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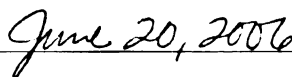
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AN UNTOLD STORY: THE EXPERIENCES OF GAY STRAIGHT ALLIANCE
(GSA) ADVISORS IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

By

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ABSTRACT

AN UNTOLD STORY: THE EXPERIENCES OF GAY STRAIGHT ALLIANCE (GSA) ADVISORS IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

By

Maria Teresa Valenti

This phenomenological, qualitative study explored the motivation and decision making processes of Gay-Straight Alliance club advisors regarding their choices to become involved with these organizations. This study also examined the various roles that a GSA advisor can play for these clubs in a public school system. Fourteen advisors from one Midwestern state were randomly recruited for participation. Inductive and deductive qualitative analyses elucidated themes and sub-themes surrounding the two areas of inquiry: motivation for becoming advisor and advisor roles. For motivation, the themes that emerged were a protective attitude toward LGBT youth, a personal connection with sexual minority people/issues, homophobic incident reaction, past social justice work, and a dedication to fairness. Becoming a GSA advisor was not necessarily an easy decision to make, therefore the decision making process was analyzed, which elucidated themes surrounding their worries (time commitment involved, their possible lack of credibility, their fear about possibly losing their job, their fear about being accused of recruitment to the 'gay lifestyle' and fear of a general negative community response) and their sense of security (having tenure or other protections against being fired, and being married). Limitations and implications for future research and practice are discussed.

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OVERVIEW

Past research suggests that over 10% of youth could be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning their sexuality. In recent years there has been an increase in the trend for these youth to come out¹ in school, especially high school. Students who come out in school are sometimes not accepted by their peers or teachers, and have consequently experienced the effects of homophobia. Homophobia in schools has been defined as the interrelated mechanisms of silencing: systematic exclusion and systematic negative inclusion. Systematic exclusion is the process of rendering sexual minority people invisible while systematic inclusion includes portraying sexual minority issues and people as pathological. One reason silencing occurs is that there is a lack of intervention to stop homophobic harassment. For example, homophobic remarks often go unchallenged at school, and there has also been evidence that some teachers actually encourage antigay talk. Students report that homosexuality is discussed in some of their classes, but is mainly talked about in a negative context or in conjunction with pathology. For instance, sexual education classes often define sexual activity as vaginal intercourse between a man and woman, condom use is discussed only in terms of vaginal penetrative sex, and homosexuality is still equated with pedophilia.

A growing body of research has begun to document the negative outcomes that homophobia in school has on sexual minority students. Research has shown that homophobia puts sexual minority students at risk for feeling unsafe and isolated, which can lead to absenteeism, substance abuse, and suicide. Like students, sexual minority staff are also affected by homophobia in schools. Teachers are often subjected to blatant

¹ The term 'out' signifies the process of disclosing one's sexual orientation to others (Bochenek & Brown, 2001).

and subtle forms of homophobic harassment, which can span from direct threats to dismissal to assumed heterosexuality. Through this harassment grows fear. Some teachers fear losing their job if someone finds out about their sexual orientation. It is currently legal in 33 states to be fired for being gay or lesbian (French, 2002). There is also no federal law protecting gay and lesbian workers from discrimination based on their sexual orientation (French, 2002).

While homophobia occurs in many schools, there have been efforts by some schools to address the needs of sexual minority youth. One such effort is the development of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) in high schools, which is an extracurricular club for students who are LGBT, are questioning their sexuality, have family members who are LGBT, or consider themselves an ally to LGBT issues and people. These groups offer LGBT youth the opportunity for a sense of belonging and community, as well as the possibility to explore and test different aspects of themselves in a safe environment. Although these clubs have potential benefits for sexual minority students, they have been met with opposition by some school administration and community members. Despite this opposition, these clubs have survived due to the Equal Access Act and the First Amendment.

In order for the students to establish a GSA, an advisor is needed who typically must be an employee of the school. These advisors may play an important role in fighting homophobia in the schools, and are visible adults advocating for sexual orientation equity. In addition, because GSA's are considered controversial, and LGBT youth are an oppressed minority, agreeing to become a GSA advisor can be conceptualized as an act of social activism. As such, to understand the experiences of GSA advisors, we need to

understand the broader context of what it means to be an activist and participate in activism. Based on both theoretical and empirical research, two main perspectives have emerged that attempt to describe why people participate in activist activities: individual and contextual. Whereas this literature can provide a useful framework for an explanation of GSA advisors, to date, there has yet to be any research examining the experiences of GSA advisors or motivation of GSA advisors to advise a controversial student organization. Therefore, this research study has the aim of exploring the experiences of these advisors. Specifically, this research study used a qualitative individual interview method to answer the two primary questions: (1) Why do GSA advisors advise this student organization? (2) What is the GSA advisor role in the school environment? Through the interview process, GSA advisors gave insight into why advisors were motivated and decided to become advisors and their subsequent roles in the school system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual (LGB) Prevalence in Youth Population

Youth are examining their sexuality at earlier ages than in years past, leading to an increase of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth who disclose their sexual orientation identity to peers and faculty at school (Bochenek & Brown, 2001). The exact percentage of youth who are sexual minority is difficult to assess, but percentages cited range from 1.1% (Treadway & Yoakam, 1992) to up to 10% (Herdt, 1989; Little, 2001). It has also been suggested that when the percentage of youth questioning their heterosexuality is included, the percentage increases to greater than 10% (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Gonsiorek, Sell & Weinrich, 1995).

This broad range of percentages of the prevalence of LGB youth can be problematic. According to Gonsiorek et al (1995), politicians attempt to only quote studies that suggest that there is only a small percentage of youth who are sexual minority. This creates the illusion that sexual minority youth are extremely rare, thus making it seem that the effects of their “political disenfranchisement will be trivial” (Gonsiorek et al, 1995, p. 40). In other words, because there are so few LGB youth, there is no urgency to include these youth and issues into the education system, where these youth are possibly discriminated against. No matter what percentage of youth may be sexual minority, it is likely that they encounter homophobia. Therefore, it is important to examine the concept of homophobia in the school setting.

Homophobia

The term homophobia materialized fairly recent in history, less than fifty years ago in the 1960s. It was not until the 1970s that the definition became under contention.

In 1972, George Weinberg defined homophobia as “the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals” (as cited in Fone, 2000, p. 5). From this definition grew other definitions that attempt to explain this phenomenon. There are various forms and definitions of homophobia. One form, called institutional homophobia, involves homosexual discrimination in social policies, and/or laws. This includes, for example, ignoring the existence of lesbian and gay people in insurance policies and wills, hospital visiting rules allowing ‘immediate family only,’ laws that prohibit consensual sexual activity between two same-sex adults, and mass media portrayal of the world as entirely heterosexual (Herek, 1986).

Homophobia can be overt or subtle (Little, 2001). Overt homophobia is the “verbal and physical abuse of sexual minority [people] or those who are perceived as being sexual minorities. This harassment is expressed in the form of name-calling, queer jokes, AIDS jokes, snide remarks, gay bashings, and other hate crimes” (Malinsky, 1997, p. 38). Other researchers have simply termed this overt homophobia definition as harassment (Burn, 2000) or homophobic bullying (Douglas, Warwick, Whitty, Aggleton, & Kemp, 1999).

Evidence of homophobia in the school setting. There is evidence that overt homophobia in the form of verbal and physical harassment occurs on a regular basis during the school day. Antigay activities are seen as a normal, everyday part of school social organization (Buston & Hart, 2001; Smith, 1998). The name calling of ‘fag,’ ‘dyke’ or ‘queer’ and the sayings, ‘that’s so gay,’ ‘you’re so gay’ are heard quite often in a negative context. About 75 to 90% of high school informants in various studies report hearing these remarks very often or frequently (Burn, 2000; Buston & Hart, 2001;

Gustavsson & MacEachron, 1998; Kosciw & Cullen, 2001; Peters, 2003; Smith, 1998).

Most of these homophobic slurs come from other students (Kosciw & Cullen, 2001; Mason & Palmer, 1996; Peters, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1994). However, some report that as many as 25% of the harassers are faculty, staff, and administrators (Kosciw & Cullen, 2001; Peters, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1994). In addition, the verbal harassment may not be as direct as being called names, but may be indirect such as in the form of jokes, snide remarks (Malinsky, 1997) or obscene gestures (Bass & Kaufman, 1996, as cited in Little, 2001).

In addition to verbal harassment, physical harassment often occurs in the school setting. A survey of the Los Angeles County school system found that the high prevalence of antigay abuse inflicted by classmates was premeditated, rather than a chance occurrence. The most frequent abusers were fellow teenagers (Savin-Williams, 1994). Physical assault consists of being punched, kicked, and/or injured with a weapon and it happens quite often (Kosciw & Cullen, 2001; Mason & Palmer, 1996; Savin-Williams, 1994). As many as 20% of LGB youth report some incident of physical assault and over 5% state that it happens frequently because of their sexual orientation (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Kosciw & Cullen, 2001). Students reported that violent attacks against them took place at school according to a British national study of 'hate crimes' (Mason & Palmer, 1996).

