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Meghan E. McGrath
Perceptions: A Quantitative Look at
the Impacts of GSAs on Bullying
and Overall School Climate

ABSTRACT

Bullying and school climate are salient topics in today's society particularly in the educational setting. They are especially salient topics for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) youth because they are targeted more frequently and with more intensity. However, there is little existing information regarding risk and protective factors for this population.

This quantitative study examined the perceptions of the faculty and staff at one high school, Helix Charter High School in San Diego, California, with regard to the Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) and its impacts on bullying and overall school climate. The 72 participants answered an online survey. The survey had a total of 24 items, which were comprised of six areas: Demographics, Gay/Straight Alliances, LGBTQ Youth, Bullying of LGBTQ Youth, Personal Experiences, and Closing. This study found that though most respondents were aware of the GSA on campus they were not directly involved with the club. Additionally, many participants reported feeling confident about raising LGBTQ issues within the classroom but nearly 60% do not do so regularly. While findings suggest that the majority of participants are supportive of the GSA, they also report a lack of true understanding with regard to the specific needs of LGBTQ youth. Recommendations for future research include expanding the survey to other high schools as well as surveying the students at Helix Charter High School to allow for a side-by-side comparison of responses.

Keywords: LGBTQ Youth, Gay Straight Alliance, Bullying, School Climate

PERCEPTIONS:
A QUANTITATIVE LOOK AT THE IMPACTS OF GAY STRAIGHT ALLIANCES ON
BULLYING AND OVERALL SCHOOL CLIMATE

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Meghan E. McGrath

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In today's society, the majority of youth are affected by bullying. It is an especially salient topic for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) youth because they are targeted more frequently and with more intensity. Marino (1995) viewed LGBTQ adolescents as the most vulnerable and most likely to suffer from discrimination and bullying. The Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs) provide crucial benefits for LGBTQ youth such as a safer atmosphere, a sense of belonging, and access to allies (2007). Yet, despite GSAs clearly serving as a protective factor for LGBTQ youth, Rienzo, Button, Sheu, & Li (2009) found that GSAs exist in only one sixth of all districts. LGBTQ youth are without an official, clearly defined safe space in the majority of the nation's schools. Though the existing research is limited it clearly indicates that such groups are important and beneficial for LGBTQ youth.

This study examined how the presence of GSAs on high school campuses impacts bullying as well as overall school climate. The research was undertaken to explore the perceptions of the faculty and staff at one school, Helix Charter High School (HCHS) in San Diego, California by asking the question: What are the perceptions held by the faculty and staff with regard to the impact of the GSA on bullying and school climate at HCHS? There are many gaps in the available research and literature on LGBTQ youth, LGBTQ bullying, and GSAs. This inquiry attempts to directly address the need for a clearer understanding of whether GSAs are perceived as having an impact on bullying and school climate, whether they are effective, and how to more successfully utilize them.

Helix Charter High School began a GSA fairly quickly after the national GSA movement began and has maintained it for 10 years. However, the impact or perception of the GSA at Helix had not been assessed prior to this study. School administration and leadership of the GSA agreed that assessing the impact, particularly now that the GSA has been in place for a decade, could provide invaluable information and insight into the current state of affairs on campus.

The quantitative study targeted all school faculty and staff, a total of 150 teachers, nurses, support staff, and school administration. The final sample size for this study was 72 HCHS faculty and staff members. A cross-sectional design was selected in order to consider the perceptions of one school community at one point in time. The study was conducted using an online survey for three reasons: time and cost effectiveness, geographic flexibility (the research took place in San Diego, California despite the researcher's location in Boston, Massachusetts), and confidentiality, which is important given the subject matter.

Overall, this study found that the majority of respondents support the Gay Straight Alliance at Helix. However, many respondents acknowledged being uncertain as to whether LGBTQ bullying is actually an issue at HCHS. Despite this uncertainty, most agreed that further training is needed. Yet, most respondents stated that LGBTQ issues should not be a singular focus but, rather, should be included in discussions, trainings, and interventions with a focus of overall tolerance.

The findings of this study may be useful to the LGBTQ community, families of LGBTQ youth, school administrations, teachers, and helping professionals and organizations. At Helix specifically, it will be helpful for the administration, GSA liaison, and school social worker to be aware of the attitudes and beliefs shared by the respondents. These study findings can be used to tailor awareness and tolerance trainings for staff, faculty, and students alike. The purpose for

doing this research study was to provide an in-depth look at how the faculty and staff at one school view the impacts of having a GSA on campus. The following chapter provides a review of the existing literature regarding LGBTQ youth, LGBTQ bullying, and GSAs.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

This chapter is organized into three main sections: 1) LGBTQ Youth, 2) LGBTQ Bullying, and 3) Gay Straight Alliances. The initial section looks at the population of LGBTQ youth as well as the specific risk and protective factors. Next, it highlights the harassment, discrimination, and negative experiences LGBTQ youth often face during their high school years. Lastly, the literature review concludes with an examination of Gay Straight Alliances and their impacts.

LGBTQ Youth

Members of the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning) community are sexual minorities in that their sexual practices, orientations, or identities do not match those of the majority of society. According to Gary Gates (2011), the Williams distinguished scholar of The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, a sexual orientation law and public policy think tank, approximately 9 million (about 3.8%) Americans identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. The numbers of youth who identify are lower, “Estimates of the number of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth in the United States range from just over 1 percent to just under 9 percent, with the best estimates at 5 to 6 percent of the total population.” (Human Rights Watch Report, 2001, p. 24).

LGBTQ youth are considered to be a population “at-risk” as they are raised in a society that is characterized by homophobia and heterosexism (Rotheram-Borus & Fernandez, 1995). According to Miceli (2005):

Social and cultural definitions of sexual identity, which stigmatize and define homosexuality as unnatural and abnormal, shape and condone negative reactions to

LGBT[Q] people. Importantly, these same definitions also serve as the base of information out of which LGBT[Q] people come to understand and define themselves (p. 46).

LGBTQ youth understand early that “being anything but heterosexual places them at risk for victimization and humiliation. In fact, it appears that being anything but heterosexual equals something bad as early as elementary school” (Espelage & Swearer, 2008, p. 158).

Although LGBTQ youth are known to be an at-risk population, research concerning this population is difficult to find. According to Tharinger & Wells (2000), there is a paucity of information to be found due to several factors: it is not easy to locate LGBTQ youth willing to be “out” for research purposes, it can be difficult to obtain parental permission to carry out research, and institutionalized heterosexism has prevented researchers from expanding the knowledge base of LGBTQ studies. Additionally, there is little information regarding what it means to self-identify as a sexual minority in the school setting. Unfortunately, there is even less information on the coping strategies that LGBTQ youth develop to withstand the multiple challenges in the school context (Durby, 1994; Rivers & D’Augelli, 2001; Lasser & Tharinger, 2003). According to the Human Rights Watch Report (2001):

The systematic failure of the public school system in the United States to protect [LGBTQ] students means that they are left to choose between struggling in isolation to survive the harassment as they seek an education or escaping the hostile environment by dropping out of school. The burden these students bear is exacerbated in many cases by the rejection of their families, condemnation within their communities, being demonized by individual teachers and administrators, and rejection by members of the adult

[LGBTQ] communities who are too scared of being identified themselves to offer support to gay youth (p. 3).

Additionally, according to Smith & Gray (2009), existing research tends to depict LGBTQ populations through a deficit-based lens rather than from a strengths-based perspective. In other words, there are significant issues within the field that lead to stalls in research. In fact, according to Horn, Kosciw, & Russell (2009), “Until questions about sexual orientation and gender identity are standard in studies of adolescents, we will never have a robust understanding of the prevalence and correlates of risk and protective factors among LGBT[Q] youth” (p. 865).

Though the information is scarce, there is some research with regard to the risk and protective factors impacting the lives of LGBTQ youth. However, there are more risk factors than protective factors to report. This section will focus on the impact of isolation. Isolation is a risk factor present in the lives of significant numbers of LGBTQ youth. “LGBT youth are rarely represented in the educational curriculum, they are at increased risk for verbal harassment and physical abuse, and they are left out of the compulsory heterosexual social activities (e.g., the prom)” (Lee, 2002, p. 2). Living in a society that does not reflect a positive image for LGBTQ youth can result in such youth constructing distorted and negative self-images. Further, small changes can make big differences for LGBTQ youth as described in the following testimonial:

If someone would have been ‘out’ at my school, if the teachers wouldn’t have been afraid to stop the fag and dyke jokes, if my human sexuality class have even mentioned homosexuality, if the school counselors would have been open to discussion of gay and lesbian issue, perhaps I wouldn’t have grown up hating what I was and perhaps I wouldn’t have attempted suicide (Ryan & Futterman, 1998, p. 59).

Validation and approval are important feelings for all students to experience during their early lives. For LGBTQ youth, “a simple acknowledgment of an LGBTQ historical figure or storyline in any part of the curriculum can have a positive impact” (Shores, 2007, p. 28). Yet, only a small percentage (13.4%) of youth nationwide are taught utilizing such an inclusive curriculum (GLSEN, 2009).

LGBTQ youth are not only isolated via the curriculum, but, because they are perceived as “others,” they are often socially excluded both by their families and peer groups. Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig (2005) found that LGBTQ youth “indicated that they felt significantly less closeness with their mothers and less companionship with their best friends than did heterosexual youths” (p. 480). According to Tartagni (1978), one of the loneliest people in any high school in the U.S. is the isolated LGBTQ student. LGBTQ youth frequently report feeling socially and emotionally isolated (Dietz, 1997; Jacobs, 1996). In their study, Telljohan & Price (1993) found that approximately one-third of the LGBTQ youth interviewed described a negative familial reaction to their sexuality. Whether this isolation is a result of LGBTQ youth distancing themselves or of social discrimination, it can have damaging effects on their emotional health (Miceli, 2005). Such intense isolation, if not resolved, can lead to a lifetime of issues such as depression, self-hatred, and anxiety among others (D’Augelli, 2002; Hetrick & Martin, 1987).

This kind of ever-present stress and isolation among LGBTQ youth can lead to emotional struggles including suicidal thoughts and attempts. Eliason (2011) notes that, “the overall results of population-based and convenience sample studies consistently find sexual and gender minority individuals to have higher risk for mental health and suicide-related behaviors” (p. 5). “LGBT[Q] youth scored significantly higher on the scale of depressive symptomatology. They were also more likely than heterosexual, non-transgendered youth to report suicidal ideation

(30% vs. 6%) and self-harm (21% vs. 6%).” (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009, p. 1001). Smith & Drake (2001) found that LGBTQ youth are “2 to 14 times more likely” to attempt suicide (p. 155). In fact, D’Augelli (2002) reports that “more than 1/3 of LGB youth report having made a suicide attempt.” Further, Haas, Eliason, Mays, Mathy, Cochran, D’Augelli, & Clayton (2011), identified 19 studies linking suicidal behavior in lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adolescents to bullying at school. These findings and statistics demonstrate a dire need for research and support services in an effort to reduce the incidents of mental health issues and suicide among LGBTQ youth.

