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MAKING SCHOOLS SAFE AND INCLUSIVE: GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES AND SCHOOL CLIMATE IN ONTARIO¹

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Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) have become widespread in Ontario schools and, starting in 2012, all schools are required to permit students to form GSAs. While American research suggests that GSAs have a positive impact on school safety and inclusion, there is little research on the impact of GSAs in Canadian schools. This study, based on a survey of 41 educators working with GSAs, suggests that policy changes in Ontario have had a positive impact on school climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students and that GSAs contribute to the development of safer and more inclusive schools.

Introduction

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) have become flagships for safe schools initiatives in the United States (Lipkin, 1999) and Canada (Rayside, 2008). While the grassroots development of GSAs has been slower in Canada (Rayside, 2008), GSAs have recently been acknowledged by provincial governments and school districts as instruments of inclusion and school safety. In Ontario, this shift in policy is reflected in a Ministry of Education [OME] equity and inclusion policy that places homophobia at “the forefront of discussion” (OME, 2009b, p. 7) of school safety initiatives. Bill 157 (OME, 2009a) encourages the formation of GSAs in secondary schools, while Bill 13 requires all publicly funded secondary schools (public and Catholic) to

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allow students to establish GSAs. These initiatives demonstrate that the Ontario educational landscape for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth has changed considerably since GSAs first appeared in the 1980s. There have also been promising developments in Alberta (Wells, 2007), British Columbia (Pride Education Network, 2013), and New Brunswick (Pride in Education, 2013). In 2008, Rayside found that only 1% of Canadian schools had such groups, but there are hundreds in secondary schools today. The number, size, and influence of GSAs are likely to grow now that the provincial government has identified the formation of GSAs an effective means of protecting and supporting sexual minority students in schools.

While American research suggests that GSAs have a positive impact (Lipkin, 1999; Lee, 2002; Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004), there is little research on GSAs in Ontario schools let alone on the impact GSAs are having on safety and inclusion. As the Canadian context differs markedly from that in the United States, evidence from provinces such as Ontario can help inform policy discussions and evidence-based practices. Our current and ongoing research, “Gay-Straight Alliances and Homophobic Bullying in Ontario Schools: Perspectives of Educators Working with GSAs” offers the perspectives of GSA advisors on this issue. The first stage of the study, which is examined in this paper, involved an on-line survey of 41 GSA advisors; during the second stage, 14 survey participants were interviewed.

The purpose of this study is to examine LGBTQ inclusion and safety from the perspective of GSA advisors. In particular, we examine (1) school climate, harassment, and bullying; (2) the response of educators to harassment and bullying; (3) GSAs in action; and (4) GSA advisors and membership. The information and insights provided by these advisors, who are generally at the forefront of LGBTQ issues in their schools, offer a window into school

climate for sexual minority youth and the impact GSAs are having on safety and inclusion. The educators serving as GSA advisors strongly endorse the view that GSAs and policies that promote the formation of GSAs make a positive difference for students of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Our preliminary findings suggest that recent policy changes have had a positive impact on school climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students, and GSAs have had a positive impact on school safety and inclusion. This paper will help Canadian educators and policy-makers better understand how GSAs contribute to the development of school cultures that respect equity, engage students, and enhance learning.

Literature Review

Gay-straight alliances, which have existed since the early 1980s, are a response to both the needs of LGBTQ youth and the prevalence of homophobia in North American schools. Virginia Uribe, a secondary school teacher for the Los Angeles Unified School District and a doctoral student in education, conducted one of the first studies on LGBTQ youth and homophobic harassment in schools. In response to the needs she identified, Uribe formed the first Gay Straight Alliance, initially named Project 10, as a support group for LGBTQ students, a place to make friends, and a forum for activism (Friends of Project 10, 2013). Shortly thereafter, across the country, a secondary school student said to her history teacher, Kevin Jennings, “You’re gay and I’m straight, so let’s call it a gay straight alliance” (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2013). Since then, the number of GSAs has grown dramatically in the United States and Canada. They are grassroots clubs often initiated by students who want to challenge homophobia in their schools. Today they are defined as clubs with teacher advisors,

regular meetings, and defined mandates to support LGBTQ students and their allies through education, activism, and networking (GSA Network, 2009).

While GSAs have generally emerged from the grassroots, they have also been endorsed by some policy-makers as instruments of larger-scale reform. When the governor of Massachusetts implemented a state-wide Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students in 1993 (Lipkin, 1999), the development and support of GSAs was a critical component. Since their inception, GSAs have been mainly concerned with safety and confidentiality for LGBTQ youth (Lipkin, 1999). The strategic decision to form alliances with straight students and educators, rather than operate as counselling groups, has led them to become educational, social, and activist in their orientation (Lipkin, 1999). This has sometimes led to resistance from conservative parents “worried about the ‘positive image of homosexuals’ that such a group provides” (Szalacha, 2003, p. 83). In her study of the Massachusetts model, Szalacha (2003) recognizes the beneficial effects that occur when administrators and teachers enforce tolerance and respect for sexual minority youth while GSAs and GSA advisors advocate for acceptance.

In order to understand the role of GSAs, we frame our work in relation to understandings of gendered harassment, bullying, and school climate. “Harassment and bullying in schools are persistent, prevalent, and commonly misunderstood,” writes Elizabeth Meyer (2009, p. 1), with those targeted for homophobic and transphobic harassment identified as being at a higher risk of negative outcomes (Meyer, 2009). Meyer’s (2009) distinction between gendered harassment and bullying is useful for this study. Gendered harassment is “any behaviour that acts to shape and police the boundaries between traditional gender norms” (Meyer, 2009, p. 1). Whereas harassment may be occasional and unintentional, bullying is defined as “behaviour that repeatedly and over time intentionally inflicts injury” (p. 2).

