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Are Gay-Straight Alliances Working ? Advisor's Perceived Role Of And Level Of Success Of GSAs in Combatting The Bullying Epidemic In South Carolina

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Are Gay-Straight Alliances Working? Advisors' Perceived Role of and
Level of Success of GSAs in Combatting the Bullying Epidemic in South
Carolina

by

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DEDICATION

To my grandparents, Ken and Carolyn Bagley, Ruth Slimp, and Robert Shoemaker

For giving me the opportunity to thrive and achieve my goals, and for never wavering in your belief in me

To my mother, Debbie Mitchell-Knight

For giving me the opportunity to finish this project

To my family and friends

For your unconditional love, support, and encouragement

To LGBTQ youth

For your strength and perseverance by which I am eternally inspired

To anyone who has been bullied because of who they are

It gets better.

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological, ethnographic, collective case study examined the effectiveness of Gay-Straight Alliances in public high schools in South Carolina in reducing or eradicating aggression and bullying towards LGBTQ students through the lenses of both queer and critical theories within a framework of social justice. The current study investigated the perceptions of experts and GSA faculty advisors regarding the success of the clubs in reducing or eliminating bullying in South Carolina high schools. The investigation stemmed from the perceived discrepancy between literature on GSAs, which reports that the clubs contribute to a more positive school climate, positive effects on LGBTQ youth, and to fewer instances of homophobic aggression, and results from the GLSEN National School Climate survey, which indicates that this aggression still occurs. Four cases were created for the study based on three geographic regions of South Carolina, and one expert case. Case sub-units included faculty advisors from suburban high schools, with an uneven distribution of participants from the suburbs of the capital city. Qualitative data were collected from GSA faculty advisors in South Carolina, as well as experts in the field of LGBTQ issues, through qualitative questionnaires, and interviews using a constant, comparative method in both within and cross-case analysis to gain insight into their close working perspectives on the clubs' success or lack thereof, as well as shed light on issues that are currently affecting LGBTQ youth in South Carolina high schools. Factors that could influence advisors in their roles included gender, identity or sexual orientation, personal experiences, and geography. Results show that high

schools with GSAs report fewer instances of bullying and more accepting school climates. By examining the perspectives of experts and faculty GSA advisors, the study found that in schools with a GSA, bullying is, indeed, reduced. GSAs, however, do not guarantee a supporting environment; most advisors report that negative speech and insults are common. Findings were consistent with prior studies and literature on GSAs, and the needs of LGBTQ young people, but the challenge extends to LGBTQ advisors, who must often deal with similar problems of discrimination and the possibility of losing their job. Other findings of the study indicate that homophobic attitudes are entrenched in South Carolina, and are the cause for many of the challenges that are faced daily by LGBTQ youth and advisors, providing advocates many opportunities to continue to work for positive change. Advisors in South Carolina high schools call for more inclusive curriculum, especially with sexual education, and comprehensive protection through official policies. The perceived discrepancy between GSA literature and current statistics on bullying in South Carolina was not resolved, and further investigation is suggested to discover the source of the negative data, and if they are emerging from high schools that are not served by a GSA.

GSAs are considered a necessary part of providing support to these students, and function in different ways to meet their needs. They are also considered to provide recognition and a collective face that sends a message to schools that these young people are accepted and supported. The GSA does not solve the challenges faced by LGBTQ youth, but the clubs make a difference in the lives of students and the culture of the schools. GSAs are considered to be successful in reducing bullying by simply existing,

but depending on the type of club, its activity and visibility, student leadership, and member needs, their contributions to fewer instances of bullying may be stronger.

Key Words: Gay-Straight Alliance, Faculty Advisor, Case Study, Qualitative Research

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

ALL YOUNG PEOPLE, REGARDLESS OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION OR IDENTITY, DESERVE A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH TO ACHIEVE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL. ~HARVEY MILK

Currently, bullying is at the forefront of much discussion in the education field. Reports from across the United States are bringing the problem of bullying to a place of prominence in the public consciousness, and many people are demanding action from school districts, state agencies, and both state and federal legislators.

The story of Jamie Nabozny, a student from Wisconsin, is a tragic example of how verbal harassment can escalate into life-threatening violence in high school... This “kind of stuff” continued throughout middle school and escalated in high school, when he was attacked several times in the bathroom and urinated on. On the school bus, he was routinely pelted with objects, including steel nuts and bolts. But the most serious assault occurred in eleventh grade, when Jamie was surrounded by eight students and kicked in the stomach repeatedly while other students stood by. A few weeks later, Jamie collapsed due to internal bleeding caused by the attack and was rushed to the hospital. (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012)

Bullying is a generic term referring to negative experiences or feelings based on an unbalanced power dynamic in a social relationship. The current study focused on the issues that are faced by youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or

queer/questioning (LGBTQ), specifically bullying, and is operationalized as biased language, feeling unsafe at school, electronic harassment, and both verbal and physical harassment or assault (Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2014; Athanases & Comar, 2008; Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Cianciotto & Cahill, 2012; Cooper & Blumenfeld 2012; Dewitt, 2012; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Espelage & Rao, Chapter 9, 2013; Grossman et al., 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Meyer, 2011; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Ramirez, 2013; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011).

Studies find that sexual identity discrimination and bullying are related to increased depression (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Birkett et al. 2009; Cooper & Blumenfeld 2012; Dewitt, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Kosciw et al. 2012; Meyer, 2011; Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010; Ramirez, 2013; Toomey et al. 2011), suicide (Almeida et al., 2009; Birkett et al., 2009; Cooper & Blumenfeld 2012; Dewitt, 2012; Grossman et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2009; Meyer, 2011; Toomey et al., 2011), lower self-esteem (Athanases & Comar, 2008; Cooper & Blumenfeld 2012; Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al. 2012), truancy (Aragon, et al. 2014; Birkett et al. 2009; Cooper & Blumenfeld 2012; Grossman et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2012; Meyer, 2011), non-completion of schooling (Aragon et al., 2014; Athanases & Comar, 2008; Dewitt, 2012; Grossman et al., 2009), lower academic achievement (Aragon et al., 2014; Athanases & Comar, 2008; Birkett et al., 2009; Cooper & Blumenfeld 2012; Grossman et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2012), running away from home (Dewitt, 2012), substance abuse (Birkett et al., 2009; Dewitt, 2012; Grossman et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2009; Meyer, 2011; Toomey et al., 2011),

risky sexual behaviors (Robinson & Espelage, 2013), and exclusion (Cooper & Blumenfeld 2012; Dewitt, 2012; Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010). These negative effects of discrimination and bullying are discussed at length in chapter two.

Aggression towards LGBTQ students, coupled with stigma (Kosciw et al., 2009) and negativity from society led to the creation of student-led groups called Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in schools (Toomey et al., 2011). These groups seek to provide a space where, “LGBT youth can safely discuss issues associated with their sexual orientation or gender identity, and GSAs foster communication with others who understand what they are going through” (Cianciotto & Chaill, Chapter 4, 2012). GSAs also serve to counsel and support LGBTQ youth, raise awareness, provide education on LGBTQ issues, and be a space for these young people to socialize and be themselves (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2003; Hackford-Peer, 2010; Lipkin, 2003). Studies indicate that students who are involved with GSAs, “benefit through a positive academic outcome, an increased feeling of belonging to the school, a heightened sense of safety within the school, and the development of coping strategies for dealing with others’ assumptions regarding their sexual orientation” (Fedewa & Candelaria, Chapter 11, 2013). Other studies discuss the positive effects that GSAs have on school climate and perceptions of the school experience of LGBTQ youth (Cianciotto & Chaill, Chapter 4, 2012; Dewitt, Chapter 5, 2012; Griffin et al., 2003; Russell, Horn, Kosciw, & Saewyc, 2010). Still other positive effects of GSAs in schools, such as fewer incidences of biased language, bullying, missing school, increased feelings of safety at school, hearing more positive comments about LGBTQ people, being aware of a supportive adult in the school setting, experiencing greater empowerment to combat discrimination, and having a greater sense

of belonging to their school community, (GLSEN, 2007; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Heck, Lindquist, Stewart, Brennan, & Cochran, 2013; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009; Russell et al., 2010; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012) demonstrate a need for them. Several years later, LGBTQ youth currently enjoy more acceptance, yet society is faced with continued stories of suicide resulting from bullying and increased mediatization of reports of aggression against students who identify in this manner from across the nation. The usefulness and purpose of these supposedly safe zones for LGBT students are under question as the tragedies associated with bullying and sexual identity discrimination continue to occur and be reported (Heck et al., 2013). In mentioning a 2004 study by Mayo, Hackford-Peer (2010) critiques ineffective GSAs, calling for,

caution about the connections between enforcing policies demanding politically correct language and a culture of civility which does not make actual change can be applied to the presence of these spaces. The doors to these “safe spaces” symbolize a portal between two different worlds; on the inside the queer student can exist without judgment or the fear of violence. But on the other side of the door, the side where the rest of the school is, the homophobia is still there, the slurs are still yelled, the threats are still made.

The presence of a GSA does not guarantee a reduction in victimization, (Toomey & Russell, 2011) though some studies report a decrease (Sczalacha & Westheimer, 2006; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). Chapter two of the current study examines what, exactly, a GSA is, as well as the influence these support groups have on aggression

towards LGBTQ students. Another integral part of GSAs, and the perspectives on which the current study is based, is the faculty advisor.

These advocates serve as an important connection to resources outside of the school context, a counselor, at times, and a visible adult who shows support for the GSA members and participants, as well as other staff members of the school (McGarry, 2013). The advisor can find him or herself in a tough situation, depending on the climate of the school or community which, as an adult, they often know more about than students, where they want to protect the LGBTQ students, but may also fear having to protect themselves (Adams & Carson, 2006; Valenti & Campbell, 2009; Watson, Varjas, Meyers, & Graybill, 2010). Chapter two also discusses the role of faculty advisors, and their importance to the organization.

The negative effects of bullying and sexual identity discrimination against LGBTQ youth are tangible products of a public school system that reinforces heteronormativity. These negative effects prevent these young people from a positive school experience, and the opportunities for success to which their heterosexual schoolmates are privileged (DeBlaere & Brewster, 2013). The oppression faced by LGBTQ students and the inequality that is reinforced by the heteronormative privilege of the setup of schools, or institutional homophobia (Blumenfeld, 2000), including acceptable gender performance, provide a backdrop of social justice, against which the purpose of GSAs is defined in chapter two. Social justice is the focus on inequality that results from the marginalization of diverse groups, causing advantages or privilege of some groups at the expense or disadvantage of others. “The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their

needs” (Bell, 2000). The continued oppression through bullying of these young people in relation to heteronormative bias is also a reason for which the effectiveness of GSAs was examined in the current study. The power dynamic that creates a need for social justice for LGBTQ students is explained as follows,

The dominant group holds the power and authority in society relative to the subordinates and determines how that power and authority may be acceptably used. Whether it is reflected in determining who gets the best jobs, whose history will be taught in school, or whose relationships will be validated by society...The relationship of the dominants to the subordinates is often one in which the targeted group is labeled as defective or substandard in significant ways. (Tatum, 2000, p.7)

Problem Statement

Nation-wide over the past decade, while the number of LGBTQ students who report being bullied at school has decreased, (Kosciw et al., 2012), the figures are still alarming. However, according to the 2011 National School Climate Survey, 71.3% of students heard homophobic remarks frequently, 63.5% of students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 38.3% reported being physically harassed, 18.3% were physically assaulted, and 55.2% experienced electronic harassment, or cyberbullying (Kosciw et al., 2012). Referring to the types of bullying operationalized for the current study, over half of the students surveyed have experienced discrimination in some form over the past year. 56.9% of survey participants reported hearing homophobic remarks by teachers or school staff. The non-action or even non-supportive speech by

staff members only exacerbates the problem of bullying in all of its forms, and more disturbing yet, many students who are bullied do not report incidences, fearing retribution or that no action will occur to correct the situation (Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2012). The refusal to report incidences of bullying makes it very difficult to help these students and eradicate bullying or discriminatory behavior. The physical and psychological abuse and anxiety associated with bullying can lead to further problems such as school non-completion, lower grades, dissociative behavior, and suicide (Almeida et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2012; Toomey et al., 2011).

South Carolina is known to be a conservative, religious southern state where homosexuality is not looked upon favorably and sexual identity-based discrimination is engrained in the culture and laws. Twenty-five years ago, author James Sears produced a groundbreaking work, Growing up Gay in the South, in which he laid the foundation of a challenge to the hegemonic environments that LGBTQ youth face on a daily basis. These students do not have the support from family and community, accepting peer groups, and educational resources regarding issues that affect them, and are necessary for them to feel safe and succeed at school (Espelage et al., 2008; GLSEN, 2007; GLSEN, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2012). This societal prejudice against LGBTQ citizens is not a new concept; rather, it has existed for centuries. In conservative communities, especially in the American South, conservative views are often tied to politics, religion, social norms, laws, and institutional policies (Swank, Fahs, & Frost, 2013). These community views can play a part in a community's perceived need for support by the LGBTQ community, and for local decisions, such as starting a GSA (Miceli, Chapter 7, 2005; Worthen, 2014). By entrenching fear and beliefs that should not be mixed with

government and policy, these communities are codifying prejudice and making discrimination legal. One example of codified discrimination in South Carolina comes from the code of regulations for schools. The Comprehensive Health Education Act of 1988 states, “The program of instruction provided for in this section may not include discussion of alternate sexual lifestyles from heterosexual relationships including, but not limited to, homosexual relationships except in the context of instruction concerning sexually transmitted diseases”.

When a high school in a South Carolina school district tried to form a GSA club in 2008, the principal turned in his resignation because the school district forced him to allow the club, setting off a local and national controversy. The district, in which the school is located, cited the EAA as the reason that it would allow the GSA to exist. Its only other option would have been to eliminate all co-curricular organizations. The school board of the district amended their board policy regarding clubs in June of 2008 to reflect the EAA, and included several new stipulations for all clubs as a result of the situation (Smith, 2008). With this codification of prejudice and discrimination, these communities are continuing the heteronormative system of oppression that continues the cycle of aggressions toward the LGBTQ community. Schools are microcosms of the communities in which they operate, so logically, if a community is perpetuating homophobia and heterosexism, the school will, also. The 2011 National School Climate Survey provides a state snapshot for South Carolina. Nine out of ten students who participated in the national survey indicating they were from South Carolina, reported hearing homophobic remarks regularly at school, and 30% regularly heard staff making homophobic remarks (GLSEN, 2013). According to the South Carolina snapshot, the incidences of bullying

range from nine out of ten students reporting verbal harassment, to 61% experiencing cyberbullying, to two out of ten reporting being physically assaulted. While a 20% reporting of assault appears more encouraging than other forms of bullying, the report goes on to say that 59% of students who were harassed or assaulted never reported it (GLSEN, 2013).

The Gay-Straight Alliance is a current push against this age-old discrimination against non-heteronormativity, and a way to support, educate, and combat the bullying that comes from prejudice against LGBTQ students (Fetner & Kush, 2008; Miceli, Chapter 1, 2005). There are very few GSAs in the state of South Carolina, according to the GLSEN directory of registered clubs, meaning that there is a large segment of LGBTQ youth with no support, making them easy targets for bullies and the tragic results that can come from continued abuse. Studies have shown that GSAs contribute to a more accepting school climate and fewer incidents of bullying, especially in larger, suburban or urban schools (Diaz et al., 2010; Espelage et al., 2008; Kosciw et al., 2012; Worthen, 2014). The problem, which serves as the basis of the current study, is that if GSAs are thought to contribute to fewer cases of aggression on a national scale, then why are over half of LGBTQ students still reporting that they are being bullied at school? There is a gap in bullying research, which is mentioned by Espelage and Rao (2013). The current study investigates what issues LGBTQ students in South Carolina are facing, and if GSAs in South Carolina are effectively contributing to fewer cases of bullying, or not. In doing this, it contributes to a gap in literature about GSAs in the South, specifically, in South Carolina.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative research design was the best fit for the current study because, “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in their world” (Merriam, 2001, p. 6). The phenomenon being studied was the perspectives of faculty sponsors of high school GSAs in South Carolina regarding the issues that LGBTQ students in their clubs are facing, and their perception on the GSAs success in reducing sexual identity bullying of LGBTQ students. These perspectives consisted of affective responses from study participants on their own perceptions about their GSA or work with LGBTQ populations and school. Other characteristics of qualitative study that Merriam mentions, and which were applicable to this research were: the researcher being the primary method of collecting and analyzing data, the necessity of fieldwork, the use of inductive research, and rich description (Merriam, 2001) to tell the story of a population to be studied (Mayberry, Chenneville, & Currie, 2011). Critical research was the chosen orientation within qualitative research design because through the perspectives of faculty sponsors of GSAs, the literature on bullying incidents in schools and the small number of clubs in South Carolina, the current study was able to shed light on the social injustice experienced by LGBTQ youth in the state.

Case study, specifically, collective case study, was the chosen qualitative design method because it allows for the most complete description of the phenomenon (Cousin, 2005; Grossman et al., 2009), allowing for, “an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (Merriam, 2001, p. 19). “In case study research, cases can be chosen and studied because they are thought to be instrumentally useful in

furthering understanding of a particular problem, issue, concept, and so on” (Schwandt, 2007, p.28). Case study research is advised when the focus of a study is “how” or “why”, behavior of participants cannot be manipulated, you want to examine the context of a phenomenon, or the boundaries of the context or phenomenon are not clear (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Collective case study allows for, “detailed, extensive data collection through multiple sources of information” (Ramirez, 2013, p. 94). “The use of multiple data collection sources provides a more ‘convincing and accurate’ case study” (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2012, p. 13). In discussing collective case study, Stake says, “It is not the study of a collective but instrumental study extended to several cases. Individual cases in the collection may or may not be known in advance to manifest the common characteristic. They may be similar or dissimilar, redundancy and variety each having voice. They are chosen because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding, perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases” (Stake, 1994, p. 237). The current study sought to elicit the perspectives of GSA advisors all over the state of South Carolina. Since the climate of every school is different, collective case study best provided the opportunity to analyze trends in data, “and allows investigation of a phenomenon, population, or general condition” (Stake, 2000, in Glesne, 2011, p. 22). In chapter three, there will be more specific discussion of the selection of the cases for the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Diefenbach, 2009; VanWynsberghe & Khan, 2007; Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

This investigation sought to answer the following research questions:

What are the issues that faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina feel are important to, or being faced by LGBTQ members of their clubs?

What challenges do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive as being faced by LGBTQ students and/or GSA members?

How do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive the role of the group in their schools?

What do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive as happening with bullying of LGBTQ students in their schools?

How do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina feel that their clubs are contributing to fewer instances of sexual identity discrimination or bullying?

How do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive the success, or lack thereof, of their clubs in contributing to fewer instances of sexual identity discrimination or bullying?

Purpose of the Study

This purpose of the current study was to examine the perceived success or lack thereof of high school GSAs and perceived issues faced by student members in the state of South Carolina, a conservative state in the Southeastern United States. Schools are not welcoming places for LGBTQ students, as a high percentage of them report being bullied

on school grounds (GLSEN, 2013). Continued bullying can lead to negative effects that decrease the probability that LGBTQ students will be successful and happy with their school experience, as well as physically safe. The goal for all students, regardless of how they identify, is to get an education, and to be able to walk the halls of a school building and be proud of who they are without fear of physical or emotional abuse is one influence for the study (Dewitt, Chapter 3, 2012). No young person should have to hide who they are for any reason. It is a duty and accepted notion that the role of schools is to create productive citizens. This is not happening if bullying, non-completion, suicide, and the hiding of identity is the product that is being created in schools, a product that is not receiving a fair or equitable education if children are avoiding school to stay safe. This desire to improve the quality of the school experience for LGBTQ students and their straight allies in South Carolina was one of the driving influences for the study. Data collected from participants provided a description of the perceived issues that are of importance to LGBTQ youth, and the success of GSAs in preventing or reducing bullying, through the eyes of their faculty advisors.

The study stemmed, in part, from a personal goal of mine as a faculty sponsor of a high school GSA. I often saw the club I sponsor was lacking in topics to discuss, information to present, and a general lack of focus. Some of the students appeared to only come to the meetings to socialize. I also heard of students' interactions with other students both in and out of school, and it seemed that their experiences were negative and could be classified as bullying. I had even been told of stories involving other teachers that either by not putting an end to negative student interaction, or by participating themselves, contributed to an overall unsatisfactory high school experience for these

learners. This desire to improve the quality of purpose for my own GSA and others across the state, as well as the school experience for these students was one of the influences for the study.

There was also a practical goal for the current study that will be further discussed in chapter five. It was a goal that through the study of the perceived pertinent issues being faced by LGBTQ youth, and the perceived success, or lack thereof, of GSAs that clear(er) goals can be established for them, better communication between stakeholders (students, advisors, teachers, administrators, etc.) will occur, students will be more empowered to counter heteronormative oppression, and that any bullying of LGBTQ students will be reduced or eradicated. There were no known studies on GSAs in South Carolina, and very few on GSAs in the Southeastern United States (Mayberry et al., 2011), so this work also contributed to the body of literature on GSAs and sexual identity discrimination, shedding light on a subject that is under-represented in this geographical region.

Conceptual Framework

The current study was epistemologically oriented and framed by the philosophies of poststructuralism and social reconstructionism. Poststructuralism is a rejection of systems or structures that privilege some over others. In this case, LGBTQ youth are the victims of the heteronormative systems of gender performance, institutions such as schools, and social norms that allow heterosexuals advantages and privileges that non-heterosexuals are denied. Social reconstructionism seeks to correct inequalities that exist in society due to power, privilege, and unseen norms that elevate some over others,

creating an injustice. Three theoretical lenses both provided support for, and were supported by the epistemological orientation of the study. They were critical theory, queer theory, and social justice. All three lenses can interact and strengthen analysis of phenomena, as well as stand independently, serving individual roles. “Queer theory, as a form of cultural study and a theoretical framework, has been influential in acknowledging the ways in which gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning students experience formal schooling” (Love & Tosolt, 2013, p. 192). Heteronormativity or disciplined power in schools has afforded privilege to students and adults who identify as heterosexual and entrenched an expectation and atmosphere that LGBT students not disrupt with their gender non-conformity (Butler, 1990; Dhaenens, 2012; Green, 2010; Love & Tosolt, 2013; Mayo, 2004) These expectations contribute to a negative school climate and experience for LGBTQ youth, and are a main source of the discrimination that they face (Dhaenens, 2012). Queer theory seeks to dismantle heteronormative notions and labels that force LGBTQ youth into fixed categories and to empower them to be more knowledgeable and resistant to the oppression of heterosexism (Love & Tosolt, 2013; Meyer, Chapter 1, 2011;). Mayo states that queer theory has helped to blur the lines of identity categories, and that GSAs have been instrumental in providing students a way to work through their complicated identity development (2004).

For the purpose of the current study, a critical lens was helpful to highlight the social injustice through bullying, harassment, and identity discrimination that is experienced by LGBTQ high school students. Critical theory highlights an injustice, and seeks to bring it to the consciousness of the public, offering suggestions for correcting the injustice. In the current study, the injustice is a result of heterosexism in the school

setting (Meyer, Chapter 1, 2011). Quoting a 2003 study by Fairclough, Leap says, “The aim of critical social research is better understanding of how societies work and produce both beneficial and detrimental effects...” (Leap, 2013). Strine validates the choice of a critical lens, and the role of the researcher by saying, “Critics representing groups that are oppressed or marginalized by virtue of class, race, or gender have been especially effective in developing the theoretical implications of an agenda of critical interference” (Strine, 1991). As a gay man who endured harassment and bullying in my youth, I had my own perspective to share and be aware of throughout this project. In examining the perspectives of GSA sponsors to illuminate the struggles and issues that are important to the students with whom they work, and to determine if clubs are helping reduce bullying instances, the study brought to light the continued difficulties LGBTQ students face in schools, and the lack of support that the majority of these students face in South Carolina due to the lack of a GSA at their school.

Operational Definitions

For the purpose of the current study, the following terms will be defined:

- LGBTQ will be operationalized to exhibit the most current and inclusive terminology from the literature for those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer/questioning. Most sources referred to in the study use LGBT, and older ones use the term LGB.

- Bullying is used in the current study to refer to any type of aggression against LGBTQ students. This aggression includes discriminatory speech or slurs, verbal abuse or threats,

physical abuse or violence, and cyberbullying (Cooper & Blumenfeld, 2012; Grossman et al., 2009).

- GSA is an acronym for Gay-Straight Alliances. These are usually co-curricular clubs that serve as safe spaces for LGBTQ students and their straight allies to receive support, discuss issues, and be themselves (Griffin et al., 2003).

- Faculty advisor refers to a member of a high school faculty, usually a certified teacher, who serves as a reference for club members, other faculty members, and administration. These advisors are not permitted to lead or participate in meetings, but can guide members to resources that can help them (Adams & Carson, 2006).

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations of the Study

Assumptions

Being a faculty advisor for a GSA can be stressful for adults. Advisors may have a strained relationship with their administration for sponsoring a club, fear being perceived as or outed as a member of the LGBTQ community, or fear negative action by colleagues or community members (Adams & Carson, 2006; Valenti & Campbell, 2009; Watson et al., 2010). To relieve this stress, the identity and school of all participants was not reported. It was also an assumption of the study that any faculty advisor of a GSA is a current member of the faculty at the school in which the GSA is located.

The current study examined high school GSAs. The majority of schools in South Carolina that are considered high schools are made up of students in ninth through twelfth grades, and when one thinks of the term “high school”, this definition is what

comes to mind. There are, however, a small number of schools that house more or fewer grades for various reasons. For uniformity of the cases, only high schools that are comprised of ninth through twelfth grades, and have a GSA were included.

It was also assumed when provided with a sound research proposal, school districts would permit the contacting of their faculty members for the current study. If a district rejected the request to perform research, this became a study limitation.

Limitations

There were some limitations of the current study that must be mentioned for consideration. One limitation was that the study sought to find out about all GSAs in South Carolina. This was limited to the small number of clubs that exist currently, and by the participation of faculty advisors. Before contacting any district or advisor, I searched every website of every high school in South Carolina. This was to examine their list of clubs or student activity sites. The majority of high schools did not list a GSA as one of their organizations. Since the completion of data collection, and I began my work with the state coordinator of GSAs, more groups have formed, so my data is limited to faculty advisors who were able, and who agreed to participate. Another limitation of the study was that the data collected was the perspective of adult faculty sponsors and adult experts. Access to students for first-hand perspectives was not practical due to the ethical and safety challenges that come with working with youth and the tight security of schools, which makes getting access to student voices virtually impossible. In seeking the perspective of adults, a limitation was that their maturity and life experience were different than that of the students living the experience of LGBTQ youth in high school.

The perspectives that they provided may also be based on information that they received from their students who are not bullied first hand, but rather relayed vicarious victimization information. While the denial of access to students was an understood limitation, another limitation surfaced with regards to access to teachers. During the process of contacting school district research offices to request permission to contact faculty advisors for the study using district email or phone systems, two districts refused access altogether, stating in their response letters that the research was not beneficial to them. Two districts reported that they did not have enough GSA advisors in their schools, or had no active GSAs to warrant research in their systems. Finally, three other districts never responded back to my request to go through them to conduct research. This limitation had a negative impact on the study because when I researched schools with GSA clubs listed on their school club list, I only contacted districts in which those schools were located. Though frustrating for me as a researcher, I was more upset about the advisors who were not afforded the opportunity to share what is happening with their LGBTQ students. A personal limitation of the study was time. I experienced some tragic loss and setback in my personal life, and lost an entire semester of time on the current study. Fortunately, I was able to collect two data sources, and will discuss the implications of this limitation in chapter five.

The study sought information about LGBTQ students who are bullied at school. This was a limitation for the study, as bullying is not only confined to the school building or the school day. Many students are victimized elsewhere, including cyberspace. An additional limitation to the study was that it relies on student reporting of being

victimized. Unfortunately a true figure cannot be obtained, as many students do not report their experiences.

A final limitation for the study, and one of which I was aware and discuss safeguards against in chapter three, were my personal experiences as a member of the LGBTQ community, and as a faculty sponsor of the GSA at the school in which I work. My experiences in supporting the LGBT and straight allies in my own school community played a large part in my personal goal to improve the quality of services offered by the club and to improve the daily school experience of these students. In hearing these young people, who often use the GSA as an outlet for the distress and angst they feel about being harassed or bullied at school, tell their personal stories involving various negative encounters with other students and, at times teachers, shows that there is a problem and that the GSA is somehow not meeting a need for those for whom it solely exists.

My perspective and positionality regarding my research and methods are addressed to prevent bias and increase the validity of my data analysis.

Scope

The current study examined the perspectives of faculty advisors of high school GSAs in South Carolina. Faculty advisors work closely with members of GSAs and can give a unique perspective on the issues that they feel are important to the students with whom they work closely, and how successful their clubs are in reducing or eradicating bullying in their schools. While there are very few studies done on GSA effectiveness in the South, the current study only collected data from South Carolina GSAs.

Delimitations

First, there were clubs in South Carolina that do not use the name Gay-Straight Alliance, but serve a similar purpose in educating student bodies on diversity issues. I only sought to collect data from GSAs, as their name overtly states their purpose. This prevented having to investigate each anomaly to find out if it meets the definition of a GSA. This becomes a limitation if clubs that act like GSAs, yet have different names, are left out of the study.

Another delimitation of the study was the exclusion of private schools. While the experiences of LGBTQ students in private school settings are just as valid as those in public school, it was felt that more students could be reached through the focus on public high school GSAs.

Case selection served as a delimitation for the study. Cases do not form alone. A deliberate process must be selected and communicated by the researcher, as well as be logical and valid.

A final delimitation was the purposeful exclusion of analyzing my own GSA. This decision was made to decrease the chance for bias to intrude on data analysis.

Significance of the Study

Knowledge Generation

The current study was significant in that it contributed to a gap in literature on GSAs in conservative, Southern states. To my knowledge, there has never been a study to address this topic in South Carolina, and examining the relationship between the clubs

and bullying, as well as other issues that are considered important to LGBTQ youth, brings attention to the social injustices that LGBTQ students face in South Carolina. It can be replicated in other states to provide data to stakeholders, and add to the professional literature that currently exists. The perspectives of GSA advisors can shed light on what LGBTQ youth are facing, from those who work closely with them in their high schools.

Professional Application

Professional application of the study allows GSA advisors to establish clear goals for their clubs to continue what they are doing or to make changes that can help address the needs of LGBTQ students in their school, as well as reduce or eradicate the bullying that is occurring. This can be through the creation of GSA vision or mission statements. Those who might be interested in starting a GSA in their school can use the current study to have discussions with their administrators or school boards as they provide reasons for why their GSA should be created. Other professionals might replicate the study in their own state to determine if GSAs in their geographic location are contributing to a reduction or eradication of bullying and addressing the needs of or issues that students are facing. Through the current study, I hoped to gain understanding on how GSAs in South Carolina operate, and if their members feel that their needs are being met. I hoped to gain insight into how the clubs are contributing or not contributing to a positive school climate, if the clubs are well received, if they have been forced to change their names, if they exist under a different name, and what their purpose or goal is. This work also can help me to better advise my own club as I seek to provide a safe zone for them to meet, and increase positive interactions between club members and their families, teachers, and

classmates. Ultimately, I would love to see more GSA clubs created to serve the needs of LGBTQ students in South Carolina, and that policy makers will use this information to include this student population in non-discrimination policies.

Social Change

The foundation of the study on critical theory allows a light to be shown on the ugliness of bullying and sexual identity discrimination that is occurring in South Carolina high schools, and across the United States. This examination of the phenomenon and the perceived success of South Carolina GSAs allows for anyone who is interested in social change or justice to use the study as proof of what is occurring, and as justification for the change(s) that must be made to ensure safe learning experiences for this vulnerable population of young people.

