Demographic Differences in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth's Participation in School-Based Gay-Straight Alliances in the United States

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Abstract of Thesis

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Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) – student-led extracurricular clubs that provide support and challenge biased and discriminatory behaviors and practices in school – can help to create safer and more inclusive schools, particularly for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. There is little empirical research examining differential access to and participation in GSAs. Using data from a national survey of LGBT secondary school students (N=6,207, 64.4% White, 57.8% female), this study examined differences in GSA participation by race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation on two measures: frequency of attending club meetings and taking on a leadership role. Results from hierarchical linear regression and binary logistic regression analyses indicated that race/ethnicity and gender identity significantly predicted GSA participation (p<.05). Black and Latino/a youth were less likely than White youth, and males were less likely than female or transgender youth to participate in their school's GSA. Findings highlight a need for further research examining barriers to GSA participation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth face challenges in school which are specifically related to their sexual and/or gender identity. The safety-, bullying-, and harassment-related school experiences of these youth have been well-documented over the past decade, with experiences ranging from social exclusion and isolation to verbal harassment and physical violence. LGBT youth report regularly hearing homophobic remarks, such as "faggot" or "dyke," in school from other students as well as school personnel; many are made to feel unsafe and are victimized while at school specifically because of their sexual and/or gender identity and are deliberately excluded from activities by their classmates for these reasons (Goodenow, Szalacha & Westheimer, 2006; Kosciw, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; O'Shaughnessy, Russell, Heck, Calhoun & Laub, 2004; Sausa, 2005). In addition, LGBT youth are more likely to experience victimization and other types of negative events in school than their non-LGBT peers (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2005; Pearson, Muller & Wilkinson, 2007). Such experiences can negatively impact youth's academic performance and ability to engage in their school communities – the victimization experienced by many LGBT youth is related to increased absenteeism, poor academic performance, and lower educational aspirations (i.e., planning to complete high school and attend college) (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Pearson et al., 2007). In addition, these experiences are related to poor physical and mental health outcomes (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004). Unfortunately, the majority of LGBT youth who are victimized in school do not report incidents to school authorities (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2005; Kosciw, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz,

2006), often because they do not believe that staff will effectively deal with the situation (Kosciw, Diaz & Greytak, 2008). Even when learning about incidents of harassment or assault or witnessing biased behaviors themselves (e.g., hearing homophobic language), school personnel often fail to effectively intervene or address the situation (Kosciw, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004).

Impact of Gay-Straight Alliances on School Experiences

Over the past decade, empirical research examining the utility of resources and interventions that can improve the school experiences of LGBT youth has steadily grown, and existing research demonstrates that certain school-based resources may help to create safer and more inclusive school environments for these youth. One such resource, which has received a good deal of media attention in recent years, is the Gay-Straight Alliance. Open to students of all sexual and gender identities, Gay-Straight Alliances or GSAs are extracurricular student-headed clubs that often seek to provide support to youth, and work to raise awareness and educate school communities in order to make them safer and more affirming places for youth who are LGBT or may be struggling with issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity, and their peer allies (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; GSA Network, 2009; Goodenow et al., 2006; Russell, 2002). A growing body of research examining the impact of these school-based students clubs has shown that the presence of GSAs is associated with positive indicators of school climate for LGBT youth. Youth in schools with GSAs are less likely to hear homophobic language in school and have more positive overall perceptions of their school's climate for LGBT youth (Szalacha, 2003). They are less likely to feel unsafe or to be victimized in school,

and in turn are less likely to report missing school because they feel unsafe (Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004).

Prior research also demonstrates that LGBT youth with GSAs in school report a greater sense of attachment to school than those without this resource (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Kosciw et al., 2008; Lee, 2002). Furthermore, GSAs may have a positive impact of LGBT youth's academic performance and educational aspirations (Lee, 2002). In addition to overall school climate, school-based GSAs may be beneficial for LGBT youth's mental health as well. Prior research demonstrates a link between access to GSAs and decreased suicidality among LGBT youth – compared to youth without these types of student clubs those with a GSA are less likely to have suicidal thoughts and to actually attempt suicide (Goodenow et al., 2006; Walls, Freedenthal & Wisneski, 2008). Furthermore, school-based GSAs are often sites of community-building, and participation in a GSA provides youth the opportunity to learn civic responsibility and to cultivate a sense of empowerment and community engagement, all of which are important to healthy adolescent development and are opportunities which many LGBT youth may not have otherwise (Lee, 2002; Russell, 2002).

