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# Can Student-Built GSAs Provide Positive Development for LGBT Youth in High Schools?

## A Review of Literature

By Beau Coggsdale

Within school systems, there are sexual minority students that are not treated with the same amount of attention that the sexual majority gets. These minority students include individuals that identify as bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, or questioning. These students would fall under the category of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, or pan/polysexual (LGBTQQIAP). Many LGBT students in high school report feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Hong, Espelage, and Kral 885-886). Many of these students, especially in rural areas, require some form of support within the school system for healthy positive development. Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) are especially notable when they are student-run and student-built. There are many positive correlations between the presence of a GSA and the success of the LGBT students within that school system. Internalized homophobia is a major mental health issue that can be reduced by utilizing certain forms of support for adolescents, especially within school systems.

GSAs, especially student-made ones, provide a unique opportunity to help educate not only the student body, but the teachers and staff of the schools as well. The more educated the staff is, the more likely they are to provide some intervention when sexual minority youth are being harassed; it would also provide them with ways in which to deal with common sexual minority issues such as parental rejection and peer rejection. GSAs may provide the necessary feeling of inclusion for LGBT teens that helps reduce the effects of verbal and physical harassment (Russel, Muraco, Subramaniam, and Laub 891-892). This paper first considers research on the consequences of heterosexism or internalized homophobia, research on where heterosexism comes from, covering (hiding) one's sexual identity, how to reduce heterosexism, and finally how GSAs combat heterosexism in schools.

### *What Are the Consequences of Heterosexism?*

Throughout an adolescent's time during high school, there are many important developmental stages that are important in determining the mental health of the adolescent presently and in the future. Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, and Russell report that research indicates that sexual minority youth are at a greater risk than heterosexual youth for suicidal ideation and attempts at suicide, substance abuse, and low self-esteem and that the period of greatest risk for teens is during the developmental period of adolescence (175). During psychosocial development, it is important to realize that the experiences these students face stay with them into the future, which can cause serious issues in adulthood. These youth are sensitive about the way they are viewed; the negative views their peers and adult figures in their lives have about homosexuality can cause them to contemplate suicide. Hong, Espelage, and Kral indicate that sexual minority youth in America were at a greater risk for suicide (885-886); they asserted that that mental health of sexual youth is a major concern because they are more likely to kill themselves than their heterosexual counterparts (Hong et al. 885-6).

Many people have theorized about why being of a different sexual orientation would cause suicidal ideation. Toomey et al. assert that lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents were at a

greater risk of committing suicide because of the negative mental state that develops in LGBT adolescents (175). Hong et al. contend that adolescence is an important time for emotional and social development, which could be hindered by the outward discrimination by peers and adults (887). According to the 2011 GLSEN study, the psychological well-being of high school adolescents was influenced by the amount of victimization that LGBT students experienced about their sexual orientation or gender expression. The higher the rate of victimization means the higher the levels of depression and the lower the levels of self-esteem (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, and Palmer 44). The low self-esteem develops from a lack of acceptance about their own sexual orientation, which is influenced largely by the acceptance of their family and peers. Therefore, many adolescents try to cover their sexual orientation in order to fit into their community's expectations. The LGBT adolescents assume that they are inferior to their heterosexual counterparts because of their community pressuring them to cover their true identity during this important part of development. al. utilized a 2005 survey, which reported that 45% of LGBT youth tried to commit suicide, while 8% of heterosexual students reported trying to kill themselves. It was clearly stated that sexual orientation and gender identity are not risk factors for committing suicide, but the victimization they experience is a risk factor (885). Mayo reports that LGBT-identified youth face hostile environments at schools, where both their teachers and peers make homophobic comments (356). The term "gay" is used with a negative connotation. LGBT youth also experience more verbal and physical abuse than their heterosexual peers because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation (356). Toomey et al. also recorded that the high rates of physical and verbal abuse experienced by adolescents made them feel that their school environment was unsafe (175). Because many of the students felt unsafe at their school, many of them refused to go. Avoiding classes made them even feel worse than before, so they end up even more depressed and anxious than they were to begin with (175-176). It creates a negative cycle that never ends. LGBT students continue to feel more negatively about their sexual orientation, and also they feel like they cannot do anything about stopping heterosexism because they fear for their safety and rejection from their parents and peers. Mayo observed that LGBT youth skip class because of the pain and humiliation that they experience in their school; many of these students also reported feeling unsafe in their school environment, (356).

