

HETERONORMATIVITY AND ITS EFFECT ON SCHOOL BELONGING:
A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF RECENT GENDER AND SEXUALITY DIVERSE

GRADUATES

A Dissertation

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the past, current, and future members of

Spectrum Gay-Straight Alliance

Thank you for inspiring me and for believing that you can be the change you wish to see

in the world.

Acknowledgements

To my husband, David. Completing a doctorate is not the ideal way to start our first years of marriage. Thank you for encouraging me to do it in the first place, seeing me through, and supporting my ambition. I could not have finished without your encouragement, patience, humor, foot massages, and sometimes force and coercion to get to work!

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The Dissertation Committee for Drexel University

certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Heteronormativity and its Effect on School Belonging: A Narrative Inquiry of Recent
Gender and Sexuality Diverse Graduates

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Abstract

Heteronormativity and its Effect on School Belonging: A Narrative Inquiry of Recent Gender and Sexuality Diverse Graduates

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Gender and sexuality diverse (GSD) high school students in the United States often feel alienated from their classmates due to heteronormative policies, curriculum, and climate, causing them to have higher rates of victimization, suicide and suicide ideation, failure to graduation, absenteeism, and drug use than their classmates. These students often cannot find representation in the curriculum or among the adults who work with them and often feel unsupported by their classmates and teachers. This study sought to determine, through the narratives of five recent GSD graduates, how heteronormativity affects GSD students and what supports can be put in place or strengthened to support GSD students at one central Pennsylvania high school.

Through a participatory/advocacy approach, this study gathered the experiences of four GSD graduates of a high school in central Pennsylvania through narrative interviews and focus groups. Through these interviews, the researcher developed an analysis of the school culture from the perspective of GSD students by collecting, identifying, and analyzing heteronormative school policies and interviewing administration to gauge the understanding of GSD student issues and the need for further training and professional development. Through coding, themes of safety, belonging, and self-esteem were identified and analyzed. Recommendations are given to help the school district, building administration, faculty, and Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) create a greater sense of school belonging for GSD and all students.

Student narratives illustrate the struggles that GSD students face, as well as their triumphs in finding a place to belong and gaining a sense of identity and confidence as students and young adults. Participants are further empowered in their ability to effect change in their alma mater.

Keywords: social sciences, education, central Pennsylvania, high school, LGBT students, GSD students, queer studies, narrative, Gay-Straight Alliances, professional development, bullying, victimization, school safety, school belonging

Chapter 1: Introduction

Gender and sexuality diverse (GSD) children and adolescents and the struggles they face in school have recently become frequent in news headlines. These stories recount issues students may have with a gendered dress code or bathroom policy, difficulty in starting a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), or traditions, such as graduation and prom, that involve heteronormative policies and customs. Many GSD students make news headlines regularly when they challenge heteronormative traditions that are often in place in high schools across the country.

In 2011, a journalism student approached me about helping her start a GSA after a discussion about a news article highlighting a local school's fight to start their own GSA, which had been denied by their school board and community. Two other students joined us and wrote a proposal to the school principal advocating for the club. Two of those students were participants in this study. In creating the club, the students decided that they wanted it first to be a safe place for GSD students and second a group to educate the student body and advocate for GSD people. The club has been very popular and active since its conception and has fulfilled its role as a safe place for students who often feel like outsiders and outcasts in the general student body.

When I began my tenure as the GSA adviser, I had no idea that the role would include: comforting crying students who did not think their parents would love them anymore if they came out; providing resources for students after they were kicked out of their homes or denied support from their parents because they were GSD; facilitating conversations about religion and helping students find new religious homes when they did not feel accepted in their own; matching students to sex education resources when the

school's sex education curriculum did not fulfill their needs; educating students about GSD history and current events, which were also absent from much of the curriculum; listening to students complain about teachers who did not stop homophobic comments; watching students feel excluded from their own yearbook or graduation because of gendered dress codes and encouraging and teaching them to advocate for themselves in these situations. I understood why students wanted our weekly club meetings to be a safe space, a time to socialize with other classmates without feeling judged. However, I also wondered if the club could do more to extend that safe space into classrooms and the school at large, as well as to their families and the community.

The lack of safety and belonging that GSD students feel in school can be avoided if school administration, faculty, and other students can understand the experiences of GSD students and how these experiences can lead to high risk behaviors and low student achievement. Through understanding, support systems can be put in place that will help all students, including GSD students, to succeed.

This study sought to share the experiences of GSD high school graduates as they revealed their experiences with homophobia, transphobia, and hetero- and cisgender-normative policies and traditions and the effect these policies had on their sense of school belonging and school achievement. This study also used these student experiences to identify how institutional supports such as GSAs and professional development of school staff can build a supportive atmosphere where GSD students thrive.

Problem Statement

While the effects of homophobia, bullying, and harassment of GSD students are well documented, little is known about the effects of heteronormative policies, or how supports like GSAs or teacher professional development can help.

Having a strong sense of school belonging is important to a student's success. High schools often enact heteronormative or gender-centered traditions and policies regarding gender and sexuality that intentionally or unintentionally deter GSD students from fully feeling a sense of belonging to their schools and among their peers. This lack of belonging can develop into serious problems for GSD students, including absenteeism and attrition, lack of educational motivation or educational aspirations, depression and other indicators of poor psychological well-being, and suicide ideation or attempts.

Purpose and Significance of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of recent GSD graduates from a small town high school in central Pennsylvania and how their sense of belonging as GSD students was affected by heteronormative traditions and policies that existed in the school. Additionally, the study determined what supports, such as GSAs or faculty professional development, were in place to support GSD students, and how successful these supports were in helping them gain a sense of belonging. A result of this study is to suggest the implementation of effective support systems for GSD students and to eliminate policies and procedures that exclude GSD students.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this study was: How can understanding School A's GSD graduates' experiences with school belonging effect positive change in the

school's policies, traditions, and supports? The study also attempted to answer the following sub-questions:

1. What school traditions and policies, if any, have a negative effect on GSD students' sense of belonging and how can they be revised to be more inclusive?
2. What systems have GSD students experienced that make them feel more supported in schools?
 - a. How have they been supported by the school's GSA and what changes can be made to make the group more supportive?
 - b. How have they been supported by faculty and administration in the school and what changes can be made to make faculty and administration more supportive?

Conceptual Framework

Researcher Stances and Experiential Base

An axiological stance was utilized as it is important to be aware of biases and experiences of both the researcher and the participants and to understand the multiple interpretations of reality, recognizing that everyone has different experiences (Creswell, 2013). Rather than making generalizations about the GSD student experience as a whole, each experience that an individual GSD student has is important. Therefore, qualitative narrative analysis research was used in order to understand the experiences of GSD students and their needs regarding support systems in school. Through critical theory and queer theory and a participatory/advocacy worldview, I desired to see change in the treatment and experiences of GSD students and in the policies, curriculum, and

professional development frameworks at the high school under study. Perhaps more importantly, the participatory model and the ability to tell their stories also allowed the recent graduates to collaborate to become part of the change to their alma maters (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). In combining a narrative analysis mode with critical and queer theory, the study shows how high school students are influenced and affected by their social settings, and how a paradigm shift is needed to ensure all students are receiving an equitable education.

Conceptual Framework

In order to understand the experiences of GSD high school students, one must consider the following factors: their sense of belonging to their school and why and how this affects their achievement and development; how they are affected by heteronormative and gender-centered traditions, policies, and practices; and what supports are or could be in place to help them navigate these policies, advocate for themselves, and achieve a sense of belonging (see *Figure 1*).

Sense of belonging. Many GSD students do not feel that they have a sense of belonging or connectedness to their schools. Much of this stems from feeling unsafe, having no role models, and having no support from peer groups or adults. Students who feel they can be out about their gender identification or sexuality are more likely to do well in school and have a strong sense of school community; however, less than half of GSD students are comfortable being out to school staff (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009). Students who are more frequently harassed and have a lower sense of school connectedness are more likely to have lower grade point averages (GPAs) and less likely

to pursue a post-secondary education than their peers (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014).

GSD students are also more likely to feel community if they can talk to someone in school about GSD issues. For example, nearly two-thirds of transgender high school students in a nationwide study spoke to a teacher and 51% with a mental health professional in the school (Greytak et al., 2009). In another nationwide study, students who reported that there were several supportive staff members in their schools were twice as likely to say they felt safe in school than students who reported that there were no supportive staff members in their schools (Kosciw et al., 2014). However, in some cases teachers have lost their jobs for advocating for students or personally coming out, which eliminates important supports and role models (Watson, Varjas, Meyers, & Graybill, 2010). Students who attend schools where they can find representation in the curriculum are less likely to be verbally harassed, miss school, or feel unsafe, and report a greater connectedness to the school overall. However, only about 18.5% of GSD students can find such representation (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Effects of heteronormative policies and practices. Only 24% of GSD students report that their school has an anti-harassment or bullying policy that includes sexuality and gender identification (Greytak et al., 2009). This can lead to the unsafe feelings mentioned above.

However, other policies, programs, and traditions in high schools can make the school unwelcoming to transgender and other GSD adolescents. These may include policies about dates to school dances, public displays of affection among same-sex couples, irrelevant gender designations when it comes to school rewards and positions,

and gendered dress code for daily school attendance as well as at events like prom, graduation, or school pictures. Homophobia leads to gender expectations, especially regarding masculinity, in places such as sports teams and physical education (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, & Diaz, 2011). Junior Reserve Officer Training Core (JROTC) and physical education classes are other areas where failure to meet gender expectations can cause bullying, harassment, and hazing for GSD students (Varjas, Mahan, Meyers, Brickbichler, Lopp, & Dew, 2006). However, more inclusive policies and programs lead to less frequent harassment against GSD students (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2008).

Supports for GSD students. A study by Diaz, Greytak, & Kosciw (2010) showed that schools that supported GSAs, created supportive and educated faculty and staff, and created policies that included all GSD students were the best three ways to support GSD students and led to the greatest feelings of school connectedness. However, while 83% of transgender students in a nationwide study could identify one supportive educator, fewer than 36% could identify more than one (Greytak et al., 2009). Similarly, only 61% of GSD students in the same nationwide survey could identify six or more supportive faculty members (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Education about advocacy, current issues, and the rights of the students is key, both for students and the adults teaching them (Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, & Watson, 2009). GSAs can take responsibility for educating the students, and also the faculty and administration in the building to an extent. GSAs can introduce students to queer and feminist theory and break down heteronormativity (Conway & Crawford-Fisher, 2007). Participation and even just the existence of a GSA in high schools has positive effects on

GSD students. Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell (2011) showed that GSA participation can lead to improvement in depression and suicide ideation.

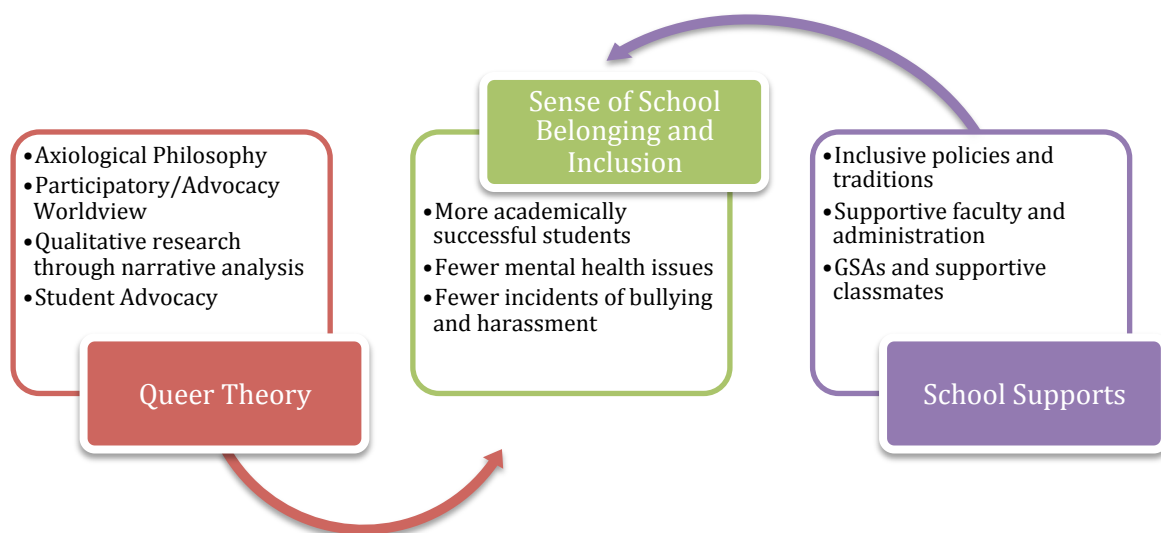


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework—How school supports affect a sense of belonging for GSD students

Definition of Terms

The first dilemma in defining terms for this research was to determine how to refer to the population being studied. Below are some commonly used acronyms:

LGBT or GLBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender. Some feel this acronym is exclusive because there are myriad other labels and categories of gender and sexuality diversity that this acronym does not cover.

LGBTQIA – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and/or Queer, Intersexual, Ally and/or Asexual. Some still think this acronym is exclusive or do

not feel that a gender and sexuality diverse person should conform to any one label.

LGBT+ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and any others. Again, some find this exclusive, giving preference to some sexual and gender diversities and not others.

GSD – Gender and Sexuality Diversities or Diverse. An emerging term that encompasses all types of sexuality and gender identification. This is the acronym that is used in this research.

Queer – a term that encompasses gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual identities, as well as all non-heteronormative and non-gender-conforming identifications.

Queer is also used to refer to “queer theory,” “as a way to push back at normalized social conceptions in the broadest sense” (Quinn & Meiners, 2009).

While “GSD” is not the most commonly used or popular acronym to refer to the population studied, it is the most inclusive acronym and therefore was used in this study.

Below are other relevant terms that must be defined for this research:

Agender/intergender – having no gender or not identifying with either the male or female gender.

Asexual – a person who has no sexual desire or does not feel sexual attraction (Meyer, 2010).

Bisexual – a person who is attracted to either gender or for whom gender is not a consideration in determining sexual attraction (Chase and Ressler, 2009). The prefix “bi” assumes the belief that there are only two genders (Meyer, 2010).

Cisgender – the state of self-identifying with the same gender that one was assigned at birth. This term is used to mean the opposite of transgender (Meyer, 2010).

Cisnormativity – Social expectations that everyone identifies with the same gender they were assigned at birth, and that those gender roles are accepted by everyone.

Coming out/Being out – the process of becoming or state of being open about one's gender or sexuality diversity. One may be out in one aspect of life but not others, such as being out to friends and family, but not out in the workplace.

Demiboi/Demiboy/Demiguy – Some who identifies partially as a male but not completely (“Trans 101,” n.d.).

Demigirl – Some who identifies partially as a female but not completely (“Trans 101,” n.d.).

FtM/MtF – Female to Male or Male to Female. This acronym is often given to transgender people to designate a person's assigned gender at birth and the gender to which they self-identify. For example, FtM means a person was assigned as female at birth but self-identifies as male.

Gay – a person who engages in same sex relationships. Although the term can be used to describe both men and women, it is often used to refer just to men (Meyer, 2010).

Gender – a classification of male, female, or some other label based on roles, aesthetics, identities, etc., determined by society's perspective and the individual's perspective. This may be regardless of the biological classification of “sex” (“Trans 101,” n.d.). The characteristics of men and women that are socially constructed (Meyer, 2010).

Genderfluid – a gender identity or expression that changes back and forth from one gender to another or is constantly changing on a spectrum of genders (“Trans 101,” n.d.).

Gender assignment – the gender one is assigned at birth, which is typically only based on external sex genitalia. Transgender people typically do not identify with this label.

Gender expression – how one chooses to physically present one’s gender. This could be expressed through mannerism, speech, dress, physical appearance, etc. (Meyer, 2010).

Gender identity – the gender with which one identifies, which may be different from the gender one was assigned at birth or the gender assigned to one by society, usually considered on a spectrum of masculinity and femininity (Chase and Ressler, 2009).

Gender roles – the way society believes males and females should act based on traditions, morals, and societal norms.

Genderqueer – a person whose gender identity challenges a gender binary system (Meyer, 2010).

Grey-A/Grey Asexual – a person who identifies in the grey area between sexual and asexual. These people may feel very mild sexual attraction, may only experience it occasionally or under very specific conditions, or may not wish to act on their sexual attraction.

GSD minority – for this study, a gender or sexuality diverse person who does not identify as lesbian or gay. This may include, but is not limited to: transgender, bisexual, pansexual, intersexual, questioning, or asexual people.

Heteronormativity – also called heterocentricism or heterosexism. The idea that heterosexual relationships and traditional gender roles are the “norm” and that any other type of gender or sexual diversity is deviant or outside of the “norm” (Chase and Ressler, 2009). Social expectations based on the belief that everyone is or should be heterosexual (Meyer, 2010). The privileging of heterosexuality (Sullivan, 2003). A person or school can be tolerant of GSD people and still perpetuate a heteronormative culture.

Homophobia – Fear, hatred, prejudice, or other negative feelings towards the GSD community, individuals, and their relationships (Chase and Ressler, 2009).

Intersex – the condition of being born with hormones, chromosomes, and/or genitalia and reproductive organs of both sexes (Chase and Ressler, 2009).

Lesbian – a woman who engages in same-sex relationships (Meyer, 2010).

Pansexual – also called “gender-blind” or omni-sexual. Pansexual people reject that there are only two genders. Gender is not a factor in determining their attraction to another person (Meyer, 2010).

Preferred Pronouns – refers to the pronoun that a transgender person prefers to use to refer to him/herself, which may be different than the pronoun of his/her assigned gender. Additionally, traditional pronouns promote a binary of either being male or female. Transgender people who do not identify with either gender may choose to use the male or female pronouns (i.e. he, she, etc.), a

gender neutral or plural pronoun (i.e. it, they), or an invented pronoun such as “zie” for the nominative and “zir” for the objective (“Trans 101,” n.d.).

Sex – a classification of male, female, or some other label based on one’s biological make-up, which includes chromosomes, hormones, genitalia, reproductive organs, and gonads. This is largely a medical and legal categorization (Meyer, 2010).

Sexual Orientation – refers to whom a person is typically attracted, usually with respect to gender. A person’s gender identity and their sexuality are two different identifications. Orientation is preferable to “lifestyle” or “preference,” which imply the person has made a choice (Chase and Ressler, 2009).

Transgender – the state of not self-identifying with the gender others have assigned him/her/them. A transgender person may choose to manifest their identity in a range of ways, such as taking on traits of both genders, expressing as one gender but identifying as another, not identifying as any gender, or completely transitioning to the gender opposite of their assigned gender at birth (transsexual) (“Trans 101,” n.d.).

Transsexual – generally refers to a transgender person who has completely transitioned to the gender opposite of their birth and presents only as that gender. This may or may not involve sexual reassignment surgery (Meyer, 2010).

Transphobia – Fear of individuals who identify as transgendered or who blur gender roles and expectations (Meyer, 2010).

Two-Spirit – A Native American term for individuals who were able to express qualities of both men and women. Today, individuals who are Native American and

GSD often use this term to recognize both parts of their identity (Meyer, 2010).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

In doing narrative research, the researcher must trust that the participants are sharing honest experiences, but also must recognize that the truth is colored by the perspective and emotions of the story-teller. Therefore, participants were given the opportunity to read the narratives created through the transcripts for final confirmation that I effectively captured their experiences (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Seidman 2013).

Because I helped students, including the participants, start the GSA and have advised the club for two years, I hold certain assumptions about the club and the treatment of GSD students. These assumptions include the ideas that all students, including GSD students, have the right to a fair and equal education, and that their unique needs must be considered. Additionally, my relationship with the participants could have also caused some limitations. I wanted participants to share their experiences with the supports in place in the school, which would include the GSA they were a part of and that I advise. Students may have held back criticism of the club or of specific teachers or administrators if they feared offending me or if they felt the information may get back to my colleagues. To combat this, I ensured students of their confidentiality rights and anonymity and encouraged them to speak freely. I attempted to create an atmosphere accepting of criticism and praise as warranted by posing questions that welcomed honest opinions and a desire to improve the school environment and the club itself.

It is also important to remember that the environment regarding GSD issues is changing rapidly as more states begin to legalize gay marriage and civil unions, same-sex adoption, and anti-discrimination laws based on sexuality and gender identification. However, these changes have often been met with some backlash from conservative legislators and citizens. It is important to continually examine the effects of GSAs on the heteronormative culture as these changes continue to occur.

One limitation is that there is a fair amount of existing data that examines victimization and harassment of the GSD community, but much less that examines heteronormative cultures and practices and their effect on the GSD community.

Another limitation is that, while recommendations will be developed from the participants' experiences that can help to change school culture and acceptance for GSD students, the research may be too specific to generalize to any school other than the school in question. Not all schools have the same needs, just as not all GSD students have the same needs.

A delimitation of this study involves the choosing of the participants. Research about current GSD students at the high school level can be difficult to gather for a number of reasons. At the high school level, students are still struggling to identify their sexuality. They may not be comfortable with answering interview questions if they are not open about their sexuality. Additionally, surveys or focus groups about sexuality would require permission from a parent or guardian for current students to participate. If students are not out to their parents, or if parents do not support their child's sexuality or gender identification, those students may not be willing or able to get permission. One researcher anticipates that data is probably skewed when interviewing high school

students because only students who are out and have supportive parents would be able to participate (Varjas et al., 2006). Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) also recognize the particular difficulty in obtaining parental consent to interview or survey students when sexual attitudes are being discussed. For these reasons, I chose to interview young adults who are recent graduates of the school in question. However, this does mean that the research perspectives of the participants are retrospective and not first-hand (Russell et al., 2011).

Summary

The intent of this study was to understand the experiences of GSD graduates of the high school under study and their feelings of school belonging and connectedness, and how their experiences can be used to affect changes to policies and support systems such as GSAs and teacher training and professional development in the school. This study offers a literature review to help teachers and administrators understand why the GSD population is at-risk. Recommendations to administrators can inform decision-making in creating policies in the future. The research questions, conceptual framework, definitions of terms, and the assumptions and limitations laid out here serve to create a context and map for the study that follows.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

High school can be a difficult place to find acceptance, and this is even truer for GSD adolescents. A hostile school climate for GSD students can cause higher rates of absenteeism, dropping out, substance abuse, suicide attempts, suicide ideation, and depression, as well as lower self-esteem, academic achievement, and sense of school belonging (Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Kosciw et al., 2014; Diaz, et al., 2010). The purpose of this section is to provide a review of the current literature on queer theory, school climate and belonging, and the effects of GSAs and other supports on school climate and sense of belonging.

This study is timely, as current events confirm that cultural acceptance and laws for GSD people are rapidly changing. In 2010, the United States Congress and President Barack Obama signed the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010, allowing GSD soldiers to work in the military without keeping their sexuality and gender identification a secret. In May 2012, Vice President Joe Biden was the first sitting Vice President of the United States to support marriage equality, and President Obama followed shortly after as the first sitting President. At the inception of this study, marriage equality existed in only nine states; as of June 2015 with the Supreme Court ruling of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, it is now legal in every state in the country. It is important for schools to evolve on GSD issues with the rest of the country. However, in spite of these changes, homophobia and heteronormativity still exist. In the month of June 2013, the commissioner of the New York City police announced that anti-gay hate crimes were up 70% (Fuchs, 2013). Companies that try to break away from heteronormative gender roles and relationships in

advertising often face backlash from conservative groups. In many states, businesses still have the right to refuse service to a GSD person, deny them housing, or terminate their employment. In schools, GSD students are not explicitly protected and have often faced discrimination from classmates, teachers, and administration. GSD students have been denied participation in school activities, or denied accommodations that are provided for other students, such as safe restrooms and locker rooms. While Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits the discrimination or exclusion of students based on sex in public education, there is no mention of gender identification or sexual orientation. While some GSD students have been successful in using Title IX to gain rights in their schools, GSD adolescents in public schools need more explicit protection that actually prohibits the discrimination and exclusion of students based on their gender, gender identification, and sexual orientation. Changes in these policies and attitudes can only occur if more attention is brought to the education and equal rights of GSD students.

This literature review examines three themes, as shown in Figure 2 below. The first is an overview of critical queer theory and the effect of society and culture on heteronormativity, particularly in schools. The second theme deals with the issues and risks of being a GSD student or teaching GSD students in high school. Finally, the third theme deals with the importance of belonging, including why belonging is particularly important to GSD adolescents and how some structures have been shown to support GSD students. The following review reveals that, despite many barriers, GSAs and other supports can have a positive effect in creating some change.

The Literature Review

Critical Queer Theory

Studying queer theory is essential to understanding the heteronormative policies and traditions that exist in high schools, and how they can negatively affect GSD students. The very motive of queer theory is to break down the binaries and labels that exist in society so that all people can feel accepted. As will be discussed in the final stream, this feeling of acceptance and inclusion is essential to a student's success in school. In the sources that follow, Sullivan (2003) and Wilchins (2014) both give a thorough overview of queer theory, including its history, its effect on society and culture in the past, and its examination and critique of heteronormative structures in society. Meyer (2010) applies this theory specifically to schools while Quinn and Meiners (2009) make an application to teacher training programs and Sanlo (2005) to college campuses.

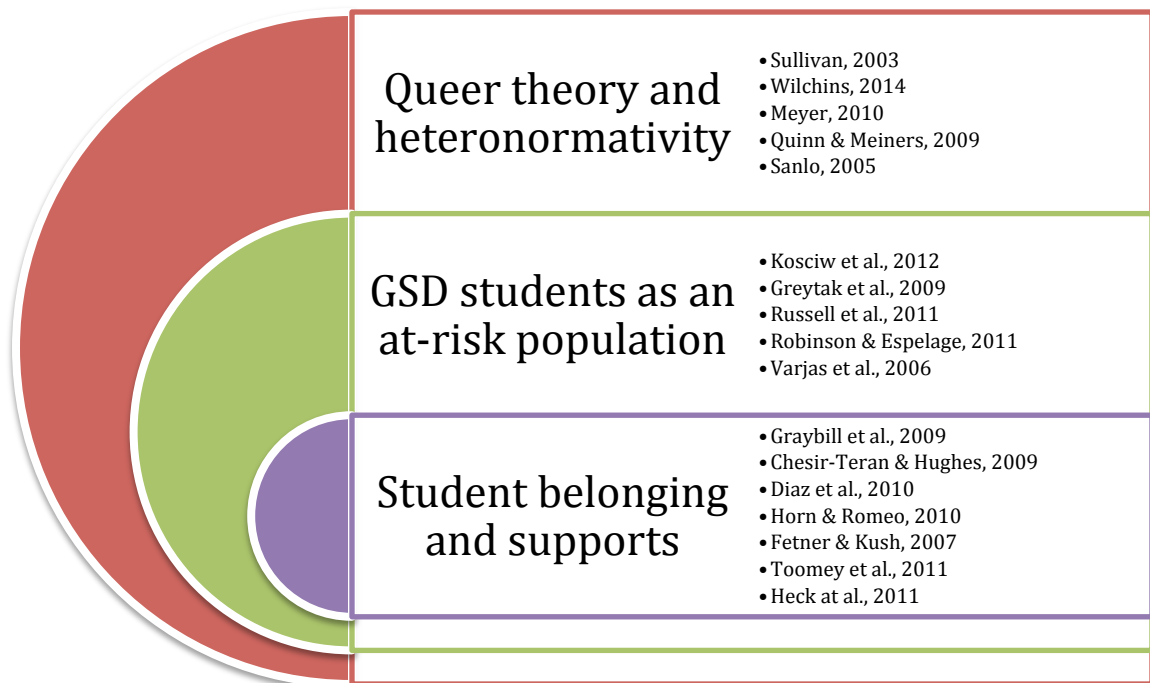


Figure 2. *Literature Map – Using queer theory to understand the GSD student population in order to put supports in place to help all students achieve success.*

Like Michel Foucault's (1978) *The History of Sexuality*, one of the earliest examinations of queer theory and sexuality, Sullivan's (2003) primer on queer theory gives a genealogical overview of society and sexuality that examines power struggles and the search for understanding and knowledge of sexuality. Sullivan (2003) points out that historically and culturally, people who engage in same-sex relations and behaviors can be treated as a person of respect or as a pariah, depending on the cultural influence of the time. Much of the cultural atmosphere regarding sexuality in Western culture has to do with procreation, religion, and fitting into gender roles. For example, in the past, while men were labeled as "sodomites" if they engaged in same-sex relations, women who engaged in same-sex relations might have been accused of "acting like man," a crime against nature (Sullivan, 2003). Throughout history, like today, sexuality and gender has always meant something different depending on the perspective — social, medical, legal, historical, sexual (Sullivan, 2003).

In her chapter titled "Assimilation or Liberation," Sullivan (2003) discusses the development of the cultural atmosphere for GSD people in the first half of the 20th century. At this time there was a big push to decriminalize and also to understand homosexuality, and to bring homosexuals and heterosexuals together. However, this push also caused the attempted assimilation of homosexuals into heteronormative culture (Sullivan, 2003). In pushing for tolerance, GSD people were painted as the same as everyone else. Any interpretation of sexuality would eventually form the heteronormative culture that exists today — if sexuality was explained as a natural part of biology, then GSD people were treated as a medical anomaly that could be fixed and pitied because they had no control over their situation. If sexuality was seen as a choice,

then homosexuals should be able to make the “right” choice and reject same-sex relations for heterosexual relationships (Sullivan, 2003). This conflict created a culture where GSD people were viewed as powerless victims of their condition. Even those in support of tolerance still juxtaposed them with the heterocentric culture in power. Within the GSD community, there was a push to assimilate into the heterocentric culture, and flagrancy, drag queens, and gay bars were rejected (Sullivan, 2003).

