Gay-Straight Alliances, Inclusive Policy, and School Climate: LGBTQ Youths' Experiences of Social Support and Bullying

Jack K. Day,
University of Texas at Austin

Jessica N. Fish,
University of Texas at Austin

Arnold H. Grossman,
New York University

Stephen T. Russell
University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) and school policies focused on support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning youth may reduce bias-based bullying and enhance social supports in schools. Using multivariate regression, we tested the relationship between youth reports of the presence of GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies, independently and mutually, with experiences bullying and perceived support ($n = 1,061$). Youth reported higher classmate support in the presence of GSAs and higher teacher support in the presence of LGBTQ-focused policies; the presence of both GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies was associated with less bullying and higher perceived classmate and teacher support. The findings indicate that GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies are distinctly and mutually important for fostering safer and more supportive school climates for youth.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) youth often navigate more hostile school climates than their heterosexual, cisgender peers. Youth who are bullied because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity are at higher risk of poorer mental health and academic outcomes (Sinclair, Bauman, Poteat, Koenig, & Russell, 2012), and of engaging in risky behaviors and substance use (Russell, Sinclair, Poteat, & Koenig, 2012). Creating safer and more supportive school climates has emerged as a shared concern of school staff and administrators, researchers, and policymakers (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Hatzenbuehler, Birkett, Van Wagenen, & Meyer, 2014; Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010; Russell & McGuire, 2008).

Schools are an especially important site of study, as they serve as fundamental developmental contexts in which youth spend a majority of their time outside of their family environment (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Prior research underscores

that positive school climates, which include feelings of safety and the presence of supportive relationships between students and teachers, are essential for a range of health and wellbeing-related outcomes (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Concerningly, bullying and harassment are common in schools across the United States, with 21% of students reporting having been bullied at school within the last year (Lessne & Cidade, 2015).

Teachers are instrumental to creating positive school climates. Positive teacher–student relationships are associated with greater school engagement and better academic performance, and overall better social-emotional well-being (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; NRC/ IOM, 2004). Teachers also serve as the nexus between the implementation of school policies and direct interactions with students (Cohen et al., 2009). School context becomes even more important when we consider the health and well-being of LGBTQ youth, as they are more likely to experience school-based harassment, victimization, and bullying than their cisgender and heterosexual peers (Day, Perez-Brumer, & Russell, 2018; Toomey & Russell, 2016).

School-sponsored programs such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs; also known as Gender and Sexuality Alliances) and school policies focused on support for LGBTQ students (LGBTQ-focused policies) have also been identified as effective means for improving school climates, especially for LGBTQ youth (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Goodenow et al., 2006; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2013; Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010). Enumerated antibullying policies that are inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity are associated with stronger feelings of safety, less victimization (Kosciw et al., 2016; O'Shaughnessy, Russell, Heck, Calhoun, & Laub, 2004), and lower rates of suicidal behavior among LGB youth (Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2013). GSAs and LGBTQ--focused policies are also associated with less psychological distress and depressive symptoms, and greater general well-being, among LGBTQ youth during adolescence (Goodenow et al., 2006; Heck et al., 2013; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010) and later in young adulthood (Toomey et al., 2011). However, the mechanisms through which GSAs and policies, especially policies related to sexual orientation and gender identity, contribute to positive school climate are not well-understood (Poteat & Russell, 2013).

In this study, we propose that GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies are associated with less bullying and stronger social support from multiple sources in schools – such as classmates and teachers – for LGBTQ youth. This study provides a novel contribution to existing literature on school experiences of LGBTQ youth, as we investigate whether GSAs and school policies, independently and mutually, are associated with less bullying and youths' perceptions of support from classmates and teachers. Previous studies of sexual and gender minority youth in school contexts have often combined samples of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth; this is also among the first studies on measures of school climate related to social support and bullying to include gender identity independent of sexual identity. Recognizing this, the review below uses variations of the acronym LGBTQ

(lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning) to accurately describe the sample characteristics of prior studies.

Bias-Based Bullying in Schools

All forms of bullying are concerning, yet youth who experience bias-based bullying based on their perceived or actual sexual or gender identity have poorer mental health, greater substance use, and higher truancy compared to youth who experience general forms of bullying (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001; Russell et al., 2012). A recent meta-analysis revealed that LGBQ youth, especially males, were more likely than heterosexual peers to be victimized at school (Toomey & Russell, 2016). In one national survey of LGBTQ youth, 67% reported frequently hearing homophobic comments at school, 58% felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation, and 43% felt unsafe because of their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2016). Additionally, only 12% of the youth reported that teachers intervened most or all of the time when they heard homophobic remarks; yet in schools with GSAs, 20% of youth reported teacher intervention in response to homophobic statements (Kosciw et al., 2016).