One of the major issues associated with being a part of a sexual minority is the inability to conform to society's standards and norms. Many people cover their sexual orientation in order to assimilate into societal expectations. Craig, Tucker, and Wagner contend that LGBT youth are subjected to discrimination and harassment because they do not follow a majority's sexual orientation or accepted gender norms; therefore, LGBT are more likely to be subject to discrimination, harassment, and violence in comparison to their heterosexual peers (244). Craig et al. state that the bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth has become a significant problem within the United States (250). LGBT students are faced with minority stress from heterosexual adolescents and adults stigmatizing them on the basis of being gender non-conforming or for their sexual orientation (238).

### *How Is Heterosexism Created?*

Chesir-Teran define heterosexism as the "systematic processing of privileging heterosexuality relative to homosexuality," which causes homosexuals to be placed at a disadvantage (268). Hong et al. report that heterosexism increases adolescents' risk of suicide, and leads them to forms of suicidal ideation, depression, loneliness, and anxiety; there are very few resources for gay individuals in rural environments, and the lack of support leads to feelings of isolation

(887). Isolation is present in teens because teens understand the level of heterosexism within their families, which makes it difficult for teens to reveal their sexual orientation (Yarbrough 137-138). Isolation from a peer group is one of the ways LGBT youth try to cover their sexual identity because it keeps their peers from becoming suspicious of their sexual orientation. Also, it allows them to avoid any current physical or verbal harassment that they are experiencing; however, isolation or suppressing sexual orientation can lead to other harmful effects.

Chesir-Teran stress that heterosexism is the main reason that LGBT adolescents feel isolated from their peers (267). Heterosexism can result in psychological distress, reduced self-esteem, increased suicide attempts, alcohol or substance abuse, school absence, and internalized heterosexism (267). Yarbrough report that school administrators and teachers often refuse to address the harassment of gay adolescents by students because they believe that LGBT adolescents brought the problem upon themselves (132). The lack of support from adult figures within the schools caused the harassment of sexual minority students to escalate (132). One of the most harmful things within school systems about their treatment of LGBT individuals is the lack of support from adults. When adults do not stand up for LGBT youth within the school, other students feel like they can continue the harassment. Radowsky and Siegel believe heterosexism should be reduced because it reduces the amount of maladaptive behavior demonstrated by LGBT adolescents to cope with anxiety and depression (200-201). The maladaptive behavior results in the adolescents feeling even worse about themselves and placing them at a higher risk of depression and suicidal ideation.

Blackburn and McCready state that students who come from communities that have lower income and tax brackets, more blue-collar workers, and less educated individuals are more likely to experience a large amount heterosexism in their schools (228). Because of the heterosexism in these schools, it is possible that very few LGBT issues are being covered in the curriculum. More research into the amount of LGBT issues covered in these schools needs to be collected further. The state could possibly require classrooms to incorporate LGBT issues into their curriculum in order to help ameliorate some of the heterosexism in the classroom, especially in rural states.

Fisher, Irwin, and Coleman state that rural LGBT people were more likely to continue maladaptive behavior such as binge drinking, less likely to be accepting of their sexual orientation, and less likely to have health insurance as adults compared to their urban LGBT counterparts (1080). Although there is not enough support in certain urban areas because of the demographic, urban LGBT students tend to be more accepting of their sexual orientation and well-adapted in adulthood.

### *What is Covering One's Identity?*

Fjelstrom asserts that homo-negative environments result in sexual minority individuals having to hide their feelings, creating significant barriers to the possibility of living authentically as a non-heterosexual person (802). When the individual's inner experience, such as their sexuality, does not conform to societal norms, cognitive dissonance arises. Some sexual minority individuals seek to resolve the dilemma by attempting to change their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual (802). Sometimes adolescents feel obligated to cover themselves in order to fit into the majority, so they do not have to face the homo-negative environment directly. Because they feel shame about their sexual orientation, they develop a sense of internalized homophobia that results in low self-esteem, poor relationship satisfaction, and increased psychological stress (Allen and Oleson 40-41). However, there are consequences of repressing one's sexual identity as well, which are noted by the case studies involving those that

tried to change their sexual orientation through sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE).

