SAFE SPACES IN THE MIDDLE: AN EXAMINATION OF PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOL

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE CLUBS AND THEIR

EFFECTS ON SCHOOL CULTURE

By

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ABSTRACT

The needs of LGBTQ+ students in the USA, specifically cultures of inclusivity in public schools, go largely unnoticed and unmet (Fontaine, 1998). According to educational research (Case & Meier, 2014; Heck, Lindquist, Stewart, Brennan, & Cochran, 2013), the first step in helping LGBTQ+ students feel comfortable openly expressing "who they are" with regard to gender identity and sexuality at school is to create safe spaces such as Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs within their schools. Before the creation and institution of a GSA, one must first identify the perceptions of those working within the school, specifically how they feel a GSA will affect school culture. This is particularly the case in middle school, where GSAs are not as often found (GLSEN, 2018). The belief is that with more research on teachers' perceptions of these clubs, administrators and stake-holders will have a better working knowledge of what needs to be done before and during the institution of a GSA in a middle school setting to help to ensure the club's success and longevity (Mayo, 2015). Without this information, the implementation of such a club could be misconstrued, and community backlash may become a threat to the newly created safe space initiative (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). In this qualitative case study, I conducted fifteen in-depth interviews with middle school teachers to explore their thoughts on having a GSA within their school. My research questions for this study are as follows: What are middle school teachers' perceptions of Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs? How do middle school teachers think a Gay-Straight Alliance Club will affect their school's culture of inclusivity? The findings of this study contribute to suggestions for successfully proposing, instituting, and sustaining a GSA at the middle school level as well as recommendations for further research in this area.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community, especially the youth and students who endure the undeserved stigmatization that has been institutionalized in our society for far too long. For the sake of our future generations, it is my hope that we may continue blazing a path to social justice for all people.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem

For learning to take place in a classroom setting, a student must be comfortably situated

in his or her educational environment; comfort includes being able to express oneself, and

feeling that one's culture, race, gender identity, and sexuality are represented and socially

accepted by teachers and fellow classmates (GLSEN,[1] 2018). For this inclusivity and acceptance

to take place, a student's learning community needs to first become aware of differences,

especially differences that can go unseen, as can be the case with gender identity and sexuality

(Sokolower-Shain, 2016). Students' or teachers' sexualities may remain unknown, and become

something they choose to hide rather than coming out at school because of the associated

misunderstandings and prejudices (Cohen & Chasnoff, 1996; Sokolower-Shain, 2016). It can be

difficult for students to engage with the class and learn in a meaningful way while dealing with

the discomfort of having to hide a huge part of who they are as a person (Lee, 2002). This is

where I find motivation for my research.

In the past six years as a seventh grade English Language Arts teacher at a central New

Jersey public middle school, I have had multiple students come out to me, identifying themselves

as part of the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*, Queer or Questioning) community.

Many also expressed fears that their fellow students, and even some of their other teachers, may

find out and react in negative ways. My LGBTQ+ students are concerned that others will not be

accepting of their differences in gender or sexuality, and will not treat them as kindly after they

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[1] Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network

come out. They fear bullying and harassment from their peers, and judgment from their teachers

and administrators (Kaufman et al., 1999). These students appreciate the fact that I have "Safe

Space" signs in my own classroom, and I strive to create an environment in which LGBTQ+

students, as well as students from various racial and economic backgrounds, are safe, secure, and

represented equally in the curriculum and class discussions. Certain students have even

mentioned how they wish they could feel as safe and accepted during the rest of their school day

outside of my classroom.

Personally, I have been reading about and advocating for LGBTQ+ youth and student-

diversity acceptance for quite some time. However, I am one of only a few teachers in my school

who is well versed in effective awareness and inclusion strategies for LGBTQ+ youth. In all

schools, it is important that the teachers, administrators, and students are aware and inclusive of

various races, ethnicities, gender identities, and sexual orientations. An effective way to raise

awareness and acceptance of this student diversity within any educational organization is to

create safe spaces for minority youth students (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013). This can be achieved

with the formation of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) Club. A GSA is "a student-run club in a

high school or middle school that brings together LGBTQ and straight students to support each

other, provide a safe place to socialize, and create a platform to fight for racial, gender, LGBTQ,

and economic justice" (Hooker, 2019, pp. 222). In the current political climate, especially with

the national rise in awareness of diversity and LGBTQ+ issues, now is the time for investigative

research on perceptions of these GSA clubs and their effects on school culture at the middle

school level.

Significance of Study

If students can feel free to openly share their differences in gender identity and sexuality with their teachers and classmates, they will then have more freedom to express themselves without the constant worry of accidentally "outing" themselves and being subject to judgments or ridicule (Kaufman et al., 1999). The needs of LGBTQ+ students in the USA, specifically cultures of inclusivity in public school, go largely unnoticed and unmet (Fontaine, 1998). According to educational research (Case and Meier, 2014; Heck, Lindquist, Stewart, Brennan, & Cochran, 2013), the first step in helping LGBTQ+ students feel comfortable openly expressing who they are with regard to gender identity and sexuality in the classroom is to create safe spaces such as Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs within their schools. Before the creation of such clubs, however, it is important to first create buy-in from staff members, specifically the teachers that children look up to as role models. Before the creation and institution of a GSA, especially in a public middle school where they are not as often found (GLSEN, 2018), one must first identify the perceptions of those working within the school, specifically how they feel a GSA will affect school culture. With more research on teachers' perceptions of these clubs, administrators and stake-holders will have a better working knowledge of what needs to be done before and during the institution of a GSA in a public middle school setting to ensure the club's efficacy and longevity. Without information on how middle school teachers feel about having a GSA, the implementation of such a club could be misconstrued, and backlash from the school community may become a real threat to maintaining this newly created safe space initiative (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). To obtain this critical information, in this qualitative case study, I conducted fifteen in-depth interviews with public middle school teachers to discover their opinions on having a GSA within their school.

Research Questions

To explore middle school teachers' perceptions of Gay-Straight Alliance clubs and their effects on school culture, my research questions for this study were as follows:

- What are public middle school teachers' perceptions of Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs?

- How do public middle school teachers think a Gay-Straight Alliance Club will affect their school's culture of inclusivity?

These questions were designed to elicit information on what these teachers know about GSAs, how the clubs work, what the club's goals may be, and how the club will affect the school community. The answers to these questions will provide school communities and steak holders with information on how a GSA may be received in a middle school setting, along with the possible benefits and barriers to the implementation of such clubs.

Organization of Study

This qualitative case study was conducted over the course of three consecutive months in the fall of the 2019-2020 school year. Fifteen middle school teachers of various subject areas from two different New Jersey public middle schools were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Following a thorough review of relevant literature in Chapter Two, more detailed information about the data collection and analysis procedures for this study will be presented in Chapter Three. Significant themes that emerged from the data will be presented as findings in Chapter Four. Chapter Five concludes the study with a discussion of the findings as well as recommendations for further research.

Definition of Key Terms

Bisexual: a person who is attracted to both males and females

Bullying: being exposed to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons repeatedly and over time; This definition includes three important components: 1) bullying is aggressive behavior that involves unwanted, negative actions, 2) bullying involves a pattern of behavior repeated over time, 3) bullying involves an imbalance of power or strength (Olweus, 2012)

Coming Out: the process of revealing one's sexual orientation or gender identity to another person or persons

Gay: a term for a male who is attracted to other males

Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA): "a student-run club in a high school or middle school that brings together LGBTQ and straight students to support each other, provide a safe place to socialize, and create a platform to fight for racial, gender, LGBTQ, and economic justice" (Hooker, 2019, pp. 222)

Harassment: the mistreatment and victimization by another individual "through repeated negative acts like insulting remarks and ridicule, verbal abuse, offensive teasing, isolation, and social exclusion, or the constant degrading of one's work and efforts" (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994, pp. 381)

Heteronormativity: the assumption that all individuals within an institution are, or should be, heterosexual; the institution's policies and norms are based upon this assumption (Filex, 2006).

Homosexual: a person who is attracted only to members of the opposite sex

Heterosexual: a person who is only attracted to members of the same sex

Lesbian: a term for a female who is attracted to other females

Sexual Orientation: the pattern of emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to another person or

persons

Straight: a term for a person who is heterosexual, or attracted only to members of the opposite

sex

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the following sections, I will be reviewing the relevant literature regarding the history of cultures of inclusivity in educational institutions in the United States, the use of queer theory (Lugg & Murphy, 2014; Penell, 2017) in addressing school culture within the era of accountability, a brief history of Gay-Straight Alliance clubs, and the benefits and barriers of forming a Gay-Straight Alliance within a school. It is important to understand the history of school cultures for LGBTQ+ youth[2] when analyzing teachers' beliefs regarding GSAs because some perceptions might be affected by this history and can depend on the teacher's age and past experience with LGBTQ+ youth policies (Blount, 2005). The era of accountability can also affect teachers' perceptions of the importance of these clubs; scholars suggest many teachers are more concerned with student achievement and test scores than school culture (Lugg, 2003; McGuinn & Supovitz, 2016). However, using a queer theory[3] lens may highlight the importance of school culture regarding LGBTQ+ youth during these times of high stakes testing, as it has been found that LGBTQ+ students' academic performance may suffer due to the discomfort of a homophobic school culture (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). Finally, understanding the history and the benefits and barriers of GSA clubs can help explain teachers' perceptions, as certain views depend on how much teachers know about GSAs and whether or not they think the benefits of forming these clubs outweigh the risks.

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[2] Although the acronym LGBTQ+ is the most current and inclusive form for this group, I may be using LGB, LGBT, or homosexual youth depending on the era and the term being used in the research at the time.

[3] The queer theory framework aims to "decenter the legal and social structures that privilege and police heteronormativity, patriarchy, white supremacy, class advantage, and heterosexuality" (Lugg & Murphy, 2014, pp. 1183).

Cultures of Inclusivity

The cultures of inclusivity in educational institutions for individuals of diverse gender

and sexuality expressions have certainly changed over time (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003). The

increasing acceptance of both staff and students by their peers along with a heightened focus on

creating a more inclusive school environment are evidenced by both a change in general opinion

and more effort on the part of schools to emphasize a culture of acceptance (Griffin & Ouellett,

2003). For example, Jennings notes, "over the past 15 years, innumerable schools have expanded

their non-discrimination policies to include categories like sexual orientation and gender identity

[and] hundreds have established Gay-Straight Student Alliances" (2004, pp. 88). I will elaborate

on the research concerning Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in forthcoming sections. Historical

researchers, Griffin and Ouellett (2003), take a further look back and identify three broad

historical eras for LGBTQ+ educational issues over the past 80 years. The end of each era is

punctuated with a shifting of the focus of these issues. More specifically, the longest period,

lasting almost 60 years until 1979, saw homosexual educators thought of as a threat to children

(Blount, 2000). Homosexual youth were also morally condemned during this time period, which

was reflected in their self-esteem. For example, in 1972, Roesler and Deisher conducted a study,

interviewing youthful homosexual males from ages 16 to 22 in search of recognizable patterns in

identity development; however, they found research involving gay participants to be difficult due

to interviewees' emotional guilt and social isolation. This study concluded that the coming out

process for males could take an average of four years from the time they have their first

homosexual experience. All participants interviewed were deeply conscious of an inherent

difference between themselves and the rest of society, which may be the root cause of the

lengthy and uncomfortable process of formally identifying with the homosexual subculture. By

the late 70s, research began to shift from exploring the reasons for and the process of being

homosexual to looking at the psychological problems related to homosexuality, which was

classified as a form of mental illness in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental*

Disorders until 1973 (American Psychiatric Association, 1983). Unfortunately, depending on the

time period in which some middle school teachers grew up or began teaching, they may still be

holding on to some of the vicious stigma outlined in this research from the past. This could have

an obvious impact on their perception of today's Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs.

Griffin and Ouellett (2003) label the 1980s as the era of the identification of lesbian and

gay youth as a population at risk. The authors discuss the increased risk of suicide among

lesbian and gay youth, which resulted in a national discussion on how to address it. For example,

in 1988, Gonsiorek explores the considerable controversy and confusion that surrounded the idea

of youthful homosexuality. Opposing the idea that mental health issues are innately part of

homosexual identity, the author explains how homophobia and erotophobia[4] can lead to the

social and psychological problems of gay and lesbian youth. Specifically, he cites the verbal and

physical abuse of peers, lack of homosexual role models and youth services, as well as societal

bigotry as the causes for homosexual youth to deny and avoid their sexual orientation, and in

some cases, resort to self-harm or suicide to escape the hatred. Gonsiorek urges mental health

professional not to be dismissive of or try to change a youth's homosexual identity. Homosexual

youth need societal and family support, role models, and advocacy in education to understand

their own value and normalize their adolescent experience. If the middle school teacher

participants in my study agree that educational institutions must advocate for and support this

youth, then they tend to present a more positive view on the establishment of a GSA.

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[4] The fear of sex or negative attitudes about sex

In the same year, Robert Bidwell (1988) published an article joining the discussion on how to assuage psychological problems and mortality risk associated with gay and lesbian youth. He cites that in 1983, "the American Academy of Pediatrics recognized the reality and special needs of those adolescents for whom homosexuality is a natural and valid developmental outcome" (Bidwell, 1988, pp. 3). Despite the formal recognition that homosexuality is no longer considered a disorder, gay and lesbian youth still grow up in an environment largely hostile towards their identity. Like Gonsiorek, Bidwell urges health care providers to provide support, accurate information, and guidance to youth and their parents. He further urges health care providers to address the need for a societal change in attitude towards homosexuality. Citing Kinsey et al.'s (1948) study, which approximates 10% of the population to be homosexual, Bidwell implores Americans to abandon their traditional fears and address the issue of society's highly widespread homophobia detrimental to the 2.9 million adolescents who are lesbian or gay. If public middle school teachers today are aware of the research regarding LGBTQ+ youth suicide (Bidwell, 1988), they may have a more positive perception of GSA clubs, as they know that creating a safer environment for LGBTQ+ youth at school can contribute to lower rates of youth suicide.

The last era of the aforementioned Griffin and Ouellett (2003) piece outlining the shifts in environment for homosexual youth moves to a new focus on safer school atmosphere. This era, from 1990-2002, sees research and discussion focused on identifying necessary changes in school culture and policy. For example, in 1992, Butler and Byrne studied homophobia among preservice elementary school teachers in hopes of bringing to light necessary changes in school culture for very young and impressionable students. The authors surveyed 97 undergraduates, 92 women and 3 men, from ages 18 to 42 with the mean age of 22.9 using Herek's Attitudes

Toward Lesbians and Gay Men (ATLG) scale. The results showed that overall this group of teachers was "slightly homophobic" and the variables significantly related to homophobic attitudes in these teachers their religiosity and number of gay friends, relatives, or acquaintances (Butler & Byrne, 1992, pp. 357). The authors discuss that even slight homophobia among educators is problematic, especially since elementary teachers can significantly affect their young students attitudes. Butler and Byrne encourage teachers to assess their own attitudes, try to recognize the source of negative views towards homosexuality, and educate themselves to dispel damaging biases. Strategies provided in this article are staff development sessions to provide accurate knowledge about sexuality, a more inclusive curriculum, and policies that specifically forbid the harassment of homosexuals.

Unfortunately, there were no follow up studies to determine if these suggestions were effective. The authors also concede that these strategies may be met with resistance, and much like Griffin and Ouellett's (2003) article, they are careful to note the cultural backlash from religious conservatives in trying to improve school culture for LGBTQ+ youth. Nevertheless, they urge teachers to start with small steps, as it is the teachers' ethical responsibility to ensure a safe and positive environment in which all children can develop. When the teachers in my study, at the middle school level, are aware of the impact that their views and opinions regarding the LGBTQ+ community can have on their students, and they note this in interviews regarding their perceptions of Gay-Straight Alliance clubs.

Many individual stories also emphasize the complexity of being LGBTQ+ in education. Mara Sapon-Shevin (2004) discusses her own struggles with her sexual identity as an educator. She reports each moment for her, whether it was in collegial debate or a teaching opportunity, marked a decision point; should she support her argument for safe and more inclusive

environments by discussing her own experiences and identity? She discusses four situations, from some seemingly innocuous to at least one more sinister, in which she struggled to decide if her own "outness" was important to the conversation. After considering the personal struggles of LGBTQ+ teachers, of which Sapon-Shevin's is one key example, it becomes clear that a GSA club will not only benefit students, but can help create a more comfortable workplace for teachers of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. In the case that a middle school teacher in my study has LGBTQ+ friends or acquaintances, and is familiar with struggles such as these, it may affect their opinions on creating safe spaces like a GSA in their school.