Adolescence can be particularly complicated for LGBTQ youth because they frequently contend with a heterosexist society, homophobic and/or oppressive school environments, and unsupportive families. Winnicott states that, according to object relations theory, for healthy development to occur a child needs a good enough caregiver who is sufficiently attuned to the child’s need (Flanagan, 2008). Though healthy development and attachment patterns may have developed early in life, they are often painfully disrupted for LGBTQ teens once they are “out.” As they develop, LGBTQ youth come to realize that they are different than those whom society accepts without hesitation. This realization often leads to experiences of identity conflict. Through no fault of their own, LGBTQ youth face “unique challenges [with regard] to identity development, social acceptance, and survival” (Ryan & Futterman, 1998, p. 4). Studies have shown that such conditions leave LGBTQ youth at risk for increased levels of victimization, depression, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, dropping out of school, homelessness, and substance use and abuse (D’Augelli, 2002; Faulkner & Cranston, 1998; Russell, Driscoll, & Truong, 2002; Russell, 2003).

Despite the numerous risk factors facing LGBTQ youth, research has shown that there are some protective factors at work as well. It has been documented that religion can play a protective role in the lives of adolescents (Smith & Lundquist Denton, 2005). However, faith and religion can be “complicated [for LGBTQ youth] by the fact that many religions condemn non-heterosexual sexual orientations as unnatural and sinful” (Horn et al., 2009, p. 865). Further, according to a study utilizing a relational assets approach, LGBTQ youth identified the following factors as assets: family willingness to discuss LGBTQ issues, GSAs, and LGBTQ school faculty (Sadowski, Chow, & Scanlon, 2009). Relational theory posits that the ability to form connections through relationships is the foundation of healthy human development. “There is a powerful need to preserve an abiding sense of oneself as associated with, positioned in terms of, related to, a matrix of other people” (Aron, 1991, p. 33). In other words, creating spaces where LGBTQ teens can feel safe and connected to a community (such as Gay Straight Alliances) may contribute to those teens’ healthy development. The need for increased knowledge with regard to LGBTQ youth development as well as the need to improve the support structures for youth in schools provides the motivation and demand for this research study.

LGBTQ Bullying

Bullying, in general, is a hot topic in today’s society as it affects the majority of youth. Bullying is an especially salient topic for LGBTQ youth because it is more frequent and, often, more intense. In examining the entire LGBTQ community, Marino (1995) considered LGBTQ adolescents to be the most vulnerable and most likely to suffer from discrimination and bullying. However, much of the mainstream literature fails to specifically consider the experiences of LGBTQ youth (Horn et al., 2009, p. 865).

Homophobic attitudes are among the last utterable prejudices among adults. With the certitude of religious conviction or state statute as supports, many adults continue to tolerate and participate in denigrations of LGBT[Q] individuals. Their behaviors provide negative models for young people and, at least, tacit encouragement to punish non-normative gender behaviors among peers (Conoley, 2008, p. 219).

Heterosexism and the accompanying harassment impact the lives of LGBTQ youth daily, particularly those youth who choose to be “out.” Society, generally, and school communities in particular, often do not understand, acknowledge, or respect LGBTQ youth and their experiences. This lack of respect and understanding, particularly in the school setting, often leads to discrimination and bullying.

Most adolescents spend the majority of their time at school. Therefore, school should be a safe place for all students. However, for LGBTQ youth, school can be dangerous and damaging. “At-school victimization disproportionately impacts LGBT[Q] youth and has been shown to be related to lower levels of school belonging, feeling unsafe at school, poorer academic performance, more substance use, and more depressive symptomatology.” (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011, p.163). “Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students describe their daily experiences as living in survival mode. Not surprisingly, they lose their focus, their grades drop, some drop out, and a few commit suicide” (Human Rights Watch, 2001, p. 174).

In an effort to examine this phenomenon, GLSEN has conducted a national survey every other year since 1999. In 2005, GLSEN found that LGBT[Q] students were three times as likely as non-LGBT students to say that they did not feel safe at school (22% vs. 7%) and 90% of LGBT[Q] students (vs. 62% of non-LGBT teens) had been harassed or assaulted during the past year (GLSEN, 2005). The 2009 survey involved a population of 7,261 middle and high school

students and found that at school 84.6% of LGBT[Q] students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported being physically harassed, and 18.8% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2009). Further, 72.4% heard homophobic remarks, such as "faggot" or "dyke," frequently or often at school and 61.1% of students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation. Lastly, 29.1% of LGBT[Q] students missed a class at least once and 30.0% missed at least one day of school in the past month because of safety concerns (GLSEN, 2009). Additionally, bullying due to sexual orientation, as previously mentioned, has been correlated with increased suicidality and mental health issues (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002).

Other bodies of research support the GLSEN findings and consider different aspects as well. According to the 1999 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey, LGBTQ youth are nearly three times as likely as their heterosexual peers to have been assaulted or involved in at least one physical fight in school, three times as likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon at school, and nearly four times as likely to skip school because they felt unsafe (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000). Kosicw (2004) found that "higher frequencies of verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation, damage to or theft of their personal property, and sexual harassment were associated with youth's plans not to continue their education after high school" (p. 23). Saewyc, Skay, Richens, Reis, Poon, & Murphy (2006) examined data from seven population-based surveys and found that LGB[TQ] youth were more likely to report histories of physical and sexual abuse than their heterosexual peers. And Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002) used data collected from 9,188 high school students who completed the Youth Risk Behavior Survey in Massachusetts and Vermont and found that LGB[TQ] youth reported higher levels of at-school victimization when compared to heterosexual

youth. Research consistently demonstrates that LGBTQ adolescents are specifically at-risk for both verbal and physical harassment. When left unchecked, peer harassment escalates into violence. For example, in the Human Rights Watch Report, (2001), “Beth G. reported that several months of verbal threats and other harassment culminated in physical violence. ‘I got hit in the back of the head with an ice scraper.’ By that point, she said she was so used to being harassed that [she] didn't even turn around to see who it was” (p. 42).

Though some LGBTQ youth experience a positive environment at school, “only a small number of young people are lucky enough to attend schools that actively support and protect gay students. For most, the scenario is grim” (Bass & Kaufman, 1996, p. 193). As Randy Driscoll’s testimony before the Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth in Boston shares:

Freshman year of high school is already hard enough, but the big seniors pushing you around because the rumor is you’re the ‘faggot’ made it ten times worse... I was spit on, pushed, and ridiculed. My school life was hell. (Blumenfeld, 1994, p.117)

Schools and school administrators are constitutionally required to protect LGBTQ students. “School teachers and administrators must realize that they teach and are responsible for teens who identify as LGBTQ. Ignoring the fact that LGBTQ students are present allows for deterioration in the quality of each student’s education, and ultimately, the life of the LGBTQ student” (Shores, 2007, p.33).

Overall, the need for concrete solutions is increasingly clear. Massachusetts, for example, has pending legislation which, if passed, would specifically protect LGBTQ youth in schools. However, though certain states are taking action to address anti-LGBTQ bullying, there is much work yet to be done.

Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA)

A Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) is defined as “a student-run club in a high school that brings together LGBTQ and straight students to support each other, provide a safe place to socialize, and create a platform for activism to fight homophobia and transphobia” (GSA Network, 2011). Additionally, GSA participants often alert the larger school community to LGBTQ issues and advocate on behalf of those who are, or perceived to be, LGBTQ (Holmes & Cahill, 2003). Such clubs are not only remarkable because they are focused on confronting cultural and institutional heterosexism but also because they are typically led by youth (Miceli, 2005). Overall, GSAs provide a space for LGBTQ youth to feel included, safe, and understood.

According to the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), the first GSA was formed in 1988 when a straight student interested in LGBTQ issues approached her teacher and proposed a club: “You’re gay and I’m straight, so let’s call it a Gay-Straight Alliance” (2011). The number of GSAs in high schools has grown steadily in the 20+ years since their creation. Today there are more than 4,000 Gay-Straight Alliances across the United States (GLSEN, 2011), yet, not nearly enough high schools have committed to maintaining a GSA. Rienzo, Button, Sheu, & Li (2009) conducted a qualitative study using an online survey to assess whether schools throughout the nation are utilizing GSAs to address the needs of LGBTQ students. GSAs were found to exist in one sixth of all districts and other support groups for LGBTQ youth were found in just 22% of districts. Thus, LGBTQ youth are left without a safe space in the majority of the nation’s schools.

There is a lack of substantial research examining GSAs, however, the research available persuasively indicates that such groups are important. According to GLSEN (2007), GSAs

provide several crucial benefits such as a safer atmosphere, a sense of belonging, and access to allies. Lee (2002) reports that GSAs:

Positively impact academic performance, school/social and family relationships, comfort level with sexual orientation, development of strategies to handle assumptions of heterosexuality, sense of physical safety, increased perceived ability to contribute to society, and an enhanced sense of belonging to the school community (p. 13).

Hermann (2010) further examined the impacts of exposure to GSAs on LGBTQ youth and found a significant negative correlation between levels of internalized homophobia and GSA involvement. Shores (2007) similarly found GSAs to have a positive effect on students' sense of physical safety, school and social relationships and interactions, and feelings of belonging to the school.

In 2001, Szalacha conducted a study demonstrating the positive impacts of GSAs. The study collected data from nearly 1,700 students in a stratified random sample of 33 secondary schools. The study found that educational interventions such as school policies explicitly protecting sexual minority students from harassment and violence, faculty and professional staff training, and a school-based extra-curricular group were associated with positive differences in school climates. Specifically, schools with GSAs were positively associated with less homophobic school climates. Hatzenbuehler (2011), utilizing an online survey, documented an association between the social (school) environment and suicide attempts among LGB youth. The study found that the risk of attempting suicide for LGB youth was 20% greater in unsupportive environments (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). Both Hatzenbuehler's (2011) and Szalacha's (2001) findings support the idea that GSAs have a positive impact in the lives of LGBTQ youth.

This impact may be dealing with less homophobia or, more intricately, reducing the number of suicide attempts.

Treadway and Yoakam (1992) suggest that GSAs can be “life-saving” spaces for LGBTQ youth to meet with others like themselves. GSAs can truly serve as the deciding factor between life and death. As a participant from Blumenfeld’s (1994) study shared with great candor:

Each time [I wanted to kill myself] I was able to call someone from the Concord Academy Gay/Straight Alliance or someone who I’d come out to through the strength and support I received there... If not for the support that I found... I would be dead today (p. 118).

This teen’s experience demonstrates clearly the potential a GSA has to make positive impacts on the lives of LGBTQ teens whether it’s through individual interactions, creating positive school climates, or some combination of both.

