Embracing Diversity: The Dual Role of Gay–Straight Alliances

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Abstract

The social landscape has changed regarding public knowledge, perception, and acceptance of "alternative" sexual lifestyles. In recent years, public and political discourse around issues of non-heterosexual orientations has shifted significantly. Despite many legal milestones, society has not realized complete inclusion of individuals whose sexual orientations do not conform to the mainstream, heterosexual majority. Non-heterosexual Canadians still experience negative repercussions of heterosexism in both social and institutional realms. This article discusses one important avenue of advocacy—gay–straight alliances—and takes the position that these alliances serve a dual role: education and social activism.

Keywords: gay–straight alliance, homophobia, heterosexism, education, social activism, diversity

Résumé

Le paysage social a changé pour ce qui a trait aux connaissances et à la perception qu'a le public des comportements sexuels « autres » et à leur acceptabilité. Ces dernières années, le discours politique et public sur les questions d'orientations non hétérosexuelles n'est plus du tout le même. En dépit des nombreux jalons juridiques qui ont été franchis, la société n'a pas complètement réussi l'inclusion des personnes dont les orientations sexuelles ne sont pas celles de la majorité. Les Canadiens qui ne sont pas hétérosexuels subissent encore les répercussions négatives de l'hétérosexisme dans la vie courante comme au sein des institutions. L'auteure de cet article analyse un aspect important de la défense des droits—les alliances gais–hétéros—et soutient que ces alliances remplissent deux rôles, l'éducation et le militantisme social.

Mots-clés : alliance gais–hétéros, homophobie, hétérosexisme, éducation, militantisme social, diversité

Introduction

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me!" This is a common retort issued in the face of schoolyard bullies; a magical phrase that, according to many parents, is supposed to make the name-caller realize the futility of his or her efforts and the name calling will cease. My mother shared these "words of wisdom" with me, and rather sheepishly, I admit that this oft-ineffective mantra has been explained to my own children. But what happens when the words are *faggot*, *queer*, *homo*, *dyke*, *gay*, *lesbo*, or *freak*? Words *do* hurt and the homophobic sentiments behind these hostile epithets can lead to broken bones, broken spirits, and occasionally even death.

This article discusses a growing movement in the fight against homophobia and institutionalized heteronormativity—gay–straight alliances (GSAs). Using specific examples drawn from recent initiatives in Canada, this article explores the advantages of these alliances and their important role in supporting youth and advocating change. The first GSA club was established in 1989 in response to violence and prejudice against non-heterosexual youth in Massachusetts schools (Schindel, 2008). Organized by teachers and counsellors, and modelled somewhat after community support services, GSAs were established to provide support within the educational setting (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). GSAs serve a greater purpose than being simply another extracurricular activity like the math, French, chess, or drama clubs. In addition to the educational component provided by these alliances, GSAs are on the cusp of a greater social movement that, building on the gay rights movements of earlier decades, is breaking new ground in the areas of equal rights and social accountability.

Social Context

The social landscape has certainly changed in terms of public knowledge, perception, and understanding of diverse sexual orientations. In the span of a few generations, public and political discourse around the issues of non-heterosexual orientations has shifted from complete exclusion to an increased recognition of the right to equality and protection under the law (Hammack & Cohler, 2011). As recently as 45 years ago homosexuality was considered a crime in Canada and those found guilty of homosexual conduct were imprisoned as "dangerous sexual offenders" (CBC, 2012). This changed in 1969, when

then prime minister Pierre Trudeau passed legislation that kept the government out of people's bedrooms and decriminalized homosexuality (CBC, 2012).

Growing public recognition of homosexuality as a sexual orientation, rather than a deviation from sexual normalcy, accompanied with greater "scientific" awareness prompted the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 to no longer consider homosexuality a mental disorder (Bayer, 1987). This tide had been mounting since the end of the Second World War when a "new wave of homosexual activism" (Bayer, 1987, p. 42) began to exert enough influence on the societal context that programs of research began to shift in subtle ways. According to Bayer, "It was the struggle for homosexual rights that ultimately transformed this research from an interesting methodological critique of psychiatric theory and practice into a weapon in the assault on the power of psychiatry" (p. 42).

Social movements that increased understanding of multiplicity and the dynamics of sexual orientation and basic human rights inspired changes to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, changes that assured equal rights to all Canadians. Further progress came in 2005 when the Civil Marriage Act was passed, making Canada the fourth country in the world to legalize same-sex marriages (Alderson, Orzeck, & McEwen, 2009; Canada, Department of Justice, 1982, 2005). In the United States, President Obama has openly expressed his support for same-sex unions and gay rights and, as of February 2015, 37 states now permit same-sex marriages (ProCon.org, 2015). Most recently, and on a more global level, the world has witnessed a historic national referendum in Ireland where citizens overwhelmingly voted in favour of changing the nation's constitution to allow gay marriage (Hjelmgaard, 2015). However, religious fundamentalism and ultra-conservative right-wing political agendas continue to wage fierce battles against personal sexual freedom. While the tide is mounting in support of diversity and inclusion, proponents of heterocentric fundamentalism fight to sustain the suppression of acceptance of sexual diversity and reaffirm institutionalized heterosexism (di Mauro & Joffe, 2007).

