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Gay-Straight Alliances and School Experiences of Sexual Minority Youth

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Abstract

Recent findings on the impact of gay-straight alliances (GSAs) on the school experiences of sexual minority youth have demonstrated that numerous positive outcomes are associated with attending schools that have such student organizations. Some research attributes the positive impact to shifts in campus climate resulting from recognition and legitimization of GSAs, while others suggest that the influence is primarily due to the increased social support that sexual minority youth experience. This study examines the manner in which GSAs impact sexual minority youth by comparing school experience variables of three discrete groups of sexual minority students: (1) those who attend schools without GSAs, (2) those who attend schools with GSAs but who are not members, and (3) those who attend schools with GSAs of which they are members. Findings suggest that the presence of the GSA in the school positively impacts more school experiences than whether or not the sexual minority youth is an actual member of the group.

Key words: lesbian, gay, sexual minority, gay-straight alliance, victimization, academic achievement

Gay-Straight Alliances and School Experiences of Sexual Minority Youth

Introduction

Educational institutions can be stressful places for sexual minority youth. These youth frequently feel unsupported and unsafe (Kosciw, 2004), and victimization and bullying are commonplace experiences (Rhee, 2004; Ryan & Rivers, 2003). Anti-gay/anti-lesbian hostility can be particularly immobilizing for sexual minority youth given that they are legally required to attend schools to a certain age, that they have little recourse to change schools should their school be a hostile environment, and that they are under the legal and/or financial control of their parents. The impact of the hostility is further amplified given that they are in a developmental phase focused on issues of identity development.

One attempt to improve the experience of sexual minority youth and young adults in schools and colleges is the formation of gay-straight alliances (GSAs) – " student-led clubs open to youth of all sexual orientations with the purpose of supporting sexual minority students and their heterosexual allies and also reducing prejudice, discrimination, and harassment within the school" (Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer, 2006, p. 575). In the last two decades there has been unprecedented proliferation of GSAs. Over 3000 groups now exist within U.S. high schools and colleges, offering resources and support to the sexual minority student population (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), n.d.; Miceli, 2005).

While the picture of the overall educational experience of sexual minority youth and young adults is far from complete, research on the impact of GSAs on the school experiences of these youth and young adults is even more inchoate. Studies that do exist suggest a number of positive outcomes associated with GSAs. This study seeks to contribute to this literature in two ways. First, it examines the influence of the presence of GSAs in schools on the educational

experiences of sexual minority youth. This includes examination of experiences of victimization in schools, issues related to safety, protective behavioral responses, and educational achievement. Additionally, because most research on GSAs has not examined whether the positive outcomes for sexual minority students are associated with the presence of the GSA in schools or with actual membership in the GSA, this study examines this question as well.

School Experiences of Sexual Minority Youth

Victimization. Heterosexism and the victimization that accompanies it shape the daily school experiences of sexual minority youth (Hetrick-Martin Institute, n.d.; Morrow, 2006; Rhee, 2004; van Wormer & McKinney, 2003), especially youth who are open about their sexual orientation (Kiedman, 2002). Victimization comes in the form of verbal as well as physical harassment and abuse (GLSEN, 2005; Hunter, 1990). Physical victimization and harassment occurs at high rates among sexual minority youth in high schools (GLSEN, 2005; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Walls, Freedenthal, & Wisneski, 2008), and, is likewise, fairly commonplace in college (D'Augelli, 1989). Abuse is not uncommon in family homes either, with sexual minority youth being more likely to have been physically or sexually abused by their family members than their heterosexual counterparts (Saewyc et al., 2006). Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995) found that 33% of the youth they surveyed had been verbally abused and 10% had been physically assaulted by family members. The overrepresentation of these youth in foster care further underscores the disproportionate experience of familial abuse and neglect that they face (Lenz-Rashid, 2006).

Victimization has both immediate effects, as well as negative long-term educational and mental health effects. Kosciw (2004) found that sexual minority youth were twice as likely not to attend college as a national sample of high school students: "Higher frequencies of verbal

harassment because of their sexual orientation, damage to or theft of their personal property and sexual harassment were associated with youth's plans not to continue their education after high school" (p. 23). Even in the absence of direct victimization, sexual minority adolescents often face a "bottleneck effect" in career development because of the internal psychological energy needed to address issues surrounding neutralization of a stigmatized sexual identity (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006, p. 22; see also Hetherington, 1991). In terms of mental health, in-school victimization because of sexual orientation has been shown to be correlated with suicidality (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Hecht, 1998; Walls et al., 2008) as well as with subsequent mental health problems, especially posttraumatic stress disorder (D'Augelli et al., 2002). It is also important to remember that victimization of members of marginalized communities has more than just negative *individual* consequences. It additionally serves to "regulate access to public spaces" (Burrington, 1998, p. 108) – that is to silence stigmatized groups, maintaining their invisibility and disenfranchising them of their rights to participate in decision-making processes that directly impact the quality of their lives.