Though not all LGBTQ youth will join a GSA, they are clearly an important resource. Tharinger & Wells (2000) state, LGBTQ youth are “trying to make sense of their homosexual feelings within an ecology of homophobia and heterosexism” yet “very few receive the continuity of caregiving they need for a ‘good enough’ and healthy attachment pattern to be maintained” (p. 159). GSAs may be able to serve as the “holding environment” and provide a safe space in which LGBTQ teens can maintain their sense of security and healthy attachment patterns. Moreover, opportunities arise in groups such as GSAs for members to become involved with one another and develop relationships. The group becomes a “place for taking ‘safe risks’ in a safe environment and playing out new and different parts of oneself” (Brandler & Roman, 2009, p. 5). As the group continues to develop, members have the opportunities to see their

concerns validated, experience a sense of universality, and feel a reduced sense of isolation. The experience of giving and taking (mutual aid) results in “an increase in self-esteem and an ability to see oneself as having something valuable to give” (Brandler & Roman, 2009, p. 5). These results are especially important for LGBTQ teens who have experienced isolation, abuse, and harassment throughout their educational years.

In summary, GSAs can help make schools safer for students and may play a role in mitigating the negative impacts of bullying and harassment experienced by some LGBT students (GLSEN, 2007). Doing this research study at Helix Charter High School, a school that has maintained a GSA for over 10 years, may provide insight into the long-term impacts of GSAs on overall school climate and LGBTQ-specific bullying.

As is evident from the aforementioned research, there is little information available about LGBTQ youth, how bullying specifically impacts LGBTQ youth, and what risk and protective factors impact LGBTQ youth. The limited existing literature illustrates a significant need for further study. The next chapter presents a description of the methodology and research questions for a study to examine the impacts of GSAs on overall school climate and anti-LGBTQ bullying.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Research Method and Design

This quantitative study used a cross-sectional design in order to take a “snapshot” of the school community’s perceptions around GSAs and their impacts on bullying and overall school climate. The research question this study asked was: What are the perceptions held by the faculty about the impact of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) on school climate and bullying at Helix Charter High School? The study was descriptive in nature and was not designed with intent to establish causality or connections between variables.

The study was conducted using an online survey. This method was selected for three reasons. First, using a survey is time and cost effective. Second, it allowed geographic flexibility as the research took place in San Diego, California despite the researcher’s location in Boston, Massachusetts. Third, it provided confidentiality, which is important given the subject matter.

Recruitment and Sampling Frame

The recruitment process for this project involved seeking participants within one school community. Written and verbal permission to conduct this research was obtained from the HCHS Executive Director, Social Worker, and GSA Liaison prior to beginning the study (see Appendix A). The study was announced, via the GSA liaison, during a staff meeting utilizing a flyer (See Appendix B). The GSA liaison presented an introduction to and explanation of the project. The staff was then sent a follow up email with directions to access the survey.

The survey was open for approximately three weeks. The GSA Liaison sent two emails to the faculty and staff (See Appendices C and D). The first introduced and provided information on how to access the study and the second, two weeks later, served as a reminder email. The

researcher's contact information was included in the informed consent and in the body of each of the emails in the case that any questions or concerns arose.

A non-probability availability sampling method was employed to recruit participants. This method was chosen due to the researcher's connections to the principal, GSA liaison, and school social worker at Helix Charter High School. This type of sampling can be limiting in that it does not involve a random selection of participants. This means that there was not clear evidence that the participants demonstrated representativeness of the larger population. In this case, however, it was advantageous because the study captured the perceptions of the HCHS faculty and staff. The inclusion criteria were: 1) being a faculty or staff member at Helix Charter High School, 2) being 18 years of age, and 3) speaking English. The exclusion criteria were: 1) anyone who is not a faculty or staff member at Helix Charter High School, 2) those who do not speak English, and 3) those under the age of 18.

Prior to conducting this research project an application was submitted to and approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee at Smith College School for Social Work (Appendix E).

Sample

Helix Charter High School is located in a racially and religiously diverse, low-income area of San Diego. The Helix community consists of ~2,000 students and ~150 faculty and staff. All faculty and staff were asked to participate in the survey. The number of participants who began the study was 85, 1 was not eligible to participate, 4 skipped one or more of the criteria questions, and 5 did not agree to the informed consent. 3 were excluded for answering fewer than 75% of the survey items. The final sample size for this study was 72 HCHS faculty and staff members.

The age of the sample members ranged from 21 to 70 years old with an average of 39.8 years old with 52% of the sample was between the ages of 30 to 49 years old. Of the participants, 72% were female and 28% were male. Additionally, 95.8% of the participants identified as straight, 2.8% identified as gay, and 1.4% identified as other. Finally, 94.4% of participants hold positions at the school that require them to supervise students whereas 5.6% did not. Table 1 outlines the demographic information of the study participants including age, gender, and sexual orientation.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (n=72)

Characteristic	<i>f</i>	%
Age		
20-29	18	25.4
30-39	16	22.5
40-49	21	29.6
50-59	10	14.1
60-69	5	7
70+	1	1.4
Gender		
Female	52	72.2
Male	20	27.8
Transgender	0	0
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	1	1.4
Black/African American	2	2.8
Hispanic/Latino	1	1.4
White/Caucasian	61	84.7
Other	3	4.2
Multiracial	4	5.56
Sexuality		
Straight	68	95.8
Gay	2	2.8
Lesbian	0	0
Bisexual	0	0
Transgender	0	0
Other	1	1.4
Years Working at HCHS		
0-3	12	16.7
4-7	20	27.8
8-11	16	22.2
12-15	12	16.7
16-19	5	6.9
20+	7	9.7
Student Supervision Required of Position		
Yes	68	94.4
No	4	5.6

Survey Instrument

The survey had a total of 24 items which were comprised of six main areas: 1) Demographics (6 items), 2) Gay/Straight Alliances (5 items), 3) LGBTQ Youth (5 items), 4) Bullying of LGBTQ Youth (5 items), 5) Personal Experiences (2 items), and 6) Closing (1 item). Each section is described in the paragraph below. See Appendix F for a copy of the survey. The survey took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

The demographic section had six items and included information about the participant including age, gender, and sexual orientation. The second section focused on the Gay Straight Alliance at Helix. The third section focused on LGBTQ youth specifically and whether the faculty or staff member felt prepared to work with them. The fourth section looked at the bullying of LGBTQ youth and whether the faculty or staff member perceived of it as a problem at HCHS. The fifth section, which was requested by the school's Executive Director and Social Worker, inquired as to the faculty or staff member's personal experiences with discrimination while on HCHS grounds. Finally, the sixth and closing section was an open-ended question giving the participants a space to share any further thoughts they had regarding the GSA, LGBTQ youth, LGBTQ bullying, and their personal experiences.

The researcher developed all of the sections of the survey as no standardized instruments specifically matched the study topic. The sections were developed based on a review of the literature, the needs of the HCHS administration, and the researcher's interest in the topic. Items were designed using straightforward, user-friendly language.

Data Collection

Once approval was received from the Human Subject Committee at Smith College School for Social Work, the recruitment process began. All HCHS faculty and staff received two

recruitment email (Appendices C&D) from the school's GSA Liaison. The emails described the research project, provided a link to the survey, and reminded the respondents of the project after two weeks. The informed consent (Appendix G) was embedded in the online survey.

All of the surveys were distributed, completed, and submitted electronically using SurveyMonkey, a secure Internet survey hosting website. Participants accessed the survey by using an on-line link provided in the recruitment email. Participants were able to complete the survey from any location with access to the Internet. The first window opened a welcome screen that thanked the participants for their time and consideration (See Appendix H). The next screen (Appendix I) showed the screening questions that determined if the participant was eligible to participate in the study:

1. Are you a member of the Helix Charter High School faculty or staff?
2. Are you 18 years of age or older?
3. Do you speak English?

If the selection criteria were met, the participant was directed to the informed consent screen and informed of their right to refuse to answer any of the questions or to withdraw from the study by stopping at any point while taking the survey. Potential risks and benefits were described as well as how the findings of the study will be used. The participants indicated agreement to the informed consent by selecting "Yes" to the "I Agree" question on the screen. Participants were then able to begin the survey. If the participant selected "No," they were exited from the survey website and thanked for their time (See Appendix J). At the end of the survey, the participant was asked to "submit" the survey. Respondents were then thanked for their time and participation, and again provided the contact information for the researcher. Once the respondents submitted their survey, the option to withdraw was no longer available due to the

anonymous nature of the survey. As previously stated, the survey took 15-20 minutes to complete.

The survey was open for approximately one month, from January 3, 2012 to January 27, 2012. Two emails were sent to the list of contacts. The first introduced the study and the second, two weeks later, was a reminder email. The researcher's contact information was included in the body of the email, in the online survey and on the informed consent if the participants had any questions or concerns.

The participants remain anonymous, as their participation did not include identifying information such as their names or job titles. Participants' email addresses were also protected by the on-line survey program through the process of firewalling, making this researcher unable to identify participants. Additionally, all data will be stored electronically on a password-protected computer in a secure place for three years as required by Federal regulations and then destroyed when no longer needed. The results from this survey are only accessible to this researcher and her thesis advisor.

Data Analysis

The data from the survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics in order to look at the characteristics of the sample. These characteristics are based on the data gathered from the demographic data (nominal measurements) and the questions using rating scales (ordinal measurements). Theme analysis was used to organize the responses to the three qualitative questions.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

This study was an investigation into the perceptions of the faculty and staff at Helix Charter High School regarding the impacts of the GSA on anti-LGBTQ bullying and overall school climate. As stated in the previous chapter, there are approximately 150 faculty and staff at HCHS. All faculty and staff were invited to participate in the survey. The number of participants who began the study was 85, 1 was not eligible to participate, 4 skipped one or more of the criteria questions, 5 did not agree to the informed consent, and 3 were excluded for answering fewer than 75% of the survey items. The final sample size for this study was 72 HCHS faculty and staff members. Additionally, the previous chapter outlined the demographic information gathered from the study sample. This chapter will provide an analysis of the data gathered through the GSA, LGBTQ Youth, and Bullying of LGBTQ, Personal Experience, and Closing sections of the survey instrument.

GSA Related Items

There were five items designed to explore perceptions and beliefs with regard to the GSA. When queried as to whether they were aware of the GSA at HCHS, 95.8% (n=69) of respondents answered yes while 4.2% (n=3) answered no (See Figure 1). Interestingly, though most knew of the GSAs existence, 75% (n=54) were not and had not been involved with the club directly whereas 25% (n=18) of respondents had been involved in with the club (See Figure 1).