Homophobia/transphobia and homophobic/transphobic bullying remain persistent issues in most schools. The *First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools*, prepared for Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere Canada, revealed staggering levels of homophobia in Canadian schools (Taylor & Peter, 2011). For example, 70% of all students reported hearing “that’s so gay” everyday in school (Taylor & Peter, 2011). This form of harrassment is indicative of “the day-in, day-out saturation of school culture” (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 10) with heteronormativity and homophobia/transphobia. This negative culture, reinforced by teacher silence, creates an environment in which bullying flourishes. As a result, 64% of LGBTQ students and 61% of students with LGBTQ parents did not feel safe in school (Taylor & Peter, 2011). These results are consistent with Canadian (Center for Addiction and Mental Health, 2004; McGill University, 2010) and American studies (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesan, & Palmer, 2011) indicating that suicides related to homophobic bullying have been on the rise in North America for the past decade.

There is also ample research for over a decade in both Canada and the United States that verifies LGBTQ teens are at higher risk of committing suicide, due to homophobic bullying in schools (Science Daily, 2010; United States Department of Health and Safety, 2001). In Canada, the Center for Addiction and Mental Health (2004) reported that suicides related to homophobic bullying have been on the rise for the previous decade. The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2008), after reviewing the literature, concluded that the “greater risk of suicidal behavior among LGBT youth may be seen as largely a function of our social environment, including discrimination and stigma” (p. 45). The suicide of Ottawa student Jamie Hubley after being bullied in 2011 made this issue real for many parents, educators, and LGBTQ students (Boesveld, 2011).

Major efforts have been made by educators and society to enhance school safety and reduce bullying in North America (Szalacha, 2003; Rayside, 2008). In Ontario, safe schools amendments to the *Education Act* and multiple Ministry of Education documents have addressed these issues (e.g., OME 2009b, 2009c, 2012a). School boards, in response, have implemented policies and initiatives designed to improve school climate, including character education, restorative justice, and peer support programs. The fact that school climate remains a challenge for many sexual minority students, despite enhanced legislation and policies, reinforces the critical role that teachers and administrators have in successful anti-bullying initiatives (Colorosso, 2003; Safe Schools Action Team, 2005).

We also frame our work around research conducted on school climate and school ecologies. The research on school ecologies indicate that the climate of a school is often established by students, with prevailing adolescent attitudes determining what constitutes *cool*, and who is identified as a *freak* or as a *geek* (Milner, 2004). Correlating school ecology research with evidence contained in school climate surveys conducted for EGALE Canada (Taylor & Peter, 2011), and by the Gay Lesbian Straight Educators Network (Kosciw et al., 2011), it is evident that LGBTQ students are viewed as not conforming to the norms of masculinity and femininity prevalent among the adolescents identified as *cool* in “the informal stratification system of students” (Milner, 2004, p. 187). This may lead to poor self-esteem among LGBTQ youth, and higher incidents of harassment and bullying.

Homophobic harassment and bullying remain persistent issues in most school cultures. *The First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools* revealed staggering levels of homophobic/transphobic harassment in Canadian schools, with 49% of trans students sexually harassed in the last year, along with students of LGBTQ

parents (45%), female bisexual students (43%), male bisexual students (42%), gay male students (40%), and lesbian students (33%) (Taylor & Peter, 2011). The 2011 American school climate revealed similar results to the Canadian data. Eighty-eight percent of students heard “that’s so gay” every day in American schools, 84.9% were verbally harassed for being gay, and 63.5% of LGBTQ students did not feel safe in schools (Kosciw et al., 2011).

Educators can make a positive difference, but only if they take the initiative to address the problem of harassment and homophobic bullying in their schools. Clearly they are not when 75% of Canadian LGBTQ students stated that teachers and administrators did nothing to stop homophobic comments and bullying when it was reported (Taylor & Peter, 2011). More surprising, 58% of straight students surveyed were upset because they witnessed teachers doing nothing to stop homophobic comments and bullying occurring in their presence (EGALE, 2011, p. 26). Teachers are less willing to address homophobia or advocate for LGBTQ students when they are likely to be challenged by students, parents, or the wider community, as is often the case in the United States (Rayside, 2008). As sociocultural perspectives on LGBTQ issues inform school factors and individual responses (Watson, Varjas, Myers, & Graybill, 2010), the sociocultural shift in Canadian attitudes in the aftermath of same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, and other LGBTQ human rights advances in recent years (Rayside, 2008) may significantly reduce the risks of advocacy.

While there is limited information on the impact of GSAs in Ontario, there is considerable evidence from the U.S. that such groups have a significant impact on school environments and on the experiences of LGBTQ youth (Lipkin, 1999; Kosciw et al., 2011; Rayside, 2008). There are also many resources available to support the development of GSAs (e.g., EGALE Canada Human Rights Trust, 2011, mygsanetwork.org, glsen.org, and glad.org).

Also, American climate survey results (Kosckw et al., 2011) indicate that students in schools with comprehensive on homophobic/transphobic harassment and bullying policies are more likely to indicate that school staff are effective or very effective (55.8%) than students in schools with general or weak policies (42%).