Isolation. Sexual minority youth often report feeling socially and emotionally isolated in their lives (Dietz, 1997; Hetrick & Martin, 1987, Jacobs, 1996), and in their experiences of the educational system (Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006; Peters, 2003; Rofes, 1990). They frequently do not know to whom they might turn for support as they work through identity development processes, learn to cope with stigma associated with being a sexual minority member and/or gender nonconforming, face struggles with relationships, and encounter numerous other issues that arise for these youth (Miceli, 2005). Isolation can be a significant problem even among college-aged sexual minority students (Martin & D'Augelli, 2003), and has been linked to a number of negative outcomes including adolescent substance abuse (Jordan,

2000). If isolation is not resolved for sexual minority youth, it can lead to problems in adulthood, including anxiety, depression, feelings of alienation, self-hatred, and demoralization (Hetrick & Martin, 1987).

Campus Climate. In addition to victimization and isolation, sexual minority youth are particularly vulnerable to campus climate – the general atmosphere of a school campus. For sexual minority students, campus climate can impact both their sexual identity development process (Evans & Broido, 1999), as well as their career and vocational development (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006; Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003). A negative campus climate can give permission – both explicitly and implicitly – for the harassment and victimization of sexual minority youth, as well as foster an environment where these youth experience higher levels of chronic fear and anxiety (Evans, 2001; Evans & Broido, 1999; Rhoads, 1995).

Research in this area suggests that the experience of a negative campus climate is not uncommon (Evans, 2001; Rankin, 2003; Waldo, 1998). Seventy-four percent of Rankin's (2003) sample of sexual minority students classified their school campus as 'homophobic'. In a random sample of college students of all ages from the general campus population, Malaney, Williams, and Geller (1997) found that 25% of participants believed that anti-gay/anti-lesbian attitudes were prevalent at their school. D'Augelli and Rose (1990) documented that almost a third of heterosexual students in their first year of college in their study, believed that their colleges would be better off if only heterosexuals attended them. Additionally, Croteau and Lark (1995) suggest that, "[a]ssumed heterosexuality may be the single most pervasive and quietly damaging practice of all" (p. 476). It is not surprising that many sexual minority students stay hidden and closeted given that they experience schools as hostile environments (Rankin, 2003).

Experiencing school as a hostile environment can substantially interfere with students'

learning processes and is associated with increased likelihood of skipping individual classes and missing entire days of school due to feeling unsafe (Kosciw, 2004). In their examination of the relationship between sexual identity development and career/vocational development among college-aged lesbian-identified students, Tomlinson and Fassinger (2003) were surprised to find that "...campus climate explained more of the variance than lesbian identity development in both vocational variables" (p. 856). Negative perceptions of campus climate have also been found to be significantly associated with emotional distress, and academic disengagement (Cress, 2000).

The Impact of GSAs

While GSAs are a fairly recent social phenomenon on the educational landscape, a few studies do exist that have examined their impact. Even though most of the existing scholarship's generalizability is limited because samples have been taken from a limited geographic area or because the research is qualitative in nature, the overall picture that is emerging suggests that GSAs have the potential to make a positive impact on the educational experiences of sexual minority youth. These positive impacts may result from either providing individual support, altering the campus climate to be more inclusive, or both (Walls et al., 2008).

Many of the documented benefits of GSAs appear to be related to the direct support offered to students and the focus on developing and supporting individual and collective empowerment (Garcia-Alonso, 2004). This support may come in the form of providing information about topics such as coming out or relationships, connecting with supportive faculty and staff, finding faculty and staff mentors, or assisting youth to develop coping strategies for living in a frequently hostile world. Lee (2002), for example, argues that GSAs play an important role by providing a safe place for the development of positive relationships. Participants in a number of studies have reported, in line with Lee's assertion, that their relationships with others

improved as a result of their involvement in GSAs (Dietz, 1997; Hecht, 1998). Similarly, the support afforded youth by having connections with supportive sexual minority faculty in their schools has been shown to increase a sense of belonging as well as to increase the likelihood that the student would officially report incidents of harassment or assault to school officials.

In addition to improvement in interpersonal relationships, some studies suggest that the presence of GSAs may be related to improved mental health for sexual minority students. Goodenow and colleagues (2006; see also Walls et al., 2008) found that significantly fewer sexual minority students who attended schools with GSAs reported experiencing suicidality than their counterparts who attended schools without GSAs. This decrease in the prevalence of suicidality may be the natural outcome of finding and developing a network of supportive friends as suggested by findings that a lack of supportive friendships is associated with increased suicidal ideation among these youth (Prinstein, Boergers, Spirito, Little, & Grapentine, 2000).

Similarly, participants in GSAs have reported subjective improvements in a number of other psychosocial factors related to mental health, including increased comfort with their sexual identity, greater self-efficacy, and an increased sense of identification with their school. Cooper-Nichols (2007) identified participation in sexual minority groups as one of the seven major factors influencing the development of a healthy sexual identity for sexual minority youth. Rhee (2004) found that college-level sexual minority support groups helped decrease risky health behaviors.