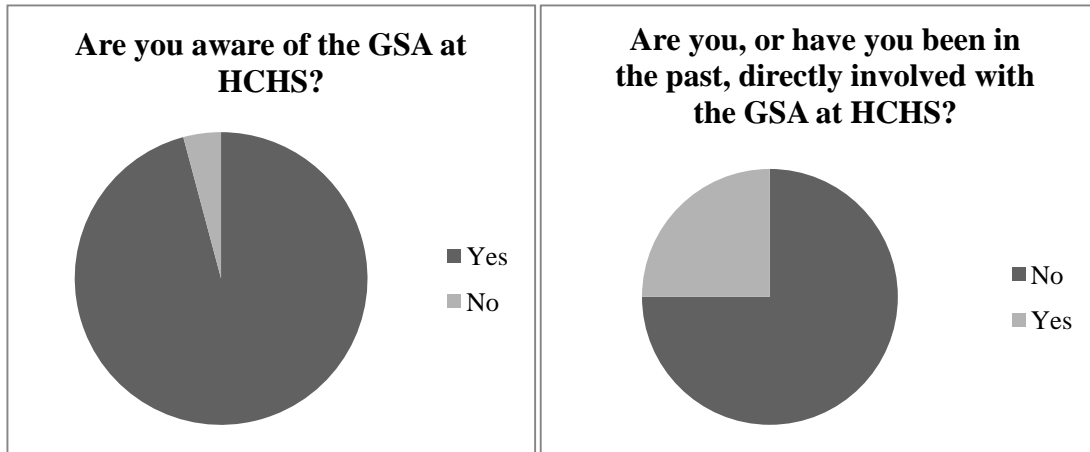


Figure 1. Awareness of and involvement with the GSA at Helix Charter High School.

Additionally, the participants were asked if they thought the GSA was effective. Figure 2 demonstrates the levels of effectiveness the GSA is perceived to have at Helix.

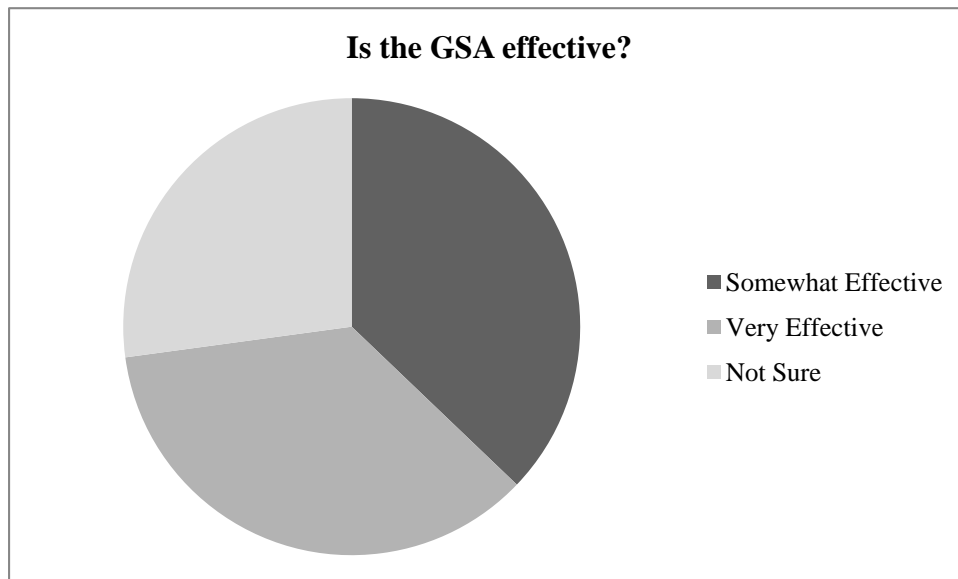


Figure 2. The perceived effectiveness of the GSA.

As shown, 35.7% (n=25) of all respondents viewed the GSA as effective, 37.1% (n=26) viewed it as somewhat effective, and 27.1% (n=19) were not sure whether it is effective. When asked to rate the importance of having a GSA available at the school 66.7% (n=48) viewed it as very

important, 20.8% (n=15) viewed it as somewhat important, 6.9% (n=5) were unsure, and 5.6% (n=4) viewed it as somewhat unimportant.

Participants were next asked whether having an active GSA on campus contributes to a more positive school climate. Just over three-quarters of respondents (n=56) answered yes. Though, 6.9% (n=5) did not think the GSA contributes to a more positive school climate, 13.9% (n=10) responded with maybe and 1.4% (n=1) chose other. This item also provided a space for open-ended responses. The majority of respondents shared pro-GSA sentiments. One respondent noted firsthand knowledge of the importance of the GSA to the students in stating, "It's very important for its members as they have told me. All members feel that they are sending a message of acceptance which is itself becoming more accepted." Another participant shared, "I think anytime you allow a student to feel comfortable and supported it generates more positivity." The quote that best captures this group of respondents' positive perception of the GSA is: "It provides a community where GLBT students can find support. Additionally, the GSA promotes awareness and tolerance, improving school climate."

Yet, there were also several comments which shed light as to what some of the faculty and staff view as areas where work is still needed. One respondent stated, "While I support the GSA, I still feel it has many negative and sarcastic stigmas associated with it. This is not my belief but more so what I have observed from other staff members and their general attitudes." Another stated,

I believe the GSA is a necessary place for students who need somewhere safe.

Unfortunately just having a GSA club on campus has not made other students more tolerant. This is where the school as a whole needs to work towards.

Finally, one respondent noted frustration with the GSA,

As with many student groups, or any groups for that matter, there is a tendency toward hostility against others who do not think as we think. So GSA can be intolerant of legitimate questions and label anyone as homophobic who asks questions regarding health, the lifestyle, the meaning of marriage, etc.

LGBTQ Youth Related Items

There were 5 items designed to gather information regarding the faculty and staff awareness of and comfort with LGBTQ youth. As Figure 3 shows, the majority of faculty and staff at HCHS (n=66) have knowingly worked with LGBTQ youth and feel comfortable doing so. However, as figure 3 also shows, 72.2% (n=52) of the faculty and staff have not received training on working with LGBTQ youth specifically.

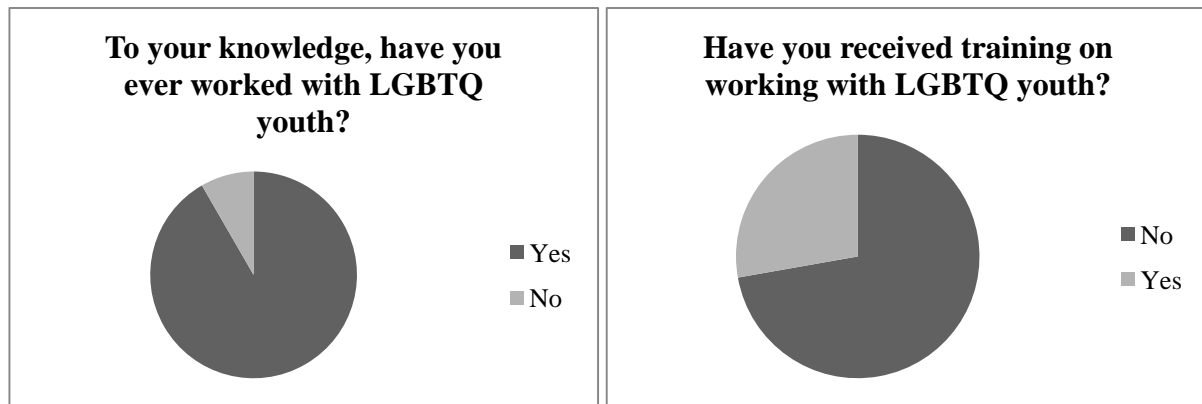


Figure 3. Working with and being trained to work with LGBTQ youth.

Interestingly, though a majority of the respondents reported that they have not been trained to work with LGBTQ youth, 69.5%, (n=50) of the respondents feel confident addressing LGBTQ issues within the classroom (See Figure 4 below).

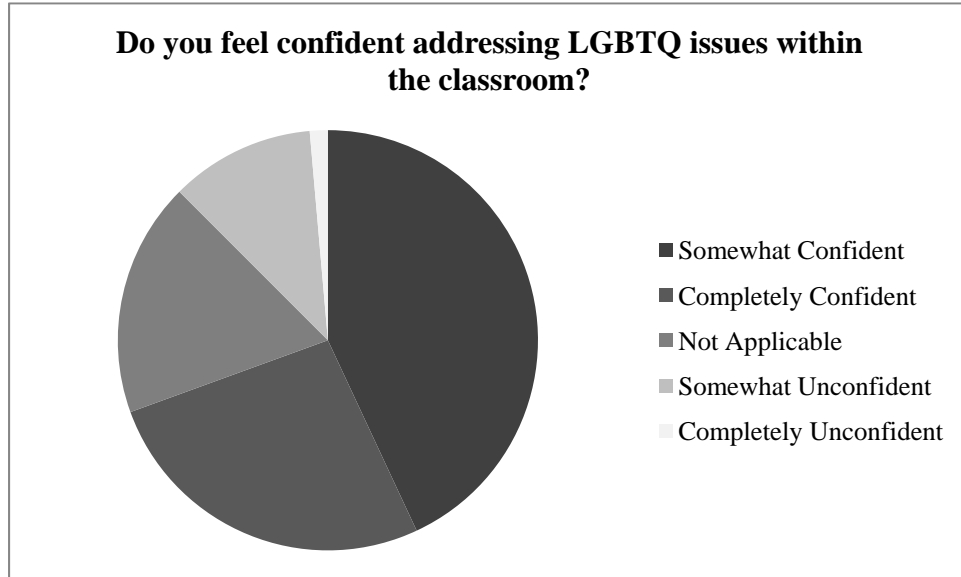


Figure 4. Confidence levels in working with LGBTQ youth.

However, when asked how often LGBTQ issues are discussed in the classroom, not one respondent answered "regularly" and 9.7% (n=7) responded "somewhat regularly." 30.6% (n=22) answered "not applicable", 31.9% (n=23) responded "somewhat irregularly," and 27.8% (n=20) responded "irregularly." Nearly 60% (n=43) of respondents do not regularly raise LGBTQ issues within the classroom.

LGBTQ Bullying

In this section there were 5 items designed to discern the thoughts and beliefs around LGBTQ bullying and its existence at HCHS. When asked whether bullying is an issue for LGBTQ students at their school, 55.6% (n=40) of respondents answered "yes," a mere 1.4% (n=1) of respondents answered "no," and 43.1% (n=31) answered unsure (as demonstrated in Figure 5 below).



Figure 5. Bullying as an issue at HCHS.

Of those surveyed, 81.9% (n=59) agreed that LGBTQ issues are important to address in the school setting. 13.8% (n=10) neither agreed nor disagreed and 4.2% (n=3) disagreed (See Figure 6 below).

