

Article

The GSA Difference: LGBTQ and Ally Experiences in High Schools with and without Gay-Straight Alliances

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Abstract: We examine the lived experiences of high-school students who participated in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ)-centered activism of some kind, highlighting the promise of gay-straight alliance groups by comparing the experiences of students at schools with gay-straight alliances (GSA schools) with the experiences of students at schools that did not have an LGBTQ-specific group (no-GSA schools). We compare students at GSA and no-GSA schools based on their experiences of harassment, experiences of support from authority figures, and patterns of friendships. We find that students at both types of schools experienced harassment and heard negative comments about lesbian and gay people. However, students at GSA schools reported more support from teachers and administrators than students at no-GSA schools, who have stories of teachers and administrators actively opposing equality for LGBTQ people. Students at GSA schools reported a wide variety of friendships across sexual identities, while students at no-GSA schools felt more isolated and withdrawn. This much-needed qualitative comparative analysis of students' experiences brings a human face to the improved quality of life that schools with gay-straight alliances can bring to young people.

Keywords: youth; gay-straight alliance; education

1. Introduction

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) are student groups in high schools that have spread across North America since the 1980s. They are now common, but not ubiquitous, in high schools, and there is a rich scholarly literature that describes their usefulness to students. In this paper, we add to this literature by offering an analysis of students' experiences in high schools that compares schools with an official gay-straight alliance group to schools without a gay-specific student group. The views of students who navigated the landscapes of their high schools—all of whom had an interest in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) equality, justice and activism—allow us to understand the contours of students' experiences and the role of gay-straight alliances in shaping the context of high schools.

We do this through qualitative interviews with 53 young adults, ages 18–25, living throughout the United States and Canada. In semi-structured interviews, these participants were asked to reflect on their memories of high school and the role that their gay-straight alliance may have played. By comparing the experiences of participants with and without a gay-straight alliance group, we offer an on-the-ground view of students' high school lives while highlighting the impact of GSA groups.

Scholarship on gay-straight alliances is largely positive. Many have found that gay-straight alliances provide a safe space for LGBTQ students and their allies [1–4]. Others argue that the benefits of gay-straight alliances extend beyond LGBTQ students and last beyond graduation [5–7]. Large-scale studies have even found that schools with GSAs have better health outcomes than those without [8].

Despite this evidence for the benefits of gay-straight alliances, these groups remain controversial in many settings. Many educators and administrators disapprove of the inclusion of groups that specifically include the term “gay”. Many religious-based schools are opposed to LGBTQ inclusivity on theological grounds. Some school administrators and teachers hold anti-gay opinions. In other cases, teachers and administrators are uneasy about acknowledging LGBTQ students because they feel that the topic of sexual identity is not age-appropriate for high-school students. However, as Pascoe demonstrates, high schools incorporate heterosexuality routinely into the curriculum, into the extracurricular life of the school, and into their interactions with students [9]. The normalcy of heterosexuality is naturalized and routinized by the practices of everyday life in high schools, while LGBTQ topics are marginalized.

Thus, not all schools offer gay-straight alliances for their students, even as they have become common throughout the United States and Canada. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reports that there are thousands of gay-straight alliance clubs in the United States. Whereas the 2007 research report claims that less than a quarter of high-school students were enrolled in schools with gay-straight alliances [10], the 2013 report notes that just over half of high-school students were enrolled in schools with gay-straight alliances [11]. Though a marked improvement, there are still many high school students who lack access to gay-straight alliances. Thus, the experiences of high-school students can vary widely, with some students' access to gay-straight alliances being uncontroversial, other students having to fight their school administrations to start a club, and other students having no access at all to these groups.

With this qualitative analysis, we consider students' perspectives on navigating high schools with and without gay-straight alliances as LGBTQ students and allies. We find that students across all kinds of high schools, regardless of gay-straight alliance, dealt with hostile and anti-gay attitudes among students, teachers and administrators at their schools. However, students at GSA schools were much

more likely to have access to supportive teachers and administrators. Finally, we find that students at GSA schools report more friendships with other students across a variety of sexual identities, while students at no-GSA schools reported feeling more isolated or in small friendship groups—a problem that was exacerbated by the secrecy of being in the closet. We explore the terrain of these high schools through the lens of our participants in GSA and no-GSA schools.