Religious leaders, who have long been considered a source of counsel and support for many family issues, have been revealed as "critically significant factors in determining the cause for depression in sexual minority youth" (Hackel, 2009, p. 17). Certainly not all religions or religious leaders take such an exclusionary stance on sexual diversity, but the notion of sexual deviance is so ingrained in many traditional denominations that religion as salvation is translated to religion as oppressor for many sexually questioning

youth, who are often told they are unhealthy or sinful (Batelaan, 2000) and that they may be able to be "cured" with "effective" religious therapies (di Mauro & Joffe, 2007; Rivers & Carragher, 2003). The conflicting message of God's unconditional love, qualified by the exception of cases where one doesn't conform to the heterosexual norm, can delay the coming out process and make it even more frightening and risky for many adolescents (Hackel, 2009).

Despite the legal milestones that have been achieved, society has not realized complete inclusion of individuals whose sexual orientations do not conform to the mainstream, heterosexual majority. Even though Canada would be considered quite liberal in terms of its laws governing sexuality in comparison to other countries around the globe, non-heterosexual Canadians still experience negative repercussions in both the social and institutional realms. Defined as a "systemic process of privileging heterosexuality, based on the assumption that heterosexuality and heterosexual power and privilege are normal and ideal" (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009, p. 964), heterosexism is evident throughout Canadian society and can have devastating effects, especially for those youth who are deemed to be "unable to conform" to the heterosexual norm.

Clarification of Terminology

There appears to be no consensus in the literature on the preferred terminology to use when engaging in discussions regarding gender and sexually diverse individuals. Many acronyms abound and much discussion has been had over how best to encompass the multiple realities of those whose sexual orientations or expressions vary from cisnormative and heteronormative conceptualizations. Following the example of a recent policy article released by the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (Murphy, Hobbs, Rose, Madden, & Irwin, 2015), this article uses the acronym LGBTQ+ to refer to anyone who identifies as "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Two-Spirit, Asexual, Pansexual, and other identities and sexualities that are not cisgender or heterosexual" (Murphy et al., 2015, p. 1). Although other terminology has been suggested, we note that "LGBTQ" appears to be the most commonly used and recognized. Murphy and colleagues' addition of "+" emphasizes the fluidity and variability of gender identity and expression, and sexual orientations.

School Climate for LGBTQ+ Youth

A national survey of Canadian high school students conducted between 2007 and 2009 revealed alarming results regarding homophobic and transphobic experiences of Canadian youth: 59% reported that they were verbally harassed; 25% indicated being physically harassed due to their sexual orientation; 31% reported personal or cyber harassment; 73% felt unsafe at school; and 51% felt they were unaccepted at school (Taylor et al., 2011). Statistics reported by the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) are equally disturbing for US high school students, with school climate surveys of American sexual minority youth (GLSEN, 2005, 2009) reporting actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender expression as the top two reasons sexual minority youth feel unsafe at school. In a country where equal rights are espoused in the constitution, the system appears to be failing the LGBTQ+ community—especially youth. (See Markow & Fein, 2005; Schrader & Wells, 2004; van Wormer & McKinney, 2003, for excellent reviews of the experiences and consequences of heterosexism in schools.)

Heterocentric bullying due to actual or perceived sexual orientation and non-conforming gender expression increases the threat of psychological and emotional distress in youth (Alderson et al., 2009; GLSEN, 2009; Schrader & Wells, 2004; Taylor et al., 2011). While Savin-Williams (1994) claimed that the majority of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, intersex, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+) youth will be well-adjusted, the disturbing truth is that there are a considerable number of youth who cannot rise above the harassment, ridicule, and rejection they suffer at the hands of not only peers but also school administrators, family, and society at large (Schrader & Wells, 2004; Snively, 2004; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). Social isolation and alienation (Savin-Williams, 2004), dropping out of school (van Wormer & McKinney, 2003), depression, substance abuse, and suicide ideation and behaviours mark this population as "at risk" (Snively, 2004). Van Wormer and McKinney (2003) also suggested that much of the suicidal behaviour by LGBTQ+ youth goes unrecognized. According to these researchers, as LGBTQ+ youth struggle with their identities and social stigma, they may be more prone to dangerous behaviours, such as substance misuse, "living on the streets," prostitution, or other promiscuous sexual activities as a means of courting death (p. 413).