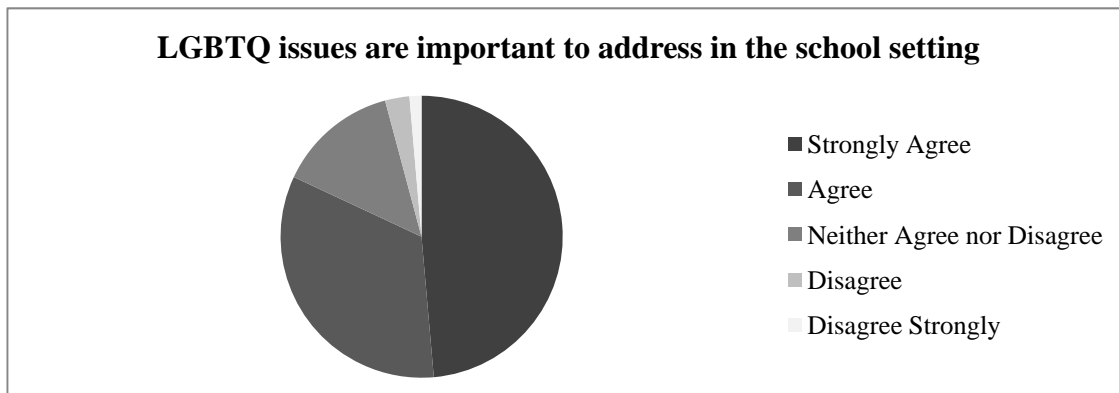


Figure 6. Perceptions of whether LGBTQ issues are important to address in the school setting.

Further, as demonstrated in Figure 7 below, 66.6% (n=48) agreed that it is their responsibility to address issues of anti-LGBTQ sentiment within the school environment. 27.8% (n=20) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 5.6% (n=4) disagreed.

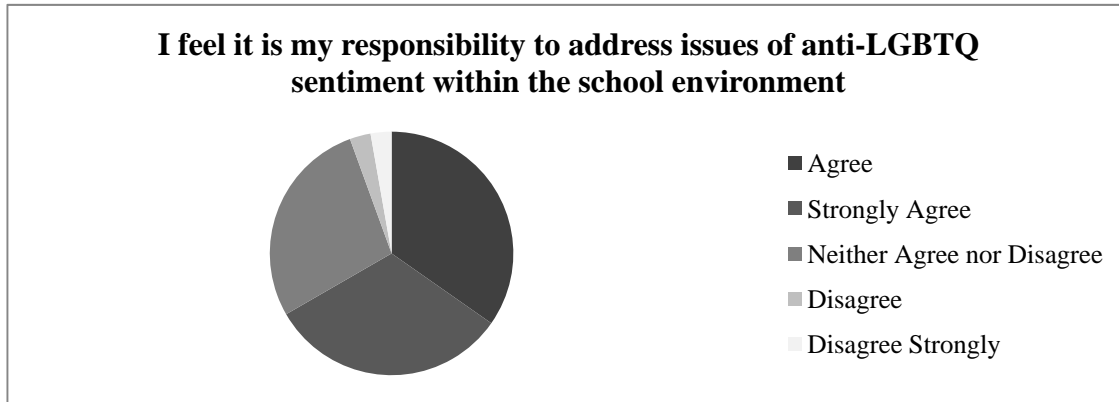


Figure 7. Perception of responsibility with regard to addressing anti-LGBTQ sentiment within the school environment.

In response to whether their employer provided an orientation to bullying as related to LGBTQ persons, 52.8% (n=38) agreed, 23.6% (n=17) neither agreed nor disagreed, 23.7% (n=17) disagreed. This data is illustrated in Figure 8 below.

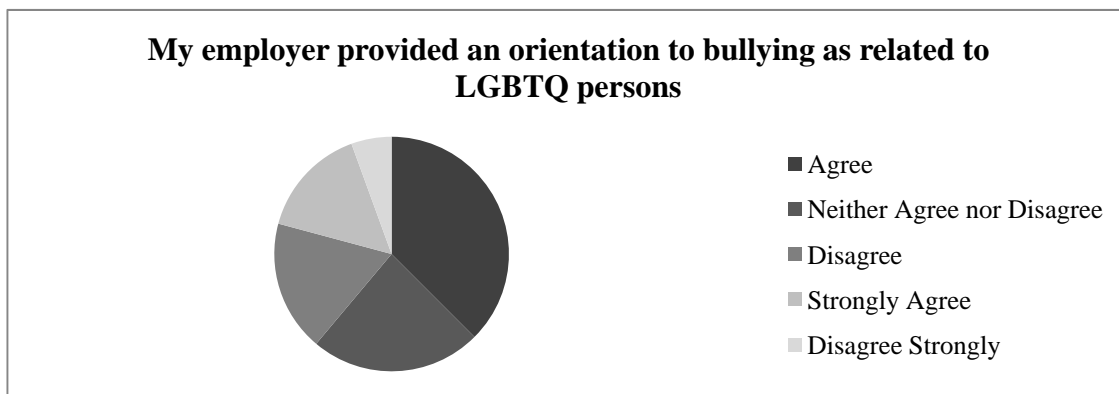


Figure 8. Perceptions of whether HCHS provided an orientation to anti-LGBTQ bullying.

When participants were asked how many trainings specifically related to LGBTQ issues they had attended as an employee of Helix it was notable that 51% (n=34) reported attending "0." Further, of the remaining 49% (n=33), 33% (n=22) had attended only one training. Figure 9, below, shows the exact numbers of training reported through the survey.

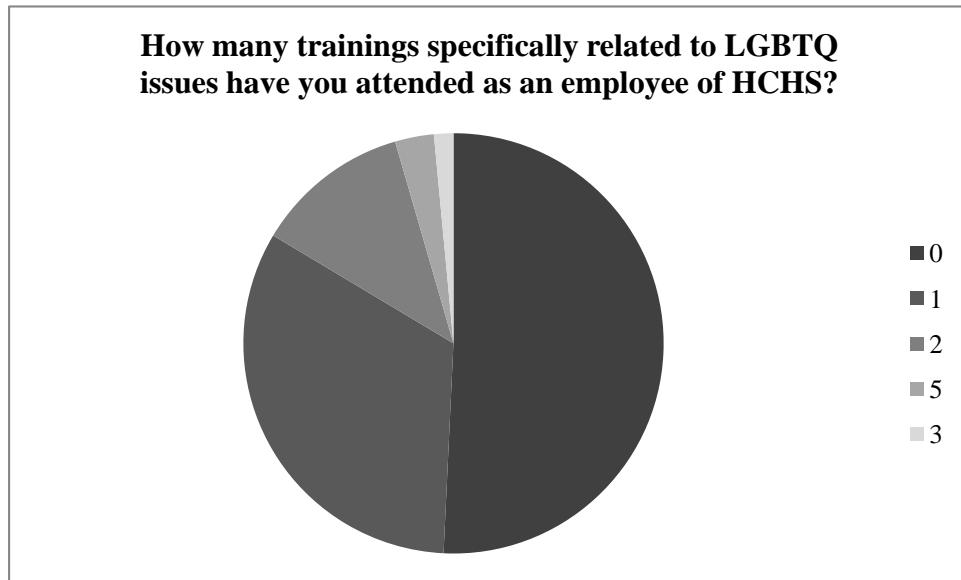


Figure 9. The number of trainings related to LGBTQ issues participants reported attending.

In response to whether the issue of bullying LGBTQ students is something resources should be directed towards, 76.1% (n=54) answered "yes" and 23.9% (n=17) answered "no" as shown in Figure 10 below.

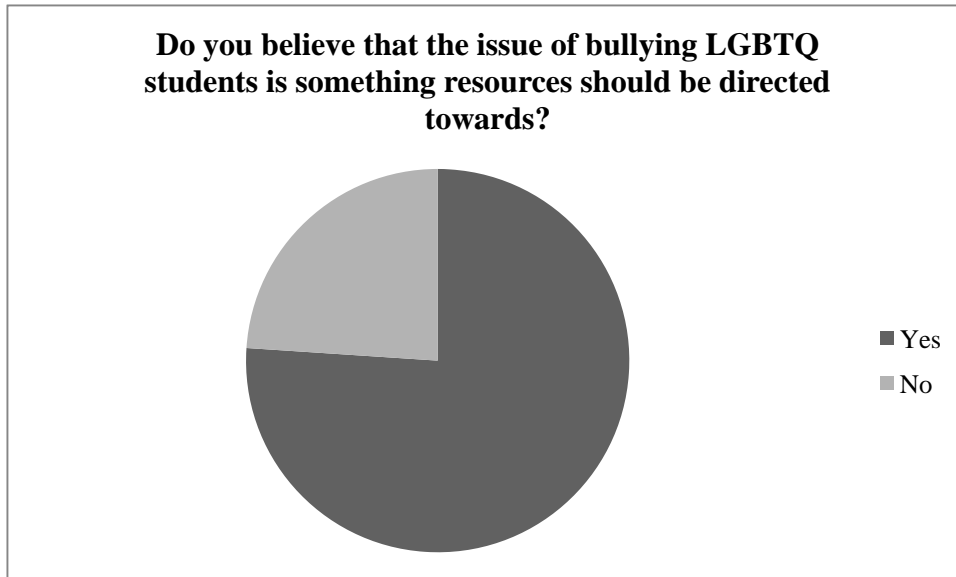


Figure 10. Beliefs regarding whether resources should be directed toward LGBTQ bullying.

Many respondents also took the time to share their reasoning in the open-ended space provided in the survey. The majority of respondents noted that the issue of LGBTQ bullying should be encompassed within more generalized tolerance and anti-bullying trainings. One respondent stated,

I believe there should be resources for any issue of bullying on campus. This of course would include the bullying of LGBTQ students who could possibly [be] more vulnerable than other students and could possibly be most emotionally scarred from the exclusion.

Another participant noted,

I do not think this one issue should be so singled out. Bullying training should be provided, and this one reason for bullying should be mentioned therein. Bullying happens for lots of other reasons besides LGBTQ issues, but these reasons aren't talked about nearly as much.

Finally, one respondent addressed the idea of LGBTQ bullying should be part of an overall anti-bullying effort quite clearly: "Bullying in general is something resources should be directed towards. There are many other, just as prominent and important, reasons people are being bullied that should be addressed as well."

Others thought that funneling resources toward LGBTQ bullying issues was not something of importance. One respondent stated, "Resources should be allocated to help student[s] become successful. There are a lot of areas that need resources, I do not rank the LGBTQ need any higher than the needs of coaches as a part of our athletic programs." Another noted that, "With limited resources (such as they are) this does not seem of utmost importance. When funding increases, then I think it would be worthwhile."

Of the 72 participants, 26 chose to answer the final item of the Bullying of LGBTQ Youth section. The question was: Do you have suggestions about resources or training around the topic of bullying and LGBTQ youth? Of those 26, seven of the respondents simply wrote "no." The 19 respondents who answered provided a range from very specific ideas to sharing general thoughts regarding resources or training around the topic of bullying and LGBTQ youth. The responses are summarized below.