Gay-straight alliances are student groups, mostly in high schools, but now in some middle schools as well. Encouraged by national LGBTQ social movement organizations, such as GLSEN in the United States and EGALE—Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere—in Canada, these groups are run by students, like any other club or student organization. In the United States, students earned a legal right to form extracurricular student clubs regardless of content under the Federal Equal Access Act in 1984—legislation aimed to protect religious student groups [4,12]. In Canada, several provinces explicitly protect them, and others allow school boards and teachers' associations to set their own policies [13]. For instance, provincial legislation has been passed in Ontario [14], Manitoba [15], and Alberta [16] that gives students the legal right to create and name a gay-straight alliance in their school. Despite these legal protections, research has shown that adoption of gay-straight alliances has been uneven [17]. At the national level within the United States, the 2013 GLSEN survey reports that 17.8% of students were restricted from forming or promoting a GSA. Within Canada, students in Ontario and Quebec reported higher likelihoods of their schools having a gay-straight alliance than schools in the Prairies, Atlantic provinces and the North [18].

At this point, there has been a substantial body of research done on various aspects of gay-straight alliances. The findings show a wealth of benefits that gay-straight alliances have for high school students [5]. For example, gay-straight alliances form safe spaces for students [2] and these safe spaces can act as sites of advocacy and social change [19], as sites of empowerment [20–23], and as “counter-publics” where LGBTQ youth can redefine youth subjectivity [24]. Students in gay-straight alliances also report lower victimization and suicide attempts [25], and LGBTQ students who participate in gay-straight alliances show reduced incidence of suicidal thoughts [26]. Furthermore, LGBTQ youth who attended a high school with a gay-straight alliance report more favorable school experiences and less incidences of alcohol use and psychological distress [27]. Gay-straight alliances can also decrease social isolation and improve school climate [28] and contribute to the development of safer and more inclusive schools [3]. This improved climate even benefits LGBTQ students who are not involved in the gay-straight alliance [23], as well as non-LGBTQ students in the school more broadly [7,8]. In addition, Toomey and colleagues [6] note that the benefits of having participated in a gay-straight alliance extend beyond the high school years into young adulthood (see also [25,29]), while Poteat and colleagues [8] find that the presence of a gay-straight alliance in a school is associated with less truancy, smoking, drinking and suicide than no-GSA schools. Further, this association is greater for LGBTQ students than for others, though positive for all students. Finally, Elizabeth Saewyc and colleagues [7] find similar long-term benefits of gay-straight alliances. Their study finds that LGBTQ students (and heterosexual boys) at schools with a GSA and/or anti-homophobic bullying policies (in place for over three years) showed lower odds of past year discrimination and lower levels of suicidal thoughts and attempts.

There are some notable exceptions to these positive reviews of gay-straight alliances. For example, gay-straight alliances are not readily accessible to students of color or gender nonconforming students

(e.g., [30]). The social divisions at the intersection of class, race, and gender are not solved by gay-straight alliances, and the supports found in the literature may not extend to these groups. In addition, although gay-straight alliances empower their members to “break the silence” around homophobic school practices, they do not challenge, reshape or expose heteronormative school environments [31,32] nor do they empower members at the organizational or community level to create coalitions with community organizations outside the school setting [20]. These findings reflect Fetner *et al.*'s ([2], p. 204) conviction that “scholars cannot assume *a priori* that safe spaces [namely gay-straight alliances] lead to mobilization”.

Despite these critical shortcomings, the research is clear. Students who attend schools with gay-straight alliances have advantages over students who attend schools that do not have these groups. This finding holds for LGBTQ students who participate in gay-straight alliances, as well as those who do not. It holds for non-LGBTQ students as well [7,8]. Furthermore, the positive effects of gay-straight alliances last beyond the high school years into young adulthood. In this paper, we seek to learn about the contours of life in high school, from the perspective of students who are LGBTQ or who care about LGBTQ issues. In particular, we compare the experiences of students in GSA schools with those in no-GSA schools, to understand better the lived experiences of students in their schools. We focus on experiences of harassment and negativity, the support of teachers and administrators, and the friendship circles of students in schools with and without gay-straight alliances.

One study in particular has compared schools with and without gay-straight alliances [23]. In a quantitative analysis of over 300 surveys completed by students ages 13–22, authors find that LGBTQ students in schools with GSAs feel safer than those in schools without GSAs. They also find that these students were more able to identify at least one supportive adult in their schools. This important work demonstrates that gay-straight alliances matter to the lives of LGBTQ students. Our paper adds to this rich literature by extending this analysis to include friendship networks and by offering a qualitative analysis that complements the aforementioned quantitative study. By conducting a qualitative analysis, our comparison give students the opportunity to describe these feelings of safety, discomfort, or social isolation in their own words.

2. Data and Method

To consider these issues, we use qualitative interviews of young adults who had recently completed high school. We recruited a sample of 53 young adults, age 18–25, through snowball sampling with multiple entry points. We recruited through online announcements on LGBTQ-related listservs and websites, university and college LGBTQ activist groups, and LGBTQ-related community centers. We selected young adults for our target group, rather than high school-age youth, so that we would not bias the sample toward those who could obtain parental permission to participate, and to remove schools as gatekeepers to student populations. We also wanted to design a recruitment strategy that was as inclusive as possible to participants who were in the closet—a difficult to reach population. This project was approved by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board, project 2005 073.