Research also consistently shows that LGBT youth who have been bullied because of their sexual orientation or gender expression report lower levels of school connectedness (Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010). School connectedness is a key indicator of school climate (McNeely & Falci, 2004; Wilson, 2004) related to whether youth feel that adults and peers in their school care about students as individuals and about their academic success (CDC, 2009). Importantly, positive school climates are associated with higher academic achievement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000), better mental health (Bond et al., 2007), and less engagement in risky behaviors (Bond et al., 2007; McNeely & Falci, 2004). Positive school climates have also been found to mitigate negative adjustment for LGB youth (Birkett et al., 2009).

Social Supports for LGBTQ Youth

The benefits of social support on overall health and well-being are well documented (e.g., Chu, Saucier, & Hafner, 2010). Studies demonstrate that among LGB youth, social support within schools, and from peers, and family is associated with better health and educational outcomes (Watson, Grossman, & Russell, 2019; Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl, & Malik, 2010; Goodenow et al., 2006; Needham & Austin, 2010;). In a sample of LGB and transgender youth, parental support was associated with greater school belonging and lower levels of suicidality, which were predictive of better academic outcomes, although sexual orientation and gender identity were not treated as distinct categories in the analyses (Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011).

Studies on social support among LGB youth emphasize a distinction between general support and sexual identity-specific support (Doty et al., 2010). Compared to general support, higher levels of sexual identity-specific support are associated with lower emotional distress (Doty et al., 2010). Similarly, a recent study that examined wellbeing among LGBT young adults found concurrent LGBT-related support from families and friends during

adolescence was associated with higher life satisfaction and self-esteem (Snapp, Watson, Russell, Diaz, & Ryan, 2015). Extant research suggests, however, that parental support may generally be lower for LGB (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005; Fish & Russell, 2018; Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002; Needham & Austin, 2010) and transgender (Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Fish & Russell, 2018) youth compared to heterosexual and cisgender youth.

Given that LGBTQ youth often experience varying levels of support and acceptance (or rejection) from family members, schools may serve as an important context for modeling and cultivating social support, and sexuality-specific support, via LGBTQ-focused programs, policies, and curricula (Snapp, McGuire, Sinclair, Gabrion, & Russell, 2015; Snapp, Watson et al., 2015). In a nationally representative study, youth who reported same-sex attraction also had higher GPAs and fewer school troubles (e.g., related to paying attention and getting along with others) in the presence of more supportive teachers (Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). Other studies show that LGBT youth who note supportive teachers or staff members in school also report feeling safer (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013; McGuire et al., 2010), greater belonging (Murdock & Bolch, 2005), and fewer incidences of victimization (Kosciw et al., 2013). Additionally, LGB youth in schools with LGB-sensitive curricula are less likely to engage in risky sexual activity and substance use (Blake et al., 2001). Notably, peers and teachers each play a unique role in positive youth development (Watson et al., 2019), highlighting the need to consider how classmate and teacher support are both independently instrumental to LGBTQ youth experiences in schools.

Although schools may serve as an important context for social support outside of families, LGBT youth often report a lack of support from classmates and teachers (Grossman et al., 2009; Sausa, 2005). Research examining attitudes toward LGBT youth and LGBT-related issues reveals that heterosexual youth tend to be less accepting and supportive of sexual and gender minority peers than they are of their heterosexual peers (Horn, Szalacha, & Drill, 2008; Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). The lack of social supports and higher risks of victimization of LGBTQ youth in schools underscores the importance of identifying programs and policies that improve school climate and experiences for LGBTQ youth.

GSAs and LGBTQ-Focused Policies in Schools

Gay-Straight Alliances may serve a particularly valuable support function within schools. LGBT youth in schools with a GSA report significantly less victimization compared to those without (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Goodenow et al., 2006; Heck et al., 2013; Marx & Kettrey, 2016). School personnel in schools with a GSA are more likely to intervene when they hear homophobic remarks than those in schools without GSAs (Kosciw et al., 2016), and LGBTQ youth report greater school connectedness and lower negative mental health outcomes when attending schools with GSAs (Heck et al., 2013). Youth in schools with GSAs engage in less risky behaviors related to alcohol, tobacco, and sex, and are less likely to be truant (Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013). LGBTQ youth in schools with a GSA also report more support from classmates, teachers, and administrators (Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2016). Notably, with the exception of a few recent studies (Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Poteat, Calzo, & Yoshikawa, 2016; Poteat, Heck,

Yoshikawa, & Calzo, 2016), most studies of GSAs do not distinguish between sexual orientation and gender identity. The recent change in name from the "Gay-Straight Alliance Network" to the more inclusive "Genders and Sexualities Alliance" network encourages consideration for how these programs may provide differential support for LGB and transgender youth (GSA Network, 2016).