Until the late 20th century, GSD issues were often included in critical theories in general, usually as part of a feminist view, or even as just gay and lesbian theory. Queer theory, however, was developed in response to the binary that feminist or gay and lesbian theories create (Sullivan, 2003). Queer theory instead broke down those binaries and presented a post-structuralist way of thinking. Post-structuralists argue that there are no known truths, but rather knowledge is affected by current culture and history. Post-structuralists examine and analyze the differences between people and reject that self exists without exposure to culture (Sullivan, 2003). Social constructs, relationships, and systems of power create self. Therefore, queer theory does not necessarily examine a binary, but whatever is in conflict with the normal or dominating powers of a society. Similarly, queer theory aligns itself with a deconstructivist view, which also rejects a polarization and hierarchy between heterosexual and homosexual, and instead focuses on the relationship between these terms and power, culture, and history, as well examines the fluidity and instability of these terms. Sullivan (2003) also recognizes that while the very point in creating queer theory is to reject the labels and binaries, the term “queer” has become a label, often meaning homosexual, although it was not meant to be.

Queer theory has a complicated relationship with other types of critical theory. For example, critical race theory, feminism, and queer theory share some aspects that are similar; queer theory is largely rooted in a Eurocentric frame and must also be viewed in the cultural and historical context of race (Sullivan, 2003). Queer theory covers many categories and nuances of gender and sexuality. The experiences and perceptions of GSD people of varying genders, gender identifications, races, religions, and socioeconomic classes are all different. The point of queer theory is to reject a social construct and instead to understand that all of these varieties of sexuality exist.

Sullivan (2003) also points out that heterosexuality is not innately “normal” or “natural” but is a social construct just like homosexuality. Therefore, despite its appearance in current culture as the “norm,” it can also be subjected to queer theory. Sullivan (2003) points out that heterocentricity or heteronormativity often goes unexamined. Heterosexuality is a tool of heterocentricity and cultural hegemony. Sullivan (2003) makes the argument that heterosexuality is compulsory to women and that it is a means of preserving the patriarchy. This is also true of gender roles for men and women, which sometimes also carry over into homosexual behaviors and relationships. In this way, Sullivan (2003) argues that even heterosexual feminists could be considered “queer” because they are breaking down social constructs of gender norms and male dominated heterosexual sex.

Finally, Sullivan (2003) discusses the sense of community and what it means to GSD people. She defines community as a group with a shared set of beliefs, identity, or purpose. The assumption of a community is that it is a safe place that offers some familiarity and strength in numbers. It may also be a way to grow a cause, to educate, or

to improve. However, the idea of community is complicated in queer theory, as the very point of this critical theory is to reject labels and break down social structures. In some ways the influence of community works at odds with the idea of identity, which one would develop individually. However, community for GSD people also helps to break down social structures because it allows for visibility of diversity within the group (Sullivan, 2003). This complex relationship with community is important to remember in examining GSD students and their sense of belonging within the larger school community.

Wilchins' (2014) book on queer theory gives an overview of the history of the theory, sexuality, and culture, much in the same way that Sullivan (2003) does. However, Wilchins' (2014) goal was to write a book about queer theory that is accessible to the masses, positing that queer theory is a part of everyday life and something the masses should understand.

Wilchins (2014) starts by making connections between queer theory, women's rights, civil rights, and transgender rights. She suggests that all of these theories and movements are about politics, power, and identity (Wilchins, 2014). The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s sparked an era of mobilization and advocacy for the rights of all, and this in turn influenced women's right and later gay rights. As Sullivan (2003) also points out, queer theory stems very much from feminism, where the masculine sex has been established to be dominant. Feminists, women who want to fight for equality, are accused of just trying to be men. Maintaining the patriarchy means maintaining traditional gender roles and a gender binary. One fears what one does not know, and the idea of life without a gender binary, where everyone fits on one side or the

other, seems to make society uneasy, to say the least. Wilchins (2014) even goes so far as to argue that women are the “queer sex” in a male dominated culture.

Gay rights followed feminism and women’s rights, but today gender is rarely linked with gay rights. Instead, there is a push to normalize homosexuality, a desire to assert and believe that GSD people are “just like you” but attracted to different people. Unfortunately, the identity of a GSD person (or any person) is much more complicated and involves gender roles, identification, and expression as well as sexuality. Wilchins (2014) argues that one cannot discuss queer theory, gay rights, or homophobia without discussing gender, because much of the fear of homosexuality is the threat to masculinity and gender binaries. For this reason, sexuality diversity and gender diversity split in the 1990s, and the transgender community had to fight to be included in gay rights groups and activism (Wilchins, 2014). This inclusion finally led to the overarching idea of queer theory, which covers a wide variety of gender and sexuality diversity.

Wilchins (2014) also examines the role that theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Foucault had on queer theory. Modernists, she argues, were convinced that society could continually improve with the pursuit of science, medicine, and fact. From a modernist viewpoint, being queer is a problem that science can explain or solve. Derrida exposed the metaphysics of language and that these social constructs only exist because society named and developed them through language, and then spent resources and energy to make sure that they were maintained (Wilchins, 2014). One way this is done is through our educational institutions. In building these constructs, society uses differences to define meaning. Ideas are constructed by examining what society excludes. This forces binary thinking, in which everything has to be “this” or “that” (Wilchins, 2014). Queer

theory focuses on the space between and all around those binaries, and the elimination of those binaries all together.

Much like Derrida, Foucault breaks down the structures and language given to sexuality (Wilchins, 2014). Foucault broke down structures and labels. While coming out or accepting or proclaiming a label may seem empowering today, Foucault also wanted individuals to understand that those labels were only given meaning within the past few centuries and that they are highly politicized; while empowering, those labels also represent a power struggle (Wilchins, 2014). Foucault also explained the power of discourse, which is an examination of the rules that govern the production of knowledge in a given society of thought (Wilchins, 2014). For example, in our current society of thought, the notion of a third gender may sound silly, as it is “common knowledge” that there are two genders. The idea contradicts our current discourse. There is no authority over this type of discourse, but it still exists and is accepted by most of the population. Postmodernists like Foucault worked to deconstruct the structures that society created. However, Wilchins (2014) argues that in order to create change, in some ways one must also construct, because society wants to hear not only what is wrong with current social structures, but how to change them and what to put in their place.

Moving specifically into queer theory and education, Meyer (2010) gives an overview of gender theory and how it plays into cultural, political, and social viewpoints that affect public education, teachers, students, and families. In providing an overview of queer theory and education, Meyer (2010) spells out several myths regarding gender and sexual diversity and how these myths negatively affect students' experiences in public education. Meyer (2010) makes the broader point that teachers and administrators are not

educated about these myths and continue to teach incorrect information about gender and sexuality, as well as to support heteronormative constructs in schools. Additionally, because public education is meant to educate the masses, educators are creating a population of citizens who are ignorant of GSD issues and who believe in heteronormativity. Students and teachers must be taught to be critical and independent thinkers in order to move toward change in education (Meyer, 2010).

In education, there is a tendency to associate gender and sexuality diversity solely with homosexuality, leaving out gender identity and other types of sexual orientation altogether. However, Meyer (2010) argues that it is important that educators understand gender and sexual diversity in schools because it affects student safety, physical and emotional health, the diversity and equity of the school, student engagement, curriculum, extracurricular activities, and school climate.

Meyer (2010) describes seven theoretical foundations of educational thought and shows how each school of thought advocates for the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity. Below are the seven theoretical foundations:

- Democratic Theory of Education – The idea that citizens have the right to make educational policy, but also should be restrained in making policy that is discriminatory or oppressive. This type of educational system is vital to maintaining democracy. Meyer (2010) argues that schools have the responsibility of facilitating education for all students, as well as limiting things that deter education. Democratic theory of education ensures that all students get an equal education.

- Critical Pedagogy – the application of critical theory in education. Critical pedagogy works to understand oppression and alienation in society and how it affects the education process. Many argue that schools have a hidden Euroheteropatriarchal curriculum that maintains the status of oppressed groups, and instead curriculum should be more diverse and include non-canonical literature and other diverse media and textbooks (Meyer, 2010).
- Feminist Pedagogy – Feminism is important to queer theory and education because it too challenges the Euroheteropatriarchal systems at work in public education. At the heart, feminism is about breaking down power structures that create an oppressed class. Feminist pedagogy also places importance on breaking down the favoritism of masculine traits, which can be damaging to both women and GSD students, especially males who do not embody all traits of masculinity (Meyer, 2010).
- Multicultural Education – The idea of incorporating multiple viewpoints and voices in order to diversify education. Again, this theory examines power structures that have been established that favor Eurocentric masculine heterosexual traits and reexamining these structures by introducing new texts and viewpoints (Meyer, 2010).
- Social Justice –The idea that all groups can participate fully in society, even if this means that wealth and services are distributed evenly (Meyer, 2010). These resources are used to make sure that groups feel safe and are being represented in the curriculum.

- Anti-oppressive Education – A theory that builds upon the above theories, but takes a more radical stance. Anti-oppressive education advocates for a resistance of traditional education and disruption when protesting a Euroheteropatriarchal curriculum. This includes ensuring four areas of education for students: Education for the Other, education about the Other, education that reveals how some are privileged and some are "othered," and education that creates change (Meyer, 2010). The goal of anti-oppressive education is to cause discomfort to create change.
- Queer pedagogy – A theory that focuses on gender and sexuality identity and breaking down categories that support a heterocentric view of sexuality and gender. The goal of queer pedagogy is to use education to redefine "normal." Resistance to discussing sexuality in schools exists because the structure of education is designed to be heterocentric, teachers and administrators worry about the appropriateness of discussing sexuality with students, and many educators are internally conflicted with teaching about sexuality (Meyer, 2010).

In addition to addressing theories of education, Meyer (2010) discusses myths and misconceptions about sexuality and gender, explaining how these myths and perceptions play into how students are treated in school, and what influence public educators have on changing culture to become more inclusive. However, myths abound about sexuality and gender, but teachers have not been trained to address these myths, and so they continue to spread them to their students (Meyer, 2010).

In addressing sex and gender, Meyer (2010) states that even researchers, doctors, and counselors do not understand gender and sex. Culturally, people tend to place a child

in one of two gender groups immediately upon birth, or before. This is an extreme oversimplification of gender and self-identity that can be damaging from the beginning. Sex is determined by chromosomes, hormones, and gonads, but parents and doctors tend only to consider gonads to make a determination of sex. Even more damaging is the expectation that the sex determination should match the gender identification. Meyer (2010) poses four major categories of sex: male, female, transsexual, and intersex. These identifications affect gender identity and expression, but they do not determine it. Meyer (2010) then explores the gender expectations of masculinity and femininity as well as varying gender identifications that do not fit into a binary, such as transgender, two-spirit, and genderqueer. These expectations and theories greatly influence the school environment and expectations of students from their peers, teachers, parents, and society.

In addressing sexuality, Meyer (2010) uses four broad categories to describe sexuality and orientation: Asexual, bi/pan/omnisexual, heterosexual, and homosexual. She reminds the reader that these categories can be a part of one's identity but do not mean that to identify with one category an individual has to fall into the category all of the time (Meyer, 2010). Therefore, one's orientation may not match with one's behaviors. School is a significant source for students when developing their own ideologies, and often schools normalize heteronormative relationships and behaviors in the curriculum, as well as in the social construct of the institution. Meyer (2010) cites information forms, school dances, prom rituals, and graduation traditions as just some ways that schools perpetuate a gender binary and normalize heterosexual relationships.

Meyer (2010) states that schools need to be safe physically and emotionally for students, take the responsibility of educating students about diversity in sexuality in

academics and through interpersonal skills, and recognize that not all families consist of a heterosexual nucleus.

In the second part of the book, Meyer (2010) examines myths about gender and sexuality that explicitly affect the classroom setting and curriculum, including misguided beliefs that sexuality and gender are private and should not be discussed in school, that if sexuality and gender are not part of the subject area then the teacher does not need training in that area, or that because gender and sexuality are controversial topics, they should be ignored in school. However, Meyer (2010) points out that in ignoring gender and sexual diversity in curriculum, educators are actually supporting a hidden curriculum, which creates a binary between the “norm” and the “other.” Ignoring gender and sexuality diversities reinforces a heterosexual and heteronormative culture. She argues that these norms can be broken down with the incorporation of gender and sexual diversity in curriculum, giving suggestions for all subject areas to incorporate GSD ideas, not only literature and history. She also gives suggestions for ways extracurricular groups, beyond GSAs, can incorporate an environment welcoming of the GSD perspective (Meyer, 2010).

Meyer (2010) also discusses the impact that recent legal and political debates have on young students. In many states and cities in the United States, citizens are not protected by anti-discrimination laws and in some ways GSD people are treated like second class citizens. There are no federal laws and few state laws that mandate the inclusion of GSD issues into curriculum or teacher training. While the current political climate regarding GSD issues seems to be changing for the better, this still puts young

people and educational institutions in an awkward position with little policy to help schools navigate.

Unfortunately, the myths surrounding GSD students and issues in schools cause a great deal of harm to students, and not only GSD students. Schools are failing to educate students on sexuality and gender issues, and they are creating bullying problems for all students, as gender and sexuality are often the root of bullying for all students, whether they are GSD or not. Teachers are often not trained to discuss these issues or to recognize patterns of bullying. Also, because school is the main social network for children and adolescents, and because older students will start experimenting with sexual behavior and gender expression during their schooling years, it is important that schools provide an environment that is accepting of all gender and sexuality diversities and do not make GSD students feel like the “other” (Meyer, 2010).

Finally, Meyer (2010) argues that there are three elements of resistance that prevent educators and activists from making real change in schools for GSD students. These elements are structural—structures, policies, and traditions in place that create heteronormativity or encourage silence around the topic of sexuality; pedagogical—beliefs that sexuality is an inappropriate topic for students to discuss with teachers or that sexuality should be kept secretive in general; and psychical—internal conflicts such as religion, shame, personal values, and experiences that perpetuate traditional gender roles and heteronormative relationships and ideas (Meyer, 2010). She believes that to change these myths about education and to create a paradigm shift in the very systems of education, all stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members, must be committed to creating change (Meyer, 2010).

Specifically addressing the subject of teacher training and professional development, the aptly named *Flaunt It!* (Quinn & Meiners, 2009) illustrates a journey through queer activism in the public education setting by sharing the experiences that two women had which led them to advocate for the teaching of sexual orientation and gender identity to pre-service teachers in Illinois colleges and universities, as well as the experiences they had in trying to gather research and publish their advocacy.

Through their experiences, Quinn and Meiners (2009) find that when educators advocate for a cause, even if it is equality, they are often labeled as being too political or controversial. They are expected to be neutral and stay out of political matters, even when it means advocating for their students. This bias about teachers inspired Quinn and Meiners (2009) to develop the advocacy method of "flaunting it." They recognize that an organized approach to advocacy is important, but that sometimes being upfront, honest, and unapologetic about a cause is the best way to spark change.

Quinn and Meiners (2009) also expose several binaries that exist in education. These binaries can often be damaging when students or teachers feel forced to place themselves in one box or another, especially when the very root of queer studies is to study those who do not fit into those boxes. Below are some of the binaries revealed:

- Public and private – many GSD people have a different identity in public and private. This is also sometimes true for their allies, as well. This also has a major effect on a student's sense of belonging in school, where he or she may have a different identity than in private. Sadly, students are often coached in school to have these separate private and public identities (Quinn & Meiners, 2009).

- Sexual orientation v. gender identity – Although these both fall under the idea of GSD or queer, sexual orientation and gender identity are two different parts of a person's identity, and while they are generally linked together, they can be very different. Additionally, gender identity is less often studied and advocated for than sexual orientation (Quinn & Meiners, 2009). Most people ignore the complex relationship these two differing parts contribute to one's overall identity.
- In the GSD community v. outside the GSD community – To those outside of the community, heteronormativity is often unrecognizable because it has become a part of life and a part of their expectations. However, to those in the community, heteronormativity can be obvious and unfair. While those inside the community see some of these issues as simple, those outside of the community see them as complex and often want to please both sides (Quinn & Meiners, 2009).
- Tolerance – Quinn and Meiners (2009) point out that tolerance itself creates binaries. Preaching tolerance sends the message that both sides should be respected. The authors argue that when it comes to educating children, pre-service teachers should not be learning to simply tolerate GSD students, but to accept them (Quinn & Meiners, 2009). When people are asked to merely tolerate GSD people, then they assume that they are also being asked to tolerate the other, bigoted, side, as well. One assumes that there has to be a balance and that each side should be free to share its opinion. But as the authors point out, when acceptance is valued over tolerance, bigoted arguments are devalued.

The book also points out that teachers themselves often unintentionally contribute to heteronormativity. Just the fact that most teachers are women plays into gender roles of women as nurturers and caretakers (Quinn & Meiners, 2009).

Finally, Sanlo's (2005) perspective of gender theory and education is geared toward college campuses, but it still examines several theory models that are equally relevant to the high school setting. Sanlo (2005) points out that while most educational institutions do not have policies in place to protect GSD students specifically, if institutions did have such policies in place, it would give the institutions a reason to evaluate the climate. Sanlo (2005) then examines five sexual orientation and gender identity development theories that must be considered when creating policies and programming for GSD adolescents and young adults:

- Stage Model – a linear model that travels through ignorance of sexual orientation through identification and immersion with a sexual orientation and gender identity. This model makes sense from a human development standpoint, but offers a linear experience in which many GSD students do not fit. The linear model also implies that there is an “end,” when in reality self-identification is an ongoing, lifelong process. According to this model, GSD students have usually come out or self identified by high school, but in reality many have not had any sexual encounters yet (Sanlo, 2005).
- Life Span Model – a nonlinear examination of several periods of identity development, which includes self-identification as well as becoming part of a community. These periods include: leaving heterosexuality or accepting that one is not part of the mainstream, heteronormative culture; developing a personal

GSD identity and sense of self; developing a social GSD identity; coming out to parents and family members and accepting the implications of their often heteronormative expectations; becoming intimate as a GSD person; and becoming a part of the GSD community (Sanlo, 2005). Because these periods are nonlinear, a GSD person could be in any of these periods or in multiple periods, and could also cycle through them multiple times and at any stage in life.

- **Diverse Perspectives Model** – compares GSD identification with other identification models, such as gender, race, class, etc. This model supports diversity and GSD issues as part of that diversity, but it also assumes that the experiences of GSD people are the same as experiences of people in other minority categories. This model also recognizes that multiple layers of identification can affect GSD adolescents or young adults and their unique social communities (Sanlo, 2005).
- **Medical and Psychiatric Model** – View of sexuality and gender as a medical and psychiatric condition and diagnosis that lies outside of the “norm” (Sanlo, 2005). While a medical classification can help students receive supports they need, this model treats GSD students as mentally ill. (Since publication of this book, most GSD classifications have been eliminated as medical diagnoses in the DSM-V).
- **Feminist, Postmodern, and Queer Perspectives Model** – identification within a social system, where power is socially constructed based on gender and gender identification, class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Sanlo, 2005). This model takes into account the power struggles between groups.

Finally, Sanlo (2005) points out that there are many other levels of self-identity that an adolescent or young adult is developing, such as faith or racial identity. Students will value and project different parts of their identity at different levels. Just because one is GSD does not mean that he or she wants to identify as part of that community, or he or she may identify more strongly with other aspects of his or her identity.

These sources reveal that it is important to the success of GSD students that societal structures regarding gender and sexuality are broken down so that GSD students can feel a strong sense of inclusion and belonging. In order for this to occur, however, educators need to be trained appropriately and policies and traditions in schools need to embrace all GSD identities.

Gender and Sexuality Diversity and Adolescents

As mentioned above, GSD students are an at-risk population. Victimization and lack of belonging in a time where adolescents are trying to develop their identities can be very damaging. Even where school bullying policies and disciplinary action keep victimization and assault in check, heteronormative school policies and procedures can intentionally or unintentionally make GSD students feel excluded. Educators need to understand the unique factors that put GSD students at risk and how they can best be supported.

The rate of victimization among GSD adolescents is very high. More than 85% of GSD adolescents report experiencing verbal harassment (Kosciw et al., 2014). Even if the comments are not directed at a specific student, the same study showed that 85% heard the term “gay” used negatively, and another 71% heard other homophobic comments. Between 87% and 89% of transgender students report being verbally

harassed directly (Greytak et al., 2009). Another 50% of GSD adolescents report their victimization occurring online (Kosciw et al., 2014). This type of victimization can be particularly dangerous because it is undetected by others.

Almost 40% of GSD adolescents reported physical harassment in school, such as being pushed or jostled in the hallway. More serious physical assault, such as punching or kicking, was experienced by 19% of students in the same study (Kosciw et al., 2014). Transgender students reported even higher levels of physical assault, as more than one in four have been assaulted violently or injured with a weapon (Greytak et al., 2009). In extreme cases, this physical harassment can become sexual. One Washington State study reported eight gang rape incidents with a youth or adolescent GSD victim occurred in one year. Two of the victims were as young as sixth grade (Reis, 1999, as cited in Holmes & Cahill, 2004). Overall, transgender students reported even higher levels of victimization than the GSD community as a whole (Greytak et al., 2009).

When victimization did occur, many students thought that they are not supported or that they did not have a reliable, trusted adult to whom to report. Currently 56.7% of GSD students state that they do not report victimization to an adult, and 61.6% of the ones that do report say that when they do, they do not feel the situation was handled appropriately or thoroughly (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Even in schools where students reported less victimization, GSD students still often faced heteronormative conditions. Many high school traditions and policies, such as school dance royalty contests, graduation, sports, dress codes, and yearbook photographs, force students into a gender binary. GSD role models, history, health and sexual education, and literature was often excluded from the curriculum. Even where a

GSA existed, heteronormativity still existed (Ngo, 2003). Oftentimes, GSAs became a social outlet for students yearning to find other students like them and never became platforms of education and advocacy. “We argue that although current GSA activities have empowered its members to break the silence around homophobic school practices, they have fallen short of disrupting heteronormative school environments” (Mayberry, Chenneville, & Currie, 2013, p.311).

The sources below give a widespread picture of GSD students and make some associations between their treatment and supports in schools and their success in school and beyond. The first source, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network’s (GLSEN) biennial survey of high school and middle school students, is the newest source, but past versions of the study’s large data set have influenced several of the works that follow (Kosciw et al., 2014). Other studies look at California high school students (Russell et al., 2011), secondary students including middle school students (Robinson & Espelage, 2011), and Atlanta students through a narrative qualitative lens (Varjas et al., 2006).

Perhaps the most comprehensive overview of GSD high school and middle school student issues is GLSEN’s biennial school climate survey (Kosciw et al., 2014). For the 2013 study, 7,898 GSD students ages 13 to 21 from all states of the United States were surveyed about their school experiences with victimization, verbal and physical harassment and assault, academic achievement and school attendance, participation in school activities, sense of belonging, psychological well-being, and levels of support from peers, educators, student clubs such as GSAs, and school policies. The survey was conducted online. Because this survey was so widespread and had such a high sample

size, the results have been analyzed in more specific ways by other researchers, as well (Kosciw et al., 2014).

This report gives the best snapshot of life as GSD high school students, starting with their exposure to homophobic language in classrooms and hallways. More than 70% of GSD students reported hearing “gay” used in a negative way. Nearly 65% heard other homophobic remarks frequently in school, and 56% heard negative remarks about gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2014). Perhaps more alarming, over half of students reported hearing language that was homophobic or negative about gender expression from their teachers and other school staff (Kosciw et al., 2014). This constant exposure to negative language can have a negative effect on GSD students, even if it is not directed at them specifically. However, students frequently reported that school staff did not discipline this verbal harassment or language (Kosciw et al., 2014). GSD students were also directly verbally harassed for their sexual orientation and gender expression. Almost 75% of GSD students were verbally harassed in the forms of name-calling and threats (Kosciw et al., 2014). In fact, the participants in this study reported that students were harassed more for sexuality and gender expression than for any other factor in school, including weight, appearance, race, religion, or gender (Kosciw et al., 2014). Cyberbullying, harassment that takes place through social media and other electronic venues, and relational aggression, bullying by spreading rumors or exclusion, were also both prevalent. Almost 50% of students reported some cyberbullying, and almost 90% believed that they had been deliberately excluded by other students. Almost half reported this happened often or frequently (Kosciw et al., 2014). The participants also reported that they were not supported by their classmates. More than 50% of participants said that

their classmates and peers would never intervene if they were being bullied for GSD issues (Kosciw et al., 2014).

The report also shows that GSD students are frequently physically harassed and assaulted in school and fear for their safety. Fifty-five percent of GSD students reported feeling unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation, and almost one third had missed school once in the prior month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable (Kosciw et al., 2014). These feelings of insecurity are not unwarranted — 36% of GSD students reported being physically harassed and 16.5% reported being physically assaulted (Kosciw et al., 2014). As with verbal harassment, students do not feel supported when reporting physical assault. More than 60% of students who reported these types of incidents said that the school staff did nothing. Because of this and fear of retaliation, many GSD students do not report victimization (Kosciw et al., 2014).

These issues tend to be worse for middle school students. Middle school participants reported higher levels of bullying and anti-GSD language than high school students. They were also less likely to report supportive staff or an inclusive curriculum. Only 7.5% of middle schools had a GSA, compared to almost 60% of high schools (Kosciw et al., 2014).

In addition to absenteeism, students who reported victimization also reported earning lower grade point averages (GPAs), not making post-secondary plans, and not feeling a sense of belonging to their schools. Psychologically, students who were victimized reported lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression (Kosciw et al., 2014). The participants also reported that feeling unsafe or uncomfortable caused them to choose not to participate in some components of the school experience. Sixty-eight

percent missed school functions, and 61% chose not to participate in extracurricular activities (Kosciw et al., 2014). Only 23% of the participants said they participated in school sports (Kosciw et al., 2014).

School rules and policies created systemic homophobia and heteronormativity in many schools. Students reported that some schools rules were not enforced fairly for GSD students. For example, 28% said they were disciplined for a public display of affection (PDA) for which a non-GSD couple would not be disciplined. Almost 16% said they were disciplined for wearing clothing or items that supported GSD causes, and 31% of transgender students reported being disciplined for wearing clothing that did not match their legal sex (Kosciw et al., 2014). Transgender students faced other issues in identifying with their preferred gender—42% reported that they were prevented from using their preferred names and were instead required to use their legal names. Nearly 60% reported they were required to use the bathroom or locker room that matched their legal sex, not their preferred gender (Kosciw et al., 2014). Other school rules that promoted heteronormativity prevented students from attending a dance with a same-sex partner and prevented students from forming GSAs (Kosciw et al., 2014).

The report also puts together other demographic information to develop findings about some more specific groups of GSD students. For example, female GSD students were less likely to feel unsafe at school or be harassed or assaulted than male or transgender students (Kosciw et al., 2014). Forty-three percent of cisgender GSD female students reported verbal harassment, compared to over 50% of cisgender GSD male students and 60% of transgender students. Likewise, 14% of cisgender GSD female

students reported physical harassment compared to almost 18% of male cisgender and over 30% of transgender students (Kosciw et al., 2014).

However, the more out a participant was in school, the more likely he or she was to have high self-esteem and a strong sense of belonging to the school. More than 50% of students who were out to their peers and 47% who were out to their teachers reported feeling a high sense of self-esteem, compared to 40% of students who were not out to their peers and teachers. Nearly 60% of students who were out to their peers reported feeling a strong sense of school belonging, compared to only 46% of students who were not out to their peers (Kosciw et al., 2014).

As with most widespread studies of GSD students, this study has its limitations. Since it used only GSD students as its participants, it only targeted students through student or online groups, or through targeted advertising on social media sites. Therefore, students who are not out about their sexuality or gender orientation may not have had access or known about the survey. The survey was also open to the public online, and therefore researchers had to eliminate outlier responses that may have been answered insincerely by the general public (Kosciw et al., 2014). Overall, the report recommends that schools create inclusive curriculum, support students in creating GSA clubs, require and provide professional development for teachers on GSD issues, and create inclusive policies and rules (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Another study with similar findings was conducted by Russell et al. (2011). The study took data from a survey of 245 California-based GSD young adults which asked them to report on their experiences as GSD or GSD-perceived high school students. The study determined to measure association between school victimization and depression,

suicide and suicide ideation, and life satisfaction. While the study may have been affected by recall bias, this study gives a unique perspective because it shows how the effects of victimization in school can manifest into adult life. The study also looked at subgroups of GSD students (Russell et al., 2011).

When looking at subgroups, the study shows that females report victimization less than males and transgender students (Russell et al., 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising that male GSD young adults reported more negative mental health issues and more trouble adjusting to adult life than their female counterparts. Overall, females reported lower depression rates than males, but all students who were victimized were more likely to report depression, regardless of gender (Russell et al., 2011). The American culture tends to place a value on masculinity. Young females are often empowered by being told they can be whatever they want to be, but young men are still often expected to have a degree of masculinity. Therefore, transgender women and homosexual cisgender men often have a harder time because of a heteronormative culture in school (Russell et al., 2011). Students are more likely to hear that they are not acting “masculine enough” than that they are not acting “feminine enough.”

Students who reported higher levels of victimization were also more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors, were more than twice as likely to have a sexually transmitted infection, and were more likely to have been at risk for HIV infection (Russell et al., 2011).

Robinson and Espelage’s (2011) study of both middle and high school students has some telling findings about sexuality and gender expression in younger adolescents, and how those adolescents’ experiences are dramatically different from non-GSD

adolescents. Their study examined data from the Dane County Youth Assessment from Dane County, Wisconsin. The study was designed to identify at-risk behaviors in adolescents, such as sexual behaviors, drug use, suicide attempts and ideation, and victimization, and was given to 13,213 middle school students and 9,387 high school students. Of these students, 654 identified as GSD (Robinson & Espelage, 2011).