In our recruitment process, we sought participants who had been involved with LGBTQ activism in high school, though we did not select for any particular sexual identity. Thus, we interviewed straight allies along with people with gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual and asexual identities. Our

participants also had a variety of gender identities, including cisgender, transgender, gender variant, and all genders. A majority of our sample is white (35 students), and other self-described racial identities include black (1), Hispanic (1), Asian (3), mixed (8), Jewish (2) Native American (1) and Armenian (1). The remaining respondents preferred not to answer.

We completed 53 interviews in total. Of those interviewed, 34 of our participants were enrolled in a school with a gay-straight alliance (GSA school), and 19 of our participants were enrolled in a school without a gay-straight alliance (no-GSA school). Some of the schools attended by this latter group had supports for LGBTQ students: support groups, group counseling sessions, or equity and justice groups that did not include a “gay” designation. Of the students at GSA schools, 20 were enrolled in an urban school setting and 14 in a rural setting, and 31 were in a public school, two in a private religious school, and one in a private school. Of the students at no-GSA schools, 16 were enrolled in an urban school setting, two in a rural school setting, and one in an undisclosed setting, and 14 were in a public school, four in a private religious school, and one in an undisclosed school setting. In GSA and no-GSA schools, our respondents were overwhelmingly located in urban settings and attended public schools—please see Table 1 for a breakdown. As we discuss below, these groups varied in the extent to which they supported LGBTQ students. Other schools in the no-GSA group had no supports for LGBTQ students at all, at least from the perspectives of our participants.

Table 1. Breakdown of Participants at Schools with Gay-straight Alliances (GSA Schools) and Schools without Gay-straight Alliances (No-GSA Schools).

	GSA Schools	No-GSA Schools
Total	34	19
Setting		
Urban	20	16
Rural	14	2
Not-disclosed	0	1
School Type		
Public	31	14
Private religious	2	4
Private	1	0
Not-disclosed	0	1

We conducted our interviews between 2005 and 2008. We communicated with our participants through instant messaging software, such as MSN Messenger, AOL Instant Messaging, and Apple’s iChat. Online interviews offered privacy and security for our participants, who were able to use a pseudonym throughout the research process. We assigned new pseudonyms for all participants after the interviews were completed to make sure that no identifiers were revealed. Online sampling broke down the usual geographic boundaries around qualitative, interview-based sampling, giving us a very wide population from which to recruit participants. Our sample includes people from all over the United States and Canada, in both urban and rural settings.

Qualitative interviews that ask participants to reflect on their memories are likely to be less accurate in terms of specific details of places and events than those that ask participants to reflect on their current contexts and circumstances [33]. Memories are not always reliable. Still, this method is

appropriate to the research questions we ask here, because we are not expecting to use these data to describe with precision any particular high school policies, curricula, or events. Rather, we are using these data to present the lived experiences and perceptions of the students as they recall them; that is, how students felt they were treated, and how much support they perceived they had. Whether a given high school had channels to help LGBTQ kids is not as important to our research questions as whether our participants were aware of and felt they had access to these channels. In this case, recent memories are appropriate data to analyze.

We analyzed the data systematically. First, we organized the interview transcripts according to whether the student attended a school with a GSA. In creating a comparative analytic framework, we employ a deductive analytic strategy that relies on the insights of the wide body of scholarly work that tells us that GSAs matter to young people's experiences of high school. Once we established the comparative framework however, we employed a more inductive analytic strategy, coding the data in an iterative approach that identified emergent themes from the interviews, noting patterns across individual interviews. Through this analysis, we identified three main themes in these interviews: experiences of harassment, experiences of support from authority figures, and patterns of friendships. We discuss these in our Findings section below.

3. Findings

Our participants are all former high-school students who participated in, or attempted to participate in, activism on behalf of LGBTQ issues in their high schools. Many of them held events that were part of nationally or internationally coordinated LGBTQ activism. One example is the Day of Silence, in which students refrain from speaking on a designated day to bring awareness to the silencing of LGBTQ voices in their social worlds (for example, the high school curriculum, sex education, or mass media). Another common event was the Positive Space campaign, in which stickers or posters identify some classrooms, offices, or other spaces in their schools as supportive spaces where LGBTQ youth can feel welcome and get help if they need it. Many focused their attention on dances and proms, encouraging schools to allow same-sex couples to attend. Others organized trips to a local LGBTQ Pride Parade. Some of our participants, as we discuss below, were not able to focus on these standard forms of activism, because they were blocked from forming a gay-straight alliance in the first place.