Not only is there the overt manifestation of homophobia such as verbal and physical harassment, there is also a more covert version prevalent in the school community. Researchers have used the term heterosexism in conjunction with the term homophobia to describe a more subtle version of harassment (Buston & Hart, 2001;

Little, 2001; Malinsky, 1997). Homophobia is often considered a part of heterosexism, referring to the bigoted statements or behavior of individuals in relations to gay and lesbian identity, or homosexual behavior (Buston & Hart, 2001). It has also been extended to include the absence of gay and lesbian positive images 'and a deafening silence about the homosexual reality' (Herr, 1997; Little, 2001). The interplay of homophobia and heterosexism as an interrelated mechanism has been used to examine the homophobia present in the school context. Herr (1997) further examined the relationship between homophobia and heterosexism and applied it to the school setting. She saw homophobia/heterosexism as being shaped and reinforced in schools by interrelated mechanisms of silencing: systematic exclusion, and systematic [negative] inclusion. Systematic exclusion is the process of rendering LGB people invisible by excluding them as positive role models and positive images of our society, as well as eliminating them from the positive messages portrayed. Systematic inclusion is the idea that when discussing sexual minority people, they are placed in a negative context, often linked to pathology or dangerous behaviors. It is through these two mechanisms that a culture is generated that gives tacit approval for antigay violence in the schools. These two mechanisms reflect and reinforce heterosexist beliefs and attitudes (Herr, 1997).

There have been fewer research studies examining this subtle interrelated version of homophobia/heterosexism than overt homophobia, but nevertheless there is evidence of it in different forms. The two interrelated mechanisms of systematic inclusion and exclusion leading to silencing are evident in various ways in the school context. One way is that there is a lack of intervention to stop the homophobic harassment. Homophobic remarks often go unchallenged at school (Buston & Hart, 2001; Jordan et al, 1997;

Kosciw & Cullen, 2001; Peters, 2003; Telljohann & Price, 1993). Jordan, Vaughn, and Woodworth (1997) administered a questionnaire to 34 LGB high school students (ages 15 to 19) from the Chicago metropolitan area. The questionnaire consisted of qualitative questions regarding advice they would give to adults, how the youth felt empowered, and incidents of harassment. The students on average reported that they heard peers use homosexual pejoratives once per day, but teachers were witnessed to correct or discipline a student for making a derogatory remark less than once per month (Jordan et al, 1997). There has also been evidence that teachers actually encourage antigay talk (Buston & Hart, 2001; Malinsky, 1997; Smith, 1998). The idea that teachers do not stop homophobic occurrences from happening is important to the argument that the school setting is homophobic. Teachers are giving tacit approval for homophobic behavior, thus propagating a homophobic environment. According to ecological theory, environments convey normative expectations for behavior (Linney, 2000) meaning that the homophobic behavior becomes normalized.

According to past research, students report that homosexuality has been discussed in some of their classes, but was talked about in a negative context or as pathological (Buston & Hart, 2001; Malinsky, 1997; Telljohann & Price, 1993). This is supportive of the definition of homophobia according to Herr (1997), which reiterates that there is evidence of homophobia in the school context. Buston and Hart (2001) observed sexual education classrooms and noted instances where homosexuality was treated as being only about sexual behavior and/or framed as dangerous. For example, the researchers noted discussions where “‘being gay’ and being HIV positive or having AIDS were conflated as if this synergy was unproblematic” (Buston & Hart, 2001, p. 100). Another example

involved a class discussion which equated pedophilia with homosexuality. In other instances, the issue of gay and lesbian sexuality was invisible. Examples included defining sexual activity as vaginal intercourse, talking solely in terms of sexual relationships being between males and females, and failing to discuss condom use in terms of anal penetrative sex as well as vaginal penetrative sex (Buston & Hart, 2001).

Across the literature, there is consensus that there is a lack of positive LGB role models for students (Hetrick & Martin as cited in Telljohann & Price, 1993; Malinsky, 1997; Ryan & Futterman, 2001; Telljohann & Price, 1993). No known research has investigated the prevalence of LGB role models in the school systems. There are sure to be some LGB role models, although they are probably few. As one teen said, "...adults have to understand that they are VERY important to us. More than they think. I've never really met a gay adult and I am quite in awe of them" (Malinsky, 1997, p. 42). This lack of known LGB role models in the school systems reiterates that the school setting is homophobic (Herr, 1997).

A few research studies have shifted focus from studying role models to focusing on LGB youths' perceived social support (Anderson, 1998; Jordan et al, 1997; Lee, 2002; Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002; Nesmith, Burton, & Cosgrove, 1999). Parents and non-gay peers were perceived as giving lower levels of support when compared to the norms of the standardized youth population (Anderson, 1998) or in comparison to non-family members and LGB peers (Mufioz-Plaza et al, 2002; Nesmith et al, 1999). One research study completed by Nesmith et al (1999) interviewed sexual minority youth from a drop-in center for LGB youth. Two certain types of people were perceived to offer the most vital support: parental figures (not their biological parents, but someone to fill

that role), and key individuals who introduced him/her to the LGB community (Nesmith et al, 1999). This study about support emphasizes that LGB youth could benefit from role models. This lack of role models along with other evidence of homophobia can put sexual minority youth at risk.

Outcomes of homophobia in the school setting. To date, the focus of research concerning the effect of school homophobia on LGB youth has been largely about negative outcomes (Anderson 1998; Herek 1993 cited in Jordan et al, 1997; Ryan & Futterman, 2001; Savin-Williams, 1994). Research has shown that homophobia in school puts LGB youth at risk for feeling unsafe and isolated, which can lead to absenteeism, substance abuse, and suicide. About 72% of LGB youth feel afraid at school, which consequently leads to being absent (Elliot & Kilpatrick, 1994; Rivers, 2000; Vare & Norton, 1998). This absenteeism limits their school interaction, which leads to social isolation. The resulting isolation can hamper gay and lesbian youth in the accomplishment of certain developmental tasks such as the attainment of a sense of identity, the capacity for intimacy, and a sense of self that contributes to psychological and physical independence (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Vare & Norton, 1998). It is well documented that it can lead to abuse of alcohol and drugs (Rotheram-Borus, Rosario, VanRossem, Reid, Gill, 1995; Russell, Driscoll & Truong, 2002; Savin-Williams, 1994). Research also supports that the rates of suicide among LGB youth is much higher than their non-LGB peers (Elliot & Kilpatrick, 1994; Garofalo, Wolf, Wissow, Woods, & Goodman, 1999; van Heeringen & Vincke, 2000; Vare & Norton, 1998; Wichstrom & Hegna, 2003).

Some outcomes appear on the surface to be positive, but really have negative roots due to homophobia in school. Malinsky (1997) reported in her study with LGB youth that most of the informants reported excelling in school. This may be because, theoretically, gay and lesbian youth may become 'super-achievers' to divert attention from their sexual orientation. Parents, school professionals, and peers regard their academic or extracurricular success positively, so there is not any cause for suspicion (Malinsky, 1997). In theory, these youth are also at a greater risk for being perfectionists. Many sexual minority youth grow up with the idea that being LGB is bad and they need to hide it, so they are perfect in everything else because they have fear that one imperfection will disclose another (Harbeck, 1994). In addition, hypothetically while some youth strive to make themselves known positively, other LGB youth try to blend in and submerge themselves into the general school population. They wish to go unnoticed so people will not suspect their 'secret' (Malinsky, 1997).

Students are not the only school population affected by homophobia. According to Harbeck (1992), there are approximately 272,400 homosexual teachers employed in public schools (i.e., two or three teachers per school or 10% of the teacher population) (as cited in Walters & Hayes, 1998). Teachers are affected by homophobia as well (Juul, 1994; Norris, 1992 as cited in Walters & Hayes, 1998; Woods & Harbeck, 1992). For instance, Olson (1987) surveyed 97 gay and lesbian teachers from around the nation. She found that all but six claimed to have experienced stereotypic notions of homosexuality through comments by parents, students, fellow teachers, and administrators. They are also subjected to both overt and subtle forms of homophobic harassment. This harassment can vary in intensity along a continuum. At one end of the continuum there

are the direct threats of being fired, and on the other they work in a complete heterosexist environment.

Through this harassment grows fear. The major fear documented by sexual minority teachers is that they fear losing their job if someone finds out about their sexual orientation (Bliss & Harris, 1998; French, 2002; Griffin, 1992; Juul, 1994, 1995; Litton, 2001; Olson, 1987; Walter & Hayes, 1998; Woods & Harbeck, 1992). According to McCormick (1994), women are routinely fired from their jobs as teachers simply because they are suspected of being lesbians because antigay prejudice is so prevalent in the educational system (as cited in Bliss & Harris, 1998). Their fear may have some grounding because it is currently legal in 38 states to be fired for being gay or lesbian (French, 2002). There is also no federal law that protects gay and lesbian workers from discrimination based on their sexual orientation (French, 2002). In addition, Olson (1987) documented that sexual minority teachers were not getting tenure or promotions at the same rate as their heterosexual peers.