Those responding generally to this item, (n=13), had varying ideas to share. One respondent stated, "I think it is important to concentrate resources on bullying (direct or indirect, online, social networks, etc.) in general. This is not a simple issue of LGBTQ youth. This is a moral issue of how students should treat each other, peers, staff, and community members."

Another responded with a discussion of their personal behavior:

I think that sometimes the separation of LGBTQ students happens because of new rules which pertain to their population or even the term itself. I don't use this term often. I am

very strict about indirect bullying such as the word 'gay' being used derogatorily, but when I address this sort of thing, I tend to embarrass kids. And I pride myself on how comfortable my classroom is. I worry that WE are making these students feel isolated and strange.

Finally, yet another expressed this sentiment: "We need to create a climate where it is possible to ask reasonable questions about LGBTQ issues without being perceived or labeled as homophobic."

Others (n=6) responded to the same item with specific ideas for trainings and other changes which could be made at HCHS. One respondent shared,

I feel that it should be mandatory that ALL staff on Helix campus receive some sort of training at least twice each year before the new semesters. Possibly could be a small segment during staff work day... i.e. how to address bullying, degrading comments in the classroom, etc. How to raise awareness and acceptance or peace regardless of one's opinion based on their individual race, religion or culture. I realize the LGBTQ community is not accepted or acknowledged by all, but as educators I feel that we need to recognize that this community does exist and is all among us (students and staff included).

Another respondent noted that specific trainings around language should be provided: "Vocal issues, the 'no homo' and saying things are 'gay.' The 'doo doo mamma' saying. I would like the students to receive training on how these words are not tolerated around campus." And another noted, "Resources and training available through The Center (we have not yet tapped this as a resource for training staff or students), training available through union (but these can be better)."

Personal Experiences

In asking about participants' personal experiences, 25.3% (n=18) of the respondents have felt discriminated against while on school grounds whereas 74.6% (n=53) have not felt that way (See figure 9). Additionally, 86.1% (n=62) of all respondents would feel safe bringing issues of discrimination to the school administrators while 13.9% (n=10) would not (See Figure 11).

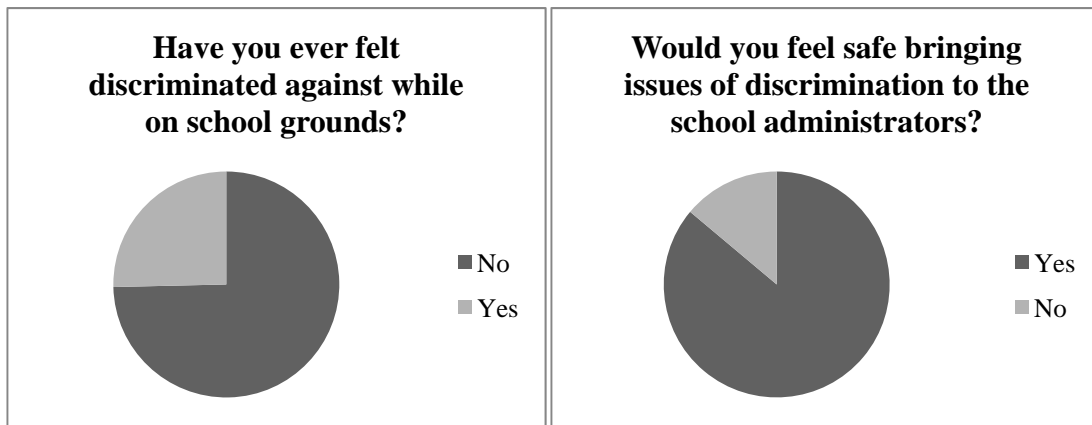


Figure 11. Personal discrimination experiences and issues of safety for faculty and staff at HCHS.

Fourteen respondents commented in the open-ended space provided after the question of safety. Most (n=10) reported that the school has historically been very supportive of its faculty and staff. However, there were some outlying opinions expressed as well. One respondent noted, "I feel that some of the administrators are not as approachable as others. [Some] seems very understanding, professional and neutral whereas some others tend to be clicky or gossipy at times." Another shared experiences of personal discrimination while on campus:

I have been warned about an issue with my religious beliefs and I feel discriminated against and I have to deal with other religious beliefs on campus that I find offensive, but I am not allowed [to] follow my own with in the confines of school.

Finally, another respondent noted that everyone deals with discrimination in some way: "Safe? Yes, but we are all discriminated against at some point. Depending upon the severity, we need to be mature enough to cope with it."

Survey Closing

The last item was included to capture anything the respondents thought the survey did not address adequately. Respondents were asked to share anything further with regard to the GSA, LGBTQ youth, LGBTQ bullying, or their experiences at Helix Charter High School. Twenty-three participants chose to answer this item. The answers were quite interesting and varied from frustration to support to other perspectives. Of those expressing frustration, the responses were passionate. One respondent forcefully stated, "Get out of just dealing with GSA or LGBTQ issues and deal with student behavior issue like bullying. Addressing bullying would indirectly address a lot of the GSA or LGBTQ issues." Another expressed their frustrations and personal views:

In their effort not to be silence[d], the LGBTQ has succeeded in silencing discussion which might raise questions about the health/safety of the gay lifestyle. It has also promoted a view of 'born that way' which cannot be questioned and does not represent the scientific consensus. In my research, it appears that causes for sexual orientation are far more complex than either 'choice' on the one hand or 'hard-wired genetics' on the other. So, yes, at times I feel bullied by the pro-gay agenda. I believe deeply that all people are deserving of respect and that LGBTQ youth and adults must be protected. But I resent being labeled as a homophobe because I have concerns about how we deal with issues of sexuality, especially as it concerns young people. I know many students who also feel effectively silenced in any discussion of LGBTQ issues. It's easier to call people names

than to answer complex questions.

Others revisited their views on bullying and did not see it as an issue at Helix Charter High School. One respondent stated,

I think it is a worthwhile program but I do not see bullying as a large issue here. Maybe I am just not seeing it... I have seen openly gay students having great social relationships and lots of acceptance in the school community. I have also heard kids talk openly of LGBTQ issues without repercussion in class.

Another stated, "I said I was unsure about if the bull[y]ing of LGBTQ youth exists on our campus because I do not see it, but not working directly with youth I cannot say what happens in their world."

Still others reiterated the point that the school should not focus specifically on LGBTQ bullying. One respondent stated, "We should continue [to] discuss bullying, and if it occurs with LGBTQ youth, or for racial reasons, or just plain ignorance it should be discussed...." Another shared,

I believe that bullying should be look[ed] at from all possible areas, sometimes I feel that the issues talked about are only for race and sexual preference. I think that bullying or intolerance can come from so many other attributes. I also think we need to look more at why kids bully and how to help them not feel the need to do so. Many times their issues are also real.

Finally, some of the respondents expressed support for the GSA as well as its advisor. One respondent shared, "I'd like to see more of a presence of the GSA on campus and higher awareness of issues affecting them, including bullying specifically." Another noted, "I feel the advisor of the GSA is superb... so respected and does a wonderful job helping students. We (as a

campus) are blessed to have her!"

In summary, most participants clearly supported the GSA although many were unsure whether LGBTQ bullying is an issue at HCHS. Though there was uncertainty about the degree to which bullying exists as Helix, most agreed that more training is needed. Further, though the requests for additional training were clear, most participants agreed that LGBTQ issues should not be singled out but, instead, included in overall tolerance trainings. The next chapter provides a deeper discussion of the aforementioned findings as well as suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This chapter is a discussion of how this study's findings compared with the current literature on the impacts of Gay Straight Alliances on bullying and overall school climate. The strengths and limitations inherent in the study, implications for social work practice, and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

Current Findings and Previous Literature

GSA related items. This study found that though the majority of the respondents were aware of the GSA at Helix Charter High School only a quarter had been directly involved with the club. However, only 35.7% of respondents rated the GSA as effective. Further, nearly 90% of respondents viewed having a GSA as important. This is interesting in that, as stated earlier, only 25% of participants had ever been involved directly with the GSA. It is puzzling that 90% of respondents view the GSA as important yet most choose to remain uninvolved. The lack of involvement and interest in the GSA may demonstrate a lack of education among the faculty and staff with regard to LGBTQ youth and their experiences within the school environment. This may show that the faculty and staff do not actually understand why having and supporting a GSA is crucial.

Another point of interest is the faculty and staff perceptions as to whether GSAs improve school climate. As noted in the literature review chapter, Treadway and Yoakam (1992) view GSAs as potentially "life-saving" spaces for LGBTQ youth. Further, Lee (2002) notes that GSAs provide LGBTQ youth with "an enhanced sense of belonging to the school community" (p. 13). This study found that, the GSA is clearly viewed as contributing to a more positive school climate at HCHS by the faculty and staff. However, one fifth of participants did not think or

were uncertain about whether the GSA contributes to a more positive school climate. It would be interesting to discover the reasoning behind the participants' responses. Perhaps the respondents do not see the impacts of the GSA on a daily basis or do not directly connect the GSA to improving school climate. Perhaps, as discussed earlier, the lack of faculty and staff involvement with the GSA keeps them from understanding its impacts on school climate. Or, perhaps they have witnessed negative interactions involving LGBTQ youth which may have impacted their perspective.

Overall, as stated earlier, the majority of respondents shared pro-GSA sentiments. This finding might have been different if the survey was given five or ten years ago when there were fewer GSAs and they were less understood. HCHS was one of the earlier schools to have a GSA. It is likely that the pro-GSA sentiment is connected to the longevity of the program on campus. One respondent shared a truly positive perception of the GSA and its impacts on the school climate: "It provides a community where GLBT students can find support. Additionally, the GSA promotes awareness and tolerance, improving school climate."

LGBTQ youth related items. The current study found that over three-fourths of respondents agreed that LGBTQ issues are important to address in the school setting. This statistic is interesting because, although the majority of the respondents agree that LGBTQ issues should be addressed, not one respondent answered "regularly" and only 7 responded "somewhat regularly" when asked how often LGBTQ issues are discussed in the classroom. In fact, over half of the participants do not regularly raise LGBTQ issues within the classroom. An open dialogue regarding LGBTQ issues does not seem to be encouraged in school settings. It would be interesting to know if this lack of discussion is related to the students feeling uncomfortable, the teachers feeling uncomfortable, or some combination of the two.

It is well documented that the experiences of LGBTQ youth are regularly left unacknowledged within school communities, which frequently leads to bullying. Yet, though the existence of LGBTQ bullying is well documented nationally, this study found that nearly half of all participants felt uncertain as to whether LGBTQ bullying is an issue at Helix. Does this mean that LGBTQ bullying does not actually exist at HCHS or, rather, that it is not noticed or acknowledged? Perhaps the LGBTQ youth at HCHS sense that the faculty and staff do not see LGBTQ bullying as an issue and, therefore, do not feel comfortable approaching teachers or staff about bullying they may experience. The finding that so many of the faculty and staff do not view bullying as an issue at Helix is distressing because, according to Heck et al. (2011), LGBTQ youth disproportionately bear the brunt of at-school victimization.