Our analysis reveals more consistencies in the experiences of our participants than just the type of activities they conducted during their high school days. As we would expect from a wide body of research on LGBTQ youth in high school, our participants told us numerous stories of harassment and violence toward LGBTQ people, and negativity toward lesbian and gay sexuality in general. This was true across the board, regardless of whether the school had a gay-straight alliance. Our other findings, however, highlight the differences between our groups, especially in two areas: the amount of perceived support that was available to our participants from teachers and school administrators, and the size and quality of friendship groups between our participants and their classmates. We organize our findings below according to the three themes that emerge from our data analysis.

3.1. Harassment and Negativity

Research on LGBTQ experiences in high school consistently chronicles harassment, bullying, and violence toward LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students. GLSEN reports that 55.5% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students feel unsafe in their schools because of their sexual orientation and 37.8% because of their gender expression. Just over half of LGBT students (51.4%) surveyed reported hearing homophobic remarks from faculty or staff. Additionally, 64.5% of LGBT students report frequently hearing homophobic labels such as “faggot” and “dyke” in their high schools, and 71.4% of students report hearing the word “gay” used as a derogatory term [11]. In Canada, the findings are similar. EGALÉ reports that almost 64% of LGBTQ students feel unsafe at school, 48% of all students, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ, reported hearing homophobic labels in their high schools, and 70% of all students, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ, reported hearing the word “gay” used as a derogatory term [18].

Our participants recounted stories consistent with these findings, reporting to us that they often heard negative claims by other students or by teachers. They reported being verbally harassed, with a few stories of violence toward our participants’ friends and acquaintances.

3.1.1. GSA Schools

Many of our participants reported that their high schools were generally supportive of LGBTQ students. They felt that everyone was treated the same and had generally positive memories of their high school experience. However, when our interviewers followed up by asking if they had seen or heard of any specific circumstances of verbal or physical harassment, most of our participants had stories to share of verbal harassment, some had memories of physical harassment to themselves or to a friend. Nearly all of our participants reported hearing the terms “that’s so gay” to indicate that something is bad, or the use of “fag” as an insult.

For example, Emma, a white bisexual woman, tells us how her classmates treated her closeted gay friend:

“My friend [was in the closet] but everyone always knew. Guys would talk about him behind his back and talk about how they would catch him staring at their dicks in the washroom or what not.”

Hannah, a white lesbian woman, shares a similar story of harassment and social marginalization. In this case, the social circles of most straight kids were closed off to LGBTQ kids:

“Well, we had some verbal harassment...actually a lot of it from what I remember, both inside and outside of school...The openly gay kids at my school kind of stuck together...they didn’t socialize with people outside of their group because they weren’t really welcome to.”

Some students who founded a gay-straight alliance at their school did so precisely to address the problem of a high-school culture that is unwelcoming to LGBTQ kids. James, a Latino gay man, shares his thoughts on this:

I think the mere fact that we needed to start a gay-straight alliance implies that there was some sort of harassment going on. Never, from what I understand, were the few gay students afraid for their safety, but it wasn't a welcome environment.

Our participants shared many stories of students being called “fag” as an insult. In some cases, participants did not express much discomfort with this practice, dismissing it as “they didn’t bother you” (Miguel, Latino gay man) or “not necessarily directed at homosexuals” (Samantha, mixed race lesbian woman). For example, Elizabeth, a white lesbian woman, tells us that despite this practice, high schools seemed open and inclusive:

“It seems that overall younger people are more open to sexually diverse people. But I also hear a lot of ‘you’re gay’ ‘you’re a faggot’, *etc.*, in the hallways, and no one really says anything to stop people from saying things like that.”

Other students, however, were upset by the practice and felt marginalized. Michael, a white gay man, recounts his anger at the practice:

“What pisses me off is that they like to call everyone faggot and say that stuff they dislike is gay. They only do this when they think it’s not affecting any homosexuals around them but they still do it, all the time...It just pisses me off, because that is extremely discouraging to anyone that might be in the closet in the area.”

CJ Pascoe documents similar harassment in her ethnography of boys in school [9]. Her analysis shows that heteronormative curriculum and extracurricular activities structured the school day, and that interactions among male students included routinized interactions about gay sexuality. The “fag discourse” that dominates at many schools, according to Pascoe, is less about putting gay men down than it is about enforcing traditional masculinity and jockeying for social status ([9], pp. 52–83). However, as we see from these quotes, a predictable effect of the “fag discourse” is that it marginalizes LGBTQ students and marks them as outsiders. Even if this isn’t the intention of the students who employ this discourse, it certainly is the effect.

3.1.2. No-GSA Schools

We heard similar stories from our participants at schools that did not have a gay-straight alliance. Many of these participants felt unsafe in their schools, telling us stories of verbal and physical harassment that had happened to themselves or others. The stories of violence had a strong effect on our participants, keeping them in the closet or organizing what parts of the school they dared to go.