The results of the study found that GSD students were more likely to report suicide ideation, with only 0.4% of straight students reporting serious suicide ideation “all of the time,” versus 2.8% of GSD students. More specifically, 5.6% of bisexual students reported serious suicide ideation “all of the time” (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). GSD students were also more likely to have reported a suicide attempt than their straight peers (Robinson & Espelage, 2011).

GSD students were much more likely to report victimization, with GSD students being bullied at a rate of 78% compared to 30% of straight students (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). GSD students were also more likely to report cyber-bullying, which was even higher for GSD students at the middle school level. The study concludes that it is worth looking at subgroups of GSD adolescents, as some groups tend to be more at-risk than others. The authors also conclude that intervention earlier, at the middle school level, seems to make more sense, as many students have already developed poor academic behaviors, such as skipping school, because of bullying that is taking place even before they begin high school (Robinson & Espelage, 2011).

In order to develop a more qualitative view, Varjas et al. (2006) conducted a narrative study of sixteen GSD high school students in Atlanta. By coding the interviews, the researchers developed the following themes: GSD students’ perceptions

of school climate, aggression and victimization, and consequences of being a GSD high school student (Varjas et al., 2006).

In contrast to the other studies, this qualitative study found that GSD students reported actually feeling accepted in school. Students could mostly identify teachers or GSA advisers to go to for support if needed. However, many GSD students noted that their guidance counselors were not very supportive (Varjas et al., 2006).

Additionally, very few students in this study reported harassment and aggression. Only one student of the sixteen reported any physical confrontation related to sexuality or gender diversity (Varjas et al., 2006). Most GSD adolescents had experienced direct verbal abuse, such as name calling, as well as indirect verbal harassment, such as hearing the words “faggot” or “gay” with a negative connotation but not targeted at a GSD student specifically. Students also reported homophobic comments written on bathroom walls, posters in the school, or being made fun of in the locker rooms or sporting matches (Varjas et al., 2006). As other reports have shown, male students seemed to be targets of victimization more often than female students. Likewise, transgender students reported more harassment and victimization than cisgender students. Participants described the bullies as “White,” “Christian,” “insecure,” “redneck,” and “male.” Students who were in Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC) were also cited as bullies in one situation (Varjas et al., 2006).

Also unlike other studies, participants in this study reported that their sexuality or gender expression did not keep them from being involved in school activities, nor did it negatively affect their school performance. However, students did report feelings of

shame, actions like cutting, and having to change schools all as consequences of being bullied (Varjas et al., 2006).

The results in this study vary from more quantitative studies, and that could be because of the sampling method. Students in this study were found through a support group, meaning they were already finding support outside of school and were confident enough in their sexuality to be out. Also students would have to have parental support, as parent consent would have been required for them to participate. This could mean that the study was skewed to include more students who would have had positive experiences and would have been accepted in other aspects of their life as well as in school (Varjas et al., 2006). However, the study still gave important insights and detail into individual student experiences that the quantitative survey could not.

It is essential to the success of GSD students that educators understand this at-risk population and ensure that supportive policies, inclusive activities, and thorough professional development are available to support them.

School Belonging and Supports

In addition to facing bullying and harassment, GSD adolescents often lack a sense of belonging in their schools. They often feel as though they are underrepresented as a peer group and cannot find examples of role models in the curriculum (Holmes & Cahill, 2004). This is even truer for racial minorities and GSD minorities. GSD students of color have a unique situation — they face racism from society, non-acceptance and homophobia from their racial and ethnic groups, and derogatory language regarding both their race and their sexuality or gender expression (Holmes & Cahill, 2004). GSD

minority groups, such as bisexual or transgender adolescents, have an even lower sense of belonging than their gay or lesbian counterparts (Robinson & Espelage, 2011).

It is important to understand the problems that GSD students face and how teachers, administrators, counselors, and GSA advisers can work to make the school climate more accepting of GSD students. Not only can this help GSD students perform better in school, it can also prevent mental illness and poor health behaviors and save lives. Currently, 54% of transgender students state that they do not report victimization to an adult, and 33% report that when they do, they do not feel the situation was handled appropriately or thoroughly (Greytak et al., 2009). Although there is some evidence that supports such as GSAs and a supportive faculty and staff can prevent behaviors like bullying and harassment, it is important to explore how these supports can make the school environment even more accepting for GSD students, so that they can have a stronger sense of belonging in the school.

Importance of school belonging. In a longitudinal study by Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2013), 572 students were surveyed throughout their high school career in grades 9, 10, 11, and 12. The researchers asked students about their sense of belonging, their academic achievement, and how much they valued school. The study found that throughout high school male students remained relatively stable in their sense of belonging while female students tended to decline in their sense of belonging. However, for most students, school belonging remained relatively stable throughout high school, only decreasing by about 7% from 9th to 12th grade (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Not surprisingly, students who were engaged in extracurricular activities and had a relationship with their teachers were more likely to feel a sense of belonging in school (Gillen-O'Neel &

Fuligni, 2013). The study also found that students who had a stronger sense of school belonging were also more likely to respond that they understood the intrinsic value of education and that they thought school was useful and purposeful to them (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013).

A mixed methods study by Wallace, Ye, and Chhuon (2012) interviewed 72 high school students in focus groups and then surveyed 841 high school students. Wallace et al. (2012) determined that there were four factors that made students feel a sense of belonging in schools: a connection to the faculty and staff; a connection to at least one specific teacher; inclusion and participation in school events; and fitting in with peers. Wallace et al. (2012) also found that negative experiences tended to have a stronger effect on the sense of school belonging than positive experiences did, meaning that a student would have to have several positive experiences to negate the damage that one negative experience had on his or her sense of belonging.

Effects of supports for GSD students. One study by Graybill et al. (2009) sought to determine how adult advocates could improve the school climate for GSD students at the high school level. Recommendations for educators to improve school climate for GSD adolescents include incorporating GSD issues into the curriculum, offering professional development to staff, supporting a GSA, encouraging administration to create an anti-discrimination policy that includes GSD adolescents, and encouraging visibility of GSD adolescents and issues around the school. Adult advocates can have an important effect on GSD adolescents and their issues, but these advocates can be hard to find (Graybill et al., 2009).

In this study, 22 GSA advisers and high school employees were interviewed about their interactions and responses to commonly asked questions and situations from both students and coworkers (Graybill et al., 2009). The interview responses were coded and analyzed. Interactions between advisers and students typically dealt with homophobic language (advisers disciplined or educated violators), sexuality (advisers reported feeling uncomfortable talking to students about sex), suicide and at-risk behavior (advisers reported the student to the appropriate person), and sexual identity questions (advisers provided validation). In interacting with school personnel, advisers typically dealt with the following topics: A student's sexual identity (advisers unanimously did not share), discrimination of a student by an adult (advisers reported the incident), and student needs (advisers provided resources to personnel). Advisers also made recommendations to the rest of the school staff, including educating themselves about their beliefs about GSD adolescents, knowing their legal rights and the legal rights of adolescents, and understanding the consequences of not advocating for GSD adolescents. Recommendations were for advisers to be more proactive in educating staff and students, and to link that education to the consequences of not providing a positive school climate to GSD adolescents (Graybill et al., 2009).

This study presents a limited sample size but offers firm qualitative data about how GSAs, especially the advisers, can affect the school climate, especially when it comes to educating other school personnel (Graybill et al., 2009). While this study shows how adults can better interact with GSD adolescents in school, it does not reveal the overall positive effect of these interactions.

A study by Chesir-Teran and Hughes (2009) does show relationship between perceived programs in place to support GSD students and the occurrence of victimization and harassment. This study analyzed data collected from an internet survey of 2,037 GSD adolescents throughout the United States and Canada. The study found that in cases where students perceived strong policies and programs in place to support GSD adolescents, there were fewer reports of victimization and harassment. Interestingly, though, this correlation only occurred in the overall data and in the data for White students. Students of other racial groups did not perceive the same benefits of GSD programs and policies (Chesir-Teran and Hughes, 2009).

In addition to demonstrating the issues that GSD students face in high school, as mentioned above, the GLSEN National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2014) also gave a comprehensive look at the effects of positive supports on those negative behaviors and experiences. For example, students in schools with a GSA (50% of the schools reported) felt safer, heard less negative GSD language, had more supportive teachers, and experienced less victimization (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Little more than 18% of students reported that GSD people and issues were positively represented in their curriculum, but where it was included, there were lower rates of homophobic comments and higher rates of feeling accepted (Kosciw et al., 2014). Where inclusive curriculum existed, 75% of participants said their classmates were more accepting, compared to less than 40% in schools without an inclusive curriculum (Kosciw et al., 2014). Students were more likely to talk to their teachers about GSD related issues more than any other school staff member, including their guidance

counselor, and the more inclusive the curriculum, the more likely a student was to talk to his or her teachers (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Almost all GSD students, more than 96%, could identify one staff member that was supportive, but only about 60% could identify six or more supportive staff members, and less than 40% could identify eleven or more. Additionally, less than one third of participants reported having supportive administration. Students who reported more supportive staff (eleven or more) were also less likely to have reported skipping school and more likely to report a higher GPA (Kosciw et al., 2014). Schools that used Safe Space stickers or posters to indicate that a teacher or faculty member does not allow homophobic or discriminatory language and that GSD people are accepted reported higher numbers of identifiable supportive teachers. However, 70% of participants said they had never seen a Safe Space sticker or poster in their school (Kosciw et al., 2014). Overall the study reports that since its start in 1999, there has been an increase in GSAs, supportive staff, supportive rules, and inclusive curriculum. There has also been a decrease in negative language and verbal harassment (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Using a previous GLSEN study, Diaz et al. (2010) look specifically at what effect these factors had on a student's feeling of connectedness to school, and the importance of those feelings. Like the 2014 report, this study looked at data gathered from an online GLSEN survey of 5,487 GSD students nationwide. The study showed that school supports were directly related to a lower victimization rate, and that a lower victimization rate was directly related to a higher feeling of school connectedness (Diaz et al., 2010). Students who participated in GSAs specifically had a higher attendance rate, showing an indirect connection between school connectedness and school supports. The authors

recommend that schools provide supportive staff for students to talk to and who are trained to recognize and correct bullying incidents; support GSAs; and put policies in place that protect students against harassment based on sexuality and gender preferences, while eliminating policies that promote heteronormativity, such as gender specific dress codes (Diaz et al., 2010).

A study by Horn and Romeo (2010) looked specifically at peer acceptance of GSD students and how schools can support a more accepting climate among students. Peer relationships are important for all students, but many GSD students lost positive peer relationships when they came out. The article identifies that there are three beliefs about GSD adolescents that need to be addressed and changed, and offers three solutions to addressing these beliefs. The beliefs are that homosexuality is wrong, that certain stereotypes of GSD adolescents are true or apply to all GSD adolescents, and that bullying of GSD adolescents is acceptable. The last belief is generally the easiest to tackle, as the authors ascertain that most adolescents understand that bullying is wrong despite their beliefs about a person's behavior (Horn & Romeo, 2010). However, the authors also noticed that while adolescents recognized that it is not acceptable to harass someone based on their sexuality, they were more likely to exclude GSD adolescents and did not see exclusion as a form of bullying (Horn & Romeo, 2010). The study also showed that as students matured and entered their older adolescent years, they were more likely to show acceptance of GSD adolescents, which could be an indication that education of GSD issues needs to occur earlier, in middle school (Horn & Romeo, 2010). The authors advocate for safe school practices such as clear anti-bullying policies and changes to heteronormative cultures in the school. The authors also advocate for more

interactions between straight and GSD adolescents, citing GSAs as one way for interaction. However, a student with prejudices against GSD adolescents may not be inclined to join a GSA, so it is important to foster other interactions throughout the school, in the classroom through cooperative learning, or through other activities.

Effects of GSAs on school belonging. Several studies specifically look at the effect that being part of a GSA in high school has on GSD students. Many studies report that GSD students benefit from having school supports such as GSAs, even if they are not personally a part of the club.

Before understanding the role of GSAs in present day classrooms, it is important to understand the concept of a GSA and the history of youth activist clubs. Cohen (2005) gives a history of GSD youth activist clubs from the mid-1960s. Cohen (2005) organizes the different structures and purposes of these groups into seven categories. The mid-late 1960s saw grassroots groups that were determined to change definitions of "normal" and "deviant" and were similar to other civil rights groups of the 1960s in their actions. In the 1970s, more formalized community groups began to exist, and later in the 1980s, school-based counseling groups and alternative schools, such as the Harvey Milk School, came into existence (Cohen, 2005). The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the emergence of GSAs in schools as organizations (although the author claims the first school based GSA to have started in the 1960s.) Finally, the advent of the internet in the 1990s brought about the online support forum, popular because of the anonymity it provided to members. The author notes that early groups were about trying to change institutions and culture. He also notes that the groups have accomplished a great deal in improving school safety and climate (Cohen, 2005).

Another study by Griffin, Waugh, and Beyer (2004) breaks down the roles of GSAs by looking at twenty-two Massachusetts-based GSAs. This article looks at the different roles of GSAs in high schools. The authors researched the GSAs by using a broad range of research methods, including focus groups, interviews, observations, collections of GSA materials, and surveys (Griffin et al., 2004). All of this data was coded to create a profile for each school. The authors then categorized the roles of GSAs as follows: counseling and support, safe space, school education and awareness (primary), and school education and awareness (as a part of wider school efforts) (Griffin et al., 2004).

Groups that primarily offered guidance and support usually were just individual or small group counseling sessions and often did not include allies. These groups were helpful to individual students, but were largely invisible to the student body and did not affect the overall climate of the school. Safe zone groups offered a place for students to socialize and develop self-awareness and obtain counseling, but also did not have an effect on the overall climate of the school. Additionally, the membership of these groups was often over 50% straight allies, and GSD students sometimes reported feeling uncomfortable sharing in these spaces, preferring to talk to a counselor or just in a small group of other GSD students (Griffin et al., 2004).

Groups that were the school's primary vehicle for advocacy often created professional development opportunities for teachers and pushed for change in curriculum. They also had widespread advocacy programs directed towards students, and may have passed out educational materials or created awareness displays (Griffin et al., 2004). GSAs that were part of a wider effort to raise awareness were the most supported groups,

as the school or community already had an organization in place to raise awareness and educate students and faculty. These groups were the most visible and were in schools with the most tolerant climates. While this study makes some conclusions of the effects of GSAs on student belonging and school climate, it also gives a comprehensive overview of what GSAs actually do and what they look like (Griffin et al., 2004).

Another study looked at the patterns of social conditions surrounding schools that established GSAs prior to 2003 (Fetner & Kush, 2007). The authors gathered their research by compiling and coding information about registered GSAs from across the country. They looked at GSAs registered through several nationwide organizations, such as GLSEN. Since there were almost no GSAs before 1990, and since the number doubled between 2003 and 2008 when the article was written, the authors consider schools with GSAs prior to 2003 to be “early adopters” (Fetner & Kush, 2007). The researchers make six hypotheses about social conditions and GSAs:

- Urban schools were more likely to be early adopters than rural schools.
- Schools in the West and Northeast would be more likely to be early adopters than schools in the South and Midwest, based on the more liberal political climate.
- High schools with larger student populations would be more likely to be early adopters.
- Schools with fewer low-income students would be more likely to be early adopters.
- Schools in states that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation would more likely be early adopters.

- Schools in states with adult-run alliances to support GSAs would be more likely to be early adopters (Fetner & Kush, 2007).

They found that urban and suburban schools were most likely to be early adopters, with 11.6 and 12.1% respectively having GSAs, compared to 6.6% overall. Additionally, 11.4% of schools in the East and 14.5% in the West are early adopters, compared to 2.3% in the South and 3.8% in the Midwest (Fetner & Kush, 2007). Schools with more resources, and schools in states with antidiscrimination laws and adult programs were all more likely to be early adopters of GSAs. The authors stress the importance of making these resources available to adolescents, who otherwise will not experience GSD issues, supports, or knowledge until college (Fetner & Kush, 2007).

Another qualitative study sought to identify the effects GSAs have on school reform efforts, particularly those that challenge a heteronormative school culture (Mayberry et al., 2013). This study examined four GSAs in Progress County School District to determine the clubs' effects and challenges. The authors interviewed 20 stakeholders involved in the four GSAs. These included students, advisers, principals, and district administrators. The authors claim that GSAs are valuable to the mental health of students and work to address some homophobic behaviors, but they still do not address the heteronormative culture of the school (Mayberry et al., 2013). The study looked at how schools often perpetuated silence around GSD issues and students, how GSAs created safe spaces for those adolescents, and how GSAs created changes that broke the silence around GSD issues. The study showed that even when a GSA was present in the school, a silence around GSD issues was perpetuated. Teachers did not address homophobic comments or language. Non-member students did not show hostility toward

the club but also did not seem to care about it. There was no overt resistance to the club, but there was passive resistance. Even most GSA participants became more involved in the social aspect of the club and apathetic to GSD issues and current events. Most clubs were successful at promoting safety and acceptance. The clubs were also successful in empowering students to address homophobic language and behaviors they experienced (Mayberry et al., 2013).

However, members and advisers of GSAs were fearful of going further in providing education to staff, students, and community, fearing backlash from administration and parents. GSAs felt supported by administration when their activities took place within their group, but they were not supported when they tried to break down larger heteronormative cultures within the school (Mayberry et al., 2013). The study found that there are several barriers to GSAs creating real school reform, mostly relating to reaction from parents and the community (Mayberry et al., 2013).

Although this study is limited by its sample size and scope (only studying four GSAs in one school district), the conclusions drawn are logical and interesting. Most interesting is the effect (or lack thereof) of GSAs on the heteronormative culture, and these authors claim that GSAs need to do more to create those real cultural changes (Mayberry et al., 2013).

Another study that shows the relationship between the existence of a GSA and positive effects on GSD students was conducted by Heck, Flentje, and Cochran (2011). In this study, the authors surveyed 145 GSD adolescents and young adults ages 18-20 to determine the relationship between positive mental health and the prevalence of GSAs in their high school experiences. This study showed a strong correlation between schools

with GSAs and stronger feelings of school belonging, less substance abuse, and less depression than adolescents who attended a school without a GSA (Heck et al., 2011).

The authors conclude that school psychologists can help GSD adolescents by encouraging administration to adopt anti-bullying policies, train teachers, support the adoption of GSAs, and add GSD issues into the curriculum (Heck et al., 2011).

Another study sought to understand the effects of GSA participation by surveying 79 college-aged GSD students about their participation in GSA (Heck, Lindquist, Stewart, Brennan, & Cochran, 2013). It particularly looked at how participation was related to student adjustment, and reasons why GSD students did not participate in a GSA. The study shows that college students who participated in GSAs in high school were more likely to have come out to at least one person at an earlier age, and that GSA members were "more out" by their senior year than non-members (Heck et al., 2013). Through coding of survey questions, researchers determined five reasons why GSD students chose not to participate in GSAs:

- Lack of interest
- Too many commitments and no time to join
- Not out or not identified as GSD in high school
- Fear of backlash or discrimination.
- The club was not active, or focused on more social aspects and not on advocacy issues (Heck et al., 2013).

Some started or joined the club and then quit for these reasons. In some cases, the school put too many restrictions on the club and students quit. The authors conclude that more research should be done about GSAs and the process of coming out. They also

conclude that GSA leaders need to consider adult and student support, the organization of the club and the amount of activities it is able to accomplish, and the size and diversity of membership. GSAs can have a positive effect on student belonging and school climate, but students have to want to be a part of them if they are to exist.

In order to show relationship between GSAs and positive young adult well-being, Toomey et al. (2011) surveyed 245 GSD young adults about their experiences with GSAs in their schools. Typically, GSD students in high schools have a greater risk of suicide, depression, substance abuse, low self-esteem, victimization by bullies, and overall negative mental health. This study examines the effect of GSAs on young adults based on the presence of the GSA, each individual's participation, and the perceived effectiveness of the club. Toomey et al.'s (2011) literature review reveals that there are over four thousand schools with registered GSAs in the United States and that these schools report lower instances of harassment and bullying. However, little research had been done on the effect of these clubs through adulthood. Participants were asked about GSAs and their participation in high school, as well as their mental health, suicide attempts, and substance abuse, and their educational attainment. In a survey of 245 GSD young adults, 35% had a GSA in their high school. Of those young adults, 64% participated in the club (Toomey et al., 2011). The study found that students who attended schools with a GSA, regardless of their participation, experienced a greater rate of positive self-esteem, lower rates of depression, and a higher likelihood of obtaining a college education. However, there was no correlation between the presence of a GSA and the decrease in victimization of GSD adolescents. Those who participated had a lower rate of depression and suicide attempts. The study recognizes that the research is inconclusive in some areas because of

a small sample size, but concludes that overall there is a positive correlation between the existence of GSAs and the mental health of GSD students, even into their young adult years. They recommend that school administrators support the formation of GSAs in high school (Toomey et al., 2011).

In another study, Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, and Laub (2009) discuss the connection between GSAs and youth empowerment by conducting a focus group of fifteen student leaders of GSAs. These leaders were adolescents who identified as lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, or straight allies. The authors focus on empowerment because they feel it has been overshadowed by reports of negative effects of being a GSD adolescent. They also label GSAs as unique because most of them do not have adult leaders or are controlled more by adolescents than by adults. Also, GSAs are both social and educational clubs in nature. The authors discuss three aspects of empowerment — using knowledge, personal empowerment, and relational empowerment (Russell et al., 2009). Students believed that being in a GSA gave them the knowledge to fight ignorance and create change in their schools. Personally, students felt better about themselves, felt like they were in control of themselves and their school, and felt that they had a voice in their schools. Relationally, students thought they were making a difference by empowering others and leaving a legacy in their schools (Russell et al., 2009). While the sample size is small, this article really gets to the heart of the importance of GSAs and their effect on individual adolescents.

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that students require their basic necessities met, including safety and belonging, before they can achieve self-esteem and self-actualization (Ravitch, 2007). Many schools have bullying policies in place that

have helped students to achieve a feeling of safety. Now it is time for schools to adopt or change policies and curriculum so that students can have their belonging needs met, as well.

Summary

The literature review presented here organizes the three streams of research informing this study. Queer theory is the overarching theme, and within that the problems that GSD high school students face are apparent. Fortunately, educators can help those students by giving them the supports they need to feel a sense of belonging, which is important to their academic success, well-being, and self-actualization. Queer theory focuses on the gender and sexuality structures that society has built which must be deconstructed for GSD people to feel connected to society. This includes students within the institution of public education. The research on GSD students and their experiences in high school underscores the importance to reach these students who are often at-risk due to bullying and exclusion. Finally, the research on student belonging highlights the need for students to feel included in their school settings. Schools can achieve this for GSD students by helping them to connect with their teachers, the curriculum, and their classmates through professional development, revision of exclusive policies and curriculum, and GSAs.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

GSD students in the United States are at risk for feeling a lack of school belonging and involvement, which can lead to low student achievement, school attrition, victimization, mental illness, and even suicide. Like many high schools across the country, School A in central Pennsylvania may have heteronormative policies and traditions in place that detract from GSD students' feelings of belonging and their ability to be involved in all aspects of the high school experience. In addition, supports may not be in place or may need to be strengthened to help support these students through their school experience.

Through qualitative narrative analysis, this study attempted to identify the effects of heteronormative policies and traditions on recent graduates from School A, as well as recognize areas where the school could improve in supporting these students. The primary research question this study attempted to answer was: How can understanding GSD students' experiences with school belonging effect positive change in school policies, traditions, and supports? The study also attempted to answer the following sub-questions:

1. What school traditions and policies, if any, have a negative effect on GSD students' sense of belonging and how can they be revised to be more inclusive?
2. What systems have GSD students experienced that make them feel more supported in schools?

- a. How have they been supported by the school's GSA and what changes can be made to make the group more supportive?
- b. How have they been supported by faculty and administration in the school and what changes can be made to make faculty and administration more supportive?

This chapter includes the research design and rationale, a description of the site and population, the research methods and data analysis methods used, and ethical considerations taken.

Research Design and Rationale

“Stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand the world around us” (Merriam, 2009, pg. 32). People have language and therefore the ability to tell their stories. It is the researcher's job to get to the meaning and essence of this story (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2013). A qualitative, narrative approach allowed participants to share their experiences as GSD adolescents, particularly their sense of school belonging and its effect on their overall school experience. Through multiple interviews, participants were deeply engaged and allowed me to become submerged in their experiences (Gunzenhauser, 2006). In engaging the interviewees as participants in the research process, and in an effort to deconstruct labels and norms that have previously been used to describe the GSD community, it was the goal of this study to understand how the participants made sense of their own life experiences and to give importance to the experience itself, not just the outcome (Merriam, 2009). To understand these experiences, interviewing was not only an option; it was a necessity (Seidman, 2013).

Coding of these shared stories allowed the identification of parallel stories as well as the unique experiences of each participant. This study was somewhat emergent in nature. While the study was pre-structured, a certain amount of flexibility was required as new insights were gathered. This resulted in changes or additions to research questions, participant selection, and analytic strategies (Maxwell, 2013). While some comparability and generalizability was sacrificed in conducting a less structured study, a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants involved was gained, which speaks to the purpose and philosophical foundations of this study (Maxwell, 2013).

This study was conducted through the lens of critical research based in queer theory. In determining how current structures in the high school setting are continuing to reinforce heteronormativity, this study sought to challenge those structures and the lasting effect they have on both straight and GSD students' perceptions of sexuality and gender. The goal is to change the status quo and to improve conditions for these students.

The purpose of this study was to give recent high school graduates a platform to share their experiences as GSD students and to use those stories to create change in the high school setting, which includes a more supportive environment and a stronger sense of school belonging for all students. As narrative researchers, "we cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret" (Riessman, 1993, pg. 8). A narrative analysis approach based in critical research and queer theory employed these shared experiences to create change in the school so that teachers, administrators, and counselors can offer a higher level of support for these students.

Site and Population

Population Description

It is difficult to describe the GSD population at School A and the school district as a whole because records are not kept on a student's sexuality or gender orientation preferences. Currently, the school's GSA is made up of about twenty-five participants, out of a total student population of just under seven hundred students. However, some of the members of the GSA do not identify as GSD but as straight allies. Additionally, there are students who do identify as GSD who are not part of the GSA and others who are not open about their sexuality or who are still questioning their sexuality at this point in their adolescent development. Therefore, it is difficult to identify the exact demographics of the GSD student population at the district's sole high school. Similarly, records are not kept at the middle or elementary school levels so it is difficult to identify the demographics of the GSD student population in the district as a whole, as well.

Six GSD students who graduated from School A in the two years preceding this study were identified as the population. The population was limited to students who had graduated, were actively involved in the school's GSA, and identified as GSD or an ally. This time frame was used to include only students who graduated since the formation of School A's GSA program. Three of these students were founding members of the GSA. Therefore, criterion sampling was used, in that all members of the population that met these criteria were invited and included in the study (Creswell, 2013). Because the population was so small, it was important to invite all members to be interviewed in order to understand a variety of experiences and how different students may have experienced the same school environment differently or similarly (Maxwell, 2013). Snowball

sampling was also an option if the chosen participants had been able to identify other possible participants who had valuable experiences to share, but they were unable to identify any additional students (Creswell, 2013). The six members of the population were invited to participate via email. Four students accepted the invitation to participate. One other declined to participate and one failed to respond. The participants were assigned pseudonyms. They are identified as in the sample below (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Graduation Year	Narrative of Gender Description	Narrative of Sexuality Description	GSA Involvement
Freya	19	2014	Identifies as a cisgender female	Identifies as a straight ally	Club officer
Clara	18	2014	Identifies as a cisgender female	Identifies as bisexual	Club member
Flynn	19	2013	Identified as a cisgender female in high school, now identifies as a demiboi.	Identified as a lesbian in high school and now identifies as grey-asexual	Club president and founding member
Emily	18	2014	Identifies as a cisgender female	Identified as a lesbian in high school and now identifies as fluid/bisexual	Club president and founding member

In addition to the main interviews, artifact collection and interviews at the site occurred in order to understand the level of support and systems in place. Interviews were also conducted with the school's principal and a guidance counselor. These interviews added supplemental information to the experiences the main participants gave regarding

their experiences with adults, policies, traditions, and curriculum in the school.

Participants in these site interviews were also assigned pseudonyms.

Site Description

There are 686 students who attend School A (see Table 2). The school offers grades 9-12 with a graduation rate of 91%. The ethnic demographics of the school are 73.47% White, 9.04% Hispanic, 8.75% Black, 6.12% multi-racial, and 2.04% Asian. The students are 34.84% economically disadvantaged, 1.75% English language learner, and 16.18% special education. The student body is 50.29% female and 49.71% male. The student-teacher ration is 12:1. The school itself is in Central Pennsylvania in a small town outside of a larger metropolitan area. Statistically, schools in small towns tend to have the highest frequency of anti-GSD language and victimization and are the least likely to have resources for GSD students (Kosciw et al., 2014). The resident population of the district is 18,355 people, with a mean family income of \$49,728 and a per capita income of \$20,611.

In 2012, three students, with my help, created the school's first Gay-Straight Alliance. It was in its third year in 2014-2015. Despite fears from the student organizers, the club did not meet much resistance and has been accepted as one of the more active clubs in the school community. The club's membership has grown over its three years, and in 2014-2015, there are twenty-five members signed up to participate. While there has been no formal statistical analysis of the club as a whole, it is made up of a diverse group of ethnicities, gender identities, sexualities, and religions.