Transition Statement

Too often, students who identify as LGBTQ or do not conform to heteronormative practices in public high schools are victimized in a variety of ways. Many times, this aggression occurs at school and the consequences range from negative effects on learning, to psychological problems, to addictions, to the tragedy of suicide. The current study investigated what LGBTQ students are facing in South Carolina high schools, to show how this bullying affects them, and to see if Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina are helping to reduce or eliminate aggression against LGBTQ students. The perceptions of faculty advisors of GSAs gives a different perspective on this problem, from those who work closely with LGBTQ students and their straight allies in the schools where bullying is taking place. Collecting this data from advisors was through

qualitative research design using collective case studies. The data collected from these participants helped to understand more about perceived GSA effectiveness in South Carolina in combatting bullying and about issues considered important by LGBTQ youth members of GSAs. Chapter two of the study examines current literature on GSAs, the importance of them, and of faculty advisors, on bullying and its effects, and gives a theoretical framework of the study using queer theory, critical theory, and a justification for the use of case study as a research method. Chapter three describes the methods used for data collection and analysis. Chapter four provides the findings of the data collection and analysis, and chapter five explains the implications of the study findings.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research your own experience. Absorb what is useful, reject what is useless, and add what is specifically your own. ~Dan Inosanto

Introduction

The current study was an examination of the perceptions of faculty advisors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in South Carolina regarding the issues or themes that are being faced by LGBTQ GSA members and their straight allies, as well as the effectiveness of their clubs in reducing or eliminating bullying at school. The review of the literature presents an epistemological and theoretical justification for the study, support for the methodological choices for the study, a plethora of data on the frequency and types of bullying that are occurring throughout the United States, as well as the negative effects of aggression on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) youth. Literature on GSAs defines what the organization is and reports positive effects of the presence of a GSA including fewer instances of bullying. This poses a contradictory problem in that high numbers of discrimination and aggression are still being reported, leading to the purpose of the study, which is to understand if GSAs are truly effective in deterring negative behaviors towards LGBTQ youth. Further examination of GSA literature discusses how effective the clubs are, the

role of the GSA advisor, and how geography influences the climate in which GSAs exist, partially influencing their effectiveness with regards to bullying.

Organization of the Literature/Potential Themes and Perceptions

The literature review can be explained by imagining a funnel-shaped design, beginning with larger concepts, and becoming narrower and more focused as it progresses. Section one will focus on the epistemological orientation of the study. These philosophies include poststructuralism and social reconstructionism. They serve as overarching concepts for the study, and the ideas generated from them transition to the theories that are discussed in section three.

Section two focuses on three theoretical lenses that were used to frame the study. The literature on critical theory examines the beginnings and growth of the theory, and how it is applied to multiple areas of study to expose instances of oppression and marginalization in order to provide more equitable experiences for all groups of people. The literature on queer theory examines how heteronormativity acts as an oppressive force that sends a message to LGBTQ students that they must behave or perform in a manner that is consistent with heterosexual gender expression. Queer theory seeks to dismantle labels assigned to gender non-performing individuals, and disrupt heteronormative oppression. The literature on social justice defines the term social justice, examines different types of oppression that exist, and offers suggestions on how to overcome them.

Section three examines literature that exists about the methodological choices for the study. The decision of choosing a qualitative style of research is justified. The

decision to do case study research is discussed and literature that both supports and critiques case study research is examined. The need for several cases in the study is justified through the examining of literature on collective case study research.

In section four, previous research and studies are examined. These studies are broken down into seven themes in order to provide definitions and context for the current study. The first two groups of prior research constitute the bulk of the literature review. The first group of studies is categorized as giving a definition of bullying, and examining different types that exist. The second group of studies examines the effects of bullying on young people. The third group of studies provides a definition of what a GSA is, including its role for LGBTQ youth. The fourth themed group of studies highlights the need for GSAs and their effects on students. The fifth group of studies discusses the effectiveness of GSAs with regards to bullying and improved school climate. The sixth theme of prior studies reflects on the role of GSA advisors, and the problems that they face. The seventh, and final, group of studies discusses how geography plays a role in the adversity that LGBTQ students face, and how it affects the creation of, and success of GSAs.

Title Searches, Articles, Research Documents, and Journals

The literature reviewed for the current study was conducted by examining peer reviewed articles, journals, research briefs, websites, and books. In anticipation of the study's topic of GSAs, I purchased several books on LGBTQ youth and GSAs from an online bookstore. Familiarity with the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) organization's website, through my role as a faculty advisor for a GSA, I knew

about the resources of GLSEN and accessed the National School Climate Surveys, State snapshot for South Carolina, and research brief on GSAs. All other articles, studies, and journals were accessed through the University of South Carolina at Columbia Thomas Cooper Library. Research gathered for the literature review included the following databases: Sage, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, and Wilson Web. In order to access the most recent literature on the topics of interest for the study, searches were conducted using the year parameters of 2008 to 2014. Searches were also conducted with no year parameters so that literature discussing theories, and older studies with themes or topics that were significant to the current study could be examined. Literature was examined and organized for its applicability and significance regarding the themes of influences on the study, including philosophy, theory, and methods, the definition of and types of bullying that exist, the explanation of what a GSA is, the need for and effects of GSAs, the effectiveness of GSAs, GSA advisors, and the relationship between geography and LGBTQ youth, including GSAs.

Key words and combinations used in the literature search included: sexual identity and discrimination, bullying and LGBT, queer theory and Foucault, queer theory and adolescents, queer theory and normativity, queer theory and heteronormativity, gay-straight alliance and effectiveness, gay-straight alliance and high school, qualitative research and case study, qualitative research and collective case study, qualitative case study and methodology, effects of bullying and LGBT, victimization and gay youth, sexual orientation and suicide, GSA and public school, gay-straight alliance and advisors, safe zone and LGBT, and queer theory and education.

Section I: Epistemological Orientation

Poststructuralism is often associated with postmodern thought in that they, “share a rejection of structuralism, humanism, and modernism, a repudiation of the ways various academic disciplines have ‘traditionally’ presented their versions of reality” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman, 1995, p. 452). Poststructuralism is a rejection of structuralism, which privileges structures, systems, or sets of relations (Pinar et al., 1995). For the context of the current study, these privileged entities are the social norms, the organization of American schools, and the expectations for gender performance that work together to privilege heterosexual students above their LGBTQ classmates, continuing a cycle of heteronormativity. Poststructuralism seeks to, “repudiate, dismantle, and reveal the variance and contingency of ‘the system’” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 453). In a critique of structuralism, which seeks causality, Michel Foucault expressed its lack of attention to social-political constructs (Pinar et al., 1995). Language and discourse play an important role in poststructuralist thought. Foucault labeled discourse a discursive practice because it creates more labels and categories. This is significant to the current study in that it influences queer theory, a theoretical lens, in which the labels and categories produced by discourse on the LGBTQ community are challenged and disrupted. These labels are contributors to the negativity in climate and behaviors that LGBTQ students face in the school environment. Discourse and the notion of power are further concepts analyzed by poststructuralist thought. Through the realities created by discourse, the power or dominance of one group over another is maintained.

The concept of “homosexuality” is pertinent here. Foucault argued that “homosexuality” and the figure of the “homosexual” were discursively

produced at the intersection of various discourses, ranging from the medical to the juridical. Consequently, the concept of the “homosexual” and the related notion of the “heterosexual,” became real. Rather than reflecting on a pre-existing reality-after all, the full range of sexual expression has been available to each individual since the beginning of recorded history- the concept created the reality (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 463).

Foucault’s ideas on power and discourse are applicable to the current study in that they demonstrate the social construct of sexual identity as being maintained through continued discourse. They also explain how heteronormativity and its oppressive power are partially maintained through this discourse. One critique of this dismantling of labels and discourse is that in breaking down previous sexual identity categories such as “gay” or “lesbian”, allowing for more freedom of gender expression, and in an attempt to be more inclusive, we have only created more categories, as can be seen in the extending of the acronym used to describe the LGBTQ community.

The oppressive forces of power and heteronormativity contribute to an atmosphere in schools where there are opportunities for them to be exercised through force or other types of aggression. The negative effects of this bullying cause many LGBTQ students to turn to unhealthy activities, underperform in school, or to become truants or non-completers. These aggressions and resulting outcomes set the stage for a philosophy of education called social reconstructionism. Social reconstructionists believe that not only is society, “in need of change or reconstruction, but that education must take the lead in the reconstruction of society” (Webb, Metha, and Jordan, 2007, p. 88). They

believe that young people are the agents that are needed to bring about changes in society. This philosophy denounces inequalities and exclusion due to power in relationships and unseen policies called the hidden curriculum, which strengthen the oppression of the group with control. Paulo Freire, a contemporary proponent of social reconstructionism, in defining praxis, said that words without actions are meaningless, and that everyone has a right to a voice (Freire, 1970). The voice of LGBTQ students is being heard, and is saying that they are suffering at the hands of other students, and at times, teachers. These students are making efforts for empowerment and attempting to break down systems of oppression and discrimination such as heteronormativity and homophobia through the creation of GSAs. “According to Friere, by exchanging and examining their experiences with peers and mentors, students who are socially, economically, and politically disadvantaged can plan, initiate, and take action for their own lives” (Webb et al., 2007, p. 90). Social reconstruction is significant to the current study because there is a need for change in society with regards to attitudes, actions, laws, and policies that are geared to oppress or devalue members of the LGBTQ community. This philosophy is used to influence theories on social justice, queer theory, and critical theory in section three.

While social reconstructionism is a part of the epistemological orientation for the study, it is not without critique. Depending on the social change desired, it translates as idealistic to portray a small group of students or teachers as able to make a significant change in social norms or policies. It is also idealistic to put the label of change agent on students, as they are often dealing with the many aspects of being children or adolescents. Teachers are often hesitant to speak up about inequalities for many reasons. However, I

believe that change, no matter how small, is a positive step towards equality. The effect of even a small ripple carries through a body of water for quite some time.

Section II: Theoretical Lenses

Critical Theory

Critical theory, like social reconstructionism, seeks to shed light on an injustice, critique its source, and correct forms of oppression. In her 1991 article, Strine showcased through a historical review, the categorization of intellectuals by Gramsci into “traditional” intellectuals and “organic” intellectuals. Acknowledging that both types serve a purpose, Gramsci stated that “organic” intellectuals are in a position to better counter hegemony due to their positionality with relation to a marginalized group. Next, Strine discussed the problems that current critical theorists have with putting theory into practice, and how the field was changing at the time of her article. She mentioned that there is less grand theorizing and that more current critical theories seek to find solutions for injustices encountered while doing critical work. She gave another historical example, the Frankfurt School, considered to be where modern critical theory began, and how they had to change their original mission due to changing social events, but that they still held true their desire to combat oppressive modern forces. Strine then addressed the positionality of critical theorists and in highlighting the work of Edward Said, said that the critical theorist “must assume a vigilant, if not adversarial, stance in relation to other cultural discourses/texts” (Strine, 1991, p. 198). Said continued by saying that the critical theorist must disrupt oppression and discourses, saying, “Critics representing groups that are oppressed or marginalized by virtue of class, race, or gender have been especially

effective in developing the theoretical implications of an agenda of critical interference” (Strine, 1991, p. 199). Strine concluded by recapping the points of her article, and reporting that critical theory appeared to be shifting away from grand theorizing to more localized praxis. Strine presented a short history of important aspects of the history of critical theory. Her article is important in that it provides an explanation of critical theory that is accessible to a variety of readers, and strengthens the association between critical theory and social reconstructionism. She also provided a warning to researchers that they are on a boundary between theory and the oppressed group. This was a warning to be careful to stay on that boundary and not to be too theoretical, or too involved with the marginalized population. She also presented, through the work of Said, a validation for the positionality of the researcher of the current study. While being aware of positionality and bias, it is also a positive aspect to be a researcher from the oppressed community. The historical information presented by Strine is interesting, and helpful for background information on critical theory, and her statement on the positionality of the researcher. However, the article is dated and the field of critical theory has changed even more since she wrote it. The current study serve as an example of using critical theory coupled with the praxis of GSAs to examine the sources of and offer suggestions to correct injustices that LGBTQ youth face at school. I am aware of my own positionality as the researcher, who happens to be a member of the marginalized community, and took steps to keep my positionality in check.

Meyer devoted an entire section of her first chapter on theoretical foundations in her 2011 book, Gender and Sexual Diversity in Schools. The purpose of this chapter was to give a theoretical justification for learning about gender and sexual diversity in

schools. She mentioned that school life is centered on gender performance, and that schools serve to reinforce dominant societal norms from the time students enter pre-school. Meyer devoted time in reporting the historical beginnings of critical theory by the Frankfurt School, and how their work expanded to, “understand oppression, alienation, and inequality in society on many other levels” (Meyer, 2011, p. 12). She also mentioned Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, defined as how a dominant group is so successful in projecting its systems or views that they are accepted as normal by the oppressed group. In other words, heteronormativity creates hegemony. The heteronormativity reinforced by school life demonstrates to both heterosexual and LGBTQ youth that traditional gender expression is the correct and accepted way to behave. LGBTQ students have grown up with this heteronormativity and for the most part accept and participate in the hegemony. Meyer discussed the work of Paulo Freire, and critical pedagogy, as an educational theory to help marginalized groups resist, critique, and transform the oppression that they face. She then shifted to describing more modern applications of critical theorists, including how hidden (and official) curriculum serves as another oppressor of atypical groups of people, and how fear and language are used to maintain dominance. A mention of critiques to critical pedagogy as being dominated by white, male scholars was not substantiated with a citation or data, but was a critique that must be addressed because if critical theory seeks equality for all oppressed groups, then all groups should contribute to the literature to offer their voice and perspective. Meyer did give an adequate and helpful historical overview of critical theory for the novice researcher through accessible language. However, the context of writing a book on education caused her to steer away from a strict description of critical theory, and to

focus the rest of the section on critical pedagogy only. This chapter section was beneficial to my study because in giving a historical description of the theory, she highlighted how the theory has developed over the years to share the same mission as the study, which is to seek equality for all groups.

In a 2013 article, Leap provided commentary on the intersection of critical theory-based studies and queer linguistics. He gave a brief update on the state of the field of queer linguistics, and how current research is finding partnerships with critical studies in the field of heteronormativity. These linguistic studies are examining how language is used to maintain heteronormativity and casting a critical lens on the privilege that is given to certain dominant groups. Leap mentioned how the field of queer linguistics has changed over the years before becoming more recently associated with critical theory. A brief definition of critical theory was given, mentioning its development from post-structuralist thought. Leap interjected his opinion when stating that, “a critical stance becomes especially valuable for studies of sexuality- for language-centered studies, especially” (Leap, 2013, p. 644). Next, he discussed another study by Schneider in which heteronormativity is, at times, even propagated through attempts to counter it. Leap went on to analyze other articles in the special journal edition in which his commentary appears, making connections between linguistics and critical inquiry. Leap sought to support that language is an important tool used to maintain control and normativity in groups. He differentiated queer linguistics from other critical inquiry fields by saying it is the only field that makes language and sexuality the central theme of investigation. The commentary given by Leap about the intersection of critical theory and language is important to the current study in that it supports research that says that discriminatory

speech that is used to bully LGBTQ youth also serves to maintain heteronormative control over them. Coupled with critical theory, the goal of reducing or eradicating bullying can be furthered by examining policy that does not protect each member of the student body from every form of discrimination, including homophobic speech.

Queer Theory

Queer theory traces its roots to feminist theory and poststructuralist thought. Much of queer theory looks to the work of Michel Foucault as an early influence. While Foucault is more often associated with poststructuralism, his theories about power and discourse in society, along with identity and language are important tenets of queer theory, an ever-changing field of study, research, and critique. Judith Butler (1990), an influential feminist and queer theorist, developed her theory on gender performativity in the early 1990's. This theory was discussed in her work, Gender Trouble. Butler discussed gender as being a social construction to which LGBTQ students do not perform in a manner that is considered correct, and how it contributes to the heteronormativity that oppresses them, as well as to the hegemony that perpetuates discrimination. The work of Butler is an important theoretical foundation for the current study as it helps to explain the origins of negative attitudes toward, fear of, and misunderstanding of LGBTQ citizens, as well as the fact that the hegemonic roles that they are forced to play in school settings. Though much of her work was done over twenty years ago, Butler's work continues to serve as a foundation for many studies.

Queer theory was the lens used to explain the concept of GSAs in an essay by Mayo (2004). "Queer theory has helped to blur the lines between identity categories and

pointed out the transgressive and progressive potential in all forms of sexual identity, including heterosexuality” (Mayo, 2004, p. 25). Mayo explained that GSAs offer LGBTQ students and their allies a space to be curious and investigate heteronormative oppression and to explore different perspectives on and aspects of identity. Mayo made reference to Foucault and his ideas that identity categories are products of power, and that they, too, affect each other, a term referred to as subjectivity. Using the category of homosexual, a term that was created and framed negatively by the medical and legal communities, LGBTQ people have been able to use it to create identities and combat inequalities through standing up for equal rights, and having conversations with and speaking out against institutions. Mayo also referred to the work of other queer theorists to discuss the importance of relations to develop a sense of community, something that LGBTQ students in an oppressive environment can benefit from. He mentioned the work of Eve Sedgwick to state that the work of GSAs is not only confined to the frame of sexuality, but that they allow members to be open about other identities that they may have, and to have discussion about how their identities may conflict with each other, or with the school environment. Background information was then given on the Equal Access Act of 1984, which serves as the protection under which GSAs are able to form and continue to meet on school grounds. Mayo stated that while a physical space to meet is an important aspect of GSAs, it is the questioning of heteronormative practices, discussion by student members, and exploration of identity, as a group that provides a sense of community for the GSA. Mayo provided a helpful connection between queer theory and GSAs as spaces that confront heteronormativity and identity categories that are forced upon LGBTQ

students. This connection serves to support using a queer theory lens for the current study.

Green (2010) contributed to queer theory through the Foucauldian lens of power. He began by discussing the concept of disciplinary power. Disciplinary power is different from heteronormative power in that it does not belong to one group, per se. Instead, it is a part of all relations and, “transforms ‘docile bodies’ into disciplined subjects” (Green, 2010, p. 317), such as subjects of the state and of the medical community. Green made two arguments in his essay. First, he examined how discourses about sexuality and gender, and the categories they create such as sexual orientation or gender create more opportunities for subjects to explore further possibilities of the self. These opportunities have allowed the LGBTQ community to continue to expand as more identity types have been discovered and to be more inclusive of each of its members. One critique of this aspect of discourse is that queer theory has historically attempted to deconstruct categories imposed by disciplinary and heteronormative power in an attempt to liberate subjects who have been oppressed by them, yet in doing this, it has created space for more identity categories to be made, a phenomenon that Foucault referred to as reverse discourse. Green’s second argument was that western sexuality discourse and classifications function as both vehicles for subjectification and frameworks within which further identity exploration occurs. His article is significant for the current study because his analysis of queer theory, discourse, and power can be applied to the role of GSAs. The clubs function to disrupt heteronormative power in schools, power that serves to oppress LGBTQ students. In this instance, the GSA acts as a space where students are safe to talk about and explore their own identities without labels or categories.

In her introductory chapter on theoretical foundations for learning about sexuality and gender in schools, Meyer (2011) devoted another section to queer pedagogy. Meyer began by giving a background of the concept of queer saying, “Queer is understood as a challenge to traditional understandings of gender and sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, binaries, and language that support them” (Meyer, 2011, p. 20). Meyer gave credit to modern queer theorists Butler and Sedgwick as main contributors to queer theory among others, and quoted Jagose (1996) in mentioning its most important achievement as specifying, “how gender operates as a regulatory construct that privileges heterosexuality and, furthermore, how the deconstruction of normative models of gender legitimates lesbian and gay subject-positions” (Meyer, 2011, p. 20). Meyer continued by discussing the resistance of normative discourses in her discussion of a 2000 study by Britzman, in which she presented and discussed three forms of resistance: structural, pedagogical, and physical. Finally, Meyer discussed Britzman’s analysis of queer pedagogy, offering up a challenge to educators to provide spaces and opportunities for students to, “question, explore, and seek alternative explanations” (Meyer, 2011, p. 22), adding that it has the ability to contribute to positive changes in schools that help to meet the needs of everyone. In her description of queer pedagogy, Meyer did not offer any new ideas, but rather, provided a connection between queer theory and educational settings. This connection is significant to the current study in that it bridges theory to the desired educational setting of the study, South Carolina high schools.

Dhaenens (2013) presented a qualitative study in which he examined the represented effects of heteronormativity on gay teens in the American musical television series, *Glee*. He began by giving a cultural binary of current events, providing a negative

example for every positive example that is taking place in society with regards to LGBTQ people. He also explained the important role of television in Western culture in both promoting and challenging heteronormativity. He gave a brief history of the increase in gay adolescents portrayed on television programming. Dhaenens then discussed the ways in which gays and lesbians are portrayed by television shows, either as marginalized, or as participating in or striving to participate in activities and institutions that continue to privilege heterosexuals. He also expressed faith in television as having the power to resist normativity, “as a site that embraces and resists hegemonic culture” (Dhaenens, 2013, p. 305). Dhaenens examined how heteronormativity plays out in the lives of Western adolescents by defining it as a construct with which people are confronted from the time of their birth, and how this construct determines our paths as the only way to exist. Anyone who goes against this construct is, “dismissed or subdued by institutions, practices, norms, and values that reify heteronormativity” (Dhaenens, 2013, p. 306). Many Western societies have become more accepting of gay and lesbian identities yet continue to try to fit them into a heterosexual mold. Dhaenens explained that when many adolescents come to terms with their sexual identity, they are expected to adhere to a fixed idea of sexual identity that is inferior to heterosexuals. He then described two models that are presented for LGBTQ adolescents, and supported by television images, victimization, and normalization or assimilation. He examined several episodes of the American series *Glee*, finding that it presents gay teens as both victims and happy. He also reported that the series resists heteronormativity by exposing it, and by paying attention to aspects of the lives of gay and lesbian characters. In closing, Dhaenens mentioned a 2010 study by McCormack and Anderson, echoing their call for

more research on the effects of heteronormativity on both gay and straight youth. While there were no mentions of GSAs in Dhaenens study, and though it focused on the portrayal of fictitious characters, it did examine the effects of heteronormativity in a high school setting. Though the climate of acceptance of LGBTQ people is improving in many Western cultures, this analysis also brings to light deeper analysis of societal expectations of LGBTQ youth to fit into continued heteronormative molds, and challenges researchers to continue to challenge these views. For the current study, this portrait of heteronormativity is helpful to more deeply understand the depth and scope of oppression that LGBTQ students face daily. The current study focused on the perceived effectiveness of GSAs on the lives of real people that are experiencing the effects of heteronormative oppression.

Love and Tosolt (2013) explained that queer theory is the most logical lens to frame their study on the lived experiences of female students at a single sex private school. For them, queer theory questions binary ideas of gender and sexuality, and the performance of gender and sexuality. They proceeded to express the importance of schools as battlegrounds for queer theory as they are often used as impact points for conflicts of culture and religion. “Queer theory, as a form of cultural study and a theoretical framework , has been influential in acknowledging the ways in which gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning students experience formal schooling” (Love and Tosolt, 2013, p. 192). The authors also stated the importance of queer theory in exposing privilege and normativity that occurs with gender and sexuality, as well as in examining homophobia and its connection to aggression against LGBTQ youth. The authors began with a description of the official stance of the Catholic Church on

homosexuality as a part of the very being of someone. Then, they examined the opinion of the church on Catholic education, likening it to a community in that it is a combination of many aspects of a student. Another statement by the church with regards to teaching about homosexuality in sex education calls for educators to put aside their own feelings or fears of homosexuality and to dissuade any discrimination. However, the Church considers acting on same-sex desires a sin. Next, the authors described the reality of Catholic schools for LGBTQ students and teachers, being very similar to their public school counterparts with regard to negative climates for these young people. When Love and Tosolt described the findings of their qualitative study, they mention the majority of participants reported heteronormative climates and policies, contradicting the positions of the Church reported earlier in the study. Their study found that LGBTQ youth deal with this heteronormativity in different ways. Some hide their homosexuality in an attempt to appear more heterosexual and avoid harassment, while others confront the normativity head on in a direct show of resistance through acting more masculine. The authors called on Catholic schools to examine their policies to be more inclusive of all of the identities to which their students adhere. Love and Tosolt presented a compelling investigation, based on queer theory, into the lives of LGBTQ students in a school setting. Though their study only focused on females and was in the context of a religious, private school, it was significant to the current study in that it directly connects queer theory to a study into the lived experiences of LGBTQ youth. The current study will also be framed by queer theory, but will collect data from public, non-boarding school settings that are not influenced by the ideologies of a religion, and will focused on the lived experiences of adult GSA advisors. This allows for the current study to provide a more representative

sample of the population because not everyone is able to attend private, boarding school institutions. The next section of theory-based literature, social justice, can be juxtaposed with both critical theory and queer theory, as social justice is an attempt to right the wrongful oppression of a group of people by another group.

Social Justice

Bell (2000) provided a definition of social justice, stating,

The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs.

Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure (Bell, 2000, p. 21).

She organized the rest of her essay in a way to provide a definition of and frameworks for understanding types of oppression. Bell admitted that her organization is an oversimplification of a complex and dynamic phenomenon, but that it helps readers to better understand, and to act more effectively against oppressive forces that they might encounter. First, Bell described oppression as pervasive, indicating that it is everywhere and engrained into everything from social institutions to how we think. She mentioned that this oppression touches almost every aspect of life, and is reinforced by history and the present. Next, she labeled oppression as restrictive, as it inhibits and constrains the opportunities and sense of hope or possibility for those who experience it. Bell also described oppression as a hierarchical relationship where a dominant group receives advantage, often unconsciously, from the oppressed group. Oppression is characterized as

multiple and crosscutting because most people have multiple identities or belong to multiple social groups. Disadvantaged groups can experience degrees of success in one area, but still face discrimination in another. Next, the author described oppression as internalized. Both victims and oppressors learn the same fears, ideologies, and stereotypes, and both groups feel effects from this internalization. Bell continued her explanation of oppression by examining different “isms”, including racism, classism, and sexism before concluding with a discussion of those who experience oppression because they belong to more than one category. The significance of this essay to the current study is that it gives a general definition for social justice, and provides a rich description of oppression. This contributes to the understanding of the oppression faced by LGBTQ students because of their sexual identity, but also informs that sexual identity discrimination may not be the only oppression that these youth face. The current study mainly focuses on bullying that is experienced by LGBTQ youth, but heterosexuals can also experience it; the problem is universal.

Blumenfeld (2000) described the internalized oppression mentioned by Bell when he described his personal experience with homophobia as a child. His sister also felt the effects of it as a heterosexual female who happened to be related to the target of homophobic slurs. Due to this oppression, both siblings suffered and lost out on time together growing up because the sister distanced herself from the author as a means of self-protection. Blumenfeld then examined four types of homophobia: personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural. Personal homophobia is likened to a prejudice, more on an individual or personal level, and defined as a belief that homosexuals “are generally inferior to heterosexuals” (Blumenfeld, 2000, p. 378). Interpersonal

homophobia is the projection of personal homophobia on to interpersonal relations, where it becomes discrimination. Institutional homophobia consists of the ways that entities such as government, school, religions, businesses, etc. discriminate because of sexual orientation or identity. Cultural homophobia, much like hidden curricula in education, refers to possibly unwritten policies, norms, or behaviors that contribute to acceptance of discrimination or oppression. Blumenfeld explained how cultural homophobia works to silence or deny rights to LGBTQ people, deny that a large LGBTQ community exists, suppress visibility, force them into a defined space such as an area of a city, deny the use of derogatory terms to empower, and to stereotype them. Next, he examined how homophobia does not just hurt the LGBTQ community, but also hurts heterosexuals. Blumenfeld's essay provided a rich description of homophobia and its effects. This is significant to the current study because much of the bullying that LGBTQ students face is due to homophobia. GSAs are also made up of heterosexual allies, and they, too, feel the effects of homophobia, and have as much a chance as LGBTQ students of experiencing sexual identity discrimination or aggression.

Tatum (2000) provided a justification for a social justice framework in her discussion on domination and subordination. Her essay began by discussing the complexity of the concept of identity. She discussed how identity is largely shaped by our surroundings, crediting Erik Erikson for the association of identity to social, cultural and historical influences. She also discussed the concept of multiple identities, mentioning that different parts of our identity become more and less important at different moments, and that, "self-definition is indeed a lifelong journey" (Tatum, 2000, p. 6). When discussing different aspects of identity with her students, the author noted that many

forget to mention the groups to which they belong with the most privilege because it is something that is taken for granted by them. She moved to her discussion of domination and subordination by stating how much control the dominant group holds over the subordinate group. The subordinate group is seen as inferior and broken while the oppressing group is seen as the norm for society. Tatum described a sort of reverse cognizance between dominants and subordinates in that the subordinates are well informed about the experiences of the dominants because theirs is the history that is taught in schools, but the dominants know little to nothing about the subordinates. She also described how subordinates often have to be aware of the dominants attitudes, moods and actions in order to protect themselves. In their case, survival may mean not reacting to social injustice. The author concluded by acknowledging that there is no hierarchy of oppression. She encouraged readers who are dominant to listen to the experiences of subordinates, and for subordinates to continue sharing their stories and to listen to those of other oppressed groups so that we can learn, build alliances, and fight for change. Tatum provided a description of the power relationship between oppressed groups and their dominant oppressors. This rich description allows readers of the current study to better understand the oppression that LGBTQ students face as the problem that is being studied. The current study adds to the rich description provided by Blumenfeld in providing real world accounts that will connect description to real life.

DeBlaere and Brewster (2013) described heterosexual, white men as the most privileged group in the United States and defined heterosexual privilege as being, “based on the societal belief that heterosexuality is the normative expression of sexual orientation and confers advantages to heterosexual individuals” (DeBlaere & Brewster,

2013, p. 73). LGBTQ students experience oppression in different forms due to this privilege. They discussed two models of oppression, the additive model, and the interactive model. The additive model takes into account each minority identity that a person has, and that a type of discrimination is experienced by each identity, combining multiple discriminatory experiences. The interactive model proposes that discrimination is not divisible into the individual identities, but rather there are feelings of a more holistic discrimination experience. The authors discussed the discrimination and experiences of other minority groups within the context of the LGBTQ community demonstrating a need to hear the voices of youth who identify with multiple groups. Other identity groups that influence LGBTQ youth, and can cause a double stigma are religion, socio-economic status, and where one lives. Deblaere and Brewster presented an essay that contributes to the current study by highlighting the oppressive nature of heteronormativity. It also provides context into other obstacles that LGBTQ students may face, depending on their identity groups. While the current study does not examine other identity groups from those who identify as LGBTQ, the knowledge shared by the authors provides a richer context to understand the school experience for these adolescents as times where LGBTQ students may not only experience oppression for their sexual identity, but also other aspects, as well. The current study adds to this description by analyzing the perspectives of GSA advisors and identities that may influence their perspectives.

Section III: Methodological Influence

Qualitative Research

The current study sought to understand GSA faculty advisor perceptions of the issues that are faced by LGBTQ GSA members in South Carolina high schools, and the perceived success or lack thereof of their club in reducing bullying at school.

Understanding human perceptions, which can be interpreted as ideas, opinions, or feelings, and the many nuances that can be discovered from analyzing them when several people participate, I felt that a qualitative frame of inquiry was best suited for the study. Merriam (2001) provided a handbook for case study research in education. The first section of her book discussed the definition and characteristics of qualitative research, including common methods that are used. She also provided a description of qualitative researchers, who should be tolerant of ambiguity and stress, sensitive “to the context and all the variables within it, including the physical setting, the people, the overt and covert agendas, and the nonverbal behavior” (Merriam, 2001, p. 21), as well as to the data they collect, and to their own bias. Merriam also stated that qualitative researchers must be good communicators, which includes projecting empathy, listening, oral and writing skills. Merriam provided, in chapter one of her handbook, a valuable starting point for researchers as they decide which style of inquiry will be best for their study. Her analysis of important characteristics of qualitative researchers provided a self-test that researchers can use to see if their personalities are best suited for qualitative research, or if they need to investigate other styles of inquiry. For the purpose of the current study, qualitative research was the best fit because it seeks to understand and make meaning of the

perceptions of the lived experiences of others. Merriam continued to guide qualitative researchers in her second chapter on case study research.

Case Study

Robert Stake (1994) gave a brief description of what a single case study is before explaining what to do when a researcher makes the decision to study a case. According to Stake, case study is not a choice of methodology, but rather, a choice of what object to study (Stake, 1994, p. 236). Research interest in the case is what drives case study inquiry. In analyzing the term case study, Stake stated that, “it draws attention to the question of what specifically can be learned from the single case” (Stake, 1994, p. 236). For Stake, the important aspect was designing studies to optimize understanding of the case rather than to make generalizations. The author continued by discussing case identification, and highlighting the need for a case to be as specific as possible. Three types of case study were mentioned, based on the different needs or purposes for studying them: intrinsic case study, instrumental case study, and collective case study. Intrinsic case study serves to explore only the case or phenomenon in question for the sake of interest in that one case, without generating theories or making generalizations beyond it. Instrumental case study serves to make generalizations or gain insight into a bigger interest. The case serves to support understanding of the primary interest. Collective case study serves to inquire about a phenomenon or population. Cases may be alike or different, but each plays a part in the story being told. Cases are chosen because they are believed to lead to deeper understanding about an even larger group of cases. Stake described case study research as an investigation into the similarities and differences between cases, and warns that uniqueness is likely to be encountered. He also warned that

generalization should not be the main emphasis of the study as it clouds the attention of the researcher from understanding important features of the case. Stake continued his guide into case study research by examining the role of the researcher, likening them to a teacher who must take knowledge from research to the reader in a clear manner. He provided methods to increase validity to the reader, including triangulation and comparison before ending his chapter with a section on case selection, sampling, and ethics. Though written several years ago, Stake still has valuable advice to give to researchers who are considering case study. Especially interesting is his insistence that the rush to generalization should not impede learning from the individual cases. This chapter was important to the current study because it provides valuable guidance to proceed slowly and learn from the data that is collected. The current study uses triangulation of data to present as thorough and rich a description as possible. The explanation of collective case study validated my choice to proceed with this form of inquiry.

