love that one! Give me it!” Her attachment was immediate, claiming the flag not just a symbol but an affective object. As Ahmed (2004, 2006) suggests, emotions do not reside within subjects but circulate between bodies and things; they “stick” to objects through histories of struggle, recognition, and collective life. The lesbian flag carried that stickiness - pride, visibility, community - and Kate’s declaration registered the joy of encountering oneself in the work.

Yet moments later, the same flag was cut. Scissors pressed into card, the clean geometry of stripes fractured into angular shards. The cutting unsettled the idea that allyship must be preserved in its authorised forms. Allyship, here, was not enacted through careful display of recognisable emblems, but through their reworking. The pleasure of recognition coexisted with the thrill of alteration. Ahmed (2004, 2006) helps us understand how feeling accumulates and adheres to both symbols and the intensity of the cut itself. The act of slicing generated a surge of movement, anticipation, and risk. The flag was no longer held intact as a stable marker of identity but transformed mid-action.

If cutting was quick and charged, sticking was slower. Pieces hovered above the page before being placed. “Does that look right?” Lauren asked, holding a fragment at an angle. Glue was passed back and forth. Shards were rotated, shifted, sometimes lifted and re-positioned. Orientation became collaborative work; orientation as in literal placement, and as in the sustained movement and direction of bodies and objects (Ahmed 2004, 2006). Visually, “Shatter Me” gestures toward symmetry without fully achieving it. Shards extend outward and angles are slightly off, edges uneven. Becky later described the piece as “a bit of a mosaic. . . when they all fit together properly”, before adding that “together, probably they would be equal. And nobody’s like, the same.” Lauren reinforced this reading: “each bit is a little bit different, little bit wonky.” Difference, here, is not smoothed out or hierarchised, but held in relation, allowed to remain uneven and dynamic. In this moment, allyship emerged spatially, visually, and art-fully. Which colours sat centrally? Which fragments overlapped? Which remained visible at the edges? These decisions were not framed as political, yet they organised the affective geography of the page. Through the passing of glue, the slight adjustments of angle and proximity, and the collective gaze assessing the emerging composition, the girls assembled a shared orientation. In this sense, the collage was less a finished image than a record of relational and collaborative negotiation. Allyship materialised as ongoing adjustment, a practice of staying with one another in the act of arranging, in the midst of movement (Manning 2016).

The aesthetic of partial coherence also foregrounds the labour of allyship as it unfolded in the workshop. Allyship emerged as a collective practice of attending to difference: the slow, tentative acts of placing and reorienting; of noticing what sits where, what is obscured, or what is made visible; of how elements come to cohere. This was an allyship of staying with the demands and doing the work, together.

From this perspective, the methodological commitments of the study are constitutive of allyship, rather than separate from its enactment. Creative methods do not simply offer alternative ways of representing data, but create the conditions through which forms of relational engagement - such as allyship - come into being through practice and sense-making (Coleman and Osgood 2026; Hickey-Moody 2013; Pasley 2022; Renold 2018, 2019, 2024a, 2024b, 2025; Renold and Ringrose 2019; Truman 2022, 2026; Zarabadi 2023). In this workshop, the collage functioned as a site where allyship was materially enacted, the flags participating in shaping how difference was encountered and negotiated, their affective energies shaping the direction of inquiry.

The work of the flags extended beyond the table. As the girls cut and rearranged pieces, conversation drifted to lived experience. Kate shared a story about her brother painting his nails and being asked whether this meant he was gay. “He can do that if he wants. . . he just gets bored at home sometimes” she said, refusing the demand to categorise gender expression or link it directly to sexuality. This moment illustrates how allyship is entangled with everyday acts of interpretation. The material engagement with the flags opened space for broader reflections on normativity and difference, on unsettling and contesting assumptions, and resisting the impulse to police identity.

By staying with not-knowing, with panic, curiosity, misrecognition, and play, “Shatter Me” challenges dominant educational approaches to allyship that prioritise clarity, coherence, and correctness. Instead, it suggests that allyship may be cultivated through moments of uncertainty, where symbols are touched, questioned, and reassembled rather than simply learned. The flags prompted questions, uncertainties, and negotiations that might not have emerged through talk alone; they also redistributed authority, allowing knowledge to be co-produced through interaction with materials rather than delivered by an expert. At the same time, the flags carried histories and politics that could not be ignored; they are saturated with struggles for recognition, visibility, and rights. Cutting them apart does not

erase these histories, but it does refuse to treat them as fixed or complete. In the hands of the girls, the flags - and their allyship - became open to reconfiguration and reinterpretation. This provisionality is central to the form of allyship that emerged in the workshop, making visible allyship as labour, as an ongoing practice of engagement and support.