Table 2*School A Demographics*

School A Demographics		
Basic School Information	Student Population	686
	Grade Levels	9-12
	Graduation Rate	91%
	Teacher to Student Ratio	12:1
Ethnicity	White	73.47%
	Hispanic	9.04%
	Black	8.75%
	Multiracial	6.12%
	Asian	2.04%
Gender	Female	50.29%
	Male	49.7%
Special Groups	Economically Disadvantaged	34.84%
	English Language Learner	1.75%
	Special Education	16.18%

The school has anti-bullying and harassment policies. In the board policy on bullying found on the district’s website, the district defines bullying as:

“an intentional electronic, written, verbal or physical act or series of acts directed at another student or students, which occurs in a school setting and/or outside a school setting, that is severe, persistent or pervasive and has the effect of doing any of the following: 1. Substantial interference with a student’s education. 2. Creation of a threatening environment. 3. Substantial disruption of the orderly operation of the school.” (2002)

The policy encourages reporting of bullying and requires investigation of reports of bullying. It is the faculty member’s responsibility to intervene if he or she witnesses bullying. However, harassment due to sexual orientation, as well as gender, race,

ethnicity, physical disability, age, or religion, is classified as unlawful harassment, which is considered an elevated offense. These offenses are investigated more thoroughly and legal action can be taken in these cases. Harassment due to gender identification or expression is not specified as an elevated offense.

Site Access

As the GSA adviser and a teacher at the site, I was able to easily access most resources at School A. The building principal, the district superintendent, and the school board gave permission for me to conduct this study. Additionally, expedited Institutional Review Board approval to conduct this study was granted since the participants were over 18.

Because parental permission can be difficult to gain for these types of studies, recent graduates instead of current students were used. First, adolescents may simply forget to obtain parental permission and complete the appropriate paperwork. Secondly, parents may not want their children to participate when they learn that the study has something to do with sexuality and gender identity. Students may also not want to obtain permission because it would require they talk to their parents about sexuality or their involvement in the GSA club. Students who easily seek parental permission may be more at ease speaking to their parents about sexuality and therefore have a different perception of sexuality and gender than students that are not supported at home (Varjas et al., 2006). Because the primary participants were recent graduates but were no longer affiliated with the site, there were no other issues in accessing them.

Approval from the superintendent and the school board was granted to interview administration and a representative from guidance. These participants were invited to

participate via email. Artifacts used included board policies, faculty handbooks, and curriculum.

Research Methods

Description of Each Method Used

Method 1 – narrative interviews. The primary data collection for this project was three interviews, including one focus group interview, which allowed the recent graduates to share their experiences as GSD students at School A. Table 3 breaks down the purpose of each data collection and analysis step.

Instrument description. In order to capture the context of the participants' school experiences, a three part interview series was used to establish a relationship with each participant (Seidman, 2013). The first interview focused on the participants' past experiences, particularly their experiences in high school. The second interview focused on the present and gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on their school experiences and how they shaped the person they are today. The third interview was conducted as a focus group with all four participants. This gave the participants an opportunity to build on each other's responses in an effort to reflect on their school experiences and to make suggestions for school policy changes, professional development needs, and GSA goals. This method also provided an understanding of the context of the participants' experiences and helped the participants to reflect on experiences and what they mean.

Participant interviews were based on a pre-structured framework (see Appendix A), but the interview was designed to remain flexible, so that additional questions, probing questions, and follow-up questions could be added in an effort to capture rich

stories from each participant. Having less structure gave the participants more control over the interviews and their personal stories (Riessman, 1993). For the initial interview, most questions were adapted from GLSEN's annual school climate survey, for which they give open permission to schools and researchers to use on their website (*Local school climate survey*, 2012). See Appendix A for justification of each initial interview question. Additional questions and follow-ups were revised for the second and third interviews based on the participants' initial responses.

The second interview was based on the students' present experiences. More structured questions were developed following the initial interview. Topics covered included students' present involvement with the GSD community or with GSAs at the college level (Sanlo, 2005), students' sense of belonging at their present institution of schooling or in the workplace, students' well-being as an adult (Russell et al., 2011; Toomey et al., 2011), and further reflection of belonging in high school (Kosciw et al., 2014).

The final interview was conducted as a focus group with all participants so that they could build upon each other's answers and stimulate a rich group discussion. The focus group was also pre-structured but was flexible so that additional questions and follow-up questions were added after the initial interviews. Some questions were generated by the participants themselves during the focus group. While the content of the first interviews may have been inappropriate for a focus group because of the sensitive and personal nature of the experiences, the third interview focused on changes that the school can make (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, participants, having already reflected on

their personal experiences, were able to collaborate to suggest and bring about change (Mayberry et al., 2013).

As recommended by Seidman (2013), each interview was scheduled for 90 minutes, which gave the participant and me sufficient time to cover the research topics in depth. The second interview was scheduled within one to two weeks of the first, and the final focus group was scheduled within two weeks of the second interview, which helped the interviewer and participants establish a relationship. Because of issues with traveling (some participants were dispersed among the region at various post-secondary institutions), participants were given the option to participate in both the first and second interviews on the same day, but this was not necessary. Every effort was made to ensure that interviews were in person, but traveling required that one participant complete her interviews and the focus group electronically via Skype.

The validity of the interview protocol was tested through a pilot study with one of the study participants. The protocol for all three rounds of the recent graduate study were given. The questions were modified based on feedback from the participant, the thoroughness in the content of data received, the ability to create rich narratives based on the data received, and alignment of the responses and questions to the literature review. After the pilot study, the only modifications made were the addition of follow up questions to ensure thoroughness in the data received and minor changes in question wording to clarify meaning.

Participant selection. As mentioned above, all four identified members of the population were selected based on criterion sampling methods and their ability and desire to participate in the study. Additional participants could have been selected using a

snowball sampling method, if the original participants had been able to identify other recent graduates who may have been interested in participating (Creswell, 2013).

Interviewing as many students involved as possible gave the broadest variety of experiences, as well as gave me the ability to make comparisons and find common themes among multiple accounts (Maxwell, 2013). However, the smaller sample size of four participants allowed depth in the questioning and analysis.

Identification and invitation. Participants received a formal written invitation and informed consent form via email to participate in the study. The invitation included an understanding of the time commitment involved in participating and an overview of the topics and purpose of the interviews. Once the participant agreed to participate, an exact timeline was developed to schedule the interviews for the following month. At this time, more in depth contact information was gathered from the participants, as well.

The informed consent form was reviewed with each participant in detail at the first interview and the participant signed it at that time. The consent form outlined the privacy and confidentiality of the study. Participants understood that they had the opportunity to review their responses. They were also asked to choose a pseudonym so that their names did not appear with their responses. Any names that appeared in their stories were changed to an initial. Participants had the option to drop out at any point in the study. They understood that their responses would appear in the published dissertation and that their names would not be connected to their stories, but details of their stories may reveal their identity, so complete anonymity could not be guaranteed (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The consent form was reviewed at each subsequent interview.

The informed consent form also outlined any potential risks associated with the interview process, as well as the rights of the participants, the possible benefits, how the information could be used in addition to the dissertation, and contact information (Seidman, 2013).

Data collection. Interviews were recorded using the Atlas.ti application for the iPad or a USB audio recorder. The interviewer also took notes as the participants responded. Every effort was made to complete the interviews in person. However, it was necessary to complete one participant's interviews via Skype due to time and transportation issues.

Ninety minutes was set aside for each interview so that the participant could explore the interview topics in depth (Seidman, 2013). All three interviews were completed over the course of a month and a half. The interviews were designed to be done with about a week break between each for reflection. Most of the interviews took place within one to two weeks of the previous one. The interviews could have been given simultaneously if absolutely necessary. Seidman (2013) states that an interview under less than ideal circumstances is better than no interview at all. Fortunately, interviewing went smoothly and all participants were able to meet three times for the interviews.

I transcribed the interviews personally, which allowed for multiple opportunities to review the data in depth (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012). Once transcribed, the transcripts were loaded into NVivo for data analysis. Participants were able to read the transcripts and make any clarifications or additions, as well as to eliminate any part of the interview. Each interview transcript was sent to each participant within one to two weeks

of the interview and participants had a week to review and request changes, clarifications, or omissions. No participants opted to make any changes to their transcripts. The graduate participants were likewise given their narratives for review and no participant opted to make any changes or clarifications. See Table 4 for a timeline of the data collection procedure.

Method 2 – Site artifact collection and interviews. In addition to the interviews of participants, the study included interviews to gain an understanding of the level of professional preparation and training teachers and other faculty members and administrators receive to prepare them to teach GSD students, the representation of GSD themes and issues in course curriculum, heteronormative policies, procedures, and traditions that may exist, and policies and procedures that support GSD students. This data was used to corroborate and fill in the gaps of the narrative stories that were developed from the recent graduates.

In order to gain further evidence of student experiences, after the initial student interviews, I also collected and reviewed school policies and procedures such as the bullying policy, the faculty handbook, and the student code of conduct.

Instrument description. After the initial interviews with the graduates, the administration and a representative from the guidance office were interviewed to determine their knowledge of GSD student issues and to gain an understanding for the school's procedures and supports. This interview instrument was pre-structured but was altered to add questions that emerged from the recent graduate interviews (See Appendix B). Because the site interviewees were not the primary participants or subjects of the study, their interviews were more structured and less in-depth in that these participants

were only interviewed once. Justification for the interview questions was rooted largely in queer theory, as can be seen in the matrix in Appendix B.

The interviews took place face to face and were scheduled for ninety minutes. A follow-up interview was conducted with both site participants about a specific incident that several of the graduate participants discussed.

Participant selection. School A's principal and a representative from guidance were interviewed based on the interviews from student participants. The representative from guidance was chosen randomly between two guidance counselors.

Identification and invitation. Site participants were invited to participate in the study with a formal invitation and informed consent form through email. This email outlined the time commitment involved in the interviews as well as the purpose of the study and the use of the information acquired. Once the participant accepted, an interview was set up within the next two weeks. These interviews followed the first and second interviews of the recent graduate participants.

During the interview, the informed consent form was reviewed in detail and the participant was asked to sign at that time. The consent form discussed the privacy and confidentiality of the study. Site participants understood that they would have the opportunity to review their responses. They were assigned pseudonyms, and their names will never be published with their responses. Any names that appeared in their stories were changed to an initial. However, details of their stories may reveal their identities, so anonymity could not be promised (Miles et al., 2014).

Also included in the informed consent form were potential risks, rights of the participants including the right to leave the study, possible benefits, how the information may be used, and contact information of the researcher (Seidman, 2013).

Data collection. Interviews were recorded using a USB audio recorder and were conducted in person. The interviewer also took notes as the participants responded. Ninety minutes were set aside for each interview. The interviews were transcribed and loaded into NVivo for data analysis.

Once interviews were transcribed, the participants were able to read the transcripts and make any clarifications or additions. Participants were also able to read the narratives and add additional data or clarify statements made during the interview, as well as to eliminate any portions they wished. The participants were sent their transcripts within a week of the interview, and were sent their narratives when they were finished. One site participant made clarifications to her language in the narrative.

All site interviews took place after the first student interviews were complete, and the questions, while pre-structured, were revised based on student responses. See Table 4 for a timeline of the data collection procedure.

Documents were gathered from district resources such as the guidance office and the school and district website.

Table 2*Data Collection and Analysis for Narrative Interview of Recent Graduates*

Purpose of Instrument:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative interviews gave GSD students an opportunity to share their experiences with school belonging in high school, as well as to reflect on the effects of their experiences and how the school setting could be improved.
Domain and Instrument Specifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This instrument addressed most of the research subquestions for this study. Questions were asked about school climate, school policies and procedures, school curriculum, faculty support, and the school's GSA. • The number of questions per topic varied as this is emerging research. There were at least two for each area in the semi-structured interviewing tool.
Creating the Instrument	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The instrument formed for the interviews was loosely structured to allow for emerging questions to develop throughout the interview, in an effort to develop a thorough narrative. Subsequent interview protocols were developed after the initial interview, in order to expand on topics brought up in the first interview.
Pilot Testing and Revisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The initial interview protocol was tested on one sample graduate. • Questions were scrutinized for relevance and clarity at that time. • Additional questions were added as needed based on information that was lacking or relevant topics that were brought up by the sample participant.
Conducting Validity Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data was validated through correspondence with participants (Riessman, 1993; Seidman, 2012)). • Comparisons were made with other narratives from GSD students and the research to look for corroboration. • Coding was reviewed by a peer reviewer to test interrater reliability (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012).

Table 4*Timeline for Data Collection and Reporting*

Date	Task	Participants	Purpose
late February 2015	Identified and invited participants	Recent graduate participants	To inform participants of study purpose and gain participants for study
early March 2015	Conducted pilot interviews and analysis	One participant	To determine the validity and scope of the interview protocol and analysis technique and revise accordingly
mid to late March 2015	Conducted initial graduate interviews – 90 minutes each, (Seidman, 2013)	Recent graduate participants	To begin to gather experiences to form a narrative, to use base information to guide the rest of the study
mid-March 2015	Identified and invited administration and guidance representatives to participate	Site participants	To create a link between the shared experiences of the recent graduates and faculty and administration
mid-March 2015	Reviewed initial recent graduate surveys and developed next questions – 1-2 days per interview (Miles et al., 2014).	Recent graduate participants	To gather experiences to include in the narrative analysis
late March or early April 2015	Conducted second interview and focus group with recent graduate participants – 90 minutes per interview	Recent graduate participants	To add to the experiences included in the narratives and to follow up with any additional questions that emerged during

Date	Task	Participants	Purpose
early April 2015	Conducted site interviews –90 minutes per interview	Site participants	the study To create a link between the shared experiences of the recent graduates and faculty and administration
mid-April 2015	Transcribed recent graduate interviews and sent to participants for review	Recent graduate participants and site participants	To check for accuracy and validate via correspondence with participants
early May 2015	Code all interviews – 1-2 days per interview	Site participants Recent graduate participants	To identify common themes so recommendations can be made for professional development
June 2015	Results were analyzed and reported – 1-2 days per interview	Researcher	To complete dissertation and share recommendations with the school To use transcripts to develop a core narrative of the experiences of the participants

Data Analysis

As the data was collected, the audio files were transcribed. Nonverbal noises, notes, and interruptions were included, so as to capture all nuances of the interview (Seidman, 2013). These transcripts were used to identify areas for detailed analysis and selected portions were re-transcribed for more detail, in order to ensure that every detail of the interview was included (Riessman, 1993).

Recent graduate interviews were reviewed as they were conducted, and subsequent interview questions were developed from the results of the previous interviews. However, formal coding and analysis did occur until all the interviews were conducted and all data was gathered from each recent graduate, as to create a full picture (Seidman, 2013). It was important to keep an open mind in reviewing the data and so waiting until all of the interviews were finished prevented prematurely developing themes or conclusions about the interviews (Seidman, 2013). Notes and journaling were completed after conducting and again after transcribing each interview, which helped with creating questions for the next set of interviews, analyzing and coding later, and checking and bracketing any bias.

In beginning the analysis of the data gathered from recent graduates, I first used NVivo software to develop word clouds which highlighted the most frequently used words in the interviews. Next, interviews were coded line by line on paper. The following coding methods were used until clear themes emerged:

- In Vivo coding – generating a code by pulling out the participants’ words in order to retain their voice and perspective (Miles et al., 2014).
- Emotion coding – coding with an emotion that is inferred or that the participant recalled feeling during a certain event (Miles et al., 2014).
- Evaluation coding – using “+” or “-“ symbols and evaluative words to show positive or negative evaluation of a program. (Miles et al., 2014).

Finally codes were developed based on recurring themes so that data could be separated based on topic (Maxwell, 2013). I also looked for contiguity-based connections between themes, looking for connections between the participants’ experiences and also to

policies, traditions, and supports in place in the school. At this point, three clear themes emerged, as well as multiple sub-themes for each code. Using NVivo, each transcript was coding using nodes and further organized with subnodes. Using the codes, each participant's transcript was compared to the others based on this coding to look for cross-references, commonalities, and differences (Seidman, 2013).

Like the recent graduate interviews, the site interviews were also coded for recurring themes. I also looked for connections between the site interviews and the recent graduate interviews. Once coding was complete, transcripts were given to a peer reviewer for an inter-rater reliability test. This helped to ensure that the codes were not biased (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2013). The reviewer conducted her own coding of sections of the interview transcripts and these codes were compared to my own codes for consistency. The reviewer also reviewed sections of my coding in interview transcripts and confirmed that my codes aligned with the words of the participants.

Seidman (2013) warns against solidifying one method of presenting the analysis of the data until after it has been collected. This allows the data to speak for itself. A thematic approach to organizing the recent graduate data analysis seemed as though it would be the most applicable to this study, as the purpose was to create change in feelings of school belonging of GSD students. Other options for organizing the findings could have been by creating narrative profiles for each participant (Seidman, 2013) or as vignettes, which create a profile and tell a small portion of the participant's story (Miles et al., 2014). Data analysis could have been organized chronologically, but this did not suit the desired outcomes of the study. Once the themes were thoroughly explored, a

matrix was created to draw together the thematic findings with the research questions and the literature to determine the results.

Validation of the narrative analysis occurred by analyzing the persuasiveness of the narratives developed based on the plausibility of the narrative when analyzed against other data collected. The final narratives were also presented to the participants, as one important component of narrative research is to empower participants and to allow them to be part of the research process (Riessman, 1993). In addition to giving the final narratives back to the participants, the coding process was also peer reviewed.

Stages of Data Collection

Data was collected according to the timeline in Table 4. The study took approximately four months to complete, including data analysis and completion of the findings and results.

Initiation stage. After gaining IRB approval, I sent formal invitations and consent forms to the recent graduate population and identified willing participants. As soon as participants were identified, I began to set up dates for interviews. The informed consent form was initially sent to the participants, but it was reviewed in depth and signed at the first interview before moving forward with the study.

Interviewing stage. Ninety minutes was reserved for each interview, including the site participant interviews and the focus group (Seidman, 2013). The graduate participant interviews were reviewed immediately in order to inform the subsequent interview questions. Follow-up interviews took place within two weeks of the first interview, which established a relationship with the participants and allowed the participants to explore questions more deeply.

Site interviews were conducted after the initial student interviews were completed. These also took approximately ninety minutes.

Analysis stage. Once all interviews were transcribed, participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts. They each had an opportunity to add detail or clarify portions of the interview, as well as to delete portions. Once the codes were developed, each interview took approximately one to two days to code, plus another one to two days to analyze (Miles et al., 2014).

Reporting stage. Once the interview data was analyzed, the data was presented thematically, as discussed above. The findings were used to draw conclusions and make recommendations to School A's policies and procedures, GSA clubs, teacher professional development, and curriculum.

Ethical Considerations

Because this research study involved surveying and interviewing recent graduates over the age of 18 about their school experiences, I gained expedited Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The IRB process is designed to ensure that the study follows an ethical protocol for research of human subjects that minimizes any potential harm to the participants. In accordance with the Belmont Report, this study was designed to respect individual independence (and in fact promoted autonomy in giving an underrepresented group an opportunity to share their experiences), did no or little harm to the participants, and was fair to all who participated (Seidman, 2013). Therefore, after gaining IRB approval, I was confident that I was working from an ethical research plan.

Once IRB approval was granted, the participants were asked to complete a consent form. The form fully described the interview and focus group process and the

purpose of the study as a whole, including how the information would be reported. All participants were also informed of confidentiality measures at this time. The form also informed all participants that the study was voluntary and that they could stop participation at any time.

As material was collected, it was of great importance to keep documents from the study confidential. Consent forms were coded with the participants' pseudonyms, and locked in a filing cabinet in my home office. All interview files, both audio files and transcripts, are kept digitally in a password-protected file. All print copies of this research are kept in the locked filing cabinet in the my home office. All transcripts only include the participant's initials. Interview participants understand that their responses will be kept confidential and their real names will never be linked to their responses. However, the nature of the responses could be identifying if they are truly unique in nature. Likewise, site interviewees are identified by pseudonyms but details about their teaching positions may reveal their identity. All original materials are only available to my supervisor and me.

In addition to the consent and confidentiality of the participants above, consent was also gained from the school board and superintendent. In doing so, I had the opportunity to address confidentiality concerns with the administration and could address any unforeseen issues with confidentiality at that time. However, it was also clear that school officials would not have access to the raw data that was provided by the participants. They will, however, have access to the final report, which may inform their practices in working with GSD students.

It is also important here to recognize my personal involvement and bias in this study. It is impossible to remove the interviewer from the interview, and that is particularly true in this case (Seidman, 2013). I am a teacher at School A, as well as the adviser of the school's GSA. I have personally advised and taught all of the students involved in the study. I am also a colleague to the site participants. I personally advocate for the rights of GSD students. While it would be impossible for me to erase all bias in this study, there are some strategies I followed to ameliorate bias in my interpretation of the interviews and the development of the narratives. Recognizing bias is one step in helping to minimize its effect on the overall study. Additionally, member checking and peer review of the transcripts and narratives helped to ensure accuracy and a more neutral interpretation of the raw data by ensuring that I correctly transcribed the interviews and that I used the participants' words in the correct context (Creswell, 2012; Gunzenhauser, 2006; Maxwell, 2013).

Additionally, I took care to re-establish a relationship with my former students. As the interviews began, the participants saw me as their former teacher, and this created a power dichotomy, where I held the power and the knowledge. However, in a true participatory model, the researcher and the participant should be on even ground, where both are equally knowledgeable and valuable. Therefore, it was important that I validated the participants' stories and iterated that they are the experts in their own experiences (Gunzenhauser, 2006). I made a statement during each interview that the participants should feel comfortable to tell their uninhibited stories and experiences, even if it meant being critical of me or other teachers and administrators, and that their responses would be kept confidential.

Throughout the research process, including the development of the study, I have been aware of my bias and have become aware of my own prejudices and viewpoints. Through this process of *epoche*, I have been able to recognize my bias and prejudice (Merriam, 2009). This awareness is the first step to recognizing its possible influence on the interpretation and analysis of the data, as well as my research methodology and interviewing.

Once aware of my bias, the next step was to minimize bias by bracketing my beliefs in the research process. Chan, Fung, and Chien (2013) argue that this bracketing must take place not only in the data collection and analysis process but from the inception of the project. Therefore I kept notes and journaled throughout the project to bring my subconscious thought about the subject to the forefront (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). This journaling helped me to mentally prepare for researching. Chan et al. (2013) assert that the researcher must “maintain curiosity” about the research. Being able to answer questions too quickly or too assuredly before the research is complete is a sign that the researcher is affected by bias and is not keeping an open mind.

In journaling, I became aware of the following biases, which I was then able to keep in check during the interviewing and analysis process. First, I became aware that as someone passionate about the rights of my GSD students, there were some issues that I expected students to discuss that I remembered as their GSA adviser or teacher. I do not always know if the students know how to go about advocating for themselves or realize that they have certain rights, or that they should not be treated abnormally or as “the other” because for many years that is all they have known. While I think there was quite a bit of reflection and realization for the participants through the interview process, I did

not want to color their experiences with my own advocacy and sense of their rights. By recognizing this, I was able to keep leading questions in check so as not to make them feel something they did not really experience as high school students. Likewise, I had to refrain from bringing up specific experiences that I know occurred because I may have added significance to something that did not have as great of an effect on them as I thought it did or should. Journaling also made me aware of my own naivety about the school climate for these students, despite working so closely with them. I designed this study to focus on school belonging, because I thought that safety for the most part was addressed. Journaling and allowing the participants to share their experiences made me realize that safety and security were still issues for GSD students at school A and that they needed to be included in the findings. Finally, as a teacher at School A, I know that many of my colleagues are very supportive of GSD students. However, journaling and bracketing my biases allowed me to let the students speak for their own experiences with the faculty in the school. For the purposes of this study, when discussing school climate for GSD students, their perception is the reality.

Having only a semi-structured interviewing protocol also helped to minimize bias. This format forced me to be in the moment and fully engaged in the interview process, rather than asking leading questions that could have been affected by my bias (Chan et al., 2013).

Chapter 4: Findings, Results, and Interpretations

Introduction

The purpose of this narrative study is to understand the experiences of recent GSD graduates from a small town high school in central Pennsylvania, and how their sense of belonging as GSD students was affected by the heteronormative climate that may have existed in the school. The narratives were created based on the participants' perspectives on school rules and policies, their treatment by faculty and classmates, and their experiences with the GSA and other supports. Four recent graduates were interviewed two times individually and once together in a focus group; the findings below emerged from their interviews. The first interview focused on the students' experiences in high school. The second focused on their experiences in college, the workplace, or the community, as well as how their experiences in high school shaped them as young adults. Finally, the focus group generated discussion regarding changes that could be made in School A in the future to ensure students are more supported, allowing the participants to engage in a true participatory/advocacy model.

Additionally, I gathered information about the site, including reading the student code of conduct and school board policy. Because I am employed as a teacher and GSA adviser at the site, I had background knowledge of the site, including the history and function of the GSA. I also interviewed two school employees to better understand or clarify various policies, procedures, beliefs, traditions, and climate in the school.

Participants

The main participants met with me individually for two interviews in order to reflect on their personal experiences and share their perspectives. These participants were

all graduates of School A and will collectively be referred to as “the participants.” The tone of the interviews was relaxed and conversational, as I knew each participant well through their involvement in GSA and as students in my English classes. The final interview was a focus group between all the participants, and since they had all been members of the GSA, the tone of the interview was like a reunion. Following are profiles of each participant in the study.

In addition to the main participants, two school employees were also interviewed. These participants together will be referred to as the “site participants.” Their individual profiles also appear below.

Participant 1 – Freya. Freya is a 19 year old graduate of School A and part of the class of 2014. She was an active member of School A’s GSA. Since graduating, she has been attending a small town liberal arts college near School A. She is studying social studies education and theater. She identifies as a straight, cisgender, female ally and is actively involved in her college’s GSA.

I feel like I always felt weird in the LGBT community because I'm not, I'm straight, I identify as straight, so I always felt like I didn't belong in it. But then when I come to meetings and talk to everyone in it, they are so accepting and they don't care if you are straight. ...I definitely was like wow, this is a place where I can see myself in. And I think it's funny that most of my friends at school are gay. Almost all of them. I have just one straight friend. They're like, what do you do, just collect all the gays and just hang? I don't mean to, I just like them. They're cool.

Freya jokes that she is the “mediator” between the GSD community and the straight community on her campus, constantly addressing the same concerns and questions:

I feel like I have 5 key points that I go through. They don't hit on you. You don't have to be gay. You don't have to share anything if you don't want to.... Do I have to do anything?... And do I have to give anything?

Freya reports that she did well in school and had a sense of belonging to her school, especially to her group of friends.

Participant 2 – Clara. Clara is an 18 year old School A graduate in the class of 2014 and also a member of the GSA. Since graduating, she has been helping her mother take care of her nephew. She plans to work at a local amusement park this summer. She wants to go to college for communications but does not have any definite plans at this time. She identifies as a bisexual cisgender female. She credits her involvement in GSA to helping her identify as bisexual:

It made me think about myself throughout my whole life and doing that I realized I liked a lot of girls. Guys too, but I liked a lot of girls, too. Because of GSA, I saw, oh wait, I'm bisexual. I don't like just girls and I don't like just guys.

Clara is out in her everyday life, with mixed acceptance from family and friends. “My mom doesn't exactly like it, but then again, she doesn't like a lot of the things that I do. Everyone in my family knows.... Everyone in my little circle knows that I am.” Clara feels that despite trying to fit in through sports, the arts, and other school activities, she did not have a sense of belonging to the school, nor did she feel safe in school.

Participant 3 – Flynn. Flynn is a 19 year old graduate of School A's class of 2013. He was a founding member of School A's GSA and the club's first president. After graduating from School A, he attended a small university about 2.5 hours from home and was studying to be an English teacher. He was also an active member of his fraternity and the school's GSA. However, after the first semester of his sophomore year, Flynn had to leave school after “failing out.”

I have a lot of like mental issues I guess, and they weren't controlled or anything. So the last semester I was in school I was in a really stressful romantic relationship, and a lot of shit was going down with my family and I mentally broke. There was a period of 3 weeks where I could not pull myself out of bed

until like 6 pm.... I just kind of gave up on the rest of the semester, so I failed out, which was a big disappointment to my entire family but you know. I'm getting help for myself and stuff now.

He is planning on returning to school next year and is currently living at home with his father and stepmother. He is currently working at a fast food restaurant.

In high school, Flynn identified as a bisexual cisgender female, and later came out as a lesbian in his sophomore year.

And now I identify as grey asexual, which is like you experience fleeting sexual attraction and sometimes it's there and sometimes it's not and when it's there it might not be very strong.... It's on the asexual spectrum. But it's not completely asexual.

He has also changed his gender identification and expression since high school.

I have struggled with that a lot, but as of right now I am identifying as a demiboy, which is when you feel like a boy a lot of the time, and then feel like something else other times. Some people do define the other part but I personally don't.

Flynn uses male pronouns and has changed his name to reflect his gender identification.

He plans on visiting a gender therapist and starting hormones to begin physiologically transitioning to a male as soon as he can afford it. However, Flynn is not supported by his father or stepmother, with whom he lives.

I feel like I have to fight with him and present him with so many facts... so many good, credible sources and articles, and he reads them, and tells me that they're wrong and that I'm wrong. He told me he doesn't think I am mentally prepared to transition and he told me he doesn't think I am "trans enough to transition." Exact words from his mouth. So I'm pissed that someone who is supposed to love me and support me unconditionally is one of my biggest fucking enemies. It bothers me. But it's mostly just my dad. And my stepmom, who I was like "hey, call me he/him pronouns" like eight times now and she still doesn't. And my dad doesn't say anything even to correct her. And he is like, "you have to do it." And I am like, I have fucking done it like eight times. But she doesn't listen. She doesn't do it because she doesn't want to call me her stepson because her family would not be ok with me being trans.