Another fear of sexual minority teachers is that their credibility will be compromised if they were to disclose to their students or colleagues about being gay or lesbian (Griffin, 1992; Walters & Hayes, 1998). Russ, Simonds and Hunt (2002) investigated how the act of coming out affects a gay teacher's classroom credibility as reflected by student evaluations because these evaluations often affect teachers' salary review, promotional opportunities, tenure consideration, and contract decisions. They surveyed 154 first year undergraduate students in two Introduction to Communication classes at a large Midwestern University. In both classes, a 25 year old graduate student was a guest speaker. The professor gave the same introductory statement about how the

speaker was a nationally ranked collegiate public speaker and gave other accolades. In one class, during his speech he referred to his partner Jennifer three times, and in the other class he referred to his partner Jason three times. Otherwise, the speeches were identical. After the speaker left, the students filled out a Teacher Evaluation Form, which included scales of competence and character and space for qualitative comments. The results demonstrated that students perceived the “gay” instructor to be significantly less credible in terms of competence ($p < .01$) and character ($p < .001$) than the “heterosexual speaker.” Students also perceived that they learned significantly more from the heterosexual speaker ($p < .001$) and students taught by the gay instructor reported lower levels of learning. In the comment section of the form, the straight speaker received considerably more positive comments than the gay instructor. The straight speaker received 39 critical comments, while the gay instructor received 205. In the class with the straight speaker, 93% said that they would ‘unquestionably’ hire him, while with the gay speaker, 30% wrote that they might hire him, and only 8% stated that they would definitely hire him. These findings suggest that coming out could have disadvantageous repercussions for teachers.

Some other fears sexual minority teachers mentioned in the research literature were that they will be accused of child molestation or making sexual advances to students, or accused of recruiting students to a lesbian or gay lifestyle (Bliss & Harris, 1998; Griffin, 1992). Griffin (1992) interviewed 13 educators in all levels of the education system from Massachusetts (before the passage of Massachusetts gay rights laws, which protects the employment of lesbian and gay teachers). One of the purposes of the study was to describe the experiences of gay and lesbian educators. He found that

informants believed that public accusation would result in accusation of child molestation or making sexual advances to students, recruiting students to a lesbian or gay lifestyle; and accused of being lesbian or gay as result of being seen at a gay identified place or event. Bliss and Harris (1998) found the same results as Griffin (1992) although they used a questionnaire instead of an interview for their research method. These fears may be founded on some fact. For example, according to Walters and Hayes (1998):

In the fall of 1995, a Michigan teacher was nearly fired after acknowledging he had participated in a commitment ceremony with another man. The opinion of many community residents about this instructor's competency as a teacher and his motives for working with students changed within a matter of hours: One day he was a well-liked and adept teacher; the next day he was a prowling pedophile (p.5).

These fears lead to costs. Many gay and lesbian teachers report separating their personal and professional lives entirely. They apply self-imposed restrictions that limit their interactions and relationships with colleagues, students, and parents, which can consequently create a feeling of isolation (Bliss & Harris, 1998; Griffin, 1992; Juul 1994, 1995; Olson, 1987). They constantly monitor to protect their secret identities and the energy required to do this takes a psychological toll. Griffin (1992) noted that all the informants in his study wished to integrate their gay and lesbian identity with their professional identity to end division.

Some may think that tenure, which protects teachers from arbitrary firing, may provide some comfort and protection for sexual minority teachers. Juul (1994) examined the results of tenure and legal protection on lesbian, gay male and bisexual public school

teachers by looking at the effects of openness on job satisfaction and job stress. He gave sexual minority teachers surveys such as the Teacher Job Satisfaction questionnaire, Identity-Disclosure questionnaire, Level of Professional Challenge survey, and demographics, which included asking about civil rights protected by state law, local ordinance and union contract. Juul (1994) discovered that non-tenured teachers were more willing to reveal their sexual orientation and risk exposure than tenured, although none of the informants were explicitly out in their schools. They also reported more job satisfaction, less stress, and a higher public profile, although tenured teachers were more satisfied with their pay and showed significantly less identity dissonance. However, it is important to note that the tenured teachers tended to be male and significantly older than non-tenured teachers, and these differences may have influenced the findings.

Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA)

Although there is growing evidence of pervasive homophobia in school systems, there have been growing efforts to counteract it and its negative effects. One approach has been the establishment of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) in some high schools. A Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) is an extracurricular club for students in school who are LGBT, who are questioning their sexuality, who have family members who are LGBT, or who consider themselves allies to LGBT issues and people (GLSEN, 2000). These groups offer LGBT youth the opportunity of a sense of belonging and community, as well as the possibility to explore and test different aspects of themselves in a safe environment that promotes self-understanding and acceptance (Anderson, 1998). It is essentially for all youth, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. It allows youth to build coalitions and community that can work towards making a safer school

environment for all people (GLSEN, 2000). Blumenfeld (1994) also saw GSA's as an important piece in an overall strategy to ensure that schools fulfill their mandate to provide the best education possible in a safe and welcoming school environment for students of all sexual identities.

The first high school gay support group, Project 10, was founded in 1984 (Lipkin, 2004; Uribe, 1994). Project 10 was founded by Virginia Uribe, who was a counselor at Fairfax High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District. She developed this program as a means to address the underserved needs of gay and lesbian students. The project focused on education, reduction of verbal and physical abuse, suicide prevention, and the dissemination of accurate AIDS information. Project 10 created workshops for teachers, counselors and other support personnel, as well as established support groups for students dealing with sexual orientation issues at each senior high school in the district. The goals of these support groups were to improve self-esteem, and provide affirmation for students suffering the effects of stigmatization and discrimination based on their sexual orientation.

Virginia Uribe created a model for this program that consisted of: (1) an established sexual minority school district resource center, (2) a paid coordinator for the program, (3) on-going workshops to train counselors, teachers and other staff members on issues of institutional homophobia and the special needs of gay and lesbian youth, (4) development of trained on-site school teams to whom students can go for information and support, (5) assistance to librarians in developing fiction and non-fiction on gay/lesbian subjects, (6) enforcement of non-discrimination clauses, anti-slur resolutions, and codes of behavior with regard to name-calling, (7) advocacy for lesbian and gay student rights

through commissions, task forces, PTA's and community out-reach programs, and (8) networking with community agencies, parents, educational organizations and teachers' unions. She considered this a fluid model where other school districts could implement it and adapt it as necessary for their district needs. There are no known school districts, however, that have adopted all these model aspects completely (Uribe, 1994).

Although Uribe's ideal program did not take flight as she hoped, the idea of having a group for sexual minority or questioning students at high schools did take hold and GSA's began to be formed throughout the country. Blumenfeld (1994) observed a GSA meeting at Brookline High School in Massachusetts where the members discussed a recent homophobic attack on a student in a nearby town. From talking to the students at the meeting, he became aware of the various GSA activities, which include activities that balance between political work of raising consciousness and reducing homophobia at school, and dealing with more personal or emotional issues of members. These activities may include discussion on pre-determined themes led by a member or an outside speaker, discussion of questions such as "Why are lesbians called 'lesbians' instead of 'gay'?", or "What was the Stonewall riot?" They could also include watching a movie or listening to a radio show on issues dealing with sexual orientation issues, writing letters to congressional representatives, and creating signs and posters to educate the general student body. In addition, from a brief sampling of high school campuses, Blumenfeld (1994) discovered that the term GSA is not universal. Various clubs have created their own names including Spectrum, Project 10 East, Homo-Bi-Hetero Society, GASP! (Gay And Straight People), LeSGaB (Lesbian, Straight, Gay, and Bisexual), and LesBiGay.

There is a paucity of empirical research literature surrounding GSA activities; however Griffin, Lee, Waugh, and Beyer (2004) researched 22 high schools participating in the Massachusetts Safe School Program and each one had a functioning GSA. They found four types of roles that GSA's contribute to the school setting. One role is to provide counseling and support, which has a main focus of assisting individual students who are dealing with sexual identity or gender identity issues, as well as safety issues (isolation, suicide, depression, and identity confusion). It is primarily focused on individual adjustment and less on providing educational or awareness activities that engage the whole school community.

Another GSA role is as a 'safe space,' where students can socialize and talk with other students who share LGBT interest. It is visible through public address systems and hallway posters that invite the general student body to participate. These GSAs typically do not hold events for the general school community or those students who are not GSA affiliated.

A third role is as a vehicle for raising awareness, increasing visibility, and education about LGBT issues in school. The GSA activities are social, educational, and/or political in nature. The GSA plays a lead role in calling attention to LGBT safety issues, planning school wide events such as assemblies and exhibits. This type also works to provide a safe place for members to socialize and plan activities.

The fourth role of GSAs is to actively engage in being part of broader school efforts for raising awareness, increasing visibility, and education about LGBT issues in school. These GSA's usually work in partnership with the principal, faculty, school administration, school committees, the superintendents, as well as the surrounding

community. There are also staff initiated interventions to stop anti-gay harassment, including support for the rights of LGBT in the student handbook (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004).

Research (although very limited) supports that GSA involvement by LGBT youth greatly increase their positive interaction with the school. Lee (2002) interviewed seven students from the first high school GSA in the state of Utah, who were self-identified as LGB or straight, and 'out' to their parents. She asked them questions based on how belonging to the alliance affected their academic performance, relationships with school administrators, teachers, family and peers, their comfortability with being known as LGB, and if they felt like they belonged to the school community. She also asked them if the GSA provided them specific strategies for handling heterosexism, if the students felt safer in school, if the students thought that they can 'make a difference' and contribute positively to society. She found that the students did experience some hopelessness and despair common to sexual minority youth, but the GSA helped them to 'move beyond' and gain stronger identities. They came to learn that their perceived problems were really society's problems. They also reported increased positive relationships with school administrators, teacher, family, and peers, increased self-pride, feeling safer in school, and thus a new sense of belonging (Lee, 2002).