Merriam (2001) addressed case study inquiry in her handbook for qualitative and case study research. She began by defining case study through the works of other researchers, highlighting that, “the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case” (Merriam, 2001, p. 27) and that it is a unit that is bounded by the researcher. She categorized qualitative case studies as being particularistic, descriptive, or heuristic. Particularistic case studies “focus on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon” (Merriam, 2001, p. 29), descriptive case studies provide, “a rich, ‘thick’ description of the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 2001, p. 29), and heuristic case studies, “illuminate the reader’s understanding

of the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 2001, p. 30). She continued to solidify the definition of case study by comparing it to other documentation that uses the term “case”, and discussed the determination of case study as an appropriate research design. Next, Merriam described different types of qualitative case studies within disciplines, mentioning ethnographic, historical, and psychological orientations for studies in education. Other factors to consider when determining the type of case study are the intent of the study, highlighting the characteristics of descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative case studies. Pertinent to the current study was Merriam’s description of multiple case studies. “This type of study involves collecting and analyzing data from several cases...” (Merriam, 2001, p. 40). Merriam provided a validation for the decision of the researcher of the current study in selecting collective case study, as well. “The inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability of your findings” (Merriam, 2001, p. 40). She concluded her chapter with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of case study research. Case studies are helpful in education to evaluate programs such as GSAs in the current study. Case studies offer, “insights and illuminates [sic] meanings that expand its readers’ experiences. These insights can be construed as tentative hypotheses that help structure future research; hence, case study plays an important role in advancing a field’s knowledge base” (Merriam, 2001, p. 41). Merriam provided a balanced evaluation of case study research in her chapter as she mentioned limitations of the method, as well. Some of the limitations mentioned were the amount of time and money case study research can take, the possibility of misleading the reader through oversimplifying or exaggerating a situation, and the possibility of misleading the reader to think that the case

represents all of life, when in fact, it is only a slice of a population. The researcher can also be a hindrance to case study research as there is not a lot of training available to teach researchers how to do their job and a lack of guidelines in constructing final reports; researchers are often left to their own means through most of their research process. Ethics is also a common critique of case study research, which encompasses case selection, personal bias, financing, interaction with cases, data collection and protection, and presenting findings. Another final critique of case studies is their reliability, validity, and generalizability. Merriam provided information that informs the current study in the choice to use collective case study as the preferred method of research. The current study also uses the critiques of case study research presented by Merriam to address issues of reliability and validity.

Cousin (2005) provided a resource for researchers investigating case study inquiry. She began by providing a purpose for case study as describing a chosen case with the goal of increasing the understanding of it. She used Stake's categories to describe the major types of case study inquiry: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Cousin next explained the bounds or frame for the case as both researcher-created and flexible, though her examples were for the teaching of geography in a higher education setting. She expressed the need for some sort of guide to the research, citing Stake's suggestion of using more "load-bearing issue questions" and taking issue with it stating, "...on the one hand, the case study research requires some degree of nosing around the field to see what emerges and, on the other hand, some steer from research questions for the capture of meaningful data" (Cousin, 2005, p. 424). She supported the use of load-bearing questions for collective case studies as they allow for more comparison. The

importance of description was discussed, likening it to detective work up until the reporting of findings. Data collection and analysis were addressed, suggesting organizing data by themes and using bracketing to attain reflexive distance from it. Concluding her description of case study research, Cousin addressed critiques of reliability issues and ‘narrative fraud’ by offering six strategies for researchers to consider. Cousin provided a surface description of case study research that may be helpful to novice researchers, but lacks in depth analysis of the method. The focus of her article being on geography in higher education did not relate to the current study. However, the information provided regarding case binding, research questions, and description do support the understanding of and choice of case study research.

Schwandt (2007) provided a valuable resource for qualitative researchers. This source served as an encyclopedia of research terms that are helpful in understanding philosophies, theories, methods, and other qualitative research terms that are found in literature. Each entry was supported by literature, increasing the validity of Schwandt’s book as a resource for researchers. For the current study, a clear understanding of many terms was necessary to anchor it to the philosophies of poststructuralism and social reconstructionism, theories such as critical theory, queer theory, and social justice, and the many facets of case study research, including case selection, validity, generalizability, interviewing, cross-case analysis, and many others.

VanWynsberghe and Kahn (2007) rejected some common thoughts on case study research in expressing their support of it. The authors expressed the purpose of their article was to identify several problems with the use of case studies and to provide an alternative definition that can address them. They first described what case study is, and

offered their own definition for it: “case study is a transparadigmatic and transdisciplinary heuristic that involves the careful delineation of the phenomena for which evidence is being collected (event, concept, program, process, etc.)” (VanWynsberghe & Kahn, 2007, p. 2). In other words, case study transcends research paradigms as a possibility for inquiry. They proposed that there are several heuristics involved in case study that serve to focus the researcher on the construction of the case. The authors began by discussing problems with case studies, stating that the body of research lacks a cohesive definition and mentioning twenty-five different definitions. Another problem was that the current definitions refer to case study differently, so there is confusion on whether it is a method, research design or methodology. They contended that case study is not a method because there are no specific data collection procedures. VanWynsberghe and Kahn rejected that case study is a research design because it does not provide a plan from start to finish, mainly because there is no guide for the collection, analysis of, and interpretation of data. They rejected that case study is a methodology because of a lack of connection to a theory. The authors then provided a prototype case study including elements that are important for the research to be considered a case study. These included a small sample size, contextual detail, natural settings, boundedness, working hypotheses and lessons learned, multiple data sources, and extendibility. Next, the authors used myths regarding the social sciences presented by Flyvbjerg and their definition of case study to show its value as a tool to study social phenomena. The authors challenged readers to investigate their proposed definition for case study and to notice its applicability through several research paradigms. This article was significant to the current study because it showed that case study continues to be an interest in research,

and that it is a type of research that is applicable across many disciplines. The authors provided a model case study with characteristics that will be employed in the current study. While the article came across as visionary and the ideas of the authors were backed up by further research, it was written several years ago, and current research is not using their definition of case study.

Baxter and Jack (2008) provided a guide to qualitative case study design for novice researchers. Geared to graduate students and researchers who are not familiar with case study methods, the authors provided an overview of design and implementation of qualitative case studies. They began by defining case study as an approach that uses multiple sources of data to explore a phenomenon. They mentioned that exploration through several lenses is important in providing multiple ways to understand the phenomenon. This was significant to the attachment of the current study to multiple theoretical lenses. The authors explained the philosophical influence for case study before providing literature-based guidance on when to use a case study. Next, they offered guidance in case selection through guiding questions which researchers can ask themselves. Suggestions for binding the case are offered to help researchers focus their inquiry and prevent them from attempting to answer questions that are too broad, or from trying to research too many topics. A table with different types of case studies was provided with definitions of the type of study, and study examples. After the table, the different styles of case studies were discussed. Next, the authors explained the use of propositions, or hypotheses, mentioning that they add specificity and focus to the case study. The need for a conceptual framework was discussed, and the one offered for this guide was one that dealt with nursing. Baxter and Jack continued by discussing the use of

multiple sources of data, the organizing of data, and offered analysis techniques from the literature. This was significant to the current study in offering different choices for data analysis. They concluded by discussing the reporting of data and the importance of establishing the trustworthiness of study data. Most of the article provided scant descriptions of case study research, and provided information with which I was already familiar, and very little new information to support case study. However, the sections on trustworthiness and data analysis were significant to the current study for the reporting of data and findings.

Seawright and Gerring (2008) offered suggestions on the selection of cases, one of the most challenging aspects of case study research. They posited that in studies with few cases, the researcher is seeking representation of an entire population by a few. They attended to the literature on case selection, mentioning that more recent studies have focused more on sample bias. Often, researchers rely on practical influences such as access, time, or money to select their cases. The authors did not discount these influences, but stated that researchers must connect their cases to the larger population. They stated that the techniques presented in their article allow researchers with small-N cases to provide more rigor to their explanations of how their cases relate to the broader population. The article also sought to provide clarification on methodological problems that arise in case selection, and to provide more options to researchers in case selection. Seawright and Gerring argued against random sampling with small populations because it, “will often produce a sample that is substantially unrepresentative of the population” (Seawright & Gerring, 2008, p. 295). They also mentioned that purposeful sampling runs the risk of selection bias by the researcher, but it can also be an important part of the

research process in allowing the researcher to choose the best match for the study. Before discussing selection techniques, the authors maintained that their suggestions are not all-inclusive, and are geared toward single case or small-N case studies, and that their suggestions relate better to studies seeking causal relationships rather than description. They provided a table followed by descriptions of each of their suggested techniques, including typical case, diverse cases, extreme case, deviant case, influential case, and most similar/most different cases. The current study was significant to the current study in that it provided researched-backed techniques for the selection of cases, especially the need to connect cases to the larger population. The current study provides a framework that can be replicated by other researchers to see if findings are similar and if generalizations to the larger population of GSAs can be made.

Critique of Case Study

In an effort to provide a balanced view on case study research, a critique of the approach was included to validate my decision to use it. Most critiques of case study research in this literature review exist as parts of other articles rather than stand-alone works, and include accounting for researcher bias, proving validity and trustworthiness of results and reporting of results. Diefenbach (2009) provided the most complete critique of case study validity. The author began by stating that the most common critique of case studies is methodological, but that there are many other causes of concern that force readers to question the scientific value of the research. He organized his critique by comparing qualitative case studies with scientific standards to determine if they can contribute to the progression of social science, as he examined the research process. Diefenbach began by examining a fundamental criticism of qualitative research, the

inherent bias of the researcher. He noted that qualitative research and social sciences are more likely to encounter bias because much of it addresses human issues that are close to the interests and concerns of researchers. He offered that qualitative researchers cannot exclude this human factor from their research, but must make their subjectivity inherently clear. Another critique of qualitative and case study research was that there is no precise research question throughout the study. Diefenbach defended qualitative inquiry by stating that the continual reflection on the study and research focus, tweaking it when necessary, shows progress in research and an attention to the nuances of the case that are not evident in quantitative research. While this can be tragic for quantitative research, eliminating an entire cohort of data, it is not necessarily cause to start over for qualitative data, though he did not mention what happens to previously collected qualitative data if the research question or focus must change during the study. Another critique of qualitative research was that it does not have an established set of methods, but rather that it incorporates too many, and that it contributes to a lack of rigor. He took the middle road with this critique defending the unpredictability of qualitative research as a reason that several different methods are utilized. On the other hand, he criticized those who claim to use, or only mention certain methods, as an argument for more structure in qualitative research. He continued to the next common critique of case study and qualitative research, which is that case studies do not explicitly state which theory on which they are based. He defended case studies to a point, saying that theory is not necessary for a purely descriptive case study, but that often researchers jump from description to generalizations beyond what the data reports, something he did not support.

Diefenbach continued analyzing criticism of case study and qualitative research, shifting to the collection of data, beginning with case selection, which was criticized for being biased and subjective. He addressed this criticism by saying that often researchers are superimposing quantitative standards on qualitative studies, which is not necessary unless statistics will be used for data. In discussing case selection he said, “What is needed is assurance that the site and unit of investigation are *suitable* for the type(s) of problem(s) that shall be investigated” (Diefenbach, 2009, p. 879). The same critique was offered for the selection of interviewees, and the author took the same stance. Another criticism was that interviewees are affected by the situation or the interviewer and therefore unreliable. The author described interviewing as a social process and that the interviewer has to be involved. He suggested that increasing the number of interviews can improve the quality and validity of the data, but more importantly, triangulation is best. The author continued addressing many other critiques and concluded by providing a mixed analysis. He supported this type of research against some criticism due to the availability of more methodological freedom afforded to qualitative research. He also suggested that researchers make their subjectivity expressly clear, and that methods be followed as precisely as possible, and that theory needs to be more clear and present in qualitative studies. He criticized the internal and external validity of most qualitative research and said that there needs to be more critique of the field. This critique was significant to the current study because having a sound research study from start to finish is a goal of any researcher. While the tone of the article made it seem that the author seeks to discredit case study and qualitative research, he brought up logical criticisms and

did offer some suggestions on how to make a study more reliable to increase the validity of findings.

Collective Case Study

In her textbook on qualitative research, Glesne (2011) introduced future researchers to qualitative inquiry. She began by giving a personal narrative about her own experience with qualitative research. Next, she examined major research paradigms such as positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, postmodernism/poststructuralism, and mixed methods. Glesne next described different approaches to qualitative research where she briefly defined collective case study, stating that, “When the instrumental case study involves looking at several cases...it becomes a ‘collective case study,’ and allows investigation of a ‘phenomenon, population, or general condition” (Glesne, 2011, p. 22). While this brief definition did not contribute much to the current study, it is significant because it was where I first discovered the term and possibility of using the collective case study approach.

Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) provided examples of how collective case study provides increased credibility to a study. “Multiple case studies allow comparisons, particularly in diverse settings” (Houghton et al., 2013, p. 12). The authors cited previous research that mentions the benefits to case study of using multiple data collection sources. They cited a 1985 study by Lincoln and Guba to discuss rigor in a study, which encompasses credibility, or the value of the findings, dependability, or the stability of the data, confirmability, or the accuracy of the data, and transferability, or the ability of the findings to be transferred to another similar context. The four approaches

were broken down, and strategies for ensuring them were discussed. For the purpose of the current study, triangulation, or the use of multiple methods to examine a phenomenon, was a method that was used to examine data from multiple perspectives. Houghton et al. mentioned the use of peer debriefing as another way to analyze data. This method was met with some skepticism, and advised to be used with caution. Member checking was another method discussed to confirm the credibility of data by allowing participants to examine the transcript of their interview or focus group to ensure that what is recorded is accurate and relays the intended participant message. Keeping a stream of thoughts and decisions known as an audit trail was another method to enhance dependability and provide a rationale for decisions or judgments made throughout the research process. This can be done through extensive research notes or journaling. To ensure the transferability of a study, the authors suggested providing detailed descriptions so that future readers can decide if the study meets the needs of their own work. The current study provided a greater rationale for the need to ensure the validity of a study and its ability to be replicated, both significant to the current study. However, aspects of the study that were not significant to this one are that it took place in the United Kingdom, and that it was centered on nursing. These aspects had little implication for the current study; however, the content on collective case study and the strengthening of a study were felt to be more important.

Ramirez (2013) provided a collective case study about bullying that was considered significant to the current study due to its choice of methods and subject matter. He stated that, “the collective case study design was selected because it allowed for detailed, extensive data collection through multiple sources of information” (Ramirez,

2013, p. 94). Ramirez analyzed the coping strategies of five junior high school students to examine their effectiveness in dealing with the negative effects of bullying. He mentioned the negative effects of bullying and some of the coping strategies that children use to deal with bullying and states that his study contributes to the field. Five cases were selected based on principal referral and history of being bullied. He justified his small number of cases by saying that he did not intend to make generalizations about a population, but was trying to understand each individual case's contribution. He described his methods to ensure reliability and described each of his cases. Ramirez immersed himself in the research, through six months of observations. He collected more data through individual interviews and school records. Data was reported on each case and recommendations for school social workers were provided. Ramirez provided the beginning of a blue print for the current study, but the number of differences prevented his study from being of great significance. The rationale for using collective case study was appreciated, and the subject of peer victimization was of interest to the current study. However, for his study, Ramirez made his focus on coping strategies, the age group of his participants, and his observation of and interaction with students, which were not of value to my project. The next sections provide further definitions, context, and rationales for the current study.

Section IV: Prior Studies

Defining Bullying

The bulk of literature from which the current study draws is a part of a plethora of information that details the types of and the negative effects of bullying on LGBTQ youth. Athanases and Comar (2008) investigated one of the most common forms of sexual identity discrimination, homophobic language. Their study investigated the perspectives of middle school students with regards to how often they heard and used such language, reasons for it, and reactions to its use by other students. The authors framed their study within school climate and language in the form of homophobic name-calling. They described schools as being inhospitable and sometimes dangerous for LGBTQ youth, due to harassment occurring in areas with little or no supervision, and to a lack of involvement by educators. The authors discussed how homophobic language hurts when intended as an insult, and even when it is not used to target LGBTQ youth because, unlike other forms of hurtful insults or slurs, being LGBTQ is not a visible trait. They continued by discussing bullying in more detail, providing a definition and saying it is not always a relationship between the aggressor and the victim because there are often witnesses nearby. Bullying was discussed within the context of power and social position, as well. After reporting on school efforts to respond to concerns of bullying through GSAs or professional development for teachers, the authors mentioned that schools were still being reported as hostile despite their efforts to improve. Athanases and Comar provided a context for the study, a description of the participants, and their data

collection. Responses representing perceptions of homophobic speech were categorized into the groups: innocuous banter, generic insult, gender-identity put down, injurious speech, and slur against present LGBT people. Participants also reported how they respond to homophobic speech that includes dismissal of the words, feeling no need to object, guilt for not objecting, and being so desensitized to it that it no longer bothers them. A few students reported standing up to the speech. The authors called for instruction on topics such as power, labeling and the effects of hurtful speech in an attempt to get to the root of the problem where forbidding hurtful speech has failed to succeed. The current study was significant in its identification of a very common, but rarely stopped form of aggression against LGBTQ students. While the current study only examined bullying in the form of language, the current study expanded its examination to all forms of bullying, though the examination was not first-hand as it solicited the perspectives of adult GSA faculty sponsors.

Grossman, Haney, Edwards, Alessi, Ardon, and Howell (2009) presented a qualitative study on the experiences of LGBTQ youth and how they coped with school violence. They introduced their study by presenting a context of violence in schools in which one third of the participants in a 2005 survey reported experiencing violence at school due to their actual or perceived sexuality, while 69 percent reported hearing homophobic speech at school. The authors cited a gap in literature that their study aimed to fill in examining the feelings of LGBTQ youth about their experiences with violence. They used focus groups and grounded theory to provide deeper analytic depth in searching for key issues or themes between groups. They cited their decision to use focus groups as helping participants to clarify meaning for them, as well. The study was framed

within an ecological framework to analyze the complex interactions between participants and their environments, and sought to understand the perspectives of LGBTQ youth on oppression and social conditions in their schools. The authors operationalized violence using a definition provided by a prior study which states that violence is: words and actions that hurt people, using words to scare, bully, embarrass, call names, or put someone down, hurting a person's body or things a person cares about, and it occurs when someone uses pain, fear, or hurt to make one do something (Grossman et al., 2009). Grossman et al. sought the perspectives of a diverse sample, include transgender students, include both positive and negative experiences of participants, and used actual words of participants rather than researcher summaries to separate their studies from others in the field. The Grossman et al. study sought the perspectives of public high school students who participated in a community after school program in New York City by soliciting participants with an incentive. The authors provided non-identifiable demographic information on participants, including answers to survey questions about experience with violence. Participants revealed feelings of exclusion from the school community, and feeling hopeless to create change. They also exhibited an awareness of heteronormativity and the use of power to dole out consequences for gender non-conformity. In expressing the types of violence most commonly experienced, participants stated, "that heterosexual youth primarily used name-calling, hate speech, harassment, and sometimes physical violence" (Grossman et al., 2009, p. 32). The authors reported firsthand accounts from participants about their experiences with physical violence and the effects of this violence were discussed through the continued reporting of participant dialog. To conclude, they offered suggestions from the participants, as well as themselves for schools to train adults

in the school setting to be more compassionate towards LGBTQ students, provide mentors and role models, and provide educational opportunities for parents. They also called for more research to include the firsthand experiences, perspectives, and feelings of LGBTQ youth. The current study was significant to the current study in that it provided a context that school-based violence against LGBTQ students is a national phenomenon, and served to identify different types of violence. It differed greatly in that it took place in a large urban city, had a diverse participant make up, provided an incentive for participation, pulled from a community-based after school program, used focus groups as its principal data sources, did not present an adult perspective, and was able to present the voice of actual LGBTQ high school students. The current study presented an adult perspective on the effectiveness of GSAs in reducing or eliminating bullying.

Poteat and DiGiovanni (2010) presented a study that focused on biased language and its use to bully and discriminate. They framed biased language within the confines of negativity towards sexual orientation and based on prior studies stating that, “Sexual orientation biased language, also referred to as homophobic language, can include pejorative statements, negative references toward, or epithets ascribed to sexual minorities, and it is the most common form of discrimination experienced by sexual minority youth” (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010, p. 1123). This speech is not always directed toward LGBTQ youth, but is used to insult heterosexual youth, as well as those who are perceived to be LGBTQ. The authors cited studies that confirm that biased speech contributes to negative effects in its victims that affect all areas of their lives. Sexual prejudice was discussed as a possible root of biased language, but it is not agreed

upon in the literature. There was agreement that youth who participate in frequent bullying behavior also frequently use biased language. More disagreement occurred when the discussion expanded to sexual prejudice because many adolescent boys reported using biased language in instances to prove their masculinity, and did not feel that is prejudice. Others argued that sexual prejudice can magnify the relationship between bullying and biased language. The authors expanded their discussion to the use of biased language in dominant behavior, defining it as, “attempts to establish or perpetuate hierarchies where certain individuals have greater access to resources and are considered to have higher status, influence, or control over other peers” (Poteat & DiGiovanni, 2010, p. 1124). Their study sought to examine nuances among bullying, dominance, and biased language use, specifically in boys in earlier grade levels. Participants included students in grades 7-9, were almost equal in gender representation, and were predominantly white. The authors administered a survey using different measuring scales for bullying, dominance behavior, biased language use, and sexual prejudice and survey data was statistically analyzed. Results showed that ninth grade students reported more frequent bullying, disproving one of the study hypotheses. The authors explained this as being due to grade nine being a transition year for the students. Study data showed that boys reported higher levels of bullying and biased language use than girls. The authors expressed a need for intervention when biased language is used, educational programs and increased dialog to increase awareness of the effects of biased language and offset the use of it as a way of joking. The current study differed from this research in that it only solicited the perspectives of adults that work with high school GSA members, rather than students. The methodologies of the two studies differed greatly in that the current

study was qualitative and the Poteat & DiGiovanni study was quantitative. While this methodology is helpful in determining the frequency of and types of biased language, qualitative techniques would have helped the researchers in understanding the reasoning that participants use it. Poteat and DiGiovanni (2010) was significant to the current study because it highlighted biased language as a common tool for bullying and oppression.

Meyer (2011) devoted a chapter to school environment in her book, Gender and Sexual Diversity in Schools. Significant to the current study was her description of types of bullying and the effects associated with sexual identity discrimination. Meyer introduced the chapter by criticizing schools for creating blanket bullying policies that do not address undercurrents of school climate that contribute to aggression towards LGBTQ students, and allow these behaviors to continue. She defined gendered harassment as, “any behavior that acts to assert and police the boundaries of traditional gender norms: heterosexual masculinity and femininity” (Meyer, 2011, p. 102), and being different from bullying which she defined as, “behavior that repeatedly and over time intentionally inflicts injury on another individual” (Meyer, 2011, p. 102). She differentiated between bullying and harassing where bullying is repeated, harmful, and specifically directed at someone else, and harassment can be targeted at someone or be general comments that are offensive to others and are linked to heteronormative gender performance. Meyer stated that while physical bullying gets much of the attention as it is the most obvious form of aggression towards LGBTQ students, but discriminatory speech is found to have negative effects on youth, as well. She provided a personal story to explain her interest in protecting LGBTQ students, and to highlight the negative effects of bullying on actual and perceived LGBTQ students. She criticized educators for non-

action regarding these aggressions arguing that it teaches students that these actions are acceptable and contribute to heteronormative, inhospitable school climates. Meyer continued by examining different forms of harassment, homophobic, transphobic, and (hetero)sexual harassment, providing examples of each and presenting them as prolific, nation-wide problems. She devoted a section to cyber-bullying, defining it as, “using an electronic medium, such as e-mails or text messages, to threaten or harm others” (Meyer, 2011, p. 110). Research indicates strong links between cyber-bullying and bullying that occurs at school. She described cyber-bullying as being difficult to police due to much of it occurring outside of school and the ability to be anonymous, yet also easier to document the nature of the aggression. This type of bullying is becoming more common with easier access to cyberspace through multiple devices, and an increase in platforms that are used by adolescents. This chapter was significant to the current study as it deconstructed the generic term bullying into different components. This allows readers to see the scope of bullying, and the negative effects it has on both LGBTQ and heterosexual youth. The current study does not break down the types of bullying that are experienced, but refers to all forms of anti-LGBTQ discrimination as bullying.

Cianciotto and Cahill (2012) devoted a chapter of their book to describing harassment and violence in schools by breaking down statistics, vignettes, and commentary from LGBTQ students by elementary, middle and high schools. They began their chapter by presenting the problem of harassment and violence as a nation-wide problem, comparing statistics from several studies to present the frequency of the problem, and that it is not improving over time. The authors then presented stories of harassment and violence of young children, from the age of six to middle school ages,

noting that usually when one thinks of harassment or bullying, high school comes to mind. The authors suggested that interventions start early in schooling, as programs for high school are often too late to combat bullying that has occurred since childhood. Though more rare than in middle school, the authors mentioned several examples of anti-LGBTQ incidents in elementary school. Bullying becomes more frequent in middle schools, as evidenced by continued reports of difficulties faced by LGBTQ youth. The authors presented more stories about bullying and statistics from previous studies in explaining that bullying is still common in high schools, and is expanding to other forms with cyberbullying. They discussed the impact of harassment and violence on LGBTQ youth to end their chapter with a dark portrait of the topic of violence, harassment, and our vulnerable LGBTQ youth population. This chapter was significant in that it broadens the contextual knowledge for readers of the current study, allowing them to see that bullying is a major problem in the United States, and that high school students who report being bullied have possibly been bullied over a period of time. The current study seeks to address a solution that has been created to help the problems discussed by Cianciotto and Cahill with the hopes of making it more efficient or effective.

Cooper and Blumenfeld (2012) presented a study that specifically examines cyberbullying, its frequency, and its impact on LGBTQ youth and their allies. The authors introduced their study by giving an overall definition of bullying, characterizing it as repetitive, intending to humiliate or hurt, and exhibiting an imbalance of psychological or physical power or control. They said that bullying is typically manifested in physical or psychological ways, but that a new platform for bullying now exists due to the advancement of communication technology. Cyberbullying is defined

as, “the use of information and communication technologies such as Internet websites, e-mail, chat rooms, mobile phones for making calls and text messaging, and instant messaging” (Cooper & Blumenfeld, 2012, p. 154). The authors provided an extensive list of how these technologies can be used to hurt, embarrass, or intimidate others. They cited several studies that indicate a large increase in cyberbullying due to the increased availability of and access to technology for adolescents. The amount of and types of technology that students prefer to use is broken down, as well. Cooper and Blumenfeld used prior research to examine who is being harassed and in what ways. Extensive explanation of the effects of bullying and cyberbullying was given, highlighting similarities and differences between face to face and cyberbullying. The equalizing effect of cyberspace was mentioned as users participate on socially equal footing. The authors expressed the focus of their study as the examination of the frequency and effects of cyberbullying on LGBTQ students and their allies. They administered a national survey to middle and high school students who identify as LGBTQ or an ally. Sample selection was supported with literature and sample demographics were reported. The data collection instrument was described as a survey consisting of questions grouped into four categories. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the authors analyzed results from each question category. Cyberbullying was revealed to be a prevalent and dangerous phenomenon in the study results. Factors that inhibit reporting of cyberbullying by LGBTQ youth include having to reveal their sexual identity and the possibility of losing access to technology. The authors offered suggestions for addressing cyberbullying by schools. The current study examined a newer form of bullying that continues to grow due to technology advances, but shows that the effects on LGBTQ

youth are still negative. This was significant to the current study because it examined another facet of bullying. Cooper and Blumenfeld differ from the current study in the quantitative nature of their study and its direct contact with GSA student members. There was no mention of ethical protection of participant identifiers, and the language of the study indicated a strong interest in the topic, calling into question the subjectivity of the researchers, problems that the current study will address.

Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, and Palmer (2012) presented the biennial 2011 National School Climate Survey sponsored by GLSEN. They prefaced the study results by mentioning that all quotations were from actual student responses to survey questions and providing the mission statement of the sponsoring organization.

The survey explores the prevalence of anti-LGBT language and victimization, the effect that these experiences have on LGBT students' achievement and well-being, and the utility of interventions in lessening the negative effects of a hostile school climate and promoting a positive educational experience (Kosciw et al., 2012, p. xiii).

To obtain a representative national sample of LGBT youth, two methods were used. First, GLSEN solicited participation through support organizations on the national, state, and local levels, as well as advertising through social media, specifically, Facebook. Both online and paper versions of the survey were made available, and organizations that work with transgender youth, youth of color, and those who live in rural areas were specifically contacted in an effort to have representation from these groups. Second, solicitations targeting Facebook users between the ages of 13 and 18,

and who indicate on their profile in some way that they identify as LGBT, were posted. Demographic information of the sample, including breakdown of participants by race or ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, grade in school, average age, grade levels by school, community type, school type, and geographical region were reported. The authors provided a description of the survey and the dates of data collection.

The study was organized into three parts: indicators of school climate, demographic and school characteristic differences, and indicators of hostile school climate over time: biased remarks, victimization, and resources. Each section had subheadings that were broken down further to provide detailed item analysis of survey responses and key findings through textual and graphical representations. Comparisons were made with results from prior National School Climate Surveys to examine trends since the early 2000's. Limitations of the study were described and recommendations were provided. The current study was extremely significant to the current study because it addresses most of the topics related to it such as defining bullying behaviors and reporting the negative effects of them. It also examined how geography can affect access to resources for LGBTQ students to prevent or cope with aggression, and the usefulness of methods to improve school climate. Differences from the current study were the scope, the participants being students, the selection of participants, the amount of data collected, the methodology and the means of analysis. Critiques of the study are mostly included in the limitations section, but it would be beneficial to include an adult perspective on the study by including the voice of adults who work closely with LGBTQ students in the capacity of advisor, or counselor, a deficiency that the current study will address.

The previous studies served to provide a definition of bullying of LGBTQ youth and its many forms, which include physical aggression, verbal insults and harassment, and cyberbullying. The next group of studies was selected to explain the negative physical, psychological, social and academic effects of LGBTQ bullying on these young people.

Effects of Bullying

Regardless of how one identifies regarding race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity or social group, bullying hurts. In this review of literature, studies have defined bullying as intending to cause physical or psychological harm, to embarrass and exclude, and taking several forms. This section will examine studies that show how bullying affects the daily lives of students, especially those who identify as LGBTQ.

Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, and Koenig (2008) presented a study in which they examined the effects of homophobic teasing, as well as the influence of the protective buffers that parents and schools may or may not provide. The authors provided a context for the problem they were studying by mentioning several different types of assault experienced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. After linking bullying of LGBTQ students to homophobia through several prior studies, the authors linked studies by D'Augelli to their statement that fewer mental health problems exist for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth who have parental and peer support compared to those who have less support. They said that their study sought to understand how parental support and positive school climate influence the mental health of students who are questioning their sexuality or who identify as homosexual. After describing the hypotheses of their study,

the authors gave a description of their study sample, including demographics. The authors provided validity for the measures of their study, by explaining how they replicate a prior study, and provided statistical explanations for each measure of their study. They provided a statistical explanation of each measure that they elicited from the survey given and each effect that they mentioned in their hypotheses. In the discussion of the results, the authors stated a need for the perspective of questioning youth because they normally get grouped together with youth who definitively identify as gay or lesbian. Some negative effects that the study reported are elevated rates of depression and drug use. Espelage et al. also mentioned that their study confirms that sexual minority youth are at risk without support, and that with support, they may not exhibit the negative effects of bullying. The authors discussed limitations and their effects on their study, as well. The Espelage et al. study was significant to the current study in that by investigating the effects of bullying it connects to the problem being examined by the current study. Their study, like the current study, also studies supports for LGBTQ students, though the current study differs by examining the perceived effectiveness of the support being studied, the GSA.