His father has also refused to allow him to start hormone therapy while under his roof.

Flynn reported that he did well in high school his freshman year but often felt bored in classes. His grades and performance declined but he did “ok enough to walk the stage” his senior year. Flynn also reports that he did not feel a sense of belonging to the school, despite trying to be involved in the music program.

Participant 4 – Emily. Emily is an 18 year old graduate of the class of 2014 from School A. She was also a founding member and the club’s second president. She is now attending college at a large university about an hour and a half away from home to study nursing. Emily identifies as a cisgender female and came out as a lesbian at the age of 14 but has changed her identification since high school.

Well, I first came out as a lesbian when I was 14. And I guess around last summer I came out again as bisexual. And now I am identifying more as fluid, leaning towards homosexual. It’s kind of hard to find a word that really encompasses everything. But yeah, I guess I am going by bisexual.

Emily was very out about her sexuality in high school, emanating a confidence about her sexuality as a defense mechanism.

I found that, when I first came out, to avoid being teased, I had to be kind of obnoxious about it and have an attitude like I really didn’t care, which I mean I obviously did, everyone cares what people think about them, especially in high school.

She reports that her mother was always very accepting but that her father was not, and she is just now able to start repairing their relationship.

Emily was an honors student at School A and did very well academically, but she reports that she did not feel safe in school, and despite connecting with other art students and her art teacher, she did not feel a sense of belonging to the school.

Site Participant 1 – John. John is the current principal at School A and has been in the position for two years. He was also the assistant principal one year prior to that

and was the school's guidance counselor for three years prior to that. He also worked at the district's middle school for seven years. John has followed some of the participants through middle school to the high school as both their counselor and their administrator. It should be noted that John was not an administrator the entire time the graduate participants were in high school. John's counseling background has an effect on the way he interacts with students as an administrator. He does not recall ever having any special training in teaching or working with GSD students specifically, as an administrator or as a counselor. He credits himself with not being too proud to ask for help in his position if there is a situation that he does not understand.

There are situations I don't know how to deal with all the time and I just go to somebody who's maybe going to give me some good sound advice on how to handle it. ...I would have no problems going and asking somebody. I don't have that much pride. Rather than make a wrong decision and give someone a wrong answer, I would rather be sure of the answer.

John believes he holds teachers accountable for accepting differences in students, and students accountable for being accepting and not harassing or bullying other students.

Site Participant 2 – Karen. Karen has been a guidance counselor in the district for 23 years, and is in her fourth year at the high school. Like John, she followed some of the graduate participants from middle school through high school. Karen's first and only professional development specifically geared toward working with GSD students was a two-day workshop that she and another guidance counselor attended three years ago. Karen is very supportive of the GSA and she believes that students feel comfortable coming to her if they need to talk about their sexuality or gender diversity.

I feel like I do present myself as being a pretty easy person to talk to about most issues. But I can't guarantee all GSD students would come talk to me even though I feel like I am a pretty easy person to talk to because over the years only a few have. I need to get myself out there more because of that.

Karen believes that teachers in the school need more awareness and education about GSD students.

Findings

In reviewing and coding the participants' stories, three overall themes emerged:

1. the participants' feeling of safety, both physical and emotional, in School A, 2. the participants' feelings of belonging to School A and to their peer group, and 3. the participants' feelings of self-value as a student at School A.

Finding #1 – Safety

The participants spoke frequently of feeling safe in school. In some cases, they referred to their physical safety. In other cases, they spoke of emotional safety. In all cases participants had experienced some harassment and judgment, but there was also a pervasive fear of harassment and judgment. GSA seemed to be considered a safe place by most. John described a safe school as being both physically and emotionally safe.

...The number one goal in our school is safety and security. Most people think of buildings locked and what not, but no, it's also security to be who you are, as long as you are not ...interrupt[ing] the learning process here, but more of it's a safe place to make a mistake and be ok with who you are. And sort of figure out who you are and how you relate to the world.

As the participants describe, fear of harassment and bullying can sometimes keep them from feeling safe in school, even if they never experience it personally.

Each participant involved reported experiencing or seeing some form of harassment in school. Only one student, Clara, experienced physical harassment herself; on one occasion she was pinned in a corner in the hallway by another student and confronted about her sexuality.

I was actually pinned in a corner behind a teacher's door. I don't even know why. He just came up, got really mad, grabbed me, pulled me into a corner, and was like, "Why do you like girls? Why don't you like guys?" ...I pushed myself out of it and just ran down the stairs.

On another occasion she remembers having spit balls and trash thrown at her outside of school by some classmates after a school play. However, all of the participants reported having a fear of being physically harassed for their sexuality or a suspicion that other GSD classmates were being physically harassed.

I feel like there might have been something with T. because he was harassed a lot by boys, and I felt like there might have been something just from the stories I heard. I feel like that got really harsh. I never saw anything, though. (Emily)

Regardless of actual experiences, the school climate was such that students perceived a physically unsafe environment at times or in certain situations or for certain students.

All of the participants reported at least hearing homophobic or GSD derogatory slurs, and all overheard students talking about other GSD students. Two of the participants were directly verbally harassed. Calling something "so gay" or using the word "faggot" in general conversation are two commonly reported slurs. Anything bad or negative could be referred to as "gay." "Faggot" could be used to comment on someone's sexuality or perceived sexuality, to make a joke about one's sexuality, or as a general insult. "You get called 'faggot' just for liking something different. Are you serious?" (Clara). Repetition of this type of language has a negative effect on GSD students who hear it constantly.

I hate homophobic slurs so much. I'm going to hit the table and I apologize for that ahead of time. The six letter F-word seems to be a word that gets thrown around School A, which it's disgusting, and people use the word "gay" in a really negative connotation like all day every day and it always made me feel kind of bad and I am just like, grow up. (Flynn)

The participants also felt that students who said these words did not get in trouble by administration or teachers, or did not get an equal punishment to students who use other derogatory language or curse words.

I really want people to start getting smacked in the face with a ruler every time they say the F-word. Or “that’s so gay.” ... Those are slurs. That’s not cool. Like if you are going to get in trouble for slurs, you need to get in trouble for all slurs. (Flynn)

Both site participants felt that they personally discipline students for using derogatory language about GSD students. John stated that he would discipline using “gay” or “faggot” like any other curse word. “They’re getting it. They’re getting it if they just drop ‘motherfucker.’ They’re getting the same thing. They are. I’ve got no tolerance for that. ... Both words are as bad as the other.” However, John also went on to say that because he is the school’s principal, students typically do not use language like that around him, and that he has not heard those terms recently. Karen also stated that she would confront it and make it a teachable moment. However, both John and Karen said they could not speak for the rest of the teaching staff one way or the other.

Kids are good about saying comments when teachers are not in earshot, so I think for teachers to know these are some of the things being said, these are some of the things being addressed, and to empower teachers that if you do hear it or you think you heard it or if you suspect it’s going on, that you do address it, because I think when you don’t, for this population of kids, then it feels like you’re not accepting them either. (Karen)

Both the site and graduate participants expressed the importance of teacher support in addressing students who use this language in order to preserve a safe environment for all students.

Both Flynn and Clara reported direct verbal harassment linked to their sexuality.

For Clara, just being involved in the GSA caused harassment from some of her peers. At

one point, she was harassed after appearing in a story the local newspaper did about the club. She also reported name-calling because of her involvement in the club.

...This was before I even came out as bisexual, it was just when I was involved with the group when we first joined. They'd call me faggot-lover. They'd call me carpet muncher. All the old stuff.

Flynn also reported verbal harassment directly linked to his sexuality.

There was a group of boys in my class and they didn't like me very much. I was like lower than the bottom of the food chain and they were higher than the top of the food chain — high school food chain. ...I was passing them and they said some really nasty things to me and I felt really gross. Usually when people call me names, I am like, whatever, but when it has to do with my sexuality, or my gender identity, I take it really personally, because that's something that is a part of me, so that specific situation where these few boys called me the F-word, I've never liked that word. And being called that word hurt more than any other word. That kind of sucked. It really sucked.

Whether this type of language is overheard or directed specifically at the student, participants reported it had a negative effect on their feelings of safety.

All participants also reported overhearing verbal harassment about other students. One student had a poster made with his face on it and the word "faggot" under it. Two other male students were reportedly called names frequently and endured other bullying comments because they both acted more femininely. One participant reported being questioned about another student, K., and not knowing how to respond, fearing she would also endure some of the backlash. K. used feminine pronouns and a feminine birth name in high school but presented as a male. Since high school, he has transitioned to a transgender male.

Well, with K., I played hockey with her throughout middle school, so in high school, I was always friendly with her and stuff. And I even had friends saying stuff to me like, "Does she think she is a boy? What's wrong with her? ...Why does she think she can date straight girls?" I felt like, at the time, I was too scared to be rude [back to the girls asking questions] about it, which is what I think is necessary. (Emily)

GSD students endure questions and comments from their own friends and sometimes do not know how to respond.

The participants reported that other classmates asked extremely presumptuous or bold questions, clearly violating the participant's privacy, as if they had a right to ask certain questions because the student was GSD.

People were just very rude. People would ask about sex all the time, like, "how do you have sex?" And I would just have to openly talk about a lot of things that I wasn't comfortable talking about. ... Which is something that I didn't think I should have to do. Yeah, I was just constantly explaining and talking about stuff that I wasn't comfortable talking about. This is like the general people I went to school with. Not even people that I was close with. Asking me these uncomfortable questions that I guess they felt like they had a right to know, that I didn't want to talk about. (Emily)

Other participants sustained questions most heterosexual cisgender students would not be burdened with answering. One reported being asked if she and her cousin were in a relationship because they were holding hands in the hall. Clara was asked "What, you couldn't choose what you were?" in regards to labeling herself as bisexual. She also reported males asking if she was interested in "threesomes" because she identified as bisexual. Freya also reported experiencing her GSD friends often feeling uncomfortable because people assumed that they want to hear "weird sexual jokes." Emily reported that these types of questions "made me feel kind of like a circus animal or something."

Participants reported that cyber-bullying was becoming more frequent, as well. They felt it was easier for people to bully behind a computer, and classmates could bully and harass each other without fear of discipline from teachers or administration.

Recently it's changed. On social media, people, not all, but there's a lot of posts and comments basically calling out or slandering GSD students and gender identity. (Freya)

Another student reported a picture of a male student wearing a wig and makeup at a school football game, taken and posted on Facebook without his knowledge, with the caption “what’s this faggot doing here?” and it received several bullying comments.

Students also reported that there seems to be a culture of bullying around sports, physical education classes, and gym locker rooms. One participant shared her experiences as an athlete on the soccer team.

I remember on the soccer team, I was made fun of. Because there was an attractive girl on the team and me just being kind, I would say that she was pretty. And everyone would be like, “Ohh, that’s your boo. Ohh, you’re going after her tonight.” ...I didn’t even care about it but someone else on the team went and told the Dean of Students and the guy that was in charge of all the sports and stuff and the girl that was making fun of me risked getting kicked off the team. She kept doing it though, but I didn’t care. (Clara)

She went on to note that she felt a student playing a male-dominated sport would have it worse.

Now if it was the football team? Oh no. They would be merciless to that man. Because a lot of the higher up guys, they’re not cool when it comes to homosexuality or anything like that. (Clara)

Locker rooms also were a place that students tended not to feel safe. Emily mentioned that she would purposely stare directly at her locker when she changed for physical education classes to avoid being accused of looking at other female students, and Clara mentioned that the locker room could be particularly problematic for transgender students. Freya also noted that the school should have a gender-neutral locker room that is a safe place for all students to change. There was a perception that locker rooms and sports teams were generally not safe spaces for GSD students.

Karen mentioned that situations where the student does not feel safe changing in the locker room are handled if the student comes forward about the problem.

We have had probably not quite a handful, but a number, just under a handful, of kids who we have made ...exceptions for, where they change in the nurse or somewhere else, because they are just not comfortable with changing in the locker room thing.

John also mentioned that the new school building for School A will have more accommodating bathrooms and locker rooms including some gender neutral single bathrooms.

Interestingly, although all the participants identified as cisgender females in high school, with the exception of the few cases of harassment or bullying that they had individually faced, every other incident that they reported witnessing happened to a male student. There seemed to be an overall belief among the participants that male GSD students had it harder and were bullied more relentlessly or more harshly and were more likely to face physical harassment or assault than female cisgender GSD students. "I felt especially for the boys, it was not only safety emotionally and feeling like they fit in. It was also physical safety" (Emily).

One event that occurred when the participants were in middle school was brought up several times by three of the participants (the fourth participant did not attend middle school in the district). One classmate, Damani (name changed), committed suicide by hanging himself in a closet in his home when he was in 7th grade. From the participants' perspective, this was a result of Damani being bullied in school because he was gay.

I think it's just that he was getting made fun of all the time because he was more feminine and he liked guys and he would try on make-up and the guys would make fun of him constantly. They would call him gay and call him names, pansy, stuff like that. ...I saw them trip him a couple times. Even the girls, though, ...could be fake towards him. They just never realized that people were openly gay and they would say "oh, gay best friend!" but then they would be freaked out when he was actually into a guy. I think it was just ignorance at that age that they just didn't know and they hadn't been around it at that age. (Clara)

Clara also added that Damani was bullied because of his name, which made him very uncomfortable.

Damani in 6th grade, he went by his given name, Damani, but everyone kept changing it to Gaymani. So when he came back in 7th grade, he just went by Mani. So no one would call him gay. He was very uncomfortable about it.

All three of the participants felt that the bullying and harassment contributed to Damani's suicide.

The site participants, John and Karen, who were both working in the guidance office at the middle school at the time, had a somewhat different take on the situation. They stated that bullying was rampant in that graduating class, and that most students, including Damani, were seen in the guidance office for being the bullies as much as they were for being bullied. "That was the cruelest class I've dealt with. It was. In all my years. And I worked with them from 5th grade on. They got progressively a ton better" (John). John went on to say that the class was difficult to work with because it did not follow typical patterns of bullying.

There was no one person who said they got it [victimization]. Everybody got it. That's what made it a difficult group to work with. One day it would be this kid with that kid, and the next day it would be this kid with this kid, and it's like, well, which is it? There was no separation of power. It was like, I'm going to overpower you today, well, I'm going to overpower you today. They just went at each other so much. And they were mean to each other.

As for Damani specifically, Karen states that he had many friends and that many students were genuinely upset when he died.

...I don't know that I honestly would have looked at him as a kid that just got bullied all the time because he just had a lot of friends, but I wasn't in the classrooms, I wasn't in the hallways, I wasn't in the lunch room. I don't know. ...I think the kids who genuinely grieved over everything, his suicide, who all considered themselves really good friends, again, they were popular kids, ...they were student council, they were athletes, they were academically honor roll kids; it was across the board that he legitimately had kids grieving for him.

John and Karen feel that his suicide was more complicated than a reaction from bullying at school, and may have been a reaction to his unsupportive family members and his own internal struggle with his sexuality.

The participants also recall reactions from teachers and students both immediately after it happened and in the following years. The participants told stories of teachers being very upset in telling them the news. However, they felt in the weeks, months, and years after the incident occurred, it was not talked about again. According to the participants, in the year he died, he was removed from the school's yearbook. When the class graduated five years later, some students wanted to dedicate the yearbook to Damani, but "they wouldn't let us do it" (Clara).

The participants felt that many of the students forgot about Damani, as well.

I almost feel like people forgot about it by the time we reached senior year. Like it was so sad, someone's life is gone. And it's only been five or six years and you've already forgot that they're dead. I feel like not a lot of people remembered anymore. It was only the people who were, you know, close with him. And now it hurts, you know, somebody you used to see everyday, a child committing suicide, and you can allow yourself to forget that? (Emily)

Older and younger students, according to the participants, did not care because they did not know Damani, and while some of his friends would continue to wear purple and orange ribbons on the anniversary of his death, the participants felt that most students and adults forgot about it.

According to the Karen and John, the guidance office was there to help students grieve after Damani's death and on the first anniversary, as well.

It was handled by the book. I mean, literally. There was a proper procedure on this. ...And the thing I can say is that thankfully we had that because it's hard to take emotion out of that situation, but that, step by step about what you do helped you think more clearly, you know. (John)

Both stated that students sought guidance in dealing with their own grief, but not to discuss why it happened, bullying, or sexual orientation. John stated, “I don’t recall anything programmatically changing.”

Regardless of why the student committed suicide or how the school and students reacted, the event has had a lasting effect on many members of the class. “I think that for, as a class as a whole, we were more inclusive because we knew what could happen” (Freya). John states that he is not sure if this specific incident is what changed the class, but the class grew quite a bit since middle school. “...they were the most difficult class I’ve ever worked with, but probably grew the most of any class I ever worked with.”

In addition to a fear of physical and verbal harassment and bullying, students also reported a fear of being judged or treated unfairly, particularly by adults. This actual judgment or fear of judgment often made them feel hesitant to participate in class, draw attention to themselves, or form relationships with teachers or administration. There were two rules specifically where the participants felt that GSD students were treated unfairly: the dress code, and PDA rules.

The participants felt that the dress code was not enforced fairly for GSD students, particularly male GSD students who dressed more femininely.

It’s just like I think that the rules weren’t enforced the same for the genders. They can yell at a boy for wearing short shorts but for girls it’s ok up to a certain point. They can yell at a boy for having a shirt undone, but girls could show their cleavage to a certain point. (Emily)

Clara also mentioned a specific boy that seemed to get targeted more often for certain dress code violations, while female students were more likely to get away with those violations.

The participants also felt that same-gender couples were more likely to be disciplined or spoken to about PDAs than straight-presenting couples were.

Our PDA rule was carried out more for same-sex couples, I feel. Because I feel like I saw maybe two or three instances where same-sex couples were kissing in the hallway. Or straight couples were kissing in the hallway one time and a same-sex couple were holding hands and they got yelled at and one time they were holding pockets and they got yelled at, and one time they were kissing and they got “No PDA.” (Freya)

Flynn was scolded for holding hands with his cousin in the hallway.

A boy and a girl could walk down the hall holding hands and wouldn't get shit said, but we [he and his cousin] would hold hands or whatever and immediately we would get yelled at by everybody and their brother which isn't cool because I would see straight couples making out in the hallways, and that's ok.

For the participants, these inconsistencies made them feel that their relationships and their sexuality were being targeted, while straight-presenting couples were overlooked because their affection was considered “normal.”

In addition to these two specific rules, students also frequently had a fear of being judged by their teachers and administrators, which stopped them from creating relationships with most adults in the school. One participant felt that she had to be hyper-vigilant in maintaining a professional relationship with teachers and not revealing that she was a lesbian. In some cases, it kept her from fully participating in class.

I always kind of felt like that was something I needed to keep separate from my teachers, which I felt like that kind of inhibited what I could say. Especially in English classes, I feel like you get very open and talk about your own experiences relating to whatever you are reading. ...I just felt like they would judge me so I was never open about it with any teachers. (Emily)

There were only a few specific mentions of ways that teachers made students feel unsafe or judged in class. One participant reported that her homeroom teacher would not stop classmates from making jokes about GSD people, and that he would even laugh when

they did. Another participant reported that her friend had gotten into a debate with a teacher about gay marriage.

...A. told me about a teacher, that they used to have like a debate? If being gay was a sin? And I know he just didn't think it was right but he wasn't going to be mean to anyone just because of that. But I feel like in those situations if I was part of the LGBT community, I wouldn't feel safe or I wouldn't want to ask him for help. I probably wouldn't talk to him beyond a sense of answering questions or asking questions. (Freya)

Karen, the guidance counselor, agreed that GSD students can feel judged by their teachers.

...I feel like kids do still think that they're getting judged and not just by other students but I do think some students do feel like they are getting judged by some adults who are not open to it, so I think for teachers to understand how that may come across, they may not even realize and it may not be their intention, but how that may come across to them.

In addition to teachers, there was also a fear of administration and that they would get in more trouble because they identified as GSD.

...I was afraid that they were going to be harsher on me, or punish me more for something stupid like being tardy or breaking dress code or whatever. I was just always afraid that maybe they knew that I was dating a girl or whatever, and they would take it out on me. ...I think it was just a fear, but it led me to not really talk to the administration at all. (Emily)

Whether this fear of judgment by adults was founded or not, it had an effect on the way the participants interacted with the adults in the school, which in some ways impacted their education.

The participants also discussed the effect the lack of communication and fear of judgment could have on a student's success.

If you have opinions that clash with that [being GSD], you can't let that interfere with your teaching. Even if a teacher were to feel that that is wrong, you can't discriminate against a kid, because you're a teacher. Your job is to teach. (Flynn)

Freya recognized that feeling that a teacher does not support a student can lead to that student feeling unsafe. “I feel like if a student doesn’t like a teacher or doesn’t feel safe in their environment, they’re not going to go for the help they need.” Flynn mentioned that Safe Zone training, a training designed to make classrooms a safer place for GSD students, was something that occurred at his college twice a semester, and recommended that School A teachers also participate in Safe Zone Training.

All of the participants felt that the creation of the school’s GSA also created a safe space that they didn’t feel like they had before. “Before GSA, it was pretty hard for a lot of them. I know a few just off the top of my head, and they pretty much had to hide who they were until they graduated” (Clara). Although the GSA didn’t completely erase unsafe feelings in the school, it did make students feel like there was a place they could go and be themselves without judgment.

It didn’t make me think that my school experience was any safer or whatever, but it was that place that I could go once a week where I could go and was able to be super fucking mega gay and not have anybody be like, why are you like that? Because it was a safe space for an hour and a half every week which was really cool. (Flynn)

In some ways, the participants felt that the club’s primary goal was to provide that safe space. While advocacy and education are also important, students needed to feel safe first.

I feel like it’s kind of hard to think about these larger issues when you feel uncomfortable in yourself so if we first meet the goal of everyone feeling comfortable and safe and they have a place to go, then the club members will feel more driven to start changing things. (Emily)

However, participants also mentioned that having a safe space and a support group made them feel more comfortable in speaking up for themselves.

I felt like just being there felt very safe because I was able to talk about personal things that I wasn't comfortable talking about to with people that don't understand. So that was nice to be able to talk about issues specific to LGBT people. And then I felt like in the school environment it made me speak up for myself more because people would sometimes say things to me like "that's [GSA is] unnecessary, why are you shoving it in people's faces" and that's how I learned to defend myself and the club and then the whole cause in general. (Emily).

GSA was a place where participants could go to feel safe and learn about issues from one another, and they felt more confident in supporting those issues in the school at large because they knew they had a support system.

Unfortunately, just being in the club itself was cause for harassment or fear of harassment for some students. The participants speculated on why some GSD students did not join the GSA. Emily and Flynn were two of the founders of the club and hoped more students would have joined and found GSA as a safe space.

Well, I think the thing that was most frustrating in starting was I had certain people in mind when starting it and then to see that those people were too afraid to come, that hurts and it made me really sad. To know that we tried to start it for people like that who feel scared and like they don't belong and then the people were still too scared to do it. And I think that might have to do with the stigma of the club throughout the school. (Emily)

There was also a feeling that even if you did not belong to the club, knowing that it existed could give students confidence to be themselves.

Do I wish that everybody would have stayed and joined in the first place, yeah. But it's a safe space when you need it, I guess. It's always available but it's not required to come. (Flynn)

However, some students just felt safer in school remaining closeted or not drawing attention to their sexuality.

Being out in high school is hard so you just don't do it. I just feel like people don't want to be, like the people who identify that way, may not be completely out, you know, and maybe they didn't want to out themselves by showing up here, because you know it was a gay-straight alliance but it was pretty much

assumed that if you were here you were gay, which is weird because we did have straight people come, right? Yeah. (Flynn)

Unfortunately, students did face bullying or harassment for being in the club, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identification. As mentioned above, Clara was harassed over some comments she made about the club in the local newspaper, and she identified as a straight, cisgender ally at the time. Emily mentioned that she wanted her brothers to join the club after she graduated, but she was afraid they might be bullied or teased for joining. The participants also mentioned comments from their classmates and recent graduates after the club started.

I remember when GSA was first formed and I would go on Facebook and I would see people that I was friends with like D. who graduated a couple years before me and he would be like, “oh my god, what’s going on with my alma mater? It’s going down the garbage chute.” ...So many people I thought would be ok with it were against it. And it made me feel awful.” (Clara)

While GSA provided a safe place for students and a support group that made them feel safer in school as a whole, it did in some ways also add to the fear that the participants might be judged or bullied because of their involvement.

The students also spoke about the effects of feeling unsafe in school. In addition to not connecting to their teachers and administrators, students also felt that sometimes it was just difficult to come to school because of a fear of being judged.

I know there are some people who have hard times focusing on school work because they had to take quote unquote mental health days because they think they are going to be judged by something or they think they did something. They think that they are going to be ridiculed for it, basically. (Freya)

Specifically, Freya mentioned a male student who took another male student to a dance, and although she felt no one cared or said anything at the dance, the student was still out

of school for a couple days after the dance, and she perceived this as possibly that he was fearful that someone would say something to him or about him.

The participants also felt that the fear of being unsafe or judged that they felt in high school carried with them when they began their next steps in college or work.

However, most reported that these fears were unfounded.

I think, I honestly feel like everything I felt in high school made me all the more anxious and scared to be here [college] and then when I got here it ended up being a really just happy, free time in my life. I'm much happier here and I feel like high school made me really anxious that people weren't going to accept me. I was worrying for nothing. And then I came here and ended up being really happy. (Emily)

Emily also shared that she was too afraid to tell her roommate that she is bisexual when she first moved into the dorm, and while she feels like the roommate would probably be accepting now, she feels like it would be too uncomfortable to tell her now.

Overall, participants did experience bullying and physical and verbal harassment, although most of them only experienced it a few times directly throughout their high school career. However, those few times were enough to perpetuate a continued fear of being judged and harassed, regardless of whether that fear was founded or not. GSA offered a safe haven to many students, but some felt their involvement in the club would only intensify the harassment and judgment. Unsafe feelings and fear of judgment kept students from forming relationships with teachers, administrators, and other classmates, kept students from participating in class, caused students to skip school, and created a fear in GSD graduates as they continued into work or college.

Finding #2 – Belonging

The participants spoke frequently of their feelings of belonging to the school and to their peer groups. In most cases, the participants reported a lack of belonging or

feeling included in the school. This lack of belonging typically stemmed from ignorance or a lack of understanding about GSD issues, but also stemmed from the participants' inability to form relationships with other students, faculty, and administration.

The participants' lack of belonging ranged from dreading coming to school because they felt like such outsiders to putting up a wall and ignoring their classmates and what they were saying. Most of the participants stated "absolutely not" when asked if they felt like they belonged to the school. "I was like, I don't have anything here. Like not only academically am I feeling gross, I am also feeling socially like I don't belong here, you know" (Flynn). Others felt that they had a sense of belonging to their close circle of friends and did not care about what others thought. "I think the hardest battle is finding the place where you feel like you fit. You just have to find nice friends" (Emily). Participants also responded as feeling "different," "weird," like an "outsider," and like "nothing."

Most of the participants also reported trying to fit in by getting involved with things that interested them. In some cases, this was the only place they felt welcome in the school.

...Art class was really the only other place and that was really just because we talked so much about our art and it got so emotional that we just opened up to each other a lot. So I feel like that wouldn't really have been possible in any other setting. It's just because art is such an emotional thing. (Emily)

In other cases, they did not feel like they belonged even in these places.

...From 4th grade on, band has always been my everything. I love music and I love being creative and stuff and I was really talented at it, so I was like, you know, let's pick up an instrument and do this thing. So I got to high school and thought it would be the perfect opportunity to make new friends because we're all in the band and we have this thing in common, and it wasn't like that at all. ...The only people I really made friends with were underclassmen, when I did band my 11th grade year, so I came into the school brand new and I went to

marching band camp and I was treated like shit, which really sucked. I was in the one place I felt like I should have fit in and I didn't. That was gross. ...It was disgusting. (Flynn)

The participants reported trying to fit in and wanting to feel connected to the school and to their peers. Clara describes herself as being “energetic about school” and “school-spirited” and still never felt like she had friends or belonged to the school.

For me, I tried to be really outgoing and I was a people person in a sense and I tried to make friends with a lot of people. But for sports and for plays and musicals, it was like no one wanted to talk to me whatsoever....

Despite trying to fit in and wanting to feel a connection to their peers and to the school, the participants struggled with feeling like they belonged. Emily also recalls trying desperately to fit in.

I feel like I tried really hard. I remember specific instances of going to parties and feeling like an outsider. Going to football games, trying to sit in the student section, feeling like an outsider. I just felt like any time I made an effort to fit in and be part of the school, I felt like I was rejected. I felt like I was only seen as a weird kid and people only knew me for having a girlfriend.

These participants showed that feeling belonging to the school and in their peer groups was important to them, based on the effort they put forth to achieve it.

Many of the feelings of a lack of belonging stemmed from feeling misunderstood, whether in their personal struggles or their labels. All students have individual struggles and triumphs, and although there are often some commonalities among GSD students' stories, they all have individual struggles and triumphs, as well. The participants felt that they might feel a stronger sense of belonging if more of their classmates, teachers, and administrators understood what was going on with them. From a counseling standpoint, Karen recognizes that students all have individual experiences and teachers may not have the same counseling instincts when a student comes to them with a problem.

I do think there needs to be just some of that understanding that you've got to try to work with a student where they're at. Like, "Why do you have those fears?" "Why do you have those concerns?" I think in counseling, that's a natural place to go with kids, no matter what the issue. With staff, it may not be. It could be an area where they let their own feelings on the subject dictate what they say.