Fjelstrom notes that SOCE was the terminology coined by the American Psychological Association in 2009 (803). SOCE efforts included counseling, religious practices, behavioral modification, and cognitive reframing to convert the participant's sexual orientation. The ideal outcome of SOCE is for the person to successfully change from homosexual to heterosexual. (803-804). The programs attempted to force assimilation into societal expectations about heterosexuality, and they reinforce the idea that homosexuality is inferior to heterosexuality, which can have long-term consequences. The participants were supposed to learn to fully cover their sexual identity. McDavitt, Iverson, Kubicek, Weiss, Wong, and Kipke report that some youth that had fully disclosed their sexual orientation chose to keep the obviousness of their sexual orientation at a minimum (366). Many of the participants in the study covered their sexual identity once they learned about their family's opinions and peers' opinions about homosexuals (McDavitt et al. 366-367).

The participants in Fjelstrom's study documented an overwhelming feeling of inauthenticity and disconnection in their everyday lives (805). The motive of the participants for entering a SOCE was to remove their "sinful" behavior that would cause them to be ostracized by their peers, community, family, and church. The initial acceptance of talking about homosexuality in these programs helped the participants feel accepted (805). Just from this data alone, one could conclude that providing a place where homosexuality is acceptable to talk about would be beneficial. Although the participants knew that the people in charge of the program were not accepting of their sexuality, the program participants felt some relief when they no longer had to cover their sexual orientation. Covering appears to be one of the biggest factors in feelings of not being accepted. However, the program eventually taught them to cover even more, especially about certain behaviors that were commonly associated with the opposite gender. Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) would help by allowing students to have a place within school to not cover.

Fjelstrom asserts that many of the participants were forced into traditional feminine and masculine roles such as the flute being a "feminine instrument" and baseball a "masculine activity" (809). Traditional male and female gender roles and activities tend to be a source of harassment for LGBT adolescents. The majority of the gay men surveyed in Sanchez and Vilain's study wished to be more masculine and less feminine than they perceived themselves. Men tend to lean more towards acting in a masculine way than appearing masculine because it is easier to manipulate one's behavior than one's outward appearance (117). Essentially, LGBT youth would prefer to completely cover their identity, especially their behavior, in order to conform to societal norms.

Sanchez and Vilain state that many of their participants' feelings about covering come from the belief that as gender-nonconforming children they were scrutinized, which led them to defeminize or masculinate their behavior to protect themselves from a sense of alienation from same sex peers (112). Because the idea of isolation is so unappealing and dissatisfying, many just change their entire behavior in order to fit a heterosexual, cisgender model. Fjelstrom states that many of the participants reported that behavior, mannerisms, and anything related to homosexuality were considered inferior to heterosexual behaviors (809). "Sometimes participants told stories with amusement; at other times, there were tears because they were even told to change ways of dressing, gesturing, and speaking that they felt closely aligned with their personal expressions" states Fjelstrom (810). Studies into SOCE and their long-term effects on the individual support that covering one's identity often has a negative impact in the long run, since trying to cover your identity does not change it.



### *Can We Build Something that Reduces Heterosexism?*

One of the major ways to reduce the amount of covering that occurs within high school adolescents would be to reduce the amount of heterosexism present within the school, which could be done with education. Knotts and Gregorio state that the GMCLA's (Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles) Education Outreach Project uses live music and a standards-driven curriculum to teach students in an engaging way to think critically about personal, national, and international issues (66). Knotts and Gregorio note that the GMCLA's Education Outreach Project contains a curriculum that talks about Billy Strayhorn, a gay, African American composer (67). Bringing up LGBT individuals is uncommon; so many students do not realize the contributions LGBT individuals have made. The GMCLA added more gay composers and incorporated their stories, which involved immigration, religious persecution, race, and class (67). The GMCLA project had an impact on the majority of the students, helping them better understand LGBT issues that they previously knew nothing about (78). Simply providing kids in high schools with information about LGBT issues had a significant impact on the majority of the students, which reduces some of the constrictions of heterosexism that students place on their LGBT peers. Education is one of the best ways to reduce heterosexism within school systems.

Blackburn and McCready state students are still faced with homophobia within schools (226). Regardless of the amount of support there is for LGBT youth, including GSAs, many of these students feel isolated from support such as GSAs because of the negative connotation they have in some schools (226-227). It is apparent that GSAs do combat heterosexism, but they are limited depending on the amount of support that is received from the school. Toomey et al. state that like their heterosexual counterparts, school based activities can be a primary setting for positive LGBT youth development (176). Schools with active GSAs are shown to have lower victimization rates, have greater school safety, and provide sense of connection for LGBT adolescents within their schools (Toomey et al. 176). Active GSAs could provide LGBT students with a chance to get involved without having to cover their actual identity when they are with their peers, which would allow for closer interpersonal relationships to form. Also, interpersonal relationships would be more likely to form between LGBT students and their teachers as well if there was some sort of understanding of LGBT issues.