Access to Gay-Straight Alliances

Given the positive impact that GSAs may have on the climate of schools and personal experiences of LGBT youth, accessibility is an important issue to consider and one which has received little attention from researchers. In a national study of LGBT middle and high school students, less than half (47.2 percent) of respondents reported that their school had a GSA or other similar student club (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). The

majority of those students with a GSA reported that they regularly attended GSA meetings (66.3 percent) and more than half had been a leader or an officer of their club (52.7 percent). There is little empirical research that examines differences in youth's access to or participation in GSAs; however, what there is demonstrates that different populations of youth may be less likely to have access to GSAs than others. LGBT youth in the Midwest and South, small towns and rural areas, and communities with higher levels of poverty are less likely to have GSAs in their schools than youth in the Northeast or West, urban and suburban areas, and more affluent communities (Fetner & Kusher, 2008; Kosciw, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). These differences have been attributed to differential availability of resources that may help to make a GSA possible, such as financial resources and a diverse student body, as well as characteristics of the larger community in which a school is located, such as being situated in more politically and socially "liberal" communities and the presence of anti-discrimination laws regarding sexual orientation (Fetner & Kush, 2008).

Current Study

Advocates for safer and more inclusive schools for LGBT youth recommend that schools support the implementation of GSAs, and existing research has shown the critical role these clubs may play in improving school climate and the educational experiences of LGBT youth. Given the important role that GSAs play, educators and advocates must ensure that GSAs are accessible to diverse groups of youth. In the current study, I attempt to address a gap in the literature about GSAs by examining how accessible these student clubs are for different populations of LGBT youth. More specifically, this study

addresses the following question: Does access to GSAs differ by youth's race/ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation? Using data from a national sample of LGBT secondary school students in the United States, I examine the relationship between race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation and participation in GSAs.

Chapter 2: Research Method

Data

Data for this study come from the fifth installment of the *National School Climate Survey* (NSCS), which is conducted by GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, a national non-profit education organization focused on school safety and climate issues at the K-12 level. First conducted in 1999, the NSCS is a biennial survey of secondary public and private school students in the United States who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT). The survey documents the school-related experiences of these youth, focusing primarily on experiences related to feelings of safety, personal victimization, exposure to biased language, and the availability of school-based resources, such as supportive educators, policies for reporting incidents of victimization, and Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs). The current study is based on secondary data analyses of the 2007 NSCS.

Data for the 2007 NSCS were collected using hardcopy and online surveys, both of which were anonymous. Fifty community-based organizations and groups serving LGBT youth were randomly selected from a national list of over 300 and asked to have their youth participate in the survey. Participating organizations/groups were mailed paper copies of the survey, which youth voluntarily completed. The online version of the survey was advertised via Internet announcements that were posted on youth-oriented listservs and websites and emailed through GLSEN listservs and national youth advocacy organizations' listservs. Advertisements were also posted on the social networking website MySpace, targeting youth between the ages of 13 and 18 years who indicated in

their profiles that they were lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Data were collected between April and August 2007. A total of 288 surveys were collected via the community-based organization method, and 5,919 were collected online. GLSEN's Internal Review Board approved the study. As the survey was anonymous and presented minimal risk to participants, parental consent was not required. However, all respondents were required to review and agree to an informed consent page before completing the survey.

Measures

Dependent Variables

GSA participation. The NSCS includes two items assessing level of participation in a GSA. Respondents were first asked whether or not their school had a GSA or similar student club, and those who indicated that their school had a GSA were asked two follow-up questions: 1) How often do you attend meetings? and 2) Have you ever participated as a leader or officer of your GSA? In the question regarding meeting attendance, the 5-point response scale ranged from "never" (coded as 1) to "frequently" (coded as 5). The question regarding GSA leadership was dichotomous with "yes" coded as 1.

Independent Variables

Racial and ethnic identity. Race and ethnicity were assessed with a single self-report item, which included the following response options: Black or African American; White or European American; Hispanic or Latino; Asian or Pacific Islander; Native American, American Indian or Alaska Native; and "Other race or ethnicity." Respondents were permitted to choose multiple options and those who chose "Other race

or ethnicity" were asked to write-in a response. For the purposes of this current study, responses were re-coded into mutually exclusive categories. Youth who chose White/European American and a racial/ethnic minority category (i.e., a "non-White" category) were re-coded as the minority category (e.g., a student who chose both White/European and Black/African American was re-coded as Black/African American for this study). Youth who chose more than one racial/ethnic minority or "non-White" category were re-coded as "multiracial (e.g., a student who chose both Black/African American and Native American)."[1]

Gender identity. Respondents' gender was assessed with a single self-report item, with the following response options: Female, Male, Transgender, Transgender Female-to-Male, Transgender Male-to-Female, and "Other gender identity." Youth were permitted to choose multiple options and those who chose "Other gender identity" were asked to write-in a response. Responses were re-coded into mutually exclusive categories. Youth were re-coded as male or female if they chose one of those categories and no others, and youth who chose any of the categories for transgender were coded as transgender.