She goes on to say that it is important that the faculty and administration understand what GSD students might be going through.

... We have some kids who they may be rejected from their family because of their orientations, and I think the staff needs to understand the hardship that a kid goes through if that is the outcome of them coming out.

The participants agreed that students need an outlet to tell their stories and feel like they are understood. "There are so many stories that people have had throughout their lives that I think would be worth sharing" (Clara). This understanding could form stronger relationships between teachers and students.

Another source of misunderstanding from both classmates and teachers and administration is a lack of understanding about sexuality and gender identification, especially what it means to be bisexual, transgender, or even an ally. As mentioned above, Clara experienced classmates asking her why she could not "choose" in reference to identifying as bisexual, as well as assuming she wanted to participate in "threesomes" because she liked both men and women. She also mentioned how people's misunderstanding of bisexuality continued to make her feel like an outsider or "weird."

They think that you can't make up your mind for what you want. And they just think, "oh, they're so greedy. They just want both." No, that's not it. You can like a guy or a girl. It just depends on the person that you click with the most. That you want to be with and try to make something with.

She also spoke to the assumption that bisexual people become either straight or gay when they start dating someone of one sex or the other. "That's not how it works. It's not going to change. You're still going to be attracted to both sexes" (Clara). Emily also

speaks to people's misunderstanding when coming out as bisexual after identifying as a lesbian for a few years.

...When I came out, I just felt like everybody kind of thought I was a fake when I came out as a lesbian. And then I think there is additional stigma with being bisexual because people think you are just being slutty, or you don't want to make up your mind. It's hard to convince people — I know I'm only 18 but I have been thinking about this for so many years. Just like trying to explain it to people who don't understand. I thought that was even harder than coming out as being bisexual.

Having a large part of their identity misunderstood made these participants feel as though they were outsiders or that others thought they were “weird,” which affected their sense of belonging in the school.

Similarly, participants felt that transgender students were also not understood or accepted, which also affected their sense of belonging. In fact, most of the participants felt that students and faculty were becoming much more accepting of sexuality diversity than they were of gender diversity. “Sexuality and gender are two completely different things” (Freya). Flynn adds that students at School A are more reluctant to accept gender diversity.

I just feel like there's so far yet to go because sure, ground is being broken on the sexuality front, I guess, but there's a whole other monster in the closet and, I don't know, I feel like [School A] would probably take the gender thing harder than they would take the sexuality thing...

Karen also agrees that in her position as a guidance counselor, she does not think that the staff of the school really understands gender issues.

I really do feel like as the population of students continues to grow, our staff needs to be much more in tune with it, and I think that there's so much out there for our students on the web, links for students to have forums to talk, to speak. We keep seeing different, I don't want to say trends as if it is trendy. There's different things. There's gender fluid and all kind of stuff but I think our staff is unaware that some of these terms even exist but our kids are using them and I think just to make our staff aware what some of these things mean and if you have

a student who is identifying that way or talking about it, this is what it means for them. I do think some students may feel teachers judge them because they don't "understand" them. I don't think teachers are intentional in their actions but may come across as non-accepting in what they say or don't say. As a whole, the faculty needs to better understand the issues surrounding GSD students.

Emily points out that sometimes transgender students do not even feel welcome in the GSD community, and that people who are allies to those who are sexuality diverse are often not as understanding or welcoming of those who are gender diverse.

...The main things that upset me were hearing the transphobic things and the fact that even people I was friends with thought it was ok to talk about these people when they knew I was part of the LGBT community. And they just kind of separated it. I honestly felt like that was the main issue among the kids. Of course, it's not good for anybody in the LGBT community, but I felt like the trans kids had it the hardest.

Flynn notes that even the name "Gay-Straight Alliance" can be problematic for gender diverse students.

I don't know, it's super important. I understand it's the gay-straight alliance, but if you're going to have a club like that, I feel like genderqueer people and trans people, I feel like everyone should feel like they have a place there.

Flynn also points out that in many ways sexuality diversity has become more normalized, and that people have some concept of it, even if they do not understand or agree with it.

But many people do not understand gender diversity at all.

...I feel like even younger kids understand that sexuality is a thing that's a spectrum. And they know that things like gay and lesbian and bisexual and those things exist. But as a whole, society drills into everybody that there is only male and female, which is really problematic because gender is a spectrum as well. I feel like we should normalize talking about the gender spectrum as much as we have talked about the sexuality spectrum because you should at least have a very small nugget of knowledge on it before you go out into the world because you could stir up a lot of shit for being "you are only male or female, there is no in between."

As with other GSD issues, the participants felt that gender diversity needed to be addressed in curriculum, particularly in health classes. This lack of understanding also

led to a lack of belonging for transgender students, even among some other GSD students and allies.

In discussing rules and traditions that were heteronormative, most of the traditions identified were specifically problematic for transgender students. The two traditions mentioned most prominently by the participants were senior yearbook pictures and graduation. Both are problematic because of specified attire that is linked to gender. School A requires female students to wear a traditional drape in their yearbook photos, and requires males to wear a tuxedo. Likewise, they require female students to wear a yellow cap and gown with a white collar, and male students to wear a blue gown with no collar.

The senior pictures. The senior formals. Why do the girls always have to wear the drape? The transgender [boys] can't wear the tux, they have to wear the drape. And I don't get why that is. I think it's really ridiculous that they have to wear the drape when they don't feel comfortable doing that. And the same for the guys. They have to wear the tux. They don't get to wear the drape. (Clara)

The participants also recalled situations with two transgender male students in their graduating classes who had issues with this tradition.

So, C. at the time was identifying as a transgender male as well and he refused to take those pictures and so he did not have his formal in the yearbook, but K. talked to the yearbook person and the yearbook person again was like, no, you are not getting the fucking suit and tie. Probably not in those words. ...So K. had to wear the shawl. (Flynn)

Flynn also discussed K's struggle with graduation and a conversation they had about the graduation regalia.

...I was like, "just ask for the blue gown, it shouldn't be that hard. I don't understand why people would tell you no. You feel this way, you identify this way, you should get the blue gown." Yeah, he was told no, absolutely not, you're not getting the blue gown. And then he went ...to our vice principal. Actually, I think he was acting principal at the time. He asked Mr. C. and Mr. C. also said he had to wear the yellow gown, but he was really cool about it, but he was like,

“I’m really sorry about it but this is just how this has to be.” Which still isn’t cool. But he [K.] was really upset about that, like really torn up. But I was like, “just wear the gown, but wear pants and shoes instead of a dress. It will be fine, no one’s going to fucking say anything to you. We’re graduating in fucking 20 minutes.” ...So begrudgingly, he wore the yellow outfit and he did wear a suit underneath...

The participants felt that these types of traditions made gender diverse students feel uncomfortable, misunderstood, and like they were not really included as part of the school and its ceremonies and traditions.

The participants also felt that there is a misunderstanding about straight students who are potential allies. Freya discussed the importance of straight allies to the GSD community, as a straight ally herself.

I don’t identify as anything other than straight, [but] they’ll recognize that they need people who are straight to be their support system and I definitely see that from most of my friends. ...They appreciate that I know that they’re not going to hit on me or going to have this huge crush on me because I’m a girl and they’re into girls.

Straight students do not always understand what their role could be in the GSD community or that they can also participate in GSA.

I feel like it comes down to me because I am the only like really well known straight person [in GSA]. Like even middle-schoolers ...were like, “oh my god, da da da da,” asking me questions. I am like, “ok, child.” I am like, “go to a meeting and feel it out for yourself.” (Freya)

Participants also noted their frustration at potential allies asking if they have to be gay to be in the club, or if anyone will hit on them. “I don’t even know how to go about being like you don’t have to be LGBT to be in the group because it’s literally in the name, so I don’t understand” (Flynn). The participants also noted that some of the student body did not understand why the GSA was needed or why they could not have a “straight club.” There seemed to be a lack of understanding of heterosexual and cisgender privilege from

the student body in general, which possibly stems from the lack of education about GSD people and their rights. When the club started, students were asked why they needed the club and were accused of just “waving it in everyone’s face” (Emily). Clara recalled one student asked, “Why do gay people need a day of silence? Why don’t we have a straight day of silence?”

I feel like that’s a common theme everywhere. Oh, gay people have this? Well, why don’t straight people have it? Hey, when you get carted off for mass genocide, then you can have a straight pride parade and a straight day of silence and clubs specifically for straight people. (Flynn).

This lack of understanding makes many GSD students feel a disconnect between themselves and the student body.

The participants credited much of this misunderstanding to a lack of normativity surrounding GSD people and issues and felt that if GSD people were established as “normal,” it will help to create more understanding between classmates. The participants struggled with the fact that heteronormativity seemed pervasive in the school and was probably taken for granted by most heterosexual, cisgender students, faculty, and administration. The participants felt that it was assumed that everyone was straight and that any gender or sexuality diversity was weird. “Like, the concept of GSD people was not present anywhere inside those four walls and it pissed me off. It really fucking pissed me off” (Flynn). Students felt that gender and sexuality diversity was not represented at all in the school, besides in GSA, and it made them feel as though they had to hide something about themselves in order to fit in.

The idea that straight people can feel welcome to talk about their significant other and LGBT people kind of have to hide it. Which sucks because if you’re happy about it you want to talk about it and share it with everyone and you can feel kind of like you’re not allowed to. (Emily)

Participants felt that one way GSD people and issues could become “normalized” was for it to be included in the curriculum. “I feel like that would be the best way would be to just incorporate it into the curriculum to let students see it’s not a weird thing. It’s kind of an everyday thing. And that it’s ok” (Emily). According to the participants, the only time sexuality diversity was mentioned throughout their high school careers was to discuss AIDs in health class.

...Sex isn’t something to be ashamed of, homosexuality isn’t something to be ashamed of, and I feel like the curriculum for health class should be something that is taught equal opportunity, like everyone should be discussed. It shouldn’t just be heterosexual sex, except for the HIV unit, which I talked a lot about before, but that’s the only time that we talked about gay men in my high school health class was the HIV unit, which isn’t cool, that just sets a whole negative connotation on it. Like that’s not cool. Not cool at all. (Flynn)

According to the participants, sexuality diverse people are only ever taught about in this one specific way, which only gives students a negative impression of homosexuality. Gender diversity is never mentioned at all. Students felt that in addition to including more about sexuality and gender and homosexual sex in health courses, classes such as history, social studies, and literature should also explore gender and sexuality diversity.

No, absolutely not, I feel like GSD people are not represented at all in our curriculum and it bothers me because people ages 14-17, super impressionable, this is the time they need to be learning about these things. They might be struggling with these things. “...nobody else has this happening to them, it’s just happening to me.” We need to teach people these things because you never know who is struggling with it. They need to know that they’re valid and they need to know that they aren’t the only ones going through, like sure every experience is unique, but they’re not the only one feeling this kind of way. I would love queer literature, like I would love queer people in history, that shit is exciting for me. (Flynn)

The participants also noted that textbook companies include culturally representative names in their books, but do not include scenarios or examples that include same-sex couples. Inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity in the curriculum not only can help

GSD individuals feel a sense of belonging in the GSD community, but it can also help non-GSD students understand GSD issues and normalize GSD issues, which further contributes to GSD acceptance and belonging in the school as a whole.

As mentioned above, the participants felt that teachers or administrators sometimes ignored verbal harassment and derogatory statements about GSD people and enforced some rules, such as PDA rules, more harshly for GSD students. These actions made students feel unsafe, but also contributed to the participant's lack of belonging and further perpetuated heteronormativity by making gender and sexuality diversity "weird." The participants feared that language such as "that's so gay" was becoming more normalized and accepted than actually being GSD.

Another aspect of belonging that the participants discussed was making relationships with other adults in the building. Faculty and administration that work with GSD students need to understand that many of them have been alienated by not only their friends, but also by some of the adults in their lives. They can be wary or distrustful of adults because they have felt judged, betrayed, or abandoned by parents and other adult family members and caretakers.

With my family, I think that was the hardest because my mom was always very accepting but my dad was totally against it and that was the point of my life where I started drifting apart from him. And him being so close-minded kind of ruined my relationship with him and I am just now, like 4 years later, starting to build that back up. (Emily)

Flynn attributes his rocky relationship with his parents and siblings as the catalyst for many of his struggles as a high school student, as well as one of the reasons for dropping out of college.

Karen recognizes the reluctance from students to talk to their teachers about their identities. “I feel like a lot of them are keeping that in and maybe not really feeling like the teachers really know who they are because they’re not totally comfortable or out.”

Flynn shared that he always kept his teachers at arm’s length, especially about sexuality and gender.

When I came to school, my dad taught me always to treat everything like a professional relationship, so I came to school and I treated my teachers as professionals and I respected them as professionals and I basically had no desire to get to know them as people. They were just teachers and I was there to learn and they were there to teach and that’s just how it was. But I had a few teachers that I emotionally connected with and I felt like I could talk to them and be open with them about things that I wouldn’t be open to just anybody about.

In order to form relationships with GSD students, faculty and administration need to reach out, understanding that students may already have damaged relationships with other adults in their lives.

In general, students felt that their teachers were supportive, even if they were wary or afraid. They recognized that teachers could support them and help them to feel more included in the school.

I think most of the teachers notice if you’re normally a chipper student and you’re feeling down, they’ll ask like what’s wrong, and they’ll try to talk to you and let you know that you have someone to talk to. So belonging is like the biggest one the school could do and did do. (Freya)

Throughout the participant interviews, each participant mentioned more than one teacher by name with whom they had a positive relationship while they were students at School A. Words that were used to describe these teachers were “outwardly supportive,” “stood up for me,” “respect,” “favorite teacher,” “felt like I could open up to you,” “formed a connection with,” and “adored us.” As John points out, this connection to at least one adult in the school is important to making a student feel like he or she belongs.

Do I want all the teachers to understand every kid? Absolutely. But I want somebody, I want someone to be able to understand every kid here. Does that make sense? ...I don't know if everybody here will ever understand every kid. And I don't know if that's even realistic to say. But if somebody understands every kid, then as long as we match those two people up, we're in a better place.

However, as mentioned above, the participants did report instances where they did not feel supported by their teachers, which made them feel both unsafe and excluded, especially if the teacher made the joke or comment in front of other students, or failed to correct a student who was using derogatory language or harassing another student. Participants felt that some rules were enforced more harshly for GSD students, and in some cases they did not report harassment because they did not think anything would be done. The participants also reported that they felt less of a connection to the administration than other students had.

I definitely saw the administration having close relationships with students, and I never felt that way. I always felt like kind of like a little kid being spanked or something. I just felt very belittled. And I can't say if it was from having involvement in the LGBT community or what it was, but I just felt kind of much more belittled by administration than I saw other students. You know, I saw other students interacting with them in a very different way. (Emily)

Unfortunately, as the participants pointed out, those negative interactions can have a stronger impact on a student's sense of belonging in school than the positive interactions.

The participants also had several suggestions for training that they thought would benefit the faculty and administration and help GSD students to feel more included.

Freya's advice to teachers was "listen more than you talk." Clara added that teachers should not make assumptions about their students. Emily's advice was that teachers need to keep their personal feelings to themselves if they have an opinion about sexuality or gender diversity so as not to make students feel excluded. "You are a teacher. Your job is to teach." During the focus group, the participants were asked to design a professional

development session for teachers and administrators on the topic of teaching GSD students. Ideas ranged from informational sessions, accommodations for GSD students, speakers from the GSD community, Safe Zone training, and student or graduate speakers.

Everybody's experiences are different and stuff but just seeing snapshots of people lives or whatever you know, I feel would be beneficial because you are still seeing a life that isn't cisgender or a life that isn't heterosexual. Which I feel, like you could tell somebody about something and they are just like, eh, but if you show somebody something... (Flynn).

The students felt that this type of professional development might help teachers and administrators to understand the GSD community better, including what it means to be GSD and what those students actually experience.

The participants also discussed the effects that feeling excluded had on their high school experience. Freya, an education major in college, was familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs and referred to them when discussing why belonging is important.

I'm a firm believer of the hierarchy of needs and I think that [belonging] is the third one. I firmly believe that if you don't have all of those steps you won't be able to be your best person and I feel like that's what everyone strives to be, the best version of themselves, and that's super great. I think that's what high school is preparing you for, for being the best person you can be and doing everything that you would want to do....

Not having this sense of belonging did have a negative effect on the participants' desire to come to school and their performance when they were there. "I feel like it [feeling included] would help them focus more, in a sense. Instead of focusing on the bad and feeling awful about themselves. And that could help with grades, too" (Clara). Emily and Flynn both discussed how they tried to fit in but then gave up and just focused on getting out of school.

But then I think as I went on throughout high school I just kind of stopped caring and I saw it as like, I'm never going to enjoy being here. I just have to be here to get the best grades I can, so I can move on. (Emily)

I felt like I didn't really have a place. By the time I got into the end of my 10th grade year, I was like, I don't know why I bother coming. (Flynn)

The participants discussed the effect feeling excluded had on their self-esteem and attitudes, as well. Many compared school to feeling like a prison or feeling trapped.

You need to be able to enjoy your daily life and if you're going to school everyday and feeling like an outcast it's just going to make you feel bad about yourself and you're just not going to enjoy going. And it's somewhere you have to go every single day but you don't want to feel like you're going to prison. (Emily)

Flynn discussed how the social aspects of high school should prepare students for social interactions in life, but as a GSD student, he felt as if that experience was marred because he was an outsider.

Students are here 7 hours a day, 5 days a week, 180 days total a year, and if you are going to be spending so much of your life here, you need to feel like you have a place here. And like I said, I understand school isn't a social experience, it's an educational experience. But it's really not though. High school is, while it's rather insignificant in the grand scheme of life, ...it's like your baseboard for jumping into life and you have to have those social interactions so if you come to school and you feel like you don't have a place or you have no friends or you feel alienated by your classmates, you are not going to have a pleasurable experience, then you are not going to want to come here, and then you are not going to be doing what you are supposed to be doing in school, which is learning. Which is kind of what happened to me. So I think it is very important that students feel like they belong inside of the school.

As the participants pointed out, school should be a place where students create positive memories, become fully immersed in the learning environment, and learn to socialize and form relationships with peers, colleagues, and authority. All of these were damaged by a lack of feeling as though they belonged.

There was also a fear that they would feel equally excluded in college or the workplace, and while the participants all reported having more positive experiences in work and college, those experiences were also overshadowed by a fear of exclusion.

I feel like they [high school and college] were two totally and completely different experiences. ... I look back at high school and think of it as this little cube frozen in time and sometimes I look at it and I am like did that even happen? Because college felt so much more real to me. (Flynn)

The participants mostly reported better conditions in college and the workplace than in high school.

I went and it was completely different and within the first weekend I was in the gender and sexuality alliance, I was pledging a fraternity, and it was so different. Like the atmosphere was so different. (Flynn)

Flynn also noted how those feelings of belonging affected his overall mental wellbeing and connection to his college, in contrast to his high school experience.

Everybody on campus knows who I am so people want to be friends with Flynn and it's cool. And no one looks at me different because of my gender or sexuality there. They just know me as Flynn. He's a cool dude, he likes male pronouns, he identifies this way, and he likes video games, which is awesome. I definitely feel like I belong there more than with my actual biological family.

In general, the participants felt more of a sense of belonging in college than they did in high school, mostly because the students were more accepting and because there were established support systems and rules in place that supported them.

Finally, the participants commented on how the school's GSA had a positive effect on creating normativity for GSD people and issues among their classmates, as well as creating a positive space where GSD people could feel a sense of belonging. The participants felt that the longer the GSA exists, the more accepting the student body will become because they learn to understand GSD issues and people.

I personally think that the longer that GSA is around, I feel like the more credible the voices coming out of GSA will be. I feel right now it's just, I feel like people might not take it seriously because it's a relatively new thing but I feel like after it's been around for awhile that people can start to speak out against [issues]. (Flynn)

Additionally, students felt that as the GSA became more popular, different types of people would join the club, and normativity and understanding would spread.

There should be someone in the club that kind of represents every part of the school. I think that's the best way to keep it more inclusive and keep more people joining. I'm glad to hear more people are joining though because it's definitely a struggle. (Emily)

Finally, the participants noted that GSA-sponsored events like the National Day of Silence were good ways to spread the message and help all students understand, even if they were not members of the club.

...It was a good portion of the student body understanding, even if it was just for 24 hours. It was a really monumental moment to me. I don't know if other people feel that way but that's definitely how I feel because we spread this message and people heard it (Flynn).

Overall the participants noted that while they hoped participation in the GSA would increase, advocacy events sponsored by the GSA also had an impact on student understanding and contributed to a sense of belonging for all GSD students, not only those in the GSA.

The participants also noted that the GSA had an impact on their feelings of belonging by giving them at least one place in school where they felt like they belonged. For the students who founded the GSA, there was a noticeable difference in their feelings of inclusion after the club was started. "When we started the GSA, I felt like that was the only place where I kind of fit in. It was like that and art class, were the only places where I felt like I was kind of part of the school" (Emily). The participants noted that the club was started to be a place where everyone could fit in since there was no other place for many of the students. The participants also noted that in addition to meeting new people

and feeling a sense of belonging in the club, they also felt a little more included in the school because they knew there were other people in the building that supported them.

For me I guess it was like all these people I probably never would have associated with, well most of them, but I would have never associated with some of the people that were in the club, before we were a part of the club together. But then it's like, outside of the club I would see them, and it would be like a head nod or like a little wave, so it was cool. (Flynn)

Yeah and then you know that you have people you can go to in just the general student body. Like after seeing people there it kind of makes you feel a little bit better in the school in general, seeing those familiar faces, I think. (Emily)

The participants specifically noted some specific activities that the GSA did that contributed to their sense of belonging. Although some participants mentioned that there should be more advocacy in the club, they also mentioned that just having a social place to talk to other GSD students and allies was important to their sense of belonging.

I feel like it was just in general, like the meetings, the time that we had that was downtime when we could just kind of sit together and talk about how our week or our day went and just feel closer to a group of people within the school and not feel like an outsider. (Emily)

Specifically, the participants remembered a very simple weekly activity where students were able to share a high point and a low point of the week, called "Highs and Lows."

I said it before and I will say it again, I really loved best thing of the week. That was my favorite thing. I really liked that because we all got to share, we all had shit weeks, and we could all come together at our meetings and share all this positivity with each other which was really great and I think it's also really important to focus on something positive to get you through until next week. It was a lot of fun. (Flynn)

John noted in general that clubs can help students feel a sense of belonging in the school.

So when you bring clubs together, there's obviously like interests whether it be Youth and Government, or Key Club, or GSA, there's a reason that people want to be a part of that club, there's a likeness, even with the advisers, I believe a lot of time, and just associate with those like interests and that's where our kids can go and find each other. (John)

For students who do not feel like they belong in other aspects of the school, the GSA was important in both feeling a sense of belonging to something and in starting to create understanding and normativity for GSD people in the school.

The participants did mention two areas where the GSA at School A can improve in creating a sense of belonging. One of these is including transgender students and issues and making those students feel more welcome to the club. Additionally, the participants felt that bringing in more students who are allies would also help to create a sense of normativity, which would contribute to inclusion across the school. “I think that when the club becomes more established, people will start bringing their friends and it will get to a point where it will be seen as a gay-straight alliance rather than the gay club” (Emily). In this way, the GSA itself can find ways to become more inclusive within itself, as well as within the school as a whole.

In general, the participants felt that they did not belong or were not included in the school, except in GSA. They thought these feelings stemmed from being misunderstood by their classmates and their teachers, lacking relationships with their teachers and administrators, and failing to see any representation of GSD people or issues in the school traditions, rules, or curriculum. This lack of belonging made the participants not want to be in school, and many reported giving up or not caring as much about their education, or giving up on belonging and trying to get away as soon as possible after graduation. The participants felt the GSA was important in both giving GSD students a place where they belonged and in helping to create more understanding and visibility for GSD people in the school at large.

Finding #3 – Self-Value

The participants spoke frequently about how the school rules, their relationships with their teachers and classmates, their participation in GSA, and their sense of belonging and safety in the school affected their own feelings of self-worth, self-esteem, and confidence over their four years as high school students and into adulthood. The participants also discussed how high school helped to shape their identities in school and today.

The participants were affected differently by their experiences at School A. Flynn thought that his experiences, particularly with classmates, damaged his self-esteem.

I, ok, School A made me feel like trash. Like absolute trash. Going there, being there 7 hours a day, 5 days a week, you know. I feel like my self worth plummeted when I was in high school and it had a lot to do with the way that people who were higher on the social ladder or whatever treated my group of friends and stuff.

Clara felt that her treatment in high school affected her sense of self and her identity.

Honestly I didn't even recognize myself anymore. I had no idea. I could look at myself in the mirror for an hour and be like, who are you? And I don't know, before high school, I knew who I was, and I knew what I wanted to do. But then when I get into high school, it, I changed into something I don't really recognize.

Emily commented again that she thought she had to put on an act that she was more comfortable with her sexuality and with talking about it than she really was, to avoid looking like it was something she was ashamed of or not confident about. She thought she could have had a more enjoyable high school experience if she had been able to fit in more.

So I just feel like I could have made more of myself and been more involved in more, been generally a happier person. Because that was the years of my life when I was most depressed, when I was contemplating my sexuality, so you know. I think I could have just been a more happy and successful person.

Freya commented that she saw friends who were struggling with their sexuality and

feeling excluded consider skipping school or not caring about school because they just did not feel like it was something they should care about.

I definitely think that it could put someone in a bad mood or they could get completely depressed and not care about all of the things they used to care about or perform not well on that test they should have studied for. Something like that.

The participants saw a link between feelings of belonging and success both in school and later in the future.

I think that if kids don't feel like they belong then they are going to feel like they don't need to try. And that's one thing. You know, if a kid feels like they're not going to try then they're not going to want to go to school and they're not going to get good grades and they're not going to be able to succeed in life as they could have if they worked to their full potential. (Emily)

Karen also noted that in her recent two-day training on working with GSD students, one of the most eye-opening things was how students' experiences contribute to the internal struggle to identify themselves and accept who they are.

I think the biggest eye opener was just hearing of, what do I want to say, that the kids are going through so much internally and kids who you don't even know are struggling in the classroom. So many times we are not aware that they are even struggling. We should try to be tuned in more when possible.

Most of the participants had very low self-esteem and confidence as high school students, and most attributed that to their lack of belonging or feeling as though they fit in.

The students also attributed their feelings of fear when they left high school and went to college to their high school experiences and the low self-esteem and lack of confidence that came with it. "I was really scared to come [to college]. You know, I was really afraid about making friends because I lived in [Town A] my whole life" (Emily). Clara attributes her experiences in high school to feeling unprepared to go to college right away.

I feel like if my experience in high school was a little different, I would have

focused more in school and been more prepared to go off to college. But right now, I am just like, everything has cooled down a minute, I don't need to be with them right now. I can wait a little while. (Clara)

Flynn's lack of self worth in high school left him feeling as though he would always be on the bottom in life.

And I felt really shitty. And I left high school thinking that the rest of the world... was going to be like this and I would always get shit on by people higher up than me and that's not how it should be but that's how it is.

Fortunately, for the most part, the participants have found that their college and work experiences are much more positive and they have started to shed these feelings of low self-esteem. Flynn, however, has reverted back to some of these ways of thinking now that he has left college and returned home. "I feel disgusting and I'm never going to look the way I want to and I have to wait until I am done with college before I can even think about transitioning" (Flynn). He also feels as though he does not have an outlet or support group for his desire to advocate for the GSD community.

And I did all that [advocacy in college] and now I'm at home and all I can do is sit on my trans blog on Tumblr and be like "that's not how things are, things are actually like this." And nobody listens to you because I am just a social justice warrior on Tumblr. I don't know. I feel like I was doing a lot more before.

While high school was not the only factor that affected the participants, it was certainly a factor in the estimate they created of themselves.

The participants recognized that the GSA played a large part in the development of their identities and in helping them to build self-esteem. Two of the participants, Emily and Flynn, were founding members of the club, and they both served as president of the club. Freya was also an officer in the club. Creating and leading in the club, as well as learning to advocate, played a key role in fostering confidence in these students.

Before the GSA, most of the participants indicated that they had never been in a

leadership role before. John states that one goal of his is to help develop that leadership in all students in the school.

One of the things as I look back when I took over as principal was I want to be in a position where the kids sort of lead the school. They will never run the school, that's why the adults are here. But I want them to have say in what we do here. I can tell you from last year to this year, I get a lot more requests from the kids about "hey can we do this, can we do that."

In the case of GSA, three students saw an opportunity to take some leadership in the school and create a space for GSD students.

For me, GSA was the first place that I ever felt like in a leadership role. I felt like, I always felt kind of pushed to the side throughout my life and GSA was the place where I actually got to say my ideas. You know, people listened to me and I felt like I was important in constructing something. And you know I still see kind of bringing up the club as one of my big accomplishments because I never really felt like I had the chance to impact anything until that happened. (Emily)

Emily also mentioned that this was the first time she had ever felt like a leader in her life.

Flynn was another founding member and the first president of the club, and like Emily, also felt that the club was one of his biggest accomplishments in high school.

And then my senior year Spectrum happened — I birthed Spectrum. Then after that I was like this is something I can put my energy into and make a place for me, and not only me, but people after me who are the same and don't feel like they belong anywhere and they can come here. And everything is Gucci.

Flynn also felt that his leadership in School A's GSA helped him to also become involved and a leader in his college's GSA, as well. He repeatedly refers to the GSA as his "child." For Freya, assigning leadership positions in the club made it seem like a "real" club to her, and she internalized the club's meaning once she had a leadership role in it.