The establishment of GSA's in many schools around the country has been met with controversy. On the extreme end of the continuum, people are going to great lengths to oppose the establishment of GSA's. For example, some school administrations have refused to allow these clubs to exist in their schools and consequently have been faced with court cases. One court case of particular importance established precedence. In 1995

at East High School in Salt Lake City, a senior high school student, Kelli Peterson, decided to start a GSA and register it with school officials. Instead of permitting this club, the school administrators responded by banning all non-curriculum related clubs in all the public schools. They did this to legally comply with the Equal Access Act, which is a federal law constraining the ability of school districts to deny recognition selectively to school-affiliated student organizations. In response to the school administrators' decision, students organized protests and walkouts objecting not to the ban on the GSA, but the widespread effects on other clubs. In addition, a small group of students responded by forming the SAFE (Students Against Faggots Everywhere) club (Gewirtzman, 1998).

In 1996, the Utah state legislature, dominated by the Mormon Church, responded by passing a law (S.B. 1003), which states that, "local school boards shall deny access to any student organization or club whose program and activities would materially or substantially (1) encourage criminal or delinquent conduct, (2) promote bigotry, (3) or involve human sexuality" (Utah Code Ann., 1996). When asked about being in favor of Bible study groups but having the bias against the gay club, Utah Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) stated that when the Equal Access Act was approved, it was not for 'those sorts of groups' ("Gay club," 2000).

With this new state law all clubs were reinstated except for the GSA. In response, a federal lawsuit followed where the GSA students charged that they have the right to establish the club in connection with the Equal Access Act *and* the First Amendment. The District Judge ruled that the board violated the Equal Access Act, but that the First Amendment was not violated because school officials announced a policy stating that

there was no prohibition on expressing gay-positive viewpoints in *curricular* settings (East High Gay/Straight Alliance v. Board of Education, No. 2:98CV193J as cited in Lambda Legal, 2000). In 1999, resigning to the policy and fearing that their GSA would remain in court battles until after they graduated, students decided to form a curricular club called PRISM (People Respecting Important Social Movements) with a gay perspective. School officials again denied approval of this club, and the students again went to court, obtaining a preliminary injunction that permitted PRISM to meet while their case proceeded. This resulted in a federal lawsuit and an injunction that required that the board allow the establishment of the PRISM club. The District filed its own appeal against the injunction. Finally, on September 5, 2000 almost 5 years since the first lawsuit, the Salt Lake City School Board reversed its decision and decided to allow all student clubs, including GSA's, to meet at their schools (East High School Prism Club v. Seidel, No. 2:00-CV-0311K as cited in Lambda Legal, 2000).

The Salt Lake City GSA situation is extreme in that the school administrators decided to ban all clubs rather than permit a 'gay' club to exist; however the refusal of school administrators to permit this club to meet is not uncommon. A search on LexisNexis revealed that there are currently ongoing court cases in various states including Kentucky, Colorado, Texas, Utah, Louisiana, and Missouri. Not only have school administration denied the right of GSA's to meet, but parents have become involved in fighting against these clubs. In Hazel Park, Michigan the GSA club prompted some parents to demand parental approval before students join any school organization. For example, one parent stated "When you are of high school age, you are vulnerable, and have mixed and confused feelings... Should they be talking to homosexuals? Are

there straight persons helping to run the meetings (“Some Parents,” 2003)? This same person has a son in junior high school who will not be attending the high school if officials continue to permit students in clubs without parental permission (“Some Parents,” 2003).

Even though some GSA’s have been met with controversy, there have been teachers that may have advocated for sexual minority youth and issues by becoming a GSA advisor. However, to date, there has yet to be any research examining the experiences of GSA advisors, who could possibly play an important role in fighting homophobia in the schools, as well as be a visible adult advocating for sexual orientation equity. In addition, the GSA advisor could be an important support person for LGBT youth since GSA’s are established to serve sexual minority youth who may not be out to their parents. The GSA advisor may be the only adult supporting them through the exploration of their sexuality and accepting them through the process. The GSA advisor may provide for some sexual minority youth the supportive relationship with an adult that is ‘the most critical variable’ predicting health and resiliency throughout childhood and adolescence (Scales & Leffert, 1999).

Activism

As discussed previously, GSA’s are considered controversial, and LGBT youth LGBT and teachers are an oppressed minority. Therefore, the role of the GSA advisor can be conceptualized as that of an activist. To understand the experiences of GSA advisors, the literature on activism and why people become activists may be informative. To begin, definitions of activist and activism are essential. The term activist can be applied to people who “act strategically with others, on the basis of shared values, to

create a more just society (changing how society or its institutions operate, creating new institutions, creating a new society on the basis of alternative principles)” (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003, p.186).

The term activism is sometimes referred to as social activism or civil activism and can have a precise or a broad definition. Faver (2001) defines activism as the activities specifically intended to create change at the societal level rather than focusing on helping people at an individual level, while Watts, Williams, and Jagers (2003) define it more broadly as any action that is taken to help overcome oppression. Mohamed and Wheeler (2001) determine it to be any activity in support of or in opposition to any issue involving the civil affairs of people at different societal levels such as the neighborhood, local, regional, state, national, and global levels. According to these definitions, examples of activism could include individuals, organizations, and/or institutions engaged in advocacy and public education efforts, research and public policy, nonviolent public demonstrations, resource development, or participation in the democratic process (Roach, Sullivan, & Wheeler, 1999 as cited in Mohammed & Wheeler, 2001).

Using these definitions, a GSA advisor could easily be participating in activism by advising a club of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender high school students who in many ways are oppressed in school culture (Buston & Hart, 2001; Herr, 1997; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Kosciw & Cullen, 2001; Smith, 1998; Vare & Norton, 1998; Walters & Hayes, 1998). Oppression means that there is an unfair use of power by a social group over another in a manner that creates and maintains inequity over the distribution of coveted resources. It is propagated through overt or material violence and can be subtle or ideological, such as institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, or heterosexism. The

ideological form of violence is sometimes determined to be at the core of oppression because it normalizes oppressive social relationships and material inequity (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adid, 1999; Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003).

The literature on activism and citizen participation has used both an individual level of analysis and a contextual level of analysis to explain why people engage in activism. For this section of this literature review, there will be first discussion about why people participate from the individual level and then why people participate from the contextual level perspective. Both individual research studies and theories will be discussed. These approaches will then be examined to see how they fit into the GSA experience.

Why do people become activists? Jones (2002) examined personal motivators for becoming an activist in her study of 4 lesbians and 2 gay men who were leaders of a radical street activist group. In her interviews, she asked the participants: “(1) How do you describe your political activism? (2) What motivated you to become an activist? (3) What is the difference between you and someone who is not an activist but believes in the same things you do?”(Jones, 2002, p. 42). She found that 4 out of 6 of the informants had a family history of activism, which is a common motivation for activist participation (Mondros & Wilson, 1990 as cited in Jones, 2002). Their parents actively ingrained in them the necessity of being politically knowledgeable, being willing to participate and to voice an opinion, and caring about the community. In addition, the informants also seemed to have strong beliefs, values, and perceptions of the world and how they should operate in it and their activism was the outward manifestation. They were also motivated by their personal power and resiliency, such that “each expressed with great confidence,

their belief that they could survive, master, or conquer virtually any situation in which they found themselves” (Jones, 2002, p.49). Another salient motivator was their oppression. Every day the informants were reminded of how oppressed the LGB community was since they all are members of the LGB community (Jones, 2002).

There are also specific theories that attempt to explain the personal motivation for activist participation. One theory attempting to explain why people participate is called ideological disposition, which is from the individual perspective. This theory focuses on individual characteristics, such that a person may have a strong affinity with the goals of the movement or a set of grievances consistent with the movement’s ideology. One study that looked at ideological disposition was Faver’s (2001) interviews with 50 women who were working for social change as professionals or volunteers. Three main themes emerged in her data that described the participants’ motivation for doing this type of work: to ensure the rights of individuals and groups, to fulfill responsibilities, and to restore relationships and build community. The women felt that there was an interconnectedness and interdependence of everyone and that everyone deserved basic rights, such as the right to respect and dignity, the right to have basic needs met, the right to equal opportunity, and the right to self-determination. They also felt personally responsible for taking care of people and the natural environment, to pass on what they receive, to reduce unfair advantage and reallocate resources and power more equitably (Faver, 2001).

Some other researchers believe that activist participation may also be movement specific. According to Jennings and Andersen (2003), there are many domain issues that have distinctive properties that need to be considered in order to understand gradients in

political activism. They came to this conclusion based on their AIDS activist research, where they surveyed 4000 NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt volunteers through a mail questionnaire. They discovered domain specific explanations for participation. For example, while conducting their analysis, gender and sexual orientation lost their significance as explanatory factors when AIDS specific attributes were introduced into analysis. Therefore, it became necessary to identify issue-specific features which led to a more complete understanding of political activism. Many informants knew people who had died of AIDS related illness, or who had HIV themselves. The severity of the pain and loss appeared to stimulate a number of motivations that led to increased participation. Experiencing emotions/cognitions prompted greater activity than just being 'biographically available' (Jennings & Andersen, 2003).