Birkett, Espelage, and Koenig (2009), likewise, studied the effects of bullying and school context on negative outcomes for lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB), heterosexual, and questioning youth. The authors introduced their study by setting the context for these young people by providing statistics that support the statement that LGB youth frequently experience sexual identity discrimination. They cited studies that report that LGB youth are often truant, feel unsafe at school, have negative attitudes towards school, and drop out to avoid bullying and harassment (Birkett et al., 2009). LGB students were also

revealed to suffer from higher rates of depression, feelings of suicide, and run an increased chance of using drugs and alcohol, though these negative outcomes were not cited as being directly related to bullying or harassment. Birkett et al. sought to examine how a homophobic school climate and sexual identity discrimination affect drug use, depression, and truancy among LGB, questioning, and heterosexual young people. The authors explained the research method being a survey based on another survey that is administered to students every five years. They described the study sample and provided demographic information as reported by participants. The topics included on the survey were explained, in detail. Next, they gave statistical analysis of the survey results before discussing their significance. The survey found that negative effects for LGB and questioning young people can be avoided through an absence of bullying and homophobic school climate. This result is true for all participants, regardless of sexual identity. They called for more research on students who are questioning their sexuality, as they report higher frequency of the negative effects examined in the study. The authors provided strengths and limitations of the study. Birkett et al. performed a very similar study to the 2008 Espelage et al. study, though they focused on middle school students, while the 2008 study focused on high school students. The results were significant to the current study in that they examined supports for LGBTQ students and indicated that support and a positive school climate can contribute to reduced or eradicated bullying. However, the current study differs in that it examined the adult perspective of GSA advisors on the effectiveness of the support, and is concerned with South Carolina high schools only.

Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, and Azrael (2009) presented a study in which lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) high school students' perceptions of experiencing victimization by others due to their perceived sexuality and its relationship to psychological distress were investigated. They examined the emotional distress of LGBT youth due to their identity, as well as the high frequency of them being bullied. The authors examined limitations of prior research before providing a description of their own study. They identified self-harm and suicide as the psychological distress examined by their study and mentioned that they sought to examine any relationship between the perceptions of aggressions being based on LGBT status, and its contribution to psychological distress. A description of the study sample, the Boston Youth Survey, which served as the data source, the data collection method, and the measures used was presented and supported with literature. The descriptive statistical measures used were described for each variable before a discussion of the results. LGBT student participants indicated that they were more likely to experience discrimination, but males were more likely to exhibit psychological distress than their female counterparts. This distress was partially associated with perceived victimization due to perceived sexual identity more so in males than in females, according to the study. The authors provided suggestions for more school inclusive policies before discussing the limitations of their study. The current study was significant to the current study in that it supported the fact the bullying of LGBTQ students can lead to negative outcomes, the problem being investigated. It differed in that it was a quantitative study that takes place in Boston, Massachusetts, and sought to examine relationships that were not relevant to the current study.

Diaz, Kosciw, and Greytak (2010) examined the feeling of being a part of a school community in their article. The authors presented this feeling as being a positive contributor to adolescence, and said that there are barriers that exist to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students that prevent many from experiencing connectedness to their school community. They cited literature that discussed the frequency of bullying, and how this negatively affects their feeling of being a part of their school community. They used data from a national survey to examine the experiences of LGBT students and supports within the school environment that contribute to students' feelings of connectedness. In discussing the experiences of LGBT students, the authors mentioned negative effects of bullying, such as lower academic performance and self-esteem, in addition to lower feelings of connectedness. Diaz et al. cited a need for more research on the relationship between school connectedness, victimization, and the presence of supports for LGBTQ youth within the school context. They presented a model of these relationships, and proposed a direct relationship between bullying and a lack of school connectedness, and that institutional supports such as a GSA are directly related to an increase in feelings of school connectedness. They offered examples of suggested supports for schools to adopt in order to increase the feelings of connectedness for their LGBT students. This analysis was significant to the current study as support for the negative impact that bullying has on LGBTQ young people, and for the positive impact that supports like GSAs exert on them. The article did not, however, present original data, but served as an analysis of a prior GLSEN National Climate Survey. The current study accounts for this lack of new data by producing brand new information in a geographic location that has not been studied in a similar manner.

Robinson and Espelage (2013) examined differences in risky sexual behaviors by LGBTQ and heterosexual youth and their relationship to victimization. The study examined the behaviors of a large sample population of middle and high school students in Wisconsin, both before and after accounting for peer victimization. The authors analyzed data resulting from an anonymous survey project between schools and community organizations, and described the demographics of their population before explaining their data analysis procedures. The authors found that victimization does contribute to risky sexual behaviors by LGBTQ youth, though it is not a major contributor. They cited a prior study using the same data in which they compared victimization to suicidal tendencies and proposed that higher victimization of LGBTQ youth contributes to riskier sexual behavior, as well as increased chances for suicide than their heterosexual schoolmates. The current study was significant to the current study in that it added another negative effect of bullying to increase the urgency of the problem being studied and the possibilities if supports are not provided, or are ineffective. Robinson and Espelage presented a quantitative study in a geographical region that was not of interest to the current study, though significant to the literature on the effects of LGBTQ victimization. The current study differs by analyzing the voice of adult faculty advisors, and contributes to the body of literature through a new geographical study context.

Aragon, Poteat, Espelage, and Koenig (2014) examined the effects of bullying on the academic achievement of LGBTQ students. The authors cited other studies in listing negative effects of sexual identity discrimination that affect psychological well-being, social development, behaviors, and academics. They expressed a need for research in

education that identifies academic needs and concerns of this student population. The authors hypothesized that there are significant differences between LGBTQ and heterosexual students on variables examined. They collected data from a large population and administered a survey, and mentioned their interest in the academic factors that participants submit as part of the larger survey, including LGBTQ identity, truancy, academic grades, post-high school intentions, and victimization. In the three academic outcomes, LGBTQ students underperformed compared to heterosexual classmates. The authors made suggestions for combatting the negative effects of bullying, including the creation of GSAs. They discussed the limitations of their study before calling for future research into why LGBTQ youth are less likely to express an intention of attending a four-year college, and increased research with the sub category of those who are questioning their sexuality. The current study was significant for the current study in that it supported the problem statement that bullying contributes to negative outcomes for LGBTQ students, and that GSAs can have positive effects for them. The authors contributed to several studies using the same data set, which included middle school students, survey results from students, and took place in a geographical region that was not of interest to the current study. The current study differs by analyzing the voice of adult faculty advisors, and contributes to the body of literature through a new geographical study context.

This section included studies that discussed the effects of bullying on different aspects of the lives of LGBTQ youth. These negative effects are harmful for the psychological, physical, social, and academic well-being of this vulnerable population,

supporting the problem that is addressed in the current study. In the next section, the Gay-Straight Alliance will be defined.

Definition of Gay-Straight Alliance

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are a current way that LGBTQ students are able to resist the heteronormative oppression that they encounter in high schools. The literature examined in this section provides a definition of these clubs and explains their purpose.

Griffin, Lee, Waugh, and Beyer (2003) presented roles that GSAs play in twenty-two schools that participated in a prior qualitative study in Massachusetts. The authors provided a context for the reader as they described homophobic violence in schools and a need to provide support to LGBTQ students. They cited a lack of protection by states in addressing sexual identity discrimination and staff training for school faculty members as impediments to these students receiving much needed, broader support. According to prior studies cited by the authors, schools with GSAs are more inviting and positive environments for LGBTQ students than those without them. A brief description of the Safe Schools Program initiative in Massachusetts was given to provide context for the data collected from high schools participating in the program. The study methods were described, as well as the participants from whom data was collected for the study. The four roles of GSAs presented by the authors were: counseling and support, “safe space”, primary source of education on LGBT issues, and being a part of broader school efforts for educating about LGBT issues (Griffin et al., 2003). Each role was described in detail, with supporting data from the study findings. The authors described these roles as snapshots of a school, as the roles of GSAs can change to meet the needs of its members

and of the school. Benefits and limitations of each role were discussed, with benefits mentioned being the provision of counseling and support for students who may be struggling with identity issues, providing a sense of community that many LGBTQ students lack in a judgment-free zone, providing a space for heterosexual students to exercise inclusion and support for LGBTQ family and friends, providing a visibility of the LGBTQ student population that reminds the student body that these classmates are, in fact, a part of the school community, a space where students can learn about and participate in social action, and where LGBTQ students can overcome feelings of isolation that they encounter in other parts of their school day. Each role was also critiqued in a balanced manner. The authors completed their discussion by challenging schools to examine heteronormativity and its effects on all stakeholders. Griffin et al. provided a definition of GSAs that was significant to the current study because knowing what a GSA's purpose is allowed for an examination of its effectiveness in meeting the needs of its members through contributing to fewer incidences of bullying. The study is several years old, however, and uses data from a state that is not as conservative as South Carolina, which can be seen in the number of high schools providing data for the study. The current study collects brand new data and though it was from an adult perspective, the adult participants work closely with LGBTQ youth, so were able to give as accurate a description as possible.

Lipkin (2003) introduced a special journal issue on GSAs by discussing the beginning of the GSA movement, describing studies in the special issue, and inserting his own thoughts on the clubs. While Lipkin did not report a study of his own, his article provided a description of GSAs that is helpful to the current study in understanding the

historical background of the clubs, and how they serve LGBTQ students today. Lipkin summarized several articles for the issue that described GSAs as places of identity negotiation that serve as spaces where LGBTQ youth can question and experiment with identity, as well as make connections with others who may be oppressed in other ways. A critique of GSAs was offered, examining their lack of racial diversity and challenging them to broaden their goals to be more inclusive of all. Lipkin described a role of GSAs as being transformative, mentioning that the contributors offer that GSAs cannot bear the burden alone, and that space must be given to LGBTQ issues in the curriculum, as well, as students must be taught different ways to analyze in order for change to occur. Creating goals for GSAs was addressed as Lipkin gave reasons that many students participate in GSAs and called for GSAs to educate their members on how to think beyond their own needs, and how to develop a sense of commitment to diversity and social justice. He also described how the safety given by GSAs can attract a variety of non-LGBTQ youth, and challenged GSAs to serve the needs of its members while retaining its LGBTQ mission. While Lipkin did not offer a study per se, he did provide significant description of GSAs that was valuable to the current study in providing deeper understanding of the roles these organizations play. The current study examines the effectiveness of the protective role of GSAs.

In describing the organization of her book, Miceli (2005) stated that the:

chapters are meant to document the progress of LGBT youth from an invisible population; to an 'at risk' youth population; to pockets of youth across the nation asserting a positive, proud, and unapologetic self-image;

to agents of change claiming a space and a voice in schools; to catalysts for a social movement (Miceli, 2005, p. 13).

Miceli examined the beginning of the GSA movement in her first chapter, where she discussed how the recognition of LGBT youth as a vulnerable population led to the creation of community centers that provided resources and space for them. She discussed how a U.S. government report on youth suicide provided a connection between LGBT youth, sexual identity discrimination, and suicide. The development of the first GSAs and their leading to broader programs in Massachusetts was discussed, as well as the creation of organizations such as GLSEN, the GSA network in California, and other state initiatives before a history of legal cases that are significant to GSAs. GSAs did not start out to bring about social change, but rather to be a visible beacon of support that could improve the environment and experiences of LGBT people.

She described the recognition of LGBT students in schools, and the struggles that they face, in her second chapter. Miceli discussed literature on identity development, and provided the perspectives of young people in her discussion of acceptance, coming out, and self-identification. In her third chapter, Miceli discussed case studies of high school students resisting heteronormative practices by their schools from the perspectives of students, principals, and superintendents. In chapter four, Miceli provided a historical description of organizations that have served to protect LGBT students, while in her fifth chapter she presented attacks on them, especially from religious conservatives. In chapter six, she covered the media coverage of the debate over GSAs, mentioning the more recent shift in public opinion on homosexuality as related to its opinion on GSAs. To conclude her book, Miceli evaluated the success of the GSA movement as well as the

impact the clubs have on students and schools. She then examined GSAs as agents of social change. Miceli provided an in-depth examination of GSAs from their beginnings, detailing the struggles that they have faced, to their current status. The work of Miceli was significant to the current study in providing a thorough understanding of why these clubs were formed, their original intent, and their transformation through the years. The current study adds to Miceli's work by investigating how effective GSAs are perceived to be in eliminating or reducing bullying directed at LGBTQ high school students.

Fetner and Kush (2008) defined GSAs as, "extracurricular groups in high schools that support and advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students" (Fetner and Kush, 2008, p. 114). They continued their definition in mentioning that GSAs are student-led, supportive of all identities, including heterosexual, and often serve to educate their schools and advocate for LGBTQ issues. The authors provided a history of GSAs, and connected them to filling a need for the vulnerable LGBTQ population in high schools. After a description of the fields of study that informed their inquiry, they offered their hypotheses on the characteristics of schools and states that adopted GSAs early in the historical development of the movement. Next, the authors described the method of their study, and the sources of data. The study found that GSAs were adopted early by more urban and suburban schools than rural areas, and that geographical regions that have been more supportive of LGBTQ rights in the past are more likely to be more open to GSA adoption, specifically in the Western and Northeastern United States. The current study was significant to the current study because it offered an explanation for the low number of GSAs in South Carolina, and provided data that could inform the current study of where GSAs might be located. There

was no specific data from Fetner and Kush on the Southeastern region or on South Carolina, so the current study contributes to a gap of little or no information on GSAs in the geographic region. One critique of the study is that it focused on characteristics of schools that adopted GSAs early in the movement, rather than examining current characteristics of schools with GSAs.

Using a queer theory lens, Hackford-Peer (2010) examined how two discourses shaped how GSAs both support and limit LGBTQ students. She introduced her article with a personal narrative of how she came to be the advisor for a university GSA, and her experiences with it, presenting two discourses that are used when policy makers engage in discussion on making schools more LGBTQ-safe, that of innocent victims and activist educators. Hackford-Peer analyzed the discourses through other research that presented LGBT youth in conflicting manners, victims of hate and violence, yet still innocent children who were expected to enjoy their youth, yet not be sexual. On the other hand, this group is at the intersection of debates on their rights to form GSAs, with whom they can attend school functions, and the content of sex education courses, often with no solicitation of their voice. The internet serves as a space where many of these youth are making their voice heard, and forming communities, as well. The author mentioned studies that present LGBTQ youth as not passively waiting on adults to advocate for them and shedding the discourse of innocent victim. She discussed how heteronormativity in schools serves two functions, systematic exclusion of positive role models or examples of LGBTQ people in the buildings or curriculum, and systematic inclusion, in which they are included in discussions about LGBTQ people and issues, but in a negative light. Hackford-Peer discussed how these discourses served to limit queer youth by portraying

them as asking for special rights or rules, or insinuating that they all want to be visible, and when applied to GSAs, cause the mission of reaching out to develop relationships between all students to be forgotten or repressed. They also support these adolescents in being active change agents. She challenged GSAs to reach their potential for change and to re-frame the discourses that limit them, and examined the different roles of GSAs from prior research, in regards to either reinforcing or re-framing the discourses. This article provided a significant challenge to the traditional roles of GSAs found in the literature. It sought to push them to become more than the general mold that is provided by adults who see LGBTQ youth as victims or activists. Hackford-Peer contributed to the theoretical framework of the current study in examining or deconstructing both the ways in which adults think about and create policy around LGBTQ youth, and the role and purpose that the GSA serves in schools. The current study continues this trend of GSA analysis, but from the perspective of their adult advisors, and by examining their success in combatting bullying.

Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, and Russell (2011) presented a study in which they sought to examine the potential of GSAs to have positive impacts on LGBTQ youth and to reduce both bullying and negative effects on young adults. They introduced their study with a description of problems that are faced by LGBTQ youth, and cited a need for research that investigates the experiences of this population with positive school-related activities such as extra-curricular interests. The authors described their study as a retrospective examination of the effects of GSA presence, participation, and perceived effectiveness from adult reflections on their high school years. They briefly defined GSAs, through prior research, as, “student-led, school-based clubs that aim to provide a

safe space for LGBT students” (Toomey et al., 2011, p. 176). Also, through prior research, they explained the positive effects of GSA presence in schools as protective and associated with fewer instances of biased language and bullying, increased sense of connectedness and more involvement by faculty if homophobic aggression occurs. Membership in a GSA was mentioned as having more of an impact on individual outcomes such as empowering youth and academic achievement. The authors stated that the studies mentioned are limited in that they only examine outcomes of adolescents during their high school years, and that their study adds to the body of knowledge in that they examined the influences of GSAs and their perceived effectiveness into young adulthood. Toomey et al. presented their research questions and sampling method in which they used data from a survey administered to LGBT young adults, as well as the original study and procedures that they were replicating. The authors discussed the criteria that they set for participation and the demographic information from their sample. Each measure of the survey measures was explained, and statistical analysis was provided. The findings of the study were reported and discussed. Toomey et al. found that the presence of GSAs was associated with better young adult well being, but the only finding associated with health was fewer instances of substance abuse by young adults. The study reported that the perceived effectiveness of high school GSAs by young adults was positively associated with college education and negatively associated with psychological and substance abuse problems. The participation in high school GSAs by young adults who experienced low levels of bullying served as protection against several negative effects of bullying that can continue into adulthood. However, for those who experienced high levels of bullying, the buffering effect of GSA participation was not

effective. The authors provided suggestions for school administration and faculty to provide support in forming high school GSAs. The Toomey et al. study was significant to the current study because it presented data on the positive effects of the presence of and participation in GSAs for LGBTQ youth. Data was not conclusive on whether or not the GSA prevents bullying from occurring, and stated that the amount of bullying experienced can offset the positive effects of the clubs. Certain aspects of the Toomey et al. study were not significant to the current study such as its data collection from young adults who participated in GSAs, and the geographical location of the study being in an area of the United States that is more supportive of LGBTQ people than that of the current study. The current study addresses these issues by collecting data from participants who currently work closely with GSAs, and in a more hostile geographic locale.

In another chapter of their book, Cianciotto and Cahill (2012) presented an overview of what schools are doing to serve their LGBTQ students. They began their fourth chapter with an analysis of the roles of teachers, administrators, and other staff members of schools. In analyzing the role of teachers, the authors expressed the reticence in reacting to anti-LGBTQ harassment or abuse by both heterosexual and LGBT teachers as being caused by moral feelings, ignorance, fear of losing their job, and parental complaints as being more common in states that lack policies of nondiscrimination. They also discussed societal phobias regarding LGBT people, and how they harm LGBT youth by keeping supportive adults hidden, and robbing them of positive role models and support. They explained the need for LGBTQ youth to have a visible, supportive adult to whom they can turn. Cianciotto and Cahill discussed the need for more professional

development and the positive effect that it can have on the school climate, providing quotes from interviews with teachers and students. In addition to staff development, the oppression of heteronormativity and negative school atmosphere, according to the authors, the curricula must be updated to provide positive examples of LGBTQ figures, and to educate about LGBTQ issues. A summary of safe schools initiatives included a description of the programs in Massachusetts, Los Angeles' Project 10, and New York City. The authors concluded their chapter with a description of GSAs that included a definition, help for those who are interested in forming a GSA, research on the positive effects of the clubs, and the Harvey Milk High School in New York City. The chapter was significant to the current study in its thorough definition of a GSA, and its examination of the importance of supportive adults for LGBTQ students. The current study responds to the call for more visible adults by including them as sources of data through which GSAs can be analyzed.

Need for/Effects of GSAs

This section provides literature-based support for the need for high school GSAs, and the effects they have on LGBTQ youth. With a thorough definition of what a GSA is, provided in the previous section, this section will answer the question of why should schools support their formation.

A 2007 research brief by GLSEN examined research findings about GSAs, focusing on, “major findings regarding school safety, access to education, academic achievement for LGBT students, and access to GSAs in school” (GLSEN, 2007, p. 1). One finding stated that GSA presence in schools contributes to increased school safety

for LGBT students by decreasing the likelihood that they will hear biased language or feel unsafe at school, though the brief still reports that 57% of LGBT students at schools with a GSA do experience verbal bullying. Another finding mentioned that GSAs contribute to a more positive school environment. An effect of this that was mentioned is a drop in truancy and increased faculty support. This increased support relates to a third finding from research on GSAs, that awareness of, and perceived support by faculty or a supportive adult increases with the presence of a GSA. A final finding reported by the brief was that most students, especially those in southern, rural areas lack access to a GSA or any type of student club that provides support or education for LGBT youth and allies. This research brief, though short in length, was significant because it supported the research that exists on GSAs, and was significant to the current study as it supports the paradox that is being studied between the positive effects of GSAs and a lack of a decrease in bullying of LGBTQ students.

Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, and Laub (2009) presented a study in which they explored the perceptions of youth involved with GSAs, and their own empowerment. The authors introduced their study with an examination of the meaning of empowerment through prior research, and how it differs between adults and youth. Most research on youth empowerment likens it to, “leadership, civic engagement, self-efficacy, or youth activism” (Russell et al., 2009, p. 891). They also remarked that most research on LGBT youth centers on their development or outcomes, and lacks a positive focus on how these youth are connecting and creating change for themselves and others. They sought to fill this gap by examining the perspectives of GSA youth leaders. Russell et al. provided historical context for the study by showing GSAs as a space for social justice, and by

giving a brief history of their development, and the roles that they serve. They cited research that demonstrates the positive effects of GSA on schools and on students individually. The authors focused on GSAs as spaces for empowerment because of the fact that they are primarily student initiated and led, as well as their role of challenging heteronormativity. After a research-based discussion of empowerment, the authors described their study methods, procedures, and analytic approach of grounded theory. They used quoted data from the study to report their findings, and reported that empowerment is experienced differently by youth and adults, and is both context and community specific. They also called for further research into youth empowerment in other contexts to contribute to the models of and body of literature on the topic of engaging youth for social change. The study was significant to the current study in that it supported the positive effects of GSAs on schools and youth, which was a goal of the study beyond the examination of faculty advisor perspectives. The current study investigates if all of the GSA benefits are really occurring, through the examining of their efficiency in reducing bullying.

Russell, Kosciw, Horn, and Saewyc (2010) provided a research-based analysis to federal, state, and local laws and policies that affect LGBTQ students. They introduced their article with an overview of the literature focus over several years, which was based on the negative effects or outcomes that LGBTQ youth face before the focus of literature shifted to the contexts in which they live and grow, and protecting them. Next, the authors mentioned two federal laws aimed at protecting LGBTQ students in public schools, with a brief description of each. They stated their purpose in examining literature on this population in order to, “understand the rationale for these laws and policies”

(Russell et al., 2010, p. 5). They examined the development of LGBTQ youth, especially the phenomenon of more youth coming out at earlier ages, and attitudes towards LGBT people due to non-desire interactions with lesbian or gay people. Russell et al. also examined the literature on the effects of homophobia at school on LGBTQ youth. They noted how much research has shifted from bullying or individual focus to the policies and characteristics of schools with regards to positive and negative outcomes for these adolescents. They included GSAs as one of several practices that promote positive outcomes for them. This was significant to the current study because it supported its purpose, which was to contribute to the reduction or elimination of bullying through the efforts of GSAs. The authors examined four types of school practices through literature, inclusive policies, professional training, GSAs, and access to LGBT resources and curricula. The current study returns the focus back to the support offered by the GSA, rather than policies, and whether or not it is perceived as successful in combatting bullying.

Walls, Kane, and Wisneski (2010) examined the effects of GSAs on the school experiences of LGBTQ youth. They contributed to the literature on the positive effects of GSAs by investigating the influence of the presence of and membership in a GSA. The authors described the literature-based, negative experiences of these young people, focusing on victimization, isolation, and school climate. Further literature indicated a positive effect of GSAs that resulted in increased support and empowerment, improved relationships and connections with others, fewer negative and more positive psychological outcomes, increased academic achievement, and a more positive school atmosphere. The authors presented their hypotheses and findings. With regard to GSA

membership, unclear results were reported in its relationship to bullying and to feelings of safety. A description of the methods, data collection, and of the sample was given, as well as a description of the measures used in the survey that was administered. The study showed that membership in a GSA has no significant influence on whether or not participants experienced harassment or feeling unsafe at school, but members of GSAs reported a significant separation with regards to grade point average. The lack of influence of GSA membership on bullying concerned the authors, who brought up more questions about social geography of schools, faculty intervention, school policies, and whether LGBTQ victimization is afforded the same degree of severity as other biased acts. The authors proposed methodological reasons as possibilities for the surprising results. The current study was significant to the current study in that it revealed a benefit that GSAs can provide their members, however, while it justified the existence of a GSA club, its lack of a relationship between GSA membership and bullying were concerning as being contrary to other study results. The authors provided possible reasons for this lack of statistical significance. This result and the admission of possible methodological problems for their study were also important to the methodology of the current study.

Dewitt (2012) devoted a chapter of his book, Dignity for All: Safeguarding LGBT Students, to GSAs. He began by setting a context that expressed the need for and benefit of GSAs through examples of how lonely it can be to be LGBTQ youth who need somewhere or someone to whom they can turn. He described a GSA as mutually beneficial to heterosexuals, as well. The chapter consisted of content and vignettes that provided a human face to the message of the author. In describing the benefits of GSAs, Dewitt also mentioned that the clubs provide spaces for students to learn lessons of

acceptance, as well as a place to talk, share experiences, and be oneself. He described the protection of these clubs under the federal Equal Access Act of 1984 before continuing with reasons why schools should offer GSAs and addressing reasons that schools often do not, including geography. He also addressed the GSA advisor and why faculty members are reluctant to serve in this role. The author concluded the chapter by explaining to readers how to form a GSA, and suggested some events in which they may want to participate. Dewitt provided a very short chapter with very little academic significance to the current study. However, he did provide support for the existence of GSAs and gave readers a glimpse into contexts that demonstrate a need for them.

Toomey, McGuire, and Russell (2012) investigated student perceptions of school climate and gender nonconformity, and if strategies such as GSAs were associated with greater perceptions of safety. They defined heteronormativity and how it operates in a school setting, affecting LGBTQ students. Next, they provided a literature-based description of negative school climate and its effects, which include victimization of LGBTQ youth. They separated their study from prior research, which they say has mostly centered on individual perceptions and not as many have focused on differences across school sites. They provided their hypotheses, method, and sample description. Next, the authors explained each measure that they were investigating as well as a statistical explanation of their results. Their results were consistent with prior research in that bullying is still a frequent experience of LGBTQ youth, but their study found more frequent victimization of male and transgender participants. A larger than expected percentage of participants reported that their schools were perceived as safe for gender nonconforming students, which conflicts with the high number who reported being

bullied. The authors attributed this to many participants being unaware of bullying that may take place outside of the school, or feeling that school bullying is not worth reporting on the survey. They reported that the presence of GSAs did not have a significant influence on feelings of safety, though the clubs are prevalent in schools in the geographic location of the study. Toomey et al. presented results that were significant to the current study because they cast doubt on other research that reported GSAs as contributing to increased feelings of safety at school. More surprising was that the current study took place in a geographical region of the United States that is traditionally supportive of LGBTQ people. The study was not significant to the current study with its population sample of only middle and high school students, and the study locale of California.

Fedewa and Candelaria (2013) contributed a chapter to a collection in which they examined ways to create inclusive school environments for LGBT parents and their children. While most research for the current study centered on LGBTQ students, this chapter was a different perspective in navigating school for the LGBT parents. The authors began the chapter with research that stated that children of same-sex couples are just as psychologically and physically healthy as the children of their heterosexual neighbors. They provided examples and research about the difficulties faced by LGBT parents in the school setting, and the lengths that they go to in order to prevent their children from being bullied. The authors called for more diversity training for teachers and administrators, providing examples of successful models. Other practices that the authors called on schools to consider included updating forms and policies to be more inclusive of the diversity in their stakeholders, and creating welcoming environments

through decorations, posters with messages. Fedewa and Candelaria, like many researchers in this field, called for curriculum reform to be more inclusive, and to provide positive examples for LGBTQ youth. In the short section that was significant to the current study, the authors encouraged schools to form GSA clubs. Despite the fact that their chapter centered on LGBT parents, they did cite several benefits of GSAs, which provided support to the current study in showing a need for more support for LGBTQ students in South Carolina.

In this section, literature provided a need for GSAs in schools, and presented the (usually) positive effects of the clubs on the school experiences of LGBTQ adolescents. In the next section, the effectiveness of GSAs will be explored.

Effectiveness of GSAs

The current study sought to examine the perceptions of high school GSA faculty advisors with regard to the effectiveness of their clubs. Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006) examined perceived support and its relationship to victimization and suicide. At the time of their study, not much research on support groups such as GSAs had been done. The authors introduced their inquiry by providing a literature-based context of LGB youth and their negative experiences in schools with bullying and its effects. Next, they described school characteristics that influence safety and support, including the size of the student body and proximity to an urban area. The GSA was mentioned as the most well known approach to a supportive school climate that is geared toward sexual minority youth. They provided a brief history of the GSA movement with a specific example of GSAs in the state of Massachusetts that resulted from state support

and funding. They provided their hypotheses, sources of data, and provided a description of their participants before explaining each measure of interest to their study.

Surprisingly to the authors, their results revealed that LGB students are more likely to be bullied at smaller, suburban schools with little diversity, and that are perceived as safe.

The presence of GSAs is an influence on greater perceptions of safety. They cited their study as the first to provide an empirical link between support groups like GSAs and negative outcomes. A limitation to the study that the authors mentioned was that they did not know how study participants identified, but the detail was not considered by them to jeopardize their findings. The current study indicated that GSAs are effective in reducing victimization of LGBTQ students, a finding that was significant to the current study, which sought to evaluate the same effectiveness, though through an adult perspective. A point of concern for the current study was that this data is not consistently supported through the literature, and must be compared with results from other similar studies.

Mayberry, Chenneville, and Currie (2011) sought to evaluate the effectiveness of GSAs in impacting school climate through the use of qualitative research. The study provided information about LGBTQ students' negative experiences in school and the negative impact harassment has on them. This relationship led to the implementation of practices intended to make schools safer for LGBTQ youth, yet the phenomenon of bullying was still occurring. This was the same phenomenon of interest for the current study. Next, Mayberry et al. discussed the GSA movement in the United States, and stated that their study explored the positive impacts of GSAs and their shortcomings through examining school practices of silence and passive resistance, safe spaces, and breaking/barriers to breaking the silence. Their study focused on one large, urban public

school district in the Southeast while the current study focused on the entire state of South Carolina, only on the perspectives of GSA advisors, and did not investigate school practices. Mayberry et al. provided a description of their sample, which consisted of only four GSA clubs, but also solicited the perspective of students, advisors, principals, and district administrators. The decision to use qualitative methods for their study was described; their decision to use semi structured conversational interviews, a design that would, “allow participants to ‘tell a story’ (Mayberry et al., 2011, p. 316) was explained. The authors described their method of data analysis, and provided a description of their research team, as well as the literature-based reasoning for their choice in methods. Next, they described types of school reform efforts to help readers understand the part that GSAs play. These efforts included silence and passive resistance and safe spaces. Mayberry et al. provided participant data throughout the study to provide support for their discussion. The study findings supported literature that GSAs are effective in increasing school connectedness, feelings of safety and empowerment. Participants expressed that they felt that their efforts were contributing to the reduction of homophobia in their schools. The current study was significant in that similar to the current study, it sought to examine the effectiveness of GSAs for the school experiences of LGBTQ students. It also took place in the geographical region of the current study, but focused on a large, urban area. The current study also included the perspectives of youth and adults who are connected to high school GSAs, whereas the current study only examined adult faculty advisors.

Toomey and Russell (2011) provided a mixed review on the effectiveness of GSAs in their study. They presented GSAs and their research-based benefits as effective

in the introduction to their study. This is significant to the current study as increased support for the claim that GSAs should have a positive effect on reducing victimization of LGBTQ students. They cited a need for more research on relationships between GSA social justice activities and health and academic outcomes, which their study sought to examine. The authors described social justice activities as, “pathways for youth to become involved in the civic and educational institutions that affect their lives” (Toomey & Russell, 2011, p. 503). Next, they described the negative school environment for LGBTQ youth before explaining their study. The authors found that the presences of a GSA and involvement in related social justice activities yielded positive outcomes for LGBTQ youth, specifically with higher grade point averages and feelings of school belonging. The study also found that neither involvement in GSA related social justice activities, nor the presences of a GSA in a high school buffered the effects of frequent bullying. No data was reported on the effectiveness of the clubs to reduce any type of sexual identity discrimination. The current study was significant to the current study as it did report GSA effectiveness in some domains, but did not contribute to the literature that states that GSAs are effective in reducing bullying. The current study continued this work on the effectiveness of GSAs.

Heck, Lindquist, Steward, Brennan, and Cochran (2013) presented a retrospective study on the experiences of LGBT college students at high schools with GSAs. The study focused on reasons for GSA membership and non-membership, but the authors did provide support that was significant to the current study by supporting with literature the effectiveness of GSAs in contributing to the reduction of sexual identity discrimination, feelings of safety at school, and feeling supported by school faculty. This was the only

information of interest to the current study. The authors described the goals of their study and described their methods and participant sample. They also provided a detailed description of the data collection tool and the measurements studied. Heck et al. provided a model of their results, which they discussed, providing narrative data from study participants to support each frame of their model. Next, they discussed the study limitations and provided suggestions for future research.