Around this time of research, another minority group that had gone largely ignored and unnoticed began to appear in the literature: Trans+* and non-binary persons, or those who feel that their gender identity does not match their sex assigned at birth. It was not until the 1990s that this subgroup of identities became mainstream, and eventually, states and educational literature began to include the "T" in the acronym LGBT (Lugg, 2018). In 2010, McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, and Russell focused on transgender youth and described their need for safe environments, as they face significantly higher levels of harassment than even their LGB peers do. Their mixed method investigation used data from two studies examining issues of harassment, the strategies implemented by schools to reduce harassment, and the impact of supportive school personnel on affected students. The first study surveyed 2,260 public middle and high school LGBTQ+ students in California recruited through affiliations with GSA clubs, while their second study comprised of four focus groups, which were recruited through community resource centers in western US cities. Through these studies, the authors analyzed the interventions created to support Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) youth in schools to determine if they directly benefit transgender youth. This study clarifies that "when policy makers and school personnel stop

harassment when it occurs, refrain from participating in harassment, and promote safe

environments on campus for transgender youth, transgender youth are more likely to report safe

environments" (McGuire et al., 2010, pp. 1187). These findings warrant a careful look at policies

designed to support a vulnerable population and the consideration of safe spaces such as GSAs

as the educational community moves forward in the new era. Depending on how familiar the

middle school teachers in my study are with the trans* community, some mention the benefits of

a safer environment for these students when discussing the institution of a GSA club.

In other literature underlining the need for safe environments for LGBTQ+ people in

schools, Kolbert et al. (2015) studied teachers' perceptions of bullying of LGBTQ+ youth across

a county in Pennsylvania. The study surveyed 200 middle, junior high, and high school educators

from 42 different schools in the county and concluded that heterosexual teachers often believed

that the school environment was more supportive of LGBTQ+ issues, whereas LGBTQ+

teachers felt the environment was less supportive. The divide, the authors surmise, may be

attributed to wishful thinking or simply unawareness of LGBTQ+ student struggles on the part of

heterosexual teachers. They recommend more training for teachers in identifying and

appropriately intervening in LGBTQ+ issues because their findings indicate teachers may not

currently be acknowledging the deficit in their school's culture of inclusivity. Although this

article effectively highlights teachers' perceptions of bullying of LGBTQ+ youth, it is limited by

a low response rate of 5.94%, the fact that all the participants were from one county in one state,

and the survey did not cover teachers' perceptions of Gay-Straight Alliances. Therefore, it is not

clear if the differences in perceptions across heterosexual and LGBTQ+ teachers would exist in

other contexts or if these perceptions were even held in the other 94% of teachers within this

study context. It would also have been helpful to know which schools in this study had a

functioning GSA and how the teachers felt the club contributed to the school environment. My

study contributes to this gap in literature by shedding light on how middle school teachers

perceive a GSA.

This brief history of the cultures of inclusivity in US schools demonstrates that every few

years, new research comes to light regarding the need for safer environments for LGBTQ+ youth,

and furthermore, a highly addressed way to achieve a safer school environment for LGBTQ+

youth is the formation of a Gay-Straight Alliance club (GLSEN, 2018). In the following section,

I describe the theoretical bases of such clubs and how the era of accountability in education

today may affect teachers' perceptions of the formation of GSA clubs in their middle school.

Queer Theory Battles The Era of Accountability

Despite the aforementioned literature calling for educational institutions to address

cultures of inclusivity for LGBTQ+ youth, the current educational context of accountability and

high stakes testing may help to explain the possibility of finding, through my study, that certain

middle school teachers still lack support and excitement for GSA clubs. This era of increased

accountability may have teachers solely worried about their students' achievement on

standardized tests, as these scores can affect a teacher's employment (McGuinn & Supovitz,

2016). However, the lens of queer theory helps put the importance of a positive school culture

for LGBTQ+ youth in perspective for educators (Pennell, 2017).

A recent major cause of reduction in the importance schools place on inclusivity within

secondary schools has been the era of accountability and high-stakes testing (Lugg & Murphy,

2013). As current research in the education field suggests, schools have become increasingly

concerned with stringent academic accountability targets for their students. Meanwhile, goals of

educating children to become happy, responsible members of a democratic society have fallen by

the wayside. Unfortunately for students, in efforts to achieve these far reaching academic

achievement standards to be considered a good school, schools have essentially been forced to

adopt an "at all costs" mentality to improve test scores (Lugg & Murphy, 2013, pp. 183). Many

schools across the country have made efforts to restructure classes, schedules, and curriculums in

an attempt to raise test scores, paying less attention to the culture of the school itself. So much

structure has been implemented that some schools have even revoked students' access to clubs

and recess (Lugg & Murphy, 2013; Lugg & Murphy, 2014), which illuminates the focus that

schools have placed on academics rather than the social-emotional needs of students. It is

interesting to examine teachers' perceptions of instituting a GSA to improve school culture when

most schools are merely concerned with increasing test scores (McGuinn & Supovitz, 2016).

      With the pressure to perform academically being so high, children, especially minority

students including LGBTQ+ youth, can lose the opportunity for a positive secondary school

experience in which they can develop their identity as young members of society. One possible

solution, prevalent in queer historical research, is the use of a queer theory approach in revising

and improving schools' cultures and curriculums (Lugg & Murphy, 2013; Lugg & Tooms, 2010;

Pennell, 2017). The queer theory framework aims to "decenter the legal and social structures that

privilege and police heteronormativity, patriarchy, white supremacy, class advantage, and

heterosexuality" (Lugg & Murphy, 2014, pp. 1183). Basically, this theory aims to eliminate

structures in which one type of person is privileged over another, based on preconceived or

socially constructed norms. The bullying and harassment of LGBTQ+ youth and the

overemphasis of student test scores can be studied through this lens in order to find viable

solutions resulting in equality for youth of all types within an educational institution. This

framework is useful in shaping my research as my study highlights ways in which a school

battles social issues, like heteronormativity and obsession with test scores, in order to create a safe and equitable learning environment for LGBTQ+ youth by instituting a GSA. Examining teachers' perceptions of these clubs shows whether or not the importance of "queering the curriculum" (Lugg & Murphy, 2014) and allowing students a safe space to express themselves outweighs the importance of focusing solely on academic achievement growth.

The middle school teachers' perceptions of the GSA greatly depend on the lens through which they view the club and its effects. If the teachers are more concerned with their students' achievement on standardized tests, they may not be as supportive of the club, whereas if the teachers view their school, curriculum, and club offerings through more of a queer theory lens and are concerned with breaking down the barrier of heteronormativity, they view the club in a more positive light. Furthermore, if teachers are aware that LGBTQ+ student academic performance has shown to be negatively affected by a homophobic school culture (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004), they may be thrilled about the prospect of a GSA as this club would both support LGBTQ+ students emotionally and help to improve their test scores. Either way, in order to meticulously analyze these teachers' perceptions of GSA clubs, it is helpful to first examine a brief history of such clubs followed by the benefits and barriers in forming these clubs as presented in the literature.

The Creation of Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs

Although not all peer-reviewed literature, the primary sources in this section are essential to include in this review of literature as they detail the first ever Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in this country, which help to frame my study. There is some disagreement in the literature as to when and where the first ever GSA club initially appeared, although LGBT-advocate historians Kevin Jennings (1999) and Virginia Uribe (1994) both place the event somewhere in the mid 80s

to early 90s. Jennings cites that student-led GSA clubs first began at Concord Academy and

Phillips Academy, two schools in Massachusetts in the year 1989. On the other hand, Uribe

claims to have founded the first club of this nature herself at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles,

California in the year 1984. Her program, however, went by a different name: Project 10.[5]

In an empirical journal article written by Uribe herself (1994), she describes the mere

acknowledgement of gay and lesbian youth as a pressing challenge that faces educators. She

notes that school can be a very scary place for LGBT youth, and she cites reports of ridicule,

harassment, and discrimination as causes for self-hate, substance abuse, and suicide among this

minority group of students. The author reviews relevant literature to define sexual identity,

noting that is not a choice and that the age of realization for most LGBT people is around early

childhood to the start of puberty. She makes this point clear to emphasize that the issue of teen

sexual identity must be addressed as early as middle school. Myths and misinformation are

prevalent in schools along with severe homophobic opinions that "discussing homosexuality will

'create it'" when in reality, "homosexuality is not a choice, not a sickness, and not a

developmental flaw" (Uribe, 1994, pp. 169-170). After making this convincing argument, Uribe

describes her model school program, Project 10.

Project 10 was developed as a way to address the needs of this underserved population.

The program's foci include unbiased education, reduction of harassment, suicide prevention, and

dissemination of accurate information regarding AIDS and other STDs (Uribe, 1994). Not only

does Project 10 provide students with safe spaces in the form of support groups to provide

affirmation and promote higher self-esteem, but teachers, counselors, and other school staff

members are also provided with informational workshops. Project 10 student clubs average

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[5] This program title comes from Kinsey et al.'s (1948) report approximating around 10 percent of
the entire population to be homosexuals.

around 10-12 students in any given session, they meet once a week, and confidentiality is always

maintained for members. Facilitators of these clubs are volunteers and are often not LGBT

themselves. They do, however, undergo training before taking on the role of facilitator. The

student support groups "make up the heart of the Project 10 program," and "in addition to

dealing with issues of sexual orientation, the facilitators provide counseling with issues such as

staying off drugs and alcohol, avoiding high-risk sexual behavior, getting jobs, staying in school,

and going to college" (Uribe, 1994, pp. 170). Students who have participated in these sessions

report finding self-value and empowerment through the meetings. There was also a noticeable

improvement in attendance and academic performance for these students, which may be a

convincing factor for many teachers today when considering the necessity of such clubs. Despite

the obvious benefits of this first-of-its-kind program, there were never any studies done to gauge

the teachers' perceptions of the Project 10 clubs.

Uribe does mention a small number of people that criticize the program, mostly on

religious grounds, but she urges school districts to follow her model program. She reports in

1994, ten years after initiating the program at Fairfax High in Los Angeles, CA, that many

educators have already sought to add Project 10 to their own schools in hopes of supporting their

underserved homosexual youth. In an *NEA Today* article several years later, Uribe states that

Project 10 "was never really a revolutionary undertaking. It was at heart, a child-protection

program" (1998, pp. 19). Perhaps the Massachusetts schools that Jennings (1999) mentions to

have come about in 1989 were modeled on Uribe's Project 10, or perhaps these schools simply

came to the conclusion themselves that support groups for LGBT youth were crucial to ensuring

their safety and comfort in school. Either way, clubs like the support groups described in the

Project 10 model grew in numbers and locations as the decade went on (Jennings, 2004). Along

with this growth in what came to be known as Gay-Straight Alliance clubs came a rapid increase

in educational research and scholarly literature on the topic. A gap in the literature remains,

however, as middle school teachers' perceptions of these clubs are still unaddressed in the

research. According to Uribe and Jennings, these clubs were originated in high schools, yet

current research suggests that students begin forming their sexual identity at the middle school

age (Birkett et al., 2009; Williams, Connolly, & Pepler, 2005), and it is in the middle schools

where harassment, intimidation, and bullying peaks for young LGBTQ+ students (Kaufman et al.,

1999; Nansel et al., 2001). My research aims to address this gap by shedding light on the

importance of middle school GSAs from the perspective of middle school teachers.

Benefits and Barriers in Forming Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs

An effective way to support LGBTQ+ students in today's schools detailed in an article by

Cerezo and Bergfeld (2013), as well as in other scholarly research on the topic (i.e. Case and

Meier, 2014; Heck at al., 2013; Lee, 2002; Mayberry, 2006), is for teachers or counselors to

establish a Gay-Straight Alliance within their educational institution. Cerezo and Bergfeld's

article, which incorporates lessons gleaned from educational research on students of color, is a

call to action for improving school cultures for LGBTQ+ youth; the authors' main suggestion

being to develop "counterspaces" or "safe spaces" within schools in the form of a Gay-Straight

Alliance (2013, pp. 355). A GSA can afford students the opportunity to voice their opinions on

the school's curriculum and culture. GSAs need not only focus on LGBTQ+ issues, but can use

their diversity awareness standpoint to shed light on a variety of ways in which school culture

can be improved for *all* kinds of students. When viewing the goals of a GSA through a queer

theory lens, "public school students should see a variety of people and their families, who live in

various racial, ethnic, class, and religious contexts, who are queer and non-queer" represented in their school (Lugg & Murphy, 2013, pp. 120).

In her 2003 article, Lugg gives an example for how each subject could incorporate LGBTQ+ identities and culture, such as "when the Holocaust is studied, queers are included in the list of whom the Nazis prosecuted" (pp. 130). Penell (2017), likewise, suggests in her article a "Heteronormativity Scavenger Hunt" in which students study their school's environment, posters, clubs, and curriculum to look for signs of LGBTQ+ inclusion, or its lack of representation. Along with making suggestions for a more inclusive curriculum and participating in activities to assess and improve the culture of inclusivity, GSAs can also allow diverse students to not only embrace, but to celebrate their culture by participating in projects and activities throughout the year such as Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, Pride Month, Day of Silence, and Transgender Day of Remembrance (GLSEN, 2018). If middle school teachers are aware of the diversity awareness standpoint offered by a GSA, then they seem to be more likely to support the club, especially if they are concerned with the safety and comfort of their racial and ethnic minority students.

Research shows LGBTQ+ youth that participate in GSAs report fewer problems such as substance abuse, depression, and feelings of isolation (Heck et al., 2013). In their retrospective study of 79 LGBTQ+ college students, Heck et al. (2013) analyze responses from two open-ended survey questions regarding these students' high school experiences in a GSA to report these findings. They also offer some suggestions for GSA leaders and advisors including the use of GSA-related programming resources provided by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) as well as social networking opportunities to increase membership. They do not, however, go into detail about the formation of such clubs or how they should be conducted.

Addressing this gap in the literature, a study by Mayo (2015) draws on ethnographic fieldwork and eight in-depth interviews with GSA members, ages 14-18, and the GSA advisor to show that if the teacher or counselor forming the group has proper professional development training on how to run a GSA, using effective theoretical and pedagogical techniques, all participating members, not just LGBTQ+ youth members, share the benefits that stem from being part of the group. The GSA in this study had been active for over ten years, and the author attributes this to the activist-oriented students as well as the critical pedagogy used by the GSA advisor.

The GSA advisor is not the only teacher in a school that can support and benefit from the institution of a Gay-Straight Alliance. A study by Swanson and Gettinger (2016) surveyed 98 teachers from grades 6-12 to examine the relationship between GSAs and teacher attitudes toward LGBTQ+ youth. The authors conclude that teachers report a higher frequency of engaging in behaviors to support LGBTQ+ students when they work at a school with an active GSA and receive training specifically related to LGBTQ+ youth. Although this study shows a link between the teachers' perceptions of LGBTQ+ youth and the existence of a GSA, it does not specifically examine the teachers' perceptions of the club itself and how the club affects the school culture.

It is clear from the research that professional development regarding LGBTQ+ youth, including how to form and run a GSA, has an positive influence of the culture of inclusivity in educational institutions (GLSEN, 2018; Lugg 2003; Lugg, 2006; Lugg & Murphy, 2013; Lugg & Tooms, 2010). In the "Jump Start Your GSA" Guide produced by GLSEN, the organization cites that GSAs can have a great impact on school culture, and according to GLSEN research, students in schools with a GSA hear anti-LGBTQ+ remarks less frequently in their school and generally

have more positive attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people. Yet, unfortunately, many students do not have access to a GSA in their school. GLSEN's survey of all secondary school students found that only about a third of students (36%) had a GSA present in their school (GLSEN, 2018). The fact that the majority of schools in the United States do not have GSAs may have an effect on how my participants view the importance and necessity of such clubs.