Blackburn and McCready suggest that teachers should be required to enforce stricter rules involving homophobia, requiring staff and faculty to learn about supporting LGBT students and how to intervene when a student is being harassed (228). In addition, it would be beneficial to require teachers to provide up-to-date resources on LGBT issues through the school publicly and privately when it is necessary (228). The more the teachers know about the subject, the more likely they are to understand why kids would hide their identities and that homosexuality is not something that can just be changed on a whim, such as what SOCE programs attempted. Toomey et al. contend that schools with active GSAs have more teachers covering LGBT issues in their curriculum (226). Mayo notes that students in GSAs provide information to other students about gay civil right issues, historical figures such as Harvey Milk, Proposition 8, Don't Ask Don't Tell, and even shows about LGBT celebrities (373). GSAs provide a gateway for LGBT issues to start being discussed in secondary education. These issues that are considered controversial would have a much smoother transition if a GSA already existed than if it was outright placed into a standard curriculum set up by the state.

Mayo asserts that LGBT-themed discussion provides students with a chance to become actively engaged within the classroom about current civil right issues (353). Student-made GSAs provide students with the freedom to learn about LGBT-themed topics that were not mentioned in the classroom. GSAs offer a chance for students to become more aware of gender

and sexual identity (353-354). Overall, incorporating conversations about the topic of LGBT issues would provide some relief from heterosexism, and it would give students a chance to understand more about LGBT social movements and compare them to other social movements. Also, it could provide information about famous LGBT individuals that did not cover their sexual orientation, and it would give LGBT students a chance to gain role models. This role model would let them see that they can be successful regardless of sexual orientation, which would allow for positive psychosocial development.

Mayo states that it would not be difficult to include these topics because many are comparable to events in the African American civil rights movement such as gay civil rights movement (375). Incorporating these themes would result in students having a broader understanding of social justice (375). However, people will be hesitant in including this information because of the controversy and misconceptions about homosexuality and gender identity. The controversy over the issues of homosexuality and gender identity makes it difficult for local governments to incorporate LGBT themes into schools' curriculums, but the misconceptions of these issues can be remedied through education.

#### *What Can Student-Built GSAs Do to Combat Heterosexism?*

Russel, Muraco, Subramaniam, and Laub assert that GSAs allow high-school-aged adolescents to feel empowered (892). The sense of empowerment in sexual minorities leads to lower rates of victimization and suicide rates (892). The sense of empowerment experienced by the leaders of these organizations is especially notable. Mayo notes that the GSA at Freedom High School is a safe environment where students are allowed to talk openly about queer issues, and members of the GSA are allowed to inform others outside of the classroom about what they had learned within the GSA (353). The case study shows that GSAs can be very positive additions in schools because they would reduce heterosexism and switch some focus to LGBT history and LGBT issues, which would provide a more comprehensive understanding of issues faced by their LGBT peers. Toomey et al. assert that positive support for LGBT youth within schools is an important part of adolescent development, and a way in which they could incorporate positive support within the school system is the development of a GSA (176).

Russel et al. note that once students came together to combat issues that they believed in, their feelings of isolation decreased as well (891). GSA programs evolved from adult-based programs, but they are all almost run entirely by youth, which gave Russel et al. the opportunity to actively study self-empowerment in adolescents (891-892). GSA members' sense of empowerment and conversations about empowering experiences are all grounded in the concept of social and sexual justice (892). Toomey et al. also noted that the presence of GSAs also resulted in greater academic achievement and LGBT personal empowerment (176). Academic achievement is very important for the personal satisfaction for the majority of LGBT students. The better they feel about how they are doing in school, the higher the level of self-esteem, which contributes to combating feelings of depression and suicidal ideation.

Mayo reports that members of GSAs were much less likely to miss a day of school because of fearing for their safety than their heterosexual peers (357). The correlation appears to be between the GSA and the number of school days missed. It is possible that providing students with an adequate amount of support could increase academic achievement. Youth in these programs had a greater sense of belonging in the school's community. Members of the GSA at Freedom High School benefited greatly from the presence of an active GSA in their school's community (357). The active GSA provided the students with a social support system that did not require them to assimilate into a mold; therefore, it was possible for the people within the club to actually support their peers.