Sexual orientation. Sexual orientation was also assessed with a single self-report item, with the following response options: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Straight or Heterosexual, Questioning, Queer, and "Other sexual orientation." Respondents were permitted to choose multiple options and those who chose "Other sexual orientation"

[1] Throughout the rest of this paper, I abbreviate these categories and use the following when discussing racial/ethnic differences: White, Black, Latino/a, Native American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and multiracial.

were asked to write-in a response. Responses were re-coded into mutually exclusive categories. Youth who chose gay or lesbian and another option were coded as "gay or lesbian," and those who chose bisexual and a category other than gay or lesbian were re-coded as bisexual for the purposes of this study. Youth who chose only queer (n =47), straight/heterosexual (n =11), or questioning (n =128) were re-coded as "other sexual orientation."

Control Variables

Academic achievement. Academic achievement was assessed by a single item which asked students to report their grades (response options ranged from "Mostly As" to "Mostly Fs"). Responses were re-coded into a grade point average (GPA) on a 4.0 scale.

School extracurricular activities. Students' level of involvement with extracurricular activities (aside from any involvement with a GSA) was assessed using a 12-item scale, which asked students to rate their involvement with a variety of extracurricular activities (e.g., student government, cheerleading) with the following response options: have not participated (coded as 0), active participation but not as a leader or officer (coded 1), and active participation as a leader or officer (coded as 2) (Cronbach's alpha =.801; United States Department of Education,1988). A summed variable of all 12 items was computed and included in the analysis.

LGBT community group involvement. Youth were asked how often they attended meetings of an LGBT community group outside of school, with a 5-point response option ranging from never (coded as 0) to frequently (coded as 5).

Degree of being "out" in school. Two items in the survey assessed students' degree of being out or open in school about their sexual orientation or gender identity: the first asked them how many other students in school knew that they were LGBT and the second asked how many school staff knew they were LGBT, each with a 4-point response options ranging from "I am not out to any students/staff" (coded as 1) to "I am out to all students/staff" (coded as 4).

Frequency of in-school victimization. The degree to which youth experienced in-school victimization because of their sexual orientation, gender, gender expression, or race/ethnicity was assessed with 12 survey items, each asking students how often they had experienced verbal harassment, physical harassment, or physical assault specifically related to each of the four characteristics (e.g., "In the past year, how often have you been verbally harassed (name-calling, threats, etc. directed at you) at your school because of your sexual orientation?"; "In the past year, how often have you been physically harassed (shoved, pushed, etc.) at your school because of how you express your gender?; "In the past year, how often have you been physically assaulted (punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) at your school because of your race or ethnicity or because people thought you are of a certain race or ethnicity?", etc.). Five-point response options ranged from never (coded as 0) to frequently (coded as 5) for each item. (Cronbach's alpha for all 12 items =.882.) In order to obtain a more comprehensive assessment of in-school victimization experienced by students, four weighted variables were computed, measuring the frequency of victimization across the three victimization levels, with more weight given to physical harassment (x 1.5) and physical assault (x 3) because of the increasing

severity of the events. The four weighted variables for victimization related to sexual orientation, gender, gender expression, and race/ethnicity were included in the analysis.

Sample Characteristics

The total sample consisted of 6,207 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth who were attending U.S. middle or high schools during the 2006-2007 academic year. Respondents were between 13 and 21 years of age, and came from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. A majority of respondents attended public school (92.5 percent) and was in high school (77.2 percent) at the time of the study. Most survey respondents attended schools in suburban or urban communities (42.0 percent and 32.4 percent, respectively), and about a quarter were in rural schools (25.6 percent). About a quarter of all respondents (26.6 percent) attended schools in districts where more than 50 percent were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The sample was almost evenly split among four U.S. regions (22.1 percent in the Northeast, 30.1 percent in the South, 22.6 percent in the Midwest, and 25.2 percent in the West). As shown in Table 1, about two-thirds of the sample was White (64.4 percent), and more than half was female (57.8 percent) and gay or lesbian (53.7 percent).

Table 1. Sample Demographics		
	n	%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	3974	64.4
Black	356	5.8
Latino/a	805	13.0
Asian or Pacific Islander	253	4.1
Native American	385	6.2
Multiracial	331	5.4
Other race or ethnicity[a]	65	1.1
Gender Identity		
Male, non-transgender	2069	33.5
Female, non-transgender	3572	57.8
Transgender	295	4.8
Other gender identity[a]	248	4.0
Sexual Orientation		
Gay or Lesbian	3327	53.7
Bisexual	2589	41.8
Other sexual orientation[a]	284	4.6

[a] Not included in the regression analyses.