8. Fragment 3, or Doing-Allyship-With: Collective Affective Pedagogies

This section turns to how allyship emerged through the collective affective and material relations of the workshop itself. What matters in the “Shatter Me” workshop is not only that the girls engaged with Pride flags, but how they did so together. Rather than approaching allyship as a quality held by individuals, this analysis understands allyship as something that takes shape through collective practice. If allyship is often framed as standing beside or with someone, this workshop suggests a subtler formulation of doing-with. The collage was not assembled by allies acting on behalf of others, but by participants entangled in shared experimentation. Feminist new materialist approaches offer a way of attending to these moments without assuming stable subjects or pre-existing meanings. From this perspective, allyship does not reside in people alone, but is produced through the intra-action of bodies, materials, discourses, and affects (Barad 2007; Renold 2018). In the “Shatter Me” workshop, allyship emerged through what happened when girls, flags, scissors, phones, jokes, anxieties, and curiosities came into relation with one another.

The togetherness of this making extended beyond shared labour into shared voice, with the collective emergence of the title. As established, the title of the piece, “Shatter Me,” pays homage to the girls’ favourite book series (Mafi 2011), one full of crossings-out and fractured typography. When the girls invoked this series, they folded their extracurricular reading lives into the workshop space, entangling dystopian imaginaries with school-sanctioned allyship work.

“I think we’ve got to come up with a title for this piece as well,” I said.

“Shatter Me!” Lauren immediately shouted, the reference almost bursting out of her.

The next few seconds of the audio recording are unintelligible as the girls agreed, with much excitement, on the title: all speaking at once, “Shatter Me, oh my gosh! Yes!”

“It’s our favourite book series!” Becky’s voice broke through.

“Oh okay, you’re doing it because of the books?”

The unintelligible excitement aligned the girls’ voices affectively and culturally. The title crystallised not only the fragmented aesthetic of the collage, but the shared cultural terrain the girls inhabited beyond school. Their extracurricular reading lives, of dystopian romance, strikethrough typography, dangerous touch, folded into the workshop space and named the piece. The girls claimed the piece together, the title providing a unique form of ownership at which they had collectively arrived; a brief alignment that signalled the collective authorship of what had been made. The alignment was felt, and more than just audible: an affective entanglement of voice and feeling. Feelings of excitement, of their shared reading, of previous conversations, rushed into the moment, excitement bordering on incomprehension, the swell of affective claiming of their artwork.

This intertextual borrowing complicates any neat division between curricular and extracurricular worlds. The workshop did not exist in isolation from the girls’ cultural lives, but was permeated by them. The title, with its connotations of rupture and intensity, captured something of the affective charge of the session: the pleasure of recognition, the thrill of alteration, the collective reassembling of symbols. In invoking ‘Shatter Me’ (Mafi 2011), the girls named the process they had enacted as more than a breaking apart that destroys, as a shattering that makes reconfiguration possible.

Affect theory helps make sense of this shift. Ahmed's (2004, 2006, 2007) work on affective economies draws attention to how emotions circulate and attach to particular objects and figures. In school contexts, allyship is often bound up with feelings of moral responsibility, fear of offence, and the pressure to be visibly supportive. These affects can become heavy, producing what some participants described as panic or overwhelm. In the workshop, these circulating affects were not eliminated but redistributed. The collective acts - Googling, asking questions, cutting, sticking, designing, naming - allowed responsibility to be shared rather than individualised. These collective moments did not resolve into clear statements about identity or inclusion, nor should they have. In contrast to policy-led approaches to allyship which often emphasise visibility, clarity, and correct representation, the "Shatter Me" workshop foregrounded ambiguity. The girls did not aim to produce a "correct" flag or a legible message of support. Instead, they produced something speculative: a collage that held together familiarity and rupture, recognition and confusion.

Importantly, this speculative quality does not signal a lack of care. On the contrary, care was enacted through attentiveness: through checking meanings, through negotiating placements, through responding to one another's discomfort or enthusiasm. Allyship here was not an identity one could claim, but a practice one had to keep doing. It required affective, relational, and material work, and that work was ongoing.