Safe School Policies and Anti-Bullying/Harassment Initiatives

Van Wormer and McKinney (2003) recognized that "failure to take a proactive stance to help youth with gender identity issues is a major cause of psychological problems, leading in some cases to suicide, alcohol and other drug abuse, and homelessness" (p. 409). These authors advocated a harm reduction approach to these issues, a model which was then gaining popularity in the addictions field. Harm reduction, as defined by these authors, is "meeting people where they are and helping them to protect themselves from harm" (p. 409). Van Wormer and McKinney (2003) supported this approach by suggesting that the period of adolescence is accompanied in most instances by secretive and risky behaviour. However, two of the problems compounding the social pressures faced by LGBTQ+ youth are the lack of social support and a paucity of relevant sex education (Mayo, 2008; van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). A harm reduction approach would target these areas as vital to increasing the protective behaviours and strategies within this population of at risk youth. Adequate access to community and social supports fosters positive change not only for LGBTQ+ youth but also for the community at large.

Current research shows that LGBTQ+ students in schools where GSAs are present report feeling safer and more accepted regardless of whether or not they hold GSA membership (cf. Clarke & MacDougall, 2012; Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin, & Drechsler, 2012; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011; Mayberry, Chenneville, & Currie, 2011; Morrison, 2012; Russell et al., 2009). Other research indicates that the protective factors associated with GSAs in schools include increased academic motivation, grades, and attendance, and increased visibility of supportive adults (Walls et al., 2010) and that GSA presence in schools correlated with decreased reports of depression and risky behaviours, including substance misuse (Heck et al., 2011). Additionally, research indicates that schools with GSAs have better defined and implemented policies regarding inclusiveness and diversity and a more accepting climate overall. However, given the fact that resistance continues to be prevalent in many environments, it cannot be inferred that this inclusivity is a result of GSA formation; rather, GSA formation may have more easily occurred due to an open and embracing academic climate (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011; Walls et al., 2010), which ultimately may be a product of a more progressive and accepting social (community and regional) environment overall (Fetner & Kush, 2008).

Despite the fact that school-based support groups for LGBTQ+ youth and their allies have been increasing in prevalence across North America, youth and school violence has continued to rise, prompting a number of governmental task forces and the development of safe and caring schools policies and frameworks across Canada over the last decade. One such initiative was a special Safe Schools Action team appointed in 2004 by the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME; Morrison, 2012). The role of this action team was to study school safety across the province and report to the Ontario government with policy recommendations. Sandals, Hughes, Auty, and Pepler's (2005) *Shaping Safer Schools Report* echoed previous research regarding the dire implications of bullying and resulted in several policy changes. Specifically, changes were implemented to existing policies clarifying language with respect to diversity and inclusion (OME, 2009a), bullying prevention and intervention (OME, 2009b), and progressive discipline and promoting positive student behaviour (OME, 2009c).

Education departments, ministries, and school boards in other jurisdictions have also engaged in the development of policies and frameworks that promote inclusivity, violence prevention education, and the development of GSAs in their districts. For example, in Alberta, recent amendments to Bill 10, the Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect Our Children (received Royal Assent March 19, 2015), enshrined sexual orientation, sex, gender identity, and gender expression in the Alberta Bill of Rights as protected grounds from discrimination and legislated the requirement of school authorities to "allow students to form groups and activities including GSAs or QSAs (queer–straight alliances) on school property if students express an interest in forming these peer-support groups" (Alberta Education, 2015). Currently in Alberta there are 691 anti-bullying clubs, 708 diversity clubs, and 90 GSAs, all initiated prior to the proposed amendment.

Newfoundland and Labrador's provincial government's safe and caring schools policy was introduced in 2006 and has evolved steadily through the continued development of programs and resources aimed at early intervention and education on violence prevention. In 2012 the provincial government allocated $90,000 for a new teacher resource to support school officials and faculty in the establishment of GSAs in schools. The resource was provided to all Newfoundland and Labrador schools offering Grades 7–12 (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Education Executive Council, 2012). The Yukon Department of Education has similarly taken a proactive stance to the development of GSAs in their school districts (by legislating that schools facilitate their

existence when requested by students) and the development and implementation of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) policies (Government of Yukon, Department of Education, 2012).

Similarly, a policy manual retrieved from the Vancouver School Board (VSB) website in May 2015 outlines the VSB's policies with respect to sexual orientation and gender identities, including the responsibilities of all elementary and secondary schools to appoint a "safe contact" to act as a resource persons for LGBTQ+ students and that in the absence of a staff person voluntarily stepping forward to assume this role, the school administrators will act as the safe contact (VSB Policy Manual; ACB – R – 1). Additionally, the policy says that all secondary schools will be supported in establishing and maintaining GSA clubs. However, the policy fails to indicate how the schools will support these initiatives or what sanctions will be imposed on schools that create obstacles or barriers to the creation of GSAs.