Data Analysis

In order to determine which variables to include as controls in the analysis, I first conducted step-wise regression analyses, which were appropriate given that this research is exploratory in nature and there was no theoretical guidance regarding which variables should be controlled for and in what order to enter variables in the regression. Separately, frequency of attending GSA meetings and GSA leadership were regressed on: respondents' age, self-reported academic achievement; involvement in other extracurricular activities; frequency of attending an LGBT community group outside of school; degree of being "out" or open about one's sexual orientation or gender identity to school staff and other students; age; and the four variables measuring in-school victimization related to sexual orientation, gender expression, gender, and race/ethnicity.

Results of a step-wise linear regression analysis demonstrated that the following variables were significant predictors of frequency of attending GSA meetings, and these variables were included as controls in the final hierarchical regression analysis: attendance at an LGBT community group, involvement with extracurricular activities, being out about LGBT-status to school staff, and GPA. Results of a step-wise, forward LR, binary logistic regression analysis demonstrated that attendance at an LGBT community group, involvement with extracurricular activities, being out about LGBT-status to school staff, and GPA significantly predicted whether a respondent had acted as a leader of his/her GSA. Thus, these variables were used as controls in the final binary logistic regression analysis. Frequency of in-school victimization, degree of being out to

other students, and age were not significant predictors of either measure of GSA involvement and were not included in the final regression analyses.

To examine relationships of racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation to GSA participation, hierarchical regression was used with regard to students' frequency of attending GSA meetings, and binary logistic regression was used with regard to GSA leadership. Variables were entered in two steps: all control variables were entered in the first step and in the second step the predictor variables for race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation were entered. Students who chose "other race or ethnicity" and wrote-in a response (n =65) were not included in the analysis, as responses were both low in number and varied greatly (e.g., "human", "Middle Eastern"). A substantial number of respondents chose to write-in a gender identity (n =248) or sexual orientation (n =284). The nature of the write-in responses varied greatly (e.g., "genderqueer," "pansexual") and there were not enough of any one response to code as additional gender or sexual orientation categories in a way that made sense in this current analysis. Thus, these students were not included in the subsequent analysis.

Chapter 3: Results

About a third of respondents (35.7 percent) reported that their school had a GSA or similar student club. Data for the subsequent regression analyses were limited to youth who had a GSA or similar student club in school. In the first step of the hierarchical regression analysis, frequency of attending GSA meetings was regressed onto the set of control variables. At step 1, there was a significant increment in explained variance for GSA meeting attendance (R^2 =.148, p<.001). LGBT youth with a higher GPA, greater involvement with extracurricular activities, who attended community LGBT groups more often, and were out to more school staff were significantly more likely to attend GSA meetings (see Table 2). In the second step, GSA meeting attendance was regressed onto race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This step resulted in a significant increment in explained variance, although it was a small effect (ΔR^2 =.023, p<.001).

GSA leadership was regressed onto the control variables in the first step. Higher GPA (Odds ratio [OR] =1.307, p<.001) and involvement with extracurricular activities (OR =1.085, p<.001), more frequent attendance at LGBT community groups (OR =1.416, p<.001), and being out to more school staff (OR =1.432, p<.001) were each related to a greater likelihood of acting as a leader in a GSA (see Table 3). In the second step, GSA leadership was regressed onto race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

GSA Meeting Attendance

As shown in Table 2, Black LGBT youth were significantly less likely to attend GSA meetings than White youth (β =-.085, SE_β =.028, p<.01), controlling for GPA, level

of involvement with other extracurricular activities, degree of being out to school staff, and frequency of attending an LGBT community group. With regard to gender identity, female youth were significantly more likely than male youth to attend GSA meetings (β =.135, SE_β =.032, p<.001). Transgender youth were also more likely to attend GSA meetings than their male peers (β =.072, SE_β =.030, p<.05). Sexual orientation did not predict the frequency of GSA meeting attendance – bisexual youth were no more or less likely than gay and lesbian youth to report attending meetings of their GSA (β =-.037, SE_β =.032, p>.05; see also Table 2)

GSA Leadership

As shown in Table 3, logistic regression analysis indicated that Black youth were about half as likely (OR =.408, p<.05) and Latino youth about a third as likely (OR =.609, p<.05) as White youth to have been a leader in their school's GSA (see Table 3). Gender identity did not significantly predict GSA leadership, and sexual orientation was a marginally significant predictor of GSA leadership (see also Table 3). Bisexual youth were marginally less likely than gay and lesbian youth to report acting as a leader in their school's GSA (OR =.738, p<.10).