Given educators' pivotal role in promoting an inclusive environment for LGBTQ students, educators who facilitate GSAs seem well positioned to observe and comment on the climate in their schools, and the degree to which it has changed in response to recent initiatives in Ontario schools. Their visibility as advisors makes them well informed about the experiences of LGBTQ students in their schools. With such information, "advisors allow the voices of LGBTQ youth to be heard by serving as a bridge between them and faculty, staff, and administrators" (Watson et al., 2010, p. 103). Also, because they are often engaged in school-wide efforts to reduce homophobia, they have greater insight than most into the efforts of administrators, teachers, and students (Watson et al., 2010).

Methodology

Population

The population in this study was GSA facilitators in Ontario schools. Educators involved with GSAs were invited to participate through a variety of modes. Initially, potential participants were solicited through a website titled mygsa.ca, hosted by EGALÉ Canada. Each Ontario GSA registered with the site was sent an anonymous email address inviting the GSA advisor to participate in an electronic survey in the spring of 2012. As this site proved to be less active than anticipated and as many potential participants were reluctant to participate without approval from their school boards, we submitted our research proposal to ten school districts and

were given ethical clearance by seven boards. Through school district email systems, GSA advisors in those boards were then asked to participate during the fall of 2012. A major job action by provincial teachers—one which involved teachers refusing to engage in non-curricular activities—proved an added complication that reduced participation. In the end, our sample size consisted of 41 educators (N=41). Teachers were the majority (85.4%), while the remainder were educational assistants, social workers, and child and youth workers. They were distributed unevenly across the province, with the largest group coming from suburban boards (56%), followed by urban boards (24.5%), and town and country (19.5%). The vast majority (95%) were from secondary schools (39 in total), with two from middle schools.

Measure

The research for this study employs a mixed method approach that involved gathering both quantitative and qualitative data (Fink, 2012). This paper is based on the quantitative data collected using the survey method. The second stage, which is not part of this paper, involves interviews with participants.

The survey uses a cross-sectional design that provides a portrait of the current landscape in schools for LGBTQ youth, seen through the eyes of the GSA advisors. The first part of our survey employs an anonymous online questionnaire through Fluid Surveys (fluidsurveys.com). An “Invitation to Participate” introductory email was sent to prospective participants across Ontario and included a link to the survey. Once participants logged into the survey, an informed consent letter appeared and, in order to continue, they had to accept the terms and conditions of the survey or choose not to participate. The survey utilizes three different forms of questions (Fink, 2012). The first section was a series of descriptive questions that

focused on the participants. Their responses were inputted into a statistical program in order to establish frequency, mean, standard deviation. The second set of questions used an ordinal scale known as a 7-point Likert scale with space for comments. Inferential statistics using the dependent and independent variables were calculated to establish statistical significance. Descriptors and ordinal scales were compared using the correlation (r), P value and degree of association. The third set of questions were open-ended and their responses were recorded and organized and examined for common themes and answers.

Examples of the 22 questions in the on-line questionnaire include:

- How would you rate the overall climate of your school?
- How would you rate the school climate for LGBTQ students?
- Is your GSA visible to the rest of the school through: posters, announcements, yearbook club photo, club days, orientation days, parent teacher night, conferences, club t-shirts, other (specify).
- Recount one of your proudest moments as a GSA facilitator?
- Recount one of your greatest challenges or distressing moments as a GSA facilitator?

The second part of the mixed methods consists of interviews with survey select participants. These interviews were open-ended and conducted in a semi-structured format (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Fourteen participants from across Ontario were interviewed in-person for an hour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Similar questions were asked, with the interview format allowing for fuller responses and deeper probing of issues that arose from the survey data. Participants were afforded the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences and provide content-rich data concerning their school contexts. The interviews will be analyzed by the research team who will code the data for common themes and information.

Analysis of Data

Quantitative data were inputted into SPSS 19.0, a statistical software program, to analyze the responses. Responses to questions regarding schools and bullying were measured using Likert scales addressing both the mean and standard deviation. Inferential statistics were then tabulated comparing independent variables and statistical significance. A Spearman rho correlation test was used to address correlation between climate questions and advisors. Finally, inferential statistics compared the means of two or more levels of the GSA independent variables.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study should be interpreted with caution due to the nature of the sample. Challenges in finding participants resulted in a sample that is not broad enough to include all regions of Ontario. Also, at 56% of the sample, suburban areas are significantly overrepresented. In this regard, the sample could be regarded as a sample of convenience, with more participants in districts where we had contacts and where we were able to obtain both ethical approval and administrative support.

The participants in this survey may not be representative of GSA advisors generally. Half had been GSA advisors for five years or more, which suggests a high level of commitment. Also, it is more likely that engaged and active advisors would take the time to participate in such a study. Thus, it is prudent to assume that other GSAs may not be as involved and their schools may not have climates this positive.

There is a need for studies with a wider sampling of GSA advisors in the province and deeper examinations of subgroups of GSA advisors by gender, sexual orientation, school district,

and level of urbanization. Nonetheless, the data do offer a glimpse into the school climate for LGBTQ students and the involvement of GSAs in Ontario schools.

Although our questions asked about the LGBTQ spectrum, with a place for transphobia alongside homophobia, there was very little mention of trans students or issues. The responses, therefore, should be viewed as primarily referring to gays and lesbians. Further study is needed to determine how school climate is changing for transgender students.

Findings

The findings have been organized into three broad categories. The first section reports on GSA advisors' perceptions of school climate, harassment, and bullying in schools. The next section reports on the response of teachers to these challenges. The third section considers the impact of GSAs on school climate, from the perspective of GSA advisors. The composition and activities of the GSAs are documented in the final section.

