RESEARCH ARTICLE

LGBTQ Youth's Views on Gay-Straight Alliances: Building Community, Providing Gateways, and Representing Safety and Support

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──────── ABSTRACT ────────

BACKGROUND: Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are school-based clubs that can contribute to a healthy school climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. While positive associations between health behaviors and GSAs have been documented, less is known about how youth perceive GSAs.

METHODS: A total of 58 LGBTQ youth (14-19 years old) mentioned GSAs during go-along interviews in 3 states/provinces in North America. These 446 comments about GSAs were thematically coded and organized using Atlas.ti software by a multidisciplinary research team.

RESULTS: A total of 3 themes describe youth-perceived attributes of GSAs. First, youth identified GSAs as an opportunity to be members of a community, evidenced by their sense of emotional connection, support and belonging, opportunities for leadership, and fulfillment of needs. Second, GSAs served as a gateway to resources outside of the GSA, such as supportive adults and informal social locations. Third, GSAs represented safety.

CONCLUSIONS: GSAs positively influence the physical, social, emotional, and academic well-being of LGBTQ young people and their allies. School administrators and staff are positioned to advocate for comprehensive GSAs. Study findings offer insights about the mechanisms by which GSAs benefit youth health and well-being.

Keywords: adolescent; gay-straight alliance; school-based; sexual minority.

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Adolescents thrive in climates that foster healthy development; arguably the most important climates are those in school and family settings. While macro-level systems certainly influence societal climate (eg, marriage legislation, media messaging), it is the micro-system of interpersonal and socioenvironmental factors that are the strongest predictors of whether a climate is more protective or risky for an adolescent. The infrastructure of a school (eg, school policies, programs, staffing ratios) can foster or inhibit a positive, health-promoting climate. Gay-straight alliances (GSAs), as a part of a school's climate, are a key strategy designed to ensure safety, support, and respect for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in schools. Yet little is known about the mechanisms through which GSAs might lead to positive outcomes for LGBTQ youth. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and benefits of GSAs through the voices of LGBTQ youth.

School Climate

School climate is the essence of school life that "reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures."[1,2] A positive school climate

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promotes healthy youth development, learning, life satisfaction, civic engagement, feelings of safety and respect, and student learning and is associated with lower levels of mental health problems (eg, anxiety, depression, and loneliness) and substance use.[1,3,4] Thapa et al[4] present 5 interrelated socioecological dimensions that comprise school climate, including safety, relationships, teaching and learning, institutional environment, and the school improvement processes. GSAs are integral to promoting a positive school climate for LGBTQ youth. More broadly, research indicates that "creating a supportive environment for LGBT students improves educational outcomes for all students, not just those who may identify as LGBT."[5] Thus, it is essential to consider GSAs as being situated in school climate and as influencing not only LGBTQ youth but also all youth in schools settings.

Gay-Straight Alliances

GSAs are school-based clubs that aim to provide a safe environment for LGBTQ youth and their allies. GSAs are often student-led with a teacher or school-related adult adviser. Fifty percent of LGBTQ students in the United States have a GSA or related student club available at their school, and two thirds of these students reported participating.[6] GSAs are not uniform across schools, although most provide various types of support such as socialization (eg, peer group support, queer prom, movie nights, Facebook pages), counseling (eg, individual or small group session with GSA adviser/school counselor), and advocacy (eg, Day of Silence, classroom presentations).[7,8]

A growing body of predominantly quantitative research demonstrates that GSAs are an important resource for LGBTQ youth.[9-13] The relationship between a GSA and school climate is complementary and mutually informative; for example, GSAs in schools where students perceive greater hostility regarding sexual orientation engage in more advocacy efforts than schools with less hostility.[8] LGBTQ youth who attend a school with a GSA, in comparison to those without a GSA, report safer school climates, more supportive teachers and school staff, better grades, and a lower likelihood of skipping school because of fear.[13]

GSAs most certainly impact and intersect with all the aforementioned school climate dimensions, either directly or indirectly, and warrant further investigation as a key contributor to positive school climate.