Some improved educational outcomes have been reported as well. Lee (2004) found that students mentioned improvement both in their motivation for school as well as their grades. This included their desire to attend class, development of better study habits, greater interest in course work, and improved educational aspirations. Kiedman (2002; see also Sadowski, 2005) found

that protective factors such as belonging to support groups were correlated with involvement in high schools and were strong predictors of school membership.

In terms of campus climate, the literature suggests that there may be an improvement both for sexual minority youth as well as for the general school population. GSA members reported feeling safer at school and being harassed less frequently (Lee, 2004). With the incorporation of each recommendation from Massachusetts' Department of Education's Safe School Programs for Gay and Lesbian Students – one of which was the development and support of GSAs – Szalacha (2001) found a decrease in the level of homophobia in the school climate. At the very least, GSAs can inform students, faculty, and staff that harassment is not acceptable. A student's remark on her feelings of safety offers insight into the perception of the impact that a GSA can have on campus climate,

I think it (increased safety) probably has a lot to do with them seeing us as being really covered by the administration and by teachers. They know we have a faculty sponsor and they know that the principal checks up on us often, so I'm sure they see us as being out of their jurisdiction. We have a network of power. (Lee, p. 21)

While the combined results of these studies suggest that GSAs have the potential to improve the school experiences of sexual minority youth, and suggest far-reaching implications that these improvements could have on mental health and future academic plans, they offer little insight into the mechanism by which GSAs affect students. It is possible that most of the benefit of GSAs emerges through individualized support provided to the students, giving them a safe place to spend time, get needed services, and connect with allies. However, this would suggest that sexual minority youth would need to actively participate in GSAs in order to reap these benefits. Miceli's (2005) survey of GSAs indicates, however, that most of the students involved in the student groups are actually heterosexual allies. While expressing gratitude that their school

had a GSA, many sexual minority youth report keeping their distance for fear of outing themselves. Kevin Jennings, Executive Director of GLSEN reports,

"...for a lot of LGBT students, they're still afraid to walk through that door, because they're afraid they're going to be targeted if they do. But, what I've also heard from these students, often after they graduate, was 'yeah there was no way I was going to go to that group, but, boy, it made a big difference to me to know it was there.'" (quoted in Miceli, 2005, p. 118).

Another possibility is that GSAs in schools foster a more accepting climate toward sexual minority students, or at least give the impression of institutional legitimacy for their presence. In this case, the presence of GSAs in schools should have positive impact on sexual minority youth whether or not they are members or active participants in the student organization.

Hypotheses

This study examines three sets of hypotheses. The first is a single hypothesis examining the difference in drop out rates by GSA status. The second is a series of hypotheses about the differences that emerge in school experiences between students who attend a school with a GSA, and those who attend a school without a GSA. The final set is a series of hypotheses about the differences that emerge in school experiences between students who are members of GSAs and those who are non-members but who attend schools where GSAs exist.

Dropping out. We had only a single hypothesis on the relationship between GSA status and dropping out. Because GSAs have been associated with an increased sense of belonging and increased academic motivations, we hypothesized that a lower percentage of sexual minority students who had attended schools with GSAs would report having dropped out of school than those who had attended schools without GSAs.

Presence of GSAs. We had seven hypotheses regarding the difference in educational experiences between sexual minority students who attend schools where a GSA exists, and those who attend

schools without a GSA. Based on the notion that the presence of a GSA confers some degree of legitimacy on the presence of sexual minority youth in the school, we hypothesized that a lower percentage of students attending schools with GSAs would report victimization – both in general and specifically related to their sexual orientation – than those attending schools without GSAs. Legitimization should act as a deterrent to potential students' anti-gay/anti-lesbian behavior.

One of the clearest patterns in the existing literature on the impact of GSAs is that the presence of GSAs is associated with an increase in sexual minority students' subjective feelings of safety within the school. In line with those findings, we predicted that a lower percentage of students attending schools with GSAs would report feeling unsafe compared to students attending schools without GSAs. Given that most schools require official student organizations to have a faculty or staff sponsor on record, we anticipated that a higher percentage of students at schools with GSAs would be able to identify a safe adult at their school with whom they could discuss issues of sexual orientation or gender identity than at schools without GSAs.

On both of the behavioral response questions, we anticipated that a lower percentage of students at schools with GSAs would feel the need to miss school because of fear for their safety and/or to carry a weapon for protection than at schools without GSAs. Finally, we anticipated that students attending schools with GSAs would report making better grades than students at schools without GSAs.

GSA membership. We had seven hypotheses about the differences in educational experiences of GSA members compared to the educational experiences of GSA non-members (in schools where a GSA exists). However on three of the hypotheses, we did not predict directionality as there were theoretical rationale for relationships in either direction.

We were unclear as to the effect of GSA membership on rates of victimization. On one

hand, being a GSA member could provide youth with a support network that acts as a safeguard against bullying (Kiedman, 2002), while on the other, GSA members might be more visible to the general student body allowing heterosexist students to have knowledge of who was involved in the GSA – fostering a backlash against those students. The second possibility is in line with research that suggests that students who are more out about their sexual orientation frequently experience greater levels of victimization (Kiedman, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2005). As such, while we anticipated a difference emerging in rates of victimization, we did not predict the direction of the relationship.