LGBTQ-focused school policies also play a vital role in strengthening social supports in schools for LGBTQ youth. Much of the extant literature to date documents the role of enumerated policies in relation to bias-based bullying and safety (e.g., O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Poteat & Russell, 2013). Beyond improved school climates, especially for LGBTQ youth, enumerated antibullying policies are associated with lower suicidal ideation among LGB youth (Goodenow et al., 2006; Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2013), and suicidal ideation is also lower in schools in which there are multiple supports for LGB youth, including GSAs, LGBT-inclusive curricula, harassment policies that enumerate protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and training for staff on how to create supportive environments for LGBT youth (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014). Comprehensive antibullying policies in schools are also associated with higher self-esteem among LGBT youth, possibly because such policies signal that schools are an affirming place for LGBT youth (Kosciw et al., 2013). To our knowledge, only one study to date has specifically examined transgender youths' experiences of victimization and harassment in relation to LGBTQ-focused policies (McGuire et al., 2010). McGuire et al. (2010) found that although victimization of transgender youth was pervasive, transgender youth felt safer and more connected to teachers in schools with policies that addressed bullying, and expressed the need for policy that specifically enumerates gender identity. More research is needed to carefully consider how GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies cultivate safe and supportive school climates for all youth, and how experiences of LGB and transgender youth may differ within schools.

Current Study

This study extends prior research by considering how GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies relate to experiences of bias-based bullying and perceptions of support in schools among LGBTQ youth. In previous studies, LGBTQ youth were often combined into a single category; we specifically test for how levels of social support may differ based on gender identity. Using data from a contemporary cohort of racially and ethnically diverse LGBTQ youth, we investigate the association between GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies, individually and in combination, with youths' experiences of bias-based bullying and perceptions of classmate and teacher support. We conceptualize social support as youth's perceptions of: (1) teachers as caring, fostering supportive classroom environments, taking an interest in youths' learning, and offering positive encouragement; and (2) classmates as friendly and attentive, interested in helping academically, encouraging, and inclusive in activities.

We expect that GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies will contribute to safer and more supportive school climates among LGBTQ youth (Russell, Day, Ioverno, & Toomey, 2016; Russell & McGuire, 2008; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). Specifically, we hypothesize that: (H1) LGBTQ youth's reports of the presence of GSAs and LGBTQ-

focused policies, both individually and mutually, will be associated with less self-reported bias-based bullying; (H2) the presence of GSAs will be positively associated with perceived support from classmates and teachers; (H3) given that teachers are the ones who are most likely to be knowledgeable of and tasked with implementing policies, LGBTQ-focused policies will be positively associated with perceptions of support from teachers; and (H4) the presence of both GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies will be positively associated with perceptions of support from classmates and teachers.

Regarding potential differential findings based on gender-identity and life stage, we hypothesize that (H5) the association between the presence or absence of GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies, as reported by LGBTQ youth, and perceptions of support may differ for transgender youth compared to cisgender youth. We also consider whether or not youth are "out" to classmates or teachers at school because out youth are more likely to be victimized at school (Russell, Toomey, Ryan, & Diaz, 2014), but appear to access and receive more support from others who are sensitive to the issues LGBTQ youth encounter within schools (Watson, Wheldon, & Russell, 2015). We also hypothesize that (H6) the association among GSAs, LGBTQ-focused policies, experiences of bias-based bullying and perceptions of support may differ for youth who are still in high school versus those who have already graduated. Specifically, those who have graduated high school may be susceptible to recall bias. Further-more, those who have gone on to postsecondary education may conflate their high school and college experiences. Although LGBTQ youth often have negative experiences in college (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013; Yost & Gilmore, 2011), they theoretically have more choice about where they enroll for postsecondary education, and may select colleges with more LGBTQ-focused supports.

METHOD

Participants

Our sample includes participants from the first of a four panel longitudinal study on the risk and protective factors for suicide ($N = 1,061$). Participants were recruited from community-based agencies or college groups for LGBTQ youth from three urban cities in the Northeast, Southwest, and West Coast. Snowball sampling was used to recruit additional participants.

The sample included LGBTQ identified youth, aged 15–21 ($M = 18.8$), and was ethnically and racially diverse (see Table 1): 38% were Hispanic or Latino/a; 24% were Black/African American; 23% were multiracial; 22% were White; and 9% were Asian/Asian American, American Indian/Native American/Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Fifty-four percent (54%) of the participants identified as cisgender female, and 12% identified as transgender. Additionally, 47% identified as gay or lesbian, 43% as bisexual, and 10% as questioning or other, and a majority of the participants (67%) reported disclosing their sexual or gender identity to either classmates or teachers. More than half of the participants indicated they received free or reduced lunch (59%), which was used as a proxy for socioeconomic status.