GSAs have been found to reduce mental health and substance abuse issues, including suicide, depression, alcohol use, and smoking.[9,10,12,14] Importantly, GSAs have also been associated with students having an increased sense of safety and lower likelihood of harassment experiences.[15] Russell et al[16] noted that GSAs can provide feelings of empowerment for young people as well, in the form of combating sexism and heterosexism and community/safe space formation. Other studies show that LGBTQ youth who report participating in a GSA have fewer problems related to bullying and anti-LGBTQ victimization.[9,17] In a retrospective study, Toomey et al[11] found that LGBQ young adults who attended a school with a GSA were more likely to obtain a college education. In addition, GSAs are associated with (1) lower odds of discrimination because of actual or perceived sexual orientation, (2) suicidal thoughts and attempts among LGB youth, and also for heterosexual boys, and (3) reduced odds of recent binge drinking for LGB girls, and unexpectedly, also for heterosexual boys and girls.[18,19]

Study Purpose

Although the body of literature about GSA benefits to youth is growing, there continues to be a gap in understanding of the specific ways in which GSAs contribute to youth well-being, and in particular, which GSA attributes or offerings are linked to these positive outcomes. Further understanding of the beneficial aspects of GSAs is needed to ensure ongoing positive contributions where they already exist in schools, and to identify core components of GSAs that are of value to youth for schools seeking to establish GSAs or similarly supportive groups within resource constraints. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the varied experiences of LGBTQ youth involved in GSAs, and, specifically, the functions they perceive that GSAs serve in their lives.

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METHODS

This study is part of a larger mixed methods project examining LGBTQ youth's environments, resources, and healthy development (Project RESPEQT: Research and Education on Supportive and Protective Environments for Queer Teens). We used a go-along interview methodology, an approach that involves the interviewer and respondent moving within the socioenvironmental space(s) discussed during the interview.[20-24] This interview technique can yield contextualized understanding, particularly about environmental assets and risks, which was a key focus of the parent study.

Participants and Recruitment

Youth in Canada and the United States, ages 14 to 19, were invited to participate using purposive and snowball sampling in schools and LGBTQ youth-serving organizations. Sixty-six young people completed interviews; 58 of them offered comments related to GSAs and are therefore included in this analysis. These 58 participants were diverse in terms of their self-reported sexual orientation and gender (Table 1). Nearly half of the youth self-identified as white or European ancestry (N = 28), with others identifying as a mixed racial background (N = 12), Latino (N = 8), Asian (N = 4), black/African (N = 2), aboriginal/native (N = 2), or other (N = 2). Of those who did not comment about GSAs, 2 were from Minnesota, 2 from British Columbia, and 4 from Massachusetts; these 8 were older (7 of the 8 were 17 or 18 years old) and more likely to be living in an urban setting (63% compared with 29% of the total sample) but in other ways were not demographically distinct from the 58 who did talk about GSAs.

In 2 locations, participants provided consent for themselves. In Minnesota, minors were asked if they were comfortable with the study team member approaching their parent/guardian for parental consent, as required by that University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Additional recruitment information can be found elsewhere.[20]

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted across Minnesota, Massachusetts, and British Columbia, in urban, rural, smaller city, and suburban settings, from November 2014 to July 2015. Interviewers were graduate students identified from each region and trained in go-along interview techniques by the first author; the research team represented a diversity of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, nursing, social work, and public health.

The interview guide consisted of 6 open-ended questions about the youth's environment (eg, ''If another LGBT friend was visiting you here and needed help with something or had a problem, where would you recommend they go to get care or support?'' and ''What other places in your community make you feel safe?''). Follow-up probes elicited reasons places or resources were considered supportive or not, how the youth found out about a place mentioned, and comparisons between places discussed. Participants guided the interviewer by foot, car or public transportation; a few chose to remain stationary for the interview. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 35 and 110 minutes (M = 78 minutes). Among the 58 who mentioned GSAs at all, comments ranged from 1 to 26 per participant, with an average of 7.7 comments.