Stephanie, a straight white woman, talks about how her gay friend, one of the only out gay students at her school, was verbally harassed:

“My one gay friend...he got teased a lot...We used to take the bus home together, and a lot of the younger kids teased him. He took it lightly, but I’m sure it didn’t feel good. It used to piss me off so much.”

It is interesting that Stephanie uses the term “teased”, a relatively benign word to capture the practice of students giving her friend a hard time for being gay, despite the fact that this practice angered her, rather than use a stronger term like “bullying” or “harassment”. Since this was a practice

that was never resolved, just something that her friend had to endure throughout his high school days, perhaps it is difficult for her to name it as a more serious problem. The issue of naming is an important one as Currie, Mayberry and Chenneville note in their analyses of discourses surrounding gay-straight alliances [31]. Although they focus on how discourses surrounding gay-straight alliances as “safe spaces” need to be renamed in terms of “social justice” in order to challenge heteronormative school environments, a similar argument can be made in regards to renaming “teasing” in terms of “harassment” in order to challenge the normalization and acceptance of bullying and antigay sentiments within school environments. In other words, heteronormative and unsafe climates are reinforced by reframing bullying and/or harassment as “teasing”.

Austin, a white gay man who was in the closet during high school, tells us directly that he felt unsafe: “I did not feel safe to come out”. He describes how he learned that his school was hostile to gay students by watching another gay student come out of the closet:

“The other guy in the group who came out, he had a very hard time with being mobbed. People called him faggot a lot, put porn pictures on his locker. It seemed to affect his overall high school experience and performance quite negatively.”

Austin decided to wait until he graduated high school to come out of the closet.

Some students’ high school experiences included interactions with antigay activists. Tyler, an Asian-American queer gender variant, tells us of an antigay citizens’ group that included some of his classmates’ parents. This group made his school the target of their activism, challenging the school’s practice of inviting a speaker from P-FLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gay Men, to talk with the kids about LGBTQ issues:

“Well, some alumni of my high school and others who labeled themselves as ‘concerned citizens’ came together and held a protest vigil across the street from the school because of their ‘concern’ that the school was promoting ‘homosexuality’.”

In this case, Tyler, who was in the closet at the time, felt that he was in the crosshairs of this citizens’ group. He tells us that he managed to connect with other supportive students to form a secretive support group:

It was underground, but for the small few of us who managed to find each other, it did however provide a much needed support network.

Tyler’s high-school experience of antigay activist groups protesting the school was on the extreme end of the stories we heard, but there were other moments of political clashes where LGBTQ issues became controversies. Lucas, a Latino gay man, attended a private religious school:

“In my high school there was no concept of ‘non-straight’. It was a religiously affiliated school where being anything but straight would lead to social ostracizing, and possible disciplinary action from the school, including up to dismissal (it never happened, but it was assumed).”

As Lucas’s statement makes clear, in many of the no-GSA schools, the tenor of the culture was more than just heteronormative; it was antigay. Whether this was in the official school policy, in the

religious orientation of the school, or in the statements of teachers and administrators, students at some schools were given the clear message that LGBTQ students were not welcome.

Like at the schools with GSAs, there were many stories of the “fag discourse” that Pascoe so eloquently describes [9]. Our participants often described these incidents with a sense of resignation. For example, Anthony, a white queer man, describes this practice as normal:

“As at any school, people were taunted or threatened for perceived sexual identity, whether gay or not, and it was a background thing. ‘Boys will be boys’, and such.”

The blasé attitude that Anthony holds about the behaviour of boys in his school is consistent with the research literature on high schools. Despite significant changes in attitudes toward lesbian and gay people over time, high schools remain a site where homosexuality is deployed to maintain social hierarchies and establish heterosexuality as a superior position [9,34].

The picture that our participants in GSA and no-GSA schools paint of the acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ students in high schools is bleak. Harassment, threats, violence and the “fag discourse” were common experiences among all of our participants. In this regard, our findings support those of Mayberry, Chenneville and Currie [32]. They observe how “silence” around harassment persists in schools with gay-straight alliances. As our research shows, this is also true in schools without gay-straight alliances. However, as we discuss below, schools vary greatly on their support for LGBTQ students, and the actions of a few teachers and administrators can make a big difference to the experiences of students as they navigate high school.

3.2. Support from Teachers and Administrators

Although our participants had a wide variety of negative experiences in their high schools, they reported many positive experiences as well. Many of our participants recalled receiving support and encouragement from teachers and school administrators, especially if they attended a school with a gay-straight alliance. These memories were cherished by our participants, who told us of adults who made a real difference in their lives. These types of positive experiences between LGBTQ students and teachers, staff and administrators are important because, according to the most recent national data from GLSEN, students with many (11 or more) supportive staff at their school were less likely to feel unsafe, less likely to miss school, more likely to feel connected to their community and had higher GPAs than other students [11].