Measures

Bias-based bullying.—Bias-based bullying was assessed through two items based on the question, "During the past 12 months, how many times on school property were you harassed or bullied for any of the following reasons": "Because you are gay, lesbian, or bisexual or someone thought you were" (*homophobic bullying*) and "Because of your sex or gender" (*gender-based bullying*) (0 = never; 4 = more than once a day) (r = .73). Variability was low for the most frequent categories (i.e., every day, more than once a day). We therefore collapsed responses into three categories (0 = never; 1 = less than once a month/ once a month; 2 = once a week/more than once a week). Homophobic bullying and gender-based bullying were included as distinct measures.

Perceived social support in schools.—Both perceived *classmate support* (α = .96) and *teacher support* (α = .97) were measured via 12-item subscales from the Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale (Malecki, Demaray, & Elliot, 2000). Participants were prompted to rate how often they received support from (1) classmates and (2) teachers (0 = never; 5 = always). For example, youth were asked, "How often my classmates.. ." "treat me nicely," "pay attention to me," "give me information so I can learn new things;" and, "How often my teacher(s).. ." "cares about me," "treats me fairly," and "takes time to help me to learn to do something well."

GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies.—The presence or absence of a *GSA* and *LGBTQ-focused policies* was assessed through two separate items: "Does (did) your school have a Gay/Straight Alliance group?" (0 = no; 1 = yes), and "Does (did) your school have an antibullying policy that specifically protects LGBTQ students?" (0 = no; 1 = yes; 2 = I don't know). For analyses we included a categorical measure with six categories reflecting youth who attended a school with: (1) a GSA only (7%); (2) a GSA, but were unsure about LGBTQ-focused policies (25%); (3) no GSA, and were unsure about LGBTQ-focused policies (13%); (4) LGBTQ-focused policies only (8%); (5) both a GSA and LGBTQ-focused policies (31%); and (6) neither a GSA nor LGBTQ-focused policies (17%; reference category).

Covariates.—Models were adjusted for: sexual identity (1 = bisexual; 2 = questioning; gay/lesbian was the reference category); assigned sex at birth (0 = female; 1 = male); gender identity (0 = cisgender; 1 = transgender); race (including Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American; Black or African American; multiple races; and unreported, with White as the reference category); ethnicity (0 = non-Hispanic; 1 = Hispanic); age; receipt of free or reduced school lunch (0 = no; 1 = yes); finally, we created a dichotomous measure of being out to school classmates and/or teachers based on youths' responses to the question, "who knows about your sexual identity/gender identity: classmate(s)? teacher(s)?" Youth who answered "yes" to being out to either classmates or teachers were coded as "out at school" (0 = no; 1 = yes). See Table 1 for sample descriptive statistics.

Analytic Strategy

We conducted multivariate ordinal logistic and linear regressions using Stata 15 (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003; StataCorp, 2016) to investigate the relationship between the

presence or absence of a GSA and/or LGBTQ-focused policies, bias-based bullying, and perceptions of classmate and teacher support. We also tested whether gender identity moderated these associations to investigate whether GSAs and policies operate differently for transgender youth. Complete case analyses resulted in a loss of 9% of the total sample. Data were determined to be Missing at Random (MAR) using tests for missingness in Stata 15, and we therefore used multiple imputations using chained equations (10 iterations seeded at 53,241) to account for missing data (Enders, 2010). Results for each outcome are reported in Tables 2 and 3.

RESULTS

Bias-Based Bullying

We first tested our hypothesis that the presence of GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies, as reported by LGBTQ youth, will be associated with less self-reported bias-based bullying (H1). In line with this hypothesis, we found that youth had lower odds of experiencing frequent homophobic bullying in schools with LGBTQ-focused policies only ($AOR = 0.37$, 95% CI 0.19–0.71), and both a GSA and LGBTQ-focused policies ($AOR = 0.55$, 95% CI 0.36–0.83; see Table 2). Additionally, youth in schools with a GSA, but who were unsure if the school had LGBTQ-focused policies, were less likely to experience frequent homophobic bullying ($AOR = 0.45$, 95% CI 0.28–0.70). Having a GSA in schools where youth knew there were not LGBTQ-focused policies was not associated with homophobic bullying. Youth in schools with GSAs, but in which youth were unsure if they had LGBTQ-focused policies, ($AOR = 0.50$, 95% CI 0.30–0.84), and both GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies ($AOR = 0.53$, 95% CI 0.33–0.86) were also less likely to experience frequent gender-based bullying than youth who reported having neither a GSA nor LGBTQ-focused policies at their school. Having LGBTQ-focused policies exclusively was not independently associated with gender-based bullying.