While these amendments are encouraging, many LGBTQ+ advocates and students have worried that the changes have amounted to little more than lip service (Fetner et al., 2012; Morrison, 2012). Underlying policy development and implementation is the assumption that school faculty, staff, and administrators are capable of acting with true objective inclusivity in order to adequately implement and fulfill the objectives set forth by governmental initiatives and revised school policies. The amendments failed to address the root of the problem—homophobia—and were based on the assumption that school board officials, administrators, teachers, and support staff were free from it (Morrison, 2012). This ignorance is disturbing, considering the fact that school climate surveys from both Canada and the United States have consistently reported that students continue to communicate that they are subjected to verbal harassment and lack of support from some school faculty and officials (GLSEN, 2009; Taylor et al., 2011).

There remains a lack of acknowledgement on the part of education officials that bullying and harassment are not only perpetrated by youth against other youth but also that LGBTQ+ adolescents are subjected to systemic homophobia, which may actually be exacerbated by failure on the part of administrators and teachers to combat bullying and harassment, especially where actual or perceived sexual and gender non-conformity are at the root. Moreover, the 2009 OME policy changes with respect to discipline and promoting positive student behaviour are ambiguous, and neglect to consider counselling or training for either the perpetrators or the victims, resulting in meaningless punitive

measures (Morrison, 2012). In Ontario, the government's Policy/Program Memorandum 145 effectively placed the onus of bringing the situation to light on the victim, and called for school officials to respond by "asking a student to stop the inappropriate behaviour; naming the type of behaviour and explaining why it is inappropriate and/or disrespect-ful; and asking the student to correct the behaviour…and promise not to do it again" (OME, 2009c). While this memorandum alludes to training strategies to be implemented by school boards, it does not spell out an accountability process or address ways school officials could assess their own biases and identify how they may be (either overtly or unconsciously) reinforcing homophobic behaviours. School boards responded by reduc-ing the issue to an easy three-minute fix (Morrison, 2010). If you Google "how to handle harassment in the hallways in three minutes" you will find several school board responses in PDF form offering simple strategies on how to handle harassment "effectively" in the schools.

A number of Canadian provinces and territories provide links to resources for parents, students, and school personnel on issues of GSA organizations and on safe school, anti-bullying/anti-harassment, and SOGI policies. However, despite the allusion to a Pan-Canadian consensus statement on school health and safety (Newfoundland and Labrador, Safe and Caring Schools, 2006), there does not appear to be a national policy of overt inclusion as seen by the number of provincial or territorial education ministries or departments who do not make these kinds of information or resources available on their websites to the students and families they serve. Moreover, while many provinces and territories have official SOGI policies and policies regarding the formation of GSAs, the legislation to back these policies is not always in place. Very recently, Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall insisted that the province's extant policies on GSAs in schools en-sure their existence and that legislation won't make any difference (The Canadian Press, 2015). Consistent with criticisms of the Ontario policies and memorandums, implementa-tion procedures, accountability measures, and disciplinary procedures and consequences for administrative non-compliance appear to be vague and open to interpretation, and youth still struggle with barriers to inclusion. Saskatchewan's opposition leaders argued that failure to table legislation is a disservice to Saskatchewan LGBTQ+ youth and their allies and creates an additional and unnecessary barrier for students trying to establish GSAs in their schools (The Canadian Press, 2015).

The Dual Role

While established initially to provide safe spaces and counselling supports within the academic setting, GSAs transcend institutional boundaries by challenging prejudice and discrimination on a much larger scale. Built on a partnership between LGBTQ+ youth and their heterosexual allies, GSAs are grounded within the educational setting but are extending their reach beyond the confines of the institution. Schindel (2008) framed GSA efforts as *mobilizing education*; that is, students are "mobilizing people and resources directly within schools, as well as creating greater impact through their own increased mobility within these increasingly networked spaces" (p. 57). Particularly, each GSA has the potential to become a forum that is not only connected with other community organizations, but in fact creates other connections within the community, fostering education, understanding, and acceptance through communication and frank discourse. According to Schindel (2008), in the context of GSAs, education and activism are inextricably linked and "gender activism and education outreach...are integral to making schools safer and more inclusive for *all* youth" (emphasis in original; p. 55).