According to Lugg and Murphy (2013), GSAs can provide the time and resources for students to organize queer-positive libratory movements such as "Safe Zones" with, and for, their peers, teachers, and administrators. These authors highlight the benefits and importance of GSAs in schools, yet they do not provide details as to how GSAs are formed or the obstacles that could stand in the way of their formation. In a separate article by Lugg and Tooms (2010), it is noted that GSAs "have been and can be barred by administrators worried about promoting possible immorality and illegal behavior… Even worse, some administrators fail to support GSAs out of fear that they will be seen as queer by their own communities" (pp. 82). Yet, in Lugg's earlier article (2003) as well as in an article by Cerezo and Bergfeld (2013), GSAs are said to be protected under the Federal Equal Access Act (EAA) of 1984, and therefore could not be barred from a school. Unfortunately, it seems that although protected by this federal act, GSAs are still banned by administration in many schools. Students simply comply with the administration's decision to ban the club perhaps because they are unaware of the EAA, or they want to avoid a lengthy legal battle. It is interesting to see which middle school teachers in my study are aware of the legal protections of a GSA and how this affects their perceptions of implementing the club.

The literature I have reviewed serves to illustrate that Gay-Straight Alliance clubs can help a school become an overall more inclusive environment for students. Unfortunately, middle

school teachers' perceptions are typically not represented in the scholarly research regarding

GSAs and their effects on school cultures. My addresses this gap by discovering and presenting

data on the views and opinions specifically of grade 6-8 teachers regarding the institution of

Gay-Straight Alliance clubs.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

In keeping with my research questions and the goal of gaining a deep understanding of middle school teachers' perceptions of Gay-Straight Alliance clubs and their effects on school culture, the research design for my investigation was a qualitative case study used to conduct in-depth analyses of specific cases (Creswell, 2014). More specifically, over the course of several months, I used a phenomenological case study approach, drawing on qualitative techniques for the collection of data and evaluation of the research questions. Phenomenological case studies "involve in-depth inquiry into particular instances of a phenomenon in its natural context, from both the researcher's (etic) and the research participant's (emic) perspective" (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2015, pp. 341). The phenomenon in this case was the institution of a GSA club and the natural context was the middle school setting. This type of research design allowed me to examine the institution of a GSA from my own perspective as a researcher as well as from the perspectives of my participants, the teachers at the middle schools. I conducted this research using in-depth interviews as my primary research tool.

Conducting in-depth interviews allowed for the "voice" of the participants to be heard and interpreted. According to Vogt, Gardener, and Haeffele (2012), interviewing tends to be effective when one is seeking knowledge best obtained by the target population "because it is subjective or internal to the people being interviewed" (pp. 36), which is exactly the kind of information I was hoping to obtain in my study. The interview questions elicited further information on how these middle school teachers view the idea of having a GSA at their school and what effects the club may have on the school's culture of inclusivity.

Sample: Research Sites and Participants

I selected the middle schools and participants for this study based on purposeful sampling. This means participants needed to meet certain criteria to inform the research questions (Gall et al., 2015); the central criterion used for inclusion was that teachers were employed at the public middle schools which I chose to examine because they did not have active GSA clubs at the time of data collection. I chose two middle schools, one in Northern New Jersey and the other in Central New Jersey, for this study. I chose schools that I knew did not currently have functioning GSA clubs so that I would be able to explore teachers' perceptions of a possible institution of the club in the future. Both middle schools were located in suburban areas, but with close proximity to urban cities, with an enrollment of a highly diverse student body. The demographics of the two schools were fairly similar; the only difference being that Northern New Jersey Middle School had a higher Middle Eastern population and Central New Jersey Middle School had a higher Hispanic population. Both middle schools were comprised of roughly 900-1000 students in grades 6-8.

I did not want to limit my teacher participants to a specific age range or gender because experiences and insights from diverse participants would be valuable, as long as they were employed at schools without a GSA. This sample provided me with valuable data for my study because it encompassed multiple perspectives on inclusive cultures within the two schools.

Along with the schools and participants chosen for my study being a purposeful sample, they can also be seen as a convenience sample. Convenience samples are sometimes called volunteer samples because the sample is based on participants' availability and willingness to participate in the research study (Gall et al., 2015). I chose the middle school at which I work along with another middle school about an hour away so that multiple commutes for data

collection would be manageable. Unfortunately, out of the twelve New Jersey middle schools I

contacted to participate in my research, these were the only two schools at which I was granted

permission to recruit participants for the study. Many principals and superintendents simply did

not respond to my email request, while a few declined without citing reasons. I believe that the

nature of the study, the fact that it involved an LGBTQ+ issue, could be a reason for my lack of

success in easily securing research sites. This hardship in itself contributes to my findings in that

I found many administrators to be leery of participating in any research involving such a

controversial topic. The stigmatization around this area of study proves to make research quite

difficult.

      Within the research sites I was able to secure, the participants in the schools that agreed

to be interviewed did so of their own accord, making this a volunteer sample. After getting

written consent from each school's principal and superintendent, I recruited my participants

through emails, and anyone willing and able could volunteer to participate. Each participant

signed a written consent form (see Appendix A) before beginning the interview. The names of

the schools and participants in this study were changed in this publication to ensure

confidentiality.

      After selecting the population and sampling procedures for my study, of equal

importance was determining an ideal sample size. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest sampling

until a point of saturation or redundancy is reached, meaning to conduct interviews until "you

begin hearing the same responses to your interview questions [and] no new insights are

forthcoming" (pp. 101). The authors suggest setting a minimum sample size based on expected

reasonable coverage. I selected a sample size of 15-17 participants to account for possible

participant drop out. For example, out of the seven participants at Northern New Jersey Middle

School who responded to my email agreeing to sit for an interview, only five actually followed

up to set a date and time to meet. I was left with enough interview data to analyze from the

remaining interview participants. The 15 total participants I was able to interview were diverse in

age, gender, and subject area expertise. This was fortuitous as I was able to perceive whether or

not these variables had an impact on participant responses through axial coding during the

analysis process, which I will later describe in my findings. Below is a table displaying the

participant demographics.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

Participant Pseudonym	School	Years Teaching	Subject Area	Race/Ethnicity	Gender/Sexual Orientation
Lucy (LM)	CNJMS[6]	2 years	English	White	Female/Non-LGBTQ+
Hank (HZ)	CNJMS	25 years	Math	White	Male/Non-LGBTQ+
Allison (AR)	CNJMS	6 years	Math	Polish-American	Female/Non-LGBTQ+
Sally (SN)	CNJMS	2 years	Math	White	Female/Non-LGBTQ+
Jim (JC)	CNJMS	10 years	Social Studies	White	Male/Non-LGBTQ+
Marco (MU)	CNJMS	10 years	Social Studies	White	Male/Non-LGBTQ+
Bianca (BI)	CNJMS	8 years	Science	White	Female/Non-LGBTQ+
Tanya (TL)	CNJMS	20 years	Special Ed.	White	Female/Non-LGBTQ+
Anita (AG)	CNJMS	11 years	Special Ed.	White	Female/Non-LGBTQ+
Brian (BW)	NNJMS[7]	9 years	Health/Gym	White	Male/Non-LGBTQ+
Shane (SC)	NNJMS	21 years	Math	Italian-American	Male/Non-LGBTQ+
Stacy (ST)	NNJMS	20 years	Science	White	Female/Non-LGBTQ+
Shakira (SM)	NNJMS	8 years	Art	White	Female/Non-LGBTQ+
Matthew (MS)	NNJMS	24 years	Health/Gym	White	Male/Non-LGBTQ+
Jing (JL)	NNJMS	5 years	Music	Asian-American	Male/Non-LGBTQ+

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[6] Central New Jersey Middle School (pseudonym)
[7] Northern New Jersey Middle School (pseudonym)

Data Collection

Via email, I scheduled a date and time with each participant to meet for an interview. I completed most interviews at CNJMS during the school day on a common prep period, seeing that I work at this school. Some CNJMS participants were able to meet after school for the interview if we did not have a common prep time. To conduct the NNJMS interviews, I arranged for two separate days off work to travel north and meet my participants at their place of work. I completed three interviews one day, and I completed the other two on a separate day the following week. The interviews all took place in the participants' classrooms during their free period.

My interview protocol (see Appendix B) consisted of four demographic questions related to the participant's age, race, subject area expertise, and sexual orientation, along with fifteen questions relating to my research questions. These questions regarded their personal opinions on GSA goals and accomplishments, GSA effects on bullying and harassment, GSA effects on school curriculum and culture, and possible perceptions of other teachers, administrators, and parents regarding GSAs. For example, I asked participants what they thought a GSA club would accomplish at their school, how they thought the club would affect bullying and harassment of LGBTQ+ students, and what they thought other teachers, principals, and parents in the district might say about the institution of the club. Participants' answers to these questions gave me a deep understanding of their overall perceptions of GSA clubs and their effects on school culture. The interviews each took between 25 and 60 minutes and were conducted in the teacher participants' classrooms or a conference room within the school. This was ideal for the participants' comfort and minimized background noise, which could make transcribing very difficult.

SAFE SPACES IN THE MIDDLE   29

Immediately after I conducted each interview, I created short analytic memos, as suggested by Hays and Singh (2012). For the majority of the interviews, I used the recordings to transcribe my own data. By transcribing manually, I felt that I had a better connection with the data and was able to notice more common themes. I used Rev transcription services for several of the final interviews. Once all of the interviews were transcribed, I proceeded to analyze the data.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was completed over the course of two months. I began by reading through each interview and coding, or labeling, quotes and excerpts that stood out as significant. For example, if a participant had mentioned harassment, intimidation, or bulling of LGBTQ+ students, I would code the excerpt "HIB". For more specificity, I began utilizing sub-codes such as "anti-gay remarks," "unsafe bathroom/locker room," and "cyberbullying" to note the type of harassment, intimidation, or bullying. These sub-codes would later be grouped under the parent-code, "HIB". An additional example of my coding process is if a participant noted that he or she thought there would be pushback or resistance of any kind regarding the implementation of a GSA club, I would code the excerpts with sub-codes such as "teachers privately criticize club," "aggressive/vocal parents," or "only takes one kid to ruin it." These sub-codes could be grouped under the parent-codes, "Teacher Pushback," "Parent Pushback," and "Student Pushback" respectively. After each interview transcript had been marked in this way, I created a codebook in Excel to organize each code and sub-code, which I have included in this publication (See Appendix C). The codebook was an invaluable organizational tool in the data analysis process. Within the spreadsheet, I added columns for exemplary quotes and frequency counts, where I would note the participants from each school whose comments reflected the code,

as well as a column for relevant literature to match each code. Including relevant literature for

each code lent itself to discovering common themes amongst the codes and ensuring that the

codes were relevant to my research questions. The codebook amounted to 35 total codes, each

accompanied by their sub-codes, frequency counts, exemplary quotes, and relevant literature.

I thought I might be able to use axial coding to further develop several themes from the

codebook. For example, I thought that when comparing the interviews of participants of various

ages, I would find that teachers who have been teaching for over ten years may have had more

negative views of GSA clubs than teachers who have been teaching for under ten years, or I

thought I may find that female teachers viewed GSA clubs as more necessary to have in middle

schools, whereas male teachers may have thought GSA clubs should only be present in high

schools. I ended up finding that all of my participants, whether they were male or female, new or

veteran, had extremely similar perceptions of GSA clubs and their effects on school culture.

I was, however, able to find several themes across my codes by studying what each

participant was actually saying in excerpts where they mention certain codes. For example, I

noticed in my codebook that many teachers discussed that bullying of LGBTQ+ students will

decrease with the institution of a GSA; however, several teachers noted that this might not

happen right away. Instead of noting in my findings that teachers felt bullying would simply

decrease overall, I decided to look more deeply into this pattern to come up with a theme relating

to the decreasing of bullying as a process, rather than as an immediate result. I scanned my

transcripts further and found many of my participants thought that bullying might increase when

the club is first introduced, then decrease over time. When I present this theme later in my

findings, I will note the possible factors in this process as perceived by my participants.

Validity

For validity purposes, before exploring the emerging themes from my data, I used an inter-rater reliability process, or "peer review," to establish whether the data coded in the respective categories were consistent with the other raters (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 251). To do so, I enlisted two other Doctoral students from my cohort at Rutgers University to review my codebook and code a random selection of quotes and excerpts. After several correspondences and clarifications, we were all able to come to an agreement that the codes were valid interpretations of the interview data. I also shared my codebook with my dissertation chair and the two other professors on my committee. Overall, with five sets of additional eyes besides my own, it was confirmed that the analysis of the interview data was valid.

To ensure the utmost validity for this study, I employed a few other types of safeguards after analyzing my data as well. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "though qualitative researchers can never capture an objective 'truth' or 'reality,' there are a number of strategies that you as a qualitative researcher can use to increase the 'credibility' of your findings" (pp. 244). The strategies I used to increase my credibility were comparing interviews, member checking, and a chain of evidence. I compared and contrasted the information obtained from each data source, or participant, in order to weed out any major contradictions or inconsistencies. If I found anything suspicious, I revisited the source of the data to sort out any errors. This was done using member checking, which is "the process of having field participants review research procedures and statements in the research report for accuracy and completeness" (Gall et al., 2015, pp. 362-363). I allowed my participants to view my analysis of their words before attempting to write up my findings to ensure that I have presented their perceptions in a fair, accurate, and honest manner.

Finally, I include a chain of evidence in the description of my case study design, which "involves demonstrating how the research questions, raw data, data analysis procedures, and findings are linked to each other in a meaningful manner" (Gall et al., 2015, pp. 363). I used an audit trail in the methodology section of this paper where I thoroughly document all procedures for data collection and analysis so that other researchers can check the soundness of my methodology and perhaps even replicate my study (Gall et al., 2015). By incorporating peer review, interview comparisons, member checks, and a chain of evidence, the results of my study remain valid.

Ethics and Researcher Reflexivity

It is important to consider ethics when conducting any type of research; however, seeing that my study is centered on LGBTQ+ issues, I needed to be especially cognizant of personal biases. Throughout my study, I was sure to get oral and written consent from participants for all interviews, ensuring that they realized their participation was completely voluntary and that they could choose to discontinue participation at any time. Since one of my research sites was the middle school at which I work, I decided to only interview volunteers with whom I do not regularly interact. For example, I would not interview a teacher with whom I have a rapport; rather, I interviewed teachers who hardly knew me at all. This way, the participants would not feel an obligation to say things they thought I wanted to hear.

It was also important to avoid bias results because, as the lead researcher and teacher advocate for LGBTQ+ youth myself, I obviously wanted to see examples of only positive perceptions of a GSA. Also, the fact that I identify as straight and cisgender may have inhibited me from understanding some perceptions or analyzing certain data, for I may not be able to empathize with an LGBTQ+ person's experiences regarding harassment and bullying or being a

part of a GSA. If any teacher participants identified as LGBTQ+, I would have needed to make

sure they did not feel any kind of power differential during the interview or feel like they were

being studied because of their LGBTQ+ identity. In this case study, it was a non-issue as all my

participants identified as straight and cisgender, but I will keep this in mind for future research

studies. I was also sure to make the aims of my study clear to all participants during my research,

and assured them that their perceptions were important to me as a researcher, regardless of what

those perceptions were. During the data analysis process, I continued to remind myself to include

all perceptions relating to GSAs and LGBTQ+ issues, whether they were positive or negative, so

that my results remain valid and ethically sound.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Using a queer theory framework (Lugg & Murphy, 2014; Penell, 2017) to explain my

results, I present five major themes in this section, which emerged from my analyses of the

interviews. Each will be discussed in turn. The first theme I present shows how the

implementation of a GSA at the middle school can be regarded at a school change process. This

theme emerged from my participants' discussions regarding administrative resistance or

hesitation as well as their thoughts on how bullying and harassment of LGBTQ+ students would

change once a GSA is instituted. I found that most of my participants felt that their

administration might be hesitant, if not resistant, to a GSA because it would entail a major shift

in school culture and that an initial increase in bullying of GSA members might occur followed

by an eventual decrease overall. In presenting this theme, I will explore the possible factors

surrounding administrative resistance to change and this process of eventual decrease in bullying,

supported by evidence from my interviews.

The second theme I present surrounds the idea that a person's age and personal

experiences can be factors in their perceptions of a GSA and the LGBTQ+ community in general.

Here, I discuss participants' views on the delicate age of middle schoolers and whether this is an

appropriate age to introduce a GSA because of the students' stage in development, or if, because

of their immaturity, middle schoolers may be too young to understand or accept a GSA club.

Additionally, I explore possible reasons for almost all of my participants mentioning that

younger staff and younger parents would have a more positive perception of the club, whereas

older people may not be as accepting. In presenting this theme, I use evidence from my

interviews to determine reasons for this perceived correlation between age and GSA acceptance,

and explore the idea that it is perhaps not a person's age, but rather their personal experience

with the LGBTQ+ community that would determine their perception of a GSA club.