Associations between covariates and outcomes were also of substantive interest (see Table 2). Compared to lesbian or gay youth, bisexual youth had lower odds of experiencing homophobic bullying; and compared to cisgender youth, transgender youth had two times greater odds of experiencing homophobic and gender-based bullying. Additionally, youth who indicated their assigned sex at birth as male were almost twice as likely to experience homophobic bullying compared to those who were assigned female at birth. Compared to White youth, Black or African American and multiracial youth were less likely to be bullied for homophobic reasons.

Classmate and Teacher Support

We next tested our hypotheses that: GSAs will be positively associated with perceptions of classmate support (H2); LGBTQ-focused policies will be positively associated with perceptions of teacher support (H3); and the presence of both GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies will be positively associated with perceptions of support from classmates and teachers (H4). Youth who reported that their school had a GSA, but were unsure if they had LGBTQ-focused policies, perceived greater classmate support ($b = 0.31$, $p = .016$; see Table 3) than youth who attended schools who had neither a GSA nor LGBTQ-focused policies

(H2). Youth also perceived more support from classmates when they attended schools with both a GSA and LGBTQ-focused policies ($b = 0.46$, $p < .001$) compared to youth who attended a school with neither (H4). Having LGBTQ-focused policies with ($b = 0.28$, $p = .030$; H4) or without ($b = 0.41$, $p = .023$; H3) a GSA was associated with higher levels of perceived teacher support, compared to youth who attended schools with neither GSAs nor LGBTQ-focused policies; having only a GSA was not significantly associated with perceptions of teacher support.

Regarding covariates, Black or African American youth reported higher perceptions of support from classmates compared to White youth (see Table 3). Compared to youth who did not identify as Hispanic or Latino/a, youth who did not report an ethnicity also had higher perceptions of classmate support. Transgender youth reported less classmate support relative to cisgender youth, though there were no differences based on sexual identity. Youth assigned male at birth reported higher perceptions of teacher support compared to female assigned youth, though sexual and gender identity were not related to classmate support. Youth who were out at school had higher perceptions of classmate and teacher support relative to youth who had not disclosed their sexual or gender identity.

Moderation of GSAs and LGBTQ-Focused Policies by Gender Identity

Next, we tested if the association between GSAs, LGBTQ-focused policies, and perceptions of support was moderated by gender identity (H5). Interaction terms between gender identity and GSAs/LGBTQ-focused policies were not statistically significant. We therefore did not find evidence that the effect of GSAs, LGBTQ-focused policies, or the combination of both differed for transgender and cisgender youth.

Comparisons between High School Students and High School Graduates

Given that 518 of the participants in our sample had already graduated high school, we compared stratified models of youth in high school to youth who had graduated (H6; results available upon request). Among youth who were still in high school, having a GSA and being unsure about LGBTQ-focused policies ($b = 0.51$, $p = .020$) and having both a GSA and LGBTQ-focused policies ($b = 0.62$, $p < .001$) were associated with higher perceptions of classmate support. Youth who reported attending schools with only LGBTQ-focused policies ($b = 0.56$, $p = .026$) and both GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies ($b = 0.51$, $p = .013$) had higher perceptions of teacher support. Neither GSAs nor LGBTQ-focused policies were associated with homophobic or gender-based bullying among youth still in high school.

Among youth who had graduated high school, neither GSAs nor LGBTQ-focused policies were associated with perceptions of classmate or teacher support, though the combination of GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies was significant at the trend level for perceived classmate support ($b = 0.34$, $p = .052$). Youth who had attended schools with a GSA but who were unsure about LGBTQ-focused policies ($AOR = 0.31$, 95% CI 0.17–0.57), and GSAs in combination with LGBTQ- focused policies ($AOR = 0.37$, 95% CI 0.20–0.66) had lower odds of frequent homophobic bullying; GSAs in conjunction with LGBTQ-focused policies

were associated with lower odds of frequent gender-based bullying (*AOR* = 0.39, 95% CI 0.19–0.80).

DISCUSSION

We studied whether the presence of GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies were associated with positive school climates for LGBTQ youth as measured through fewer experiences of bias-based bullying and perceptions of higher social support from classmates and teachers. We found support for our six hypotheses. First, youth were less likely to report experiencing frequent homophobic and gender-based bullying in schools with GSAs and/or LGBTQ-focused policies (H1). Although previous research has documented how GSAs (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Goodenow et al., 2006; Heck et al., 2013; Marx & Kettrey, 2016) and LGBTQ-focused policies (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Poteat & Russell, 2013) independently improve school climates, our findings suggest that the combination of LGBTQ-focused programs and policies are especially effective mechanisms for addressing bias-based bullying.