School Climate, Harassment, and Bullying

One of the reasons GSAs have been endorsed in government policy is that they are seen as effective vehicles for creating safe spaces for LGBTQ students, and reducing homophobic harassment and bullying in schools.

In order to identify the degree of homophobic harassment and bullying in schools, we asked participants to rate the overall climate, rate of teasing and harassment, and the amount of bullying in their schools. Table 1 provides a summary of the ratings on seven-point Likert scales.

Table 1
School Climate and Bullying

Question	Mean	S.D.	Response	Frequency	Valid Percent
How would you rate the overall climate of your school?	5.20	1.123	Negative, unsafe	0	0
			2	1	2.4
			3	3	7.3
			Neutral	5	12.2
			5	12	29.3
			6	18	43.9
			Positive, Safe	2	4.9
How would you rate the school climate for LGBTQ students?	4.37	1.410	Negative, unsafe	0	0
			2	4	9.8
			3	11	26.8
			Neutral, no opinion	3	7.3
			5	13	31.7
			6	9	22.0
			Positive, Safe	1	2.4
How would you rate the amount of teasing and verbal harassment of students in your school?	3.93	1.330	High	0	0
			2	7	17.1
			3	12	29.3
			Neutral, no opinion	3	7.3
			5	15	36.6
			6	4	9.8
			Low	0	0
How would you rate the amount of homophobic/transphobic teasing and verbal harassment of students?	3.68	1.491	High	2	4.9
			2	9	22.0
			3	9	22.0
			Neutral, no opinion	5	12.2
			5	13	31.7
			6	2	4.9
			Low	1	2.4
How would you rate the amount of bullying in your school?	4.12	1.269	High	1	2.4
			2	2	4.9
			3	12	29.3
			Neutral, no opinion	7	17.1
			5	15	36.6
			6	3	7.3
			Low	1	2.4

How would you rate the amount of homophobic/transphobic bullying in your school?	4.15	1.494	High	1	2.5
			2	4	10.0
			3	12	30.0
			Neutral, no opinion	2	5.0
			5	16	40.0
			6	2	5.0
			Low	3	7.5

Over 78% percent of respondents in this survey rated the overall climate of their schools as safe generally (5–7 rating), while over 56% rated their schools as safe for LGBTQ students. On the other hand, more respondents found schools unsafe (1–3 rating) for LGBTQ youth (37.6%), than for the school population as a whole (9.7%). When asked to rate the amount of teasing and verbal harassment of students, GSA advisors were evenly divided between those who rated it as generally high (46.4%) and generally low (47.5%); most (73.2%) viewed it as moderately safe, neutral, or moderately unsafe (3–5 rating). Interestingly, rate of teasing and verbal harassment that was homophobic/transphobic in nature was only slightly higher than the general rate in the study, with 48.9% rated as high (1–3 rating) and 39% rated as low (5–7 rating). More respondents (46.3%) rated bullying overall as low (1–3), with fewer (36.6%) identifying homophobic/transphobic bullying as high and a large number regarding it as neutral (17.1%). On the other hand, homophobic/transphobic bullying was rated as higher (42.5%) and lower (52.5%), with only 5% using the neutral rating.

An inferential analysis of data related to participant identity and their school contexts, using the Kruskal Wallis test, identified few statistically significant variations in responses. Among the statistically significant variations was that participants under 30 more positively rated the response of teachers (P=.024) and administrators (P=.026) than did other groups. School size was a statistically significant factor (P=.032) in the perceived bullying, with bullying worse in

schools with fewer than 500 student than in schools of 900–1200 ($P=.026$). In turn, bullying was worse in schools with populations of 900–1200 ($P=.015$) than in school populations over 1200.

Educators' Responses to Harassment and Bullying

As support by educators has been identified with positive differences for LGBTQ students (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 50; Kosciw et al., 2011), we were interested in the perceptions GSA advisors had regarding the efforts of their colleagues. In order to determine how well educators were responding to homophobic/transphobic harassment and bullying in schools, we asked participants to rate the responses of teachers and administrators to teasing and verbal harassment and to bullying in their schools. After each, we asked them to rate these again in relation to homophobia/transphobia. Table 2 provides a summary of the ratings on seven-point Likert scales.

Table 2
Responses of Teachers and Administrators to Incidents

Question	Mean	S.D.	Response	Frequency	Valid Percent
How would you rate the response of teachers to taunting and verbal harassment of students in your school?	4.17	1.482	Poor, ignore	1	2.4
			2	4	9.8
			3	12	29.3
			Neutral, no opinion	2	4.9
			5	17	41.5
			6	2	4.9
			Good, address	3	7.3
How would you rate the response of teachers to homophobic/ transphobic taunting and verbal harassment of students in your school?	4.58	1.375	Poor, ignore	0	0
			2	2	5.0
			3	10	25.0
			Neutral, no opinion	5	12.5
			5	11	27.5
			6	10	25.0
			Good, address	2	5.0
How would you rate the response of the principal and guidance counsellor to taunting and verbal harassment of students in your school?	5.68	1.439	Poor, ignore	1	2.4
			2	0	0
			3	3	7.3
			Neutral, no opinion	3	7.3
			5	8	19.5
			6	11	26.8
			Good, address	15	36.6
How would you rate the response of the principal, vice-principal and guidance counsellor to homophobic/ transphobic taunting and verbal harassment of students in your school?	5.63	1.609	Poor, ignore	1	2.4
			2	0	0
			3	6	14.6
			Neutral, no opinion	2	4.9
			5	5	12.2
			6	10	24.4
			Good, address	17	41.5

Teachers were generally viewed by the GSA advisors in the study as moderately effective in responding to teasing and verbal harassment, with 83.8% ranking them as between 3 and 5 on the seven-point scale. Interestingly, the response of teachers to homophobic/transphobic harassment

specifically was better with 57.5% deemed to have addressed it effectively (5–7 rating).