A third theme I will present is a GSA's impact on the middle school community at large

as well as the effects a community can have on the GSA club itself. Here, I discuss participants'

thoughts on how the demographics and location of a middle school can influence community

members' perceptions of GSA clubs. I also investigate how student, parent, and teacher

pushback due to misconceptions and lack of education can become a barrier to GSA

implementation, and how, if properly executed, the implementation of a GSA club can positively

affect members of a school community through proper education.

Fourth, I discuss how I found the moral and legal obligation to support a GSA to be

theme among participant interviews. Many teachers noted that it is their job to support students,

regardless of their own personal beliefs about the LGBTQ+ community, which aligns with

literature including the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Additionally, teachers mention that

GSAs provide a "safe space" for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and especially questioning students to

explore their identities without feeling isolated or being bullied. Many participants note that

legally and morally, it is the school's job to protect students from this harmful isolation and

bullying that could lead to serious consequences, such as suicide.

Finally, the effects of institutionalized homophobia and gender on GSA club involvement

for students emerged as a theme from the data. Participants noted a double standard in "coming

out" in middle school, where girls seem to have a much easier time of it than boys. In my

discussion of this theme, I also explore how institutionalized sexism, trans-erasure, toxic

masculinity, and stereotypes may be causes of this double standard, and how some teachers even,

inadvertently perhaps, contribute to these causes, setting a poor example for our future

generations.

GSA Implementation as a School Change Process

When asked how the implementation of a GSA club would affect bullying and

harassment within the middle school, the participants had an interesting perspective. Generally,

GSA clubs are intended to reduce bullying and harassment (Case and Meier, 2014; Heck et al.,

2013). However, some of my participants spoke to the fact that an initial increase in bullying

may take place after the implementation of a GSA. For example, Sally mentioned in her

interview, "I think initially [the GSA] might be met with negativity from some students. Even

some teachers, unfortunately." She likened the GSA club to African American acts during the

Civil Rights Movement using the following example: "It's kinda one of those things if you think

about black students who would go to sit-ins in segregated schools. At first, it was absolutely

terrible for them. I can't even imagine." Sally is referring to the fact that throughout our

country's history, when a group of people decides to stand up for their rights, they are initially

met with backlash from a population adverse to change. However, Sally did mention that

eventually, when the GSA gains support and is normalized, the bullying will decrease because

there will be more bystanders sticking up for minority LGBTQ+ students.

Sally was not the only participant with this perception. Allison also mentioned that

initially, there would always be some kids who take advantage of the opportunity to criticize

something because it is new and different, until they realize it has become the norm. Allison

stated, "I feel like you're always going to have those kids who are going to take something really

good and poke fun at it or give it some negative connotation. But I guess the more and more kids

that do get on board with this idea, then the more those other kids are outcasts." Allison feels that

at first, kids may laugh at students coming out as LGBTQ+ or the allies of those who are coming

out, but eventually, as the support for this community grows, the number of students holding

negative perceptions will dwindle and students will realize its no longer normal to poke fun at

these minority students. Similarly, Hank holds the idea that at first students may actually bully

GSA members more because they are out of the norm. Once the idea of the club is normalized,

bullying will go down. Hank stated, "There's always gonna be the kids that are gonna be the

bullies because they don't feel comfortable...if you have enough positivity, then those bullies are

just gonna be drowned out." Hank, like the other participants, realizes that students like to fit it,

and if enough students accept the club as their norm, those who make fun of it will become

minorities themselves, and will then cease to bully or harass those in the club.

Digging deeper into the reasoning behind the initial increase in bullying of new GSA

members, Lucy used an interesting metaphor in her interview. Lucy had little background

knowledge of GSA clubs before the interview, but when I informed her that the club was not

necessarily confidential, she compared new GSA members to students having a target on their

heads. In regards to bullying, she thought, "Overall, I would say it would go down, but at first it

may put a target on a certain group of people... middle school kids sometimes aren't the nicest."

She perceived the GSA club as "outing" students who had not previously identified publicly as

LGBTQ+ before, and she thought this might cause increased negative attention from peers.

Another participant, Shakira, also shared this fear for her students by stating, "You don't want to

give kids ammunition [to bully] a child who is already going through a tough time." Shakira also

believes joining the club may be dangerous for LGBTQ+ students because it gives their

classmates "ammunition" or further reasons to bully them. Before the club, these LGBTQ+

students may have gone unnoticed or unrecognized as having a different gender identity or

sexuality (Sokolower-Shain, 2016), whereas when joining the club and bringing awareness to

their differences, they may be putting a metaphorical "target" on themselves for bullying by

students with negative perceptions of LGBTQ+ people. This may be due to the hypervisibility,

or highly increased awareness, of LGBTQ+ students in the club (Lee, 2002). According to

participants, this initial negativity will then gradually subside as the club grows in numbers and

gains support from both staff and students, but according to Shakira, these LGBTQ+ students

will have to be "brave" to be one of the firsts to join the GSA.

>   According to the perceptions of 12 of my 15 participants, eventually, the bullying and

harassment of LGBTQ+ students in the middle school would decrease with the institution of a

GSA club. My participants seemed to perceive the implementation of the GSA as a school

change process in which staff and students must first become aware of the LGBTQ+ students,

become accustomed to them, become better informed or fix their misconceptions, and then

eventually, become accepting. My last participant, Jim, summarized this idea quite nicely:

>   I think most of the problems that you see, like as a historian, people tend to be ignorant of
>
>   certain things. I think once you're exposed to things, the ignorance tends to dissipate, and
>
>   ignorance breeds fear, and so I think the fear of it, I think that can cause issues, but I
>
>   think just by having the club, the organization, it can try to reduce the ignorance that
>
>   some people might have, and therefore the fear goes down and the stigma or the isolation
>
>   of certain people, I think it can go down. (Jim)

Taken as a whole, Jim articulates what many of my participants were getting at in their

interviews. Humans are likely to be afraid of things they do not understand, and this fear can

cause avoidance or even aggression toward the unfamiliar. As middle school teachers especially,

my participants see young students who just want to fit in, understand their society, and be

understood by others. My participants believe that initially, the bullying and harassment of

LGBTQ+ students and their allies in a GSA club will increase due to ignorance or

misinformation, and through a process of educating the misinformed and normalizing the

unknown, the negative perceptions and reactions to the club will dissipate.

Along with this process of a change in school culture surrounding LGBTQ+ student

safety, an institution of a GSA club in the middle school can also be regarded as a school change

process to which administration and teachers may be hesitant or resistant. According to Corbett,

Firestone, and Rossman, regarding the sacredness of a school's norms, "challenges to the sacred

are greeted immediately with forthright resistance and subsequently-if threat continues-with the

creation of a culture of opposition" (1987, pp. 36). At Central New Jersey Middle School, eight

out of ten (80%) of participants felt that their administration would be at least hesitant if not

resistant to the idea of instituting a GSA. At Northern New Jersey Middle School, three out of

five (60%) felt this way as well. Overall, the majority of my participants felt that administration

would resist the club due to various fears, mainly parent and community pushback. For example,

from CNJMS, Marco stated, "I think that the administration would try to not have [the GSA]

happen...the principal would be nervous about any kind of conservative parent pushback," Tanya

noted, "I think all of them might have some hesitation just because of fear of any backlash from

parents, board, et cetera," and Anita said, "I really don't think admin are really approachable

about this...I think that it is administration's fear that there would be a lot of pushback from

parents." These three participants from the same school all felt their principal would be resistant

to a GSA for fear that parents would not support the club and may be vocal about it. From

NNJMS, Stacy told me administration might think, "like how are the parents going to respond?

What's the community going to respond, you know?" Overall, from both schools, participants'

first thought about why administration would be so resistant to a GSA was that the parents and

community at large would fear this school change.

In Corbett, Firestone, and Rossman's one-year study of the effects of school

improvement initiatives on the cultures of three different schools, the authors found fear of

parent pushback to be a major factor in resistance to school change as well. I found several

quotes from the participants in their study that were very similar to my own findings. Teachers in

this study mentioned, "'When the school gets one phone call from a parent, things are

wild'...'when it comes down to it, the school goes with the parents' wishes'; and 'Anytime a

decision is made, the first thing thought of is, 'will a lawyer be with the parents?'...it's almost

like parents run the school'" (Corbett et al., 1987, pp. 48). Clearly, administration's resistance to

any kind of school change, especially one that parents may be vocal about, can become a barrier

for teachers wishing to start initiatives, such as a GSA. In chapter five, I will discuss measures

that can be taken to help assuage administrative resistance and the fear to implement a GSA, as

well as students' fear to join the club due to the aforementioned initial increase in bullying that

may take place according to my participants' perceptions.

Age and Experience as Factors Affecting GSA Perception

A second theme that emerged from my data is the idea that the age of a teacher or parent

will be a factor in whether or not they would be accepting of and comfortable with a GSA club at

the middle school. Ten of my fifteen participants mentioned that a person's age would affect

whether or not he or she would support the institution of a GSA. Several teachers mentioned that

the school's staff is very young, and therefore progressive in their views of LGBTQ+ people.

The teachers did not think that older staff would be overtly opposed to the idea of the club; many

simply suggested they would not be as excited about it. Also, a few teachers mentioned other

variables, such as experience and exposure, which may correlate with age and be reasons for these perceptions.

Regarding the idea of younger staff, a fifth year teacher, Allison, cited, "When you have a younger staff, you have people who are more educated about this stuff and it's not as new for us...we've been exposed to, or this has become more a part of our norm than a veteran teacher." This participant did not necessarily think that the older staff or "veteran teachers" would be opposed to the club per say; she just thought that they would maybe have more questions about it. Lucy, a second year teacher, mentioned, "I feel like overall we have a younger staff, so they're more open minded. So I think they would be more encouraging. I would hope so." Lucy felt that because of her young age, she is more accepting of LGBTQ+ people and GSA clubs, and thinks this may be the case for other teachers around her age.

Interestingly, both Allison and Lucy agree that their youth contributes to their positive perceptions of LGBTQ+ people, yet earlier, they mentioned that the bullying and harassment of LGBTQ+ students would increase due to other students, who are much younger, holding negative perceptions of these minority students. Perhaps the teachers use of the word "young" only refers to young adults rather than young children who are still growing and learning about cultural differences. Or perhaps these teachers are simply unaware of the contradiction they pose when correlating youth with acceptance while also discussing the tendency of children to bully those who are different. Another possible explanation for this conflicting data can be found in my interview with Sally. Sally insinuates that perhaps *experience*, rather than age, is the real variable when it comes to perceptions of LGBTQ+ people. She explains why teachers at this middle school would be mostly accepting and excited about having a GSA club:

> Especially because we have such a young staff. So I think the younger that you are, the
>
> more likely you have been exposed to it in school. Or with your peers, or with friends or
>
> family who have identified as LGBTQ, versus teachers in their 40s or 50s, when being
>
> gay wasn't even legal. (Sally)

Rather than age alone, Sally feels that the more experience and positive exposure one has had with LGBTQ+ people, the more accepting of a GSA club one will be, regardless of age. If one has been surrounded by negative views of LGBTQ+ people, like some older teachers who grew up in a time with much higher stigmatism (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003), then in turn their views will be negative. This may explain why younger children, especially middle schoolers, may have negative perceptions which lead to bullying and harassment of LGBTQ+ students; they simply have not been exposed to LGBTQ+ people before and do not know how to react. With this new variable in mind, I thought it fascinating to compare the responses of my youthful, female participants, Allison, Lucy, and Sally, with two of my older male participants, Hank and Shane. Interestingly, despite the age and gender differences, the five participants held the same perceptions of age being a factor in GSA acceptance, though Hank and Shane seemed to agree more with Sally that it is not so much age as it is experience and exposure that truly affects one's perceptions.

Hank, a 25-year veteran teacher, and Shane, a 21-year veteran teacher, both had very positive perceptions of GSA clubs. They also agreed, though, that age may be a factor. Hank explained, "I've been doing this for 25 years; I think the older generation would have a harder time with it. I think the younger generations are more accepting." He does believe that age may be a factor in a teacher's perception of a GSA; however, like Sally, he also mentions the additional factor of experience, "And I think if you've been in situations too, like growing up

with it or being exposed to it, makes it a little easier too." In this quote, Hank was referring to how having LGBTQ+ friends or acquaintances will result in a more positive perception of a GSA club, regardless of one's age. Shane tells a similar story:

> I don't want to mischaracterize, but maybe some of your older teachers who come from a different generation, they might not be [as accepting], I don't know. I'm not speaking for them. But I think maybe a lot of these younger teachers who have been a part of this generation that has been like the LGBTQ, that whole movement, they grew up with that. So to them it's just like, 'I understand it.' (Shane)

Shane feels that as society changes, and with the LGBTQ+ rights movement on the rise, people who grew up in more recent generations will have more positive views of the LGBTQ+ community in general. Although Hank and Shane are much older than my other participants, their views on GSA clubs are positive because they have had positive experiences with LGBTQ+ people in their own lives. For example, both Hank and Shane told me in their interviews that they have LGBTQ+ family members whom they love very much, and therefore have had positive experiences with LGBTQ+ people.

Additionally, Shane added that although he feels most teachers from newer generations would be accepting of the club, he felt that only staff members that personally identified as LGBTQ+ themselves would be fit to run such a club. He sentiments were as follows: "This is going to sound like a dumb question but could a straight person run that club and be effective? I don't think so. It would be like...You don't want a football coach teaching somebody how to play flute. It doesn't make sense." Shane believed that regardless of age and advocacy, any non-LGBTQ+ staff member would not have the necessary experience to guide these young sexual minority students. I found this to be an interesting and novel perspective; however, according to

most literature on GSA clubs, most faculty advisors are actually not LGBTQ+ themselves (Uribe, 1994). I expand on this perspective and relevant literature further in the discussion section of this paper.

Overall, the majority of my participants felt that the younger a teacher is, the more accepting he or she will be of a GSA club in the middle school. However, as several responses suggest, age may only be a variable inasmuch as it provides the time needed to gain positive experiences with LGBTQ+ people. The exposure to this community in a positive light may be the real factor in determining how accepting and comfortable teachers will be with the idea of a GSA club in their middle school.

It is not surprising that teachers believed age and experience to be potential variables in overall perceptions of LGBTQ+ people and GSA clubs. According to literature throughout history, there have been massive shifts in general perceptions of LGBTQ+ people in this country (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003). For example, in the 1970s, many people saw homosexuals as a threat to children (Blount, 200). By the late 70s, research began to shift from exploring the reasons for and the process of being homosexual to looking at the psychological problems related to homosexuality, which was classified as a form of mental illness in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* until 1973 (American Psychiatric Association, 1983). Aligning to this literature and the quotes from my participants, it is clear that depending on the time period in which some middle school teachers grew up or began teaching, they may still be holding on to some of the vicious stigma outlined in this research from the past. This could have an obvious impact on their perception of today's GSA clubs.

Along with the age of teachers and community members affecting views of a GSA, it is also important to determine whether or not the views of the delicate-aged middle school students

will be a benefit or barrier in implementing a GSA. Regarding middle schoolers' possible

thoughts on a GSA club, Marco from CNJMS states, "I don't think they're too young to

understand it. I do think they're definitely immature, but not too young to understand it. They

may not take it as seriously, but they definitely are able to comprehend it." Likewise, Jing from

NNJMS explains:

> I guess it would be appropriate. I guess I would call it a delicate age...And, the whole
>
> things with hormones and going around...And, this is the time to really find themselves. I
>
> love this age group, but kids are going to be kids. They're going to find an excuse to
>
> bully each other. Kids are funny though. Sometimes they have moments of great
>
> enlightenment and understanding. And then, sometimes, they're just terrible. They're
>
> monsters. (Jing)

It would seem that both Marco and Jing are unworried about the students misunderstanding the

concept of a GSA, instead worry that they may find it to be something to poke fun at or use as an

excuse to bully LGBTQ+ students in the club. Shane echoes this concern by mentioning,

"They're middle school kids. This is historically the cruelest age group known to mankind."

Unfortunately, middle school aged students' immaturity and tendency to bully others who are

different or "uncool" according to their social hierarchy (Bishop, 2004; Cillessen, Schwartz, &

Mayeux, 2011) may prove to be a barrier when implementing a GSA.