Education

Education is a vital function of GSAs. Education in this context comes on two fronts: educating the youth members and their allies, and educating school administrators and the community. In 2012, building on the *Safer Schools Report* (Sandals et al., 2005) and the subsequent Policy/Program Memoranda of 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) took a proactive stance by amending the Education Act to include provisions making the establishment of GSAs mandatory in instances where a student requested there to be one. Amendments in Alberta, Manitoba (Government of Manitoba, 2013), and the Yukon have also witnessed legislation of GSAs in schools upon student request; other provinces and territories are likely to follow suit. While these legislative and policy changes have created a "turf war" of sorts between the various ministries and departments of education and Catholic School Boards over their right to control curricular and extracurricular content to be in line with the religious values and teachings of the Catholic Church, the public (secular) education systems have remained committed to making this change. However, once again, there remains a notable absence of direction on how

the acts are to be implemented or concrete sanctions for boards which refuse to comply. Moreover, the revisions to the Acts do not account for boards or individual school administrators whose internal hurdles impede GSA formation.

Other key obstacles to GSA formation within the education systems are often the school board policies governing sex education. Mayo (2008), citing American examples, suggested that abstinence-only curricular policies severely limit not only the range of topics deemed appropriate for student discussion but also the depth of exploration into the topics that are permitted. Additionally, these policies have been used to prohibit student use of school facilities to discuss in extracurricular forums anything deemed inappropriate (in other words, perceived to be obscene or promoting sexual activity) under the blanket of an abstinence-only curriculum (Mayo, 2008). Di Mauro and Joffe (2007) provided a scathing review of the history of the Religious Right and American sexual policy since the 1970s, in which they discuss their success as "reshaping the content and intent of [sexuality education] and, in the process, steering millions of dollars to religiously affiliated organizations that promote abstinence-only-until-marriage education" (p. 69).

One criticism of abstinence-only policies is that curriculum conforming to these guidelines necessarily situates all sexuality and "normal" sexual behaviour heterosexually (Mayo, 2008; Schindel, 2008). The very nature of the information imparted to students reinforces mainstream heterosexist norms and does so under a somewhat authoritarian state, as these policies leave no room for incorporating alternative perspectives or information. Additionally, school board abstinence-based sexual education guidelines also increase parental power to determine what, if any, extracurricular organizations students are permitted to participate in (Mayo, 2008). The problem here is that rigid policy in this respect fosters the persistence of stereotypes by quashing active discourse regarding important issues related to adolescent sexuality, leaving Mayo (2008) to argue that "policies are not only teaching abstinence from sexuality but also are requiring abstinence from inquiry and association" (p. 46). Regimenting sexual education to such a degree glosses over the fundamental issues regarding sex, sexual identity, and sexuality that are pertinent to *all* youth. Likewise, because these policies impart heterosexist perspectives, this necessarily means that they also impart (implicitly or not) information defining a certain way of being a member of the community or society at large (Mayo, 2008).

Religious-based schools seem to face even greater challenges in the delivery of sexual education and the implementation of GSAs. Catholic curriculum continues to

maintain a heteronormative and cisnormative perspective on human sexuality and relationships, and while on the surface some comply with provincial mandates to adhere to GSA facilitation and inclusive language, many provincial Catholic school boards continue to resist on the basis of Vatican directives on the sanctity of male–female relationships and the physical embodiment of God. For example, despite recent legislation in Alberta that granted the right of students to request and receive GSAs or QSAs in their schools, the Edmonton Catholic School Board has adopted a LIFE framework which permits LIFE or diversity clubs as long as they comply with the theological doctrines governing the school and the church (Edmonton Catholic Schools, 2015). Likewise, a BC Catholic high school prohibits bullying and harassment according to school policy and regulations, and includes racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender slurs as prohibited, but fails to include explicit language protecting the rights of individuals who may be targeted based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender expression (Notre Dame Regional Secondary School, Vancouver, BC, n.d.). Guided by the *Pastoral Guideline to Assist Students of Same-Sex Orientation* (Colterman-Fox et al., 2004), Catholic bishops prohibited GSAs in Ontario schools (Leslie, 2012) despite the OME's regulations legislating all Ontario schools to facilitate GSAs where students request them. Instead, some Catholic school boards suggested that they encouraged student groups that supported inclusivity, anti-bullying, and anti-harassment; however, all clubs had to adhere to Catholic teachings and values with respect to divinity and morality (Houston, 2011). This position was supported by a teacher's resource published prior to the final passing of the OME legislation to guide schools in the facilitation of activities promoting diversity (Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association, 2012). Encouragingly, however, not all Ontario Catholic school boards chose to adopt the bishops' directive in a blanket fashion; in fact, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association openly supports the establishment of GSAs in schools and accepts "GSA," "gay," "homosexual," and other language contrary to the pastoral guideline recommendations, promoting acceptance and inclusion in their districts and striving to meet the needs of students affected by this debate (Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, 2012).