Another theory is called social exchange or political economy theory, which takes into consideration the risks, costs, and benefits of participation (Irons, 1998; McAdam, 1986; Prestby, Wandersman, Florin, Rich, & Chavis, 1990; Wandersman, Florin, Friedmann, & Meier, 1987). The term risk means the "anticipated dangers whether legal, social, physical, financial, etc. of engaging in a particular type of activity" (Irons, 1998; McAdam, 1986). The term cost includes expending time, money, and energy or giving up something, losing something or anything 'negatively' experienced that is required of a person engaged in any particular form of activism (Jennings & Andersen, 2003; McAdam, 1986). People weigh the risk and costs of participation with the benefits of participation before deciding to get involved. Some potential benefits include: (1) the material or public good incentives, which are tangible rewards that can be translated into monetary value (wages, increased property value, and information), (2) purposive

benefits which includes bettering your own community, (3) fulfilling your civic duty or sense of responsibility and (4) solidarity benefits which are derived from social interactions (socializing, status, group identification, and recognition) (Homan, 1961, 1974 as cited in Prestby, Wandersman, Florin, Rich, & Chavis, 1990). Homan (1961, 1974) came to the conclusion that people will be more likely to participate if: (a) the benefits are greater than the costs (value proposition), and (b) the benefits are varied and thus more valuable (deprivation-satiation proposition) (as cited in Prestby, Wandersman, Florin, Rich, & Chavis, 1990).

Wiltfang and McAdam (1991) investigated differences in the levels of cost and risk assumed by activists within a single movement. From their results, they determined that people are not homogeneous in their perceived level of risk/cost and benefits. People who participate in high risk/cost activism in the movement tend to report more benefits than people who participate in low risk/cost activism. High risk/cost activists report more solidarity benefits meaning that they are deeply committed to the ideology and goals of the movement, and are integrated into activist networks. They also have more biographical availability, meaning that they are relatively free of personal constraints that would make participation especially risky (Jennings & Andersen, 2003; McAdam, 1986). For low cost/risk activists, there are more perceived risks and less perceived benefits. The strongest benefit reported was prior contact with a 'recruiting agent' (McAdam, 1986; Wiltfang & McAdam, 1991).

One of the criticisms of this approach and other approaches involving only a personal dimension is that they do not take into consideration the role of settings, roles, and specific circumstances (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003). According to McAdam

(1986), using individual attitudes in explaining low risk/cost activism is limited because in general few people participate in activism when there is really not much to be lost from participating. He suggests that ideological disposition does not matter because if a person does not have the 'structural context' to get involved, they will not. Therefore contextual factors must be considered.

One approach consistent with a contextual level of analysis is the mobilization model (Leighley, 1995). It states that participation is a response to contextual cues and political opportunities structured by the individual's environment. People with high socioeconomic status have more 'mobilization potential,' meaning they have more resources than people of a lower socioeconomic status, and consequently more opportunities to engage in formal and social mobilization activities, such as parties, campaigns, and political discussions. It is through these links that those individuals became favorably disposed toward a movement's means and goals. Leighley (1995) also suggests that the most frequent reason local party leaders become active in politics is they had been asked to do so and almost half of those were recruited by friends or family. It is suggested that youth and liberals participated more in Vietnam war protests and the Women's Rights Movement in the 1960's than their older or more conservative counterparts simply because there were more opportunities for them to become involved (Leighley, 1995).

Application of Activism Theory and Research to study of GSAs. Several theories have attempted to explain why people become motivated to become involved in activism. These theories may be useful in explaining the motivation for GSA advisors because research exploring their motivation currently does not exist. The ideological disposition

(Faver, 2001) perspective that focuses on individual characteristics may be especially relevant. It could be that GSA advisors have a strong affinity with the goals of what a GSA stands for and the potential it has to change the climate of the school environment. Perhaps some youth in her/his class directly asked or persuaded him/her to be an advisor to this club. It could also be that the GSA advisor either is or knows someone close to him/her that is LGBT, and feels like it is their responsibility as the member of the community to advise youth who struggle with their sexual identity.

The ideological perspective might account for some part of why people became GSA advisors, but may not be a complete explanation; there might be more contextually-based explanations that would give a more inclusive perspective. Social exchange or political theory, which take into account the balance of risk, costs, and benefits of activist participation, might be informative (Irons, 1998; McAdam, 1986; Prestby, Wandersman, Florin, Rich, & Chavis, 1990; Wandersman, Florin, Friedmann, & Meier, 1987). It could be that GSA advisors perceive more benefits than risks/costs. Because it has been documented that sexual minority teachers have received negative consequences as a result of their sexual orientation (Bliss & Harris, 1998; Griffin, 1992; Juul 1994, 1995; Olson, 1987), GSA advisors may have experienced something similar because they are advocating for sexual minority youth. The potential negative consequences could include discrimination such as being denied tenure, losing credibility in the classroom, accused of 'converting' youth to a sexual minority, accused of being a 'pedophile' and perhaps being fired. It could also include verbal and physical harassment by students, parents of students, peers, and other community members. On the other hand, it could also be that GSA advisors do not experience any of these possible risks and costs. Despite potential

risks, however, there might also be enough benefits to outweigh the potential negative consequences. The benefits may include the satisfaction of helping oppressed youth gain voice in the school community, the ability to make more money for advising an extracurricular club, the joy of working with youth outside academics, and the dedication in creating equality for sexual minority people.

According to Jennings and Andersen (2003), it is important when trying to understand motivation to consider distinctive group characteristics. This may be important when investigating the experiences of GSA advisors. Their motivation for participation may vary in comparison to other populations and movements already researched. For example, Jones (2002) investigated radical street activists, Faver (2001) studied women participating in social change as professionals or volunteers, and Jennings and Anderson (2003) explored the experiences of AIDS memorial quilt volunteers. Each group may not be comparable to each other and trying to fit them into one theory might be futile. For example, the motivators for the radical street activists might not be the same for the women professionals working for social change. Therefore, there might be distinctive features of being a GSA advisor that significantly sets him/her apart from other populations involved in other movements. The school and community environment may provide context that is unique to GSA advisors motivation for involvement.

The mobilization model states that participation is a response to contextual cues and political opportunities structured by the individual's environment (Leighley, 1995). There might be contextual influences that are available in certain school environments that enable the GSA advisors to participate in being an advisor. The opportunity to be a GSA advisor could have presented itself and the GSA advisor was at the 'right place at

the right time.' There was a need for a GSA advisor, and it happened that s/he could fit into her/his schedule. In addition, there might have been a need for a GSA, such as the sexual minority youth wanted to organize, the school climate needed to be more sexual minority friendly, or the administration set up an avenue for starting this club with an advisor already picked. This perspective, however, may not be complete because it does not take into consideration personal individual influences.

THE CURRENT STUDY

To date, no studies have examined why GSA advisors choose to be in their advising positions. Current theories of social activism and citizen participation can provide useful insight for such an investigation, but it is important to note that no theory may be sufficient in explaining the stories of GSA advisors. As such, it was important to take a truly exploratory approach to understand GSA advisors' experiences, especially because GSA's are being met with controversy in several school systems. Therefore, the first research question examined in this study was: Why do GSA advisors advise this club? This study examined the motivations behind GSA advisors' decisions to become involved in these clubs and how they weighed the risks and benefits of their participation. In addition, there has been no research to date that has examined the roles and tasks of GSA advisors and how they negotiate the challenges of their responsibilities. GSA advisors must establish linkages with students involved with the club, and also with administration, colleagues, and perhaps parents. Therefore, the second research question examined in this study was: What is the GSA advisor role in the school environment? This project explored how GSA advisors are a resource to LGBT youth and their school communities.

To answer these research questions, this study used a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods take a social constructivist perspective, which provides extensive, 'thick' description that potentially lets the diversity and the specificity of human experience be captured. It also can allow for detailed examination of specific behaviors and context. There were several characteristics that made qualitative methods compatible with the aims of this research project. Qualitative methods have the potential to benefit

informants by giving voice to informants' lived experiences. Because GSA advisors may not have had the opportunity to discuss their motivations, roles, and responsibilities, this research project provided them an opportunity to share their stories and to have their experiences documented.

Qualitative methods also provide researchers with conceptual roadmaps into previously uncharted territory. These methods can potentially help identify contextually salient variables while avoiding inappropriate norms and constructs based from other populations. Qualitative methods can also be a powerful tool for understanding the 'why' of human behavior (Banyard & Miller, 1998; Maxwell, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994), which is synergistic with the first research question, 'Why do GSA advisors advise this club?' In addition, qualitative methods provide flexibility, which means that data collection times and methods can vary as the study proceeds. This was beneficial because little is known about GSA advisors' experiences; there was room to modify the protocol if needed to further investigate topics that emerged. This allowed for more complete and detailed information to be captured from revisions and additions to the questions used for the interview (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

For this project, a phenomenological qualitative method using individual interviews was used. The phenomenology perspective was chosen because its goal is to explore the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience. Phenomenology attempts to explore how people transform their experience into consciousness, both individually and as a shared meaning (Patton, 2002). This was synergistic with the goals of this study, which was to explore the experience of GSA advisors, whose subjective experience is their reality. Through interviewing a number of GSA advisors, the

information gained from their experience revealed an essence to their shared experience
(adapted from Patton, 2002).