Data Analysis

All audio-recordings were professionally transcribed, with minor language corrections made (eg, recorded ''ums'' and ''uhs'' removed in the transcription process). Interview transcripts were uploaded to Atlas.ti to facilitate coding by a multisite team. The transcribed interviews were descriptively and deductively coded using the interview guide to inform code development. Additional broad inductive codes were also identified and added to the codebook as transcripts were reviewed and coded. All transcripts were assigned to coding team members in the 3 study settings; 1 person coded and a second coder conducted a quality check by reviewing the coded transcript. This process yielded 446 quotes from youth addressing GSAs in general, as well as categories directly associated with GSAs (such as GSA teachers, or an identified lack of a GSA); these quotes were not specific to 1 interview question but were youth responses to any of the primary or follow-up questions that were posed during the interview.

All the 446 quotes referencing GSAs were compiled for secondary analysis for this study. The following

Table 1. Participant Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (N = 58)

	Female	Male	Trans and Other Labels[‡]	Total
Gay or lesbian*	8	11	2	21
Bisexual*	5	9	3	17
Queer and additional labels[†]	5	1	12	18
Straight	—	—	1	1
Other	—	—	1	1
Total	18	21	19	58

*Gay or lesbian includes N = 2, ''same-sex attraction''; bisexual includes N = 1, bicurious.
[†]N = 9 queer; additional descriptors included N = 7 ''pansexual,'' N = 1 ''asexual,'' N = 1 ''panromantic asexual,'' and N = 1 ''rainbow sexual.''
[‡]Trans included N = 11 whose self-descriptor included ''trans'' (eg, trans-female, nonbinary trans person); additional descriptors included N = 10 who provided various labels, eg, fluid, nonbinary or neutral.

coding process was followed to analyze these GSA-related quotes. First, the second and third author each independently and inductively open coded the GSA quotes. Discussions with the project coding team shaped the organization of codes and the language used. Second, a resultant codebook was created, and using this codebook, ~40% of the transcripts were deductively coded independently by both the second and third author, with any discrepancies discussed and resolved. The remaining transcripts were divided between these 2 coders for coding; the authorship team reviewed the final coded dataset.

RESULTS

Youth described multiple facets of GSAs, which were organized into 3 major themes: (1) GSAs Provide and Build Community, (2) GSAs Serve as Gateways, and (3) GSAs Represent Safety. These are described in detail below, with quotes provided and identified by the participant's age, self-reported gender, and self-reported sexual orientation.

GSAs Provide and Build Community

The most prevalent theme that emerged from youth's comments about GSAs was that GSAs provide a readily accessible community, with community-oriented benefits that largely coalesced around 3 aspects of community as defined by McMillan and George:[25] (1) community members share an emotional connection and social support, (2) communities provide a sense of membership, and (3) communities fulfill needs of the members.

Community: shared emotional connection and social support. Sharing an emotional connection provides a foundation for membership in the GSA community and the support received from this community. Youth described the benefits of a GSA community in facilitating connection around common experiences: "You have something in common ... you might go through some hardships in life and it's just nice to be around people that you can express your problems with" (18-year-old, male, bisexual). Another young adult elaborated:

You think maybe they won't be my type of people. Maybe I won't fit in with them. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if they look like the type of people you'd hang out with or not. They're gay and you have something in common and you have that going for you. (18-year-old, male, bisexual)

One participant highlighted the appeal of having this GSA community after learning about the GSA from a student speaking in class:

I was pretty excited to join, and I noticed that the other kids didn't really care. It didn't really affect them, but for

me it affected me a lot because I wanted to meet others like me. I wanted to meet others that would support me or that were supportive of this community. (17-year-old, trans male, asexual)*

Membership in GSA conveys for many youth that someone is friendly and/or is someone with whom a youth has something in common, even if they did not appear to be upon first impression. Once membership in the GSA was known, impressions can change, as 1 youth shared: "We have people I would see from a distance in the cafeteria who I would think don't seem too friendly but then see at GSA and think, oh, I guess they are friendly" (18-year-old, "it" gender, bisexual).