Toomey et al. state that GSAs help students improve academically, have a more positive psychosocial development, and have a positive impact when LGBT youth are transitioning into adulthood (176-177). Toomey et al. note that GSAs are student-led clubs within schools that attempt to create a safe environment for LGBT students (176). As of 2011, GSAs have increased dramatically within schools and over 4000 are registered with the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (Toomey et al. 176). It appears that the student-led nature of these programs is what makes them especially effective because they provide students with a feeling of empowerment over their situation. The empowerment allows students to address the situations they may face due to heterosexism.

Toomey et al. conclude that the presence of a GSA serves as a protective factor for LGBT adolescents because more students report feeling safe within their schools (177). Also, the presence of a GSA resulted in fewer homophobic remarks, less victimization, greater school safety and school connectedness, and more teachers defending students over LGBT issues (177). Adults are one of the bigger contributors to the heterosexism within schools, and GSAs have shown to help prevent some of the harassment from adults with heterosexist attitudes. Areas where homophobic remarks are considered unacceptable tend to have a GSA. The study conducted by Toomey et al. in 2011 determined that schools with large numbers of immigrants or lower socioeconomic status were less likely to contain a GSA within their school system (179). Toomey et al. conclude from their study that if schools officials ameliorated the amount of victimization within the schools then GSAs could be even more beneficial (183).

Blackburn and McCready note that classes that were mostly white received more publicity about the GSA events (227). Students in multi-racial classes were less likely to hear about the GSA event because people would turn the club into a joke. When racial minority students finally got the nerve to attend these events, they felt isolated because the majority of the club members were white girls (227). There appears to be a problem with racial minority groups finding support within GSAs in some schools because there is little representation of their racial group within the club, which could be attributed to some cultural backgrounds being less accepting of homosexuality.

Blackburn and McCready report that many times when parents heard about a GSA being formed in a school the parents would organize a group to protest the creation of the GSA because their children were too young to learn about LGBT issues (227). Many of the parents were extremely worried about their own child's sexuality being influenced because of the presence of a GSA. The school administration would often support the GSA; however, the constant pressure from parents sometimes results in the removal of the GSA (227). Even though student-built GSAs can help combat heterosexism, there are still pressures from parents within communities to muffle anything involving homosexuality. Because many parents attempt to prevent these programs, it is important for the programs to be completely student-made because it helps reduce some of the pressure that administration and teachers experience from parents.

### *Conclusion*

As heterosexism still continues to be present within school systems and communities, it is imperative to find ways to reduce the amount of stress that is experienced by sexual minority students and gender-nonconforming students. Through providing youth with an outlet such as GSAs, students become more empowered and feel more in control of their situation. GSAs can drastically affect the student body, and it also causes staff and administration to be more focused on providing support to LGBT students. Overall, a GSA provides LGBT youth in high schools with the opportunity to reduce the amount of isolation felt because of heterosexual privilege,



which is especially prevalent in rural communities. GSAs could have a long-term positive influence on LGBT youth that lasts into adulthood. Internalized homophobia is a major issue for LGBT youth that results in a decrease in mental health in the long-term; if it can be reduced, it would reduce the amount of suicides, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation that is present in high-school-aged adolescents. Student-built GSAs would be the best way to combat heterosexism in schools because of the feeling of empowerment the students feel, along with the feeling of peer acceptance and not needing to cover their personal identities.

Student-built GSAs should be implemented in the communities where the highest rates of suicide, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation for LGBT adolescents are. The reason student-built GSAs should be supported in rural schools is because it is likely to provide a sense of empowerment for the students where they usually do not garner any support because of a lack of resources for LGBT individuals. However, more research should be conducted on the effect of students covering their sexual or gender identity because of the lack of data and lack of population diversity in the data of most studies. Further research should be conducted on the demographics of the communities surrounding the school because there appears to be direct link between the harassment from heterosexism and the demographics of the community. Until more research is conducted on the topic, there is no accurate way to tell how beneficial student-built GSAs within rural schools would be for the students.

There should be a national survey that covers the majority of rural areas about whether the school has a GSA, the activity of the GSA, the demographics of the community, whether the GSA is student-run, and a mental health evaluation on LGBT adolescents in high schools, including schools without GSAs. The data collected could be used to determine if student-run programs are effective in reducing heterosexism within schools. Also, a longitudinal study should be conducted on adolescents that had an active GSA, adolescents with an inactive GSA, and adolescents with no GSA in order to determine long-term mental health benefits for LGBT support in school systems. Although a lot of information points towards GSAs being effective, there is not enough quantitative data in the field to tell how effective these student-run organizations are.

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