Di Mauro and Joffe (2007) argued that the "primary goal of sexuality education is the right of youth to know about human sexuality" (p. 80); however, the historical approach to the delivery of sexuality education is to protect adolescents from potential harms that arise from raging hormones and irrational behaviour—a "we know what's best

for you" approach that determines both the parameters of knowledge and access to it and undermines adolescents' rights to be provided with "appropriate services and sufficient information with which to protect themselves" (p. 80). Santelli et al. (2006) agreed, arguing that abstinence-based policies are "morally problematic" because withholding essential health information does not empower youth to make informed decisions.

Recent changes to the Ontario sex education curriculum appear to be keeping pace with changing social attitudes regarding the LGBTQ+ community, and introduce a changed focus on inclusive language and attention to healthy self-expression and healthy relationships, no matter what their dynamic. Despite increased social acceptance to these topics generally, considerable backlash resulted with the implementation of new curriculum standards in 2015, to some extent renewing the moral debate over sexual identity and expression by some opponents' suggestions that the new curriculum guidelines will promote promiscuity, sexual experimentation, and gender confusion as a result of inundating young minds with more information than they are cognitively, developmentally, or emotionally capable of handling (Levinson King, 2015).

In the absence of more progressive sexual-education curriculum, GSAs can serve to temper the heterosexist information delivered to students by providing a means of accessing alternative resources. While the point could certainly be argued that all adolescents experience similar pressures and concerns relative to sex and sexuality, one could also successfully argue that there are issues and concerns specific to LGBTQ+ youth. All teens experience a great deal of emotional and physical upheaval during their sexual development; however, LGBTQ+ youth are faced with additional challenges as a result of their perceived gender- and sexual-nonconformity. GSAs linked to community agencies and larger networks of other GSAs and their community allies, provide avenues for youth to explore multiple information sources more suited to their individual questions and concerns. Online communities are also important avenues for making connections and networking for LGBTQ+ youth and GSA groups. Canada offers MyGSA.ca as a multipurpose website promoting safety, inclusion, and access to information for LGBTQ+ youth, as well as families, friends, school administrators and teachers, and community allies. In the United States, GLSEN offers similar links and services.

In addition to providing education and resources to LGBTQ+ youth and their allies, GSAs also serve to educate their schools, the school boards, families, and the community at large. GSAs provide a means of challenging binary gender conceptions,

and safely engaging in discourse around definitions, self-identity, labels, emotional and sexual health and discrimination, homophobia, and heteronormativity. Schindel (2008) reported that, according to the participants in her qualitative exploration of GSAs and gender activism, educating others and articulating the issues surrounding gender identity and LGBTQ+ realities is not only of paramount importance, but is "often the biggest challenge within their activist efforts" (p. 63).

Positive and negative attitudes, however, are not dichotomous. An absence of negative attitudes does not necessarily translate to positive attitudes (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) or identification with the out-group (Pittinsky & Montoya, 2009; Pittinsky, Rosenthal, & Montoya, 2011). In fact, Pittinsky and Montoya (2009) and Pittinsky et al. (2011) argued that low levels of prejudice are better explained as tolerance and are quite distinct from acceptance and positivity. Furthermore, Fingerhut (2011) suggested that, while lack of negative or prejudicial attitudes might inhibit one from behaving in a discriminatory fashion, this is not necessarily sufficient to ensure out-group empathy, nor will it inspire someone to go out of their way to help. Optimistically, however, as far back as Allport's 1954 research on prejudice, out-group contact has been linked to positive intergroup relations. The contact hypothesis suggests that out-group contact facilitates a reframing of perspectives leading to shifts in ideas and the development of ties (Pettigrew, 1998). Fingerhut (2011) proposed that in order to inspire action in defence of the out-group, genuine empathy, respect, and affection must be present in in-group members. In this manner, GSAs provide an important bridge between LGBTQ+ students and the heterosexual majority by using education as a means of encouraging contact with different ideas and ways of being, which in turn can facilitate a social shift from tolerance toward acceptance.

Social Activism

Moving beyond education and the "mobilizing" of education is the broader social and political impact of GSAs as a social movement. GSAs are unique with respect to the fact that they are youth-led and provide a "youth-driven context for the development of youth leadership, activism, and engagement in social change" (Russell et al., 2009, p. 892). Because heterosexism (and sexism) is largely institutionalized, especially in the education system, LGBTQ+ youth are faced with discrimination not only from their peers but also

from the school in terms of its policies, policy administration/interpretation, and adults who administer these rules. There is very little in the way of guidance on how to enforce or implement recent legislative and policy changes to their full degree. The intention was to ensure that adequate wording existed in policy to protect people on the grounds of sexual orientation or gender diversity (or rather to ensure that the wording adequately expressed that sexual orientation and gender expression in any form were protected grounds) and also to send the message that "isms" of any kind were not acceptable and thus not tolerated. The problem is that these policies are subject to a considerable degree of interpretation. This is coupled with the fact that guidelines for implementation and evaluation of the policies and their effectiveness, as well as guidelines for discipline in cases of non-compliance with policy, are lacking.