Youth talked about the GSA not only as a source of emotional connection, but also as a source of personal support: "I like that they'll talk about problems and they'll try to help you. As like a community, basically, which I find is cool" (14-year-old, male, bisexual). The same participant illustrated the importance of a sense of shared emotional connection by describing when he felt that emotional connection does not exist with their straight group leader: "She doesn't really have a connection to it. I think it's pointless that she would run it [the GSA]" (14-year-old, male, bisexual). Other youth reflected broader appreciation for all involved in the GSA, as shared by this young male:

There's nobody in there that's going to say anything against me or anyone else there. And everybody in there is absolutely for sure accepting of the LGBTQA+ community, like, all those people. So I guess that's kind of [why] I feel at home. (14-year-old, male, gay)

Community: membership. The youth's sense of membership in the GSA community was apparent in a number of ways. Many talked about membership in the GSA community as providing an open, comfortable space, and feeling, for some, like a family. For example, a youth said: "Everyone is just really understanding ... always open arms for anyone who wants to come in. So, it's just really [a] kind and open space" (17-year-old, trans* male, pansexual). A recently graduated participant reflected: "We really just hung out and just talked and laughed and danced. It was a family, definitely" (18-year-old, female, lesbian). For many, the social benefits of membership reached outside the bounds of the GSA meetings; participants talked about hanging out with the same group outside of the school environment.

For some, a sense of membership in the GSA community was fostered by being invited to the GSA by existing friends; for others, the direction was reversed: "It was kind of tricky to find people that I would relate to, and then I joined GSA, and I found my friend group" (14-year-old, gender-neutral, pansexual). Membership in the GSA community caused youth not to feel isolated in their identity:

"It was nice to know that there were other people like that, because I would never have suspected that anyone else was" (17-year-old, male, gay). A few participants said they did not attend (or delayed attending) because they did not know anyone or did not like the people in the group.

Finally, youth membership in the GSA community was demonstrated by youths' expressions of personal investment. For many, personal investment was shown by taking on leadership or co-leadership roles in the GSA or GSA activities. It was also demonstrated in participation, as 1 youth expressed frustration at missing a planning meeting: "I forgot to go, and I'm, like, no, I needed to go to that" (14-year-old, male, gay).

Community: fulfills needs. The youth in our study highlighted ways the GSA community fulfills the needs of members within the group itself and outside of the GSA in the broader school community. Within the group, the GSA community can fulfill the educational, advocacy, and other personal needs of the group members. Youth highlighted their own education within the group, sometimes learning from each other and sometimes learning together from outside resources:

> *There's some kind of doctor who specializes in gender, so we're Skyping with him on Monday because we have a couple of students in our GSA who are like, 'I don't know my gender,' and they want to put a label on it, so we're going to Skype with him and see if he can help that and explain to people who don't understand the genders. Even me, I think I've got a better grasp on it. (16-year-old, female, pansexual)*

A few youth highlighted the role of the GSA in helping members come out to parents: "My friend, she wanted to come out as bi, but she had no idea how to do it. … She came to GSA, she asked a couple questions and the week later she was out to both her parents" (14-year-old, gender-neutral, pansexual).

The GSA community also works to fulfill the shared needs of group members in the broader setting, for many, but not all youth. Those involved in their GSAs mentioned the multifaceted role of the GSA in raising awareness for LGBTQ issues in school, providing LGBTQ education within the school, working to address bullying, hosting school events, fighting for gender-neutral bathrooms, and advocating for queer youth in specific circumstances. One participant identified some of the issues their GSA was taking on: "… educating the rest of the school. And making things within the school and the community more queer-friendly. Like, we just got a gender-neutral washroom in our school" (16-year-old, "other" gender and orientation). This young person also talked about planning events to raise awareness:

"Once or twice a year we hold events. So, like, we're planning a trans awareness week right now. Where we'd put like announcements in the mornings saying, here's a fun fact about trans people" (16-year-old, "other" gender, queer orientation). Some of the youth who elected to not attend the GSA at their school said they felt the group does not accomplish anything, and mentioned that they belong to other groups that better fulfill their needs; specific examples of how these other groups fulfill their needs were not described.