Further, as mentioned, the current study found that most respondents agreed that LGBTQ youth, their experiences, and issues should not be a primary focus of trainings or staff education. Instead, most agreed that LGBTQ issues should be rolled into general diversity trainings. However, somewhat contradictorily, most respondents believed that more training with regard to LGBTQ youth and bullying is needed. The need for training becomes glaring when looking at this study's data. The current study found that half of the respondents had never attended a training specifically related to LGBTQ issues as an employee of HCHS. Further, of the remaining half of participants, one-third had only attended one training on the topic. The data demonstrates that despite such an apparent lack of training, the majority of respondents do not want LGBTQ specific trainings offered.

These findings are concerning because the LGBTQ population is at "high risk" for issues including mental health struggles, suicide, drug use, and homelessness. School faculty and staff need to understand that rolling LGBTQ trainings into general diversity trainings does not

adequately address the needs of the population given the specific risk factors. Youth of color and other racially or culturally diverse populations may have built in support systems at home and within their communities whereas the same cannot be said for LGBTQ youth. As Unks (1995) stated, LGBTQ youth "do not enjoy the sort of social allegiances, educational resources, or cultural support that are routinely established by the adult society for other youth subcultures" (p. 4). Given the extreme isolation LGBTQ youth often face, faculty and staff within the school need to be especially sensitive to and aware of their particular needs.

Personal experiences. It is notable that one fourth of the respondents have felt discriminated against while on school grounds, and those who elaborated noted religious discrimination. Though it is not a majority, it is still too high. Wyatt, Oswald, White, and Peterson (2008) believe that the attitudes toward homosexuality held by teachers significantly impact the school environment. If the adults are feeling discriminated against it is quite likely the students are feeling this way too. This is an issue the administration should work to decrease by encouraging an open dialogue between faculty, staff, and the administration. If the administration is made aware of discrimination occurring against the faculty and staff, they can better address both the individual cases and the overall school climate. The fact that the faculty and staff are feeling discriminated against does not bode well for the overall school climate. Further, if the faculty and staff have not adequately addressed the issues of discrimination they have faced then they have not provided proper modeling for the students.

Additionally, a little more than one tenth of the faculty and staff would not feel safe bringing issues of discrimination to the school administrators. Overall, the respondents found HCHS to be very supportive of its faculty and staff. However, there are those that are left feeling

unsafe on campus. If the faculty and staff are unable to feel safe on campus it may be indicative that the students are unable to feel safe as well.

Finally, several respondents, in the open-ended questions, noted that everyone deals with discrimination in some way. The question is how to decrease such attitudes and behaviors so that all members of the school community feel safe and secure. Wyatt et al (2008) explain that:

Because students spend a third or more of each weekday at school, the school environment needs to be a safe, welcoming place for all students and staff. Teachers and administrators must learn how to develop and maintain a safe learning atmosphere that openly welcomes sexual diversity (p. 177).

Negative attitudes and behaviors do not and will not disappear without intention and effort. It will take the school community working together to change the campus culture. By encouraging an open dialogue and addressing the challenges, negative attitudes, and behaviors directly with proper disciplinary measures and support for victims of discrimination, the administration can positively impact the overall school climate.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The use of an online survey may have contributed to a less representative sample (Rubin & Babbie, 2007). The participants all self selected to participate in the study, had Internet access, and were motivated to respond to an online survey request. Further, the study looked at one school community, which means that the sample was limited to those who work at HCHS and that the data cannot be compared to other school communities. Despite this limitation in scope, the study has important implications for the development of policies and interventions at Helix Charter High School, as discussed later in this chapter.

Another clear limitation is that the respondents may have felt required to take the survey

given that a faculty member administered it within the school. Additionally, though the current quantitative survey gathered much information, a qualitative study may have better captured more detailed, rich, and helpful information.

Further, though the study was, in part, about school climate, there was only one specific school climate question within the survey. There were other questions that implied school climate but they were not specifically referencing the study area. This is a limitation because there are many well-established climate survey tools in existence that could have been helpful for use within this study.

Finally, the issue of researcher bias is another limitation that is important to note. The researcher is a member of the LGBTQ community which not only impacted her research interest but also the way she perceived the data. The researcher's underlying belief, prior to doing this study, was that GSAs are a positive resource and that they provide positive outcomes for LGBTQ youth.

The strengths in the data collection and sampling plan are also worth noting. One strength of the sampling plan was the ability to produce a relatively substantial number of participants in a short time. “The main advantage of online surveys is that they can quickly and inexpensively be sent to large numbers of prospective respondents anywhere in the world.” (Rubin & Babbie, 2007, p. 141). The web-based research approach had cost saving benefits, including eliminating the cost of paper surveys, postage, printing, and mailings. Rubin & Babbie (2007) confirm that online surveys are cheaper to conduct, but that it can be difficult to ensure that the respondents represent a more general population, as previously stated. This approach also saved time and allowed for a quick response time by those completing the survey.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Gathering information regarding perceptions of the impacts of GSAs on school climate is useful for the LGBTQ community, families of LGBTQ youth, school administrations, teachers, and helping professionals and organizations. Additionally, this work is important because it takes into account the mental health and quality of life of a vulnerable population: LGBTQ youth. Specifically, the information in this study could impact the current policies at Helix which address school climate, especially those with a specific focus on ensuring that LGBTQ students feel supported. School climate could potentially be improved if teachers regularly wove LGBTQ history, figures, and issues into classroom discussions. Additionally, it could be helpful if faculty and staff utilized "safe space" stickers prominently so that students know they can speak candidly without repercussion. Further the adult leaders and liaisons for other school groups should encourage their clubs to participate in "day of silence" activities as a show of solidarity with the GSA members. As Szalacha found in 2001, educational interventions such as school policies explicitly protecting sexual minority students from harassment and violence and school-based extra-curricular groups were associated with positive differences in school climates. Schools with GSAs were explicitly found to be positively associated with less homophobic school climates.

The study results could also impact program development and interventions used at HCHS. If a policy explicitly protecting sexual minority students from harassment and violence does not currently exist, developing such a policy must be considered, as having a GSA cannot be the school's sole effort to support its LGBTQ community. The school should adopt a school wide program including an anti-oppression education model. Further, this policy should be included in both the student and faculty/staff handbook in order to send a clear message that LGBTQ youth are a priority and that LGBTQ bullying will not be tolerated. If the administration

is viewed as embracing such a policy and vision, it will most certainly impact the community as a whole.

Discrimination of any kind should also be addressed at the school. A zero tolerance policy for discriminatory behavior should be created and enforced. The language of the policy should clearly indicate the consequences for acts of discrimination by students, faculty, or staff and should be clearly noted in the student and faculty/staff handbook. Enforcing a zero tolerance policy for discriminatory behavior may create a more accepting environment at the school and have a positive impact on overall school climate.

Ideally, the study will affect the training curriculum provided for the faculty and staff at HCHS. The data suggested that many faculty and staff are unaware of what GSAs actually do to support LGBTQ youth. It would be important to provide general education for the entire community (faculty, staff, and students alike) in addition to specific trainings. Further, this study's results demonstrated a need for the development of a training program at Helix. There is clearly an appetite in the HCHS community for increased training on bullying for LGBTQ issues and others. As this study found, a large number of people have not been trained, but are interested in further training. There should be annual trainings that incorporate the most recent cases of LGBTQ bullying to highlight that such bullying is an ongoing issue. In-service trainings should start the dialogue regarding issues that LGBTQ students face. Ideally, such trainings would empower silent supporters to become more vocal. Additionally, the trainings should provide the tools needed for faculty and staff to feel prepared, capable of, and willing to confront homophobia within the school setting. It is possible that aligning the faculty and staff with the administrations school wide vision could "start a top-down reaction which [could] create a school climate change and a safer learning environment for all students" (Shores, 2007, p. 152).

Further, this research relates to social work practice, specifically for all social workers who practice with LGBTQ youth and in school communities. At Helix specifically, it will be helpful for the administration, GSA liaison, and school social worker to be aware of the attitudes and beliefs shared by the respondents. The current data can be used to tailor awareness and tolerance trainings for staff, faculty, and students alike. Faculty and professional trainings are found to be associated with positive differences in school climate (Szalacha, 2001). Additionally, the school administrators, GSA liaison, and social worker should work together to identify allies and risk factors within the school community. For example, providing a role model such as a coach or counselor with opportunities to attend LGBTQ training conferences could have positive far-reaching impacts within the student body. If allies were encouraged to participate in more extensive trainings they would know the proper language and messages to use when discussing LGBTQ issues. This type of understanding could create support that LGBTQ youth can see, sense, and seek out. The HCHS administration should vocalize that LGBTQ youth are a priority on campus and allocating financial resources to provide these learning opportunities would speak volumes.

Recommendations for Future Research

This section provides suggestions and recommendations for future research in regard to GSAs, bullying, and overall school climate. The study raised several questions for future research. The recommendations are summarized as follows.

The first recommendation is to encourage researchers to consider surveying the students to further understand the Helix community perceptions. Such a survey would provide an opportunity to understand the GSA and its impacts as viewed by the student body. Giving a similar survey to the students would allow for a side-by-side comparison of the student and

faculty responses. It would be interesting to see whether the students' perceptions line up with those of the faculty and staff or whether there is a gap. The student survey should also focus on the students' specific experiences with bullying and their perceptions of safety within the school environment. Such an examination could also include a longitudinal research component. This would allow for the researcher to see any potential impacts of the GSA over the course of the four years each student is at the school.

The second suggestion for further research is focused on the faculty and staff at Helix Charter High School. The respondents in this study reported a lack of training as well as a desire to be trained. Qualitative methods could supplement the existing research and glean a clearer understanding of the faculty and staff perceptions. Such methods could also provide more specific information as to where the faculty and staff see gaps in their training.

Finally, it would benefit not only HCHS, but also the field of research to consider repeating this survey, adding a school climate specific survey tool, and involving several similar schools. As explained earlier, there is a paucity of research in this area due to barriers including harassment and discrimination. However, gathering such information is important if there are to be improvements in school climate and a decrease in bullying. Understanding the impacts of GSAs on bullying and overall school climate would be helpful for all schools as they determine how to best approach supporting and caring for their LGBTQ community members. Additionally, such an effort would allow for comparison and create improved representativeness and generalizability.

Conclusion

Understanding the entire community's current perceptions will help the school administrators, faculty, and school social worker recognize and, ideally, address all the levels of

school policy which may have a negative impact on LGBTQ youth. Currently, LGBTQ youth are left without a safe space in the majority of the nation's schools. What is distressing about this fact is that GSAs have been found to positively affect the lives of LGBTQ youth and, in this researcher's opinion, should be implemented in more, if not all, high schools. Shores (2007) found, "G.S.A.s appear to make school experiences more positive and decrease the likelihood that LGBTQ students will fall prey to any of the several high-risk behaviors or harassment that LGBTQ youths frequently encounter" (p. 141).