Anecdotal comments suggest that there has been professional development regarding these issues, but its focus and effectiveness were questioned. One participant wrote, “it varies from teacher to teacher. Some fantastic while others walk around with blinders.” Typical of several responses is “while most teachers do intervene (it is the law!), there are others who feel they are not equipped to do so.” This reflects a perception that more needs to be done to develop positive understandings and intervention strategies among teachers, rather than just reporting and punishing inappropriate student conduct. Several participants identified teachers in science, math, or physical education as less sensitive in their language and more tolerant of homophobia.

The response of administrators was viewed much more favourably. The responses of principals, vice-principals, and guidance counsellors to teasing and verbal harassment were viewed as effective by 82.9% of respondents. Their response to homophobic/transphobic harassment was viewed somewhat less favourably (78.1%), yet this too is significantly above the rating for teachers. Of particular note is the plurality ranked as highly effective (rating of 7) in their response to harassment generally (36.6%) and homophobic/transphobic harassment (41.5%). As one participant wrote, “it really depends on the administration. Some years we have a very safe climate and others not at all.”

GSA advisors were also asked about provincial policies that might contribute to greater acceptance of minorities and improved school climate. Ninety-eight percent were aware of *Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (OME, 2009), with 56% rating implementation in their schools as positive (5–7 rating), while only 27% rated implementation as poor. Anecdotal comments, 12 in total, suggest that the level of awareness among administrators far exceeded awareness among classroom teachers. One participant noted, “there is still

resistance from teachers to addressing equity issues in our school, and the administration addresses it because they have to.” Three-quarters were familiar with Bill 157 (OME, 2009), which requires educators to react to, report, and document harassment and bullying. While there was a range of commentary on the implementation of this legislation, most regarded it as a positive development. One participant wrote, “our admin and the staff who attended shared the information and importance with the staff back at the school in a timely fashion. We have also continued to ensure that staff and students are provided with PD activities and speakers that address issues of safety.”

Impact of GSAs on School Climate

In response to an open-ended question, 35 respondents (85.4%) reported that the presence of GSAs had a positive impact on school climate for LGBTQ identified students, with 3 respondents uncertain and 3 not seeing effects up to that time. Well over half of the positive respondents were emphatic in their conviction that GSAs made a considerable difference.

Among the anecdotal comments made by survey respondents were:

- I have asked that question many times and the students feel that the presence of the GSA provides a "normalizing" effect on the school community.
- Absolutely. There has been a lot of emphasis on teaching through activities and our bulletin board. All students realize that there is support for the LGBTQ community in our school. Through the acquisition of knowledge comes comfort and understanding.
- We like to think so. It does, however, mean some students hear comments (when the words are read aloud on announcements) that other students might make. Still, the students ask to have the words read.
- Yes, we have had assemblies, days of silence, and other events that inform the school of LGBTQ issues.

- Yes, we have reports from ex-students that it has helped and that, even if the students did not come, they felt that it was important to know that it was there.
- We have a strong GSA that monitors school safety for all LGBTQ students in our school.

The monitoring by GSA advisors and members helped encourage administrators and teachers to make addressing homophobia a school priority. GSA members and advisors often served as leaders in these efforts. Also, as one participant noted, climate improved considerably “because of the presence of anti-bullying and the GSA initiatives.” Other participants noted the role of GSA advisors as “vocal advocates” and noted the “normalizing effect [the GSA had] on the school community.”

Gay-Straight Alliances in Action

There has been much discussion of GSAs recently, yet most people know little about the composition and activities of GSAs in Canadian schools, let alone the contribution that their presence makes to the school environment. This section begins with descriptive information about the GSAs and schools of these Ontario teachers (see Table 3).

Table 3
Descriptive Information about Participants and Schools

Variable	Levels	Frequency	Valid Percent
Sex	Female	30	73.2
	Male	11	26.8
Age	Under 30	4	9.8
	30–39	12	29.3
	40–49	11	26.8
	50+	14	34.1
Identity	Straight	22	53.7
	Lesbian	6	14.6
	Gay	11	26.8
	Bisexual	2	4.9
School Board	Urban	10	24.5
	Suburban	23	56
	Town and Country	8	19.5
School Size	Under 500	6	14.6
	500–900	5	12.2
	900–1200	14	34.1
	1200+	16	39.0
Role	Teacher	35	85.4
	Educational Assistant	3	7.3
	Child and Youth Worker/Social Worker	3	7.3
Role as a Teacher: Subjects you teach (N=57—as some participants listed more than one role)	Math/Sciences	7	12.3
	Special Education	7	12.3
	Social Sciences	12	21
	English	10	17.4
	Languages	2	3.6
	The Arts	1	1.8
	Technology/Business	2	3.6
	Guidance	6	10.6
	Other	10	17.4

The 41 GSA advisors, each from a different school, were predominately female (73.2%), with a slight majority identifying as both straight and female (53.7%). Age did not seem to be a significant factor in involvement. A further analysis of the data reveals that all of the male advisors identified as gay. There are straight male advisors, as several participants reported

partnering with them, but they appear to be few in number. Significant percentages of GSA advisors came from subject areas such as special education, English, and social science, with considerably fewer from math, sciences, physical education, or business.