Conversely, however, many participants from both research sites mentioned that middle

school is a great setting for a GSA because it is the time for students to develop a sense of self

and explore different identities. According to research, middle school is when most students

begin to develop or question their sexual orientation (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Troiden,

1989) and many are in the stages of "coming out" to their peers (Williams, Connolly, & Pepler,

2005). With this in mind, it is not surprising that most of my participants felt a GSA would be

appropriate to introduce at the middle school age. Shakira explains:

> This is my first year in middle school and I got to tell you, I really see that this is the
>
> perfect age for [a GSA], because then by the time they go into high school, they've kind
>
> of, the confusion could've already set in. So I think this is the perfect age. This is the
>
> perfect time for education and to teach us all about tolerance, and you know that we are,
>
> that we're all different. (Shakira)

Shakira, coming from an elementary school position, did say that there is "such a thing as being

exposed to sexuality too young," but she feels that is not the case for middle schoolers. Like

Shakira, Bianca also agrees that a GSA at the middle school level would be a perfect way to set

kids up for high school: "I think you'll eliminate a lot of the bullying and the judgment and the

stigma, and that they can go into the high school with a clear mind focused on school and

knowing that they're accepted, and they don't have to worry about how they identify on top of

going into a new school with new people." So, although certain participants were concerned that

middle school is a tough age to implement a GSA because it's the age at which harassment,

intimidation, and bullying peaks for LGBTQ+ youth (Kaufman et al., 1999), most participants

felt that despite this, or even because of this, GSAs should be implemented at the middle school

in order to support young LGBTQ+ students, especially those still questioning their identity.

The School Community and The GSA: How They Impact Each Other

A third major theme emerging from my data was that a community at large can have an

great impact on the GSA club at their middle school; at the same time, the GSA club at the

middle school can have an equally great impact on its school's entire community. I will first

discuss the effects a community can have on GSA, including how community demographics and

location can be a benefit or barrier, as well as how pushback from parents, teachers, and students can become an obstacle to the club. I will then address how a GSA can impact its school community by providing much needed education to fix any negative misconceptions of the club and the LGBTQ+ community in general.

First, according to my participants, the demographics and location of a school can affect the way its community members would perceive the idea of instituting a GSA club at the middle school level. Although the public two schools I chose to examine for this study were located in two different areas of the state, the participants had similar views on how demographics and location in general would be either a benefit or barrier to implementing a GSA. For example, participants from CNJMS had the following to say about the benefits of their school's demographics and location: "First of all, politically, this is a more liberal area that we live in and work in, so I think that does help. I think the fact that it's a more liberal community because of where we live, people would be pretty open to [a GSA]" (Marco); "I think location makes a huge difference. I think because of where we're located, I think the backlash or outspokenness of a club like this would be minimal" (Brian); "we're mostly a blue-collar community...we have low parent involvement" (Jim). According to these teachers, being a politically liberal area located in the suburbs of New Jersey near a few big cities with many "blue collar" parents who are less involved in their child's education would lend itself to community members being more supportive of a GSA club, or at least not trying to shut it down. Regarding the parent involvement in the community, some participants noted that most parents would not even realize there was a club because they rarely talk to their students about school.

Conversely, Sally, also from CNJMS, mentioned one barrier due to demographics: "Especially with such a high Hispanic population. Traditionally, Hispanic parents are much less

open toward [the LGBTQ+ community] than other races. I think it's more of the religious aspect than anything else. There's a correlation between Hispanics being more religiously conservative." Sally believes that a community with a high Hispanic population, who are usually Christian conservative, may become a barrier to starting a GSA as you may find yourself fielding angry phone calls from religious parents who do not condone the LGBTQ+ identity.

Over at NNJMS, participants had the following to say about how their school's demographics and location could be a benefit for starting a GSA: "There is diversity, whether it's ethnic diversity, economic diversity, there's a big range" (Stacy); "based on the teachers, based on the diverse community that lives here, I don't see [a GSA] being a huge issue" (Jing); "I think given the fact that we're very close to New York City where I think a lot of the kids now in school aren't as afraid to hide if they happen to be...say gay" (Shane). These participants feel that due to the diversity of their community members and the fact that they live near a big city, the community at large will be accepting and supportive of a GSA at the middle school. Again, however, some participants did mention religion as a possible barrier to a smooth implementation of the club: "Especially with religious beliefs. There's a big Middle Eastern culture here and [being LGBTQ+] is a no-no. So, that would be tough. That's a tough one" (Matthew); "you have kids coming from some homes where religiously...you might get kids that come from very Christian homes that read that [the LGBTQ+ identity] is wrong in the Bible at CCD. You could have some of these religious fanatics that might be like, 'I can't believe they're adding clubs for these gays'" (Shane). At both research sites, teachers felt that their suburban, nearly urban, location and liberal, diverse communities would benefit a GSA with their full support, with the exception of any strongly religious community members, who could become a barrier by voicing their opposition to such a club.

Research does support this notion that religious views could be a cause for opposition to LGBTQ+ people and GSA clubs (Blount 2005; Butler & Byrne, 1992; Pascoe, 2007; Uribe, 1994). Yet, interestingly enough, regarding my participants' thoughts that their near-urban locations would benefit their LGBTQ+ youth, Blackburn and McCready found that "queer youth in urban schools face higher levels of homophobia, which negatively affects their academic performance and activism" as they face more intersectionality of oppression (2009, pp. 227). So perhaps despite my participants' opinions, the students at CNJMS and NNJMS may face higher levels of homophobia and therefore have less support for a GSA because of their community's close proximity to big cities.

Any barrier that a community's demographics and location may cause, according to my participants, boils down to the idea of pushback from community members, whether it comes from parents, or even the students and staff at the middle school. Besides religiosity, many of my participants felt that a main reason for pushback against a GSA would be negative misconceptions because of a lack of education and truthful information about GSA clubs.

Regarding student pushback, participants noted that unless the students were educated on the purpose and goals of a GSA, they might misconstrue the concept. Sally stated, "It would have to be really emphasized that it's a G-S-*A*, and the *alliance* part would really have to be emphasized. Because I think going back to the whole, it could be met with some backlash. You have kids that are like, 'Well, how come they get a club and straight people don't get a club?' That kind of thing." Sally believes students may misconstrue the club as a "gay students only" deal, which would cause some backlash and perhaps lead to the mistreatment of those in the club.

The same was said regarding teacher pushback in that any teacher that misunderstood the club's purpose might criticize it. Although none of my participants thought that any teacher

would outright oppose the club, many noted views such as, "I think there may be a pocket full of

a couple teachers who behind closed doors criticize it and implant or own beliefs on it" (Marco).

Several participants from both schools were concerned that teachers would privately criticize the

club, which could lead to a quietly growing discontent. They thought that in order for the club to

be fully accepted at the school, for both students and staff, the most important step in rolling out

the club would be to thoroughly educate the school community on what a GSA really does.

Educating a community within a school can be simple. On the whole, teachers thought it

best to have some sort of announcement, assembly, or newsletter fully describing the club to

avoid the aforementioned student and staff pushback. Educating the surrounding community,

however, can be more difficult. All fifteen of my participants at some point in their interview

mentioned the fact that parent pushback due to societal misconceptions surrounding LGBTQ+

issues will undoubtedly become a barrier to instituting a GSA at the middle school. The

following excerpts from interviews highlight some common misconceptions the participants felt

community members may have:

> "I feel like parents might have these misconceptions that at a GSA, you're just talking
>
> about sex and like the act of sex and sexual behavior, and they're not really informed
>
> about what the discussions are" (Allison); "They might say, 'You're exposing my kid to
>
> this gay and lesbian. My kid might turn gay and lesbian'...but that's how some people
>
> think. Like if you expose my kid, then my kid's gonna turn into one" (Hank); "I think
>
> you'll have parents coming in, calling saying, 'Shut it down. I don't want my kid in that. I
>
> don't want my kid around that. I don't want my kid in a school where you have a group
>
> of gay kids parading around'" (Sally); "You might get a little pushback. Like, 'it's my
>
> baby...No, no. My baby's too young'" (Shakira).

These were just several of the countless speculations as to why parents and community members

may be opposed to having a GSA at a middle school. Allison felt parents may assume a GSA

club inherently has to do with sex, Henry thought parents would fear the presence of a GSA

would turn their child gay, Sally noted parents may think the club is for gay students to "parade

around" perhaps protesting at school, and Shakira felt that parents would think their child is too

young to be exposed to the idea of the LGBTQ+ community.

Unfortunately, according to these same participants, sometimes people will remain

convinced of these misconceptions despite being educated, but it could not hurt to try. The

teachers in my study suggested ideas such as a parent information night regarding the GSA, a

community-wide flyer or newsletter with information about the club, and even a "robo-call"

phone message from administration to parents explaining the purpose and goals of the new club.

Overall, each and every one of my interview participants felt a middle school's community

would have a major effect on the implementation of a GSA club, whether it be demographics and

location, or pushback due to misconceptions. The only suggestion to assuage these barriers

caused by the community at large would be to educate people, which is actually one of the first

and foremost goals of a GSA (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Uribe & Harbeck, 1994).

Seeing that a GSA can be a most powerful force for a change in school and community culture

(Hansen, 2007), it is important to find ways to educate the greater community before and during

the implementation of a GSA club. As Anita explained at the end of her interview, "The goal of

having a GSA in middle school would be number one, educating the rest of the community,

educating the staff, educating the parents. Education is key."

School Employees' Moral and Legal Obligation to Support a GSA

The penultimate theme that emerged from my data was that these middle school teachers feel it is their moral and legal duty to support their students regardless of their own personal beliefs. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) is a national policy that mandates all school staff to provide a safe school culture for all students. Paired with an individual school's anti-bullying policies, this act ensures that teachers and administrators, regardless of their own personal opinions of students, do everything in their power to create a safe school environment for all children, regardless of their race, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

Nine of my fifteen participants mentioned that legally, if not morally as well, they felt an obligation to provide support and a safe environment for their students. From CNJMS, Brian explained, "I think that there's also an understanding that that's our job. If we want the students to be accepting, we have to be accepting, even if you're not personally accepting of [LGBTQ+ people], that's our job." Brian feels that as part of his job as an educator, he should strive to always make his students feel accepted and valued, even if he disagrees with part of their identity are on a personal level. He also wants his students to be accepting of others, so he sets the right example. At NNJMS, Jing added a personal note to his response:

> I'll be very upfront with you. I definitely identify as a conservative Christian. Do I
> support this type of thing for those kids? Absolutely. I think it's important. Other teachers,
> it's hard for me to say. I think we're all in the same place, though. If a student needs
> support and needs help, we're here to help them. We're not going to turn them away.
> We're not going to discriminate them...I mean, we signed our contract and our pledge to
> help the student. So, whether we agree with them or not agree with them or their life

choices or style, we're here to help them. So, whatever that means, we need to provide

that. (Jing)

Jing admitted that as a conservative Christian, he might have some dissenting feelings about the

LGBTQ+ community; however, when discussing the idea of a GSA for his LGBTQ+ students,

he was in full support. He noted that legally, he had signed a contract as a teacher, which means

he is obligated to make his students feel safe and supported. Morally, he alludes to the fact that

he would never turn his back on a student that needed help. Another participant, Shane, also

displayed a strong sense of obligation to his students when he said, "Why wouldn't you [support

students]? If you're doing this and you're miserable doing this, you're in the wrong field. You

know what I'm saying? You're in the wrong field." Shane was making the point that as a teacher,

part of your job is caring for your students. In other words, perhaps if one does not care to

support all students regardless of one's own beliefs, one should not be in the field of teaching.

Shane also connects his views on teaching to his views on parenting. Regarding his own children,

he emphasized, "As a parent, I'm going to love my kids no matter what. Like my daughters don't

like boys? Good. You're my flesh and blood anyway. I love you. Who gives a shit? I'm saying,

that's your flesh and blood. I don't care if you came out with a tail, I'm still loving you." Shane

was adamant that when it comes to children, whether they are your own offspring or a student in

your class, you should love and support them regardless of any divergence from the norm that

they may display.

On a further legal note, some participants mentioned that it is an LGBTQ+ student's right

to have a GSA, which is consistent with the literature (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; Lugg, 2003).

Anita noted in her interview regarding a GSA, "The facts are the facts, and the law is the law.

We are allowed to have that." This participant happened to be well versed in school law and was

referring to the Federal Equal Access Act (FEAA) of 1984, which mandates a school to allow for

any type of school club to form, or risk losing federal funding. Another participant, Jim, alludes

to the legal right to form a GSA when he states, "It kinda goes back to the first amendment. You

have assembly rights." Besides the FEAA and the first amendment, Shane adds to a GSA's legal

argument with the following scenario: "Let's think about this logistically. God forbid this kid

went home and said to his mother or father, 'Well, I'm gay. They're not providing...' You know

how it works these days. We got to make sure everybody's feelings are taken care of. I don't

mean that in a sarcastic way." Shane posits that legally, a school must provide support for all

kinds of students. A school should support and celebrate various cultures, or it may incur

backlash from the community, maybe in the form of a lawsuit.

Additionally, many teachers expressed possible legal and moral ramification for not

instituting a GSA, citing mainly the physical and emotional safety of their LGBTQ+ students. A

GSA can provide social support for these students that may not be able to find it elsewhere (Pace,

2009), which leads to a higher sense of visibility and acceptance (Lee, 2002), and lesser feelings

of isolation (Mayberry, 2006). Sally predicts these GSA benefits for her own students: "Having

that team would be really beneficial for students who, especially students are questioning. It's

giving students resources. It's giving students a team, a support system that they might not have

at home." She further notes, "it would give kids who might think one way, the opportunity to

explore other options, without feeling isolated." Consistent with the literature, several

participants, much like Sally, ruminated on the benefits of GSA clubs, including the safe space it

provides, and the possible ramifications for not having one. Four participants even mentioned

LGBTQ+ student suicide as a possible consequence of not providing safe spaces like GSAs

(Bidwell, 1988). Jim from CNJMS stated, "I know with the suicide rates being very high

amongst our LGBT kids, maybe [a GSA] can have an effect on a reduction of our suicide rates, which have been really high in recent years, especially in our town." Jim may be specifically alluding to the recent suicide of an LGBTQ+ student who had attended CNJMS. Even at NNJMS, a school without a recent case of LGBTQ+ student suicide, Shane explained, "If these kids feel that they're not going to be accepted because of their sexuality, they're going to hide. And you shouldn't live like that because then you have this big ball of anxiety, and that's why kids commit suicide because they're afraid of how they're going to be perceived." Shane feels that a GSA club can help these students feel accepted and avoid "this big ball of anxiety", which could lead to terrible outcomes like student suicide. In the end, the literature along with my participants' perceptions show that morally, and legally, a school and its teachers have an obligation to protect each and every student from emotional and physical harm, such as isolation that can lead to suicide.

How Institutionalized Homophobia and Gender Affect GSA Involvement

The last theme apparent in the data from my study concerns the effects that institutionalized homophobia (Blount, 2005), trans-erasure (Nicolazzo, Renn, & Quayle, 2017), sexism, and toxic masculinity can have on middle school students and a potential GSA. Additionally, within this theme, I explore the idea that a student's gender can affect whether or not that student decides to become a part of a GSA at the middle school level (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). I found that even some of the teachers I interviewed were prone to using stereotypical language that contributes to the male vs. female double standard that exists for both LBGTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth.

Before even reaching the data collection process, I found institutionalized homophobia to be an obstacle in conducting my study, as many administrators refused to allow me to conduct

research involving LGBTQ+ issues within their schools. After reaching out to twelve school administrators, only two agreed to allow me to conduct this research. Several administrators did not provide any valid reason for their refusal, rather I received responses such as "I apologize for my delay in responding. Unfortunately, [our middle school] staff members will not be able to participate in this study. Thank you, in advance, for your understanding" (anonymous administrator). Additionally, when viewing the demographic data of the participants I was able to interview from the two research sites I managed to secure, I realized that no LGBTQ+ teachers themselves agreed to participate. It would seem that only non-LGBTQ+ teachers felt comfortable enough to sit for an interview regarding LGBTQ+ topics. As was the case with previous studies involving LGBTQ+ topics (Kolbert et al., 2015; Roesler & Deisher, 1972), I found that institutionalized homophobia prevented me from easily securing comfortable research participants. Furthermore, once I did have the chance to interview my participants, I found that institutionalized homophobia, trans-erasure, and sexist double standards continued to be themes in how several of the teachers responded to my questions.