Similarly, we were unclear as to how actual GSA membership might influence feelings of safety. GSA members might feel emboldened and supported, decreasing their subjective experience of unsafeness within the school context. Or, an argument could be made that students who were feeling more afraid might seek out GSAs at a higher rate because of their increased need for support. Savin-Williams and Ream (2003), for example, found higher levels of suicidality and life stressors among sexual minority students attending support groups than among their counterparts who were not involved in such groups. As such, while we anticipated a difference emerging between GSA members and non-members on experiences of safety, we again did not predict a direction.

Because of the very public nature of faculty and staff sponsors of GSAs within schools, we did not anticipate a significant difference emerging between the percentage of GSA members and non-members who could identify a safe person in their school. Even for those students who are not GSA members, it seems likely that they would easily have access to knowledge of which faculty or staff member was the sponsor, helping them identify a potential safe person within the context of school.

As we anticipated that membership in student organizations would lead to greater identification with school, which would then act as a factor to promote pro-social and inhibit anti-social behavioral responses, we predicted that a lower percentage of GSA members would report skipping school or carrying a weapon than non-GSA members. Finally, based on Lee's (2004) findings where students reported increased academic engagement after involvement with their school's GSA, we anticipated that GSA members would report making better grades than non-GSA members. To assist the reader, we summarize all hypotheses in Table 1.

| TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE |

Data and Methods

Rainbow Alley – a program of the Youth Services Department of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center of Colorado (The Center) – provides support, education, advocacy, youth leadership and social activities for sexual minority youth and their allies. Support is provided through open-topic groups facilitated by trained volunteers, informal case management, peer-to-peer support programming, and a drop-in center. Educational support includes access to homework assistance, GED preparation guides, and basic computer skills trainings. Social activities have included talent nights, drag shows, dinner and movie nights, and annual events like prom and weekend camping trips. The program is built on a youth-adult partnership model whereby staff members engage youth in decision-making roles for programming, policies, and administrative changes.

As part of its annual programmatic evaluation, program staff at Rainbow Alley conduct a survey of youth. Historically administered as a pen and paper survey, the survey has typically targeted only youth receiving services at Rainbow Alley. In 2006, staff decided to utilize an online survey format, and to make the survey available to a wider audience of sexual minority

youth to better understand the social service needs of Colorado's sexual minority youth who were not receiving services in order to provide direction for future program development. As such, youth were recruited to participate in the survey through a number of activities. Staff directly requested that youth receiving services at Rainbow Alley take part in the survey, explaining that participation was voluntary, and that decisions not to participate would not influence the youth's relationship with the program. Additionally, subjects were recruited at a number of social events where large groups of sexual minority youth could be found, and to broaden participation beyond Colorado, survey information was mailed to numerous community-based agencies in the U.S. that work with sexual minority youth. Finally, information about the survey was prominently displayed on The Center's webpage with a link inviting sexual minority youth and young adults to participate to allow those not associated with youth-serving agencies to access the survey.

The online survey consisted of ten screens, each made up of four to fifteen questions regarding a specific topic, and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Topics included school experiences, mental health issues, identity, levels of outness, drug and alcohol usage, among others. Measures were modeled after questions from the National Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004) and the GLSEN 2003 National Climate Survey (Kosciw, 2004). Data were collected anonymously with no identifying information collected and all respondents had to electronically sign a consent form prior to completing the survey. IRB approval was sought and obtained for analyses of the dataset as secondary data analyses as the data were originally collected for evaluation and planning purposes by The Center as part of its annual programmatic review and evaluation process.

The full sample consists of 306 youth who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or queer, between the ages of 13 and 22 who self-selected to participate in the

Center's online survey.¹ Of those, 13 were dropped because of missing data on the GSA or current grade question, resulting in a sample size of 293 youth. Given that the first hypothesis tested examines the differences between dropout rates based on GSA status, the full sample was used. The next series of hypotheses examined *current* educational experiences based on GSA status. As such, all respondents who were no longer in high school or college ($n=64$) were dropped from the sample, along with 22 respondents who had missing data on one or more of the variables of interest, resulting in a usable sample size of 207 for the second series of hypotheses. The final series of hypotheses compared the current school and college experiences based on GSA membership for those students who attend an educational institution where a GSA was present. This necessitated dropping all respondents who attend a school without a GSA, resulting in a sample size for this series of hypotheses of 135.²

Measures. Respondents were asked to indicate their age, and to identify their gender with five potential responses: "female", "male", "trans/male", "trans/female", "self identify/other". For race/ethnicity, respondents were given the options of describing themselves as "American Indian or Alaska Native", "Asian", "Black or African American", "Hispanic or Latino/Latina", "Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander", "White", or "Biracial/Multiracial." While all subjects in the sample identify as non-heterosexual, variability does exist in terms of the identity label. Response choices in the survey were "gay", "lesbian", "bisexual", "pansexual", "queer", "asexual", "other" and "not sure/questioning".