Almost half had facilitated GSAs for five years or more, while the others were less experienced. All of them saw themselves as models for students and teachers, either as allies or as LGBTQ. Seventy five percent viewed themselves as educational resources to students and teachers, as well as activists (75%). This sense of activism led many to engage with students in challenging events at school or in the community. These included organizing a Day of Silence, conference and panel discussion, parent night activities, and HIV support. Many of these educators were also the main advocates for LGBTQ issues at school, and for students experiencing homophobic harassment or bullying.

Table 4
Descriptive Information about GSAs

Question	Mean	S.D.	Response	Frequency	Valid Percent
Gay-Straight Alliances					
How long have you been in this role?	1.49	0.553	Under 5 Years	22	53.7
			5 Years and Greater	18	43.9
			NA	1	2.4
How long has the GSA been in your school	1.56	0.594	Under 5 Years	20	48.8
			5 Years and Greater	19	46.3
			NA	2	4.9
How many members are there?	1.59	0.499	0 to 10	17	41.5
			11+	24	58.5
What activities does the GSA engage in?	Conversation led by students			39	95.1
	Conversation facilitated by teachers			39	95.1
	Educational activities			29	70.7
	Social events			30	73.2
	Educational outreach events at the school			30	73.2
	Advocacy/awareness events at the school			35	85.4
	Events in the larger community			19	46.3
	Other (Discussion activities, field trip, movies/media, GSA conference, GSA lunch with other schools, GSA night with other clubs)			8	19.5
What is the ratio of male to female participants in the GSA?	1.50	0.599	21–50% Male: 79–50% Female	22	55.0
			0–20% Male: 80–100% Female	16	40.0
			NA	2	5.0
What percentage of members identify as LGBTQ?	1.85	0.844	Under 50%	17	43.5
			50% and Greater	11	28.25
			NA	11	28.25
Is your GSA visible to the rest of the school?	Posters			38	92.7
	Announcements			39	95.1
	Yearbook			30	73.2
	Club Days			21	51.2
	Orientation Days			15	36.6
	Parent Teacher Night			11	26.8
	Conferences			23	56.1
	Club T-Shirts			14	34.1
	Other (Presentations (i.e., Assembly, staff)			16	39.0

While the 41 GSAs in this study varied considerably in size and composition, clear patterns did emerge (see Table 4). In terms of membership, many clubs had fewer than 10 (41.5%), while the majority (58.5) had 11 or more members. The number of members in many clubs tended to vary over several years, but there was no clear pattern upwards or downwards. Membership was predominately female, with 95% reporting male participation at under 50%; male participation was under 20% in most GSAs. Most GSA members did not identify themselves as LGBTQ, either because the clubs did not encourage disclosure or because they were not LGBTQ; many comments by advisors suggest that the majority of their members were heterosexual. Most GSA advisors seemed cautious about students ‘outing’ themselves, with one commenting that “sexual orientation was not brought up,” in order to make it a safe space.

Most GSAs were very active, meeting weekly or bi-weekly after school to engage in a range of activities. Ninety-five percent of clubs engaged in conversation, with both students and educators taking active roles in leading discussion. The activities of the clubs, beyond building a supportive and safe environment through conversation and social events, tended towards educational activities for members, educational outreach at school, and advocacy events at school. Most GSA advisors viewed their clubs as highly visible in their schools. Announcements and posters were primary means of raising visibility in most schools. The lower numbers that had yearbook photos, club days, orientation days, and parent-teacher night presentations, suggests a more modest presence in the general activities of school life. Three-quarters of the clubs established alliances with other GSAs, which seemed to offer direction and support. Two-thirds of clubs received school or school council funding, mainly at the same rate as other clubs. Some clubs supplemented their income through special funding, government grants, or fund-raising activities.

While GSAs were activist in orientation, and GSA advisors were committed to advocacy, most clubs were deemed to be student-centred. One advisor wrote, “I believe in creating space where students can be themselves.” Another wrote, “I encourage students to make the club the way they want. I am there to guide them through events and school procedures.” At the same time, GSA advisors monitored the work of the GSA closely to ensure that students navigated sensitive issues appropriately. At times, such as the formation of a new group or the transition between leaders, they felt a need to intervene more: “I prefer to assist a strong student leader, however, I step in when there isn’t one to keep the group active.”

This data, along with the anecdotal comments that accompany it, suggest that many GSAs are very active, engaged, and visible in their schools.

Discussion of Results

The survey data provided by GSA advisors suggests that Ontario schools are addressing the needs of sexual minority students through improved school climate and the activities of GSAs. The activities of GSAs and their advisors seem to have contributed to this change in the climate of schools. In this section, we highlight results that offer insights into the climate in Ontario schools, as well as the nature and impact of GSAs in advocating for safety and acceptance. As the literature in Canada and the United States focuses on GSAs themselves, with little information on the perceptions and roles of GSA advisors, this research explores territory that is largely uncharted. The survey data maps out the terrain in broad terms, while the interview data will enable us to probe more deeply into the issues raised by participants.

GSA Advisors and Membership

It is noteworthy that a slight majority of advisors and members identified as straight females. Many participants reported being questioned by colleagues, either overtly or covertly, about their sexual orientation. While all the male participants identified as gay, many did not disclose this to their peers or students. The stigma related to being identified as an LGBTQ educator is consistent with literature that finds homophobia still prevalent in schools (Wright, 2010). GSA advisors viewed themselves as being more of an activist than their colleagues. They defined their roles as advocates who were knowledgeable in the area of LGBTQ rights, school policies on bullying, and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Many discussed a need to advocate on behalf of GSA students when issues of bullying arose in school.