This section provided literature-based support for areas of school life affecting LGBTQ youth that GSAs are found to be effective. Data was generally positive with regards to perceived effectiveness of GSAs in contributing to reduced occurrences of bullying, but sufficient doubt is cast by some study data that prevent a generalized statement on GSAs and bullying frequency from being made. The next section will examine the role of the GSA advisor and its importance to the clubs, providing support for the selection of their perspective for the current study.

GSA Advisors

Much of the literature in this review stresses the importance of visible, supportive teachers and staff in contributing to a positive school experience for LGBTQ youth. The current study sought to examine the perspectives of faculty advisors of GSAs in South Carolina high schools, so an examination of the literature on these important allies is the focus of this section.

Adams and Carson (2006) provided a first-hand narrative of the experiences of a heterosexual, male teacher as he formed a GSA in a public high school. They explained that the teacher became interested in starting a club while attending a professional

conference on gifted children. His interaction with LGBTQ students in a break-out session lead to reflection of the population at his own school, and how negative outcomes due to their school experiences contributed to, and resulted from the school's failure to meet their needs. The teacher was aware that GSAs must be student initiated, so he could not act until they approached him. Once the request was made, they presented it, along with a club constitution to their school administration; the club was approved, but the teacher was informed that he would have little support. It became clear to the teacher that the LGBTQ student population at his school was diverse and identified with multiple groups between which they were often pulled.

The authors chronicled negative experiences that the GSA members faced from classmates, as well as teachers who projected their homophobia on them in conversations with the advisor. They discussed how heteronormativity in school and society not only oppresses the identify formation of LGBTQ youth, but that it also forces them to become silent, and to hide who they are. Adams and Carson also documented a brief study that the teacher discussed in which he chronicled biased speech throughout the school, finding that well over half of them were directed towards students who fit the profile of his GSA club membership. The teacher found, also, that even within the GSA that some member voices were silenced by other members who were perceived as belonging to dominant groups. Ally members of the GSA were also prone to victimization because of their association with the GSA. The authors examined literature on the intersection of giftedness and membership in the LGBTQ community, and identity formation, citing researchers that were also discussed in the theoretical influence for the current study. The effect of stereotypes, most often provided by the media, and their perpetuation of

heteronormativity by supporting traditional gender roles was discussed. Through his role of GSA advisor, the teacher became more aware of the difficulties that are faced by LGBTQ youth, even critiquing the dominant, abstinence-based sexual education curriculum. The authors concluded the story of the advisor by recounting the inequality of discipline faced by GSA members who stood against negative comments by other students and staff. They also mentioned that many teachers who identify as LGBTQ do not come forward for fear of losing their jobs, therefore denying students a positive role model. The teacher was eventually forced out of a job by an increased workload and scrutiny due to his role as GSA advisor. The role of advisor can be an enlightening experience for the faculty member that is not familiar with LGBTQ issues. It can also be a lonely, thankless job as these adults are often the “grown up” face of the club, and must face negative comments, inquiries into their own private lives, and accusations. This account of GSA sponsorship was significant to the study in providing a deeper understanding of the role of a GSA advisor. It also provided a difficult context in which many advisors must work to provide a more positive school experience for the LGBTQ population of their school and community. The qualitative narrative, though not the method of choice for the current study, provided readers with a story with which they can experience the emotions and experiences of the teacher, as though they were there with him. While Adams and Carson provided an intriguing glimpse into the life of a GSA advisor, one person’s perspective was not enough to meet the scope of the current study. The study addresses this by including the voice of advisors from different areas of South Carolina, and from different sizes of communities.

Valenti and Campbell (2009) presented a qualitative study in which they examined the motivation and decision-making processes of adults who choose to serve as GSA advisors. Framing their study in citizen participation and social change, the authors explored literature in both areas to inform the reader of their theoretical context. They questioned why adults would want to sponsor GSAs given the controversies that surround their formation and existence. Valenti and Campbell presented a literature-based context of LGB youth in schools, especially homophobia, biased language, bullying, support of heteronormativity in schools, the effects on LGB youth, and LGB teachers. Often LGB teachers keep their identity hidden for fear of losing their job. “Their fear may have some grounding because it is currently legal in over 30 states to be fired for being gay or lesbian” (Valenti & Campbell, 2009, p. 230). Next, the authors presented a definition and brief history of GSAs before describing their study. They described qualitative interviews of all advisors in a state as their data collection method before providing a description of their sampling strategy, as well as a demographic description of participants. After that, they provided a description of the study measures, data analysis, and verification techniques. The study results were divided into two categories, motivation and the decision-making process to become a GSA advisor. Motivational factors influencing advisors included a protective attitude towards LGBT youth, and a personal connection with an LGBT person or issue. Both of these factors contributed to the advisor being able to serve as a resource or support system for youth in their schools. Agreeing to serve as a GSA advisor can be a difficult decision for faculty members. The study participants discussed concerns that were part of their decision, as well as counterbalances to the concerns that ultimately lead to their decision to accept the advisor role. Concerns

mentioned by participants were credibility to advise a GSA when they do not identify as LGBT or feel trained to do so, about losing their job, and being accused of recruiting adolescents to be LGBT. Perceived protections by advisors that served to counterbalance concerns include having family members employed by the school district, being a female in a male dominated content area, GSAs being student driven, tenure, and being married. The study presented GSA advisors as genuinely caring and concerned for the interests of young people, but that local contexts can influence their decision to accept the role. The study was significant to the current study in its focus on adult perspectives, and the methodological decision to contact every GSA advisor in the geographical scope of the study. It also provided contextual information on GSA advisor motivation that may influence their perspectives on GSA efficiency and must be accounted for when analyzing data, a step that the current study takes by soliciting demographic information from participants.

In a qualitative study, Watson, Varjas, Meyers, and Graybill (2010) examined how GSA advisors' participation in multiple ecological systems interacted to create barriers and facilitators to LGBTQ youth advocacy. The authors presented a context in which this population needs people to stand for their rights so that they have equality of opportunity to develop in positive spaces. They also provided a literature-based explanation of the challenges that LGBTQ youth face in the school context, as well as obstacles that impede advocacy which include continued negative attitudes towards homosexuality in conservative states, and by those who believe that it is a choice, counselors who fear being labeled or excluded, lack of professional development in LGBTQ issues, legal or ethical complications of working with minors, defeatist attitudes

towards the efficacy of advocacy, ignorance to LGBTQ issues, being non-confrontational, and a lack of energy. They also presented facilitators to advocacy such as consistently enforced antidiscrimination policies with LGBTQ protection, safety programs, professional development on LGBTQ issues, inclusion in the curricula, school and community partnerships, LGBTQ representation on school boards, and GSAs. Watson et al. were interested in GSA advisors, “because they serve as visible support persons for LGBTQ youth within traditionally heterosexist environments” (Watson et al., 2010, p. 103). They described the difficulty of this role stating, “advisors may possess knowledge of the barriers that accompany working within resistant systems, such as community pressure, parental complaints, alienation, loss of job, and the loss of administrative support” (Watson et al., 2010, p. 103), putting them in a situation in which they feel the need to protect both their members and themselves. On the other hand, the role provides opportunities for advisors to advocate on behalf of LGBTQ students with the school and community while serving as a liaison between them and other adults in the school. They cited a gap in literature on GSA advisors that their study fills. A description of the participants and their selection was provided along with demographic information. Of particular interest to the current study was that the Watson et al. study occurred in Georgia, a neighboring, conservative state to the one being examined. Next, study methods and data analysis were justified and explained.

Study results showed that advisor advocacy was affected by sociocultural factors, school-based factors, and individual factors. Sociocultural factors were presented as being external to the school such as the community or society. Data for this factor was broken down further into sub factors and included parents, who serve as both inhibitors

and facilitators to advocacy, public policy, which also can serve as an inhibitor and a facilitator, society, which serves as a barrier, and community resources, which serve as a facilitator to advocacy. School-based factors were presented as being within schools. They included administrators, other school employees, students, school policies, and school-based resources, which can all serve as both barriers and facilitators to advocacy. Individual factors related to advisors also affect their ability to advocate for their LGBTQ youth. These factors were reported as being consequences to advocacy, or professional repercussions, which some see as a barrier, and others report as not being experienced, the sexual identity of the advisor, knowledge of LGBTQ issues, which can serve as a facilitator or barrier, personality characteristics and personal experiences, which are viewed as facilitators to advocacy. The authors presented a model of ecological systems in advocating for LGBTQ youth to demonstrate how the systems interact. These interactions, as reported by participants, can result in barriers to or the facilitating of advocacy. In concluding their study, the authors presented limitations and implications for further research. Watson et al. presented significant findings that inform the current study. These findings showed the different factors that influence GSA advisors. These factors can influence the perspectives of GSA efficiency in reducing or eliminating bullying that the current study seeks. Due to the proximity of the study location, the factors that influence advisors were expected to be similar due to the political and social climate of the geographic region. Watson et al. studied advisor perceptions in order to examine advocacy for LGBTQ students. The current study was only concerned with advisor perceptions of GSA efficiency in reducing or eliminating bullying.

McGarry (2013) contributed a chapter on educators who are allies of LGBTQ students and parents. He introduced his chapter by describing the school environment for LGBTQ students and the role of educators in creating positive learning environments. He expressed concern when citing a study that presented a paradox between reported teacher beliefs and practice. McGarry also provided a literature-supported overview of the positive effects of supportive adults on LGBTQ youth, but indicated a gap in literature on adult allies, how they come to take on their roles, and how they maneuver between their different roles. Next, McGarry presented levels through which educators progress as they become LGBTQ allies. These levels included developing awareness, gaining knowledge, learning to communicate with a new vocabulary skill set, and taking action. He encouraged allies to become acquainted with their school and community climate, and offered suggestions on how to advocate, including supporting GSAs, supporting inclusive curriculum, and supporting or promoting nondiscrimination policies and practices. Finally, the author presented suggestions of actions that allies should and should not do. McGarry contributed information that is significant to the current study with his presenting of ally levels of progression. With this information, deeper understanding of GSA advisors as learners, and not as experts was provided. Participant advisors for the current study were at different levels of developing as an ally of LGBTQ youth. This could influence the perspectives of GSA efficiency in reducing or eliminating bullying that the current study sought. The current study addresses this by soliciting demographic information from participants such as how long they have served in the role of GSA advisor.

There is little literature on GSA advisors, but most presents these adult allies as altruistic educators who believe in and support the rights of LGBTQ adolescents, and have a genuine desire for their best interests. These adults are presented as being in an intersection of multiple influences that affect their decision to become an advisor, as well as how they perform this role. The next section will present the influence of geography on the attitudes and beliefs that shape communities and schools, and how LGBTQ youth experience them.

Geography

LGBTQ youth can be found in every part of every American state, and where they live can greatly influence their quality of life by determining community norms or ideologies that inform beliefs that are related to school climate, that determine what, if any, resources, including school programs and GSAs, are available to LGBTQ youth. This literature review has indicated that typically, schools that are located in or near larger, urban areas with a more diverse student body tend to report fewer incidences of sexual identity based discrimination. Miceli (2005) was discussed earlier in this literature review, but also warrants discussion in this section. In explaining the disparity in GSA presence by geographical region, she stated that, “forty percent of California’s public schools have a GSA, but not a single school in Arkansas has one. Analyzing these patterns illuminates some of the social, political, and institutional factors that influence the emergence of GSAs” (Miceli, 2005, p. 196). A true number of high school GSAs is not available as registration in a database with GLSEN is voluntary. She provided numbers of GSAs by some states to show the difference between politically liberal states and politically conservative states, revealing that states like California and New York

have hundreds of GSAs, and states like Mississippi and West Virginia only have a couple each. Miceli cited prior research in stating that GSAs are concentrated in regions with traditionally higher support for LGBT issues, “with 2.3% of schools in the South, 3.8% in the Midwest, 11.4% in the East, and 14.5% in the West having a GSA” (Miceli, 2005, p. 198). The data presented by Miceli is significant to the study because it provides support for the low number of GSAs in South Carolina. Though the data was dated, it was expected that it still trends in the same manner.

Kosciw, Greytak, and Diaz (2009) examined the relationship between three variables, location, economy and education, district size and student ratios, and hostile school climate. They introduced their study by explaining the negative school experiences of LGBT youth, and their outcomes. They used an ecological perspective to propose that school and community characteristics can also affect victimization. They cited a prior study in which, “the authors found regional differences, such that youth in the South and Midwest were significantly more likely to hear homophobic language in school and to experience harassment related to sexual orientation than youth in the Northeast or West” (Kosciw et al., 2009, p. 977). The authors described their study sample and selection before discussing the study measures on which they focused such as biased remarks, victimization, demographic and locational characteristics, and community and school district characteristics. Next, they reported the study results with statistical analysis. Of significant interest to the current study was the supporting data that LGBT youth in the South and Midwest are more likely to experience bullying, to report negative attitudes toward homosexuality, and that people in the South may hold more traditional attitudes about gender roles than in other regions. This information was

important to the current study because it supported the problem being studied of bullying and provided context for the study.

GLSEN (2013) provided a state snapshot of South Carolina as an ancillary to its 2011 National School Climate Survey. The snapshot provided a negative report on the state of South Carolina high schools, stating that they,

were not safe for most lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) secondary school students. In addition, many LGBT students in South Carolina did not have access to important school resources, such as having a curriculum that is inclusive of LGBT people, history, and events, and were not protected by comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment school policies (GLSEN, 2013, p. 1).

GLSEN provided figures supporting three facts about the climate of South Carolina high schools. Ninety percent of survey participants reported regularly hearing biased remarks, even by school staff members. Exclusion and victimization were common experiences of South Carolina LGBT youth with ninety percent experiencing verbal harassment, fifty percent experiencing physical harassment, and ninety-four percent reporting feeling excluded by peers. Almost two-thirds of harassment or assault was never reported to school staff. Only seventeen percent of South Carolina survey participants reported a GSA at their schools. Based on these findings, GLSEN issued a critical challenge to South Carolina school leaders and policy makers to implement comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policies, support GSAs, provide professional development for educators about LGBT issues, and to increase access to LGBT curricular

resources. This snapshot was significant to the current study because it provided the most recent comprehensive data and figures on bullying and GSAs in South Carolina. This was important because it supported the problem being studied.

Swank, Fahs, and Frost (2013) examined experiences of discrimination of sexual minorities based on where they live. The authors based their study in minority stress theory, and briefly explained it, and examined heterosexist discrimination through literature. Next, they compared rural and urban life, with rural life being characterized as more traditional and less diverse, and urban life providing multiple encounters with different social systems and new ideas. The authors cited studies that reported that more traditional ideas on gender expression and roles were more common in small or rural communities, and that southern states were more likely to have laws that ban gay marriage. They stated that more LGB victimization occurs in small or rural communities, as well. Other factors were examined through the literature, as well, such as race, gender, and socio-economic status. Swank et al. described their study by stating their research questions, description of their data collection methods and sample, the measures of study, and the method of statistical analysis of the collected data. The data reported that geography is related to the amount of discrimination faced by LGB people, but that the types of discrimination faced and the disclosure of their sexual identity also influence the data. Other variables studied were also discussed, but were not of interest to the current study. The findings of the Swank et al. study supported the problem being studied, and can be contributors to the lack of GSAs in South Carolina. Their study differed greatly from the current study in that LGB adults and their experiences with discrimination were

the focus, as well as many other variables that were not applicable to the educational setting of the current investigation.

Worthen (2014) presented an empirical study that examined how GSA presence affects the attitudes of college students toward LGBT people, and if geography and high school population were influential. Worthen provided a brief history of GSAs and cited prior research in stating that small schools, rural areas, and schools in the South are much less likely to have a GSA, and that the region is more likely to oppose homosexuality, making GSAs in the region more needed. She proposed that college students who attended a high school with a GSA are more supportive of LGBT people than their counterparts who did not have a GSA presence in high school. She also suggested that students from rural areas with a GSA presence are more likely to be supportive than if they were from an urban area with one due to the controversy and education that occurs with this phenomenon in rural or small towns. Worthen next examined the roles and impact of GSAs in high schools and discussed the influences on GSA presence of high school population, and the type of town in which the high school with a GSA was located. The author examined the South through literature that shows higher rates of victimization. She suggested that GSAs in southern, rural towns are more likely to make an impact as they disrupt heteronormative community beliefs and practices. Next, she described her study, the sample, data collection and analysis before using descriptive statistics to report her findings. The study reported that GSA presence in high schools does have a positive influence on the attitudes of college students toward LGBT people. The study also found that smaller high schools with GSAs are related to lower attitudes of support. The South and GSA presence are consistently related to a negative impact on

attitudes towards LGB people. The author suggested three reasons for this negative relationship including less supportive societal attitudes towards LGBT issues in the South, higher religiosity levels, and the conservative political climate of the region. The author then discussed the study limitations and implications for future research.

Summary

To support the current study, the literature reviewed was organized by theme and publishing date in the following sections: In section two, the epistemological orientation for the study was explained by examining the philosophies of poststructuralism and social reconstructionism. In section three, the theoretical lenses that were used for the study were defined, and their relevance to the study was stated. These theories include critical theory, queer theory, and social justice. Section four included literature that supports the methodological choices for a qualitative study, specifically a collective case study, and the reasons that these choices are best for the topic being studied. Section five included a review of previous studies that have been further categorized into defining bullying, discussing its effects on LGBTQ youth, defining what a GSA is, examining the effects of GSAs on LGBTQ youth and the climate of their schools, the effectiveness of GSAs in accomplishing their goals or mission, the role of the GSA faculty advisor, and the impact of geography on GSAs and the lives of LGBTQ young people, specifically in South Carolina.

Transition Statement

The current study sought to examine the issues that are being faced by LGBTQ students in South Carolina high school GSAs, how bullying affects these students, and to

see if high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina are helping to reduce or eliminate aggression against LGBTQ students. The perceptions of faculty advisors of GSAs provided a different perspective on this problem, from those who work closely with LGBTQ students and their straight allies in the schools where bullying is taking place.

Chapter three describes the methods used for data collection and analysis. Chapter four provides the results of the data collection and analysis, and chapter five explains the implications of the study results.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

Be stubborn about your goals, and flexible about your methods. ~Anonymous

Introduction

This phenomenological, ethnographic, collective case study examined the issues that are being faced by LGBTQ students in South Carolina high school GSAs, how bullying affects these students, and to see if high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina are helping to reduce or eliminate aggression against LGBTQ students through the lenses of Queer and Critical Theories and within a framework of social justice. Chapter three contains the description of the collective case study design for the current study.

Over half of the participants in the 2011 GLSEN National School Climate survey, in grades 6-12, reported experiencing anti-LGBTQ discrimination over the past year (Kosciw et al., 2012). Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are one way that schools and LGBTQ youth are making an effort to resist negative school climates and homophobia that partially results from heteronormative attitudes and systems. Schools are not meeting their responsibility of creating productive citizens if bullying and its effects are continuing to negatively impact the lives of students. The desire to improve the quality of the school experience for LGBTQ students and their straight allies in South Carolina was

one of the driving influences for the study. This qualitative inquiry provided a description of the perceived success of GSAs in preventing or reducing bullying, through the eyes of their faculty advisors.

A qualitative research design was the best choice for the study because it allowed for a deeper description and analysis of the perspectives and stories that GSA advisors can share about their clubs. For most quantitative studies, a large sample population is necessary to achieve representativeness and data is usually reduced to numbers for analysis (Glesne, 2011). The small number of GSAs in South Carolina limited the current study, so a large sample population was not possible. The study also sought to examine affective responses from GSA faculty advisors. Due to the many nuances that are possible in investigating how people feel or perceive a phenomenon and the stories that they may tell, qualitative research was a better fit for the current study. Merriam (2001) mentioned several characteristics of qualitative research that further supported the decision to use a qualitative paradigm for research. They were: the researcher being the primary method of collecting and analyzing data, the necessity of fieldwork, the use of inductive research, and rich description (Merriam, 2001).

The current study examined the issues that are being faced by LGBTQ students in South Carolina high school GSAs, how bullying affects these students, and if high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina are helping to reduce or eliminate aggression against LGBTQ students through the perspectives of their faculty advisors. According to the literature on GSAs that was reviewed in chapter two, the presence of a GSA in a school is often a deterrent to on-campus bullying, but is not a guarantee, so the

perceptions of GSA advisors provided insight into the effectiveness of the clubs in the state. The next section will discuss the research design of the study.

Research Design

A qualitative method with a collective or multiple case study design was used for the current study because as Merriam (2001) stated, “The decision to focus on qualitative case studies stems from the fact that this design is chosen precisely because researchers are interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing” (Merriam, 2001, p. 29). In order to understand the reality of GSAs in South Carolina high schools and how successful they are in reducing or eliminating bullying, the perspectives from several faculty advisors was sought, as were the perspectives of those who do not currently work with GSAs, but either have in the past, or who could offer further insight on LGBTQ youth in South Carolina. A case study design was preferable to a quantitative one because, “case studies, by definition, ‘get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can...partly by their access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings, and desires), whereas experiments and surveys often use convenient derivative data, e.g. test results, official records” (Merriam, 2001, p. 32-33). A multiple case study design was used because, “by looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying *how* and *where* and, if possible, *why* it carries on as it does. We can strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings” (Merriam, 2001, p. 40). The scope of the study was the state of South Carolina. Another reason that collective case study was used is that school districts in the state function as autonomous entities, and each high school in a school district has its own school climate. Therefore, a single case study of one GSA advisor would not be adequate

in understanding how clubs throughout the state are performing. Findings from collective case studies are, “often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust” (Yin, 2014, p. 57). The research design will be flexible to allow for the exploration of any new insights that may emerge from data collection (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Other qualitative methods, such as ethnographic research, historical research, and grounded theory were not beneficial to the study because they are not appropriate in answering the research questions being investigated. Ethnographic research uses, “culture as the theoretical framework for studying and describing a group” (Glesne, 2011, p. 17). This method was not appropriate for the study because it does not seek to describe a group of people. Historical research was not appropriate because the study sought to understand the current perspectives of GSA advisors. Grounded theory was not appropriate for the current study because it did not seek to, “develop a theory that is ‘grounded’ in data” (Glesne, 2011, p. 21).

Using a design presented by Yin (2014), the current study used an embedded multiple-case design. This design, “can serve as an important device for focusing a case study inquiry” (Yin, 2014, p. 55), and can help the researcher be more aware of any shifting in the nature of the study that may arise during data collection or analysis, causing the entire study to have to be redone or re-configured. A critique of embedded design is that there is a possibility of the study focus remaining on the subunit of study and not returning to the larger unit of study. The current study did not examine the frequency or the prevalence of bullying in South Carolina high schools. Other scholars have reported this. Instead, it examined how successful GSAs are perceived to be in reducing or eradicating the sustained bullying that so many youth experience.

Once approval was received from the institutional review board of the research institution, local approval was sought from every school district in South Carolina that has a GSA. The South Carolina GSA Network, a subordinate group of the SC Equality organization, provided a list of registered GSAs. However, there was a possibility that every GSA that exists is not registered. To ensure that every club had the opportunity to participate in the study, an investigation into the extracurricular clubs that are offered by every high school in the state was performed, using a list of schools that was obtained from the South Carolina Department of Education website.

With approval from local school districts, GSA advisors were contacted via standard mail informing them of the study, and requesting their voluntary participation. Next, they received a questionnaire (Appendix A) that collected demographic information on potential study participants, as well as allowed them to provide their preliminary perspectives on the level of success of their GSA in reducing or eliminating bullying. Once the preliminary questionnaires were received from interested participants, the cases for the study were finalized. The purposeful sampling strategy of homogeneous sampling (Patton, 2002) was used for case formation and participant selection so that focus group interviews could be facilitated for participants. The study intended to examine three embedded cases. However, I knew that the cases may have to be altered depending on advisor participation, and access to them. The cases for the current study were based on three South Carolina regions, provided by the South Carolina government website: the Lowcountry, the Midlands, and the Upstate. Each region includes urban, suburban, and rural communities. Within each region, four participants were sought who advise GSA clubs. Two advisors of GSAs located in urban communities, and two

advisors of GSAs located in non-urban communities for each region were expected to serve as participants, totaling twelve advisors. Participants were to be grouped in the regional case as subunits of study as urban advisors and non-urban advisors (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). The decision to create an equal number of subunits for each case was to ensure that voices from GSAs in different types of communities were heard. If there were two or more faculty advisors for a GSA who would like to participate, only one was to be accepted, and they would be asked to self-select who would participate. Candidates would only be accepted as study participants if they were willing to take part in the final two phases of data collection, an individual interview, and a focus group with other participants in their geographical region.

In addition to cases consisting of GSA advisors, additional cases were formed that do not include GSA advisors. These cases served to tell the story of LGBTQ youth in South Carolina and some of its high schools. The additional case consisted of experts in the field of LGBTQ issues. These experts volunteered to provide their perspectives on GSAs in South Carolina, and issues that are important to LGBTQ youth.

For the study, not enough participation was solicited to continue with the planned case design. The only responses received were from suburban high schools, so the comparison between urban and non-urban was not possible. Due to the low number of participation, any faculty member that expressed a desire to participate was accepted in to the study.

The expert case was created to offer the perspectives of professionals who are not GSA faculty advisors, but who have worked with or for LGBTQ youth. Originally there

were three participants with various backgrounds and experiences regarding their work with these young people. I decided to remove one expert participant from the study because they left their previous position and became a part of the university team that worked with my study. I chose to do this to avoid any conflict of interests. Expert A serves as a coordinator in a statewide equality organization. Expert B was my former professor who introduced me to several of the theories and perspectives in a sexual diversity course, which served as the foundation for the current study. Their local work included attempts to get the perspectives of youth (LGBTQ and straight) about sexuality. They are now a professor at a northern university. Experts were solicited with Informed Consent letters, and a description of the study. I altered the participant questionnaire slightly, eliminating the first two questions, which asked about individual GSAs, and slightly re-wording other questions to elicit more perspective on GSAs, specifically GSAs in South Carolina high schools (see Appendix B).

The Lowcountry case was composed of two faculty advisors at two suburban high schools in different school districts in the Lowcountry of South Carolina. Both advisors are veteran teachers, and have been serving in their role of GSA advisor for about the same amount of time, five to six years. The advisors voluntarily provided their gender and sexual orientation. Both are female, one identifies as heterosexual, and the other identifies as lesbian. For the current study, they are referred to as LC1 and LC2.

The Midlands case was composed of five faculty advisors at five suburban high schools in four different school districts in the Midlands of South Carolina. Three of the advisors teach in two districts close to the capital city, and two teach in two different districts in the Midlands region, but in different districts that are close to a border town.

All five advisors are veteran teachers, with three having over ten years of experience, and two, being somewhat new to the profession with two and three years of experience. They have been serving in their role of GSA advisor for about the same amount of time, two to three years, with one veteran of five years. The advisors voluntarily provided their gender and sexual orientation. All five are female, four identify as heterosexual, and one identifies as bisexual. For the current study, they are referred to as M1, M2, M3, M4, and M5.

The Upstate case was composed of two faculty advisors at two suburban high schools in different school districts in the Upstate of South Carolina. Both advisors are veteran teachers, and have been serving in their role of GSA advisor from two to five years. The advisors voluntarily provided their gender and sexual orientation. US1 is a male who identifies as gay, and US2 is a female who identifies as lesbian.

Once the cases were finalized, the second method of data collection began through participant interviews. Glesne defined interviews as approaches where,

researchers ask questions in the context of purposes often important primarily to themselves. Respondents answer questions in the context of dispositions (motives, values, concerns, needs) that researchers need to unravel in order to make sense out of the words that their questions generate (Glesne, 2011, p. 102).

Interviewing was an important source of data because it allowed GSA advisors to provide the individual context of their GSA, first hand narrative of their experiences as an advisor, their perspectives on the success of their club in reducing or eliminating bullying, and reasons for their perspectives. Interviews were necessary because, “we

cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (Merriam, 2001, p. 72). Rubin and Rubin (2012) characterized qualitative interviews as providing rich description, consisting of open ended questions, and a question set that is not fixed. They also provided four categories of qualitative interviews, one of which was used by the current study. They are: focus groups, internet interviews, casual conversations, and semi structured and unstructured interviews. Internet interviews could be used in the current study, as mentioned to meet the needs of participants, but the preferred method was face to face. Casual conversations were not an option for the current study because I did not have a prior relationship with most of the study participants. Interviews with study participants were semi structured. “In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded, or the interview is a mix of more and less structured questions” (Merriam, 2001, p. 74). It also provided flexibility through open-ended questions to address topics, ideas, or perspectives that may have come up in the interview that were not thought of in advance. A highly structured interview was not appropriate for the study because its rigid nature does not allow access to the perspectives and affective response that were investigated. An unstructured interview would allow for the exploration of themes and allow for the expression of perspectives, but its unorganized nature was not an attractive option, and can make both the researcher and the participant uncomfortable. While face-to-face interviews were the preferred method of interviewing, flexibility to participant needs necessitated the option for other platforms for interviews. The responsive interview model provided by Rubin and Rubin (2012) was the interview design for the study. This type of interview emphasizes a trusting relationship that leads to a give and take style of conversation, and

is characterized by a friendly tone of flexible questioning (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Interviews took place in a place and platform chosen by the interviewee. The interviewer traveled to the location selected by the participant for the face-to-face interview. The questions and topics that were used as a basis for conversations in participant interviews can be viewed in Appendix C. The additional cases made up of experts provided their data through questionnaires and interviews, and were not expected to participate in the study beyond the interview stage.

Role of the Researcher

My interest in the problem identified in my study stemmed from personal and professional experiences, as well as a desire to seek answers to what I saw as a gap in professional literature on the topic of the effectiveness of GSA clubs. As a faculty sponsor of the GSA club in the high school in which I teach, I have an interest in seeing the students who are served by the club have success, be proud of who they are, and feel supported and accepted. This interest is part of my calling as a teacher, as well as my everyday personality. I tend to have a nurturing persona for those who are close to me, and my students, putting their needs first, and having a genuine concern for their well being and happiness. This personality characteristic invokes feelings of nurturing and protection of all LGBTQ students, but especially the ones who I have become more familiar with through their participation in the club. Personal experience was also important to my attraction to this topic. I have experienced, first-hand, bullying tied to people's perception of my own sexuality both as an adolescent and as an adult, so I know what it feels like to fear walking past a particular section of school, or the locker room for physical education class, to name a couple of examples.

While the atmosphere of acceptance has increased over the last several years with more LGBT characters in books and on television, more celebrities identifying as LGBTQ or showing their support, and with LGBTQ issues being frequently addressed in the news, it is far from widespread in conservative areas like South Carolina. When I heard one of my own club members mention that they had been bullied and that a teacher knew about it and nothing was done, anger and a desire for justice came over me, and it was then that I realized that I wanted to investigate this problem. My desire is to provide information that GSA sponsors or administrators can use to make the clubs more effective for LGBTQ students, but also to improve school climate for all students and teachers through suggestions, professional development, or any other ideas from the current study, which will be discussed in chapter five.

In thinking about how I am similar or different from my participants, I was not sure what the participant demographics would be, but I knew that some similarities are that I am an adult, and serve a teacher or authority role. I also knew there would be differences, and that I would need to know what demographic groups my participants represent in order to maintain an awareness of my subjectivity. As a white male from a middle class socio-economic status, I was aware that I may be vastly different from, and bring my own perspectives and ideas to my interactions with participants who may not be like me, as well as collected study data that I must constantly take into consideration.

A main characteristic of qualitative research that sets it apart from quantitative inquiry is the central role of the researcher in the study. This researcher role includes being the primary data collector, decision maker, and analyst. For the current study, I served the same roles. I began by contacting each school district and GSA advisor. They

sent the preliminary questionnaires for me to analyze the data that they yielded. I also performed each one on one interview, intended to transcribe them, and analyzed the data. Another role of the researcher, according to Glesne (2011), is that of learner.

As a researcher, you are a curious student who comes to learn from and with research participants. You do not come as an expert or authority. If you are so perceived, then your respondents will not feel encouraged to be as forthcoming as they can be (Glesne, 2011, p. 60).

I also took on a reflexive role for the current study to increase the accuracy and validity of data.

Glesne stated that reflexivity,

involves critical reflection on how researcher, research participants, setting, and research procedures interact and influence each other. This includes ‘examining one’s personal and theoretical commitments to see how they serve as resources for generating particular data, for behaving in particular ways...and for developing particular interpretations (Glesne, 2011, p. 151).