METHOD

Sampling

The sampling frame for this study included all known GSA advisors from high schools in one Midwestern state. Informants were found through the National Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) website, www.glsen.org, where information about GSA's around the nation is available. There were 78 GSA's registered in GLSEN National for the focal Midwestern state. The contact information from the list of GSAs for Michigan was found online through school system websites and phone books. All schools listed on the website were called to see if the club still existed, and to obtain the current advisor's name and contact information. If the contact information of the advisor was not available from the person who answered the phone, the internet was used to obtain the contact information (e.g. email address) of the advisor from the school website. From this initial round of phone calling, private schools and the clubs that were not currently functioning were removed from the list, which left 43 clubs remaining. A letter or email was sent to the advisors of all 43 clubs to inform them of the study and request their participation.

Because it typically requires more than one contact to secure participation in a research study, a protocol was developed for how to do more targeted recruitment in a way that would ensure programs across the state would be represented in the study. The 43 clubs were clustered based on geographical location. Thirty-two clubs clustered around the five major cities in the state (i.e., they were located within the city or surrounding area (suburb)). A sixth sampling cluster was formed, which consisted of the remaining 11 clubs that were not city-identified (i.e., they were geographically dispersed

and not close to one of the five major cities). Each of these six sampling clusters had between four and 12 clubs. Within each cluster, a randomized list of programs was created that specified the order in which the advisors would be contacted for intensive followup. For example, the advisor from the first program within each cluster was contacted repeatedly by phone and email to request her/his participation. If s/he agreed, then an interview was scheduled. Once an interview had been successfully scheduled, then the next program on the list was targeted for intensive recruitment. If after three attempts to recruit (spaced over two weeks), advisors did not respond, the next program on the randomized list was selected for targeted recruitment. During this process, it was discovered that three clubs were no longer in existence and they were removed from the sampling frame.

These recruitment procedures were repeated for each geographic cluster until 14 participants were interviewed, with at least two from each geographical location. Specifically, two advisors were interviewed from each of the five city-based clusters (n=10) and four from the non-city based cluster. Four advisors did not respond to the email, letter, and/or phone call. This may be because the interview process was happening at the end of the school year when teachers have many obligations. The targeted sample size was between 10 and 15, which is typical for phenomenological qualitative research (Creswell, 1998). Of the 14 participants, six were women, eight were men, and five self-identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Twelve of the participants were teachers and two were Social Workers. Six described the school where they work to be in an urban area, six a suburban area, and two a rural area. Six reported working in an upper to upper-middle class neighborhood, two in a middle class, four in a lower-middle class

to lower class neighbor and two described their neighborhood as being split between the two extremes of upper and lower class. Ten were advisors to the club when it first began. The ages of the club varied from two months to eight years.

Procedure

Data Collection. Three pilot interviews were conducted: one with an advisor from a program low on the randomization list for targeted recruitment (i.e., it was unlikely this program would be targeted for data collection), one with a retired GSA advisor, and one with co-advisor who was a Social Work intern. One of these pilot interviews was of sufficient quality and depth to be retained for the final sample.

All interviews took place in-person. Two interviews took place in the participant's home, two interviews took place at a small restaurant/café, and the rest occurred in the participant's classroom after school hours were over. The participant was free to choose interview location. The interview generally proceeded as follows. I first made small talk and introduced the consent form to the participant. I gave the participant the consent form, they read it, and I answered any questions or concerns. I then asked if the informant would agree to having the interview tape-recorded. The informant signed the consent form once s/he understood her/his rights as a research informant. After the consent process, I read the same established introduction to the interview protocol before beginning with the interview questions. I started with the questions on the protocol; however I probed the informants' responses to ensure that the informants' experiences are adequately understood. After the questions on the protocol were answered, I asked if they would like to add any additional information about their GSA advisor experience that I might not have captured with my questions. I thanked the informant for their time

and also asked permission to contact them again if questions emerged during the analysis. All participants consented to participating in the research, tape recording, and being contacted in the future if there were further questions.

Consent/Confidentiality. A consent form explained the purposes of the research project, as well as the research informant's rights (e.g. the right not to participate, not to answer a question if they are uncomfortable, or have something that they said not be used in the results). This consent form also explained that if the informant refuses to participate there would be no repercussions. It also asked if it is okay to audio-tape the interview. To enhance confidentiality, each informant was given an identification number that did not correspond to any personal identifying information. The audio tapes and transcripts were then labeled only with these numbers to ensure confidentiality.

Tape Recording. The interview was audio taped via informant consent. If the informant had refused there would have been no repercussions and the interview would have continued. The only difference would have been that more copious notes would have been taken and the informants' words would have been paraphrased instead of verbatim for analysis. There were benefits of having the interview recorded. By audio-taping, the original words of the informant were kept if there were questions during analysis. In addition, each word is a reflection of consciousness, so by paraphrasing it substitutes the informants' consciousness for the researchers. Through audio-taping, I also listened and critiqued my interview skills, so I could become more cognizant of where improvements in my interviewing could be made. One critique of using audio-taping is that it might inhibit informants. According to Seidman (1998) however,

informants tend to forget that the device is there, so having the presence of the audio-recorder did not necessarily lead to skewed data.

In order to reduce social desirability, I reiterated when necessary that the responses were confidential and that no one would be able to track the responses back to the interviewee. This happened if the informant asked directly during the interview or if the interviewee seemed hesitant to respond. In addition, I let the informant know of the value of their thoughts, and how this research wanted to be representative of the current state of GSA's and high school systems. The audio tapes were transcribed by myself, an undergraduate volunteer, or a professional transcriptionist. Each transcript was reviewed by a separate person other than the person who initially transcribed to check for errors. In addition, all identifiable information (e.g. names of people and places) was removed from the data during transcription. Transcription helped because the written form was available to assist in coding.

Measures

The semi-structured interview began with a brief informal conversation that helped create an atmosphere of trust and reciprocity. The interview questions pertaining to the two research questions were then asked. An example of an interview question pertaining to research question one included "What prompted you to decide to become a GSA advisor?" For research question two, the interview questions included: "What is it like to be a GSA advisor?" and "What has your relationship been like with peers/administration/students/parents since becoming a GSA advisor?" (See Appendix for interview guide). The interview questions were broad open-ended questions that helped facilitate rich description by the informant. At the end of the interview, there were

some demographic questions to gain additional information about the informants and their affiliated schools.

Data Analytic Procedures

The data were managed using ATLAS.ti. Phenomenological data analysis preceded through both induction and deduction methods. There was also analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meanings (Creswell, 1998). To begin, using the ATLAS.ti program, all text related to the first research question were selected to make the data more manageable. This text was then printed out and open coding began. Open or generative coding is the process of developing categories of concepts, and themes emerging from the data. It is an 'open' process because there is exploration of the data without making any prior assumptions (Kerlin, 2002). To do this, word(s) were given that sum up the collective meaning of phrases. These words, with their attached quotations, were exported from ATLAS.ti to Microsoft Word. The motivation open codes with their quotes were then grouped together based on similar meaning leading to the development of a theme. The theme was labeled based on the content of the open codes and quotations. Because some themes were difficult to notice, the codes with their attached quotes were individually cut out of the word document and manually sorted into piles based on their similarities or patterns. The piles were then labeled. Because some themes were large, contained many quotes, and variety within the theme was noticed, they were broken down into smaller sub-themes (axial coding), so nuances could emerge.

During analysis, cross case analysis (common themes across informants' transcripts) and within case analysis (quotations from transcripts verbatim to elucidate the

emerging themes) occurred. Tables were created for each theme and sub-theme which included demographic information to see if there were noticeable trends within the theme.

Saturation

Saturation occurs when no new information is rendered from the interviews. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967) saturation is when “no additional data are being found whereby the (researcher) can develop properties of the category. As he sees similar instances over and over again, the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated (65).” It also means that the marginal value of the new data is minimal. Saturation occurred within the themes whereas no new themes within the meta-theme could have been created and any more data would have had a marginal influence. Saturation was noted for the themes and sub-themes if at least three participants discussed the same essence of experience.

Verification of the Results

There are techniques that can be used to ensure that the findings are transferable, thus making the research more credible. One technique involved clarifying my bias before the study started, so I could understand my position and any biases or assumptions that I may hold that could impact the analysis. This included writing out assumptions that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach of the study. It let me be cognizant of them, so when interviewing I paid special attention to probe around areas. During the interview process, I also worked on keeping my facial expressions neutral and leaving out comments that could possibly bias the discussion.

Another technique included using ‘rich, thick description’ when writing. When writing the results from the qualitative analysis, there was detail about how the themes emerged, using as much as possible the informant’s words verbatim. This allows readers to make their own decisions regarding the conclusions drawn.

This study also used member checks, which involved taking the conclusions back to the informants, so they can give their opinion on the accuracy and credibility of the findings. This was done by choosing three informants who agreed that I could contact them in the future in case of further questions or concerns and seemed especially interested in the research topic. These three participants were sent a section of the results where they were advised to think about these questions :“(1) Do the quotes I used to illustrate my point fit with what I wrote about? (2) How do my ideas fit into your experience as advisor? There were 14 people interviewed, but you should be able to recognize elements that pertain to your experience. (3) Do you think I am missing anything major? If so, what's missing? (4) Overall, what do you think of the results? Any comments you have will be appreciated.” There were also attempts to contact a local GLSEN chapter to present the results and discuss the research. As of yet there has been no return contact from the organization.