Like when parts were assigned, like positions in the club were assigned, I started to take that very seriously and definitely after our summit I took it very, very seriously. It was definitely something that couldn't be taken lightly.

Because this was the first leadership role for the participants, they had to learn to step outside of their comfort zones. Emily noted that particularly in trying to create change around a controversial subject, being an officer or member of GSA requires leadership and strength. “Yeah, like be strong. Stand up. Don't be a little bitch. Like if you're going to take the leadership role, you've got to learn to step out of your shell a little bit” (Emily). Creating leadership for GSD students was integral not only to the club success, but to the success of the individual participants, as well. It helped them to learn to advocate for themselves and others and be the catalyst for change in School A.

The participants discussed how their involvement in the club helped them to become better advocates for themselves and their fellow classmates. Having the GSA helped them feel supported and confident. The students realized that if things were going to change in the school, they would have to be the catalysts for that change.

I don't know. I mean, I guess probably just GSA and talking with other people who have been through it, too, and realizing if you keep being shy and scared nothing's going to change. That's just kind of what I realized. That if we felt uncomfortable in school, we were going to have to do something about it. So I guess that's the point where I shifted from being really shy and quiet to being more advocating, you know, just trying to put people in their place a little more when they're doing something that's not right. So I guess it's just like meeting other people through GSA and when we were setting it up, just being able to talk to people about how they felt the club was needed, too, and how they felt the same way I did and they didn't know how to act. (Emily)

Knowing that there was a group of people that supported them and felt the same way they did made it easier to stand up to other students who were bullying, using derogatory language, or speaking badly about the club. Freya learned to speak up against bullying even when teachers did not intervene. “I would be the one to step up and say ‘hey guys, that isn't cool’ and I had no problem doing that but I felt like it should've been addressed.” However, in general, the participants felt that their leadership of the club helped to

improve school climate and their relationships with their teachers. “Once it got to that point when the club was established and I got more comfortable talking about it, I didn’t really feel any disrespect from any of my teachers” (Emily). In many ways, the participants also felt that their leadership improved their relationships with other students. In general, the participants felt that they were able to help many other students, even those that did not attend club meetings. “I just got tired of seeing people get hurt. Seeing people cry. And it kind of like gives you strength for yourself when you’re helping someone else” (Clara). Freya also noted that the GSA gave her strength as an ally to stand up for her friends.

I think it helped me realize that I need to be a person who’s there to help others. And who will not be judgmental. Who will be there for anyone who needs me, basically. And my GSA in high school helped me to prepare for the things that we would do in college. I really enjoyed it.

In addition to embracing the leadership role for themselves, the participants were able to embrace that role and create a better climate for their classmates, as well.

Perhaps more importantly, the participants felt that their experiences in School A, and particularly their involvement in the GSA, prepared them to advocate outside of school, as well. The three participants that went on to college all became involved in their college or university’s GSA. Two participants were even able to work with their college GSAs to get gender-free housing offered on their campuses.

So a group of us from Spectrum went and we were like, “we want gender-free housing.” And they were like, “that is something that we are talking about.” And so they saw we wanted it and so I believe that since they saw there was a want for it in the student body they’re putting it through and making it happen, which is really cool. (Flynn)

The participants mentioned that they were able to become more involved in their college GSAs and felt more comfortable advocating in a new environment because of their

experiences in School A's GSA.

A lot of people didn't know, like they knew we might have had a GSA, like Allies on campus, but they weren't sure what it was. So I had to explain what it was, what we did. Definitely on the days, like the remembrance days, you have to explain that. You have to speak up. You have to really know what you're talking about. And I feel like I know what I am talking about now. I know what the day is and why and what it's supposed to represent. And I think that's mostly how I advocate. (Freya)

The participants were also more comfortable in empowering others to advocate for themselves.

[discussing a GSD college friend who was assigned a homophobic roommate] So it definitely was resolved. No one was saying anything and I was like "K., you need to say something" and that's when they did the mediation. After mediation her roommate was like, "I don't live want to live there anymore so I need to talk to other people." So it kind of got fixed I guess. (Freya)

Emily has even changed her attitude towards homophobic people, and instead of being offended by them, instead tries to advocate for herself and help them change their way of thinking.

I think it's hard because college is a time when people are like, you're going from believing your parents' opinions to forming your own and I feel like some people are kind of lost in the middle. I mean I personally try not to get offended. I've come into contact with people, like I have one friend specifically who I have had since the beginning of the year and I recently realized that he was a homophobe before he met me and that kind of made me realize that if someone is judging, I try to be patient with them and realize that maybe it's just because of the way they were raised, and you just have to push them to change. So yeah, that's why college is a weird time, because people aren't sure of their opinions yet. They are still trying to figure out their own opinions.

Clara has also discussed advocating for GSD people in her workplace, in her personal life, and on social media. In one situation, she defended a gay couple that was being harassed by another moviegoer in the theater. "It's [school and involvement in GSA] really shown me how close-minded people can be. But it's also prepared me for those people." For most of the participants, being able to advocate for others and leaving a legacy of safety

and belonging in the school helps them to also gain confidence in their own identities.

I am a strong believer in the pass it on things. If you become someone who is a good person and can help others who are feeling down or feeling this way, you can help them, advocate for them, or even just be there for them. Then other people will be inspired by what you are doing and then they'll try to do it and I just feel like it gets better. (Freya)

In many ways, becoming advocates and leaders in the school and in their own communities and colleges became as much of the participants' identities as their sexuality and gender identification.

Finally, the participants noted that the GSA also helped them in discovering and developing their own identities. Through meeting other students, learning about GSD people, and discussing issues and struggles, the participants were able to label what they were feeling, accept their identities, and feel more confident in sharing those identities with others.

GSA actually made me feel comfortable with myself. It's actually how I discovered that I was bi. And it just made me think about everything growing up, like all the girls that I liked or kissed. And I was like, you know what, I'm ok with this. I don't care what anyone says anymore. I'm ok with this. And all of senior year I was like, screw y'all. Yeah, I'm fabulous today. I don't care. (Clara)

The GSA also helped students to come out or provided more visibility for out students in the school. "But, by my senior year, everybody knew I was the president of Spectrum. And while you don't have to be gay to be in Spectrum, I think I made it pretty clear that I was gay" (Flynn). The participants also learned to help others in their same identity struggles, helping not only to advocate for students who were not in GSA, but also helping them discover their identities and feel more confident and supported in them. "I had a friend, T., he wasn't sure if he was gay or not, and I really helped him feel comfortable with himself because I felt comfortable with myself, because of GSA

(Clara).” The club also helped the participants to understand that there are many identities on the gender and sexuality spectrum, other than just lesbian, gay, and transgender.

And it helped me realize that some people, that there are so many out there, like there’s not just lesbian and gay, there’s pansexual, there’s transgender, there’s so many out there, that’s it’s not just black and white but there’s a lot of grey, there’s a lot of colors. (Freya)

Even students already in the GSD community learned that their own identities did not have to fit into a box but could fall on a spectrum.

Much like advocacy, the participants’ involvement in GSA and its effect on their identity development carried on beyond their four years of high school. Many of the participants were afraid to go to college because they feared their college experiences would be the same as high school, but they also felt empowered by their involvement in GSA to be confident in their identities.

I feel like in high school I was very much in my shell and I didn’t really talk to people and I didn’t make an effort to make friends I guess after I got shot down so many times. But in college I was like, “if you do that here, you’ll live out your worst fear and you won’t have friends.” So I busted the fuck out of my shell and I was like, I am going to talk to people and I am going to make friends and I am going to sit with random people at lunch. I am going to walk up to people and say “hey, let me sit with you,” and you know. It’s what I did and people thought it was creepy but then I was sitting outside and it was my hair, people like purple hair. And I was sitting outside smoking and three people came up to me and they were like “hey” and I was like “hi” and they were like, “I have a really big friend crush on you,” and I was like, “oh, hey, let’s be friends,” and that was how I made all of my friends. Because it was two people from HBT [his fraternity] and a person from Spectrum. And I feel like because I knew that my introversion was probably a big issue on why I felt like I didn’t have a place in high school, I knew I had to blow that out of the water and be a totally different person in college, which I am. I am a totally different person now than I was two years ago. (Flynn)

Flynn specifically discussed his continued struggle with identification as a transgender male in college. He expressed that using labels helped him to create an identity for

himself.

I understand that in some situations people say that all these labels are problematic but I personally like having a label because I can pinpoint who I am and then find other people who are also going through the same things, and having these labels and finding other people who have these labels, it creates such a community for me and it's easier to connect to people than by saying "oh, it's whatever, I don't like labels." Labels give me a sense of validity in the queer community as a whole.

He also discussed the process of changing his name and transitioning to using male pronouns as a significant part of developing an identity for himself.

Thanks, I picked it myself. It took me like three months to find this name, because when I first came out in July, July 17th, I went by Asher. And then I was like, no that's too close to my birth name... So I decided to change my name and I went through this whole process and I had everybody give me names, and I had this long list of like 60 names and I was like, I need to pick a name, and then I was like, I think I like Flynn a lot and I don't know anyone named Flynn. So I picked Flynn....

As the participants continue to explore their sexuality and gender identification, the lessons they learned in advocacy and identity have become crucial in fine-tuning, or in some cases, completely overhauling who they are as adults.

While several experiences in high school had a negative effect on the participants' feelings of self-value and confidence, there were aspects of the school, mainly GSA, that did help the students to continue to define and create their identities, as well as to take on a leadership role in the school and advocate for themselves and other students. John stated, as the school principal, that what he really wants for high school students is for them to be empowered enough to figure things out for themselves. "You have to sort of feel them through and maybe just guide them through. Eventually I believe they get themselves to the right answer" (John). For the participants, this is what GSA and a few faculty members provided: empowerment and guidance to help them become confident

and self-assured enough to become leaders and advocates.

Results and Interpretations

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How can understanding School A's GSD graduates' experiences with school belonging effect positive change in the school's policies, traditions, and supports?
2. What school traditions and policies, if any, have a negative effect on GSD students' sense of belonging and how can they be revised to be more inclusive?
3. What systems have GSD students experienced that make them feel more supported in schools?
 - a. How have they been supported by the school's GSA and what changes can be made to make the group more supportive?
 - b. How have they been supported by faculty and administration in the school and what changes can be made to make faculty and administration more supportive?

This section will explore the connections between these research questions and the thematic findings above, as well as illustrate consistencies with the research presented in the literature review.

Result One: Policies, traditions, rules, and other institutions have an effect on a student's feelings of safety, belonging, and self

According to a democratic theory of education, all students should be given access to an equal education (Meyer, 2010). Students must be supported, especially in the official policies of the school. Policies for GSD students are recommended in multiple studies and have shown to be effective in lowering victimization and harassment and lead

to a higher feeling of school connectedness (Chesir-Teran and Hughes, 2009; Diaz et al., 2010; Horn & Romeo, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2014). A lack of these policies can perpetuate a silence around GSD issues in the school (Mayberry et al., 2013). While School A does include sexual orientation in its harassment policy, it does not include gender expression or identification.

In GLSEN's national report, students reported that they felt PDAs and the dress code were not fair or not fairly applied to GSD students (Kosciw et al., 2014). Likewise, several participants reported that PDAs were not disciplined fairly at School A and that a gay or lesbian presenting couple would be more likely scolded or disciplined than a straight presenting couple. Several also reported that the dress code was too gender specific, and that female students were disciplined more than male students in general, but that male GSD students were disciplined because of the dress code the most. Kosciw et al. (2014) reports that a high percentage of transgender students are likely to be disciplined for dress code violations when they wear clothing that does not match their legal sex. The perceived inequity in the follow through of these rules affected the participants' feelings of safety and belonging, making them feel judged or abnormal

While this study focused on the participants' experiences in high school, several of them mentioned their experiences in middle school as being significant to their high school experiences, especially since there is only one middle school that feeds into School A and three out of the four participants went to school there. According to the participants, any problems that existed in middle school continued into high school. They experienced the suicide of a classmate who was GSD, which may have been linked to bullying, the student's struggle with his identity, or his parent's lack of acceptance.

The school principal reports that the graduating class that three of the participants belonged to was notorious for bullying. Yet supports at the middle school level were even more limited than the high school. Kosciw et al. (2014) report that GSD middle school students are victimized and harassed at a higher rate than high school students, yet less than 8% of middle schools have a GSA.

In addition to school policies, there are also traditions that have become part of the school institution. While things like school dances, prom traditions, graduation attire, and yearbook photographs may not be part of official school policy, they can still perpetuate a gender binary and normalize heterosexual relationships (Meyer, 2010). Even though they are not official, they are still often upheld by school administration when students challenge them. The participants spoke at length about graduation caps and gowns and yearbook photographs, which a few students tried to challenge and were denied. These students felt uncomfortable wearing the more feminine attire even though their legal sex was female. In one case, a student opted not to have his picture in the yearbook because he was not allowed to wear the more masculine attire. Another student felt uncomfortable dressing in the feminine attire for her graduation and yearbook photo. These traditions made these students feel that they were not included in their own graduation festivities.

Gender binaries tended to create issues in other areas in School A, as well. Sports teams tended to be one school institution where GSD students did not feel safe or included. One participant reported harassment as a member of the soccer team. While all of the participants identified as cisgender females when they attended School A, there was a perception that homophobia was rampant in school athletics for boys. Even as

spectators, the participants felt that they did not fit in as GSD students in athletics. All of the participants reported feeling that male sports teams were homophobic and bullied students who were GSD or perceived as GSD, although they did not have specific evidence of this occurring. This is not surprising since students are more likely to hear that they are not acting masculinely enough than that they are not acting femininely enough (Russell et al., 2011). In general, there was a feeling among the participants that male GSD students had more difficulties than female GSD students.

The participants also reported that they felt unsafe or uncomfortable in locker rooms, and that some students felt unsafe in the bathrooms as well. Kosciw et al. (2014) reports that bathrooms and locker rooms are particularly problematic for GSD students, and Varjas et al. (2006) reports that bathrooms, locker rooms, and sporting events are prime locations for homophobic language. The guidance counselor and principal of School A did report that students had been given alternate places to change for gym class when they were uncomfortable using the locker room, and that the new high school building will have some facilities to further address these concerns.

Result Two: GSAs have a mostly positive impact on a student's feelings of safety, belonging, and self-esteem, as well as on the school climate as a whole.

The research shows that students who participate in GSAs, along with their advisers, can experience some backlash from other students and sometimes administration and the community (Heck et al., 2013; Mayberry et al., 2013). At School A, there were some reports from the participants about being harassed after joining the club or hearing negative comments from people in the community. Students shared that they were worried that their friends or family members would be bullied or picked on if

they joined the club, and the participants assumed that other GSD students did not join the GSA because they were afraid they would be harassed or outed.

However, overall the participants reported a positive experience with GSA. Schools that have GSAs are safer for GSD students, reporting less negative language and victimization than schools without a GSA (Kosciw et al., 2014). The participants reported that School A's GSA made them feel safer in school. One participant reported that students who graduated before the GSA started had a harder time in school. The GSA made students feel as though they had a space where they were not being judged and where they could be safe to talk about GSD issues. That safety carried over into the school in general, and the participants reported feeling safer knowing that they had a network of people that supported them, and they even felt safer advocating for themselves.

For the most part, students also reported that the GSA made them feel like they had a stronger sense of belonging in the school. In general, students who participate in extracurricular activities have a stronger sense of belonging to their school (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Wallace et al., 2012). The participants reported that GSA gave them a place where they felt like they belonged and felt supported by their classmates as a whole. They felt that being in the club made their feelings of belonging in the school as a whole improve. Although the participants reported that they wanted to complete more advocacy, they felt that the social aspect of the club was important to feeling a sense of belonging. The students did feel as though the club could do more to include all GSD people, especially transgender students, by focusing on issues other than sexual orientation.

The GSA also helped to normalize GSD issues and people and to break down heteronormativity at some level. The literature shows that historically GSAs improve normativity and visibility and foster interactions between GSD and straight students (Graybill et al., 2009; Horn & Romeo, 2010). The clubs can also provide resources about GSD issues that students otherwise would not encounter until college (Fetner & Kush, 2007). However, GSAs have also been accused of only breaking down homophobia but not the heteronormative culture (Mayberry et al., 2013). While the participants agree that the club could be doing more to combat heteronormativity, they felt that students who joined the club had the opportunity to meet several GSD students, which started to normalize diverse sexual orientation and gender identification. Additionally, as students engaged in advocacy and events throughout the school, other students began to see GSD issues as normal. The participants noted The Day of Silence as advocacy that particularly had an impact on GSD issues and visibility throughout the school.

Finally, both the literature and the experiences of the participants shows that GSAs can have a positive impact on a student's sense of identity and their confidence and self-esteem. Students who participate in a GSA are more likely to be out at an earlier age and to be out to more people by their senior year of high school (Heck et al., 2013). Students who participate in GSAs are also more likely to have higher self-esteem, lower depression rates, higher likelihood to earn a college degree, and a feeling of empowerment (Toomey et al., 2011; Russell et al., 2009). The participants note that they took the club and its mission seriously, and felt a sense of pride in creating the club. They felt that a safe place for GSD students was their legacy to the school. The club helped students to identify their sexuality and gender identification, and made them feel

safer about speaking up for themselves around and outside of school. For most participants, their GSA officer position was the first leadership role they had ever had in or out of school. The participants who attended college felt that their participation in GSA had a positive impact on their transition to college and adulthood.

Result Three: Students cannot find positive representation in the curriculum and this affects their sense of belonging and identity.

Meyer (2010) asserts that without GSD inclusive curriculum, schools create students who are ignorant about GSD people and issues, and that schools should incorporate multicultural and queer pedagogy into their teaching practices. This claim supports the experiences that the participants had with curriculum and their classmates. They thought that students and sometimes teachers do not understand sexuality and gender identification. Students made assumptions about what it means to be bisexual, lesbian, and transgender. The participants thought that having such a large part of their identity misunderstood made them feel like outcasts.

More than any other gender and sexuality issue, gender diversity and identification seems to be the most misunderstood at School A, even as sexuality becomes more accepted and understood. The participants felt that often even other GSD people or allies did not understand gender identification. There is also often a misunderstanding about the difference between sex and gender, even among health care providers (Meyer, 2010).

Meyer (2010) also claims that the typical high school curriculum is Euroheteropatriarchal in nature, and that public schools instead need to focus on an anti-oppressive curriculum that teaches how some are privileged and some are “othered.” The

participants also noted that heterosexual students were not aware of their hetero- and cisgender-privilege. Students asked why there wasn't a straight day of silence or straight club, for example. The participants also mentioned that although most students in the district study the Holocaust in depth in 8th grade, they never learned that many of the victims were homosexuals.

Another area where the participants felt GSD issues were particularly lacking was the health curriculum. Students felt that there were multiple places in the curriculum where GSD issues would have been relevant, but they were skipped. The participants claimed that homosexuality was only mentioned when discussing HIV, which created a negative representation of gay men. Only heterosexual sex and issues were taught in the rest of the unit on sex education, and sexuality and gender was not present in the rest of the curriculum.

Finally, research shows that there is a link between positive representations of GSD people and issues in the curriculum and normativity and visibility in the school. Sullivan (2003) asserts that students should be taught that GSD people are treated differently depending on the culture, and that in some cultures they are revered and respected. Students also should understand how GSD civil rights fit into so many other civil rights movements in United States history (Wilchins, 2014). Meyer (2010) recognizes that teachers often believe that teaching about sexuality is taboo, but she asserts that when teachers ignore GSD issues, they instead are perpetuating a binary between normal and abnormal, which can lead to bullying. This has a damaging effect on students who cannot find positive role models in the curriculum (Homes & Cahill, 2004). The participants claim that there is absolutely no positive representation of GSD

people or issues in the curriculum at all. They believe that not only will representation of GSD issues and people help GSD students who are struggling with their identity, it will also help straight students to see GSD people as normal. The participants also felt that GSD people and couples need to be represented in their course materials, including textbooks, citing textbooks efforts to be culturally and ethnically diverse but not representative of GSD people. Positive representation of GSD people in the curriculum can lower homophobic language, create higher rates of belonging and inclusion, and create more accepting peers and allies (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Result Four: Students' relationships with their teachers and administrators have a strong effect on their achievement and sense of belonging in school.

Several studies have shown that a student's relationship with his or her teachers is essential to his or her sense of belonging and success in school (Wallace et al., 2012; Graybill et al., 2009). The participants feared judgment from their teachers and the administration, and this affected the relationships they were able to develop with many of their teachers. The participants reported a fear that they would be judged or disciplined more harshly for breaking rules and therefore tried to keep a low profile. For this reason, the participants reported keeping a strictly professional relationship with most of their teachers. Students also often did not feel supported by administration and again expressed fears that they would be punished more harshly because they identified as GSD.

GLSEN's national report stated that many students feel that their school staff does little to address homophobic language in school. Students are also unlikely to report victimization and harassment to adults, and when they do, feel that the situation is not

handled completely or appropriately or at all (Kosciw et al., 2014). Likewise, School A participants reported feeling as though some rules, particularly the PDA and dress code rules, were enforced unfairly against GSD students. They also shared that teachers and administration do not stop homophobic language or do not treat it like other derogatory language.

There were a handful of incidents where teachers acted inappropriately to a GSD issue in the classroom. One student reported that her homeroom teacher did not stop students from telling or laughing at homophobic jokes, and that he joined in laughing. She had to intervene and advocate. In another case a student reported a teacher engaging another student in a debate about marriage equality. Meyer (2010) states that teachers often do this because they have internal conflicts about sexuality, such as religion, shame, or personal beliefs, so they perpetuate heteronormativity and traditional gender roles.

However, the participants all reported that they felt some support or connection with at least one teacher. In GLSEN's national report, almost all students reported having at least one teacher that was supportive but most did not feel supported by all of the adults in their schools. In schools where students could identify 11 or more supportive staff, students were less likely to skip school and had higher GPAs (Kosciw et al., 2014).

There is a myth that teachers do not need training on GSD issues if it is not part of their curriculum (Meyer, 2010). However, Griffin et al. (2004) reported that GSAs could be empowered by developing professional development sessions for faculty and staff. The participants had several ideas for a training session for the faculty of School A. They thought it was important for teachers and administrators to hear about student experiences

as well as to bring in speakers so that they could hear from successful GSD people. They also thought that Safe Zone training was important. Kosciw et al. (2014) report that schools that utilize Safe Zone training and stickers have a more identifiable base of supportive staff.

Students also thought that faculty needed to have informational sessions just to understand what it meant to be GSD and what puts GSD students at risk. Below are some of the things the participants thought faculty and staff needed to know:

- GSD students do not feel safe or a sense of belonging to the school.
- GSD students are being physically harassed in the school.
- GSD students are verbally harassed and experience homophobic language in the school.
- Other students ask GSD students inappropriate and harassing questions about their sexuality and gender identification.
- Cyberbullying is occurring.
- Male GSD students are harassed more often than female GSD students.
- GSD students try very hard to fit in by participating in sports, the arts, and clubs, but still feel like outcasts.
- Gender issues are different from sexuality.
- GSD students often have very low self-esteem and loathe coming to school because of these experiences.

Likewise, the research also points out that most teachers do not understand current queer theory or culture (Sullivan, 2003) and that teachers are not trained to address myths about GSD people and issues so they continue to perpetuate them (Meyer, 2010). Teachers also

often do not know or understand that GSD students are at risk for absenteeism, lower GPAs, having no post-secondary plans, lack of belonging, high depression, low self-esteem, lack of safety, and a lack of participation in extracurricular activities (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Result Five: GSD students face multiple conflicts outside of school that can still affect their performance in school.

It is not uncommon for GSD students to have a public and a private identity. Sometimes students are even encouraged to keep themselves closeted in certain situations (Meyer, 2010). Therefore, school officials, including teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors sometimes do not understand the full effect that being GSD has on an adolescent or how it can affect a student's performance in school. All of the participants that were out had a conflict with at least one parent about their sexuality or gender. In many cases, this alienation carries over to school, where students assume that all adults are going to be unaccepting.

GSD students are often struggling with their identities, especially as adolescents. They may be trying to understand or put a label to their feelings about sexuality and gender and resources such as GSA and an inclusive curriculum can help. Transgender students have an added layer because they often desire to change their names and use different gender pronouns but are concerned about how this change will be accepted. Meyer (2010) states that labels can be a part of the identity but that does not mean a person has to identify that way all of the time. However, students who are out and confident are more likely to feel a higher sense of self-esteem and school belonging (Kosciw et al., 2014).

The participants also reported that staying closeted can be a defense mechanism. However, some participants also stated that acting like they do not care what other people think or being “flamboyant” about their sexuality could also be a defense mechanism because it helped them portray a false confidence about their sexuality. The participants also stated that some students stay away from GSA to avoid being outed, which robs them of valuable resources and supports.

Finally, Wallace et al. (2012) states that negative experiences for GSD students are stronger and last longer than positive experiences, so even if the positive experiences outweigh the negative, the negative ones will have a more lasting effect. This was clear in the participants’ fears about school and life after school. Most of the participants feared being judged and felt unsafe in school, even if they had no or very few actual negative experiences. This fear carried into their lives after high school, as most reported that they were afraid they would not fit in or they would be judged in college or the workplace as well, although they all reported that college and work was much more accepting of GSD people than high school.

Summary

Through analysis of stories and experiences that the four participants shared, three major themes were derived. These themes came together with the literature and the research to form the five results above. These results will inform the conclusions and recommendations in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to use an axiological stance to provide recent graduates from School A the opportunity to identify areas for needed change as well as to recommend changes so that they could advocate for GSD students and their feelings of school belonging. In doing so, these four participants were also able to gain some belonging to their alma mater. In using this stance, I was able to gain an understanding of the experiences of GSD students in School A, how these experiences were affected by heteronormative policies, and what supports were available to help GSD students. The planned result of this study was to give suggestions for the implementation of effective support systems for GSD students in School A, as well as to suggest the elimination of policies and procedures that exclude GSD students. These recommendations will be given below.

It is important for all students to have a strong sense of belonging to their school. As the participants pointed out, high school is often their sole social base, the place where they interact with peers and adults the most in a given day, and their home for eight hours every day. When students feel like they do not belong, and especially when they are feeling purposely excluded, they are at risk for absenteeism, attrition, lack of motivation, depression, and suicide. The conclusions and recommendations below can help to prevent these serious issues for the GSD population of School A.

Conclusions

Being an adolescent in high school is hard, but it is exceedingly hard for GSD youth. In a time where students are trying to figure out their identities and how they will

take their place in the world, GSD youth are also trying to figure out how to define and express their romantic and sexual orientation, as well as their gender identification and expression. Oftentimes, school takes a backseat to this internal conflict. GSD students are also often struggling with adult and peer acceptance in their families, religious groups, and networks of friends. Therefore, they are likely to think that all adults are against them, or fear coming out and forming relationships with adults because they feel as though they can not trust them. This is particularly damaging for GSD students who could use adult guidance in creating their identities. The participants in this study experienced much of this in high school, and were eager to share their experiences with the hopes of making the high school experience easier for some of their younger counterparts. The conclusions below were formed from the voices of these participants.

How can understanding School A's GSD graduates' experiences with school belonging effect positive change in the school's policies, traditions, and supports?

Understanding the experiences of students in School A, including those of the recent graduate participants, serves three purposes in effecting positive change for GSD students. 1. it creates empathy and understanding among faculty and administration, 2. it creates awareness of struggles that faculty and administration may not otherwise see, both in and out of school, and 3. it empowers students.

Creating empathy and understanding. Understanding the students and their experiences is key to changing the school climate for GSD students. Most of the faculty and staff at School A do not identify as GSD. Therefore, it is difficult for them to understand the fear, exclusion, and judgment these students face without hearing their firsthand accounts. Many faculty and staff are likely unaware of the daily struggles GSD students endure, as well as the risks that often face these students. It is important to also

understand that every GSD student has a unique experience and that educators need to be willing to hear each individual.

The participants all felt judged by at least some of their teachers and administrators, even if they could not give specific examples of that judgment. While there were some accounts of negative interactions with faculty and administration, for the most part these feelings of judgment probably stem from the participants' interactions with other adults in their lives, such as their family members or religious leaders. To form relationships with GSD students, faculty and staff may need to go beyond simply refraining from making judgments and be more proactive in making students feel safe in their classrooms.

It can be difficult for a heterosexual, cisgender person to identify hetero- and cisnormative practices when they have become so commonplace in schools. Understanding the experiences of GSD students can help educators see how everyday rules and procedures can be problematic for students who do not fit into the parameters of a heterosexual, cisgender student, as well as for students who have parents or other family members who are GSD. Understanding student experiences can also help faculty to see areas where their curriculum could be more inclusive and provide positive role models for GSD students.

Creating awareness of struggles of GSD students. Many of the participants hid their sexuality or gender identity from their teachers, and those that were very open about it may have only been doing so as a defense mechanism to hide that lack of confidence or fear of judgment. However, sexuality or gender identity may not be the only thing students are hiding. Most of the participants struggled with acceptance from at least one

parent, and many were also not accepted by friends, siblings, and other family members. In extreme cases this lack of acceptance can result in physical and verbal abuse, and GSD adolescents are much more likely to be kicked out of their own homes and end up homeless than straight adolescents.

Even within school, faculty and administration may not be seeing everything that a student is experiencing. Even John, the school's principal, acknowledged that homophobic language or blatant bullying is not happening when he walks into a room. All of the participants reported verbal or physical harassment, if not to them personally, then to other GSD students in the school. The participants generally did not report the behavior because they felt that faculty involvement would make the situation worse, that the faculty member or administrator would not do anything, or that telling someone about the bullying would also out them as GSD. Creating relationships where students can feel free to share their experiences can help to stop this cycle.