Two questions were asked regarding GSAs. First students were asked whether their school had a GSA and were given three response choices: "yes", "no", and "I don't know".³ A second question asked whether they were a member of the GSA. From these two questions a variable was derived classifying respondents as either attending a school with no GSA, attending

a school with a GSA but not being a member, or attending a school with a GSA and being a member.

To determine whether the respondent had dropped out of high school or college, the survey asked for the current grade in school, and included, "dropped out of high school" and "dropped out of college" as two possible choices in the response set. Respondents who indicated either of these two choices were coded as a one. All others were coded as a zero. One question was used to examine the respondent's academic achievement. They were asked, "Putting them all together, what were your grades like this past school year?" with a response set of "Mostly A's", "Mostly B's", "Mostly C's", "Mostly D's", and "Mostly F's." Assuming a 4.0 grading scale, the "Mostly A's" category was converted to 3.8, "Mostly B's" to a 2.8, etc.

Two questions were examined that capture protective behavioral responses to the students' environment. The first asked how many times in the past thirty days they had not gone to school because they felt unsafe. Those who indicated zero times were coded as a zero. All others were coded as a one to indicate that they had skipped school at least once in the past month because of feeling unsafe. The second question asked how often they had carried a weapon in the past thirty days. If they had not carried a weapon in the last thirty days, their response was coded as a zero, if they had, their response was coded as a one.

Two questions regarding safety were included in the study. The first asked how much of the time the respondent felt unsafe or afraid while at school in the last twelve months. The response set was a Likert scale ranging from "Never" to "All of the time". The answers were recoded into a dichotomized variable where "Never" and "Rarely" were recoded to zero, and "Sometimes", "Most of the Time" and "All of the Time" were recoded to one. The second question asked the respondent if they could identify a teacher, counselor, social worker, or other

adult at their school with whom they felt safe talking about their sexual orientation or gender identity. It had a yes/no response set.

Two questions on victimization were used in this study. The first was a general victimization question that asked, "During the past 12 months, have you been harassed at school (or on the way to or from school)?" with a yes/no response set. A second question was asked in the same format, but which asked if they had been harassed, "...because someone thought you were gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender?"

Results

The analyses of the survey responses were conducted using chi-square tests to determine independence between the nominal level variables and the GSA variable. Initial analyses were conducted using a three category GSA variable (no GSA, GSA but not a member, GSA member), which were then decomposed into two separate chi-square tests (Iverson, 1979) comparing (a) respondents who attended schools with GSAs with those who attended schools without GSAs, and (b) GSA members and GSA non-members in schools with GSAs. For all analyses except the examination of the hypothesis regarding dropout rates, only the results of the chi-square decomposition are reported as the results of the analyses using the three category GSA variable did not add additional relevant information. T-tests were used to determine if differences existed in respondent's grades based on GSA status. All analyses were conducted using Stata 9.2.

Descriptive Statistics. Descriptive statistics are reported based on the sample of 207 respondents which was used for examining the differences between students attending schools with GSAs and those attending schools without GSAs. Table 2 summarizes information on the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and Table 3 contains descriptive information for

the remainders of the variables examined in this study.

| TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE |

| TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE |

Dropping Out. To determine if a significant difference emerged in the percentage of students reporting dropping out of school based on GSA status, we conducted a chi-square test (N=293). We found that 11.20% (n=14) of students attending a school without a GSA, 5.08% (n=3) of students who attended a school with a GSA but who were not members of the group, and 0.92% (n=1) of students who were GSA members reported dropping out of high school or college. This difference is significant ($\chi^2=10.82$) at the .01 level ($p=.004$).⁴ See Table 4.

| TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE |

The Presence of GSAs. Because the following questions pertain to *current* school experiences, all respondents who reported that they were no longer in school, as well as an additional 22 respondents who were missing data were dropped, leaving a sample size of 207. The results of all the chi-square analyses reported in this section can be found in Table 5.

|TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE|

Examining victimization at school we found – contrary to our hypothesis – no significant differences emerged in levels of either general harassment ($\chi^2=1.56$, $p=.212$) or harassment because of sexual orientation ($\chi^2=0.25$, $p=.619$) between respondents who attended schools with GSAs and those who attended schools without GSAs. For students attending schools without a GSA, 66.67% (n=48) reported being victimized, while 57.78% (n=78) of students attending schools with GSAs reported victimization. The difference in victimization based on sexual orientation was even less pronounced between the two groups. Slightly more than half of the students in schools without GSAs (56.94%, n=41) and in schools with GSAs (53.33%, n=72)

reporting being victimized because of sexual orientation. Marginal significance did emerge, however, in that a lower percentage of students who attended schools with GSAs (28.89%, $n=39$) reported feeling unsafe compared with students who attended schools without GSAs (40.28%, $n=29$; $\chi^2=2.76$, $p=.097$).