3.2.1. GSA Schools

The presence of a supportive teacher and administrator was common among our participants at schools with gay-straight alliances. In fact, many of our participants describe the active role that these adults took in the establishment of these groups. For example, Lily, a white queer woman, talks about her principal’s strong support: “The principal was very much on my side throughout the whole thing, and I made him one of the advisors of the group when we first started out.” Another student, Katie, an Asian straight woman, tells us of a teacher that was instrumental: “He was ‘the cool teacher’...He was the reason the group was able to start.”

Supportive administrators and teachers were often able to help students overcome opposition by other school staff as they started their gay-straight alliance groups. Here is a story from Chloe, a white bisexual woman:

“Most teachers were [supportive], but the administration certainly was not—I had one teacher support me through the whole process, and others were behind me—I had to fight intensely for the right to have [the gay-straight alliance] with the administration—constant meetings, *etc.*...I had to threaten to get the alumni and the media involved.”

Chloe was ultimately successful in establishing a gay-straight alliance in her high school despite the opposition of school administrators. The support of these teachers, as well as the larger community of high school alumni, was critical. Ayasha, a Native American, pansexual woman, recounts a similar experience in forming their gay-straight alliance group.

“It took us forever to get through administrators. We needed sponsors, and the only two openly gay teachers helped us get that spotlight and the encouragement of non-gay students.”

Other students did not recall facing any opposition for their participation in their gay-straight alliances. In some cases, they reported widespread support, and in others, the supportive teachers and administrators cleared the way for them around those teachers who were not supportive. For example, Chris, an Asian gay man, was enthusiastic in his response to our question of whether his teachers were supportive:

“Yes! Their support was tremendous, barring one or two who were less enthusiastic due to their religious background.”

Alexander, a white straight man, remembers that one teacher in particular was very helpful:

“Yes, they were encouraging. There was one openly lesbian teacher, who was head of the English department. All of the administration was supportive.”

These students' claims give us a sense of the process through which the formation of gay-straight alliances is dependent upon the support of teachers and administrators, who are in a position of greater power than the students. Even though many of these schools are subject to laws that require them to allow students to form whatever groups they like, the actual process of GSA formation on the ground is fraught with obstacles. This is especially true for the participants in our next section.

3.2.2. No-GSA Schools

The students in the no-GSA group were either unable to form a gay-straight alliance in their school or did not even try to do so. Recall that all of these students participated in LGBTQ activism in some form in their high schools, so they were interested in these issues, yet a gay-straight alliance remained out of their reach. These students tell us of their inability to find supportive teachers and administrators, as well as the riskiness of searching them out.

One example comes from Ryan, a white gay man who attended a Catholic high school. He recounts his multiple failed attempts to create a more LGBTQ-inclusive high school:

“I focused on policy...at first, trying to address the rules against bringing same-sex dates to prom, or to add sensitivity training...but when that was a no, I went to the guidance department and wanted to see if they could start a support group type thing, you know? sort of like a non-activist, lets-just-deal-with-peoples'-issues thing, since it was an all-boys school and there was a lot of homophobia, but they didn't have enough staff to deal with moderating that sort of thing, so it fell by the wayside too.”

When Ryan tried to bring a male date to the prom, he was stopped from doing so. The administrators cited a section of catechism and told him that if he did not follow the rules, he could elect not to attend the prom.

Courtney, a white bisexual woman, describes how teachers and administrators blocked her from creating a gay-straight alliance by channeling her energies into an “equity and diversity” club:

“I went to my principal and asked to create a gay-straight alliance...Things didn't go over so well in that department...I outlined my concerns, that there is no visibility, there is a huge problem with homophobia, racism, and sexism at our school, and that I think this would help a part of that. My principal didn't agree with a gay-straight alliance, so I met with the two possible advisers. One of them is gay, but doesn't talk about it really, and they both didn't want to get in trouble from either students or parents or other teachers about it, so we decided that we would create an ‘equity and diversity’ club.”

This lack of support extended into the classroom in some cases. Riley, a white transgender man who identified as a lesbian woman in high school, tells us of a lack of support in general:

“There were a couple of homophobic teachers that some of us had problems with in classes...so I guess we didn't really feel like they were on our side.”

This lack of support from teachers was difficult for our participants. Their memories reveal missed opportunities to provide a helping hand to students who were marginalized, harassed, and looking for opportunities to improve their schools. These findings of unsupportive teachers, staff and administrators are consistent with national survey reports from GLSEN wherein 51.4% of students have heard homophobic remarks and 55.5% have heard negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff, 55.5% of LGBT students report personally experiencing discriminatory school policies and/or practices, 65.2% report knowing someone who experienced discriminatory school policies and/or practices and 61.6% of students who reported an incident of harassment noted that school staff did nothing in response [11].