We also found that LGBTQ-focused policies may be particularly effective for addressing homophobic bullying, and GSAs for gender-based bullying. Perceptions of classmate support, but not teacher support, were higher in the presence of GSAs, independent of LGBTQ-focused policies (H2), suggesting GSAs are especially salient for social support among youth and their peers. While previous studies have identified how GSAs (Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Heck et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2016) and LGBTQ-focused policies serve as protective factors (Goodenow et al., 2006; Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2013), especially in terms of improving school climates (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014), this study identifies how both – independently and concurrently – are associated with perceptions of stronger social support within schools. Findings also show that LGBTQ youth perceived greater classmate support when their school had LGBTQ-focused policies independent of whether or not their school had a GSA. Notably, findings related to GSAs independent of LGBTQ-focused policies were only significant when the youth were unsure if schools had LGBTQ-focused policies, and not when they indicated there were no such policies. Youth in schools with LGBTQ-focused policies also perceived greater teacher support (H3), suggesting that these policies may influence the professional or administrative characteristics of schools, which is consistent with previous research that identify teachers as pivotal to implementing policy (Cohen et al., 2009). Youth also perceived higher support from other students and teachers in the presence of both GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies (H4).

Associations between the presence or absence of GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies and perceptions of classmate and teacher support did not differ on the basis of gender identity (H5). Our findings indicate that GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies play mutually enforcing roles in reducing bias- based bullying and promoting social support in schools. Findings suggest however that, compared to cisgender youth, transgender youth are at higher risk of homophobic bullying, and perceived classmates as being less supportive. This suggests that, although transgender youth were more likely to have more negative school experiences, the relationship between GSAs, LGBTQ-focused policies, and homophobic bullying and

perceptions of social support was no stronger or weaker for transgender youth compared to cisgender youth.

Our findings also highlight a potentially important resilience factor for Black or African American youth, since they reported notably higher levels of classmate support. Stronger feelings of support among racial minority youth in our sample may be partially accounted for by their lower likelihood of homophobic bullying. Notably, youth who were out at school did not report higher rates of homophobic bullying, a finding that contrasts with prior studies (Russell et al., 2014). Regarding teacher support, it is noteworthy that participants who were assigned male at birth, and youth who were out to classmates and/or teachers, reported more support from teachers.[1] Similar to a previous study, findings here suggest that out LGBTQ youth may be more visible and thus may receive, or seek out, more support from teachers and classmates (Watson et al., 2015).

Notably, models stratified by youth who were still in high school and those who had graduated differed from the sample as a whole (H6). Among those still in high school, youth in schools with a GSA, but who were unsure about LGBTQ-focused policies, reported higher perceptions of classmate support. The combination of GSAs and policies were associated with perceptions of stronger classmate and teacher support for high school students, and less homophobic and gender-based bullying for those who had graduated high school. The differential findings may be attributable to some participants conflating their high school and college programs and policies, or to retrospective reporting of high school experiences. We suspect that teacher support may be more salient in reports from youth who are still in high school. Further research is needed to clarify how policies and programs operate across school settings, such as high school and college, and how retroactive accounts may differ from those provided by youth still in high school.

Our study has important implications for understanding how GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies may improve school climates by creating safe and more supportive schools for LGBTQ youth. Although several previous studies found that GSAs and policies are associated with improved school climates (e.g., Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Goodenow et al., 2006; Heck et al., 2013; Marx & Kettrey, 2016), this study documents mechanisms – reduced bias-based bullying and stronger support networks within schools – through which such approaches create more positive school climates.

The results of this study also provide valuable support for the limited evidence that LGBTQ-focused policies directly reduce bias-based bullying (Russell & McGuire, 2008), and that they may mitigate the negative effects of bullying by strengthening support among classmates and teachers within schools, especially in combination with GSAs. Strikingly, GSAs were not associated with lower bias-based bullying or perceptions of higher social support in schools where youth indicated that there were no LGBTQ-focused policies. This may be indicative of less supportive school environments in which youth are acutely aware of the lack of policies that are responsive to the unique experiences of LGBTQ youth. This

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[1]In post-hoc analyses we tested a statistical interaction to assess whether the association was unique for males who were out at school, but the effect was null.

finding underscores the importance of considering multipronged approaches to improving school climates, including training teachers on policies and having teachers communicate policies to students. Such programs and policies may be sound investments and a cost-effective strategy for creating LGBTQ-specific supports within schools (Snapp, Watson et al., 2015).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Although the data in this study allows for a unique investigation into the school experiences of a diverse and contemporary sample of LGBTQ youth, there were some notable limitations. We were unable to assess *who* participants envision in the context of support measures. For example, we do not know how close participants are to classmates, nor whether they are referring to a particularly supportive or unsupportive teacher, or to their teachers as a whole. Future studies should consider both the breadth and depth of such social networks within schools.