A significantly higher percentage of students who attended schools with GSAs (83.70%, $n=113$) were likely to report being aware of a safe adult at the school than those who attended schools without GSAs (55.56%, $n=40$; $\chi^2=19.30$, $p=.000$). Significantly fewer students attending schools with GSAs (8.15%, $n=11$) reported missing school in the thirty days prior to the study because of fear, than students at schools without GSAs (19.44%, $n=14$; $\chi^2=5.64$, $p=.018$). Significant differences did not emerge, however, in the percentage of students who reported carrying a weapon in those thirty days (17.78% for students in schools with GSAs, 23.61% for students in schools without GSAs; $\chi^2=1.01$, $p=.316$). In our final examination of differences between the two groups, we predicted that we would find a higher grade point average among those attending schools with GSAs. Our hypothesis was supported. The average grade point was 2.58 for students at schools without GSAs, while it was 2.82 for students at schools with GSAs ($t=1.944$, $p=.026$).⁵

Differences that emerged between sexual minority students at schools with GSAs and those who attend schools without GSAs centered predominately on subjective experiences of safety (feeling unsafe, identifying a safe adult), academic achievement (dropping out, higher grade point average), and skipping school because of fear. Differences did not emerge in terms of students experiences of victimization in school, nor to carrying a weapon.

GSA Membership. Turning our attention now to an examination of differences between GSA members and non-members at schools with GSAs, we conducted our analyses only with

respondents in the sample who attended a school where the respondent was aware that a GSA existed, reducing our sample size to 135. See Table 6 for the analyses reported in this section.

[TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

We did not find a statistically significant difference in the percentage of students who experienced either general harassment or harassment due to sexual orientation between GSA members and non-members. Among GSA members, 59.55% ($n=53$) reported general harassment and 57.30% ($n=51$) reported harassment because of sexual orientation. This compares to 54.35% ($n=25$) of non-members reporting general harassment, and 45.65% ($n=21$) of non-members reporting harassment due to sexual orientation ($\chi^2=.337, p=0.562$; $\chi^2=1.65, p=0.198$, respectively).

Comparing the two groups on the subjective experience of feeling unsafe at school, and on being able to identify a safe adult to talk with at school, we again found no significant differences ($\chi^2=.081, p=.776$; $\chi^2=1.515, p=.218$, respectively). For GSA members, 28.09% ($n=25$) reported feeling unsafe at school during the last thirty days, and 86.52% ($n=77$) could identify a safe adult at school. This compares to 30.43% ($n=14$) for non-members feeling unsafe at school, and 78.26% ($n=36$) being able to identify a safe adult. These results fail to support our hypothesis about the differences between the groups on feeling unsafe at school, but do support our hypothesis that no significant differences would emerge between the two groups on identifying a safe adult at school.

GSA members were no more or less likely to report missing school in the thirty days prior to the survey (6.74%, $n=6$) than non-members (10.87%, $n=5$; $\chi^2=.691, p=.406$). Likewise the two groups were not significantly different in the percentage who carried a weapon in the previous thirty days (16.85%, $n=15$ for GSA members, and 19.57%, $n=9$ for non-members;

$\chi^2=.153, p=.696$). In the final comparison, as predicted, GSA members had a significantly higher grade point average with a mean of 3.024 than did non-members who had a mean grade point average of 2.426 ($t=-3.73, p=.0001$). Grade point average turned out to be the only significant difference we found between GSA members and non-members at schools where GSAs exist.

Implications for Practice

Youth-serving professionals should be aware that the presence of GSAs in schools appears to act as a protective factor for sexual minority students in some ways, but not in others. The findings here suggest that having a GSA may increase the subjective experience of safeness that students have in schools, and may make supportive adult allies in the school more visible as a resource. Given the documented influence of anxiety and fear on both academic achievement and the mental health of students, these results are encouraging. The finding that sexual minority students in schools where GSAs exist had better grades and were less likely to skip school because of fear than their counterparts in schools without GSAs further underscores the potential impact on academic achievement.

The lack of difference in the prevalence of victimization at schools with GSAs and those without GSAs raises a number of questions regarding the social geography of schools which should be of concern to school-based helping professionals. Are faculty and staff at schools trained to intervene in anti-gay/anti-lesbian harassment and bullying? Do schools have a zero tolerance for bullying and is it enforced? Are anti-gay/anti-lesbian incidents handled with the same level of seriousness afforded to hostilely racist and sexist acts in schools? Are there spaces within the context of the school experience that are more dangerous for sexual minority youth than others? How have schools publicly communicated their commitment to safety and public citizenship for sexual minority students? Do sexual minority youth perceive faculty, staff, and

administration to be responsive to issues of violence and victimization toward their community? (For example, Cooper-Nichols (2007) found that sexual minority youth did not perceive school psychologists as being helpful to sexual minority youth.)

The only difference that emerged between students who were members of GSAs and those who were not was related to better reported grades. The improvement in grades was above and beyond the boost in grades that was found between students at schools with GSAs and those who attended schools without GSAs. This improvement echoes the findings of Lee's (2004) study of GSA members where students voiced a difference in their motivation for school.