At HCHS specifically, although the GSA has been in existence longer than at most of our nation's schools, an overwhelming number of the faculty and staff have had very little interaction with it. By increasing their involvement with the GSA, perhaps the faculty and staff would gain a better understanding of the specific risk factors which affect LGBTQ youth in America today. It is crucial that more of those in authority at HCHS comprehend the necessity of addressing the adverse conditions LGBTQ youth face to ensure that the school environment is safe and inclusive. If awareness can be raised, the faculty and staff may be more likely to instigate and encourage discussion of LGBTQ history and challenges in the classroom. This would help to increase the perception of each classroom and office as a safe space and should positively impact overall school climate.

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Appendix A

Institution Approval Letter



HELIX HIGH SCHOOL
A CALIFORNIA CHARTER SCHOOL
 GROSSMONT UNION HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT - 7323 UNIVERSITY AVENUE - LA MESA, CALIFORNIA 91941
 (619) 644-8200

HIGHLANDERS
 9.21.11

Smith College
 School for Social Work
 Lilly Hall
 Northampton, MA 01063

To Whom It May Concern:

Helix Charter High School gives permission to Meghan McGrath to locate her research at this institution. For the 2011-2012 school year, Meghan will be conducting a survey of our faculty and staff regarding their perceptions of the impacts of the Gay Straight Alliance on overall school climate. She has our permission to conduct this project at Helix Charter High School.

Helix Charter High School does not have a Human Subjects Review Board and, therefore, requests that Smith College School for Social Work's (SSW) Human Subjects Review Committee (HSR) perform a review of the research proposed by a Meghan McGrath. Helix Charter High School will abide by the standards related to the protection of all participants in the research approved by SSW HSR Committee.

Sincerely,

Rani Goyal
 Executive Director

Danielle Yee
 School Social Worker

Colleen Robinson
 GSA Liaison

Appendix B

Flyer for Initial Presentation at Faculty/Staff Meeting

Are you interested in knowing more about bullying and the school climate at Helix?

If so, read on...

Who: Meghan McGrath
MSW Candidate

Smith College School for Social Work 2012

What: Perceptions: A look at the impacts of GSAs on bullying and overall school climate

A research project focused on the faculty and staff perceptions of the impacts of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) on the bullying and overall school climate at Helix Charter High School (HCHS).

How: A short (15-20 minute), confidential online survey to be completed by the faculty and staff of HCHS which can be found here:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/HCHS>

Why: The results of this project will make up my Master's thesis submission and will be provided to the Helix administration. The findings may be used to inform school climate and anti-bullying interventions and policies.

If you have further questions, please contact Meghan McGrath at: mmcgrat@smith.edu

Appendix C

Initial Recruitment Email

Dear Helix Faculty and Staff,

This email is a reminder about the survey for Helix faculty and staff on the perception of the impact of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) on school climate and bullying that was presented at the last staff meeting. The survey will be online for the next month and will take you approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. The link to the survey is:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/HCHS>

If you have any further questions, you may contact the researcher, Meghan McGrath by phone (XXX.XXX.XXXX) or email (mmcgrat@smith.edu).

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Sincerely,

Colleen Robinson

GSA Liaison

Appendix D

Two-Week Reminder Email

Dear Helix Faculty and Staff,

This email is a friendly reminder about the online survey regarding the impacts of the Gay Straight Alliance on the bullying and overall school climate here at HCHS. The survey can be found at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/HCHS>

As I mentioned, the survey should take you approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

If you have any further questions, you may contact the researcher, Meghan McGrath by phone (XXX.XXX.XXXX) or email (mmcgrat@smith.edu).

Thank you for your time and participation.

Sincerely,

Colleen Robinson

GSA Liaison

Appendix E

Human Subjects Review Approval Letter

December 1, 2011

Meghan McGrath

Dear Meghan,

Nice work on the revisions! Your study is ready to go and the committee finds it quite acceptable from an HSR perspective.

If you make any changes in your process, questions, consent form or recruitment at all please email me before doing so to obtain the HSR Committee's approval. Most small changes only need a quick approval from me. Larger changes may require a Committee meeting. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me directly (dlburton@smith.edu). I look forward to hearing about your study next summer!

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

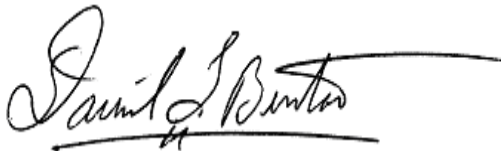
Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David L. Burton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

P.S. This was a very well done application and it was a pleasure to read your revisions as well-very clear.

Appendix F

Survey of Helix Charter High School Faculty and Staff

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/HCHS>

Part I: Demographic & Employment Information

1. Age: (# of Years)
2. Gender: (Male, Female)
3. Race/Ethnicity: (Check all that apply: White/Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, Black/African-American, Asian, Other: Open Ended)
4. Sexuality: (Straight, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Other: Open Ended)
5. How many years have you worked at Helix? (# of Years)
6. Does your position at the school require you to supervise students? (Yes, No)

Part II: Gay Straight Alliance

7. Are you aware of the Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) at Helix? (Yes, No, if participant responds “No” the survey will skip to Q12)
8. Are you, or have you been in the past, directly involved with the GSA at Helix? (Yes, No)
9. Do you think the GSA is effective? (Very Effective, Somewhat Effective, Not Sure, Somewhat Ineffective, Very Ineffective)
10. Do you view having an active GSA on campus is important? (Very Important, Somewhat Important, Not Sure, Somewhat Unimportant, Very Unimportant)
11. Do you believe having an active GSA on campus contributes to a more positive school climate? (Yes, No, Maybe; Other: Comment Box)

Part III: LGBTQ Youth

12. To your knowledge, have you ever worked with LGBTQ youth? (Yes, No)
13. Do you feel comfortable working with LGBTQ youth? (Yes, No)
14. Have you received training on working with LGBTQ youth? (Yes, No)
15. Do you feel confident addressing LGBTQ issues within the classroom? (Completely Confident, Somewhat Confident, Not Applicable, Somewhat Confident, Completely Confident)

16. How often are LGBTQ issues discussed in your classroom? (Regularly, Somewhat Regularly, Not Applicable, Somewhat Irregularly, Irregularly)

Part IV: Bullying of LGBTQ Youth

17. Is bullying an issue for LGBTQ students at your school? (Yes, No, Unsure)

18. LGBTQ issues are important to address in the school setting. (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

19. I feel it is my responsibility to address issues of anti-LGBTQ sentiment within the school environment. (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

20. My employer provided an orientation to bullying as related to LGBTQ persons. (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

21. How many trainings specifically related to LGBTQ issues have you attended as an employee of Helix? (# of Trainings)

22. Do you believe that the issue of bullying LGBTQ students is something resources should be directed towards? (Yes, No)

a. Please explain: (Comment Box)

23. Do you have suggestions about resources or training around the topic of bullying and LGBTQ youth? (Comment Box)

Part V: Personal Experiences

24. Have you ever felt discriminated against while on school grounds? (Yes, No)

25. Would you feel safe bringing issues of discrimination to the school administrators? (Yes, No)

a. Please explain: (Comment Box)

Part VI: Closing

26. Do you have anything further you'd like to share regarding the GSA, LGBTQ youth, LGBTQ bullying, or your experience at Helix? (Comment Box)

Appendix G

Electronic/Online Informed Consent

Dear Participant,

My name is Meghan E. McGrath and I am a candidate for a Master of Social Work (MSW) at Smith College. I am conducting a research study at Helix Charter High School (HCHS) which explores the faculty and staff perceptions of the impacts of the presence of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) on the overall school climate and bullying. The purpose of doing this study is to provide information for school administrators, families of HCHS students, and the faculty and staff at HCHS. Additionally, this research will be used for my MSW Thesis and may be used for presentations or publication.

The criteria for participation are simple: you must be a member of the faculty or staff at Helix Charter High School, over the age of 18, and speak English. You will, after giving electronic consent, take an anonymous online survey. Before moving into the questionnaire section of the survey, you will be asked to provide some specific demographic data including age, gender, sexual orientation, title, and number of years as a member of the HCHS community. The survey will take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. All data collection and processing will be done through a survey software called Survey Monkey.

There are potential minimal risks associated with participating in this study such as thinking about your school community in ways you had not before. This could cause mild discomfort. You can seek assistance via the local mental health resources listed below or through the school social worker if need be. The benefits of participating in this study are that you will be provided an opportunity to share your experiences and possibly gain a new perspective. By taking the survey, you will be contributing to a body of knowledge that may impact the school administration's policies and/or increase understanding amongst students, faculty, and staff. Compensation will not be provided for participation in this study.

All of the information that you provide for this study will be kept anonymous and confidential. In papers and presentations the data will be presented in the aggregate, ensuring that your demographic information will not be personally identifiable. The results from this survey will only be accessible to my research advisor and me. In accordance with federal regulations, all data from this study will be stored in a secure locked/password protected manner for three years and then destroyed.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may refuse to answer any question. Once you begin the survey you can skip questions you do not want to answer or do not feel comfortable answering. If you decide not to finish the survey, your data will not be saved. After you finish and submit the survey online, it will be impossible for you to withdraw, as it would be impossible to identify your information. If you have questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at: mmcgrat@smith.edu. Further, should you have any concerns about your rights or any other aspect of the study, please call me at: XXX.XXX.XXXX or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at 413.585.7974.

BY CHECKING “YES” TO THE “I AGREE” QUESTION BELOW, YOU ARE INDICATING THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

I encourage you to print a copy of this informed consent for your records.

Appendix H

Online Survey Welcome Screen

Welcome Page

Welcome to the Survey for Faculty and Staff of Helix Charter High School. This survey is looking at the overall impacts of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) on the school climate and bullying.

The next screen will ask you three questions to determine if you are eligible to participate in this study. If you are eligible, you will be guided to the informed consent page and then the survey. Please contact me if you have any questions about the study or survey.

Thank you for taking the time to participate.

Sincerely,

Meghan McGrath, MSW Candidate
Smith College School for Social Work
mmcgrath@smith.edu

Appendix I

Online Survey Screening Questions

Screening Questions

1. Are you a member of the Helix Charter High School faculty or staff?

Yes No

2. Are you 18 years of age or older?

Yes No

3. Do you speak English?

Yes No

(If a respondent selects "No" to any of the screening questions, they will exit the survey and be directed to the closing page)

Appendix J

Online Survey Closing Screen

Closing Page

Thank you for your participation in this survey.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments.

Sincerely,

Meghan McGrath, MSW Candidate
Smith College School for Social Work
mmcgrath@smith.edu