Also there remains the fear of backlash from parents and community, which means that implementation and enforcement are muted and cultures of silence can limit the impact of GSAs and even their viability (Mayberry et al., 2011). Negative and positive attitudes are not polar opposites; therefore, the absence of negative attitudes toward anti-homophobic policy changes does not necessarily indicate positive attitudes and acceptance. It may simply mean that the lack of negative attitudes represents apathetic tolerance and/or avoidance of the situation, thus strengthening the culture of silence and making genuine activism increasingly difficult. Likewise, some school systems choose to ignore the topic altogether, instructing teachers not to mention sexual or gender identity issues beyond what is strictly necessary in order to comply with provincial curriculum requirements (Taylor & Peter, 2011). Mayberry and colleagues (2011) suggested that failure to address sexual and gender identity issues either through curriculum or addressing homophobic comments in the classrooms and the hallways amounts to supporting compulsory heterosexuality and the stigmatization of homosexuality. In fact, they stated that "worse than the absence of consequences for homophobic behavior is the loss of teachable moments, wherein heterosexist ideologies could otherwise be challenged in the proactive manner needed to create sustainable shifts in perceptions" (Mayberry et al., 2011, p. 318). Taylor and Peter (2011) went further, suggesting that "when educators are silent in the face of abuse, their silence acts as a form of symbolic violence that says they do not find the abuse objectionable" (p. 306). However, there is no "three-minute" solution.

The implementation of policy can be perceived at times as an attempt to "cover our asses" against litigation; however, failure to enforce is not adequately addressed.

Policy implementation then complies with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and other human rights initiatives; however, at a practical level, LGBTQ+ youth are still subjected to marginalization by being excluded from representation in the curriculum and proactive discourse.

It is important to note that some researchers revealed that little in the way of social activism or policy reform has resulted from the formation of GSAs, fuelling arguments that GSAs act merely as social clubs and "safe spaces" (Fingerhut, 2011; Mayberry et al., 2011). This argument is countered, however, by the proposition that the mere presence of GSAs is a form of activism. GSAs have been grassroots, student-initiated responses to bullying in schools. A form of activism at their inception, and a form of activism challenging heteronormative institutional practices, the fact that they were not initiated as part of any school or provincial policy and that they challenged school administrators and boards to act and react to student mental health, health, and safety needs makes them prime examples of social activism (see Russell et al., 2009). Furthermore, Mayberry et al. (2011) acknowledge that in order for more significant social and political change to arise from within the context of GSAs, social connections and bonding as a group must occur first. Students need to feel comfortable in their own skin; they need to feel accepted by the group; and they need to feel safe to express their ideas and feelings. Following this, greater political challenges can be considered as strength grows as a result of the freedom to explore their personal identities from within this safe context. Clarke and MacDougall (2012) insisted that "the formation of GSAs is an excellent example of civic education in practice" due to the fact that their presence provides concrete examples of efforts to effect change in matters of social justice (p. 156).

Contrary to the connotation of "safe space" implied above, sociological literature draws attention to the notion of "safe spaces" in the context of activism and social movements (Fetner et al., 2012). Safe spaces have been defined by sociologists for decades as "small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization" (Polletta, 1999, p. 1). The mere presence of a GSA challenges the heteronormative school environment by providing an alternative space, an alternative cultural experience, and alternative sources of information.

Two of the main issues challenged by GSAs are binary gender conceptions and discrimination and harassment. Heterosexist perspectives on sexuality and sexual identity inextricably link gender and sex. Linking gender and sex implies that gender is a natural extension of biology—basically, if you were born with male genitalia you act like a male, you dress like a male, and you are attracted to females for the purposes of procreation. Likewise, having female genitalia equals dressing like a female, acting like a female, and sexual attraction to males. The vast majority of people are aware of the dynamics of homosexuality in terms of same-sex attraction (the "L" and the "G" of LGBTQ+); however, understanding the dynamics of sexuality when gender does not conform to the male–female binary is another story.

Gender activism works to deconstruct gender categories, addressing the intersection of gender and sexuality which affects all youth (Schindel, 2008, p. 65). As students organize to educate within their schools, they use their alliances to challenge institutional heterosexism, creating dialogue along the way. Participating in GSAs enables youth to have frank discussions regarding identity, sexuality, and discrimination in a safe space, which in turn motivates activism. GSAs provide LGBTQ+ youth with a forum to discuss their specific needs as well as the support they may need to either challenge the policies prohibiting full inclusion, or to hold the education system accountable for policies that are in place but that have been poorly enacted.