It is surprising that members of GSAs were not significantly different than non-members in their feelings of safeness, their likelihood of skipping school, or their likelihood to carry a weapon. Part of the lack of significance may be related to the decrease in sample size, but there may also be qualitative differences in the context of the schools or of the GSAs that explains this lack of difference. For example, it is possible that some GSAs were small groups that had existed for only short periods of time while others were very active and engaged organizations. Some schools may be hostile to the existence of GSAs (see discussion of institutional resistance to GSAs in Utah by Autman (1996), Burrington (1998), and Lee (2004)) while others may have more institutional support.

Limitations

Many of the limitations of the study revolve around the issue of the non-representativeness of the sample. While the sample does include youth and young adults from a wide range of locales in the U.S., there is an over-representation of Colorado and Denver area youth. Similarly, given that the youth organizations that provided recruitment information on the survey to their client population were primarily located in urban areas, we anticipate that the

sample underrepresents sexual minority youth from rural areas, and youth not associated with youth groups and social services. It is also important to remember the sample consists of both youth and young adults. Setting aside the concern about where adolescence ends and young adulthood begins, this study does not examine each of these subpopulations of sexual minority youth as discrete separate populations. Given the differences in cognitive development, educational contexts, and resource availability it seems likely that the trends that emerge in the study may be somewhat different for each of these groups, but it is only with larger sample sizes and further study that this could be examined. As the mean age of the sample is in the typical range for high school students in the U.S., we have oriented this paper toward that population.

An additional limitation of the convenience sample, which may seem obvious without stating it, is that it consists of youth who have self-identified as sexual minority youth. Savin-Williams (2005) correctly points out the concern that youth who are same-sex attracted but who do not identify with the labels of gay, lesbian, or bisexual are not likely to be included in samples such as these. Similarly, same-sex attracted youth – regardless of whether or not they identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender – who do not feel comfortable accessing social services or youth groups, or who do not need the services offered because they may be higher functioning or have greater social support are less likely to be included in the sample. These limitations clearly mean that the findings reported here do not generalize to all same-sex attracted youth. Finally, because of the cross-sectional nature of the data, the findings do not allow us to understand causality.

Future Research

The findings do raise numerous questions that should be examined in future research on the impact of GSAs. For the relationships that did emerge, there are still questions about the

mechanisms undergirding those relationships. For example, were the findings regarding increases in educational achievement (grades) the result of increased feelings of self-efficacy, greater motivation for school, an improved sense of belonging, higher educational aspirations, or some other reason. Including measures of such constructs in future research could be beneficial.

We examined only school experience variables, and did so only in bivariate relationships to determine if significant differences existed between the three groups. It is quite possible that GSAs have greater influence on mental health than on school experiences, with the potential that mental health variables either mediate or moderate the impact of GSAs on the school experience. Examining the relationship between GSA status and mental health variables, as well as controlling for mental health variables when examining school experiences, might prove to be quite helpful in understanding these issues.

Context information could shed additional light on some of the findings of significance as well as on some of the null findings. Given the nature of the data in the study, we were unable, for example, to determine if the level of severity of incidents of harassment were different based on the presence of a GSA in the school. It is possible that while frequency of harassment is similar between schools with GSAs and those without, the severity of those incidents could actually differ. This could drive the null findings whereby victimization appeared to be similar in schools with and without GSAs.

Finally, future research should seek to examine the differences between the educational experiences of sexual minority youth in high schools and sexual minority youth in colleges and universities. Given the developmental differences, the differences in educational contexts, and the differences in resource availability, not to mention the availability to choose the educational institution attended for young adults, it is likely that a more complex picture of the influence of

GSAs on educational experiences of sexual minority students will emerge. The research that does exist suggests that some of the patterns of victimization and isolation that sexual minority youth experience in many high schools continues to be a reality for sexual minority young adults in university contexts. The degree to which this is true and the correlates that effect the patterns could provide helpful information for youth-serving professional as well as for student service personnel in universities.

Conclusion

The existence of GSAs in so many schools in the U.S. is a fairly recent social phenomenon. As such, this movement has not had time to mature to the degree that its impact on school climate and the educational experiences of sexual minority youth has fully been realized. This study, and other early research on the impact of GSAs suggests that we are only starting to see the potential positive influence, and offers some encouraging findings to support the involvement of social workers, counselors, and other school-based personnel. While GSAs alone will not eradicate the hostile environment that is prevalent in so many schools, they are one mechanism available for professionals to support a more positive school experience for sexual minority youth. As such, conversations regarding membership in GSAs, or the founding of a GSA if one does not already exist, should be initiated. School administrators who exert control over school programs should support the existence of GSAs which may mean providing the funding necessary to create a safe space dedicated to the gathering of sexual minority students and their allies, or educating community members who oppose the students' legal right to have such organizations.

Endnotes

¹Sample size used in the different analyses varied depending on the nature of the hypotheses.

²The decision was made to restrict testing of hypotheses regarding the differences between GSA members and GSA non-members to respondents who attended schools where GSAs existed rather than comparing participants who were GSA members to the combined group of participants who were not GSA members because their school had no GSA or because they had chosen not to be members. Otherwise, we suggest that it would be difficult to determine how much of the variability found was related to the presence of the GSA in the school rather than to membership in the GSA. Admittedly this decision limits our sample size and creates issues of power in our analyses making it more difficult to detect actual significant differences should they exist.