Seen this way, the workshop functioned as a form of affective pedagogy; not because it transmitted knowledge about LGBTQ+ identities, but because it reorganised relations. The girls left having experienced allyship as something that happens in relation, through shared inquiry and material engagement. The collage itself remains unfinished in this sense: not a representation of allyship, but a map of its becoming.

9. Concluding Fragment, or Staying with the Shards: Propositional Allyship and Shatter-Pedagogy

"Shatter Me" does not resolve the question of allyship in schools. It does not offer clarity, closure, or a stable account of what allyship should look like. Instead, it leaves us with fragments: coloured shards of paper, half-formed understandings, moments of laughter and hesitation, and a collage that gestures toward coherence without ever quite achieving it. This section argues that this unfinished quality is not a limitation of the work, but its most generative contribution. This is not presented as a scalable model or a universally replicable intervention. Its significance lies in its propositional force. It asks what might shift in other classrooms, other corridors, other staff meetings, if allyship were approached less as compliance and more as collective re-making. This reframing speaks to existing work that has tended to situate allyship within institutional structures of role-based practices (Broido 2000; Reason et al. 2005; Kosciw et al. 2022; Stonewall 2017), shifting attention instead to how it is collectively negotiated in the moment.

This understanding sits uneasily alongside dominant educational approaches to LGBTQ+ inclusion, which often prioritise visibility, clarity, and correctness, and which have typically framed allyship through institutional mechanisms such as policies, programmes, and organised student groups. In such frameworks, allyship is something to be delivered through policies, displays, training sessions, or awareness days. While these interventions may offer important forms of recognition, they also risk producing allyship as something that can be ticked off, measured, or performed safely. This also echoes critiques of approaches that position allyship as a defined role of outcome, rather than an ongoing and situated practice. The "Shatter Me" workshop suggests a different possibility: one in which allyship is always provisional, always in the making.

This resistance is crucial. When allyship is framed as something to be mastered, it risks becoming exclusionary, rewarding those with confidence, cultural capital, or fluency in the “right” language, while marginalising those who are unsure, curious, or still learning. This reflects longstanding critiques of allyship as a developmental identity (Formby 2017; Jones 2015), where progress is measured against increasingly competent or recognisable forms of support. “Shatter Me” offers a counter-proposition: allyship is not something one is, but something one does-with. In doing so, it extends existing calls to understand allyship as relational and processual but also pushes further by showing how this work unfolds through affective and material engagements among young people themselves. It is enacted through relational labour: listening, checking, adjusting, and remaining open to being changed. It happens through bodies leaning in, hands cutting paper, phones lighting up with search results, and colours being rearranged on a table. The collage is a map of allyship becoming, a record of how allyship took shape in that room, at that time, through those relations. This is where the propositional force of “Shatter Me” lies. Rather than offering a model to be replicated, it offers a question: What might allyship become if we allowed it to remain unfinished? As Pasley (2022) and Springgay and Truman (2019) suggest, propositional research does not aim to provide answers or prescriptions. Instead, it opens up space for speculation, for imagining how things might be otherwise.

What emerges here is a tentative proposition for schooling: a shatter-pedagogy. Not a pedagogy of destruction, but one of opening and innovation. A pedagogy that allows matter—as in material, as in subjects—to be touched, questioned, cut, and rearranged. One that values process over product, relation over resolution, and uncertainty over mastery. In this pedagogy, allyship is cultivated through collective experimentation and affective engagement.

In the end, “Shatter Me” leaves us not with certainty, but with an invitation. In contrast to dominant framings of allyship as something to be implemented, performed, or achieved within schools, “Shatter Me” encourages us to slow down and pay attention to the small gestures that shift how relations are lived. To recognise allyship as something fragile and ongoing, something that must be continually remade. In a time when allyship is increasingly required to be visible, legible, and measurable, this work argues for something quieter and more tentative. Something that begins not with answers, but with a cut, a question, and a shared table strewn with colour.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

UK	United Kingdom
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, +

Note

- ¹ The title of the piece, “Shatter Me,” is a reference to a book series the girls read outside of school. In ‘Shatter Me’ (Mafi 2011), anyone who comes into contact with the protagonist’s skin will die. The novels are visually marked by crossings-out and fractured typography.

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