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Gay-Straight Alliance Meeting Attendance on Race/Ethnicity, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation

	B (*SE B*)	β (SE_β)	R^2	ΔR^2
Step1: Controls			.148***	
Reported grade point average	.160 (.044)***	.106 (.029)		
Extracurricular activity involvement	.035 (.011)**	.090 (.030)		
Attending community LGBT youth group	.310 (.033)***	.278 (.029)		
"Outness" to school staff	.172 (.044)***	.118 (.030)		
Step 2: Race/Ethnicity, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation			.171	.023***
Black[a]	-.649 (.216)**	-.085 (.028)		
Latino/a [a]	-.177 (.132)	-.039 (.029)		
Asian/Pacific Islander[a]	-.114 (.210)	-.015 (.028)		
Native American[a]	-.094 (.202)	-.013 (.027)		
Multiracial[a]	-.153 (.199)	-.021 (.028)		
Female, non-transgender[b]	.435 (.104)***	.135 (.032)		
Transgender[b]	.503 (.208)*	.072 (.030)		
Bisexual[c]	-.122 (.106)	-.037 (.032)		
(Constant)	1.598 (.209)			

Notes: n =1,081. [a] Reference group: White. [b] Reference group: Male, non-transgender. [c] Reference group: Gay/Lesbian. Adjusted R^2: Step 1 =.145; Step 2 =.162. *p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001.

Table 3. Odds Ratios (95% CIs) for Gay-Straight Alliance Leadership		
	OR	*95% CI*
Step 1: Controls		
Reported grade point average	1.307***	1.137, 1.503
Extracurricular activity involvement	1.085***	1.046, 1.127
Attending community LGBT youth group	1.416***	1.281, 1.565
"Outness" to school staff	1.432***	1.249, 1.641
Step 2: Race/Ethnicity, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation		
Black[a]	.408*	.207, .806
Latino/a [a]	.609*	.405, .916
Asian/Pacific Islander[a]	1.506	.798, 2.840
Native American[a]	.640	.336, 1.222
Multiracial[a]	.573	.293, .1.120
Female, non-transgender[b]	1.090	.792, 1.501
Transgender[b]	1.047	.553, 1.984
Bisexual[c]	.738†	.535, 1.018
(Constant) *B* (*SE B*)	-2.982 (.358)	

Notes: n =1,009. [a] Reference group: White. [b] Reference group: Male, non-transgender. [c] Reference group: Gay/Lesbian. †p<.10. *p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001. Model Fit: χ^2 (p) =189.339 (p<.001). df =12, n =1,009.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Gay-Straight Alliances can play an important role in improving the educational experiences of LGBT youth, many of whom continue to experience school as an unsafe and isolating space, despite positive shifts in recent decades of U.S. societal attitudes and beliefs about lesbian, bisexual, gay and, to a lesser extent, transgender individuals. Advocates for safer and more affirming schools for LGBT youth recommend that school communities support the implementation of GSAs. Yet, some studies have suggested that GSAs may not be accessible across diverse populations of LGBT youth, and that youth of color in particular may be less likely than their White peers to participate in a school GSA. Through my current research, I have examined whether there exist differences by racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation in LGBT youth's involvement with a school GSA.

Results revealed that the variables entered as controls, particularly frequency of participation in an LGBT youth group outside of school and degree of being open to school staff about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, were the strongest predictors of youth's involvement with a GSA. These factors are of clear importance to understanding differences in LGBT youth's GSA participation in school.

The demographic characteristics considered in this study were significant predictors of GSA participation among LGBT youth, above and beyond these other factors, although accounting for a small amount of variance. GSA involvement differed by racial/ethnic identity, with Black LGBT youth being less likely than White LGBT youth to report participating in their school's GSA, both in terms of attending meetings

and having a leadership role. In addition, Latino/a youth were less likely than White youth to report that they had acted as a leader of their school's GSA, although they did not significantly differ with regard to frequency of attending meetings. GSA meeting attendance differed by gender identity, with males being less likely than females and transgender youth to report attending club meetings. Gender identity was not a significant predictor, however, of respondents' reported club leadership. Sexual orientation (i.e., lesbian and gay versus bisexual) was not a significant predictor of LGBT youth's involvement with their school's GSA on either measure. Collectively the variables considered in this current study accounted for a relatively small percentage of the variation in GSA participation among LGBT youth. Nonetheless, results give rise to the question of why racial/ethnic identity and gender identity significantly predict youth's participation in a GSA.

Race and Gender as Organizers of Schools and Extracurricular Activities

The ways in which schools, including the activities and individuals within them, are organized by race/ethnicity and gender may provide some insight into these findings. Race, gender, sexuality, and class are principal organizing forces of society, shaping its macro- and micro-level processes, systems and institutions (Omi & Winant, 2008; Weber, 2001). Education is one such institution and schools are spaces in which "people act out the social relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality hierarchies…daily" (Weber, 2001, p. 127). The ways in which race, gender, sexuality, and class play out in the school environment both reflect and reproduce these hierarchies (Weber, 2001). As organizations existing within schools, GSAs may reflect the raced and gendered nature of

these institutions. Thus, the ways in which GSA involvement varied by racial/ethnic and gender identity in my study may be understood, in part, by the ways that schools (and the individuals attending them) are organized by race and gender.