Empowering students to create change. A participatory model was chosen for this research so that graduates of School A could collaborate and contribute to a change in the school. The participants gave many examples of how creating and joining GSA and contributing to advocacy in the school helped them to speak up for themselves, gave them confidence in their rights and in their identities, and inspired them to create change for others. Allowing students to tell their stories validates their experiences and gives them hope that they can be part of a collaboration towards change, rather than being silent or working in isolation.

What school traditions and policies, if any, have a negative effect on GSD students' sense of belonging and how can they be revised to be more inclusive?

While School A does have specific anti-bullying and harassment rules that address targeting students for their sexuality, there are no rules about gender identification or expression. The participants recognized four other school rules or traditions that were problematic for GSD students: PDA rules, dress code, bathrooms and locker rooms, and graduation traditions.

Public displays of affection. The participants felt that same-sex couples were disciplined or scolded for public displays of affection more often than opposite-sex couples. One participant mentioned being scolded or yelled at for platonically holding hands with her female cousin. Other participants thought they observed same sex couples being disciplined more.

Dress code. The participants took issue with the school's dress code as a whole, feeling that it targeted and sexualized female students. They felt that when students were sent home or to suspension for wearing short skirts, leggings, or shirts that showed their shoulder blades, it prioritized a male student's education over a female's because it sent the message that the female body distracted a male student from his education, which justified removing a female student from the classroom. However, the participants also felt that male GSD students (or students whose legal sex was male) were the most targeted for dress code violations. The participants noted male students getting in trouble for dress code violations for low cut shirts or short shorts, while female students were more likely to get away with the same violations.

Bathrooms and locker rooms. The participants reported that these places were not safe for GSD students. They reported feeling uncomfortable and judged in the locker rooms, and felt that the conditions in the male locker rooms were homophobic and

victimizing, although none of them had a firsthand account. In talking to the site participants, there did not seem to be a clear policy for transgender students in using the bathroom or locker room. They both reported that students had been given permission to change in alternate locations, such as the nurse's office, for gym class. However, John also mentioned that he had denied a transgender student permission to use the bathroom of her choice.

Graduation traditions. There were two traditions that the participants brought up multiple times that were part of senior year and graduation festivities. Students were expected to wear gender-specific attire in their yearbook photographs — specifically a drape for female students and a jacket and tie for male students. Students who asked to wear attire that did not match their legal sex were denied. Likewise, male and female students at School A wear graduation caps and gowns that are colored according to sex — male students wear blue and female students wear yellow. Students were also denied wearing the color that did not match their legal sex. Gendered attire also presents a problem for students who are gender fluid or agender.

How have GSD students been supported by the school's GSA and what changes can be made to make the group more supportive?

The participants reported that the creation of School A's GSA had a positive effect on school climate for GSD students. Specifically, the GSA gave them a place to feel safe and included, and those feelings spread into the school at large. Additionally, the club gave GSD people visibility and helped members gain a sense of self.

Safety and belonging. The participants reported that participating in the GSA made them feel validated as GSD students in the school. They realized that they were not alone and they had other people that they could talk to about their struggles. They also

believed there was a group of people in the school that supported them, which made them more confident in advocating for themselves even outside of the club. Talking with other GSD students also helped them validate their experiences and made them feel normal. Various activities that the club sponsored helped GSD students see that there were other adults and students in the building who were allies. The club also gave these students something to belong to when so many of them felt outcast from other activities in the school.

Visibility and normativity. Several activities that the GSA sponsored helped to make GSD people and issues more visible. These included movie days, Day of Silence, Ally Week, and an informational bulletin board. As the general population of students saw GSD students in a positive light, they became more accepting and understanding. These events also helped to create more visible allies for GSD students.

Sense of self. The participants all reported that the GSA helped them in some way to refine the way they identify themselves and helped them to become more confident in their identification. The education and support that GSA provided also made these students more likely to advocate for themselves when necessary. They also felt confident in guiding other GSD students who were questioning or closeting their sexuality or gender. Additionally, the participants felt that their involvement in GSA helped them to become leaders in a place where they had previously felt like outcasts. Two of the participants became club president after never having a leadership role before. The students took pride in the club and believed that in addition to helping themselves, they had left a legacy for other GSD students.

Changes. The participants maintained that providing a safe place where students can share their struggles without being judged and interact socially with other students is important and should be the primary function of the club. However, they also felt that as GSD students became safer and more comfortable in the school, and as GSD issues increased in visibility throughout the school and in the media, GSA members should engage in more advocacy and change. Now that the club has been established and has a firm place in the culture of the school's extracurricular activities, the participants felt the members could do more to educate and advocate not just among themselves but also among the larger student population.

How have GSD students been supported by faculty and administration in the school and what changes can be made to make faculty and administration more supportive?

Throughout the interviews, the participants identified faculty and staff that were supportive and unsupportive. Conclusions can also be drawn about the participants' perceptions of their teachers based on their experiences with other adults outside of school. The participants also discussed necessary training for teachers working with the GSD population.

Relationships with faculty. The participants were each able to identify several teachers with whom they had a good relationship, including teachers they were comfortable talking to about their sexuality or gender. These teachers were labeled as good listeners and teachers who made students feel welcome. In other words, these teachers went out of their way to make students' voices heard and to create a non-judgmental atmosphere in the classroom. Some students were able to identify these teachers because they had Safe Zone stickers or posters, or because they had attended

GSA-sponsored events. Students also noted that teachers in English, social studies, and the arts were easier to talk to about GSD issues because those classes supported discussion and empathy of the human experience.

The participants only reported a couple of explicitly unsupportive teachers. One teacher allowed students to make jokes about GSD people and laughed along with those jokes. Another teacher debated with a student about marriage equality during class time, citing his religious beliefs, which is a violation of the student's First Amendment rights. Besides these two specific instances, the participants also reported that in general, teachers at School A were less likely to discipline students for using homophobic language than they were for students using other derogatory or offensive language. They also thought that teachers were more likely to discipline GSD students for dress code violations and public displays of affection.

The participants had a mixed review about the support of administration, but this could be because the administration has changed frequently over the past several years. The participants could have interacted with seven different administrators in their school career. Specifically, one participant noted that the assistant principal/athletic director was supportive in helping her end some harassment she received as a member of a sports team. However, the participants also felt that administration in the past had been unsupportive in helping them change graduation traditions to allow transgender male students to wear male attire for photographs and graduation. They thought that administrators, like the teachers, were more likely to discipline a GSD student for dress code violations and public displays of affection.

Perceptions of adult authority figures. Many GSD adolescents struggle to find acceptance with the adults in their lives, particularly their parents. This can affect the relationships that GSD students have with their teachers. If they have consistently not been accepted for their sexuality or gender by adults in the past, they assume that all adults will feel the same way. This makes them hesitant to form relationships with their teachers unless those teachers specifically reach out and make it known that they are allies.

Training for teachers working with GSD students. Teachers are often not aware of the risks to the GSD student population, including homelessness, depression, school absenteeism and attrition, victimization and assault, physical and verbal abuse at home, self-harm and suicide, and lack of belonging. First and foremost teachers need to understand why it is important to be allies to the GSD population.

Teachers need to understand student experiences so that they can show empathy and form relationships with them. The participants believed the most important part of teacher training should be hearing the stories of students or recent graduates so that they could understand their experiences. They also thought that teachers would benefit from listening to successful GSD people in the community talk about their struggles in high school and beyond.

The participants also advocated for Safe Zone training, which trains teachers to be allies and create an atmosphere of safety and acceptance in their classroom. The participants noted that teachers who go through this training and put the poster or sticker in their classrooms are more identifiable as a teacher that they can trust. They also noted that teachers needed to understand their rights as GSD students.

Other conclusions

When I designed the questioning for this study, I did it with a focus on school belonging, working from the assumption that school safety was being addressed through bullying policies and other school rules. While I do think that the school's bullying and harassment policies along with simple school rules prohibiting vulgar language and violence do help to make students safe, I do not think physical and emotional safety can be dismissed as a legitimate concern for GSD students at School A. Students are still verbally and physically attacked in the hallways when faculty members are not watching, and they believe that they will be dismissed or judged if they report it to an adult. Students fear that they will be judged or outed as well. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, students need to feel safety before they can feel belonging (Ravitch, 2007). First and foremost before a GSD student at School A feels like they belong, they need to feel that they are safe to be themselves. Supportive teachers, inclusive school policies and rules, and support through GSA members can help them to feel safe.

Recommendations

In examining the lived experiences of four recent graduates from School A, it is clear that there are still many areas where administration, faculty, and the school's GSA can work to improve the feelings of safety and belonging for GSD students. The following recommendations are suggested in order to meet the needs of GSD students to help them find their identity and place in the school at large by making them feel safe and included. As this research was somewhat limited by its qualitative nature and small sample size, these recommendations are meant exclusively for School A. However, it is reasonable to conclude that most of these recommendations would be beneficial to GSD

students at all schools. Schools are encouraged to conduct their own interviews and listen to the voices of their own GSD students.

Official policies for genderqueer students

The district already includes sexual orientation in its discrimination and anti-harassment policies, which is more progressive than many school districts. However, the school does not include gender identification and expression as a protected class. Doing so recognizes the unique challenges that transgender and genderqueer students face and makes them feel included in the objective to make the school a safe space for all students. Policies for GSD students are recommended in multiple studies and have shown to be effective in lowering victimization and harassment and lead to a higher feeling of school connectedness (Chesir-Teran and Hughes, 2009; Diaz et al., 2010; Horn & Romeo, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2014).

Guidelines and plans in place for bathrooms and locker rooms

School A currently has no plan in place for transgender students who are uncomfortable using the bathroom or locker room for their legal sex. Locker rooms and bathrooms can be problematic for GSD students and create a space where they often feel unsafe (Kosciw et al., 2014). Bathrooms and locker rooms are prime locations for homophobic language (Varjas et al., 2006). The principal of School A stated that he would need to seek guidance if this issue arose because he has not previously encountered it. In the past, students who are uncomfortable using the locker rooms or bathrooms have been given permission to use other areas, such as the nurse's office. It is probably best that each individual student's needs are evaluated in determining a solution to this situation. However, with the prevalence of transgender students feeling more

confident in coming out before they leave high school, it would benefit the school to consider possible alternative solutions to these issues, such as permission for transgender students to use the bathroom of their chosen gender, and gender neutral or single-person bathrooms, especially as they move into a new school building.

Inclusive sports and extracurricular programs

The participants had personal experiences or held perceptions based on the experiences of their classmates that athletic programs at School A were not accepting of GSD students. The participants reported being victimized and harassed, particularly in the locker rooms. Nationwide, only 23% of participants in GLSEN's biannual survey participated in sports (Kosciw et al., 2014). School A can address this issue by training coaches and student athletes to ensure an inclusive environment for all athletes. Coaches should receive professional development on the needs of GSD student athletes, as well as how they can make their teams more respectful and inclusive. Coaches and the athletic director should demand that student athletes refrain from using homophobic or derogatory language. This should be explicitly stated in the athlete code of conduct. Programs such as GLSEN's Changing the Game, which is designed to promote sensitivity and respect for sexual orientation and gender identification in school athletics, can help coaches and the athletic director identify more specific areas for improvement.

Athletics for transgender students can be particularly complex, as sports are typically gendered in school, and a student's gender can give him or her an advantage or disadvantage depending on the sport. The placement of a student on the correct team can depend on puberty and hormone therapy. The Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletics Association (PIAA) currently allows the school principal to make this determination. It

is important that School A's athletic director and principal are trained on the rights of GSD students, particularly transgender student athletes. Currently, PIAA does not offer training on this topic.

Athletics was not the only area where participants felt excluded. One participant reported being bullied as she participated in the school play. Two other participants mentioned that they had never been part of a club or program at school other than GSA. Nationwide, 61% of GSD students choose not to participate in extracurricular activities (Kosciw et al., 2014). It is important that club advisers are trained to be aware of bullying, and that students feel comfortable talking to teachers about this inclusion so that it can be rectified. Inclusion in extracurricular activities is vital to a student's sense of belonging to the school as a whole (Wallace et al., 2012).

Change gendered graduation traditions

The biggest complaint the students had about exclusive school traditions centered around senior year and graduation traditions, specifically yearbook photographs and cap and gowns. For yearbook photos, students at School A are expected to wear a drape if they are female and a tuxedo jacket and bowtie if they are male. Likewise, at graduation, female students wear a yellow cap and gown and male students wear blue. In the past, transgender male students who are legally female have asked to wear the suit and tie for yearbook photographs and the blue cap and gown and were denied. In one case this resulted in a student choosing not to appear in his own senior yearbook. In another case, the student was embarrassed because the photograph in the feminine drape did not represent his everyday dress.

A simple remedy to this problem would be to allow transgender students to choose the drape or suit for photographs and the blue or yellow gown for graduation. However, forcing students to choose between the feminine and masculine attire still creates a male/female binary, when many transgender students identify as agender, genderqueer, or gender fluid. It also places an arbitrary importance on gender. A more inclusive solution would be to allow students to choose their own clothing in senior photographs. For graduation, students could all wear just one gown color, or could be assigned gown color based on another factor, such as their career pathways. Administrators and faculty who make these decisions must remember that it is the student's graduation and yearbook, not theirs. Forcing a student to wear something that does not represent his or her identity can be distressing and could cause students to skip these important events in their lives, or associate them with bad memories when they should be a time to celebrate.

Additionally, School A should evaluate other gendered traditions, such as scholarships, students of the month, or prom and homecoming royalty. While some of these traditions are in play because of Title IX to ensure that males and females are being given equal opportunities, these traditions can also create a gender binary that not all students fit into. Inclusion and participation in school events plays a large role in a student's connectedness to the school (Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni, 2013).

Faculty and administration professional development to support GSD students

Studies such as GLSEN's biennial national report on school climate (Kosciw et al., 2014) show that a high number of supportive teachers is an important factor in positive school climate for GSD students. These students also were less likely to skip

school and more likely to have a higher GPA. It is important that faculty and administration understand why the GSD population is at risk and how they can help to be supportive. This can be done through school sponsored professional development.

First, educators need to understand why they should be concerned about GSD students and why their support is needed. Many teachers are unaware that GSD students have higher rates of depression, suicide, absenteeism, school attrition, and victimization. Because it changes often, educators also need to be updated on the vocabulary that GSD students may use to identify themselves. Additionally, laws and rights for GSD students are also changing rapidly, and educators need to understand what those laws mean for GSD students in the school environment. This type of professional development could be brief, but it should happen yearly, at least. It could be sponsored by the school's GSA.

Additionally, in order to empathize with GSD students, educators need to understand their experiences. Educators who are not GSD and do not have close GSD family members may not truly understand the experiences of GSD students without hearing their stories. Likewise, because GSD students are often distrusting of their teachers and other adults and more likely to fail to report harassment and victimization, their stories may otherwise go unheard.

Finally, Safe Zone or Safe Space training should be offered on a voluntary basis. Kosciw et al. (2014) report that schools that used Safe Space stickers were more likely to report higher numbers of identifiable supportive teachers and administrators. Educators who display Safe Zone posters or stickers must be those who authentically wish to support GSD students, so the training should not be mandatory. GLSEN offers a full

workshop for educators who want to learn how to create a safe space for GSD and all students. This training could be sponsored by the school's GSA.

Inclusive curriculum and classrooms

In addition to training educators about how to work with GSD students, School A also must ensure that students are positively exposed to representations of GSD people and issues in the classroom. An inclusive curriculum can lead to a more accepting school environment and less derogatory and homophobic language (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Pennsylvania law requires students to learn about human rights violations in social studies and English classrooms, so discussing civil rights violations for GSD people is a natural fit in these classrooms. Classes that focus on literature, art, sociology, current events, and history of civil rights and cultures are natural fits for positive discussion of GSD people and issues.

The area where instruction and curriculum about GSD people was most noticeably lacking by the participants was the health curriculum. Sex education should include instruction about both heterosexual and homosexual sex. GSD issues and sex should not be limited to teaching about AIDs and gay men, which portrays homosexuality negatively. Students reported that they also talk about healthy relationships and mental illness in health class, which are other areas that could include GSD issues and representation.

Even if GSD issues are not a natural fit in the curriculum, classrooms can still be inclusive when teachers do not make assumptions about students' relationships or their parents' relationships. Forms such as parent information forms should be created to meet the needs of diverse families, including those with same-sex parents. In forming

relationships with students, teachers should not assume that students are interested in heterosexual relationships or tease students under an assumption that they are straight. Where there is inclusive curriculum, students are more likely to talk to their teachers about GSD issues and form a positive relationship (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Improvements to GSA

First and foremost, the GSA must continue to maintain its place as a safe zone for students. GSD students and allies should be able to use the club to meet other people who are going through the same struggles as they are, who will support each other in the larger student body, and with whom they can socialize safely. In the interviews, the guidance counselor Karen mentioned that one student failed to join the club because there were too many popular students in it. The members must take care to make sure that all students feel welcome in the club. They can do this by creating and sticking to group norms during meetings, as well as meeting a high expectation of acceptance and respect not only based on gender and sexuality diversity but in all areas of diversity, both at club meetings and in the school at large.

The club can also do more to recruit new members to the club. Members can use the daily announcements, club bulletin board, and other outlets to make sure that the student body understands what the club is, what they do, and why it is important.

Now that the GSA has been established for three years as a safe place for GSD students and allies, the club should begin to focus more on educating members about GSD issues and spreading that advocacy and education to the student body at large.

When GSAs take on an advocacy role, they can improve visibility, normativity, interactions between GSD and straight students, and available resources (Graybill et al.,

2009; Fetner & Kush, 2007; Horn and Romeo, 2010). Members should use meeting time to educate themselves about issues in the GSD community. A committee could even be assigned to share current events and research. Additionally, students need to get that information out to the student body. They could do this by using the bulletin board and morning announcements in an educational way rather than just announcing upcoming events. They could also utilize morning activity periods to conduct mini workshops for the student body. As mentioned above, these workshops can also be extended to teachers. GSA members should be involved in bringing training and workshops to teachers, as this both helps the teachers to empathize and understand the students and empowers the students to be leaders for change in their school and over their lived experiences.

Finally, GSA members and GSD students at large need to feel safe in advocating for themselves, so that they can speak up when they feel they are being harassed or victimized, or when they feel their rights are being violated. Creating supportive teachers, especially as they become visible with Safe Zone stickers or posters, will help students to feel safer speaking up, and they should be encouraged to do so. In the past, students did not know how to advocate for themselves, so they may not have challenged heteronormative or homophobic practices or behavior, or they may have accepted the first answer they received. Students need to feel like they are supported when they wish to challenge the status quo, and need to be educated on the proper channels to use to be most effective.

Middle school programs

Although this research focused primarily on issues at the high school level, it is clear that education and support for GSD students that starts at the high school level is too late. The participants noted a GSD classmate who took his own life in middle school, which may have been fueled by the lack of acceptance he felt from classmates, friends, and family. The participants also noted that in some cases the bullying they received from their classmates in high school was a continuation of what they faced in middle school. Most of them also mentioned that they began to question their gender and sexuality in middle school, if not sooner. Middle school students are victimized at a higher rate than high school students, but only 8% of middle schools have a GSA program (Kosciw et al., 2014). Middle school teachers, administration, and counselors also need the same training that high school teachers receive, and the school could also use a GSA to give students a safe space and a network of supportive classmates. More research should be done to determine what other supports would be beneficial at the middle school level.

Additional recommended research

This study was designed to be exclusive to School A and the experiences of the four recent graduates who participated in telling their stories. Therefore, additional research recommendations would involve acquiring narratives from broader or related populations. As mentioned above, school climate should be evaluated at the middle school level to determine how students can be supported at an earlier age. Also within School A, it would be valuable to determine the effects of cisnormativity on transgender students. After several comments from the participants, it would also be valuable to evaluate the school's athletic programs to determine how they could become more

inclusive spaces for GSD students. A phenomenological study could determine the effects that improvements in teacher professional development and GSA advocacy to the larger student body have on the school climate as a whole.

Beyond School A, narrative studies on school belonging and heteronormativity can be applied to larger areas, including the entire Central PA area or the state, as well as nationwide. Because teacher training was identified as an important support for GSD students, an evaluation of local teacher training programs and their inclusion of GSD issues would also help determine areas where teachers may be unprepared to work with GSD students.

Summary

The statistics presented about GSD students by national studies such as GLSEN's biennial report (Kosciw et al., 2014) should be alarming to educators who work with GSD students. There are also elements of the participants' stories in this study that are equally as alarming and should be taken seriously. However, this study also revealed that School A has already made several positive changes in supporting GSD students. School policies against discrimination and harassment include sexual orientation. The participants identified teachers and other adults in the school building that were supportive and saw a positive change in the school climate in general over their time in the high school. Much of this can be attributed to the founding and success of the school's GSA and the impact its student leaders have had on the student body as a whole.

However, there is much more that School A can do to create an accepting school climate and sense of belonging for GSD students, and it would be a shame to stop while they have positive momentum. First and foremost, teachers and administrators need to be

trained to create inclusive and accepting classrooms for GSD students. Supportive staff lays the foundation for an accepting student body and an effective GSA that can create real change in the school building.

Most importantly, educators at School A must remember the importance of allowing GSD students' voices to be heard. Striving to listen and understand the real experiences of GSD students not only creates a staff and student body more empathetic and supportive of GSD issues and students, but also empowers GSD students to feel confident in their identification and leave a legacy of acceptance for students in the future.

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Appendix A
Interview Questions for Graduates – Initial Interview

Question	Justification
<p>1. Introductions and review purpose of study</p> <p>a. Introduce self</p> <p>b. Purpose of study</p> <p>c. Ask graduates to introduce themselves with name, age, and graduation year.</p> <p>d. Define GSD.</p> <p>e. Could you please describe how you identify your sexuality and gender orientation?</p> <p>f. Now that you have graduated from School A, tell me a little bit about what you are doing now.</p>	<p>1. a-d – Introductory materials and demographic information.</p> <p>1. e – This helps students to break down traditional societal constructs of gender and sexuality by avoiding giving labels. (Sullivan, 2003; Wilchins, 2014).</p> <p>1. f – Students who are GSD are less likely to achieve postsecondary education (Toomey et al., 2011). Shows impact of GSAs and school climate on adulthood (Toomey et al., 2011).</p>
<p>2. How would you describe the climate of School A towards GSD students when you were a student here?</p> <p>a. Follow up: How were you treated by teachers, administrators, counselors, other students?</p> <p>b. Follow up: Can you give me an example?</p>	<p>School climate is important to a student's sense of belonging, particularly their relationships with teachers, other adults in the building, and with other students (Wallace et al., 2012).</p>
<p>3. Were you ever verbally harassed personally or did you ever overhear homophobic or transphobic language in the halls? Can you tell me about those experiences?</p>	<p>(<i>Local school climate survey</i>, 2012)</p>
<p>4. Were you ever physically harassed or assaulted? Can you tell me about those experiences?</p>	<p>(<i>Local school climate survey</i>, 2012)</p>
<p>5. Did you feel as though you had a strong sense of belonging to the school?</p> <p>a. Why or why not?</p> <p>b. What made you feel like you didn't belong?</p> <p>c. What made you feel like you did belong?</p>	<p>(Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Robinson & Espelage 2011)</p>
<p>6. Why do you think it is important for students to feel a sense of belonging to</p>	<p>(Griffin et al., 2004; Mayberry et al., 2013)</p>

their school?	
7. How did you perform academically in school? How do you think your academic performance was affected by the school climate toward GSD students?	(Kosciw et al., 2014)
8. Were you a member of the GSA? Can you describe your experiences with that club?	(<i>Local school climate survey</i> , 2012)
9. Did you feel that your teachers supported you as a GSD student and teenager? a. Can you give an example?	(<i>Local school climate survey</i> , 2012)
10. Did you feel that GSD people or issues were represented in the curriculum? a. Can you give an example, or an example of where it could have been included and wasn't?	(<i>Local school climate survey</i> , 2012)
11. Did you ever feel you were treated differently by administration or because of school rules because you are GSD? a. Can you explain?	10. (Russell et al., 2011; Greytak et al., 2009; Sullivan, 2003; Wilchins, 2014)
12. Would you like to share any other experiences today?	
12. Was there anything I didn't ask you that you think I should have?	

Interview Questions for Graduates – Second Interview

Questions
1. Review purpose of study and consent form a. Purpose of study b. Ask graduates to introduce themselves with name, age, and graduation year for recording. c. Define GSD. d. Is there anything from last time that you would like to discuss or add?
2. Now that you have graduated from School A, tell me a little bit about what you are doing now. Are you working, in school, or both?
3. How would you describe the climate of your current school and/or workplace towards GSD students/employees? a. Follow up: Can you give me an example?
4. Have you been verbally harassed personally or did you ever overhear homophobic or transphobic language at your current place of employment or school?
5. Were you ever physically harassed or assaulted at your current school or place of employment? Can you tell me about those experiences?
6. Did you feel as though you have a strong sense of belonging to your current school or workplace? a. Why or why not? b. What makes you feel like you don't belong? c. What makes you feel like you do belong?
7. Are you a member of a GSA or any type of community group for GSD people? Can you describe your experiences with that group?
8. How do you think your experiences in high school affected your life and success as a young adult?
9. Have you been in a situation since high school where you needed to advocate for yourself or others? Please share. Where/How did you learn to be an advocate?
10. Would you like to share any other experiences today?
12. Was there anything I didn't ask you that you think I should have?

Interview Questions for Graduates – Third Interview – Focus Group

Questions
<p>1. Review purpose of study and consent form</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Purpose of study b. Ask graduates to introduce themselves with name, age, and graduation year for recording, as well as what they are doing now. c. Define GSD. d. Is there anything from the previous interviews that you would like to discuss or add?
<p>2. What stands out to you when you reflect on your high school years as a GSD person?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Did you feel safe at School A? b. Did you feel like you belonged at School A? c. How did you feel about yourself at School A?
<p>3. What stands out to you when you reflect specifically on your experiences with GSA in high school?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Did you feel safe in GSA? b. Did you feel like you belonged in GSA? c. How did you feel about your self in GSA?
<p>4. How do your experiences now in college or work or adult life compare to high school?</p>
<p>5. Do you think there are policies or procedures at School A that exclude GSD students from fully participating in their high school experiences? Explain. Which policies do you think need to be changed? How would you change them? Explain.</p>
<p>6. Do you think there are traditions at School A that exclude GSD students from fully participating in their high school experiences? Explain. Which traditions do you think need to be changed? How would you change them? Explain.</p>
<p>7. What effect do you think the GSA has/can have on school climate?</p>
<p>8. If you could go back, what would you have changed about GSA, if anything, as a tool to create a more inclusive environment?</p>
<p>9. What advice would you give to GSD students currently at School A? Specifically the leaders of GSA?</p>
<p>10. What types of professional development or training do you think teachers need, if any, to support an inclusive environment for GSD students? What advice would you give current teachers who are teaching GSD students?</p>
<p>11. Imagine you were all asked to create a professional development session for the teachers at School A. What would it look like?</p>
<p>12. How far has School A come in terms of GSD students? Where do they need to go</p>

next?
13. Please share any other ideas you have for making School A a more inclusive environment for GSD students.
14. Would you like to share any other experiences today?
15. Was there anything I didn't ask you that you think I should have?

Appendix B
Interview Questions for Site Participants

Questions	Justification
1. Introductions and review purpose of study a. Introduce self b. Purpose of study c. Ask teachers to introduce themselves with name, age, position, and teaching experience. d. Define GSD.	Demographic information and introduction
2. Does the district offer any training on GSD students specifically, or on working with a diverse student population in general? Do you think this would be beneficial or unnecessary? Explain.	(Quinn & Meiners, 2009)
3. Can you recall a time when you were confronted with a GSD issue in your education career that you had not been trained for, or that other staff had not been trained for? Please share your experiences.	Quinn & Meiners, 2009)
4. What issues do you think GSD students face that teachers need to be aware of?	(Meyer, 2010)
5. What do you think it means to be transgender? Do you have any experiences with working with transgender students?	(Meyer, 2010)
6. What do you think it means to be bisexual? Do you have any experiences with working with bisexual students?	(Meyer, 2010)
7. Imagine that a student came to you with a problem that had to do with their sexuality, such as coming out to their parents. What training would help you with this situation, or what training would you need to handle this situation? How do you think a member of the faculty would handle that situation?	(Quinn & Meiners, 2009)
8. How do you or would you respond if you overheard a student use a GSD slur or use derogatory language to describe a GSD or GSD-perceived student?	(<i>Local school climate survey</i> , 2012; Kosciw et al., 2014)

<p>9. What types of professional development needs do think the staff has in terms of working with GSD students?</p> <p>a. What questions do you have and what would you like to learn?</p> <p>b. Describe your ideal training program in regards to GSD students.</p>	(Quinn & Meiners, 2009)
<p>10. Do you think students feel comfortable coming to you with GSD related issues? To the rest of the faculty?</p>	<i>(Local school climate survey, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2014)</i>
<p>11. What have you done to create a supportive environment for GSD students?</p>	<i>(Local school climate survey, 2012; Kosciw et al., 2014)</i>
<p>12. Are GSD role models and issues represented in the curriculum and course of study for students? Can you give examples?</p>	(Meyer, 2010)
<p>13. Do you think the policies and procedures at School A are supportive of GSD students? How so? Which need to be changed to be more supportive?</p>	
<p>14. Do you think the traditions at School A are supportive of GSD students? How so? Which need to be changed to be more supportive?</p>	
<p>15. Concluding Questions: Would you like to share any other experiences regarding GSD students or training and professional development?</p>	