³Those indicating that they didn't know were coded as a "no" under the assumption that their school either did not have a GSA, or they were unaware of the GSA as a resource if it did exist (Walls et al., 2008).

⁴While the question used for testing the dropping out of school hypothesis had a response set that included "dropped out of high school" and "dropped out of college", one anonymous reviewer suggested that adolescents and young adults may interpret this response set in a manner differently than how the authors have interpreted it. It is possible that some respondents more accurately viewed themselves as "stopping out" of school rather than dropping out with the plan to return once they were more able to do so. While it is impossible with the existing data to determine if this is actually the case, this observation warrants further investigation in future studies.

⁵Because our hypothesis was directional, a one-tailed test was used.

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Table 1: Summary of Study Hypotheses

	Comparing schools with GSAs with those without	Comparing GSA members to non-members (in schools with GSAs)
Dropping out of school	GSA < No GSA	Not applicable
General harassment	GSA < No GSA	GSA member \neq non-member
Harassment due to sexual orientation	GSA < No GSA	GSA member \neq non-member
Feeling unsafe	GSA < No GSA	GSA member \neq non-member
Identifying safe adult	GSA > No GSA	GSA member = non-member
Missing school	GSA < No GSA	GSA member < non-member
Carrying weapon	GSA < No GSA	GSA member < non-member
Grade point	GSA > No GSA	GSA member > non-member

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics: Demographics

	Female	Male	FTM Trans	MTF Trans	Missing Gender		
Gender	56.04%	38.16%	2.90%	1.45%	1.45%		
	Native American	Asian American	African American	Latino/a	White	Bi/Multi	Missing Race
Race/ Ethnicity	3.38%	2.42%	5.31%	6.28%	74.40%	6.76%	1.45%
	Resident	Non- Resident	Missing Residence				
Colorado Resident	59.90%	39.13%	0.97%				
	Gay	Lesbian	Bisexual	Not Sure	Queer	Other/ Pansexual/ Asexual	
Sexual Identity	31.40%	25.12%	28.99%	8.21%	3.38%	2.90%	

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics: Educational Experiences

	Yes	No
GSA in School	65.22%	34.78%
GSA Member	65.93%	34.07%
Experienced Harassment (general)	60.87%	39.13%
Experience Harassment (related to sexual orientation)	45.41%	54.59%
Felt Unsafe	32.85%	67.15%
Safe Person	73.91%	26.09%
Missed School	12.08%	87.92%
Carried a Weapon	19.81%	80.19%

Table 4. Dropping Out of School by GSA Status (N=293)

		No GSA	GSA, non-member	GSA, member	χ^2	p-value
Dropped Out	Yes	11.20%	5.08%	0.92%	10.82	$p=.004^{***}$
	No	88.80%	94.92%	99.08%		

Note: **** $p<.001$, *** $p<.01$, ** $p<.05$, * $p<.10$

Table 5. Tests of Difference, GSA Presence in School (N=207)

		No GSA	GSA	χ^2	p-value significance
Experienced Harassment (general)	Yes	66.67%	57.78%	1.56	$p=.212$
	No	33.33%	42.22%		
Experienced Harassment (sexual orientation)	Yes	56.94%	53.33%	0.25	$p=.619$
	No	43.06%	46.67%		
Felt Unsafe	Yes	40.28%	28.89%	2.76	$p=.097^*$
	No	59.72%	71.11%		
Safe Person	Yes	55.56%	83.70%	19.30	$p=.000^{*****}$
	No	44.44%	16.20%		
Missed School	Yes	19.44%	8.15%	5.64	$p=.018^{**}$
	No	80.56%	91.85%		
Carried a Weapon	Yes	23.61%	17.78%	1.01	$p=.316$
	No	76.39%	82.22%		

Note: ***** $p<.001$, *** $p<.01$, ** $p<.05$, * $p<.10$

Table 6. Tests of Difference, GSA Membership (N=135)

		GSA, non-member	GSA, member	χ^2	p-value significance
Experienced Harassment (general)	Yes	54.35%	59.55%	.337	<i>p</i> =.562
	No	45.65%	40.45%		
Experienced Harassment (sexual orientation)	Yes	45.65%	57.30%	1.650	<i>p</i> =.198
	No	54.35%	42.60%		
Felt Unsafe	Yes	30.43%	28.09%	.081	<i>p</i> =.776
	No	69.57%	71.91%		
Safe Person	Yes	78.26%	86.52%	1.515	<i>p</i> =.218
	No	21.74%	13.48%		
Missed School	Yes	10.87%	6.74%	.691	<i>p</i> =.406
	No	89.13%	93.26%		
Carried a Weapon	Yes	19.57%	16.85%	.153	<i>p</i> =.696
	No	80.43%	83.15%		

Note: *****p*<.001, ****p*<.01, ***p*<.05, **p*<.10