Reflexivity was demonstrated by my attention to my own subjectivity, biases, and positionality in the study. Glesne (2011) discussed subjectivity by presenting it through a 1988 article by Peshkin, in which he described subjectivity as personal states that were activated by experiences during research. In keeping with the poststructuralist influence of the study, the binary of objective/subjective was not useful for the current study, as eliminating subjectivity is not truly possible. Instead, I attempted to maintain an

awareness of my subjectivity and incorporated reflective processes throughout the study to evaluate the formation of questions, responses to questions, and the interpretation of and presentation of data that were free of personal biases. As a high school GSA advisor and member of the LGBTQ community myself, I also distanced myself from the research by removing my school and club from the study as a possible participant in an effort to increase my trustworthiness.

Finally, I also demonstrated reflexivity through an awareness of my embodiment, positions, and positionality throughout the study. Embodiment includes traits such as skin color, gender, age, and size. Positions include characteristics such as nationality, educational level, economic level, and personal experiences. Positionality refers to the researchers social and ideological placement with regards to the study or its participants (Glesne, 2011). Each of these characteristics and positions can interact with my identity and affect my decisions, interactions, and interpretations. It is difficult or impossible to suppress or eliminate these characteristics, but an awareness of them, and keeping them in mind throughout the research process was one of my important roles. This was done through reflective questioning and notation of field notes throughout the collection and analysis of data.

Research Questions

The current study sought to answer the following research questions:

- What are the issues that faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina feel are important to, or being faced by LGBTQ members of their clubs?

- How do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive the role of the group in their schools?
- What challenges do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive as being faced by LGBTQ students and/or GSA members?
- What do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive as happening with bullying of LGBTQ students in their schools?
- How do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive the success, or lack thereof, of their clubs in contributing to fewer instances of sexual identity discrimination or bullying?
- How do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina feel that their clubs are contributing to fewer instances of sexual identity discrimination or bullying?

Questions that were asked to analyze study data are:

- What challenges or issues emerge from the perspectives of high school GSA advisors in South Carolina as important or as being faced by LGBTQ students?
- What themes emerge from the perspectives of high school GSA advisors in South Carolina regarding the success of their clubs in reducing or eliminating bullying?
- What common actions are being taken by SC GSAs to reduce or eliminate bullying? What less common actions?

- What factors influence the perspectives of GSA advisors i.e. gender, identity, sexual orientation, geography?

An anticipated question regarding the research protocol was:

- How will the possibility of a non-face to face interview through email, telephone, or other technology affect the responses from study participants?

Questions that were anticipated to result from the study are:

- How can GSAs in South Carolina reduce or continue to reduce all forms of bullying?
- How can LGBTQ students who attend schools in South Carolina without a GSA be protected from anti-LGBTQ aggression?

Study Context

South Carolina, like many states in the Southern United States, is a politically and socially conservative area. In the spring of 2016 neighboring states of North Carolina and Mississippi passed anti-LGBTQ laws. Mississippi passed HB 1523, allowing for the use of religion to discriminate against LGBTQ people in several aspects of life. North Carolina passed HB 2, a law that overtly discriminates against the transgender community, as well as other discriminatory measures. Georgia drafted a similar bill, but it was vetoed due to a loud public outcry and the threat of many LGBTQ-friendly business and industries to end their business with and projects in the state. Also, a South Carolina legislator sponsored a bill that was similar to the one in North Carolina, stipulating which restrooms transgendered citizens must use. In a surprising move, the usually conservative governor of South Carolina spoke up and said they would veto any bill like that to come

across her desk. This is in addition to the discrimination that is already codified in the South Carolina code of regulations regarding education. The Comprehensive Health Education Act of 1988 states, “The program of instruction provided for in this section may not include discussion of alternate sexual lifestyles from heterosexual relationships including, but not limited to, homosexual relationships except in the context of instruction concerning sexually transmitted diseases”.

LGBTQ students who participated in the 2011 National School Climate Survey reported experiencing exclusion and victimization with ninety percent experiencing verbal harassment and fifty percent experiencing physical harassment (GLSEN, 2013). Faculty advisors of GSAs work closely with members and can give a unique perspective on how successful their clubs are in reducing or eradicating bullying in their schools. The current study examined the perspectives of faculty advisors of high school GSAs in South Carolina on how successful they find their GSAs in eliminating or reducing anti-LGBTQ discrimination. There are very few studies done on GSA effectiveness in the South, most examining other aspects of GSAs such as youth empowerment (Mayberry, 2012) and the types of resistance toward heteronormative school climates that they offer (Mayberry, Chenneville, & Currie, 2011). There is a gap in literature that examines the efficiency of GSAs in reducing bullying in the South to which the current study will contribute.

Participant context was important to the study, as the lived world of GSA advisors was the perspective that was researched. Examining the participant context and demographics from studies examined in Chapter 2, Valenti and Campbell’s (2009) investigation into why faculty members choose to accept the role of GSA advisor served as a model for the participant characteristics that were used to analyze data and answer

the question, what factors influence the perspectives of GSA advisors i.e. gender, identity, sexual orientation, geography? These characteristics included the type of community in which the GSA exists (urban, suburban, rural), the gender and sexual identity of participants, the years of GSA advising, the faculty role of participants and how long they have served in that role. These characteristics were used to analyze participant data to see if any trends emerged as influential to the perspectives of GSA advisor participants.

Gaining Access to Participants

The South Carolina GSA Network, a subordinate group of the SC Equality organization, provided a list of registered GSAs. Valenti and Campbell (2009) also used this method in beginning their search for GSA advisors in their study, though they used a database provided by GLSEN. However, there was a possibility that every GSA that exists is not registered. To ensure that every club had the opportunity to participate in the study, an investigation into the extracurricular clubs that are offered by every high school in the state was performed, using a list of high schools that was obtained from the South Carolina Department of Education website. I used this list to visit every high school website in South Carolina to examine their club lists or student activity sites so that I could make initial contact with the faculty advisor at every school listing a GSA.

Once approval was received from the institutional review board of the research institution, local approval was sought from the research review board of every school district in South Carolina that has a GSA. This was done so that districts would be aware of the research being conducted with their employee(s), and that the use of their

electronic mailing or phone systems, and possibly meeting space may be used for communication and meetings between participant candidates and myself. Local approval was sought by providing a description of the study (Appendix C), informed consent documentation (Appendix D) that indicated to districts that study participation is voluntary and can be ended at any time, and an explanation of how identifiers of participants and the district would not be collected. This allowed districts to decide if they would allow research to be conducted, effectively granting or denying access to GSA faculty advisors in their district, and if the research was of benefit to them.

With approval from local school districts, GSA advisors were contacted via standard mail informing them of the study, and requesting their voluntary participation. Upon the receipt of their informed consent and notification of desire to participate, they received a questionnaire (see Appendix A) that collected demographic information on potential study participants, as well as allowed them to provide their preliminary perspectives on the level of success of their GSA in reducing or eliminating bullying.

In addition to cases consisting of GSA advisors, additional cases were formed that do not include GSA advisors. The additional cases consisted of experts in the field of LGBTQ issues. These experts volunteered to provide their perspectives on GSAs in South Carolina, and issues that are important to LGBTQ youth. These experts are adults, and not affiliated with a South Carolina high school, so their participation was voluntary, and did not require me to gain access to them.

Methods for Establishing a Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

Establishing a working relationship based on respect and trust between the researcher and participants was instrumental in collecting data that is honest and viable for analysis. Merriam (2001) described an important characteristic of qualitative researchers, and one that is integral in establishing a positive relationship between them and their participants, being a good communicator. “A good communicator empathizes with respondents, establishes rapport, asks good questions, and listens intently” (Merriam, 2001, p. 23). I maintained a relationship with participants that included a genuine interest in their perspectives, respect for their privacy, validation of the information and views that were offered, transparency of the entire research goal, design and approach, opportunities to verify what they have said, and a token of reciprocity upon the completion of data collection.

The first thing I did with participants was to assuage any participant anxiety by informing them that their privacy was extremely important, and that no identifying information will be collected about them. Their information was also coded for security, and original information was kept in a locked safe box, while original recordings of interviews and all electronic correspondence was kept in a password protected file on my personal computer. Another method that was used to reduce anxiety was to inform participants that their confidences would be maintained, and that only the two of us would know what we discussed (Glesne, 2011). Allowing participants in interviews to be actively involved in the research process through member checking of transcripts allowed them to verify that what they said or meant to say was accurately recorded. Glesne cited Glazer (1982) in defining reciprocity, or, “the exchange of favors and commitments, the

building of a sense of mutual identification and feeling of community” (Glesne, 2011, p. 177). Participants were thanked in phase three of data collection for their commitment, time, and travel to the focus group location with a token of reciprocity. Since I was not able to complete phase three of data collection due to personal tragedies and loss, and the study limitation of time became an issue, participants were thanked after successful completion of phase two.

Measures for the Ethical Protection of Participants

Participants in the study were protected and treated in an ethical manner. Glesne (2011) presented a code of ethics provided by The American Anthropological Association. This code of ethics stresses the obligation that researchers have to those with whom they work as being above seeking new knowledge. This obligation can cause a project to be re-designed or abandoned. The code also stresses that researchers must do everything possible to guarantee that their research does not harm these people in any way, and that they must determine, in advance, if participants wish to remain anonymous or be recognized. The advance obtaining of informed consent of participants is also a requirement, and must be obtained throughout the research process.

Informed Consent

Through informed consent, potential study participants are made aware (1) that participation is voluntary, (2) of any aspects of the research that might affect their well-being, and (3) that they may freely choose to stop participation at any point of the study (Glesne, 2011, p. 166).

For the current study, initial informed consent was obtained through written consent forms (Appendix D) that were sent to GSA advisors along with a description of the study, to solicit participation. For the two phases of data collection that followed, participants were reminded of the informed consent to provide them with the opportunity to voluntarily discontinue participation. The initial informed consent statement included the purpose of the study, information about the procedures for data collection participation, advantages and disadvantages of participation, privacy, procedures associated with participation or with discontinuing participation, and identification of the researcher (Fowler, 2002).

Confidentiality

The study provided little risk for participants, who were adult faculty members of South Carolina high schools, or adult experts who were not faculty members of South Carolina schools. There was a risk involved by asking participants in phase one of data collection to reveal their sexual identity. This data only served to analyze participant data to see if themes emerged that can influence their perspectives on the success of their GSA. This risk was reduced through two measures. First, the question was optional, so participants who were not comfortable with revealing this personal information could refrain from providing the information. Second, all participant data was coded for anonymity, and original documents were stored in a locked safe box or a password-protected file on my personal computer. Coding of participant data consisted of pseudonyms for participants.

Criteria for Participant Selection

A purposeful sampling strategy was used for participant selection of the GSA advisor cases in order to create cases that are made up of the same elements, and to achieve as equal a representation of perspectives that reflect the state of South Carolina, as possible (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). To take part in the study, participants had to be a member of a high school faculty, and serve as an advisor to the GSA for that school. They had to provide their written consent to participate in the three phases of data collection, the questionnaire, a one on one interview with the researcher, and a focus group. Once advisors from two non-urban (rural or suburban) and two urban high schools from the three geographical regions of South Carolina (Upstate, Midlands, and Lowcountry) are received, the cases would have been completed and data collection was to begin.

Justification for Number of Participants

Through the format of collective case study, the current study employed an embedded multiple-case design (Yin, 2014). The context of the cases was high schools in South Carolina that have a GSA. This design allowed for in-depth study of the context in three cases based on geographic regions of the state of South Carolina, the Upstate, the Midlands, and the Lowcountry. Embedded in these cases were the individual units of study, the GSA advisor. The ideal, anticipated number of participants was to be twelve. For each region, or case, the study examined multiple perspectives. Only seeking one participant for each case was not practical because all may not hold the perspectives of one person, and the possibility of misrepresenting the population is high (Yin, 2014). In

order to collect data that was more representative of the GSAs that exist in South Carolina, the perspectives of two participants from high schools in cities (urban), and two participants from high schools in non-urban communities (suburban or rural) for each region was desired. In addition to cases consisting of GSA advisors, additional cases were formed that do not include GSA advisors. These cases served to tell the story of LGBTQ youth in South Carolina and some of its high schools. The additional cases consisted of experts in the field of LGBTQ issues. These experts volunteered to provide their perspectives on GSAs in South Carolina, and issues that are important to LGBTQ youth. Valenti and Campbell (2009) sought a representative voice from GSA advisors in their study inviting every advisor in the state and by clustering participants by major cities in their state and creating a separate cluster for GSAs that were not near one of the major cities. While this was also an option for the study, due to the research design, it was not practical for me to conduct individual interviews with every GSA advisor in South Carolina. The purposeful sampling explained kept the number of participants and data collected manageable, and provided perspectives from GSA advisors in several different contexts.

Data Collection

Data for the study was collected in two phases, using the qualitative methods of an open-ended questionnaire and face-to-face interviews. Phase one consisted of a questionnaire (Appendices A and B) in which participants provided demographic information and answered preliminary, open-ended questions. This phase took place early during the study, once local approval was received from school districts, possible participants were identified and contacted to determine interest in participation, and

informed consent forms were returned. The demographic information that was provided by participants was used in data analysis to see if there are emerging trends on GSA advisor perspective data being influenced by any of the information provided.

Demographic information provided included the type of community in which the GSA exists (urban, suburban, rural), the gender and sexual identity of the participant, the years of GSA advising, the faculty role of the participant and how long they have served in that role. Answers to the preliminary questions allowed me to gauge the direction of the study by attending to trends that emerged in the perceived success of GSAs in reducing or eliminating bullying, or the lack thereof. These responses also allowed me to tailor the individual interviews of GSA advisors to gain deeper understanding of, or clarification of responses.

Phase two of data collection took place after the data from phase one was collected and analyzed. This phase consisted of face-to-face or recorded interviews with GSA advisors. A base set of interview questions is included in Appendix B, but questions were added or deleted based on the data collected in phase one. The flexibility in interviewing was based on the Responsive Interviewing Model provided by Rubin and Rubin (2012), and emphasizes a pliability of design that expects the interviewer to adapt to what they hear from participants. I scheduled interviews based on the needs and schedules of participants, and conducted two face-to-face, and eight advisor phone interviews. The times and places of the interviews were negotiated with the participants in a locale that was comfortable to them. If a participant was unable to have a face-to-face interview, a suitable alternative was agreed upon, geared to the convenience of the

participant. The two expert interviews also took place by phone, at a time of their convenience once their agreement to participate was secured.

The data collected provided a deep description of the perspectives of GSA advisors about the level of success of their club in reducing or eliminating bullying in their schools, therefore responding to the research questions and the anticipated question about the research protocol.

Data Analysis

Though the study did not seek to produce a theory related to the data, the constant comparative method, usually associated with grounded theory research, in conjunction with cross case comparison was used for data analysis.

Because the basic strategy of the constant comparative method is compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research, the constant comparative method of data analysis has been adopted by many researchers who are not seeking to build substantive theory (Merriam, 2001, p. 159).

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection in order to continually analyze and compare data for emergent trends both within and across cases. This also served to manage the volume of data to be analyzed (Merriam, 2001). As data was collected, it was analyzed and compared by examining points of interest collected in questionnaire responses and transcripts. Categories and themes were created based on the data as it was sorted by commonalities. These categories should be related to the study, incorporate all of the data collected, be mutually exclusive, reflect the data, and be

conceptually congruent (Merriam, 2001). Due to the current study being a collective case study, two stages of data analysis had to occur. First, the within case analysis requires that each case be analyzed separately, resulting in three individual case studies before a cross case analysis begins (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2014). “A qualitative, inductive, multicase study seeks to build abstractions across cases. The researcher attempts to ‘build a general explanation that fits each of the individual cases, even though the cases will vary in their details’” (Merriam, 2001, p. 195).

Glesne (2011) defined coding as a, “progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data (i.e., observation notes, interview transcripts, memos, documents, and notes from relevant literature) that are applicable to your research purpose” (Glesne, 2011, p. 194). Coding occurred as data was collected, first bounded by each case, and then across the three cases of the study. Data was categorized, first, by major themes that emerge, and then by relationships between data such as type, causes or consequences, and attitudes, for example. Attention was paid to the overt messages in the transcripts, as well as things that may not have been said, but emerge from researcher notes (Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 2001).

The coding of the data followed the model presented by Saldaña (2013) to break coding into two cycles, first cycle and second cycle. He stated that the coding method chosen should naturally emerge from the research question of the study. The first cycle consisted of initial coding serving as the overarching method, and both descriptive and the affective method of values coding being used to organize data. Saldaña cited Strauss and Corbin (1998) in describing initial coding as, “breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and

differences” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 100). It allowed me to be open to the directions that the data may take. Descriptive coding is a versatile method that will allow me to analyze the basic topics that emerge. Saldaña cited Wolcott (1994) in stating that, “description is the foundation for qualitative inquiry, and its primary goal is to assist the reader to see what you saw and to hear what you heard in general, rather than scrutinize the nuances of people in social action” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 88). Values coding allows for the coding of data that reflects the beliefs or perspectives of participants (Saldaña, 2013). This style of coding was applicable to field notes and interview transcripts, which were a large source of data for the study. Saldaña cited Lecompte and Preissle (1993) in stating that the application of values coding to multiple sources of data, “corroborates the coding and enhances the trustworthiness of the findings” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 111). The first cycle served to become acquainted with the data in its differing formats of questionnaire responses, transcripts, and field notes. The second cycle served to more thoroughly analyze and categorize the data. In transitioning from first to second cycle coding, Saldaña proposed transitional methods that took me from becoming familiar with the data to a deeper analysis and ownership of the concepts that emerge from the study. The transitional method that was used was the visual method of code mapping. In this method, the codes that result from the first cycle of coding were written out and organized into categories before being condensed further into the central ideas or themes of the study. It consisted of multiple iterations of the codes as they are further organized or condensed into more durable themes.

The second coding cycle included methods for further analysis and organization of data and included the combining of codes that are similar or, possibly, the dropping of

codes that are infrequent or redundant. The second cycle coding methods that were used are pattern coding and focused coding. Pattern coding allowed codes to be grouped together based on an emerging theme and to organize them into a smaller number of sets (Saldaña, 2013). Saldaña cited Charmaz (2006) in describing focused coding as searching, “for the most frequent or significant codes to develop ‘the most salient categories’ in the data corpus” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 213). The combination of these methods allowed the most common and important themes that emerged from the study data to be reported in a clear and concise manner.

Tools that were used to help with the coding process were my field notes and a code book to ensure that the coding process was clear and that it can be easily picked back up when I step away and return. Groups of related data were organized into clusters that were arranged in a logical order for the reporting of data (Glesne, 2011). No software was used to analyze data.

Discrepant Cases

Since the study did not seek to prove a hypothesis or develop a theory, and dealt with the affective perspectives of GSA advisors, it was expected that there would be no discrepant cases. However, should one or more participants withdraw from the study a new participant was to be solicited from the remaining interest forms that were received, in order of receipt. All perspectives and voices from participants were reported and provided deeper understanding of how successful GSAs are in reducing or eliminating bullying.

Transition Statement

The current study examined the issues that are important to or being faced by LGBTQ students in South Carolina, and if and how bullying affects them. It also examined if high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina are helping to reduce or eliminate aggression against LGBTQ students. The perceptions of faculty advisors of GSAs gave a different perspective on this problem, from those who work closely with LGBTQ students and their straight allies in the schools where bullying is taking place.

The collective case study examined GSA advisor perspectives in suburban settings in three geographical regions of South Carolina using the qualitative research methods of open-ended questionnaires, face-to-face and telephone interviews, and expert analysis. A constant comparative technique was used to analyze data in two cycles of coding that resulted in emergent themes that will be discussed in the last two chapters.

Chapter four will provide the results of the data collection and analysis, and chapter five will explain the implications of the study results.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Getting to know someone else involves curiosity about where they have come from, who they are.

~Penelope Lively

Introduction

Bullying, harassment, and aggression towards LGBTQ youth are an unfortunate reality in South Carolina schools. This phenomenological, ethnographic, collective case study examined the issues that are being faced by LGBTQ students in South Carolina high school GSAs according to their faculty advisors, how bullying affects these students, and to see if high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina are helping to reduce or eliminate aggression against LGBTQ students through the lenses of Queer and Critical Theories and within a framework of social justice. It answered the following research questions:

- What are the issues that faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina feel are important to, or being faced by LGBTQ members of their clubs?
- How do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive the role of the group in their schools?
- What challenges do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive as being faced by LGBTQ students and/or GSA members?
- What do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive as happening with bullying of LGBTQ students in their schools?

-How do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive the success, or lack thereof, of their clubs in contributing to fewer instances of sexual identity discrimination or bullying?

-How do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina feel that their clubs are contributing to fewer instances of sexual identity discrimination or bullying?

Chapter four summarizes the case data collected from experts and faculty advisors of GSAs through questionnaires and interviews. Findings are organized and presented for the following collective cases: Expert, Lowcountry Advisors, Midlands Advisors, and Upstate Advisors. Each case analysis is presented before a final cross-case analysis, followed by an analysis of trends that emerged from the data. These trends include roles of GSAs, challenges faced by LGBTQ students, challenges faced by faculty advisors, the effects of GSAs on bullying, and the theme of silence due to entrenched homophobic attitudes.

The procedures for analyzing the data included the constant comparative method. Categories and themes were created based on the data as it was sorted by commonalities. The cases were analyzed individually, and then compared with the analyses of the other cases to see what themes emerged. Twenty faculty advisors were contacted to solicit study participation. Eleven advisors responded to participate, two responded that they did not have time to participate, and seven never responded. The research design called for twelve faculty advisor cases, four from each geographical region in South Carolina consisting of two faculty advisors from urban schools, and two faculty advisors from rural schools. Due to low participation, I was not able to form cases as planned in my

research design. Instead, I accepted participation from any faculty advisor that expressed interest in serving as a participant. The cases formed, still grouped by geographic region, Lowcountry with two subunits (faculty advisors), Midlands with five subunits, and Upstate with two subunits. In the geographical cases, each subunit reported working in a suburban community. I considered myself fortunate to be able to continue with my research design of having three geographical cases, but unfortunate in being able to solicit more participants, and unable to provide comparisons between urban and rural perspectives. Each of the geographical cases consisted of advisors who work in suburban areas of mid to large-sized cities in South Carolina.

Some discrepancy occurred within two cases, Expert and Lowcountry. Data was unable to be collected for phase 2 (interview) for one expert, and one faculty advisor. These participants for each case were not used in the study in order to keep each case as uniform as possible with two data sets. The missing data was a loss for the study because it is a loss of two important perspectives, one of working with LGBTQ youth and the hardship experienced by an expert in the field, and the other of working with them as a faculty advisor. Experiencing personal loss caused me to lose a semester of study work, and the time needed to complete my degree requirements became a limitation for my study. This limitation, and the lack of data collected, was another loss resulting in the lack of deeper perspectives, description, and participant connections that could have occurred.

Expert Case Analysis

Both experts agreed with the South Carolina state snapshot from GLSEN that the climate for LGBTQ students is unfriendly, and that no matter how many services are

offered, they do not change the underlying negative attitudes and prejudices that exist. This negative climate is the main factor in the many challenges that are faced by these youth. Expert B used a historical comparison to race and gender relations to posit that the climate for LGBTQ youth will not change, stating, “I think that there will always be some need for a GSA because issues around equity aren’t going away”.

The experts whole-heartedly agreed that they viewed the role of the GSA is to provide a safe space for LGBTQ students and their allies. They both expanded that role during their interviews when asked, again, about the role of the club, and whether or not the GSA should try to create change within the school or the community. Expert B provided more theoretical and historical responses throughout their interview, and when asked whether the GSA should attempt change in the community in order to help with negative perceptions and attitudes towards the LGBTQ population, they stated that, “If we look historically, at how things have taken place, it’s really been where the opportunity has been for the greatest amount of impact. We’ve seen things happen in many different ways. We take advantage of where the gaps are to make it happen”, expanding the role of the GSA to change agent, when and wherever possible. Expert A, who works with GSAs in South Carolina, spoke from their experiences with the types of groups that they have seen. They mentioned that some GSAs take on a more informative and activist role in their school and community, while others only serve the purpose to give students a space to socialize and be supported. Their expansion of the role of the GSA is completely student centered based on what the group needs. They expressed that the GSA should serve the needs of its members. Faculty advisor M4 stated,

Sometimes, and I fully support GSAs being at the level that they need to be at, so if a GSA wants to do a bunch of community outreach or have large programming or something like that, that's great, but if it's like small and what they need is a support group at that level then like . . . Some people sort of like bash on the GSA that surrounds identity politics like want to sit and talk about their marginalized identities but in some schools that's what you need.

The challenges mentioned by the experts stem from the underlying homophobia and negative attitudes that exist in South Carolina schools and communities. These challenges are not only experienced by LGBTQ youth in South Carolina, but also nationwide. However, in South Carolina, there is a major lack of support for LGBTQ students because there are so few GSAs. Expert B mentioned many of the things in the literature on LGBTQ youth, such as a lack of comprehensive, protective policies that extend the protection of current bullying policies to include gender identity and sexual orientation. We compared non-discrimination policies of universities, and why they do not exist in K-12 education.

In general, because of the age and various things, there's a more social liberalism around universities. Around K-12 education, there is a protective conservatism, around K-12 education. I think the lack of these policies reflects, as well. It reflects that, if you put that out there, you're encouraging people.

They were passionate when mentioning the lack of curricular representation across the nation. "We're still not seeing literature in English classes that presents and talks positively about same-sex relationships or couples, or identities that are used mentioned in Social Studies curricula. We're still not having those curricular inclusions

and discussions and critiques.” Other challenges mentioned by Expert B were isolation from many aspects of the school experience, official club recognition and the backlash that can ensue stating that while backlash and conflict is, “hard for the people going through them, they are also important for growing as community and collectively, as well . . . in term of our growing recognition, in terms of equity needs in our country.”

Expert A provided a heart-wrenching example of the challenge of cyberbullying. “I know a youth that experienced cyber bullying in the fashion of getting videotaped kissing their same gender partner and having it posted on YouTube. Both youths attempted suicide.” Another challenge that they feel is being faced by GSAs in their work in South Carolina, is isolation by not only the students within the school setting, but also by some of the GSAs that have no administrative support and/or no connection to other GSAs, something they are making great efforts to remedy.

Both agreed with the literature on GSAs that their mere presence in schools helps to promote a healthier school climate, to contribute to fewer instances of aggression, and to disrupt the prevalent hegemonic cultures and policies that exist.

The experts agreed that by providing a safe space for students to be supported, educated, and empowered, the GSAs are making a contribution in the work to reduce aggression and discrimination. Their existence forces schools to recognize that LGBTQ students exist and are a part of their student body, and to have conversations about equality and rights to meet the needs of these young people. This recognition has both positive and negative effects. Another positive aspect of the existence of GSAs is the empowerment it gives to the groups that can be a sign of solidarity for them. As

mentioned before, Expert B points out that this recognition can also invite more scrutiny and backlash to the group, which unfortunately, manifests itself as aggression.

Lowcountry Case Analysis

In analyzing the perspectives of the advisors in this case, the themes of gender, sexual orientation, geography, and personal experience emerged. Both advisors are mothers, and the desire to nurture, support, and protect the LGBTQ members of their clubs was apparent in their desire to provide a safe, supporting space for their students to interact. Sexual orientation is an influence on one advisor, who identifies as lesbian, and who described the starting of their club as their coming out to the students in the school. This provides an excellent source of experience to possibly share, and empathy for the stories that their members are living. Geography was an influence, as well, as both schools are located near cities with thriving LGBTQ resources and activities. This provides many resources and activities that they can use or encourage students to access for education and to help them participate in the local community. For both advisors, personal experience is also an influence on their perspectives as GSA advisors. Both shared stories about the formation of their clubs, and the support that they received from administration, faculty, and students.

The Lowcountry case faculty advisors both expressed that the main issue that is faced by the LGBTQ students in their clubs is a need for support and acceptance. They feel it is the duty of their GSAs to provide that support. Both described their clubs as safe spaces where anyone with an accepting attitude is welcome. Other issues faced by their members that were mentioned include not being seen as victims of the challenges that are often recognized by the campaigns of large national organizations. This was seen in the

club of LC1 who did not want to be considered victims during the national anti-bullying campaign because it was not their reality. Both advisors shared a need and desire of their groups of being educated, either by student leaders, student members, school employees, etc. They both provide some guidance or ideas for this education or contact speakers to come and present. Other than that, they have to be more laissez-faire with the educational content of the clubs. One advisor expressed the issue of being active in community events or awareness as a lesser need in their club than the other, but both provided information to students on how they could participate, even though there were some barriers for some students, and opportunities were not always accessible to all club members.

With no hesitation, the advisors for this case perceived their role as faculty advisor as one of support. They both shared examples of their support for individual students experiencing difficulties in school. For LC1, it was their son, as they came out as transgender, and for LC2 it was the student being followed and harassed for presenting through female clothing, and how unfortunate they felt it was for them that the principal made them conform to the established dress code. These were two high profile examples, but both advisors feel that their supporting role is one that is expressed on a daily basis. While faculty advisors in South Carolina have their hands tied as to how much they can participate or lead the clubs, and both advisors shared that their groups are student lead, they know that they are the adult and, at times, the expert, so the sharing of ideas or information is another role that they felt belongs to the advisor. Often, advisors are also the only advocates for the LGBTQ students of the school, so there is an aspect of the advisor that is also that of protector. Such was the case with LC2 and the student who wore the skirt, and with LC1 who discussed their own personal experience with their son,

and how they wanted to make sure he was safe and protected. LC1 also mentioned a time where some of the club members had marched in a gay pride parade in the city on an extremely hot summer day, and how they invited them into their home for water and to allow them to cool down before returning to the festival.

The Lowcountry case pleasantly surprised and inspired me with the positivity surrounding their clubs. For the most part according to their knowledge, bullying is not an issue for the LGBTQ students in their schools. Not that there is none at all; both reported incidents, but the biggest problem seemed to be that of negative speech and comments. LC1 said this only means that it is not being reported to them. Incidents could be happening, and not reported, or occurring on line, but nothing had been reported to them. LC2 reported a couple of incidents with the vandalizing of cars, and the harassment of the student wearing feminine clothing over the five to six years of the existence of their GSA, feeling that these were more isolated events that had not been repeated. LC2 also felt that negative speech was the biggest challenge faced by their students. These advisors felt that overall, the climate for these students is positive.

The faculty advisors for this case reported an overall positive school climate. They reported some isolated events of harassment or aggression, but that they had not heard of anything else other than the common negative speech or slurs in the hallways. LC1 stated that just because they had not heard about it, does not mean it is not happening. Of course the non-reporting of bullying is an unfortunate reality, as documented by the GLSEN report, among other studies, but continuing to offer constant support is what both advisors feel is necessary. LC2 did mention an online app to report bullying immediately, but had no data to report, and felt that it is only successful if young

people take it seriously. This could be a useful tool in the fight against bullying if students are well educated about it, and see that is being taken seriously by the adults who manage it, too.

Both advisors in this case feel that their clubs are mostly successful in contributing to lower instances of discrimination and bullying by being recognized as a club and merely existing. These clubs are making a difference in these high schools. Another contributor to the GSAs being successful at both schools is support from the administration. The degree of support received is not always consistent, but any is accepted and appreciated. The administration for LC1 seems fully supportive, as it does for LC2, except for forcing the young man to conform to the dress code.

LC1 and LC2 both feel that their GSAs are contributing to fewer instances of bullying and discrimination by existing. Both stated that this sends a message to the faculty and student body that the GSA is an accepted group. The fact that the son of a teacher, whom everybody knew was the impetus for the beginning of a GSA, and that at another school almost the entire faculty displays a safe space sticker lets students know that there are always eyes around, and that bullying is not accepted. While negative speech is still a common problem at both schools, it is not always possible to pinpoint a comment in a crowded hallway. The fact that these groups maintain a presence by holding regular meetings, participating in community events, as well as events within the school that advocate for LGBTQ rights, these clubs are making themselves visible, something that combats the fear of the unknown. The Lowcountry is fortunate to have these faculty advisors.

Midlands Case Analysis

The large amount of data provided by the Midlands case provided a great amount of insight into the lives of advisors and the GSAs that they serve. It was an inspiring experience to talk to these heroic teachers and to find out about their struggles and celebrations. In analyzing the perspectives of the Midlands advisors, the themes of identity, geography, and personal experience emerged as influences. Identity emerged as an influence for M4 as they described how belonging to a community youth group helped them in their adolescent years. They mentioned how they use their identity to share with their group to provide a trusting, truly reciprocal environment for their club, even if it means participating in the GSA beyond the hands off approach expected of faculty advisors. Personal experience was another theme that emerged as several of the advisors shared things that happened to them outside of the realm of their role as faculty advisor. M1 was called into the church office by their pastor, M3 had experience in their graduate studies that inspired them to volunteer as a faculty advisor, M4 grew up participating in a group for LGBTQ youth. These experiences help the advisors to be even more supportive because they can draw from them to offer support, share them with their members if they wish, and identify better with what their members are going through on a daily basis. Geography is another theme that emerged from the advisor interviews. Every advisor mentioned how South Carolina is a difficult place to live as an LGBTQ youth. The state is very resistant to change, and has a culture of bullying in different forms. The advisors believe that the negative data reported on the GLSEN report and South Carolina state snapshot must be coming from schools that do not have GSAs.