3.3. Friendship Networks

The third theme that emerged from our analysis is a difference in the size and diversity of friendship networks that our participants report belonging to in their high schools. Friends can be excellent sources of support for LGBTQ students, and those of our participants that had access to a gay-straight alliance report belonging to sizable friendship groups that were diverse in terms of sexual identity. Of course, bringing people together is one of the aims of gay-straight alliances, and our findings suggest that they are successful on this count.

3.3.1. GSA Schools

Many of our participants in schools that had gay-straight alliances told us that these sites were social hubs where friendships could be made across sexual identity and gender lines. These young adults had a variety of positive and negative experiences in their high schools, but they report having good friends to help them get through.

For example, Isabella, a white bisexual woman, reports having a wide friendship group in her school:

“I have gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and straight friends. Yes, actually, we coexist quite well at my school. Though, my friend group is rather large, and includes most of the GLBT people [in my school]...I don’t know if there were any transgender people, but there were a couple of ‘out’ gay guys and lesbians, and one bisexual girl besides myself.”

Madison, a white bisexual woman, described herself as unique among students at her GSA school, because she had so many friends, both straight and LGBTQ:

“Well, it wasn’t really typical in my high school, the LGBTQ kids usually stick together, but I just don’t care. I talk to everyone...[There were] about 10–15 in the school group...mostly bisexuals with a few gays and straights thrown in.”

Our participants tell us that gay-straight alliances in particular were conduits to friendships with other like-minded students. They report that new friends were made through their GSA groups. Like Dex, a mixed-race, gay genderqueer person, the gay-straight alliance group was central to their friendship circles:

“Yes, most of my friends were in the group, and we were most of the core group. Or we became friends because of the group...I made friends with a couple more girls through the group, and got a few people to join...”

Olivia, a white straight woman who co-founded a gay-straight alliance group with a gay man classmate, also has a large, diverse set of friends, and reports making new friends through her participation:

“I made friends with the boy who originally called me to help him start the group, as well as some of his friends that came by the student council room to help him...Out of the 10–15 people I kept close [with], the majority were straight, one came out of the closet when he went to university, and three others were out during high school.”

According to our participants, gay-straight alliances also created friendships outside of high school, by connecting students with others who were also involved with these groups. For example, Cheryl, a black bisexual woman, made social connections at a number of high schools in her area:

“I made friends with kids from other schools...All the GSAs at local high schools know of each other, I suppose, and my school started an Open Mic my sophomore year. And then junior year I headed the club and organized the Open Mic and got some kids from other schools to come, and so I met them. We also marched in the Pride Parade, and I met some kids from other schools as well.”

As is clear from the quotes we include above, the friendship groups of our GSA-school participants seemed particularly diverse in terms of sexual identity. Many of these young adults report having friendships not only with others who shared their sexual identity—for example, gay men finding other gay men to be friends with—but across a wide spectrum of sexual and gender identities.

3.3.2. No-GSA Schools

The situation was different among our sample of students who attended schools that did not offer a gay-straight alliance. While there were participants in this group who reported having good friends and feeling supported, these stories were not as prevalent as of those who felt isolated, or had only one or two friends. Joseph, a white gay man, tells us that he had “passing acquaintances that I said hi to, but not friendships”. He relied on friends outside the school for support: “I only hung out with my group of guys (not a gay group) outside of school”. Joseph had trouble finding other gay students with whom to connect: “besides me, I was aware of only one other person who was out in high school, and he did not attend very much”.

Like Joseph, Nathan had only a few friends at his high school. He organized a LGBTQ youth group outside the school to connect with other students:

“I had some friends who supported me emotionally, and the [Youth Group outside the high school] was very supportive for the entire time I was starting it and it was running.”

Tyler, the Asian-American queer gender variant whose story of dealing with antigay activism we shared above, is very direct about his feeling disconnected from fellow students.

“I was more socially isolated. I was involved in several clubs, however. I formed a few closer friendships with certain people. I think most of my friends were probably straight. Like I said, I did not have a ton of friends. I was also never ‘out’.”

Without a gay-straight alliance, and dealing with external activism opposed to LGBTQ inclusivity in the school, Tyler joined the clubs that were available to him. However, this only facilitated a “few” friendships and left him feeling isolated.

Tyler’s reference to the closet as a barrier to the development of friendships was shared by several of our participants in the no-GSA group. Whether or not they were closeted themselves, not knowing whether other students were LGBTQ made it difficult to connect. David, a white gay man, says:

“By the time I was in grade 12, I knew of a few people who might be gay or bi, and their friend groups seemed pretty accepting, but I could never be sure. It wasn’t really talked about.”