The gender differences in GSA participation found in the current study are, in some ways, consistent with previous research examining patterns of participation in school clubs and activities, which demonstrates that girls participate in various types of extracurricular activities (e.g., academic clubs, student government, fine arts clubs) at higher rates than boys, with the exception of school athletic teams (Denault & Poulin, 2009; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; McNeal, 1998). The finding that LGB female youth were more likely to participate in a GSA than their male peers is consistent with a general pattern of greater extracurricular activity participation by female youth. However, youth's involvement with other school extracurricular activities was accounted for in this current study, and yet gender was a significant predictor of GSA participation, suggesting that girls' greater participation in GSAs is not merely a reflection of their involvement with extracurricular activities, as female youth were more likely to participate in GSAs above and beyond other extracurricular involvement. Factors other than girls' greater extracurricular participation in general are at play with regard to GSA participation. With regard to transgender youth, there is a dearth of research that examines participation in school activities. A recent study by Greytak and peers about the educational experiences of transgender middle and high school students, which utilized the same dataset as in the current study, found that transgender youth participated in extracurricular activities, such as clubs focused on the arts or academics, at rates similar

to non-transgender male and female, yet were more likely to participate in a GSA (Greytak, Kosciw & Diaz, 2009). The authors suggest that transgender youth may be more involved with LGBT-related issues in their schools due to the nature of their experiences. While non-transgender LGB and transgender youth share similar school experiences in terms of dealing with harassment and safety issues related to homophobia and non-conformity with societal gender norms, transgender students are more likely to face challenges specifically related to their gender identity and presentation, such as school staff failing to recognize their preferred name and gender pronouns, and may have to advocate for themselves in ways that other youth do not. Further research is needed that specifically explores transgender students' participation in GSAs as well as other school extracurricular activities.

Previous research has demonstrated that school extracurricular activities are largely segregated by race/ethnicity; however, findings are inconsistent in existing literature. For example, one study found that Black and Latino/a youth were less likely (White & Gager, 2007) and another found that they were more likely (McNeal, 1998) than White youth to be engaged in extracurricular activities in school. A more consistent finding in existing literature is that Asian American youth are more likely to be involved in school activities than White youth; however, this pattern does not necessarily hold true across different sub-groups of Asian American youth (Wong, 1990). In this current study, Black and Latino/a youth had lower GSA involvement than their White counterparts, even while accounting for frequency of participation in other extracurricular

activities in school. Again, these findings suggest that some other factors not considered in the current study influence GSA participation among these youth.

Paths to Involvement with a Gay-Straight Alliance

Differing paths through which youth become involved with a school GSA, different motivations for participating, may provide an additional way to understand the demographic differences in participation found in this study. Specifically, personal experiences of victimization and discrimination and youth's social networks are two such paths that can lead youth to a GSA.

Previous research has found that some youth are motivated to become involved with a GSA because of personal experiences of harassment and discrimination – either their own experiences as sexual minorities or the experiences of individuals close to them (Miceli, 2005; Sweat, 2004). Through in-depth interviews with 40 GSA members in high schools in California, Sweat (2004) found that some youth were motivated to join a GSA as a result of harassment or other types of victimization they faced in school related to their actual or perceived sexual orientation and/or expressing their gender in ways that did not conform to societal expectations. GSAs may provide a safe space in an otherwise hostile and alienating school environment, and personal experiences of victimization can motivate some LGBT youth to participate in a GSA (Sweat, 2004). Research examining the frequency of harassment and assault experienced by LGBT youth related to their sexual orientation and gender expression demonstrates that transgender youth are more likely than youth with other gender identities to experience various forms of victimization in school, and non-transgender males are more likely to be victimized in school than non-

transgender females (Kosciw et al., 2008). The current study reveals that males are actually less likely to attend GSA meetings than females, which is not necessarily consistent with other findings that personal experiences of victimization motivate greater youth involvement with a GSA. In a study of the role of school characteristics in students' involvement in extracurricular activities, McNeal (1999) found that school safety was a particularly strong predictors of participation, and schools with less safe environments (i.e., higher incidents of harassment, assault, theft, etc.) had lower student participation in extracurricular activities than schools with safer climates. A wealth of research has shown that unsafe school environments are experienced by many LGBT youth (Kosciw, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; O'Shaughnessy, Russell, Heck, Calhoun & Laub, 2004; Pearson, Muller & Wilkinson, 2007; Sausa, 2005; Szalacha & Westheimer, 2006), and feeling unsafe can negatively affect students' ability to be engaged in their school communities. However, it is important to note that gender differences in GSA participation existed even while accounting for frequencies of certain types of in-school harassment and assault. McNeal points out that "school as a social context provides an opportunity structure that directly influences a student's ability to be integrated into the school environment" (1999, p. 293). Understanding the ways in which school contextual factors, such as climate and safety, may influence LGBT youth's decision (or ability) to become involved in a GSA is complex and deserving of further research.