When referring to their LGBTQ+ students, several teachers referred to these students as making a "choice" or leading a certain "lifestyle" when coming out, as opposed to students coming to terms with their identity. Participants discussed how parents or other teachers may not "be accepting of" a student's "choice," as if identifying as LGBTQ+ were something students can choose not to do. For example, Jing referred to his LGBTQ+ students' identity as "their life choices or style," and Shane told me he was "okay with" gay males. Their verbiage connoted that LGBTQ+ students are making some sort of choice for which they must be commiserated. My participants from both research sites all considered themselves allies to their LGBTQ+ students, yet unfortunately, societies' harmful stereotypes and misconceptions were apparent in the way

they spoke about the LGBTQ+ community (Blount, 2005). In addition, although I am personally

aware of the enrollment of several transgender students at one of my research sites, not one of

my participants mentioned the needs or even the existence of trans or gender non-conforming

students. It was clear that when discussing the needs of their LGBTQ+ students, teachers were

mainly referring to their cisgender lesbian and gay students, perhaps not even realizing that their

transgender students, who face higher levels of harassment (McGuire et al., 2010), are being

forgotten or ignored (Nicolazzo et al., 2017).

Regarding gender, according to Blackburn and McCready (2009), GSA clubs at any level

generally appeal more to cisgender female lesbian students than to gay males or transgender

students. Consistent with this literature, I found that several participants perceive a double

standard of sorts that makes it easier for females to come out to peers or join a GSA, whereas for

males, coming out or choosing to join a GSA proves to be more difficult. When pondering this

perception out loud in her interview, Sally began her thought process with the following excerpt:

"Actually also what I've noticed a lot, and I don't know statistically if this is accurate, but I feel

like there are way more, or significantly higher numbers, of females in our school that identify as

gay than males. I'm not necessarily sure if that's because there are more gay girls than boys."

Sally then thought about her own students and realized, "Well I have a student I know is gay, but

he's never actually said to me, 'I'm gay,' or, 'I like this boy,' or 'I have a boyfriend.' Versus,

I've had so many girls come up to me saying, 'I have a crush on this girl,' or, 'This girl just

broke up with me,' or, 'How do I talk to this girl?' I have not had any boys say that." Sally seems

to be coming to the conclusion that perhaps there are not many more lesbians than gay males at

the school; it may just be the case that she notices her lesbians students are more open to talking

about their sexuality, at least with her, than are her gay male students. As an after thought, Sally

added, "Maybe it's one of those things, you know, like two girls make out at a bar for fun, to get

attention, and that's fine. But when two guys make out a bar for fun, we're all like, 'Oh, what's

that? What's that about?'" Without realizing it, Sally used a common stereotype that contributes

to institutionalized toxic masculinity (Pascoe, 2007) to explain away the fact that her gay male

students cannot be as open about their sexuality as can their lesbian classmates. She was

certainly not trying to perpetuate this stereotype, or agree with it in any way; however, her

mentioning of it shows that even teachers are holding on to common misconceptions and

institutionalized sexism that can negatively affect their LGBTQ+ students (Blackburn &

McCready, 2009).

At my other research site, Matthew seemed to hold similar stereotypical ideas about

lesbians and gay males. He addressed this male vs. female double standard for LGBTQ+ people

in the following way: "A girl can always say, 'I just want to try it,' because women...women are

beautiful human beings. So why wouldn't a girl like another girl? That's okay. But a guy liking

another guy? Wouldn't fly. Am I okay with it? Yes sir. But I think the rest of the community...I

don't know." Here, Matthew uses some language about women that, although flattering, can be

taken as an example of the sexism and toxic masculinity he says we should try to avoid. He

blames the general community for not being okay with "a guy liking another guy," but he

himself claims to be "okay with it." Again, Matthew, like Sally, was not trying to perpetuate a

stereotype or be purposefully insensitive; however, the language he uses to describe women and

the fact that he has to tell me, the researcher, that he is "okay with" gay males highlights that

society still has a long way to go in tackling gender stereotyping and inherently assumed

negative perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community.

Unfortunately, I found several more examples of my participants' tacit acceptance of toxic masculinity and use of common stereotypes. Shakira from NNJMS described the idea of men being less accepting of the LGBTQ+ community than women. She stated, "Then you have the typical men who are scared of it or, I don't really think you get that from women as much, but you get men that are scared of it. Like, 'Oh, don't come near me.' The boys might be like, 'Oh, don't come near me.'" Here, Shakira nonchalantly mentions that male teachers and students alike may have this fear of homosexuality that drives them away from supporting, or even being in the vicinity of LGBTQ+ people, especially gay males (Pascoe, 2007).

Furthermore, Shane explains why boys have a harder time coming out and do not want to be perceived as gay by likening it to a cultural norm, without seeming to take issue with this norm. Shane commented, "It's just a matter of that's the culture almost like...for example if a boy's not tough on the playground, he gets called something like that." Shane was referring to boys being called something like "gay" or "faggot" if he was not acting tough. This is an example of what Pascoe (2007) refers to as "fag discourse," when males use terms like "gay" and "faggot" to insult other boys or make people laugh at them. Shane seems to think that although this cultural norm is unfortunate, it is just the way things are, and male students need to be strong in the face of such remarks. Jing holds similar views about students needing to toughen up. He shared, "I think the sooner we can get these kids to figure out how do you manage that type of response? Do you take it personally? Do you not take it personally? I don't know." Jing posits that certain types of harassment, especially males using "fag discourse," is going to happen regardless, and students need to figure out how to not take these hurtful comments personally. I found it interesting that the two participants that felt students need to toughen up in

the face of bullying were both males. I believe this data says much about the type of masculinity these males adhere to, or are taught to adhere to, still in today's society.

Overall, it was clear to me as a researcher during the interview process that some participants still exhibit signs of a deeply rooted institutionalized homophobia, trans-erasure, sexism, and toxic masculinity inherent in our culture as a society, regardless of whether or not they consider themselves a true advocate for all of their students. From the way some participants discuss the epidemic views that males must be "tough" or risk being called "gay," while females are "beautiful human beings" that can acceptably "make out at bars," while transgender students were never even mentioned, it is no surprise that GSA clubs in middle and high schools end up comprising of mostly cisgender lesbians (Blackburn & McCready, 2009). Unfortunately, these teachers may pass along these harmful stereotypical views, inadvertently or not, to their students, and therefore our future generations. In my discussion of these findings in the subsequent chapter, I will further unpack how deep-rooted stereotypes about gender and the LGBTQ+ community can affect student participation in GSA clubs, and I will make suggestions for how to combat these negative effects and increase GSA involvement for LGBTQ+ students of all genders.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Proposing a GSA at the Middle School

Based on participant perceptions in this study, it is clear that many middle school teachers fear that the proposition of a GSA club at the middle school level may be met with hesitation if not resistance from school administration. In alignment with past research on school change and administrative resistance (Corbett et al., 1987), my participants felt that parental backlash would be the main factor causing principals to resist the creation of a GSA. In proposing a GSA at a middle school, my findings suggest that students and teachers wishing to start the club should first approach administration with facts and statistics regarding the need for and the benefits of a GSA and a GSA's lawful right to exist, followed by the possible moral and legal ramifications of not allowing the club, and then suggest ways to assuage possible community pushback.

As per interviews with my participants, GSA benefits for LGBTQ+ students include reduced feelings of isolation (Mayberry, 2006), higher visibility and acceptance among peers (Lee, 2002), fewer instances of depression (Heck et al., 2013), and lower rates of suicide (Bidwell, 1988). Adding to previous literature, the results of my qualitative case study show that middle school teachers believe GSAs are necessary to ensure the safety and social acceptance of LGBTQ+ students (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013) and avoid the legal repercussions of not adequately providing for these minority youths. When making a case for a middle school GSA, it may be helpful to mention the fact that GSA clubs have a legal right to exist in public schools. Aligning with literature on a GSA's legal right to exist (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; FEAA, 1984; Lugg, 2003), participants in my study stressed that administration must realize there are laws in

place to ensure the protection of LGBTQ+ students, and therefore the creation of a GSA. The

Federal Equal Access Act of 1984, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and the first amendment

to the United States Constitution can be mentioned when proposing the creation of a GSA to a

resistant administrator, who will most likely want to avoid a lawsuit. Finally, per several of my

interview participants, the fact that heightened feelings of isolation of LGBTQ+ students in some

cases can lead them to commit suicide (Bidwell, 1988; Uribe, 1994) may be what convinces

administrators to allow for a GSA out of moral and legal obligation.

After presenting administration with the numerous benefits a GSA can offer and the

frightful consequences of barring such a club, it is advisable, according to my findings, to offer

suggestions to assuage community pushback. Many of my teacher participants mentioned that, as

relevant literature suggests, a GSA's main goal is to educate the school and district about the

LGBTQ+ community and to fix harmful misconceptions (GLSEN, 2018; Hansen, 2007; Hooker,

2009). However, unlike most research suggests, they felt in order to assuage community

backlash, this education needs to take place *before* the club is even instituted. Several

participants from both of my research sites suggested holding a family night, creating

informational flyers, or sending out an automated voice message to parents in the community

enlightening them to the goals and benefits of the prospective club, giving them a chance to

voice concerns and have their questions answered preemptively. Seeing that my participants

were all middle school teachers themselves, with practical knowledge of the way parents can

react to school change, I feel their suggestions are valid and can contribute to the literature while

also providing real world applications to educators and LGBTQ+ student advocates.

Instituting a GSA at the Middle School

Once approved, the initial implementation of a GSA within a middle school must be handled properly to ensure the club's success and longevity. It is important to consider which faculty members can lead and advise the club and whether or not they should require training. One also must consider how to effectively advertise the club to increase membership, while still offering some form of confidentiality to club members. Lastly, one must contemplate the importance of educating the school staff about the club and how to navigate barriers such as initial backlash or bullying of club members.

First and foremost, a GSA must have an adept faculty advisor. As mentioned in my findings, one of my participants voiced his concerns about whether or not a non-LGBTQ+ staff member would be fit to run such a club. According to most literature on GSA clubs, most faculty advisors are volunteers and are actually not LGBTQ+ themselves (Uribe, 1994); however, that is not to say students would not receive greater benefit from an advisor who is actually part of the LGBTQ+ community. Gonsiorek's article "Mental Health Issues of Gay and Lesbian Adolescents" mentions that a lack of homosexual role models can have an extremely negative impact on young students questioning their sexuality (1988). If possible, having an LGBTQ+ faculty advisor for the GSA club would in fact provide students with much needed validation and a relatable adult role model.

Regardless of the gender and sexuality of GSA advisors, it is important that they undergo professional development training before taking on the role (Uribe, 1994). Mayo (2015) shows that if the teacher or counselor forming the group has proper professional development training on how to run a GSA, using effective theoretical and pedagogical techniques, all participating members, not just LGBTQ+ youth members, share the benefits that stem from being part of the

group. Additionally, Heck et al. (2016) offers some suggestions for GSA leaders and advisors including the use of GSA-related programming resources provided by GLSEN, as well as social networking opportunities to increase membership.

The participants in my study had similar suggestions regarding how to increase membership when initially instituting the club. Along with social media, some of the teachers suggested putting up flyers and handing out pamphlets with straightforward information about the club to assuage any initial misconceptions the students and staff might have. My participants believed that properly informing the school community of the goals and benefits of the GSA when it is first implemented would improve membership and help limit any possible backlash. The majority of the teachers interviewed were concerned that the first students to join the club may have to deal with an increase in bullying from ignorant peers. One participant referred to these students as having to be "brave" to join the GSA, as if it were a great risk. Another participant voiced concerns about those students joining the GSA who have not yet come out to their own family. Research suggests that GSA club members may choose to keep their association with the club confidential (Uribe, 1994). Unfortunately, some schools may require students to get a permission slip signed by a parent or guardian to participate in the club, especially if it is held after school hours. One suggestion GLSEN makes is to let the students choose the name of the club and how they would like to advertise (2018). Other popular names for this club besides "Gay-Straight Alliance" are "Diversity Club," "Pride Club," "PRISM[8] Club," and "HERO[9] Club." Letting the students choose the name of the club offers them the freedom to avoid a conversation at home that they are not yet ready to have. It can also be empowering in that they can take ownership of their new safe space community. Students may choose to remain

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[8] PRISM stands for Pride, Respect, Individuality, Sexuality, and Maturity
[9] HERO stands for Helping to Educate Regarding Orientation

anonymous members of the club, or to be vocal about their participation and use their voice to further advertise and advocate for the club to fellow peers. My participants felt that after a while, the existence of the club would be "normalized," and students would be empowered to proudly disclose their GSA association to peers and teachers, perhaps even at home.

Participants also mentioned that staff support of the GSA club was crucial to its success and that teachers should be well informed of how to handle any possible student backlash or increase in bullying of club members. Swanson and Gettinger (2016) conclude that teachers report a higher frequency of engaging in behaviors to support LGBTQ+ students when they work at a school with an active GSA and receive information specifically related to LGBTQ+ youth, so my participants' ideas regarding the importance of educating staff to support these students are convincing. Besides the flyers and pamphlets advertising the GSA, it is also advisable to hold some sort of professional development session for the middle school staff. As mentioned in the previous section, it is important to educate the community on the purpose of a GSA before its implementation; however, it is also important to continue to educate the staff regarding not only the purpose of a GSA, but also how to handle LGBTQ+ issues when they arise in the classroom or hallways.

Almost all of my participants voiced concerns that the staff at their middle school held misconceptions or were underprepared to deal with LGBTQ+ student issues, which could be a barrier when implementing a GSA. Some teachers even mentioned that they themselves try to avoid dealing with these issues and tend to turn the other cheek if they heard an anti-LGBTQ+ remark because they did not think it was a big deal. This is especially unfortunate seeing that in relevant research, McGuire et al. (2010) found that LGBTQ+ youth report feeling safer at school "when policy makers and school personnel stop harassment when it occurs, refrain from

participating in harassment, and promote safe environments on campus" (pp. 1187). These

findings, along with my participant perceptions, warrant the consideration of LGBTQ+ student

awareness professional development for teachers. Additionally, after finding that heterosexual

teachers often believed that the school environment was more supportive of LGBTQ+ issues

than LGBTQ+ teachers, Kolbert et al. (2015) recommend more training for teachers in

identifying and appropriately intervening in LGBTQ+ issues. In the following section, I will

expand upon the available options for professional development in this area, as this initial and

ongoing training is an important aspect of sustaining a successful GSA within a middle school.

Sustaining a GSA at the Middle School

After proposing and successfully initiating a GSA club at the middle school, the focus

switches to sustaining the club with the goals of success and longevity in mind. Several ways to

increase the success and longevity of the club are ensuring that teachers remain knowledgeable

and supportive of the club, taking into account staff turnover and other school changes,

measuring the effects of the club through data collection, and growing the club's membership

and reputation.

According to my participants, it is important to sustain an accepting school environment

in which a GSA can thrive. One way to ensure that teachers become and remain knowledgeable

and prepared to address LGBTQ+ rights issues in their classrooms is through professional

development (PD). Several opportunities for this type of professional learning exist to be sought

out by administrators and implemented in their schools. GLSEN has recently partnered with the

AACTE (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education) and the ATE (Association of

Teacher Educators) in an "effort to ensure that the next generation of teachers are equipped to

effectively teach lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth and combat anti-LGBT bias in

their schools" (GLSEN, 2014, pp. 1). The organization aims to address the fact that there has

been no deliberate, comprehensive national effort to incorporate LGBT-inclusive practices and

content into curriculum and pedagogy in the United States (GLSEN, 2014). Together with the

AACTE and ATE, GLSEN seeks to develop programs and resources for teachers informed by

research findings and national teacher surveys. Administrators, or even teachers themselves, can

reach out to GLSEN for professional development resources and even schedule a professional

development session for staff.

Aside from GLSEN resources, there is another highly effective model of professional

development available known as RSIS (Reduction of Stigma in Schools) (Payne & Smith, 2011;

Payne & Smith, 2012). This innovative PD program aims to empower educators to create

supportive learning environments for LGBTQ+ students, using key elements such as educator-to-

educator program delivery, research based workshop content, and basing the program in a

university school of education (Payne & Smith, 2011). In a case study, RSIS training was

implemented from September 2006 to May 2009 with workshops ranging from 30 minutes to

three hours, and interviews were conducted to obtain teacher feedback. Relevant readings were

assigned for the course along with research-based transgender school workshops. The following

five basic ideas provide the foundation for the RSIS design, and contribute to the success of the

program:

> (1) Delivery through an educator-to-educator model; (2) bringing the information into the
>
> schools to reach all educators—not just 'the choir'; (3) bringing information into the
>
> schools facilitates connection of content to the specific school environment; (4) training
>
> content should be research-based and relevant to that school or participant group; and (5)

with adequate workshop time, most teachers will try to make the application to practice.