This study was also based on a sample drawn from LGBTQ community and college groups. Therefore, the youth in the study were in some way connected to an existing LGBTQ community, and do not necessarily reflect the experiences of youth who lack access or connections to supportive communities. Such youth may be at greater risk of experiencing poor outcomes in the absence of support within schools. Additionally, youth were asked to report on their current school experiences and the presence of GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies, or to offer their retrospective accounts if they no longer attended school. Youth who had graduated high school may have integrated their experiences in college with their retrospective accounts of high school experiences. A number of factors might also influence their reports: although there may be more sources of social and institutional support at some colleges, research suggests that LGBTQ youth often experience negative school climates on college campuses (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Tetreault et al., 2013; Yost & Gilmore, 2011). On the other hand, when reflecting on their past experiences youth may be more likely to recall negative events, especially those related to bullying, or may not accurately recall whether or not their schools had GSAs and/or LGBTQ-focused policies. Utilizing school-based samples would offer important insight into experiences of victimization and perceptions of school-based supports for youth who may lack other access to or engagement with other forms of LGBTQ-specific social support within their communities. Collecting more objective measures and multirater data, such as reports from teachers and administrators about the implementation of policies and programs, and youth's current experiences within these school settings could mitigate some of the bias that may result from our methods.

Youth self-reports of the presence or absence of GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies may not accurately reflect the actual presence of such programs and policies within schools. Objective measures of programs and policies may therefore help to elucidate their association with social support within schools, as youth need not necessarily be aware of programs and policies to benefit from them (Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Poteat et al., 2013). Our analyses were also limited to cross-sectional data, and thus our theory that GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies reduce bullying and promote social support should be further

tested. Other work shows that the presence of a GSA in schools is associated with fewer reports of homophobic bullying one year later (Ioverno, Belser, Baiocco, Grossman, & Russell, 2016), but we are aware of no other longitudinal studies that test these mechanisms. We have confidence in our results since it is unlikely that perceptions of stronger social support in schools result in more LGBTQ-focused policies or GSAs, although it is plausible that youth who feel most supported may be more likely to be aware of inclusive school policies, and resources such as GSAs.

It is also important to consider the unique school experiences of youth who identify as both a sexual and gender minority. In preliminary analyses, we examined if youths' perception of support in schools or experiences of bias-based bullying varied based on whether or not they identified as both LGB and transgender. We did not, however, find evidence of differential school experiences. Nevertheless, future studies should consider how intersecting sexual and gender identities may relate to unique experiences, and risks, within schools, and how GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies may provide differential support – or lack thereof – for diverse groups of youth. There is need for research that provide a more nuanced understanding of what policies and practices are most effective for creating safer and more supportive school climates for all youth.

CONCLUSION

Schools can serve as an important context for LGBTQ youth to gain access to supportive classmates and adults who are sensitive to their unique needs and experiences. The findings that youth perceive more peer and adult support in schools with GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies are timely as new measures of school success are considered in relation to the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act. Schools that implement both GSAs and LGBTQ-focused policies may be especially effective at improving school climate for LGBTQ (and all) youth via reducing bias-based bullying and strengthening social supports within schools.

Acknowledgments

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TABLE 1

Frequencies, Means, and Standard Deviations for Sample Demographics and Outcome Variables

	Percent/Mean (SD)	n
Sexual orientation		1,061
Gay/Lesbian	47.22%	
Bisexual	42.70%	
Questioning/other	10.08%	
Gender identity		1,061
Cisgender	87.84%	
Transgender	12.16%	
Assigned sex at birth		1,060
Male	45.75%	
Female	54.25%	
Age (15–21)	18.66 (1.85)	1,061
Race		1,061
Asian/Pacific Islander/Native American	8.67%	
Black/African American	24.32%	
White	21.58%	
Multiracial	22.90%	
No race reported	22.53%	
Ethnicity		1,061
Not Hispanic or Latino/a	49.29%	
Hispanic or Latino/a	38.27%	
No ethnicity reported	12.44%	
Homophobic bullying		1,022
Never	70.84%	
Once a month/less than once a month	18.49%	
Once a week/more than once a week	10.67&	
Gender-based bullying		1,020
Never	81.08%	
Once a month/less than once a month	10.69%	
Once a week/more than once a week	8.24%	
Perceived classmate support (0–5)	2.61 (1.28)	1,006
Perceived teacher support (0–5)	3.09 (1.32)	1,013
GSA, LGBTQ-focused policies, or both		1,061
Neither	16.68%	
GSA only	7.07%	
GSA, LGBTQ-focused policies unsure	24.98%	
No GSA, LGBTQ-focused policies unsure	12.54%	
LGBTQ-focused policies only	7.82%	
Both GSA & LGBTQ-focused policies	30.91%	
Out to classmates	64.75%	1,061

	Percent/Mean (SD)	n
Out to teachers	53.06%	1,061
Out at school (classmates and/or teachers)	66.82%	1,061
Received free/reduced lunch	59.16%	1,043

Notes. LGBTQ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning; Cisgender = gender identity aligns with assigned sex at birth (sex assigned at birth); classmate support and teacher support were scales ranging from 0 to 5 (0 = "never supported"; 5 = "always supported"); GSA = Gay-Straight Alliance; youth who were out to classmates and/or teachers were combined to calculate "out at school".