In summary, GSAs offer an opportunity for LGBTQ youth to be members of a community—an extremely important perceived benefit. Youth voiced this benefit in several ways. They enjoyed sharing an emotional connection and similar perspective with their fellow GSA members, and therefore felt a sense of safety and belonging as part of this group in which they socialized and personally invested. Through this, many individual members had their personal needs fulfilled, and the group as a whole was able to meet their shared needs within the larger school environment through education and advocacy.

GSAs Serve as a Gateway

In addition to GSAs providing a community in which youth feel connected and fulfilled, GSAs also serve as a gateway to supportive adults with whom they may not have otherwise connected, community resources, and the larger LGBTQ community.

Gateway: supportive adults. Most prevalent in our interviews were the adult relationships that youth described when discussing their GSA experiences, including GSA advisers, teachers, and school administrators. For example, 1 youth responded to a question about available LGBTQ resources not by mentioning specific material objects but rather, an adult, "there's not a structure that you can visualize when you think of a [resource]. Faces pop into your head, like our GSA adviser" (18-year-old, male, gay).

Youth from across all 3 study sites discussed the specific types of support and guidance they received from these nonparental, important adults. Several youth spoke about connecting with adults who are members of the LGBTQ community, who then serve as role models and positive examples of being out in the community. These adults provide them with support in their own identity development and discovery of additional LGBTQ-specific resources. For example, 1 youth stated, "She's [school staff] the nicest person. She helped me get out of a lot of funks. I wish my mom were a lesbian so they would date. I'm not even kidding; that's the funny thing. She's just an amazing lesbian. She's perfect" (16-year-old, trans* female, straight). Another youth talked about the adult GSA sponsor and stated: "The leader herself was a lesbian. And she's supportive, she's, like, really deep into the

community ... I'd always get ahold of her for any trouble'' (17-year-old, trans* male, pansexual).

Some GSA advisers go beyond their role as an adviser for the group to support youth in broader areas, such as with academics. For example:

> Junior year, I was failing in my grades and stuff, and one of the staff facilitators every day checked up on me, called me and made sure I wasn't stuck in school and keep going, keep doing what I was doing. It helped a lot. (18-year-old, female, lesbian)

Another youth, when asked about how her GSA adviser provided support, responded:

> We're not supposed to be friends with them on Facebook, but we have a GSA page, and she's on it too, and she'll post nice things for me. She knows I love baking, so she'll post rainbow cupcakes, and she's like 'oh, you should make these,' and I'm like 'oh, thank you!' (18-year-old, female, lesbian)

Still, other youth spoke more generally about the pro-LGBTQ messages they received from adults they connected with through their involvement with the GSA. When speaking about the process of working with school administrators in getting a gender-neutral bathroom approved, 1 youth stated:

> They worked together really well ... they understood the importance of it. And they made it happen and usually there's a lot more, kind of administrative stuff that needs to happen with it. But they skimmed over that as much as they could for now so that we could get a place to pee. (16-year-old, ''other'' gender and orientation)

Another youth, when explaining the Ally Week that their GSA hosted at school, stated, '' ... all people do is say, 'Hey, I'm an ally,' and teachers were [doing] that, and that was pretty cool'' (17-year-old, male, gay).

Gateway: community resources. In addition to connecting youth to supportive adults, GSAs also serve as a gateway to community resources. Through their involvement with GSAs, youth spoke about discovering services such as health care clinics, hotlines, and support groups: ''Because I was so involved in GLSEN [Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network] and GSA network, that's how I knew about all these resources'' (18-year-old, female, queer). Connecting with health care resources via their GSA involvement was mentioned by several youth:

> [GSA adviser] and [co-adviser] both led a health seminar, and we had health people come in, and they had a whole pamphlet on health providers for LGBT people. I actually have that, because I'm uncomfortable with my doctor, so when I'm older I want to choose a different doctor. I'm going to go based off that and people who specialize in that. (16-year-old, female, pansexual)

Another youth spoke poignantly about the importance of GSAs serving as a gateway to community resources, saying:

> My GSA has people who come in and they speak about these places, because a lot of the LGBTQ kids have problems at home, so maybe they'd run away, or problems where they don't want to go to a clinic where they have to pay, and they don't want to go to a clinic where everything is going to be leaked to their parents, in case they're not out yet. (18-year-old, male, bisexual)