(Payne & Smith, 2011, pp. 183)

Overall, the teacher participants had very positive reactions to the program, many of them

wishing only that it was for a longer duration to give them more time to reflect and collaborate

with fellow teachers to create resources for classroom use. The RSIS program allows teachers

"to feel safe enough to leave their comfort zones, engage in critical reflection…and use their

knowledge to create change in their classroom" (Payne & Smith, 2011, pp. 197). In order to fix

common misconceptions mentioned by my participants and give teachers the tools needed to

intervene on behalf of LGBTQ+ students, professional development options such as these are

recommended in order to create and sustain an LGBTQ+ positive school environment in which a

GSA can thrive. Seeing that several of my interviewees also mentioned teacher turnover as a

reason for new initiatives and clubs fading away, it is important to repeat this professional

development yearly or at least every other year. New teachers should be required, or at least have

the option, to participate in LGBTQ+ sensitivity and inclusivity training in order to maintain the

school's safe environment. An additional benefit of school-wide training would be that in the

event the GSA advisor terminates his or her employment with the school, another faculty advisor

well versed in LGBTQ+ student matters could easily step in.

Along with keeping the staff educated on supporting LGBTQ+ students, especially those

who may be bullied for joining the GSA, it is important to thoughtfully evaluate the effects of the

club each year and continually search for ways to make improvements. One way to measure

GSA effects, as suggested by one participant, Anita from CNJMS, would be administering

school culture surveys (GLSEN, 2018). GLSEN administers national school culture surveys to

both students and educators that measure the frequency of hearing biased language, experiences

of harassment, anti-LGBTQ discrimination, effects of a hostile school culture on educational

outcomes and psychological well-being, and the availability and utility of supportive school

resources. School personnel can adapt questions from such surveys to administer to their own

school community each year. By collecting and analyzing such data, a school can discover how

the existence of a GSA is impacting the school culture for both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+

youth and staff members. If the school culture is not changing, or is changing in negative ways,

adjustments can be made in the way the club is run and/or advertised. The data can reveal helpful

insights into what is and is not working. Additionally, interviewing GSA members and advisors

can provide valuable qualitative data regarding how the club is affecting those involved and

whether or not they are benefiting from participation. Again, adjustments can be made based on

feedback. In alignment with my finding as well as relevant research (GLSEN, 2018; Kosciw et

al., 2012), in order to effectively sustain a GSA, the school must collect and analyze data in order

to make any necessary adjustments.

　　　　Finally, in sustaining a GSA over the years, it is important to consider how to grow and

maintain membership as well as protect the reputation of the club. Several participants noted that

although the first students to join the GSA would have to be strong-willed, even "brave," once

the club became normalized within the school, the recruiting of members would become much

easier. One of my interviewees, Sally from CNJMS, mentioned that the *alliance* aspect of the

club should be emphasized. Other participants talked about getting buy-in from influential or

"popular" students for the club (Bishop, 2004). Furthermore, participants voiced concerns about

male students being leery of joining (Blackburn & McCready, 2009), and that they may need

extra support and encouragement. In order to maintain the reputation of its diversity and

inclusivity stand-point, it is important that students know they do not have to be part of the

LGBTQ+ community to be involved in the GSA and that all genders are welcome. Some

participants noted that it was actually extremely important that the club recruit allies that do not

identify as part of the community as well as members from both genders so that no one feels

excluded. According to research, non-LGBTQ+ allies and other majority students can use their

institutionalized privilege to be a voice for those who are often oppressed as minorities (Bishop,

2004; Cillessen, 2011). In advertising and advocating for the club, students of all genders, races,

identities, and orientations should be represented in club flyers, pamphlets, and even yearbook

pictures if they choose. A GSA club's main goals are inclusion, education, and advocating for

social justice for all students; therefore, all students should be given the opportunity to help the

club thrive.

Limitations

As is common in research, my study had some limitations. First and foremost, the small

sample size of this study can be seen as a limitation as I only completed 15 interviews at two

middle schools in the same state. My data will not be generalizable across the country or

internationally as the participants were all from the same demographic area. Additionally, since

the data was self-reported and qualitative in nature, it is unlikely that my results can be replicated

with future studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); however, the results are credible based on a

number of validity checks and my findings do help to address significant a gap in LGBTQ+

research literature. Finally, due to the controversial nature of the research topic, there is a chance

that participants may not have been completely honest in their interviews. If participants had

negative feelings about GSA clubs or LGBTQ+ people in general, they may have purposefully

hid this from me in interviews as to not come across as homophobic. I did my best to minimize

this limitation by promising my participants the utmost confidentiality and assuring them that all perceptions, positive or negative, were valuable to my study.

Suggestions for Further Research

Although my study helps address a large gap in LGBTQ+ literature by shedding light on middle school teachers' perceptions of GSA clubs and the effects they can have on school culture, further gaps remain. It would have been interesting to explore the validity of my participants' perceptions of what other teachers, students, administrators, and parents would think about the institution of a GSA club at the middle school level. I am left wondering if the pushback from administrators and parents is really as obstructive to a GSA club as my participants assumed. Further research should aim to gain an understanding of what the rest of a community, including its students, parents, and school administrators, would have to say about the creation of a middle school GSA club. Both qualitative and quantitative research would be valuable in this area. Although LGBTQ+ research can be difficult, as shown by the fact that ten out of the twelve schools I asked to participate in my study declined, it is important to continue to explore the benefits and barriers to GSAs in the eyes of various members of a community.

Furthermore, future research should aim to discover perceptions of GSA clubs in additional parts of the country and internationally. It may be interesting to explore how demographics of a community can affect how its population receives a GSA. For the sake of all future students and staff looking to establish their own middle school GSA, further research must continue to shed light on the advantages and obstacles of forming these clubs.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

<u>INFORMED CONSENT FORM</u>

You are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Amy Greubel, who is a student in the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University. The purpose of this research is to determine middle school teachers' perception of how Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs affect a school's culture of inclusivity.

Approximately 12-15 subjects will participate in the study, and each individual's participation will last approximately 30- 60 minutes.

The study procedures include a single 30-60 minute interview with each participant.

This research is confidential. Confidential means that the research records will include some information about you and this information will be stored in such a manner that some linkage between your identity and the response in the research exists. Some of the information collected about you includes your name, workplace, race/ethnicity, and number of years teaching experience. Please note that I will keep this information confidential by limiting individuals' access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location, in a locked office on a password protected computer.

The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, participant names will be converted to pseudonyms to protect their identities. All study data will be kept for three years and will be destroyed upon completion of the study procedures.

The risks of participation include possible discomfort in discussing LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning) issues; however, risk of discomfort is minimal.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time during the study procedures without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.

If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact me at:
Amy Greubel
242 Meadowbrook Road
Robbinsville, NJ 08691
Phone: (609) 947-3109
Email: alg211@scarletmail.rutgers.edu

You may also contact my faculty advisor Dan Battey at:
Dr. Dan Battey
Graduate School of Education
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
10 Seminary Place
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Office: GSE room 232
Phone: (848) 932-0800
Email: dan.battey@gse.rutgers.edu
If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact an IRB Administrator at the Rutgers University, Arts and Sciences IRB:

Institutional Review Board
Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey

Liberty Plaza / Suite 3200
335 George Street, 3rd Floor
New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Phone: 732-235-2866
Email: human-subjects@ored.rutgers.edu

Audio/Visual Addendum to Consent Form

You have already agreed to participate in a research study conducted by Amy Greubel. I am asking for your permission to allow me to audio record as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for transcribing and analysis by the researcher.

The recording(s) will not include your name or place of work. I will only be recording your responses to my interview questions.

The recording(s) will be stored on a password protected computer labeled with a pseudonym for you as a participant and will be destroyed upon completion of the study procedures.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records.

Sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:

Subject (Print) _____

Subject Signature _____ Date _____

Principal Investigator Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

I want to start with discussing your perceptions of Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in general:

How do feel about the creation and institution of Gay-Straight Alliance Clubs in general at the middle school level?

Let's switch gears a little and discuss how you would feel about the creation and institution of a GSA club at YOUR middle school specifically:

1. How would you feel about the creation and institution of a GSA at your own middle school?

2. What kinds of things do you think a GSA would aim to accomplish at your school?

3. Can you describe your school culture?

4. Overall, can you describe any effects, positive or negative, that a GSA would have on your school culture?

5. What effects might a GSA have on curriculum and instruction?

6. How would instituting a GSA affect levels of bullying and harassment of students in the school?

7. How would having a GSA affect students who identify as LGBTQ+?

8. How would having a GSA affect students who *do not* identify as LGBTQ+?

9. In your opinion, what would other teachers at your school think about the club?

10. In your opinion, how would the administration react to the club?

11. In your opinion, how would parents react to the club?

12. In your opinion, how would student react to the club?

13. Can you tell me about the process of change at your middle school? How does change

generally happen? (If you could give me an example...)

14. Is there anything else you wanted me to ask or any additional information you would like

to tell me?

Demographic Questions:

Lastly, if you wouldn't mind, I would like to ask you some questions to gain some

demographic information for my study. You may, of course, choose not to answer.

- How long have you been teaching?

- What grade and subject do you teach?

- How do you identify racially?

- Do you identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community?

Appendix C

Codebook

Code	Sub Code(s)	Participants From CNJMS (Individual Frequency)	Participants from NNJMS (Individual Frequency)	Total Frequency of Code	Exemplary Quotes from CNJMS Participants	Exemplary Quotes from NNJMS Participants
Middle School Age	immaturity, still forming identity, cruel, monsters vs. enlightenment, perfect age for GSA	MU (4), AR (2), BW (1), AR (2), LM (2), JC (2)	JL (4), MS (1), ST (1), SM (5), SC (3)	27	"I don't think they're too young to understand it. I do think they're definitely immature, but not too young to understand it. They may not take it as seriously, but they definitely are able to comprehend it." (MU)	"I guess it would be appropriate, especially this is...I guess I would call a delicate age...And, the whole things with hormones going around...And, this is the time to really find themselves. I love this age group, but kids are going to be kids. They're going to find an excuse to bully each other. Kids are funny though. Sometimes they have moments of great enlightenment and understanding. And then, sometimes, they're just terrible. They're monsters." (JL)
Need for GSA	importance, rare at MS level	MU (1), BW (1), AG (1), SN (1), AR (2), HZ (3), JC (3)	ST (1)	13	"I think it's great. No, I think that needs to be addressed more, and I think you'll see it more in a high school, but I think if we can start early, earlier. I think with their bodies changing, they're starting to realize they're changing and could be straight or gay...I think it's great. I think it's a long time coming. I think it would help a lot of kids. I think it's gonna help more kids than it is gonna hurt kids. Let's put it that way." (HZ)	"I think it would be a good idea because I think there are a number of [LGBTQ+] students who could benefit from either knowing each other, or knowing that they're not alone and to feel comfortable." (ST)

Religion	Conservative Christian	MU (1), BW (2), AG (1), HZ (2), JC (1)	MS (1), JL (2), ST (1), SC (5)	16	"If you want to speak truth and truthfully my parents would have a problem with it....it's a religious thing." (BW)	"You have kids coming from some homes where religiously, you might get kids that come from very Christian homes and they read in the Bible at CCD...You could have some of these religious fanatics that might be like, 'I can't believe they're adding clubs for these gay.' But why does it bother you? Why do people spend so much time worrying about what other people do?...and the religiousness and all that other crazy shit that ruins everything." (SC)
Demographics/ Location	urban, middle class, blue collar, affluent, north, south	MU (2), BI (1), BW (2), HZ (2), JC (1)	MS (1), JL (2), ST (1), SC (3)	15	"First of all, politically, this is a more liberal area that we live in and work in, so I think that does help, I think, with that. I think the fact that it's a more liberal community, because of where we live, would be pretty open to it." (MU) // "Especially with such a high Hispanic population. Traditionally, Hispanic parents are much less open toward that than other races, and I'm not really sure why that is." (SN)	"I think given the fact that we're very close to New York City where I think a lot of the kids now in school aren't as afraid to hide if they happen to be...say gay." (SC) // "Especially with religious beliefs. There's a big Middle Eastern culture here and that's a no-no. So, that would be tough. That's a tough one." (MS)
Low Parent Involvement	unawareness, would not notice GSA, parents should be informed about GSA club	MU (1), BI (1), BW (1), TL (1), SN (1), JC (1)	SC (1), SM (1)	8	"We're in middle school. I don't even think our parents would find out about it honestly unless their kid was in the club." (BW)	"Some [parents] are not going to even know [about the club]. Some will be supportive." (SM)

Administration Resistant/ Hesitant to Change	not approachable, fear parent pushback, needs to be informed, micro-managing, kids too young for GSA, principal needs proof/ evidence of club's need	MU (6), BW (1), AG (4), TL (1), SN (4), AR (3), HZ (1), JC (1)	ST (1), SC (1), SM (1)	24	"I definitely think the administration is more closed minded. They're walking on eggshells."; "they definitely are resistant to change"; "it's only going to go as far as administration let's it go"; "I don't think that they would be open to it, and would want to do that. I think that they would try to not have it happen."; "[the principal] would be nervous about any kind of conservative parent pushback." (MU)	"[administration] may think like how are the parents going to respond? What's the community going to respond, you know?" (ST)
Administration on Board with GSA	positive PR move, support students	JC (2), BI (1), BW (3)	MS (1), JL (1), SM (1), SC (1)	10	"I feel like our admin may see this as a positive PR. I think for them it's more of a positive PR thing. I mean, especially knowing our town's issues in the past with issues like the NAACP." (JC)	"I think they'd be okay with it. The principal, I think she'd be fine with it. Yeah, because then, that would go totally against when they tell us every morning they love you, love us. So what're they going to say in their heads, 'We love you, except if you're part of [the LGBTQ+] community, then we don't love you?'" (MS)
No Impact on Curriculum	state mandated, no effect	MU (1), BI (1), TL (1), HZ (1)	JL (1), SM (1)	6	"Yeah. I was thinking that curriculum is what we have to teach. So none of us have any say in that." (TL)	"I don't see how, as far as a club, would be affecting curriculum. I mean, that's more of a state mandate, right?" (JL)
Impact on Curriculum/ Curricular Inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues	ELA, SS, Health, Art, Music, Math, Science	MU (2), BI (1), BW (1), TL (1), AG (2), SN (3), AR (2), JC (2), LM (2), HZ (1)	MS (1), SM (1), SC (1), JL (2)	22	"ELA, History shouldn't be that tough. Math, science, I don't know how you're gonna...it's kind of impossible, I feel like." (JC)	"I teach math. So to me numbers are numbers. I don't know how much that's going to affect...again, I don't know too much about other curriculum." (SC)

Teachers' Job Regardless of Personal Beliefs	care about their safety, let them be themselves, support them	BI (1), BW (2), HZ (2), JC (1)	MS (1), JL (4), ST (1), SM (1), SC (5)	18	"I think that there's also an understanding that that's our job. If we want the students to be accepting, we have to be accepting even if you're not personally accepting and that's our job." (BW) // "I mean, I'd be happy doing it too. Look, I'm more of a conservative-leaning, white male, heterosexual guy that's very pro-LGBT, so you're having somebody like myself support it." (JC)	"I'll be very upfront with you. I definitely identify as a conservative Christian. Do I support this type of thing for those kids? Absolutely. I think it's important. Other teachers, it's hard for me to say. I think we're all in the same place, though. If a student needs support and needs help, we're here to help them. We're not going to turn them away. We're not going to discriminate them...I mean, we signed our contract and our pledge to help the student. So, whether we agree with them or not agree with them or their life choices or style, we're here to help them. So, whatever that means, we need to provide that." (JL)
Misconceptions	gayness is contagious, GSA only for gay kids, fix misconceptions	BI (1), MU (1), AG (2), BW (1), TL (1), HZ (3), JC (3)	JL (2), ST (3), MS (2), SC (2)	21	"I feel like parents might have these misconceptions that at a GSA, you're just talking about sex and like the act of sex and sexual behavior, and they're not really informed about what the discussions are." (AR) // "I think the stigmatism makes people uncomfortable if they're unsure of what it is. And I think that's a big part of it. They think 'you're exposing my kid of this gay and lesbian. My kid might turn gay and lesbian,' but that's how some people think. Like if you expose my kid, then my kid's gonna turn into one." (HZ)	"I mean I'm just, you know, there's always like going to be that one person like 'Ooh, it's going to make them gay.' Really? Yeah. I don't think so. But hopefully people can be educated...So like, you know, talking about sex doesn't make kids have sex. Talking about science doesn't make kids do science." (ST)