Discrimination felt by LGBTQ+ youth is often based on gender identity and nonconformity. In fact, Clarke and MacDougall (2012) revealed that despite the prevalence of anti-bullying programs and interventions across Canada, very few of them address sexual or gender nonconformity (or perceived nonconformity) as the root cause of a significant amount of bullying and harassment. Gender activism, as modelled by GSAs, employs a "rights-based paradigm to directly address discrimination and harassment and provide formal mechanisms to protect youth within the school system" (Schindel, 2008, p. 65). In order to challenge discrimination in the school setting, school administrators must be educated on the circumstances and the life experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. In addition, school administrators need to be made aware of the needs of LGBTQ+ students as well as the options open to accommodating them (Schindel, 2008). Adequate policies governing harassment and equal rights can hold schools accountable; however, many teachers and administrators are not clear on how these policies should be implemented. To sustain this rights-based gender activism, youth are creating spaces to educate school

administrators and fellow students about options for reconceptualizing the gender binary and holding school administrators accountable for adequate and appropriate school practices and policies fostering safety and inclusion (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Schindel, 2008), evident in the rise of SOGI and transgender policy and implementation in various education jurisdictions across Canada (e.g., Toronto District School Board, 2013; Government of Yukon, Department of Education, 2012).

Initial justifications for legislative changes and the creation of safe spaces revolved around the need for protection from harm, isolation, and marginalization (Fetner et al., 2012; Mayberry et al., 2011; Taylor & Peter, 2011). However, rather than focusing activism efforts on protecting youth based on the idea that they are different, GSAs direct their efforts to educating as wide a circle as possible based on the ideology of inclusion. GSAs draw on multiple resources to empower through knowledge and create genuine opportunities for change. GSAs provide a space for LGBTQ+ youth to intellectually explore their subculture(s) and to safely deal with the challenges of sexual and gender diversity. Some researchers suggest that, if GSAs are the sole means of activism, personal and systemic change can be challenging and even questionable (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004); however, participation and leadership from other adults and students strengthens the efforts of GSAs and helps propel awareness of this social justice movement. Because GSAs are founded on a partnership between LGBTQ+ youth and their allies, they provide information and educational opportunities with respect to sexual identity, sexuality, and gender role norms for all youth, not just LGBTQ+.

Despite some criticisms that GSAs can normalize whiteness (Blackburn & McCready, 2009) and marginalize students of colour, underprivileged students, and gender-diverse students (Mayo, 2009; Mayo Jr., 2013; McCready, 2004), GSAs have moved things a long way toward recognition and inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues. Others have suggested that the GSA movement is "one of the most visible manifestations of the contemporary movement for social justice" (Russell et al., 2009, p. 892). Additional concerns centre on the fact that some LGBTQ+ students may worry about confidentiality within the school systems and within a group of peers when GSAs are often composed of predominantly straight allies (Griffin et al., 2009). While they likely reflect society's slower movement on true understanding of gender identity issues and inclusiveness of transgender individuals, it can be argued that the issues of gender expression and fluidity have in part been brought more abruptly to the fore through the GSA "revolution" as youth are

finding safer pockets within their support environments to express their identities authentically. LGBTQ+ youth are finding the courage to express themselves according to how they do or do not identify with gender and sexual orientation, no matter where they fall on that continuum. Furthermore, this freedom of expression has surely facilitated, or at least contributed to, the development of SOGI policies across the nation in order to provide as safe and healthy a school environment as possible and to reinforce policies of inclusivity and the celebration of diversity.

Conclusion

The education system is taxed with the job of preparing youth for the world—delivering the information that they require to develop "normally," intellectually and socially. Perhaps we could liken the GSA movement to a period of enlightenment. Educators are charged with imparting the wisdom necessary for youth to make critical assessments of challenges they face; the wisdom to critically analyze information and situations in order to live productive lives and contribute proportionately and successfully to society. In education, changes must be made to curriculum, policies, and practices in order to combat the traditional heterosexist culture that has been institutionalized in the educational system. In doing this, LGBTQ+ students (in fact, all students) would experience a safe and inclusive educational environment. Furthermore, by supporting GSAs and their activism efforts, as well as fostering community alliances, the educational system would go a long way toward meeting these goals. Education should be about finding your voice—growing into your potential. GSAs are trying to move the education system to do just this through their efforts to bring about accurate information that challenges the status quo, their efforts to confront discrimination, and their reconceptualization of gender.

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