Summary of Ordinal Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting Homophobic and Gender-Based Bullying ($n = 1,061$)

	Homophobic Bullying		Gender-Based Bullying	
	OR	95% CI	OR	95% CI
GSA/LGBTQ-focused policies				
GSA only	1.33	0.76–2.33	1.12	0.59–2.15
GSA, LGBTQ-focused policies unsure	0.45 ***	0.28–0.70	0.50 **	0.30–0.84
No GSA, LGBTQ-focused policies unsure	0.89	0.54–1.47	1.06	0.61–1.83
LGBTQ-focused Policies only	0.37 **	0.19–0.71	0.62	0.31–1.23
GSA & LGBTQ-focused policies	0.55 **	0.36–0.83	0.53 *	0.33–0.86
Transgender	2.13 ***	1.38–3.30	3.05 ***	1.93–4.81
Assigned sex at birth (male)	2.06 ***	1.54–2.45	1.33	0.95–1.86
Sexual orientation				
Bisexual	0.64 **	0.47–0.87	0.82	0.57–1.18
Queer/questioning	0.87	0.53–1.44	1.25	0.73–2.16
Age	0.91 *	0.83–0.98	0.98	0.89–1.08
Race/ethnicity				
Black or African American	0.48 ***	0.31–0.74	0.78	0.47–1.30
Multiracial	0.61 *	0.39–0.94	1.01	0.61–1.68
Asian/PI/Native Hawaiian	0.67	0.39–1.16	1.02	0.54–1.92
No race reported	0.78	0.47–1.28	0.83	0.45–1.53
Hispanic or Latino/a	0.82	0.55–1.21	0.84	0.53–1.33
No ethnicity reported	1.01	0.64–1.28	1.12	0.68–1.82
Free and reduced lunch	1.21	0.89–1.64	1.44 *	1.01–2.06
Out at school	1.13	0.82–1.54	0.93	0.66–1.33

Notes. GSA/Policies was a categorical item (reference category = "neither a GSA nor LGBTQ-focused policies"); race was a categorical item (reference category = "White"); ethnicity was a categorical item (reference category = "not-Hispanic or Latino/a"); out at school was a dichotomous item (0 = "not out to classmates and/or teachers").

***
p .001

**
p .01

*
p .05.

TABLE 3

Summary of Regression Analyses Predicting Perceptions of Classmate and Teacher Support ($n = 1,061$)

	Classmate Support b (SE)	Teacher Support b (SE)
GSA/LGBTQ-focused policies		
GSA only	0.15 (0.18)	0.04 (0.19)
GSA, LGBTQ-focused policies unsure	0.31 (0.13)[*]	0.12 (0.16)
No GSA, LGBTQ-focused policies unsure	−0.10 (0.15)	0.12 (0.16)
LGBTQ-focused Policies only	0.33 (0.17)	0.41 (0.18)[*]
GSA & LGBTQ-focused policies	0.46 (0.13)[***]	0.28 (0.13)[*]
Transgender	−0.35 (0.13)[**]	0.06 (0.14)
Assigned sex at birth (male)	0.13 (0.08)	0.25 (0.09)[**]
Sexual orientation		
Bisexual	−0.04 (0.09)	−0.12 (0.09)
Queer/questioning	0.06 (0.15)	−0.12 (0.16)
Age	−0.003 (0.02)	−0.001 (0.02)
Race/ethnicity		
Black or African American	0.36 (0.12)[**]	0.07 (0.13)
Multiracial	0.19 (0.13)	0.18 (0.13)
Asian/PI/Native Hawaiian	0.21 (0.16)	0.12 (0.17)
No race reported	0.21 (0.15)	0.23 (0.16)
Hispanic or Latino/a	0.12 (0.11)	0.02 (0.12)
No ethnicity reported	0.34 (0.13)	0.21 (0.13)
Free and reduced lunch Out at school	0.08 (0.09)	−0.06 (0.09)[***]
Out at school	0.23 (0.09)	0.33 (0.09)
Constant	1.95 (0.48)	2.55 (0.49)[***]

Notes.

[***] p .001

[**] p .01

[*] p .05.