Peer review provided an external check of the research process. This helped me think of contradictory perspectives and alternative explanations for the data during the analysis. I asked a colleague to read my open codes and evaluate whether the codes were consistent with the stated theme. I also asked if the label of the theme seemed correct. There were also regular meetings with my thesis chair to discuss coding procedures, and to ensure that my bias was not the focus of the analysis. In addition, there was external

heterogeneity where themes that were similar were merged together to make sure that each theme diverges from one another.

Memoing was done which helped to interpret the phenomenon in a series of steps. While collecting and analyzing the data, I kept track of any personal experiences, as well as key phrases, and statements that spoke directly to the advisors experiences. This information then helped to interpret meanings, thus helping to reveal essential features of the phenomenon (adapted from Patton, 2002). Memoing also allowed for the linkage of different data into recognizable clusters. These clusters help illustrate instances of a concept. It can help a researcher move from the empirical data to a more conceptual level (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

RESULTS

To address the two research questions in this study, ‘Why do GSA advisors advise this club?’ and ‘What is the GSA advisor role?’ the results have been divided into three main sections: understanding advisors’ motivations to become advisors (research question #1), examining their decision process to become advisors (research question #1), and role of the GSA advisor to the school and the students in the club (research question #2). Demographic information such as sexual orientation, gender, and socioeconomic status of the school are mentioned to provide context for the informant’s statement, or if interesting and noticeable trends emerged from the data.

Motivation

To understand why GSA advisors advise these clubs, one of the questions that informants responded to was, ‘What prompted you to decide to become a GSA advisor?’ In the informants’ responses, five themes emerged. First, motivation as an area of inquiry was divided into five themes: (1) a protective attitude toward LGBT youth, (2) a personal connection with sexual minority people/issues, (3) homophobic incident reaction, (4) past social justice work, and (5) a dedication to fairness. Since almost all (13 out of 14) of the informants’ responses supported the protective attitude theme (1), it was analyzed further into sub-themes, so nuances could emerge. In addition, all themes along with the sub-themes were analyzed across interviews. It is important to realize that these themes and sub-themes are not independent of each other in all cases. These motivators may occur in combination and simultaneously. It is especially likely because two of the most salient themes constitute the majority of informants in both cases.

Protective attitude toward LGBT youth

Thirteen out of the 14 informants discussed protecting LGBT youth as a key motivating factor. These advisors could empathize with the struggles of LGBT youth and were motivated by wanting to protect and help them in their school environment. Distinct topics within this theme emerged: (1) help the disenfranchised, (2) knowledge of LGBT youth's high risk for negative experience and outcomes, and (3) to be a supportive adult.

The first sub-theme included the desire to help the disenfranchised. These advisors were not necessarily motivated by helping LGBT youth in particular, but would help any youth in need. These advisors have a protective attitude toward those kids who are in general marginalized in the school environment. Through empathy they could relate at some level to the pain that comes with being different. A social worker talked about her commitment to helping minority groups as a function of her commitment to the social work field.

I am a social worker, you know, so I have a certain amount of um, a fair amount of commitment maybe to any minority groups or downtrodden, victim disenfranchised groups and so I was I guess sensitive in that way and at all of the school social work conferences there are always pink flags, presentations, and the GLSEN presentations that I had gone to. So I guess that was my commitment.

She had gone to social work conferences where she was introduced to youth sexual minority issues through presentations.

Another advisor equated being a GSA advisor to helping 'the underdog' or helping kids that do not seem to fit in. She stated, "So I think that, it was just helping somebody else out that maybe is like kind of the underdog or doesn't feel like they fit in, that was kind of I guess the biggest reward, more on a personal level with the kids."

Being a GSA advisor also allowed her the opportunity to work with kids on a personal level, which she found rewarding.

For many youth, adolescence is a difficult period of time. Youth who are discovering that they are LGB may have a more difficult time with adolescence than heterosexual youth in today's society. This perceived difficulty became motivation for adults to become involved with being the GSA advisor.

...wow that's got to be really rough to go through that as an adolescent. There are enough problems being an adolescent as it is, and being a gay adolescent the magnitude has to be that much more difficult so... if you're a kid, I don't know, a lot kids feel awkward already...

This advisor was motivated because he wanted to help youth who may be facing extra difficulties with going through adolescence.

The second distinct topic that emerged within the protective attitude theme is knowledge of LGBT youth's high risk for negative experience and outcomes. These advisors were familiar with the specific challenges that LGBT youth face in coming out and understood that these kids were being isolated and harassed at higher levels than heterosexual youth. They knew of the higher risk from reading research literature, from talking to kids, and from personal experience of growing up gay in a heterosexual world. These advisors were motivated to help because of their knowledge of the high risk.

One advisor, while studying in college, read the research literature surrounding LGBT youth challenges.

And then in college when I was doing uhm my psychology courses I had to do some research and some papers and I looked at suicide rates of gay and lesbian youth and that really kind of opened my eyes to what happens if somebody when they receive ... [harassment], what kind of education are they going to receive based on the harassment in high school. Ya know, studies show that if they don't have a safe environment, if they don't feel supported whatever, that their

education is going to lack and then that's going to lead to problems for the rest of their lives. So, when they asked I said sure, definitely.

In college, he took a psychology class where he learned about the plight of LGBT youth. He carried this information with him as a teacher and therefore took care to look out for and protect these youth.

Another advisor discussed a situation that happened in his class. During class while discussing equal rights, he asked his students what groups of kids are discriminated against the most in their high school. They responded with 'gay kids.' From this experience, he became more aware of the extent of harassment that gay kids faced in school. This experience became one of his motivations for becoming active in the GSA. He reacted to his class experience in the interview and discussed how he empathized with LGBT youth and therefore wanted to help them.

I had that perception as well that they are the most discriminated against group and that I wanted to help out...I just realized like how difficult, I don't know for the first time it really made me kind of put myself in that position and empathize as much as possible, wow that's got to be really rough to go through that as an adolescent.

Another informant identified with the problems that sexual minority youth face because he struggled with them as well. He used his own experiences going through the coming out process to empathize with current LGBT youth. He understood the impact that being closeted and struggling with identity had on health issues and consequently school success. He saw the GSA as a potential benefit to sexual minority youth and as a way to protect these youth from negative circumstances.

I could only compare it to myself in high school where we didn't even talk about these issues and I know that being a young man in high school struggling with my own sexual orientation that it was so lonely, and you're so worried, and you feel that you somehow are different and nobody else is like you and leads to all kinds of mental health issues and depression, drops in grades, so there are just terrible

ways that gay students are impacted by a closeted life or even just lacking the ability to talk about it. So, I knew that if the circumstances of a club like this got started, it's going to be a beneficial thing for these kids.

It was common knowledge to these advisors that a GSA would be helpful for sexual minority youth. The GSA could help shield these youth from the harassment and discrimination that they may face as teenagers. These advisors were motivated by the idea that they could help make school an easier place for sexual minority youth.

A third sub-theme was that informants became advisors to provide support. Through offering support, GSA advisors can help protect the youth from negative outcomes. The advisors could offer support by listening, and offering information to the youth on how to stay healthy. One informant seemed glad that she was able to offer support especially since she learned that many times youth who struggle with their sexual orientation do not feel comfortable talking to parents or friends about their struggles.

I guess just to be able to support somebody that needs support and often times as I learned later those kids, it was nothing that they could talk about with their parents and sometimes not with their friends.

The youth perhaps may not feel comfortable talking to their friends and family, therefore GSA advisors may be someone who the youth could talk to for support.

Another advisor was motivated because he could serve as a listener. He could support them by being there if one of the youth wanted to talk.

I think the positive things would be just that it's somebody that is there to listen and I didn't really know a whole lot about a lot of the issues or anything like that, that was something that I kind of had to learn a little bit along with the kids. I think the positive was definitely that I would agree with everything that a GSA is supposed to do and so I would want that to happen.

He did not really know a lot about LGBT issues, but was willing to learn because he knew he could offer support through his ability to listen.

Emotional support was not the only type of support discussed by GSA advisors.

Another advisor mentioned that it is important to support LGBT youth by giving them access to resources that could keep themselves healthy.

[Name of local AIDS organization] has given me materials, brochures...A lot of it is information pamphlets I can review with the kids and group meetings or give individuals on the side about STDs or contraception, which by law I am not supposed to do. Fuck the law, I don't know. I am like I get really torn there because well you know they need to know and I don't know, I don't know I don't want to lose my job, but I definitely have referred people to clinics and I am not allowed to do that by the law...I would stand up against whoever would want to talk to me about that. I think I am not doing anything wrong. I think the laws are wrong and if these children need the help then by God they got to get the help. So I don't know that's my opinion...

She is willing to risk breaking the law and going against the abstinence only education policy to make sure that LGBT youth in her GSA are knowledgeable about health issues that affect them.

Another advisor mentioned the idea of support as giving necessary information out to the students. However he mentioned it is not necessarily to give information about health issues to the youth in the GSA, but to disseminate information to the general public to dispel misconceptions about LGBT people and issues.

I think ...to try to get the facts out to people and get the information to them, phone numbers, web sites where young people and other people, ya know, old people, people in the community who want to learn the facts, the science the, um, the real information instead of just rumor, could learn those things. But so it's information and it's support were the two reasons to have that. Support for the kids and information for everybody.

Through helping to get accurate information out about homosexuality, he is offering support for the youth.