Most GSA advisors, in order to create a safe space, expressed caution about students “outing” themselves, with one commenting that “sexual orientation was not brought up,” in order to make it a safe space. The tendency towards silence about sexual orientation in many GSAs suggests that there is still considerable stigma associated with LGBTQ identification (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011). While membership in GSAs did not carry a stigma in most cases, this could be because a significant number of female members were perceived to be allies rather than lesbian. The reasons for silence about sexual orientation will be explored in the interview stage of the project.

GSA Activities

The presence of GSAs contributes to awareness of LGBTQ issues in schools. More significantly, the findings indicate that most of the activities of GSAs centered on political action and awareness, and social events, which is consistent with American research (e.g, Lipkin,

1999). These data are important to highlight, since they dispel some of the common myths in the media that state GSAs are often coming-out or counselling groups.

Many events centered on educating the entire school about homophobia. This suggests that students educating students may have more impact on school climate than teachers in a classroom. There are several issues that complicate the success of addressing social justice issues in curriculum. Often teachers in our study stated that they do not know enough about LGBTQ issues to properly address them in class. In some schools, according to participants, the only course where LGBTQ issues were discussed was Health. If GSA activities take place during school hours, and attempt to advocate and educate, there is a greater chance of success, due to their ability to reach more students, and to discuss issues on a peer level. The survey results identify a strong pattern of activism among GSAs, which needs to be explored more deeply in conversation with advisors.

Safer Schools for LGBTQ Students

The survey data collected from respondents, and the comments accompanying the rankings, suggest that the climate in Ontario is reasonably safe for most students, including lesbian and gay students. This needs to be investigated further as the perceptions of educators in this study differ markedly from the results of the last Canadian climate survey (Taylor & Peter, 2011), which interviewed students from December 2007 to January 2009. Has there been a significant change in the climate in Ontario schools? Does the presence of an active GSA with a committed GSA advisor lead to a better climate? Or do educators tend to under-report homophobia in schools? Bill 157 (2009) introduced a mandatory school climate survey that must be completed in all schools in Ontario every two years by staff and students. The results of these

surveys are not made available to the public, but rather to school boards and the Ministry of Education. The goal of the survey is to make sure there is not a large discrepancy between educators and students with regards to perceptions on safety, bullying, and homophobic bullying (OME, 2009). If there is, school boards are to address these issues in identified schools.

Most GSA advisors acknowledged that more needs to be done for the many students who continue to be victimized by homophobic teasing, harassment, and bullying. While transgender students were seldom mentioned by participants, the few references to them suggest that the trans issues have a low profile and their safety needs have not been addressed.

While GSAs seem to contribute to improved school climate, another important factor seems to be increased vigilance by educators, particularly school administrators. Administrators may receive some training in the Principal's Qualification Course, in the form of policy and procedures related to bullying. The Ontario College of Teachers (2010) approved a new Additional Qualification course in LGBTQ Issues in Education, and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (2012) also runs anti-homophobia training every year. Other than these two venues, administrators would have to seek out their own professional development.

Given that many GSAs have been in existence less than five years—and advisors in long-standing clubs reported substantial improvements—a major factor would appear to be changes in education policy and law in Ontario. The Ministry of Education initiated several policies and procedures related to school climate homophobic bullying. Ontario's *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (OME, 2009b), *Bill 157* (OME, 2009a), and supporting policy and program memoranda created a framework and timeline geared towards full implementation in 2010. In light of these policy changes, along with professional development and board directives, many administrators now take homophobia and bullying very seriously. *Bill 13: Education Act*

Amendment (Accepting Schools) (OME, 2012a), which requires all public and separate schools to permit GSAs and take measures to address homophobic/transphobic bullying, reinforces this trend.

While GSA advisors were highly aware of these policies and their initial implementation, their comments about colleagues suggest that teachers remain inconsistent in their response to homophobic bullying and the reporting of incidents. The vigilance of GSA advisors is not always matched by their colleagues, or by all administrators. The contrast between GSA advisors and administrators suggests that more needs to be done to convert policy into teacher practice. This could be done through initial teacher preparation and ongoing professional development on sexual diversity and teachers' legal obligations (Kitchen & Bellini, 2012). As Bellini (2012) has observed, Canadian teachers receive minimal, if any, training on how to work with LGBTQ students.

The Importance of Policy, Principals, and Broader Culture

The gay straight alliance movement has become a critical element in efforts to support LGBTQ youth and promote safe schools programs in the United States (Lipkin, 1999) and Canada (Rayside, 2008). This has mainly been due to the efforts of social activists among students and educators, who have resisted many community and school barriers (Watson et al., 2008).

Our research suggests that the barriers to GSAs and safe schools provisions for LGBTQ youth may be falling in Ontario. Most participants indicated that support for these initiatives was stronger among school administrators than teachers generally. Principals, a group that has traditionally been hesitant to resist heteronormativity (Lipkin, 1999; Szalacha, 2003), were

viewed as appropriately concerned with safety, anti-bullying, and GSAs. Participants also made it clear that this change was motivated, at least in part, by the priority placed on these concerns by school district leaders. They also cited government policy initiatives and new legislation as factors that helped shift thinking among administrators and, more slowly, educators.