The advisors in the Midlands case mentioned two issues that are being faced by their clubs, visibility and homophobic attitudes. They reported varying degrees of visibility in their questionnaires, but when we discussed it in the interviews, other aspects of low visibility emerged. One big hindrance to visibility that was brought up by every advisor was inconsistent student leadership. With strong leadership, the clubs seem to thrive, and with weak leadership, they seem to wane. This shows in the amount of activity that the clubs exhibit that is directly related to increased visibility both within the school, and the surrounding communities.

There is not one school that is not touched by homophobic attitudes. This is an unfortunate reality across the United States. It is a problem that must be addressed at the root. Unfortunately, in the conservative, religious South, these roots are deep. Homophobic attitudes contribute to a negative school climate for LGBTQ youth. The degree of negativity faced by these students is different at each school, some schools report very little bullying or aggression, while others report that even teachers and administrators participate.

There was some slight variation in advisor perspectives regarding the role of the GSA in their schools. Most advisors see the clubs as providing a safe space for LGBTQ youth and straight allies to meet and be able to share about their lives.

I would think that the purpose of the GSA is really 2-fold, one is to give these individuals a place where they feel comfortable being themselves, with other people who are like-minded. I think that the second purpose is to give a face, I guess there's power in numbers, so to give this group of individuals a face for the

rest of the school to see so that they can, I guess, represent but not represent in isolation, their varying gender identities and sexual identities.

They all agree that the clubs are necessary, though some question whether they are still needed due to the lack of bullying in their school and low attendance by members.

Another advisor sees the GSA as being an activist organization that fights for equality. I have had all of these thoughts about my own group, but finally decided that each year the group is different, and the club should exist to meet the needs and goals of each different group, like M5 stated, “I think it should exist to fill the needs of its members. If students want a support group and not an activist group then so be it, and vice versa.” Even if the organization of meetings feels sloppy or aimless, the students should drive the clubs.

Advisors see the clubs as providing a collective face that shows that the rights of LGBTQ students matter and are recognized by school administration.

The challenges perceived to be faced by LGBTQ youth in the Midlands case are similar to the challenges faced by youth nation wide. They all stem from the previously mentioned issues of visibility and homophobic attitudes. Challenges include negative speech, some bullying, prejudice and comments made by faculty members, religious-based persecution, sexual education, isolation, transgender bathroom privileges, poor student leadership, and unfair treatment from administrations. Most of the advisors reported very little bullying at their schools; they do not say it does not exist, they just say that the climate at their schools is improving slowly, and that if bullying is taking place it is not often reported. Several advisors reported that negative speech such as anti-LGBTQ slurs, negative comments, and the ever-pervasive expression, “That’s so gay” continue to be heard from students as well as teachers and administrators, as reported by M2. Being

bombarded with hurtful speech from peers is difficult enough, but to have people in positions of power who are supposed to protect you participate in insulting you would make school unbearable for anyone. There were a few instances of bullying reported by this group of advisors, but many of the stories shared ended positively with either straight allies standing up to bullies or youth who had been empowered by their association with GSAs who felt comfortable enough to stand up to adult bullies and demand action. While bullying of any kind is reprehensible, it is encouraging to know that some youth are standing up for their rights because of the support they receive from GSAs. Another challenge addressed by M3 was LGBTQ representation in the curriculum, specifically for South Carolina sexual education, which excludes LGBTQ youth who are left, “ostracized and ignorant about sex.” Isolation is a common challenge faced by LGBTQ students, which supports the need for GSAs in high schools. It is hard enough to find your place in the complex social system that makes up adolescence. When you add marginalizing factors such as identity or sexual orientation, the isolation can become deadly. For many youth, like M4, the GSA, or other youth group in their case, can be the only place where these young people feel that they belong. Also with the information provided by M4, transgender rights and needs are becoming more and more necessary to discuss as youth become more comfortable with who they are. The fact that high schools in parts of South Carolina are already discussing restrooms for transgender youth is an encouraging step, but also a cause for concern. The school that is looking in to this is in a suburban area of the capital city. What happens to the transgender student in a small, rural high school of only six hundred students with no GSA supposed to do? A very common challenge brought up by the advisors was poor student leadership. While I have experienced this

first hand with my own GSA, I learned that it takes time to foster leadership skills.

Advisors have to guide students on how to be leaders, provide them with opportunities to grow, and let them make mistakes. Just like in the classes we teach, we have to model the product that we want students to become, and then show them how to get there. Finally, administrations were reported to be everything from fully supportive, to supportive in lip service only, to pretty unsupportive, as reported by M2. While M2 has forged a working relationship with their administration over time, there are still instances where support is not evident, such as shutting down any type of school wide awareness celebrations, or in the case of M5, who cannot get the administration to give them a club account for supplies and other expenses.

The advisors in the Midlands reported very little student-to-student bullying, or isolated incidents. They all reported that students are isolated and endure verbal abuse or harassment. The surprising stories were about adult bullying and discrimination of students by school faculty or staff. M1 reported that a cafeteria worker “preached” at a student about their “sin.” Other incidents that were reported were negative comments by students and teachers when GSA announcements were made on the school news show. One advisor reported that the desire for activism was lessened after an administrator shut down the group’s Ally Week table. Of course the stories shared by M2 about the administrator and of the teachers and substitute shared by M5 were very disheartening, as well.

The advisors provided mixed perceptions of success by their GSAs in contributing to fewer instances of bullying. M1 and M2 felt that their groups were making some progress. M1 described the student body as more accepting, but that some

forms of bullying such as negative speech were still prevalent. M2 was the most optimistic of the group, saying that there were fewer bullying instances, and a more accepting student body. M3, M4, and M5 were more pessimistic about the success of their groups. They did not report that bullying was increasing or prevalent, but they described the groups as more stagnant with regards to education, advocacy, and visibility. M5 even reported that their co-advisors did not feel comfortable talking to other faculty members about creating a more LGBT-friendly faculty. The stagnancy of some groups was attributed to weak student leadership, and if students do not initiate activities, they cannot be done. While some advisors do not feel that the GSAs are actively contributing to fewer instances of bullying, like the literature reports, most advisors feel that their existence sends a message of acceptance and lack of tolerance for aggressions to the school. One advisor who has a heart for activism and social justice was the only advisor who did not feel that a GSA presence alone was sufficient to reduce or eliminate bullying. Positive experiences shared by these advisors highlighted the positive effects the GSAs are having in their schools as support groups. M1 reported that their GSA is planning a safe haven campaign, similar to the safe space campaign, for students who need support or a “buddy”. M2 reported on the support given to a former student came out to their pastor and was told that they should kill themselves. M3 shared about the support their group received from the state equality organization as they were getting started. Even if these groups are not perceived to be actively combatting bullying through activism, they are making a difference in their schools as support for LGBTQ youth.

As reported above, some advisors from this group did not perceive their groups as being very successful in contributing to fewer instances of bullying or discrimination.

However, they reported that their groups are making efforts. For instance, M1 mentioned the safe haven initiative in their school. Their group is also partnering with another club in the school that focuses on anti-bullying to conduct acceptance assemblies. M2 discussed their close network of supporting staff in guidance and some administrators who act on any reports of bullying, and their collaborative meetings once a month with other GSAs in their district. M3 listed the different awareness celebrations that their group has participated in in the past, and M4 and M5 reported that they provide support for students when they need it. The different groups participate in different ways to make their schools more accepting and safe for their members and all students, as well as attempt to educate their members and student bodies about the challenges faced by LGBTQ youth.

Upstate Case Analysis

My conversations with the Upstate GSA advisors provided perspectives and experiences that were unlike those from other cases. Three themes emerged through the data provided by these advisors as possible influences on their perspectives, identity, personal experiences, and geography. Both advisors identify within the LGBTQ spectrum, so they have first hand knowledge of what their members go through on a daily basis. This empathy can help the advisors provide even more support to students, and their knowledge of other resources can provide more variety in the services and education offered to their members. The personal experiences shared by both advisors are also influences that affect their roles. US1 shared about dealing with hurtful, offensive words and actions by students. While they have the coping mechanisms in place to deal with them, and they minimize them as small blips, they still hurt. The journey of US2 to

become comfortable enough with themselves to come out publicly and to be courageous enough to stand up for the rights of their LGBTQ students are experiences that will serve as a model for their students. Geography, and the conservative mindset that makes up the culture of South Carolina were both mentioned by the Upstate advisors. US1 criticized the conservative ideology of the state and expressed little faith in change when discussing the sexual education curriculum and the measures that would need to take place to enact comprehensive protection of LGBTQ youth through policy change. US2 described the student population of their school as being from many different areas of the country because of the proximity to a large city. Their perception of the school climate is that diversity in backgrounds and the shared experience of being new to a school has made it more accepting.

Both advisors described the overall climate at their schools as mostly supportive and with few, if any, instances of bullying of which they were aware. Two issues emerged as being faced by the LGBTQ students that they advise, a need for support and negative attitudes towards the LGBTQ community. Both advisors are aware that there are students in need around them. These students need support, not only at school, but at home, as well. They described students who are not supported by their parents, and for whom the GSA serves as a place where they belong and matter. US2 mentioned the student who would have to sneak away to attend a gay pride festival because their parents would never support or allow that to happen. US1 described students who do not attend the GSA, but who talk to them about their lives and what they are going through. US2 did not mention negative attitudes at their school, but their experiences with them in the past, or incidents that they have heard about, coupled with their relative newness to their role

as advisor, have had them living in fear of being themselves, of advocating for their students, and of talking about issues that are important to them. Fortunately, they have begun to face their fears, and have come out to their students and colleagues and advocated for starting their GSA. US1 has faced negative speech and insults towards them, and described a student being verbally harassed at a performance event. These issues describe the underlying issue of homophobic attitudes that must be faced in order to see progress and eliminate the challenges that emerge from them.

The advisors for this case see their first role as one of supporter. This is the priority for them. US1 described how they specifically sought out a guest speaker to talk about self-harm because of the cut marks they had seen on a student. They are also providing suicide resources geared to LGBTQ youth to the guidance department because they were not aware of them, and there were two suicide events in their school. US2 told me about how they see their role as providing the social support needed by their members so that they know that they belong and are important. Another aspect of the advisor role that emerged based on the stories of US1 is the role of motivator. Weak student leadership has left this advisor frustrated enough to allow the club to go inactive. They described how they have to, at times, motivate their group to participate in activities and how they have tried to think of creative ways to create interest in the club.

The Upstate advisors described a few challenges faced by their LGBTQ students. There were no challenges that emerged as common between the two leaders. US2 decided to provide a strictly social group, and did not report any types of bullying in their school so the types of challenges reported by other advisors either do not exist or are not an issue with their group. They reported a flier being torn down once or twice, but did not

consider that a big problem. US1 discussed several challenges that both they and their students face. First, there were some instances of negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people which manifested themselves as insults towards the young man at the poetry slam event, the advisor being called derogatory names, and negative speech by students in classrooms. US1 stated that they were isolated incidents and not indicative of the general climate of the school. Another challenge discussed by the advisor is how to meet the needs of the students when they do not participate in the GSA. They described how students in their classes or with whom they have other connections and do not attend meetings talk to them about their home life, which is not always supported. There have been suicides in the student body, and others who are self-harming. This advisor has tried to offer other ways of support such as providing LGBTQ specific suicide information to the guidance department, and having specialized guest speakers for GSA meetings. The guest speaker series has increased attendance, but US1 is not sure the momentum will last due to the inconsistent member attendance over the years. US1 also mentioned isolated instances of discriminatory treatment of the GSA and LGBTQ students by faculty and administration. While it is not repeated, and US1 feels mostly supported by the administration, these actions have put them on alert and watching how other clubs are treated within the school. US1 mentioned two other challenges that affect them as advisor, or the sustainability of their club. They are poor student leadership, and low participation in the GSA. A lack of leadership has a domino effect on the both the advisor and the club. If leadership is not seeking out opportunities to engage the members, they do not attend. If they do not attend meetings, there is no GSA and a system of support disappears for the LGBTQ students in the school. Poor leadership also puts responsibility

on the advisor to provide content or to insert themselves into the club in ways that are not permitted by most district policies.

Neither leader reported knowing about instances of bullying in their schools. They do not feel that it has been eradicated, but they both feel that the climate of the schools are accepting due to different reasons. US1 reported isolated incidents faced by themselves and some students, but shared that most of the difficulties that their students discuss with them are related to home life, and not bullying. Of course, one advisor cannot be everywhere their students are at all times. It is possible that bullying is taking place at school, or online, but it is either not being reported, or has been reduced.

US1 felt as though the existence of the GSA is very necessary in schools, and that the existence of the club does send a message that contributes to less bullying. It does not succeed alone, however. They felt that a supportive faculty also contributes in tandem with the GSA to contribute to fewer instances of aggression. They shared how members of their faculty participate in the safe space initiative and discussed the LGBTQ themed books and resources procured by their media specialist. This type of support sends a message to both LGBTQ and straight students that these students matter and are a recognized part of the school community.

For US1, when they can get their GSA members to participate, they have tried to raise awareness of LGBTQ issues through national campaigns. For the most part, the clubs themselves are not actively contributing to fewer instances of bullying except by existing.

The Upstate case did not provide as rich a description of how their GSAs contribute to fewer instances of bullying as expected. However, important information

emerged about the school climates faced by some LGBTQ students in the area. More importantly, the fact that other GSAs have existed, but have gone inactive is a cause for concern as another possibility for increased rates of discrimination and bullying or harassment in South Carolina.

Comparative Case Analysis

The concepts of identity or sexual orientation, gender, geography, and personal experiences have been examined in each case as possible influences on study participants with regards to their role as advisor. The concepts that emerged across the cases were identity and sexual orientation, personal experiences, and geography. How one identifies or their sexual orientation is a private, individual matter that many adults in the education field keep to themselves for various reasons. Of the eleven participants in the current study, all volunteered this information, and each of the faculty advisors who shared it are open about it at work. This openness certainly influences how they advise their GSAs by allowing them to more easily relate to the challenges that LGBTQ students in their schools are facing. They have the opportunity and choice to share about their experiences and feelings about their journeys as LGBTQ youth, themselves, and to serve as role models for their students. Being members of the community, they also have knowledge of resources in the local and national community that they can share with their GSAs and other members of their school communities, such as guidance counselors. Being open also comes with challenges. Teachers, in general, are observed very carefully in this age of accountability. LGBTQ teachers face even more scrutiny because of entrenched cultural homophobia, so a feeling of unease would be expected. The advisors are comfortable in their environments based on their perceived administrative and collegial

support. However, at times, they shared challenges that they have faced because of their orientation. Some mentioned colleagues that will not speak to them, and others have faced more hurtful challenges such as US1 being verbally insulted by students or having a slur carved into their door. LC2 also described being asked by a parent if they talked about it (their sexuality) in class, and being accused by another parent of failing their daughter because they (the teacher) were gay. For the most part, however, these advisors did not report any negative backlash to their own identity, which allows them to focus on the most important thing, supporting their students.

Personal experiences serve as useful tools in many aspects of daily life from decision making to how one relates to others. The experiences of faculty advisors of GSAs add an element to the role of advisor that can be of benefit to the club and its members. The advisors in the current study shared both positive and negative stories about what they have experienced that influence their advisor role. Expert A shared about their experience in growing up in a conservative, southern state, and how the fact that their younger brother is still growing up in that environment pushes them to make changes to make life better for LGBTQ youth in South Carolina. LC 1 shared the inspiring story about how their school came together in support of their transgender son in the formation of their GSA, something that bonded them, and connected them in their activist work for LGBTQ rights. M2 shared how the experience of how students facing discrimination by adults in their school strengthened their resolve to be educated on the laws allowing the formation of GSAs and to stand up for the rights of their students within the legal limits allowed. The experiences of these courageous adults have influenced the ways that they interact with students, faculty, and administrations to

improve the lives of LGBTQ students in their schools. Another concept that spanned across the cases as an influence on the advisor role is geography, specifically, the culture of South Carolina, which is characterized as religious and ideologically conservative. Every participant described the climate of South Carolina as negative towards LGBTQ people, in general. This climate is a result of the underlying issue of homophobia that manifests itself through many different challenges. This cultural attitude presents challenges to how these adults serve as GSA advisors. LC2 described complaints that had been made to the school about the existence of the GSA by parents and other faculty members to the principal, while M2 described the culture of South Carolina as one that bullies in many different ways if one does not conform to the accepted norms. One expert, and a few advisors expressed their knowledge, also, that South Carolina is a right to work state, and that teachers could be fired for serving as an advisor to a GSA.

One issue spans all of the cases involved in the current study. The core issue of negative attitudes towards people who identify as LGBTQ manifests itself in many challenges that are faced by LGBTQ youth across the United States. In South Carolina, this issue is magnified by a culture that is characterized as conservative and has a strong association with religion. The ways in which school is organized favors heteronormative practices that marginalize these youth further and contribute to an overall negative, hegemonic school experience, as well as the possibility of many negative results such as bullying, harassment, isolation, truancy, low academic achievement, and even suicide.

Another issue that emerged is recognition. For many schools without GSAs, a lack of recognition of their LGBTQ students leaves them without a support system. These students can feel like second-class citizens in an environment that makes them invisible

and whose mission is to prepare them for a world that often does not accept them. In schools with a GSA, the issue of recognition is a double-edged sword. While official recognition of the clubs sends a message to the school and community that these young people are acknowledged by administrations with the right to exist at times, with administrative support, but at others as compliance with the law, there is also a negative side. Recognition also brings more attention to the groups. This attention also brings LGBTQ issues into the consciousness of homophobic people who would rather ignore or lash out at them. While recognition is mostly beneficial to GSAs and LGBTQ youth, it can also incite more aggression or negativity.

Overwhelmingly, participants agreed that the role of the GSA is to offer a safe place of non-judgmental support for LGBTQ students and their allies in which they can be themselves and interact with similar or like-minded people. This is the first priority of GSA, according to Expert A and virtually every faculty advisor. The type of support that is provided by the GSA varies depending on the needs and wishes of the students. Some advisors felt that the clubs should offer support and be more of a social space so that students can be themselves. Others felt that offering education and discussion of events that are happening, or issues that are important are an integral part to the GSA role. Still others felt that varying degrees of activism or community service should be the role of the GSA. Each is an important aspect of what a GSA is, and there is no correct combination. As long as a safe, supportive space is provided for LGBTQ students, they should decide what type of organization they want. Another role of the GSA that was mentioned is not a goal of most clubs, but serves a more secondary role. This role is that

the existence of the GSA in schools disrupts strictly heteronormative environments and forces there to be conversations about the rights of LGBTQ youth.

Across the cases a host of challenges were mentioned. Virtually all of the challenges are results of the underlying issue of negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people. According to participants, the most common challenge faced by LGBTQ youth in schools today is harassing and offensive slurs and speech. Offensive slurs or name-calling are often, but not always directed at LGBTQ youth. Straight students also use them as insults. Expressions such as, “that’s so gay” or referring to someone as being “butt hurt” are often used by straight students in everyday conversations, but are extremely offensive to LGBTQ students around them. Even teachers have been guilty of using hurtful speech. Inconsistent treatment or support from administrations is another challenge that was described by several advisors. Most administrations are aware that they cannot legally refuse a GSA to form, though some have needed reminders. Problems have emerged with how GSAs are supported through the refusal to allow participation in some activities, asking that the club name be changed, refusal to provide a financial account for the club, discriminatory treatment of LGBTQ students as reported by M2, and inconsistent treatment of school clubs. Some administrations were reported as being supportive, as well, but fully supportive ones are less common. Adult discrimination was a surprising revelation of the study. The number of teachers and administrators who say hurtful things to and about LGBTQ students was an unexpected challenge that was reported in several cases. Negative comments by teachers and administrators, the ignoring of advisors in the hallway, and the targeting of LGBTQ couples who are showing affection while ignoring straight couples that are doing the same thing are

reprehensible acts of discrimination by people who are supposed to be preparing all students to be successful in the world. Several participants mentioned a challenge that would certainly help in combatting the underlying issue of homophobic attitudes if it were addressed. That challenge is the lack of inclusive curriculum across content areas. One advisor mentioned how they make parallels to the negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people through history lessons and highlighting the many groups who have faced discrimination. The most discussed curriculum that needs inclusive representation was of sexual education in South Carolina. Advisors felt strongly that this must be addressed, but none had faith that it would be due to the strong conservative attitudes in the state. Closely related to the need for curricular inclusion, experts and advisors strongly felt that comprehensive protection of LGBTQ youth through policy that protects them based on how they identify, and their sexual orientation is necessary, but again, something that will take a long time to become reality.

Challenges that were also mentioned by a few advisors, but did not emerge as major trends across the cases include LGBTQ youth acceptance in their schools and homes, isolation from other students, being viewed as victims through national awareness campaigns and discussions on bullying, meeting the needs of all LGBTQ students since for some groups participation is an issue, weak student leadership, low group interest and activity, and a lack of goals or vision. As Expert B said, discrimination is not going away, so these challenges must be addressed.

Surprisingly, most participants felt that student to student bullying at their schools was not a big problem. Several mentioned isolated events of harassment or aggression, such as the vandalism of cars or the young man who wanted to wear female clothing to

school. Every advisor did not want to say that bullying did not exist, but that they were hearing no reports of incidents, or that they were very rare. Some advisors suggested that cyberbullying could be occurring, as well, but that basically nothing was being reported to them. This trend bodes well for schools that have GSAs and supports the literature that states that they do contribute to fewer instances of bullying. The most common things that advisors reported being said by their groups were that verbal harassment and offensive speech were still very common. Two other trends emerged from this data with regards to bullying. First, the amount of teacher participation in verbal harassment or offensive speech is shockingly high. According to its definition, this is a form of adult to student bullying. Related to that, the amount of student to teacher bullying, for advisors who are out, is also higher than expected, though none of them considered it a problem. Second, all advisors agreed that the statistics on bullying and harassment from the GLSEN report could not be coming from high schools with GSAs. Everyone agreed that the data must be coming from schools or areas of the state that do not have a GSA or support system for LGBTQ students, of which there are many.

Every case considered the groups successful in contributing to fewer instances of bullying due to their existence. While eradicating bullying is not the universal goal of GSAs, both the literature, and the advisors felt that the presence of the GSA in their schools sends a message to the student body and the community that these young people exist, that they are important, and protected by adults. This message has been successful in the schools, as the advisors have reported few to any instances of bullying. They described their school climates as mostly positive and accepting, with the exception of the negative speech mentioned previously. Advisors shared ways in which the GSAs

have been successful. The story that LC1 shared about the formation of the club how the coming out of their son brought the school together was inspirational. Another advisor shared how the school had become more accepting, and that even an out lesbian student had been elected Homecoming Queen, and several others mentioned how their faculties were embracing the offering of safe spaces so that the LGBTQ students in their schools would know that they were supported and had places to go if they needed to talk with someone. Other schools are looking into gender-neutral bathrooms and considering a public art show exhibiting the drag and transgender communities. Without these clubs, everyone believed that the school climates would not be the same.

The consistent theme that emerged from the cases with regards to how GSAs are contributing to fewer instances of bullying and discrimination is the existence of the clubs. The fact that they exist, as mentioned before, sends the message that the LGBTQ youth population in schools is recognized. It also gives the group a visible presence of public solidarity. Each group has its own model of functioning and meeting the needs of its members. They all contribute in some manner of awareness or education by participating in national awareness campaigns, and several of them have initiated safe space campaigns in their schools in conjunction with supporting faculty members. These contributions increase the visibility of the clubs and force conversations to be had about LGBTQ issues. The increased visibility of support for these young people gives them more opportunities to talk with someone in the club or in one of the safe spaces if they have a need. This visible support shows those with negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people that negativity is not accepted in an increasing number of spaces. Some clubs have made connections with other clubs in their school or with other departments like

guidance to increase the base of support and resources that can be shared with members. While some advisors did not feel that the contributions of their groups is making a difference, even if the contribution is as small as knowing that a GSA exists in a school, we are moving forward.

Findings by Theme

Perceived Role of GSAs

Queer theory seeks to dismantle heteronormative notions and labels that force LGBTQ youth into fixed categories and to empower them to be more knowledgeable and resistant to the oppression of heterosexism (Love & Tosolt, 2013; Meyer, Chapter 1, 2011;). Mayo states that queer theory has helped to blur the lines of identity categories, and that GSAs have been instrumental in providing students a way to work through their complicated identity development (2004). Mayo also provided a helpful connection between queer theory and GSAs as spaces that confront heteronormativity and identity categories that are forced upon LGBTQ students. Advisors of GSAs in South Carolina high schools express unanimous support for the positive effects of GSAs on students and school climates. Without a GSA, students who faced discrimination, as described by M2 may not have had the courage or empowerment to stand up for themselves.

Last year I had a student, a woman who's a lesbian. She was graduating, and she was walking down the hall, and she's a tough cookie, but she made it. She's graduating. She had some gang problems when she was younger, but she made it through. She's one of my kids, a fabulous young lady. She's walking down the hall with one of her friends, and one of our administrators said to her, as she was carrying a cup of coffee, and that's against the rules, he said, 'You know better

than that. You know not to have that cup of coffee.’ She smart-mouthed him, which she shouldn’t, but she does that, and he said, ‘Yeah, and you’re dressing like a man, pretending you’re a man.’ She turned around and said, ‘What did you just say?’ He said, ‘I didn’t say anything.’ There were people that heard, people that witnessed it.

Roles of the GSA as described by Griffin et al. (2003) include counseling and support, “safe space”, primary source of education on LGBT issues, and being a part of broader school efforts for educating about LGBT issues. Faculty advisors echoed these roles, with activism as another that was of interest. Every participant stressed that the main role of the GSA is of support. After that mutual agreement, however, opinions diverged, at times on other roles for the clubs. Some advisors wanted to see a more activist role for the club, while others wanted to see more educational, and others preferred to have a club that only served as social or therapeutic role. M4 stated, “I think it should exist to fill the needs of its members. If students want a support group and not an activist group then so be it, and vice versa.”

Findings by Theme

Issues Faced by LGBTQ Students in South Carolina

The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure (Bell, 2000, p. 21). South Carolina GSA advisor perspectives revealed two issues and several challenges that LGBTQ students face. These issues and challenges are not only faced by South Carolina

youth, but from around the world. What makes these issues and challenges more difficult to face is the conservative climate of society and the heteronormative environments that make up schools. GSAs help LGBTQ students to navigate these issues of negative attitudes and recognition that are the root of a multitude of challenges. The injustices that these students face are the reason that GSAs have been formed, and that so many more still need to be formed. M2 discussed recognition of the GSA, stating that another, “purpose is to give a face, I guess there's power in numbers, so to give this group of individuals a face for the rest of the school to see so that they can, I guess, represent but not represent in isolation”. The challenges that were mentioned by advisor participants support prior literature on LGBTQ youth. The most common challenge mentioned by participants was negative speech and expressions, a phenomenon that continues to be a daily experience for many, similar to the studies of Athanases and Comar (2008), and Poteat and DiGiovanni (2010).

Findings by Theme

Issues Faced by GSA Advisors in South Carolina

In their 2006 study, Adams and Carson described the experience of a heterosexual, male teacher who served as a faculty GSA sponsor. Through his role of GSA advisor, the teacher became more aware of the difficulties that are faced by LGBTQ youth, even critiquing the dominant, abstinence-based sexual education curriculum. They also mentioned that many teachers who identify as LGBTQ do not come forward for fear of losing their jobs, therefore denying students a positive role model. It can also be a lonely, thankless job as these adults are often the “grown up” face of the club, and must

face negative comments, inquiries into their own private lives, and accusations. Valenti and Campbell (2009) presented a qualitative study in which they examined the motivation and decision-making processes of adults who choose to serve as GSA advisors. The study presented GSA advisors as genuinely caring and concerned for the interests of young people, but that local contexts can influence their decision to accept the role.

Faculty advisors of GSAs played an important role in this study, as they assisted in shedding light on injustices faced by LGBTQ students in South Carolina high schools. Meyer (2011) discussed the historical beginnings of critical theory by the Frankfurt School, and how their work expanded to, “understand oppression, alienation, and inequality in society on many other levels”

While this study focused on GSAs and the challenges faced by LGBTQ youth, the theme of challenges faced by faculty advisors emerged, as well. This theme includes the openness of advisors about their sexual orientation, and discrimination that they face. Some advisors, who do not hide their orientation have faced discrimination from students such as being called offensive names, and having insults carved in to their classroom door. Another was the object of parental discrimination, being accused of failing a child because they are gay. While neither of the advisors elaborated on the situations and said that they just reported them and moved on, dealing with them had to have been difficult, and another example of how anti-LGBTQ sentiment is still an entrenched issue that must be addressed.

Findings by Theme

Perceived Effects of GSAs on Bullying

Another theme that emerged from the data is that the physical aggression form of bullying is perceived by GSA faculty advisors to be less, in part, due to the presence of a GSA. This supports the literature on the positive effects of the GSA (Mayberry et al., 2011). Advisors were sure to state that they did not believe that bullying had been eliminated, but that they were not hearing of any reports. Advisors believe that bullying may be occurring and not being reported, or that it could be taking place off school grounds, or even taking the form of cyberbullying. In an essay on social justice, Tatum (2000) provided a description of the power relationship between oppressed groups and their dominant oppressors. She described a sort of reverse cognizance between dominants and subordinates in that the subordinates are well informed about the experiences of the dominants because theirs is the history that is taught in schools, but the dominants know little to nothing about the subordinates. She also described how subordinates often have to be aware of the dominants attitudes, moods and actions in order to protect themselves. In their case, survival may mean not reacting to social injustice.

Surprisingly, most participants felt that student to student bullying at their schools was not a big problem. Several mentioned isolated events of harassment or aggression, such as the vandalism of cars or the young man who wanted to wear female clothing to school. Every advisor did not want to say that bullying did not exist, but that they were hearing no reports of incidents, or that they were very rare. Some advisors suggested that cyberbullying could be occurring, as well, but that basically nothing was being reported to them. This trend bodes well for schools that have GSAs and supports the literature that

states that they do contribute to fewer instances of bullying. The most common things that advisors reported being said by their groups were that verbal harassment and offensive speech were still very common. Two other trends emerged from this data with regards to bullying. First, the amount of teacher participation in verbal harassment or offensive speech is shockingly high. According to its definition, this is a form of adult to student bullying. Related to that, the amount of student to teacher bullying, for advisors who are out, is also higher than expected, though none of them considered it a problem. Second, all advisors agreed that the statistics on bullying and harassment from the GLSEN report could not be coming from high schools with GSAs. Everyone agreed that the data must be coming from schools or areas of the state that do not have a GSA or support system for LGBTQ students, of which there are many.

Findings by Theme

Silence due to Entrenched Homophobic Attitudes

Meyer devoted time in reporting the historical beginnings of critical theory by the Frankfurt School, and how their work expanded to, “understand oppression, alienation, and inequality in society on many other levels” (Meyer, 2011, p. 12). She also mentioned Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, defined as how a dominant group is so successful in projecting its systems or views that they are accepted as normal by the oppressed group. In other words, heteronormativity creates hegemony. The heteronormativity reinforced by school life demonstrates to both heterosexual and LGBTQ youth that traditional gender expression is the correct and accepted way to behave. LGBTQ students have grown up with this heteronormativity and for the most part accept and participate in the hegemony.

Another theme that emerged from the data, as well as other parts of the study, is silence. Silence was an important part of the study before it even began. First, the hegemony created by heteronormative school environments silences the voice of LGBTQ youth, depriving them of truly participating in the school community. M2 described the effects of hegemony on their members with regards to the reporting of bullying incidents stating, “If it's not reported, unfortunately some of our kids are so used to it that they're just like, ‘Yeah, whatever,’ and they don't say anything. I think the more they report it, though, the better it is because we can keep on top of it more.