Gateway: larger LGBTQ community. GSAs also connect youth with the larger LGBTQ community by providing connections to current policy or advocacy issues, pride events, and other LGBTQ peers. For example, 1 youth said that they [the GSA] share articles on Twitter and Facebook, especially regarding policy initiatives. This youth stated, ''During the transgender policy that was trying to be implemented ... both [Twitter and Facebook] were used hardcore'' (18-year-old, male, gay). Another youth stated, ''My GSA in my high school, they have flyers about a lot of locations where LGBT youth can hang out'' (18-year-old, female, lesbian). Some community organizations directly reach out to the GSA:

> [Community youth program] came to do an outreach for our GSA, so they actually came into our school and did a workshop. So we got a bit of a taste of what it would be like and—yeah, I met the awesome facilitator and got a look into how it would be, and it was an immediate wow, yeah, I'm joining this thing. I'm not too busy to join this. I can make time for this. Probably was too busy for it, but I still went and I'm glad I did. (16-year-old, ''other'' gender and orientation)

Through these experiences youth are able to meet other LGBTQ peers and feel part of a larger community. One youth said: ''A lot of us actually do hang out at [the LGBTQ youth organization]. We do on our free time try to get into that type of LGBT movement'' (18-year-old, female, lesbian). Another youth, when talking about a float their GSA did for Pride stated: ''It's—I guess it's a good way to show a sense of community ... You can meet some really great networking people that way. It's a lot of fun. I think it's a good way to celebrate your differences definitely'' (15-year-old, female, queer). Several youth spoke about meeting LGBTQ peers at GSA regional meetings or conferences. One spoke about the GSA regional meetings that he attends:

> Well, in [town], besides me and [my friend] and maybe 3 other people, I don't really know anyone that identifies as LGBT. I mean, there are a lot of supporters that we know in our whole friend group, but there's none that identify, so I guess in a way it's nice to know that there's other people. (17-year-old, male, gay)

In sum, an additional perceived benefit of GSAs is that they act as a gateway to many resources. GSAs assist LGBTQ youth in connecting to supportive adults, such as GSA advisers, teachers, and school administrators. GSAs offer a link to several community resources to meet individual needs outside of the group, such as health care clinics, hotlines, and support groups. They also provide youth an avenue in which to relate to the larger LGBTQ community via involvement in LGBTQ events, partnerships with community organizations, and social media news and advocacy postings.

GSAs Represent Safety

Youth interpreted the presence of a GSA as a significant marker of safety. Highlighting this, 1 participant said: ''It's mainly a safe space where we can talk about anything that we want to. Like, we don't even talk about queer things sometimes. We might just talk about movies, and it's just a place to hang out'' (16-year-old, ''other'' gender, queer). Several youth commented that the presence of a GSA in a school indicated that the school was both safe and desirable. Students wanted to attend schools with a GSA and expressed disappointment with schools that did not have a GSA. In one instance, the presence of a GSA was seen as a selling point, to make a school more attractive to LGBTQ youth: ''The GSAs from different schools will come to the health fair and say, 'Hey, if you're thinking about switching schools, this school has a GSA''' (18-year-old, ''it'' gender, bisexual).

Moreover, when a GSA was present, youth interpreted the climate of the school as safe. It seemed that schools allowing a GSA to form and operate were assumed to be welcoming to LGBTQ students: ''Google like what schools in [city] have GSAs, those places are usually safe'' (18-year-old, ''other'' gender, rainbow-sexual). A youth used her affiliation with the GSA to convey safety when introducing herself to new students: ''I was, like, 'hey, guys, I'm head of the GSA, like, what are your pronouns?''' (16-year-old, female, pansexual).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the mechanisms by which GSAs benefit youth, as described in go-along interviews. Our study contributes unique insights about how young people perceive their GSA, a potentially significant asset in the lives of LGBTQ youth, and builds upon existing literature demonstrating the protective immediate and long-term benefits of GSAs for young people.[9,10,12,15]

Youths' perspectives yielded 3 broad thematic factors (eg, mechanisms) that potentially explain the protective role of GSAs. Although each mechanism might distinctly benefit LGBTQ youth, broadly or individually, there might also be a synergistic protective benefit. For example, by offering a space for shared emotional connection and a sense of membership, GSAs provide a trusting foundation for the fulfillment of individual and group needs (first mechanism). Once this trusted community is established and experienced, GSAs might then serve as a gateway to supportive adults, the larger LGBTQ community, and community resources (second mechanism). Finally, because GSAs build community and provide gateways, they are seen as and become a source of and symbol for a need youth have, namely a sense of safety (third mechanism).