Social networks and friendship groups are another important path to GSA participation for LGBT youth. The degree to which one's friends are involved with extracurricular activities is positively related to one's own involvement with such

activities (Denault & Pouline, 2009). Findings from Sweat's (2004) study also demonstrated that some youth were motivated to participate in a GSA because their friends were involved or encouraged them to become involved. The demographic differences in GSA participation found in my study could be related to the raced and gendered composition of adolescent social networks and friendships. Research examining adolescent social networks and friendship groups has shown that youth tend to develop these relationships with individuals of the same race or ethnicity (Mouw & Entwisle, 2006; Quillian & Campbell, 2003) and gender (Diamond & Dube, 2002) as themselves. If social networks are a pathway to GSA involvement and youth social networks tend to consist of individuals who are similar in terms of race/ethnic and gender experience, then differences in GSA participation may be understood, in part, as a function of the characteristics of these friendship groups. Interestingly, relationship patterns in terms of gender may differ for LGBT youth. Specifically, gay and bisexual males are less likely to have other male friends and more likely to have female friends than heterosexual males (Diamond & Dube, 2002; Schneider & Witherspoon, 2000).

A related point to consider is how a GSA is sustained at a school – what are the characteristics of the individuals who start a GSA, who are its members and leaders, and how do their characteristics or identities then influence the recruitment and participation of other potential members? From in-depth interviews with 2 Black gay young men in a California high school, McCready (2001; 2004) found that perceived relationships among the GSA members, which the young men described in terms of gender and race, was one factor influencing their decisions not to participate in the GSA. The school's GSA was

composed almost entirely of White female students who were perceived as being part of the same friendship group. The young men interviewed were not part of the same social networks at school as the GSA members and felt uncomfortable at and, at times, excluded from GSA activities.

Gay-Straight Alliances often offer a safe space for LGBT youth in which they can receive support from both peers and educators. Some youth, particularly those who may not have a supportive or accepting social network and may feel isolated in school, may become involved in a GSA because they hope to expand their social network and develop new friendships. Future research should further explore the ways in which adolescent friendships and social networks may both facilitate and impede GSA participation among LGBT youth.

Marginalization Within Gay-Straight-Alliances

Another potential explanation for the differences found in this study is that some LGBT youth may choose not to participate in a GSA because it is a space in which they actually feel excluded and marginalized, rather than affirmed and supported. Some existing research has found that LGBT youth of color in particular may be marginalized within a school GSA. In a study of a sample of GSAs in 22 Massachusetts high schools, Griffin, Lee, Waugh, and Beyer (2004) found through interviews with student members and educator that some LGBT youth, particularly youth of color, did not feel that the GSA addressed their needs and were not comfortable participating due, in part, to a perceived lack of diversity in membership. There was little diversity in terms of the race, gender, or sexuality in the composition of student participants across schools, who were

often predominately heterosexual, White young women. Issues regarding the intersections of racial, gender and sexual identity were rarely discussed or addressed in the GSAs, which the authors suggest as another reason that youth of color in their study did not feel entirely safe or comfortable participating. Griffin et al., argue that it is important to ask for whom GSAs are safe and supportive and state that although meeting the needs of all LGBT students is a challenge, "noticing who does and does not participate is a first step to identify ways that schools can provide safety and support for students who do not find either in their GSA" (2004, p. 19).

In his study with Black, gay male youth in a California high school, McCready (2001; 2004) found that the population of LGBT students in the school was racially and ethnically diverse; however, the membership and leadership of the school's GSA was quite homogenous and composed of mainly White, female students. In addition, McCready found that the racial and gender homogeneity of the group played a large part in why the young men interviewed were not involved with the GSA. These young men felt that as gay, Black males, they had little in common with GSA members, were marginalized by race and gender within the club and, thus, chose not to participate. McCready posits that GSA faculty advisors, if they are not aware of the potentially unique experiences of LGBT youth of color and fail to actively incorporate LGBT communities of color into GSA activities, may actually help to "…unintentionally alienate these youth" and further marginalize them in a space meant to be safe and supportive (2004).

In the present study, it is difficult to say to what extent GSA membership composition and educators' own biases may explain my findings that LGBT Black and Latino/a youth and gay and bisexual males were less likely to participate in a GSA. However, these findings highlight the need for further research that explores the ways in which these factors may become barriers to GSA involvement.