Need for Education on GSAs and LGBTQ+ Issues	awareness, education, correct information, reduce stigma, stigma as obstacle to GSA, fear of unknown leads to resistance	MU (1), AG (6), TL (2), BW (1), BI (2), JC (2), AR (2), HZ (1)	JL (1), SC (2), MS (4), ST (5), SM (4)	33	"But I think if parents were informed and educated about what this is or if they had questions and whoever is running the club, or the students in the club could welcome their questions, then maybe that would get them to feel more comfortable." (AR) // "I think a lot of it is the more educated you are, the more opened minded you are with what's out there." (HZ) // "My thing is the community, how educated are people with it? A lot of people I feel like are not educated." (JC)	"I think we would need more information about it so people could accept it more. It may scare certain people because they're not familiar with it and it's always been labeled negative. So I think the more we're educated about it, it would be more acceptable...going back to being educated. If students aren't, it's not brought to them and they know nothing about it...Think about it with boys, right? Boys grow up with, 'Ew. What are you, gay?' There's that label there. Stigmatism, and embarrassment, and what does the guy say? 'I'm not gay,' but he is. But he's not going to say he is because then no one's going to hang out with him." (MS)
HIB (Harassment, Intimidation, Bullying)	anti-gay remarks, unsafe bathroom/ locker room, cyber bullying, decrease eventually, differences cause HIB	MU (1), BI (2), BW (2), TL (1), AG (1), AR (1), HZ (2)	JL (3), ST (2), SM (1), SC (3)	19	"A lot of times I think ignorance is one factor in bullying type situations where something's different, you don't know it, that makes you uncomfortable. And you might not have the tools with which to deal with it emotionally." (TL)	"I think kids that are different are going to be a target, you know, for the kids that are going to be bullying them. I don't think that's going to change." (ST)

Initial Increase in Bullying	slow process of acceptance, GSA causes 'target'/gives bullies 'ammunition'	M (3), BI (2), TL (1), AG (1), SN (3), AR (1), LM (1), HZ (3), JC (3)	MS (2), JL (1), ST (1), SM (3)	25	"I think initially it might be met with negativity from some students. Even some teachers, unfortunately." (SN) // "People tend to be ignorant of certain things. I think once you're exposed to things, the ignorance tends to dissipate, and ignorance breeds fear, and so I think the fear of it, I think that can cause issues, but I think just by having the club, the organization, it can try to reduce the ignorance that some people might have, and therefore the fear goes down and the stigma or the isolation of certain people, I think it can go down." (JC)	"I think until we're educated with it, the effect would be negative. People, when you're not used to something, it's scary. especially students that don't identify and are confused and scared, they might react negatively, and then eventually we would have a positive effect once people are educated." (MS)
Top Down Change	admin not approachable, throw changes at us	MU (1), BW (1), TL (2), AG (3)	MS (1), JL (1), ST (1), SM (1), SC (3)	14	"The principal is very much stuck in a certain mindset, and he's done things a certain way for a very long time. Our principal has been at the school for many years, and I think that he would be very nervous about rocking the boat, and he would see this as rocking the boat." (MU)	"I think education's a business now, right? To me it's a business. You're not going to have a teacher come in with an idea that's not supported and that be incorporated or implemented into anything, curriculum, social."; "Administration. Okay. I think things happen from the top down. Again, it's just when you were in the same business for...the same place for 21 years, you see how things work." (SC)
Slow Change	change takes time, kids need to get used to things	MU (2), BW (1), TL (1), AG (1)	SM (3)	8	"Change comes slowly I would say, unless it's something that the administration feels very strongly about." (MU)	"Right, I think through time, right. But you know, the sixth graders might be giggly [when they hear "Gay-Straight Alliance"]...But by the time you did it for three years, it would be known or you know, two years even. You know what I mean?...Your sixth graders would be only ones that are going to get like giggly and then they'll be over that, right? By the next year." (SM)

Change Fizzles Out	not sustained, fads, turnover	MU (1), BI (1), TL (1)	SC (1)		4	"It's keeping the change. We have a lot of things that start here and then just die off. (BI) // "I feel that change here, it's kind of thrown at us and then there's not always follow through." (TL)	"Yeah. Just like anywhere, initiatives and things sometimes like curriculum things might be hot one year and then it's older." (SC)
Age/ Experience as a Variable	teachers, parents, exposure, LGBTQ+ family/ friends/ acquaintances	MU (1), BI (1), TL (4), BW (1), SN (1), AR (2), LM (1), HZ (4)	SM (1), SC (2)		18	"I think it's becoming more open. I may be going back, because I've been doing this for 25 years, I think the older generation would have a harder time with it. I think the younger generation are more accepting. And I think if you've been in situations, too like growing up with it or being exposed to it, makes it a little easier too." (HZ)	"I don't want to mischaracterize this, maybe some of your older teachers who come from a different generation, they might not, I don't know. I'm not speaking for them."; "But I think maybe a lot of these younger teachers who have been a part of this generation that has been like the LGBTQ, that whole movement, they grew up with that. So to them it's just like 'I understand it.'" (SC)
Questioning Students	figuring out their identity, social media impact	BI (1), SN (1), JC (1)	ST (1), SM (1)		5	"I think it's also going to help the kids that are questioning their sexuality to be more confident in who they are" (BI) // "It would eliminate stigma for a lot of our kids that may be questioning." (JC)	"This is how they're hard wired right now. This is who they are. They're finding everything out about themselves and all these experiences and this is who they are. So we have to let them do that stuff. So I think having a club, it might be really good for them to learn how to be more accepted and accept other people." (SM)

Safe Space	comfort, safe environment, community, acceptance, allies	MU (1), BI (1), BW (1), TL (1), AG (3), SN (1), LM (1), HZ (1), SN (3), AR (1)	JL (2), ST (2), SC (4), MS (3)	25	"So I think having that team would be really beneficial for students who, especially students are questioning. It's giving students resources. It's giving students a team, a support system that they might not have at home...it would give kids who might think one way, the opportunity to explore options, without feeling isolated." (SN)	"I think it would reduce a lot of anxiety, those that are in that community. Nobody wants to start their day at school or work afraid"; "I think once they see other people coming out and admitting it, I think their self-esteem and confidence will increase a little bit. And once you start forming a group, I mean, no one wants to be left out, especially at this level. It's all about being accepted." (MS)
Careful Implementation of GSA	advertising, approval, proper leadership, someone to field phone calls, trial run, disseminate true information (video/ assembly)	BI (3), BW (1), AG (3), AR (1), JC (4), LM (1)	MS (1), SM (1), SC (3)	18	"In the beginning, with anything, there's always kinks, there's always problems, there's always something."; "I think that you really have to have a person educated on all of this kind of stuff to field those phone calls. Honestly, in this case, I don't think it should be the principal. It should be someone that is willing to take the time, and have the time to sit and talk with these parents about their concerns." (AG) // "I think I comes down to advertising it the right way and avoiding misinformation by telling kids what it's really all about." (AR)	"Keep parents very informed. Maybe have even like an assembly about it or something. Because it is so personal. Let them know that their kids are safe." (SM) // "This is going to sound like a dumb question but could a straight person run that club and be effective? I don't think so. It would be like, I don't know...You don't want a football coach teaching somebody how to play flute. It doesn't make sense."; "I'm not saying advertising where it's like, 'hey, all gay kids come on in.' Not like that." (SC)
Suicide	risk, prevention	BI (1), JC (2)	MS (3), SC (2)	8	"I know with the suicide rates being very high amongst our LGBT kids, maybe [the club] has an effect on a reduction of our suicide rates, which have been really high in recent years, especially in our town." (JC)	"I always keep thinking about the suicide thing, how many kids commit suicide because they're like, I can't tell people this. What's my family going to think? What are my friends going to think? No one's going to want to hang out with me anymore. It's scary." (MS)

Normalize	out of norm, not out of norm, awareness	TL (1), BW (1), SN (1), HZ (2), AR (4), JC (1)	MS (1), SC (2)	13	"I think that could be normalizing it by just saying it's the way they are. You can't change that, and I think not making it such a taboo." (HZ)	"Like I said, for kids to feel comfortable in their own skin, which is tough to do sometimes, especially in a situation where it's not the norm, and I think a club like that would be something that would make the learning environment a little bit more, comfortable." (SC)
Teacher Pushback	teachers privately criticize club, fear breads resistance	MU (1), TL (2), AG (1), SN (3)	ST (1), SM (2)	10	"I think there may be a pocket full of a couple teachers who behind closed doors criticize it and implant or own beliefs on it." (MU)	"I'm not naming names, but I know there are, you know, a couple of people who would not understand or say 'why are you doing this?' because there's always going to be resistance to change." (ST)
Parent Pushback	aggressive/ vocal parents	TL (2), BW (3), AG (7), SN (3), LM (2), HZ (2), JC (2)	MS (2), JL (2), SM (2), SC (3)	30	"I think you'll have parents coming in, calling saying, 'Shut it down. I don't want my kid in that. I don't want my kid around that. I don't want my kid in a school where you have a group of gay kids walking around.' Then I think you'll have parents calling, thanking the school for giving their kid an outlet. I think you'll have parents calling, thanking us for educating their students and creating a more compassionate environment." (SN)	"Again, the parents who are uneducated about it and label it as a negative, they're going to be against it because they're going to say, 'Oh, I don't want my child to see that being accepted,' especially with religious beliefs." (MS)

Student Pushback	only takes one kid to ruin it, naysayers, creates fear to join GSA	TL (1), AG (2), AR (1) SN (2), HZ (1)	MS (1), JL (1), SM (2), SC (2)	13	"And it only takes one vocal person to ruin things." (TL) // "I mean, you might get a knucklehead to say something stupid when the announcement comes on or something, but then that can be addressed and dealt with."; "Obviously there are going to be the kids that don't give a crap, and they're just like, 'Oh, whatever.' Not to be mean about it, but just not care. Like, 'Oh, that's not for me. I don't want to do that.'" (AG) // "I think there's always gonna be kids that are gonna be the bullies because maybe they don't feel comfortable." (HZ)	It'd be a very positive experience, but I think those few, it only takes two. You've got those few kids that could ruin it for everybody that are just going to go on the negative and not go positive and tell you about what's wrong with everybody instead of what's right." (SM) // "You're going to have kids that might be very for it. You might have kids that are very against it and sometimes in the middle school like the cool kid or the cool kids who... it can take one kid who is the leader of the school who says, 'you know what, it's cool' and now all of a sudden, everybody's going to want it."; "Again, we a 1400, 1300 kids in this building. You're going to have a handful, more or less, saying stupid shit. Sorry." (SC)
Today's Society	different day in age, back in the day, times are changing, old timers	BI (2), BW (1), HZ (3), JC (1)	JL (2), SM (1), SC (4)	14	"Looking back on just gay and lesbians and going back 20, 30 years ago, now it's more open...You starting to see people come out at an earlier age which I think is great that they feel comfortable enough and that they're able to do that...But it's changing. It is changing. I think it's a positive. Like my parents. Growing up, I never knew anybody that was gay or lesbian, never, because I was never exposed to it until I went to college." (HZ)	"I think initially the way that I was raised, not to say that it wasn't accepted, but it wasn't talked about, it was very hush hush." (SM) // "I've noticed in my 40 years that kids aren't as scared to come out as they were." (SC)

Failed GSA Proposals	tried to start one, principal said 'no'	AG (2), JC (1)			3	"[The principal] told the kids because they were asking about starting the club, so he told them that some of these issues are very sensitive. Let's just do these other things instead." (AG) // "I tried starting one at Nottingham before I left. It just didn't take off the way that I wanted it to." (JC)	
Legality	legally can have a GSA, legal ramifications for not providing for all students	BI (2), AG (1), JC (2)	SC (4)		9	"I mean, the facts are the facts, and the law is the law. We are allowed to have [a GSA]" (AG) // "It kinda goes back to the first amendment. You have assembly rights. If you don't wanna be involved with the club, don't associate with it. It's as simple as that. You're not required to do it, so I mean, it's not forcing it upon people to do it, which is fine, but it's available." (JC)	"I think, well, let's think about this logistically. God forbid this kid went home and said to his mother or father, 'Well, I'm gay. [The school's] not providing...' You know how it works these days. We got to make sure everybody's feelings are taken care of. I don't mean that in a very like sarcastic way." (SC)
Preparing for High School	will have GSA in HS, MS can collaborate with HS GSA clubs	MU (1), BI (2), AG (2), JC (2)	SM (1), SC (1)		9	"Just if I think that it could, or maybe be helpful, if a middle school is trying to do a GSA, if they could, if their high school has a GSA to somehow like partner up to get leadership on that, that way you'd be able to have the kids segue into high school." (AG)	"I got to tell you, I really see that this is the perfect age for it, because then by the time they go into high school, they've kind of, the confusion could've already set in." (SM)

Civil Rights Movement Metaphor	minority comparison	SN (5)			5	"It's kinda one of those things if you think about black students who would go sit in, in segregated schools. At first, it was absolutely terrible for them. I can't even imagine...They were being persecuted and segregated even still. But when you have those few people who stand up for people who aren't maybe brave enough to stand up for themselves, eventually you get that positive change and you see if they're strong enough to stand up against adversity, I can do it too. So yeah, I think initially it might rock the boat, but that's the goal because otherwise it's just gonna stay like this." (SN)	

Male v Female Double Standard	easier for girls to come out, more girls out than boys, males fear homosexuality, "fag discourse" (Pascoe, 2007)	SN (4)	MS (2), SM (2), SC (2)	10	"That's actually also what I've noticed a lot. I don't know statistically if this is accurate, but I feel like there are way more significantly higher numbers of females in our school that identify as gay than males. I'm not necessarily sure if that's because there are more girls are gay than boys."; "It's one of those things, two girls make out at a bar for fun, to get attention. Two guys make out a bar for fun, everyone's like, 'Oh, what's that? What's that about?'"; "But he's never actually said to me, 'I'm gay,' or, 'I like this boy,' or 'I have a boyfriend.' Versus, I had so many girls come up to me saying, 'I have a crush on this girl,' or, 'This girl just broke up with me,' or, 'How do I talk to this girl?' I have not had any boys say that." (SN)	"Because a girl can always say, 'I just want to try it,' because women...women are beautiful human beings. So why wouldn't a girl like another girl? That's okay. But a guy liking another guy? Wouldn't fly. Am I okay with it? Yes sir. But I think the rest of the community.." (MS) // "Then you have the typical men who are scared of it or, I don't really think you get that from women as much, but you get men that are scared of it. Like, 'Oh, don't come near me.' The boys might be like, 'Oh, don't come near me.'" (SM) // "It just was a matter of that was the culture then almost like...for example if a boy was not tough on the playground, he got called something that..." (SC)
Teacher Initiatives Started/ Sustained	turnover affects clubs, younger teachers more likely to start clubs, Renaissance Program, Dance team, Flag football, Origami	BI (2), TL (2), BW (1), AG (1), AR (1)	MS (2), JL (1), SM (1), SC (1)	12	"There's a lot of turnover with maternity leave. So if you start a committee and then you go out on maternity leave, it dies out." (BI) // "In general the teachers have a better feed on what will work and won't work with the students perhaps than administration. So if they think it's something that's going to work and they can get it approved, it probably does work and it's going to stick"; "I would say when it hasn't worked, it's probably been because of turnover." (TL)	"It has to be approved...You would bring it up to the principal and as long as they felt you had enough members, it gets accepted. I mean, it's money too because you've got to pay the person who's in charge of it. So that's another thing that comes into play, money."; "[flag football] took a few years to get approved, but it is now." (MS)

Administration Initiatives Started/ Sustained	"We love you", PBSIS, Open Door Friday	AG (1)	MS (1), JL (4), ST (1), SC (1), SM (1)		9	"But that's something that [the principal] really wants. If admin really wants it, it's a change that's going to happen and stay." (AG)	"I think teachers can approach administration, and they've started open door Fridays where you can go in on a Friday. I mean you can approach them anytime but you know specifically like period one and two to address concerns that you may have"; "And sometimes, you know, there are long standing clubs, so the administration might say, we have these clubs, we need people who's interested in running that." (ST)