Expert B echoed this lack of recognition in schools, mentioning how when GSAs are recognized, it is bringing affirmative attention to a group that was formerly invisible in both policy and the whole institution. Where GSAs exist, education and empowerment can occur, returning the voice to members to stand up to discrimination, as previously described by M2. This silence is further supported by the lack of support and resources for LGBTQ students across South Carolina. When researching in which schools GSAs are located, only schools in urban or suburban areas publicized having a GSA on their lists of clubs. There are over three hundred public high schools in South Carolina, and using the delimitations of club name, and definition of high school, there were only twenty schools that qualified for the study. The other school districts did not indicate a GSA on their website or their GSA goes by another name. A lack of GSAs in so many schools further supports the heteronormative environments that so many LGBTQ students must face on a daily basis. The biannual GLSEN National School Climate surveys repeatedly recommends that South Carolina must commit to improving the school experience for LGBTQ students through supporting GSAs (GLSEN, 2014). The

lack of participation by rural districts is partly due to the silence that exists in the many schools, urban, suburban, and rural, that do not have a GSA presence.

Another example of the theme of silence due to homophobic attitudes that exists towards LGBTQ students comes from the school districts approached for the study. I contacted the school districts of schools that qualified for study participation in order to inform them of the study, and to seek permission to use their email or phone systems to contact faculty GSA advisors. Most districts never returned my requests for research. This silence speaks about the community attitudes towards LGBTQ issues in the districts, connecting heteronormative school environments to school administrations and the larger community. Students in South Carolina truly have little to no support everywhere they turn. Two other school districts refused my inquiry to contact their adult faculty members, stating that my study was not of benefit to their district, and that it was not in line with the core mission of their district. This surprising refusal perpetuates the silencing of LGBTQ youth in the local high schools of these districts, and depriving them of being represented by the few faculty GSA advisors in the districts. Institutional discrimination, whether it be overt or engrained in the setup of schools, and climates, indicates that South Carolina has much work to do in addressing the underlying issue of homophobic attitudes towards LGBTQ people.

Transition Statement

The current study examined the issues that are important to or being faced by LGBTQ students in South Carolina, and if and how bullying affects them. It also examined if high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina are helping to reduce or eliminate aggression against LGBTQ students. The perceptions of faculty advisors of GSAs gave a

different perspective on this problem, from those who work closely with LGBTQ students and their straight allies in the schools where bullying is taking place.

The phenomenological, ethnographic, collective case study examined GSA faculty advisor and expert perspectives in suburban settings in three geographical regions of South Carolina using the qualitative research methods of open-ended questionnaires, face-to-face interviews. A constant comparative technique was used to analyze data in two cycles of coding that resulted in emergent themes. Data was triangulated through verification of questionnaire data through interview questions, member checking of interview transcripts, and the use of field notes and research journaling. Themes that emerged from the study data included the perceived role of GSAs, issues faced by both LGBTQ youth and adult faculty GSA advisors, the perceived effects of GSAs on bullying, and silence due to entrenched homophobic attitudes towards LGBTQ people. LGBTQ students in South Carolina face negative attitudes and homophobia that perpetuate heteronormative environments in schools, creating hegemony with which most LGBTQ youth live with without questioning. This negative attitude is manifested through many challenges that these students must face on a daily basis in their school experience. Another theme that emerged from faculty advisor perspectives on the role of the GSA is support. Participants felt that support of GSA members is the main role of the club, and that other functions are important, but secondary. The main challenges faced by LGBTQ students, according to advisor perspectives, are negative speech, negative attitudes by some faculty and administrators, inclusive curriculum, comprehensive policy protection, and isolation. With regards to bullying, the theme that emerged is that in schools with a GSA, fewer instances of bullying are occurring or are not being reported. Advisors felt

that the existence of the GSA in their schools and its varying degrees of activity make them successful in contributing to fewer instances of aggression and contribute to an overall more accepting school climate. Chapter five will explain the implications of the study results.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Remember how far you've come, not just how far you have to go. You are not where you want to be, but neither are you where you used to be. ~Rick Warren

Introduction

Bullying, harassment, and aggression towards LGBTQ youth are an unfortunate reality in South Carolina schools. This phenomenological, ethnographic, collective case study examined the issues that are being faced by LGBTQ students in South Carolina high school GSAs through the perspectives of their faculty advisors, how bullying affects these students, and to see if high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina are helping to reduce or eliminate aggression against LGBTQ students through the lenses of Queer and Critical Theories and within a framework of social justice. Queer theory seeks to dismantle heteronormative notions and labels that force LGBTQ youth into fixed categories and to empower them to be more knowledgeable and resistant to the oppression of heterosexism (Love & Tosolt, 2013; Meyer, 2011, Chapter 1). Critical theory highlights an injustice, and seeks to bring it to the consciousness of the public, offering suggestions for correcting the injustice. In examining the perspectives of GSA sponsors to illuminate the struggles and issues that are important to the students with whom they work, and to determine if clubs are helping reduce bullying instances, the study brought to light the continued difficulties LGBTQ students face in schools, and the

lack of support that the majority of these students face in South Carolina due to the lack of a GSA at their school.

Research indicates that the presence of GSAs can help to reduce bullying in schools, yet a biennial report by GLSEN indicates that many LGBTQ youth report facing various forms of harassment and assault (GLSEN, 2014). The study answered the following research questions:

-What are the issues that faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina feel are important to, or being faced by LGBTQ members of their clubs?

-How do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive the role of the group in their schools?

-What challenges do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive as being faced by LGBTQ students and/or GSA members?

-What do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive as happening with bullying of LGBTQ students in their schools?

-How do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina perceive the success, or lack thereof, of their clubs in contributing to fewer instances of sexual identity discrimination or bullying?

-How do faculty sponsors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances in South Carolina feel that their clubs are contributing to fewer instances of sexual identity discrimination or bullying?

The collective case study examined GSA advisor perspectives in suburban settings in three geographical regions of South Carolina, as well as a fourth case composed of experts who work with LGBTQ issues, using the qualitative research

methods of open-ended questionnaires, and face-to-face and telephone interviews. Data were analyzed for each individual case before conducting a cross-case comparison. A constant comparative technique was used to analyze data in two cycles of coding that resulted in emergent themes.

Interpretation of Results

There were three concepts that emerged as phenomena that play a part in influencing faculty advisors in their roles. These influences include identity/sexual orientation, personal experiences, and geography. They impact how advisors relate to students, fellow faculty, and administrators in their every day lives, how they view the role of the GSA in their schools, their expectations for the model of how the clubs operate, access to resources, perceived success of the GSAs in reducing bullying and effect on school climate.

The issues of negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people and recognition (of GSAs and therefore LGBTQ students) that they face are not particular to South Carolina, but are magnified by entrenched cultural conservatism and ties to religion which is demonstrated through the codification of discrimination in laws, school policies, discrimination by faculty members, and attempts by unsupportive administrations to keep GSAs from forming or thriving. These issues are the root of many challenges that these youth, and sometimes, advisors face on a daily basis. While progress is slowly being made with the rights of LGBTQ people, the changing of negative attitudes towards them in South Carolina is considered to be a distant reality. Affirmative recognition of GSAs and LGBTQ youth is inconsistent in South Carolina, mostly occurring in urban or

suburban high schools that have GSAs. However, these schools are small in number. Most schools in the state do not have a GSA, and the voices of LGBTQ youth are silenced through a lack of support and heteronormative school environments. Negative recognition is much more common, and can occur in schools where LGBTQ students have no services, as well as schools that do have clubs. Recognition, while affirming, also brings further scrutiny and attention of those who do not value LGBTQ rights. This negative attention can, at times, lead to backlash in many forms, including harassment and bullying, as was reported by advisors in each case.

GSAs were defined as, “extracurricular groups in high schools that support and advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students” (Fetner and Kush, 2008, p. 114). They continued their definition in mentioning that GSAs are student-led, supportive of all identities, including heterosexual, and often serve to educate their schools and advocate for LGBTQ issues. Both expert and advisor participants cited providing a safe space and support as the main role of the GSA. There is no correct model that exists for what a GSA should look like or how it should operate. This should be based on the needs of the members, and should supersede the expectations and visions of advisors. While there are several models that exist such as a model of support, an activist group, an educating group, or a social group, the needs of each group is different, even from school year to school year. Student members should decide the type of group they wish to have, with the support and help from the faculty advisor. Regardless of the type of GSA chosen, the groups’ existence will disrupt heteronormative environments and both force recognition and create dialog about LGBTQ issues.

Challenges caused by the issues of negative attitudes towards LGBTQ youth and recognition are numerous, and shared with students across the United States. In South Carolina, faculty advisors of GSAs shared that the most common challenge faced by LGBTQ youth in schools today is harassing and offensive slurs and speech. Both fellow students and teachers have been reported as using negative language, contributing to other challenges, such as isolation and the need for the safe space and support provided by GSAs. Another challenge that faculty advisors reported is inconsistent treatment of GSAs by school administrations. Problems have emerged with how GSAs are supported through the refusal to allow participation in some activities such as nationwide awareness campaigns, asking that the club name be changed, refusal to provide a financial account for the club, discriminatory treatment of LGBTQ students, and inconsistent treatment of school clubs. Discrimination of LGBTQ youth and faculty advisors by adults is also a daily challenge, and include negative comments by teachers and administrators, the ignoring of advisors in the hallway, slurs aimed at advisors, and the targeting of LGBTQ couples who are showing affection while ignoring straight couples that are doing the same thing. The lack of inclusive curriculum is another challenge faced by LGBTQ youth. This challenge prevents students from learning about everything from LGBTQ contributors to all content areas, deprives them of having role models to emulate or learn from, and forces them to seek sexual education from other, not always correct or appropriate, sources. Finally, it is unanimously agreed upon that comprehensive protection of LGBTQ youth, including identity and sexual orientation, is necessary.

The challenges that result from homophobia are numerous, and can only be remedied by addressing the issues that serve as their root. Other challenges mentioned by

different advisors include LGBTQ youth acceptance in their schools and homes, isolation from other students, being viewed as victims through national awareness campaigns and discussions on bullying, meeting the needs of all LGBTQ students since for some groups participation is an issue, weak student leadership, low group interest and activity, and a lack of goals or vision.

At schools with GSAs, bullying is not a major challenge. GSA faculty advisors report that they do not think bullying is non-existent. Instead, they offer other rationales for the positive data. Advisors feel that if bullying is occurring, they are not hearing about instances, or they are not being reported. The advisors report mostly positive school climates and that bullying is either not occurring, or has occurred as isolated events during the existence of their GSA. The most common things that advisors report being said by their groups are that verbal harassment and offensive speech are still very common. Bullying is a generic term referring to negative experiences or feelings based on an unbalanced power dynamic in a social relationship. At high schools with GSAs in South Carolina, there are two other types of discrimination, which when compared to the definition of bullying, can be considered adult to child bullying, and child to adult bullying. First, the amount of teacher participation in verbal harassment or offensive speech is shockingly high. Second, the amount of student to teacher bullying, for advisors who are out, is also higher than expected, though none of them consider it a problem. Finally, all advisors agreed that the statistics on bullying and harassment from the GLSEN report could not be coming from high schools with GSAs. Everyone agreed that the data must be coming from schools or areas of the state that do not have a GSA or support system for LGBTQ students, of which there are many.

Faculty advisors of GSAs in South Carolina high schools consider their groups successful in contributing to fewer instances of bullying due to their existence. They described their school climates as mostly positive and supportive with the exception of negative speech. Without the GSAs, these descriptions would not be as positive.

GSAs are contributing to fewer instances of bullying and discrimination by existing in South Carolina high schools. The fact that they exist sends the message that the LGBTQ youth population in schools is recognized. It also gives the group a visible presence of public solidarity. They all contribute in some manner to awareness or education by participating in national campaigns, and several of them have initiated safe space campaigns in their schools in conjunction with supporting faculty members. These contributions increase the visibility of the clubs and force conversations to be had about LGBTQ issues. The increased visibility of support for these young people gives them more opportunities to talk with someone in the club or in one of the safe spaces if they have a need. This visible support shows those with negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people that negativity is not accepted in an increasing number of spaces.

Study Limitations

There were some limitations of the current study that must be mentioned for consideration. One limitation was that the study sought to find out about all GSAs in South Carolina. This was limited to the small number of clubs that exist currently, and by the participation of faculty advisors. Before contacting any district or advisor, I searched every website of every high school in South Carolina. This was to examine their list of clubs or student activity sites. The majority of high schools did not list a GSA as one of

their organizations. Limiting the study was the fact that there are some clubs in South Carolina high schools that serve the role of a GSA, yet do not include it in their name. For the current study, this limitation reduced the number of possible participants. Since the completion of data collection, and I began my work with the state coordinator of GSAs, more groups have formed, so my data are limited to faculty advisors who were able, and who agreed to participate at the time of participant solicitation. Another limitation of the study was that the data collected were the perspective of adult faculty sponsors and adult experts. Access to students for first-hand perspectives was not practical due to the ethical and safety challenges that come with working with youth and the tight security of schools, which makes getting access to student voices virtually impossible. In seeking the perspective of adults, a limitation was that their maturity and life experiences were different than that of the students living the experience of LGBTQ youth in high school. While the denial of access to students was an understood limitation, another limitation surfaced with regards to access to teachers. During the process of contacting school district research offices to request permission to contact faculty advisors for the study using district email or phone systems, two districts refused access altogether, stating in their response letters that the research was not beneficial to them. Two districts reported that they did not have enough GSA advisors in their schools, or had no active GSAs to warrant research in their systems. Finally, three other districts never responded back to my request to go through them to conduct research. This limitation had a negative impact on the study because when I researched schools with GSA clubs listed on their school club list, I only contacted districts in which those schools were located. Though frustrating for me as a researcher, I was more upset about

the advisors who were not afforded the opportunity to share what is happening with their LGBTQ students. A personal limitation of the study was time. I experienced some tragic loss and setback in my personal life, and lost an entire semester of time on the current study.

The study sought information about LGBTQ students who are bullied at school. This was a limitation for the study, as bullying is not only confined to the school building or the school day. Many students are victimized elsewhere, including cyberspace. An additional limitation to the study was that it relies on student reporting of being victimized. Unfortunately a true figure cannot be obtained, as many students do not report their experiences.

A final limitation for the study, and one of which I was aware and discuss safeguards against in chapter three, were my personal experiences as a member of the LGBTQ community, and as a faculty sponsor of the GSA at the school in which I work. My experiences in supporting the LGBT and straight allies in my own school community played a large part in my personal goal to improve the quality of services offered by GSAs and to improve the daily school experience of these students. In hearing these young people, who often use the GSA as an outlet for the distress and angst they feel about the challenges they face at school, tell their personal stories involving various negative encounters with other students and, at times teachers, shows that there is a problem and that the GSA is somehow not meeting all needs of those for whom it solely exists.

Implication of the Findings

The findings of the current study yielded implications for schools and communities, faculty advisors, non-advising faculty, current GSAs, and policy makers. These implications will be discussed, in detail, in another section. Change will not occur unless the underlying issue of homophobia is addressed at both the community and school levels. Schools are considered unfriendly spaces for LGBTQ youth. The safe space offered by a GSA or other entity such as a safe zone presented by GLSEN or the Human Rights Campaign are necessary parts of a school community, and help to create dialog about LGBTQ issues.

Faculty advisors must realize that they are not isolated. There are resources available in South Carolina that will help them find resources, provide support for their members, and make connections to other advisors and GSAs in their areas for networking and even more support. In most schools, advisors must perform their role with a *laissez faire* approach, providing only support and guidance to resources or ideas. Advisors must be careful not to impose their own vision or goal for the GSA, but rather, allow the group to decide its purpose and goals each year. In order to help the club better meet its goals and purpose, advisors should provide guidance or possibly select students with strong leadership characteristics or potential. Non-advising faculty must be included in dialog about LGBTQ issues, as well as offered training about how their actions and speech can negatively impact students.

Current GSAs serve a powerful and important role in schools. These clubs must continue to exist in some form to provide support for LGBTQ youth and their allies in

South Carolina high schools. The clubs can function in a variety of ways, but should be student-lead, as stated in the club policies of most school districts. In order for these groups to continue to be able to support all students, they should make the conscious decision of what model to follow, and set goals each year. They should also look for ways to connect with other GSAs in their area, or LGBTQ friendly clubs within their schools in order to increase support of them, as well as collaborate with other LGBTQ youth.

Policy makers must address the needs of all of their constituents, including the LGBTQ population. True protection will not occur until comprehensive anti-bullying policy is enacted that covers all youth, including identity and sexual orientation. Opportunities for addressing the problem of bullying incidents not being reported must also be addressed. An additional implication is that recognition of the LGBTQ population must also occur through inclusive curriculum that includes a broad spectrum of contributors, including LGBTQ people, as well as educated LGBTQ youth on correct sexual education. Finally, currently, many businesses and state divisions are making efforts to increase diversity awareness through sensitivity or diversity training. The field of K-12 education has not benefited from training such as this, which would be beneficial to many, not just LGBTQ youth.

A final implication of the findings is that the many high schools in South Carolina that do not benefit from the existence of a GSA, for whatever reason, must have one.

Methodological Limitations

Limitations to the study methodology occurred in sampling procedures, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis, and emerged due to both the research design and the execution of the study. Limitations to participant selection began before the study with local school district approval to contact faculty advisors. As mentioned before, some school districts refused approval, some gave approval, and others did not respond to my request. If there was a GSA in a school district that did not give approval, the advisors were contacted at their personal email addresses to solicit participation. Another limitation to the research design regarding sampling procedures was the original design of the cases. Originally, the cases for the current study were based on three South Carolina regions, provided by the South Carolina government website: the Lowcountry, the Midlands, and the Upstate, in addition to an expert case. Within each region, four participants were sought who advise GSA clubs. Two advisors of GSAs located in urban communities, and two advisors of GSAs located in non-urban communities for each region were expected to serve as participants, totaling twelve advisors. I addressed the possibility of having to alter the case design due to advisor participation in chapter three. This, indeed, had to be done because there were no participants from urban or rural schools, and there was not enough participation in the Lowcountry and Upstate cases. Due to the lack of participants, I decided to accept all participants that expressed interest in taking part. There were two discrepant units that had to be removed from participating, one faculty advisor, and one expert, whose data was discarded. The advisor was unable to be reached to continue to phase two of data collection. A final limitation with sampling

procedures was having only two experts to participate. Originally, there were three, but I removed one expert to prevent a conflict of interest.

Limitations with instrumentation were a result of the research design, and addressed the questionnaire, or phase one of data collection. Expert B did not address several questions, citing a lack of experience in working directly with LGBTQ youth. I believe this was due to the headings for each section of the questionnaire that made it appear that I was seeking their perspectives on their work with GSAs and school climate, when I was actually looking for their general thoughts on them. This lack of clarity cost valuable perspectives from the expert. Another limitation that was brought to my attention by a participant in the Upstate case was that the questionnaire was too long.

Data collection was limited by my execution of the study in two instances. As mentioned in chapter one, time became a limitation of the study due to personal events that caused me to lose working time, so time to meet deadlines became a limitation. This same limitation of time caused me to have to resort to a transcription service to complete interview data. While transcripts were member checked and approved, the limitation caused me to deviate from the original research design.

No limitations to data analysis occurred except for how to handle contrary case units that did not agree with the trends and data that emerged. These few contradictions were reported in the study findings, but were not included in the discussion of the results.

Implications

The findings of the current study yielded implications for schools and communities, faculty advisors, non-advising faculty, and policy makers. Implications

regarding the negative data about South Carolina and the discrepancy between it, and the literature that states that GSAs contribute to fewer instances of bullying are discussed.

One implication for schools and communities is that GSAs provide positive support for a segment of student populations that has been marginalized and silenced for years. Expert participants agreed that by providing a safe space for students to be supported, educated, and empowered, the GSAs are making a contribution in the work to reduce aggression and discrimination. This support is consistent with research on the effects of GSAs. Their existence forces schools to recognize that LGBTQ students exist and are a part of their student body, and to have conversations about equality and rights to meet the needs of these young people. More dialogs are important to share the experiences of these young people so that solutions can be addressed to ensure a more positive school experience for all young people. As faculty advisor participants explained, they do not feel that bullying is completely eradicated by the presence of a GSA, but its presence does help. The presence of a GSA does not guarantee a reduction in victimization, (Toomey & Russell, 2011) though some studies report a decrease (Sczalacha & Westheimer, 2006; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010).

While faculty advisor roles were not the subject of the current study, implications arose with regards to this integral part of a GSA. Most participants described a more hands off approach to how they serve due to school board policies on advisor roles. It became apparent that not every advisor knew that in South Carolina, they could be terminated for being a faculty advisor to a GSA. Research on GSA advisors discusses the positives and negatives of their roles, and is consistent with the findings of the current study. The role of advisor can be an enlightening experience for the faculty member that

is not familiar with LGBTQ issues. It can also be a lonely, thankless job as these adults are often the “grown up” face of the club, and must face negative comments, inquiries into their own private lives, and discrimination from colleagues and students. Living and working in a right to work state, advisors must be careful about how involved they are with their clubs. This is important to adhere in order to protect themselves and their jobs if they work in a school with an unsupportive administration. Fear for their job is one possibility that there are not more GSAs in South Carolina. Another possibility is that there is not a faculty member that has been approached to advise a club. Further qualitative research into why GSAs do not exist in schools would be beneficial to understanding why there is such a lack of clubs in South Carolina high schools by examining the perspectives of faculty members and administrators at schools with no GSA. Another implication for advisors that emerged from the study is that the vision that they have for their club may not be what the members want or need. From my personal experience, I tried to force my vision on my own group, and what happened only frustrated me and encouraged me to do this research. In my discussions with advisors from around the state, it became clear that advisors need to allow the GSA to make its own goals and decide what model serves its needs the best. South Carolina faculty advisors are fortunate to have Expert A to serve as a state coordinator for GSAs, which will allow for more collaboration, networking, and support.

The role of teachers is to prepare students for their world after high school in a supporting way. The current study found that many teachers in South Carolina high schools are contributing to negative experiences for LGBTQ students, mostly through negative speech. This is consistent with research by GLSEN in the 2013 state snapshot

for South Carolina, which states, “Students also heard anti-LGBT language from school staff” (GLSEN, 2014). As with other situations such as politics, religion, and holidays, teachers are expected to leave their personal beliefs at the classroom door, and to present unbiased information to students. The implication from the current study is that teachers, like many other professions, need professional development in the form of sensitivity training with regards to LGBTQ issues.

Implications for policy makers emerged that are consistent with literature on how to improve school climate for LGBTQ students. Every participant in the study stressed the need for comprehensive protection for students that include both identity and sexual orientation, and inclusive curriculum across content areas. These implications are supported by literature and are also recommendations by GLSEN for progress.

Finally, the discrepancy between the negative data reported by GLSEN in its National School Climate survey about South Carolina high schools, and the literature that states that GSAs are effectively contributing to reduced bullying and more positive school climates served as the problem being investigated by the current study. One possibility emerged as a reason for this discrepancy. Most experts and advisors believe that the data on continued aggression against LGBTQ students must be coming from schools that do not have a GSA, of which there are many in South Carolina. The advisors generally reported school climates that were mostly supportive, and that they do not hear about instances of bullying. This implication warrants further investigation. This could be done by analyzing the data collected by GLSEN for South Carolina to see if location data was collected, and if it corresponds to areas or schools without GSAs.

Implications for Practice

The study provided some implications for practice for non-advisor faculty, and schools or districts. First, if state or district policy makers refuse to create inclusive curriculum, teachers should seize any opportunity that they can to present balanced portrayals of minority contributors in the content areas. Many curricula are provided to teachers as outlines giving them some flexibility and choice on primary sources or lessons. Teachers making choices to include LGBTQ contributors would assist in creating the necessary dialogs to address the issue of homophobia. A second implication for practice will help with instances of bullying that go unreported. One advisor mentioned an online application, or app, that their district uses for the reporting of bullying. There is a free app that can be used by schools for this with information being reported directly to the principal. This information can be reported anonymously. The serious use of an app such as this can provide valuable information about when, where and what type of bullying is taking place, and help to reduce the high statistic of unreported aggression, and possibly save lives.

Suggestions for Future Research

The current study can be replicated to examine challenges being faced by LGBTQ youth in other locations. If the current study were replicated, a suggestion would be to be flexible with case formation, taking into consideration various possibilities with regards to study participation. It would be helpful to gain insight through replication in other states, especially those located in the conservative southeastern United States. Another suggestion would be to solicit more participation from established GSAs to increase data

and provide more perspectives from faculty advisors. A final suggestion in replicating the current study would be to carefully investigate and include clubs that function as GSAs but have changed their name.

Another possibility for future research would be to investigate why GSAs are not being formed at high schools in South Carolina. Ideally, it would be most helpful to gain access to student voices, but faculty advisor perspectives have been very useful in the current study. Finally, the theory emerged that negative data about bullying in South Carolina high schools came from areas or schools that are not being served by a GSA. Testing this theory would solve the discrepancy that exists between data from GLSEN and literature about the positive effects of GSAs with regards to bullying and homophobic aggression. A suggestion would be to try to obtain more data from the National School Climate Survey from South Carolina to determine the validity of the theory, and provide information that can be used to provide support for LGBTQ students in these areas.

Conclusion

Schools in South Carolina are considered to be unfriendly towards LGBTQ students. GSAs serve to provide support, empowerment, and education to these students. The current study examined the effectiveness of GSAs in reducing or eliminating bullying in South Carolina high schools. The study stemmed from a discrepancy in data from the National School Climate Survey conducted by GLSEN and the existing literature on GSAs that states that they contribute to more positive school climates and can help to reduce bullying in schools. By examining the perspectives of experts and

faculty GSA advisors, the study found that in schools with a GSA, bullying is, indeed, reduced. Other findings of the study include that homophobic attitudes are entrenched in South Carolina, and are the cause for many of the challenges that are faced daily by LGBTQ youth and advisors.

GSA's are considered a necessary part of providing support to these students, and function in different ways to meet their needs. They are also considered to provide recognition and a collective face that sends a message to schools that these young people are accepted and supported. The GSA does not solve the challenges faced by LGBTQ youth, but the clubs make a difference in the lives of students and the culture of the schools. GSA's are considered to be successful in reducing bullying by simply existing, but depending on the type of club, its activity and visibility, student leadership, and member needs, their contributions to fewer instances of bullying may be stronger.

The need for these student organizations is still great. How GSA's support their members may vary from group to group or from year to year, but their effect on school climates and the progress that they can bring about is well documented. It is imperative that these supports be made available to students in every school. Their lives may very well depend on it.

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APPENDIX A – PHASE 1: PRELIMINARY PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the current study. Your participation is important in providing insight to the effectiveness of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in reducing or eliminating bullying in South Carolina high schools. This questionnaire constitutes phase one of data collection for the study. Please provide the demographic information requested, and answer each question to the best of your knowledge, experiences, feelings, and perspectives. Your demographic information will not be shared. It will be kept in a locked safe box, and replaced with pseudonyms. This demographic information will only be used for the analysis of the data that you provide. There is one optional question. While your response is greatly appreciated as an analytical tool and will only be seen by the researcher, your comfort level in responding is respected. Please mail your questionnaire back in the pre-addressed, stamped envelope provided.

Part I- Demographic Information

School Location:

Upstate _____ Midlands _____ Lowcountry _____

Length of time as GSA advisor _____

Faculty role: _____ Teacher _____ Counselor _____ Administrator
_____ Other (Please list)

Number of years in faculty role _____

Socio-economic status of the community that your school serves: _____ upper to
upper-middle class _____ middle class _____ lower middle class _____
lower class _____ split between the two extremes of upper and lower class

Type of community that your school serves: _____ urban _____ suburban
_____ rural

Your gender: _____ Female _____ Male _____ Transgender

** Optional** Your sexual identity: _____ Lesbian _____ Gay _____ Heterosexual
_____ Bisexual _____ Other (Please list)

Part II- Preliminary Perspectives

Please provide your written or typed responses in the space provided or on a separate sheet of paper. If you run out of space, feel free to continue on the back side of the questionnaire.

A. GSA Information

1. How would you describe your GSA with regards to size, and the demographics of the members (race or ethnicity, gender identification, sexual orientation, age)?
2. What is the atmosphere like in your meetings? Ex) Is it more of a social gathering? Do they discuss LGBTQ issues? Is there an atmosphere of empowerment or social justice?
3. What is your perspective on the role of the GSA in schools?
4. How would you describe the activity of your GSA?
5. What is the visibility of the club in the school or community?
6. Please describe some great experiences you have had with your group.
7. What are some challenges that you feel are faced by LGBTQ students in your school?
8. What experiences with anti-LGBTQ discrimination has your group had?

9. What experiences with bullying (physical harm, verbal abuse, harassment, isolation, cyberbullying) have group members (LGBTQ or Heterosexual) shared with you?

10. What experiences with discrimination have you encountered due to your association with your GSA?

11. What does your GSA do to stop or prevent bullying or discrimination?

12. How successful do you feel that your GSA is in reducing or eliminating bullying? Why do you feel that way?

13. How successful do you feel that your GSA is in meeting the needs of members? Explain.

B. School Information

14. How would you describe the climate of your school with regards to LGBTQ youth or issues?

15. What other resources are available to LGBTQ students besides the GSA?

16. What support do you or the GSA receive from the faculty or administration?

17. What types of homophobic bullying have you heard about or seen in your school

APPENDIX B- PHASE 1: PRELIMINARY EXPERT QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the current study. Your participation is important in providing insight to the effectiveness of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in reducing or eliminating bullying and homophobic discrimination in South Carolina high schools. This questionnaire constitutes phase one of data collection for the study. Please provide the demographic information requested, and answer each question to the best of your knowledge, experiences, feelings, and perspectives. Your demographic information will not be shared. It will be kept in a locked safe box, and replaced with pseudonyms. This demographic information will only be used for the analysis of the data that you provide. Your name and contact information will only be used for my personal communication with you as we continue to other phases of the study and need to coordinate meeting times and locations. There is one optional question. While your response is greatly appreciated as an analytical tool and will only be seen by the researcher, your comfort level in responding is respected. Please email your responses to bagleyj@email.sc.edu.

Part I- Demographic Information

Name: _____ Preferred

Email: _____

Preferred phone
number: _____

Role in working with LGBTQ youth _____

Your gender: _____ Female _____ Male _____ Transgender _____ Other
(please state)

** Optional** Your sexual identity: _____ Lesbian _____ Gay _____ Heterosexual
_____ Bisexual _____ Other (Please list)

Part II- Preliminary Perspectives

Please provide your written or typed responses in the space provided or on a separate sheet of paper.

C. Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)

18. In general, what do you believe is the role of the GSA in schools?

2. How successful do you feel GSAs are in preventing or reducing homophobic discrimination and/or bullying?

3. What was your role with GSAs or LGBTQ youth in South Carolina?

4. To the best of your knowledge, how would you describe the activity of GSAs in South Carolina?

5. Please describe one or two great experiences you have had with your work with LGBTQ youth or GSAs.

6. What are some challenges that you feel LGBTQ students face in South Carolina high schools?

7. What experiences with anti-LGBTQ discrimination have you had in working with LGBTQ youth?

8. What experiences with bullying (physical harm, verbal abuse, harassment, isolation, cyber bullying) have youth (LGBTQ or Heterosexual) shared with you about their experiences in South Carolina high schools?

9. How do you feel that GSAs contribute to stopping or preventing bullying, homophobia, or discrimination?

10. In your experiences and/or opinion, how successful do you feel that GSAs are in meeting the needs (any) of members? Explain.

D. GSA Advisors

11. What do you feel is the role of the faculty advisor of high school GSAs?

12. What challenges do you feel that GSA advisors face in their role?

13. If you were able to address faculty GSA advisors, what advice would you give them?

E. School Information

14. How would you describe the climate of South Carolina high schools with regards to LGBTQ youth or issues?

15. What other resources are available to LGBTQ students besides the GSA

APPENDIX C – PHASE 2: PRELIMINARY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following list of questions was used as an outline for the interview questions. Where appropriate, the interviewees were asked to expand upon their answers.

Individual GSA Questions

1. Tell me a little more about your GSA. Mention characteristics they report in their questionnaire response.
2. How are your meetings run? Is there an agenda? What types of issues has your group discussed?
3. Tell me about the activities that your group participates in.
4. Does your GSA have a vision and/or a mission statement?
5. What does your GSA do to combat bullying and homophobia at your school? Is it consistent or only a few times a year?

GSA Advisor Questions

6. Tell me about the resources that you access or use as a GSA advisor.
7. Why did you agree to serve as a GSA advisor?
8. How does your participation in or membership in other communities affect your role as a GSA advisor?
9. Your response to the questionnaire about how successful you feel your GSA is in reducing or eliminating bullying was _____. Can you tell me about your response?
10. What do you think can or should be done to improve how successful or effective you feel your GSA is?

School Climate Questions

11. How do you think the presence of your GSA contributes to the climate of your school?
12. Does merely having a GSA reduce bullying?

13. What are your thoughts about the high frequency of bullying reported in the GLSEN National School Climate Survey and literature that states that GSAs reduce bullying? Provide figures and example.
14. What other types of support, besides a GSA presence do you think are necessary?