The situation in the Ontario schools in this study was more positive than that in many American schools. In many American schools, conservative groups have required students to obtain parental consent in order to attend GSA meetings (Kosciw et al., 2011). Other have had their GSA and school climate initiatives undermined by resistance from community members and avoidance by school administrators (Szalacha, 2003). We found no evidence of active resistance to GSAs in any of the schools in this study. While participants were not directly questioned about the role of parents and the broader community, the lack of comments concerning parents and the community suggest that homophobic pressure from these quarters was very limited. The pattern in Ontario appears to resemble the experiences in politically progressive areas of the United States, which observe laws permitting GSAs in schools (Kosciw et al., 2011). Taken together, the level of support and the lack of barriers, suggests that resistance to GSAs and anti-homophobia/transphobia efforts is declining in Ontario in the aftermath of major human rights victories such as the right to same-sex marriage under Canada's *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and explicit protection from discrimination under the *Ontario Human Rights Code* (Rayside, 2008).

Now that schools are required to permit GSAs, under Bill 13, we anticipate that more teachers will be willing to facilitate GSAs and that homophobic violence will continue to be taken seriously. Support from educational policy makers and school administrators, combined

with less community resistance, combined with less community resistance, may lead to more welcoming school environment for LGBTQ youth,

Recommendations

The evidence from this study suggests that climate is improving in schools with active GSAs. This is because GSAs serve as advocates for social acceptance and school climate is less tolerant of harassment and bullying. There is still much work to be done, however, both to improve the climate in these schools and to ensure that all schools are safe and accepting. Based on these findings from a limited sample of Ontario schools, we make five recommendations for administrators and policy-makers across Canada and the United States.

1. GSAs should be permitted and encouraged in all secondary schools.

Since GSAs have a demonstrated history of success as advocates for LGBTQ youth and as proponents of school safety, it is important that institutional support be provided to students and educators who wish to establish and lead them. Support from above eases resistance from students, teachers, and the community, while providing validation to those engaged in this important work.

2. Policy direction from above is critical.

The evidence from Ontario schools in this study suggests that positive policy direction from school districts and provincial education authorities has a positive impact on schools, especially for minoritized students. Policy direction provides support for those engaged in increasing acceptance. It signals to members of the school community that intolerance is

unacceptable. It makes it clear to school administrators that they will be judged in part on their ability to maintain a positive school environment for all students.

3. Ongoing professional development for educators is essential.

The limited evidence of ongoing professional development in Ontario suggests that much more can be done to inform the practice of educators working in schools. While most faculties of education across Ontario address equity and inclusive education, there is little information on how homophobia/transphobia are addressed (e.g., Kitchen & Bellini, 2012). *Shaping a Culture of Respect in Schools* (Safe Schools Team, 2008), which highlighted a lack of readiness to support and protect minoritized students, prompted the development of several policy documents (e.g., OME, 2009c, 2012b) that addressed the need for ongoing teacher development related to bullying and homophobia. LGBTQ workshops provided by teacher federations (e.g., ETFO, 2013; OSSTF, 2013) are further signs of progress. There remains a need for compulsory general workshops to increase awareness of LGBTQ issues and of how to deal with homophobic/transphobic harassment. Also, as most advisors are self-taught, professional development is needed on how to effectively run a GSA.

4. Explicit encouragement and support needs to be given to LGBTQ teachers.

Based on the small number of LGBTQ advisors in our study and the comments of straight participants, it seems that LGBTQ teachers are reluctant to disclose their identities to their peers and, in particular, to be open to students about their own sexual orientation. As a result, many were reluctant to be associated with the GSAs in their schools. Rather than blame these teachers, for whom the environment still appears unsafe, it is important that principals and

school district officials find ways to make explicit their encouragement and support. This might include board-wide support in the form of groups such as educator GSA's. Toronto District School Board supports their LGBTQ staff in a number of ways including implementing anti-discrimination policies in the workplace, having a designated positive space representative in each school, and by funding a large board-wide equity department (j wallace, personal communication, April 10, 2013). Federations have also recognized that they need to be supporting their LGBTQ members more frequently and have started groups that meet on a regular basis (e.g., ETFO, 2013; OSSTF, 2013).

5. Explicitly encourage GSA involvement by underrepresented groups among educators.

As most GSA advisors identified as female and taught the arts or social sciences, more needs to be done to encourage involvement by straight male teachers and teachers in physical education, math, and science. One way to hasten this transition would be to encourage the pairing of female and male educators as advisors. Current advisors should ask students who they would feel comfortable with, and then approach educators to see if they would be interested in helping. Third, GSA advisors could approach other clubs in a school and create events that would include a wider range of students and teachers.

Conclusion

Gay-straight alliances have become an important part of Ontario schools, thanks to the work of GSAs in schools, and the decision of the Ontario government to make them a critical component of its inclusion and safe schools policies. This research provides a glimpse into the membership and activities of GSAs in public schools, a preliminary sense of their contribution to

making schools safe for sexual minority students, and the role GSA advisors play in making these changes happen. This research suggests that Ontario schools are becoming safer places for LGBTQ students. It appears that both the presence of gay-straight alliances in schools and the implementation of progressive provincial policies are factors in this development. More research is needed to determine the relationship between these factors, particularly the dynamic relationship between the grassroots emergence of GSAs and their subsequent promotion by governments as part of safe schools and inclusive education policies (GSLEN, 2009; EGALÉ, 2011). While American research indicates that GSAs have a positive impact, this study may offer significant insights into how school climate for LGBTQ students can improve, when the work of GSAs is systematically supported by government policy and educators in schools. As we continue to collect survey data and supplement it with interviews, we will develop a better understanding of the impact of GSAs in Ontario.

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