The circular interaction of GSAs is further demonstrated in our study findings that, for example, GSAs provide community to members but also serve as gateways to the broader LGBTQ communities. Further research is needed to examine these potentially synergistic protective mechanisms of GSAs, both in their meanings for participants as well as their health-protective effects.

Limitations and Strengths

The main limitation of this study is that the go-along interviews were designed to elicit youths' perspectives about LGBTQ resources, broadly, and participants were not explicitly asked about GSAs. Explicitly asking about GSAs could have yielded additional insights not obtained in our study. Similarly, this study did not include straight youth who might be members of GSAs, whose experiences or perceptions of GSA benefits might differ from their LGBTQ peers.

This study also has noteworthy strengths. Fifty-eight young people from 3 distinct states/provinces talked about GSAs during their interviews; the youth are diverse (eg, race/ethnic background, sexual orientation, gender identity), yielding study findings that are transferable to similar LGBTQ youth and youth-serving individuals. The recurring perspectives about GSAs among the youth resulted in credible and trustworthy, data-saturated themes. Finally, our multidisciplinary research team approached the data aware of any existing researcher bias (eg, positive view of GSAs); this awareness through the coding process can contribute to the trustworthiness of study findings.

Conclusions

LGBTQ youth recognize GSAs as important in ways that are consistent with the benefits that have been previously identified in research. Open-ended, spontaneous descriptions of GSAs by youth in this study elaborate the ways in which GSAs are beneficial, and begin to uncover the potential mechanisms by which GSAs positively influence the lives of youth.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL HEALTH

Numerous recommendations and implications from this study can be carefully made for a variety of

stakeholders serving LGBTQ youth and their families. First, for schools with a GSA, we recommend that school administrators, health professionals, and staff support the presence of a robust GSA, including an adult adviser, meeting space, financial support, and other resources made available to student groups. GSAs should consider reviewing the scope of their programming and consider ways to expand or refine in order to meet the diverse needs of LGBTQ students in ways that enhance feelings of community, safety, and linkage to other resources and supports.

Second, for schools that do not have a GSA and might not be politically supported to have one in the near future, there is a need to identify staff who can serve as resources for LGBTQ youth; such an individual may provide some of the benefits described in this research, such as connections to outside resources and the larger LGBTQ community. The school might consider initiating a social justice club or similarly themed club that might provide benefits similar to what a GSA can offer (eg, sense of community, safety, advocacy, connection to other resources). These schools are encouraged to adopt programs and policies that make the school more comfortable and safe for LGBTQ students (eg, antibullying policies specifically addressing gender/orientation, comprehensive sex education curricula, gender neutral bathrooms).

Third, nonschool-based agencies can use the insights from the youth to consider the ways in which they provide similar protections or services, particularly for youth not attending a school with a GSA. For those who work with parents of LGBTQ youth, and for parents themselves, there is benefit to understanding the important role of GSAs for many youth; this knowledge could serve parents as they advocate for their youth with school administrators, and consider which school their student might attend. In sum, findings from this study, combined with existing research demonstrating the role of GSAs in promoting wellbeing and minimizing health risk behaviors of young adults, provide clear evidence of the need to support GSAs in schools.

Human Subjects Approval Statement

Appropriate approvals were obtained from the respective University IRBs prior to any data collection.

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Michael SL, Merlo CL, Basch CE, Wentzel KR, Wechsler KR. Critical connections: health and academics. *J Sch Health*. 2015;85(11):740-758.

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Source: American Academy of Pediatrics. (http://www2.aap.org/sections/schoolhealth/mustread.htm)