Lucas, a mixed-race gay man, did not know any other LGBTQ students during high school: “I was the only gay one, but was closeted until my senior year of high school”. Anthony, a white queer man, was able to find only a few: “there were very few out queer people. In fact, I only recall three people who were completely out by the end of our senior year”.

The lack of a gay-straight alliance was isolating for these students, whether or not they were closeted themselves. Lacking in support from teachers, administrators and friends, our participants who attended schools without gay-straight alliances saw high school as a difficult time to get through, rather than a place for them to learn, make connections, and participate fully. Friendship networks are

important to mental health and well-being, and to the extent that gay-straight alliances facilitate broader, more diverse networks for high school students, they are a positive factor in the lives of LGBTQ students and their straight allies [35].

4. Conclusions

These stories of young people's experiences in high schools offer a profoundly personal view of life as an LGBTQ student or straight ally in high schools. The presence of a gay-straight alliance made a significant difference to the quality of the high-school experience for these students. While a GSA very clearly did not spare these students from negative experiences, such as verbal and physical harassment, violence, and negative comments about LGBTQ people, it did offer a safe space for students to support each other in their schools, which varied widely in how hostile they were to LGBTQ students.

In particular, students in schools with gay-straight alliances told us that they had support from teachers and administrators, often reporting that the actions of these adults were very important to them. Supportive teachers and administrators helped these students form gay-straight alliances in the first place and facilitated their work as a student group. Supportive teachers and administrators also intervened when opposition to LGBTQ inclusivity arose, dealing with other teachers, parents or students who held antigay attitudes and preferred heterosexist policies and curricula within schools. This support was critical for our participants, who lacked the power to take on these opponents themselves. Our participants reveal the close relationship between supportive adults and the presence of a gay-straight alliance. In schools where no adult is willing to champion the group, it is much more difficult for students to found them.

Our participants from schools without gay-straight alliances reported feelings of isolation and difficulty finding friends, and the secrecy of the closet seems to have exacerbated this. These students looked for friendship and support off campus, or relied on the support of a few close friends. In contrast, our participants from schools with gay-straight alliances reported large circles of friends, many of whom were made through their participation in these groups. These friendship groups were very diverse in terms of sexual identity. Additionally, these students often report making friends in other high schools through their work in gay-straight alliances, such as attending pride parades or attending the events that other gay-straight alliance groups organize.

These findings support the large literature that finds that gay-straight alliances are useful to and supportive of LGBTQ students. Like quantitative studies comparing schools with and without GSAs, we find that schools who offer gay-straight alliances feel safer for students and offer more allies [23,36]. Our qualitative comparative analysis adds a personal dimension to the now large literature on gay-straight alliances. This literature is broadly supportive of gay-straight alliances, finding these groups have a number of positive effects on LGBTQ students, their allies, the schools where they are formed, and beyond. This paper's comparative, qualitative focus adds to this body of work by sharing the students' own perspectives on their high-school experiences, whether or not this included a gay-straight alliance group.

Based on our findings, we propose several avenues for future research on gay-straight alliances. First and foremost, additional qualitative (similar to our study) and quantitative (see [23]) studies are needed in order to outline the differences between schools with and without gay-straight alliances. At

the macro level, additional comparative research is required on the similarities and differences in social contexts between GSA and no-GSA schools. For example, are there notable differences in terms of national comparisons (e.g., between the United States and Canada), demographic characteristics (race, class, gender, religion, *etc.* composition), regional variations (rural *vs.* urban, Northeast *vs.* Southwest, *etc.*), school size (large, medium or small), and/or political climate (red *vs.* blue states) between schools who have GSAs and those who do not? At the micro level, what types of organizational, cultural, interactional or personal characteristics facilitate the creation or non-creation of gay-straight alliances? These types of comparisons *between* GSA and no-GSA schools have the potential to reveal important information for LGBTQ youth, allies and activists supportive of LGBTQ issues. Second, further research also needs to be conducted *within* GSA schools in order to assess the degree to which gay-straight alliances are inclusive or exclusive along other forms of social difference (race, class, gender identity, *etc.*). In particular, are students of color and gender nonconforming students included and/or excluded in these organizations, as indicated by McCready [30]? If gay-straight alliances are not inclusive among other forms of social difference, how can we improve access for students of color, gender nonconforming students and others who feel marginalized? Most importantly, what are the mechanisms of exclusion and how can they be challenged to create more inclusive gay-straight alliances for all students? Not all gay-straight alliances are the same [2] and further research needs to be conducted to tease out the differences within these important student clubs. These types of comparative studies both *between* GSA and no-GSA schools and *within* GSA schools can provide much needed quantitative and qualitative data that will contribute to the growing body of literature on gay-straight alliances in high schools.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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