Chapter 5: Limitations and Implications

Gay-Straight Alliances are spaces in which many LGBT and allied students can give voice to their experiences, receive support, and organize to collectively challenge biased and discriminatory behaviors and institutionalized practices in schools. Results in this study suggest that gay and bisexual males and Black and Latino/a LGBT youth are less likely to be actively engaged with a GSA in their school than transgender youth, lesbian and bisexual females, and White LGBT youth. While I have discussed two frameworks that can help us to understand, in part, why these differences in participation may exist, more research is needed that explores LGBT youth's access to and involvement in school-based GSAs.

Limitations and Future Directions in Research

Caution should be used with regard to the application of findings in this study, as they cannot be generalized to all youth a school-based GSA. The sample is representative only of youth who self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender and had a connection to community-based organizations serving LGBT communities, either through the Internet or in their local community. Thus, findings may not speak to the experiences of sexual minority youth who do not identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (e.g., youth who identify as pansexual, queer, genderqueer, or who are questioning their sexual and gender identities), do not have some connection to community-based organizations, who may be more isolated. Additionally, findings should not be generalized to youth who experience same-sex attractions or engage in same-sex sexual activities, but do not identity as LGB.

My study, which was exploratory in nature, raises many questions and further research is needed to more fully understand LGBT youth's access to GSAs, potential barriers to participation, and the reasons why they do (or do not) choose to become involved with a GSA. Given that I did not look at interactions between the demographic variables considered in this study (e.g., racial/ethnic identity X gender identity), future research should explore how more complex intersections of race/ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation, as well as other characteristics that organize youth's everyday experiences (i.e., socioeconomic status, etc.) may be related to their access to a GSA. For example, differences in GSA participation by gender identity among Black LGBT youth is one area for future examination. In order to more fully understand why some youth may be less (or more) likely to participate in a GSA, further qualitative research is needed, for example in-depth interviews with Latino/a LGBT youth about potential barriers to involvement. In addition, the data used in my study did not contain measures of friendship or social networks; thus, I was not able to examine the potential relationship between GSA participation and youth's social networks. Given that existing literature demonstrates the role that peer networks can play in youths' involvement with a GSA, future research should further explore the ways in which adolescent social networks may simultaneously provide a path for some youth to become engaged in a school GSA while acting as a barrier to participation for other youth.

Another area for future investigation is the role of larger school climate and victimization in youth's involvement. Future research about GSA participation among LGBT youth should include additional measures of school climate that were not included

in the present study, such as frequencies of various forms of harassment (e.g., sexual, relational aggression), exposure to derogatory language, and school personnel's response to reports of harassment and bullying. Other school characteristics, such as school size, racial/ethnic composition of the student body, and policies limiting extracurricular club participation, should also be considered in future research. It is also important to consider the experiences of youth who participate in LGBT youth programs in their larger community but not in their school's GSA – what motivates their participation in community programs and prevents them from participating in a school-based GSA? Finally, further research is needed that explores the roles that faculty advisors and other school personnel may play in youth's access to and involvement with GSAs.

Implications for Practice

Participation in a GSA can be transformative at an individual and institutional level. Gay-Straight Alliances can be sites of resistance for many of the youth who participate; sites in which they can organize to challenge institutionalized heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, as well as sexism, racism and other oppressive forces that are inextricably linked in our society. Occupying a unique space in schools, GSAs may be in a unique position to challenge the organizing forces of race, gender, and sexuality. Indeed, their very existence in schools challenges the status quo and can provide a forum through which youth can actively assert their right to an education free of victimization and discrimination. In order to more fully serve students and, ultimately, affect change in school communities, GSAs must be spaces in which the diverse experiences and needs of students are acknowledged and permitted to be voiced. The challenge for educators,

school administrators, and others who advocate for safer and more affirming schools is to learn why some youth may choose not to participate in a GSA, and figure out how to ensure that GSAs are spaces of inclusion, empowerment, and support for all LGBT youth. School staff who are involved with GSAs, such as faculty advisors, can play a key role in creating an inclusive and supportive environment. With regard to youth of color, McCready posits that school staff who work with GSAs may help to create a space in which "Whiteness" is "normalized," and LGBT youth of color are marginalized if their experiences are framed as a "special issue" that staff are not equipped to address (2004, p. 46). In doing so, staff may unconsciously "privilege White students whose identities are viewed as normal and more understandable compared to queer youth of color" (2004, p. 47). Faculty advisors must pay attention to who is and who is not participating in their school's GSA, and to the ways in which some LGBT youth may be marginalized or excluded. In addition, they must educate themselves about the experiences of the diverse array of individuals who fall under the "LGBT youth" umbrella and actively seek to include their voices and experiences in GSA activities. Without doing so, advisors may help to create an environment in which certain raced and gendered (and classed, etc.) experiences are positioned as the norm, which may further marginalize youth whose experiences and identities deviate from this "norm."

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