Personal connection

A second reason why the informants became GSA advisors was due to a personal connection with an LGBT person. Nine out of the 14 informants discussed this theme. By getting to know someone who is a sexual minority person, they were perhaps able to look beyond the label of LGBT and realize that LGBT people are people who should be valued. One informant expressed it as, “I think once you start putting a face to people, then they’re people. You can’t, you can’t just group them together anymore.” Through seeing sexual minority people as ‘people’ instead of their sexual orientation, these advisors may have realized that they have more in common with LGBT people, could see the injustice in the discrimination LGBT people face, and therefore became motivated to do something about it. One informant disclosed that her husband’s cousin is gay and by his cousin’s coming out to the family, it impacted her perspective on LGBT people. Through this life experience, she was able to see that LGBT faced discrimination.

I have to say that one of the things that tipped the balance for me was that, uh, one of my cousins—well actually it was my husband’s cousin ...discovered she was gay... it was a shock to the entire family system, and they had to adjust to it, and understand that these are human beings who have feelings, who are not allowed to be themselves, and what they’re doing is not dirty and disgusting. It’s just, it’s normal....And I think that, that was a key piece for me, the fact that a very close person to me discovered that she was homosexual, and it wasn’t that she went out to be a dirty, rotten person or anything like that.

This advisor had someone close to her come out as lesbian and through this experience she realized that homosexual people were ‘normal.’

Another informant discussed his experience working as a student teacher under a mentor teacher who was gay and how this relationship motivated him to become proactive. He did not necessarily harbor any negative thoughts about LGBT people, but

this personal connection with his mentor teacher was what pushed him toward becoming more active instead of passively letting discrimination happen in his school.

...when I student taught seven years ago in [name of city] I had an openly gay teacher and he was my mentor teacher and he and I became friends and just I don't know, he really made me think about things differently I mean, I'd like to think that I've always been ya know, had no problem with the gay issue at all, but in terms of me being more proactive rather than just kind of sitting along the sidelines, just ya know he just showed me certain things, how he was discriminated against...

His relationship with his mentor teacher helped him see a different perspective thus motivating him to become involved with the GSA.

It does not necessarily have to be a direct relationship with someone who is LGBT but it can be an indirect relationship through someone that a person cares a lot about. Another informant mentioned that his daughter's friend was getting harassed at school for being gay. His daughter searched on the internet for ways to help her friend and discovered a website about starting a GSA. She talked to her father who works at the same school about what was happening to her friend and asked him to become involved. His daughter decided to start a GSA and asked her father to be the advisor. It was the close relationship with his daughter that enticed him to get involved.

...well after she asked and I talked to her about it, I realized that something needed to be done in a positive way. Her original dream, and it's pretty close to that, was something positive. 'We have to do something to get support to show' that ya know because one of the negative things that these stupid kids would say is 'everybody hates you, everybody is going to beat you up, or whatever ...' and we know it's not everybody. And so one of the things ya know my daughter is just stubborn enough, 'we'll show them and we'll get enough people and throw it back in their face to tell them that it's a significant number that's not against us'. Ya know that's not against gays and so on ...So what better, because we talked about it and I'm like ya know 'you can't go up and try to beat them up, that just makes it worse so, let's try to do something in a positive light' ... her mission, her desire was something that I thought definitely something that should be addressed, something that should be done.

This advisor through the motivation of his daughter got involved with the GSA. His daughter's friend was getting harassed and hearing negative messages, so the GSA would be an opportunity to counteract the negative with a positive.

While these previous examples represent the perspective of heterosexual advisors, this next quote is taken from an advisor who is a gay. He saw being a GSA advisor as an opportunity to serve as a role model to kids who are going through the coming out process. He was once at the stage of the coming out process that the kids are in and had passed through it successfully. He wanted the youth to know that it is possible to 'come out' and be okay. Being gay created a personal connection to the issue for him.

You know, the straight teachers talk about their wives or their husbands and their kids, and I try to show kids that our sexual orientation is not just what we do in a bedroom. You're, you exhibit your sexual orientation all the time. When you talk about yourself, and your plans for the weekend, or what you're doing for the holiday... I see myself as a role model for them. And so, I think, I hope that they look at me as someone's whose, is comfortable with himself and has, you know, gone through that issue and come out of it in a positive way.

It was the personal connection through knowing someone who was gay, whether a family member, friend, or family member's friend, that provided motivation to get involved in creating a safe environment for LGBT students. Having someone you love or care about be gay is a possible impetus to get involved. In general, people do not want to see people they care about get hurt. By being a GSA advisor, they are part of an effort to create a safer environment for someone that they are close to who is LGBT.

Homophobic incident

Five of the 14 informants experienced or heard about a homophobic incident that sparked the motivation to become a GSA advisor. These advisors experienced subtle or overt versions of homophobia directly or indirectly. Experiencing or watching the

silencing of LGBT issues and people, and getting harassed for being perceived as homosexual, had a powerful effect on the GSA advisors decision to get involved. In addition, looking across the demographic information of the informants that support this sub-theme, it is interesting to note that all the informants were male, tended to teach in the suburbs, and had never been an advisor before their GSA experience. These first two quotes were stated by a teacher who had put up a display for gay and lesbian history month and was ordered to have it removed by the superintendent. The removal of this display had an impact not only on the informant, but on students in the building. This action initiated the students wanting to form a GSA. Students came to him and he got involved. The action of silencing, which is an element of homophobia, became a catalyst for action.

And the reason they began the GSA is because in 1999 I put a display for gay and lesbian history month that was ordered removed by the interim superintendent and no discussion and students felt that that was wrong. A small group of students thought that was wrong and they said 'what can we do. We want to start a group' and that's when I said 'here's what you got to do to start a group' and they did that and they formed it...

At the same time that this informant was ordered to take down the LGBT history display, another staff member in the same school district unbeknownst to the informant put up a similar display which was ordered taken down as well. As a result, the informant became aware of this other staff member and together they filed a grievance against the school district citing academic freedom. With this grievance came the press who outted the informant publicly. As a result of this forced outing, he began to notice that his sexual minority colleagues were going back in the closet which also motivated him to become further involved because they were being silenced. He saw harm in this silencing.

...I saw ya know teachers that were gay going back into the closet and they were scared about what was happening to me. The thought 'oh it could happen to me too' and so they kind of all went back into the woodwork and I thought this is ridiculous. You're using too much energy to hide who they are and we're not really teaching when we're doing that um... so I sort of got involved...

Another informant experienced homophobic harassment during his high school years because he was perceived as being gay even though he is heterosexual which motivated him to get involved with the GSA. He directly experienced the sexual orientation harassment that many LGBT youth fear and many times face while in high school. It is this personal connection of being harassed himself that motivated him to get involved with trying to make the environment better for sexual minority youth.

...the real reason I am actively involved is as a high school student, I received a lot of harassment for perceiving that they thought that I was gay. ...Ya know, I dressed different, I acted different. It was the 80's [laughs]. And so I received a lot of harassment... I hated my high school experience just based on the perception that wasn't even true. If it was, I couldn't even imagine what high school would have been like [if I really was gay]. So, it's kind of like if I can make the environment a little bit better than that's my main reason.

As the above quotes demonstrate, an incident of homophobia can be an instigator, whether an advisor is sexual minority or heterosexual. The impact can cause a person to want to create change in their environment so what happened to them will less likely happen to someone else.

Social justice

Six out of the 14 informants participated in social justice activities either throughout their whole life or part of their life, so becoming a GSA advisor fit into their life schema. Because in many ways sexual minority youth are oppressed in the school environment, the work of a GSA advisor may be considered social justice work. Given that these advisors already were involved in social issues, it was somewhat synergistic

with the values that they acted upon in their past history. It perhaps was not an act outside of their character, but an extension of who they are and who they have been.

Interestingly, five out of six of the informants who support this trend are female, have not been a previous school club advisor, work in an urban school setting, and are experienced professionals that have been working in the school systems for an average of 12 years.

One informant's comments resonated that being an advisor was her way of working toward justice. She had participated in past activism by participating in the first Earth Day and has always been interested in civil rights.

You know, as a teenager of course I was involved in the first Earth Day, and... I've always been interested in rights for others... rights for ourselves, and rights for others. Protecting the rights and allowing people to be respected human beings... since I've become GSA advisor...as each year goes by, I feel more and more comfortable with my role and I feel more and more justified that what we're doing is civil rights and it's very, very important. It's very important that kids have that ability to say that they support civil rights, equal rights for all people and that they have somehow the ability to work toward justice, justice in this world.

She equated being a GSA advisor as working toward civil rights and equal rights.

Another informant described an event that sparked his activism and involvement with social issues. He described his past involvement with a progressive student government in college and how fighting for the right for students to create their own meal plans inspired him to get involved with social justice activism. He has been involved to varying degrees ever since. It makes sense then that he would be drawn to being a GSA advisor.

I went to a school where there was a particularly progressive, um student government and I was involved in that. I was involved in all kinds of issues in the '80's as a college student during Reagan's time ... It was in my sophomore year of college that I became involved in fighting for stuff ... they tried to implement, and it stills seems like a petty little issue, but a meal plan that forced all students in the dorms for [name of College] to buy this meal plan. We were like 10 blocks

away from, or surrounded, we were in [name of city], ya know where you had tons of restaurants you can go to. Anyway it became a motivating force for politically activating me... But, um we fought it off and we won. That was kind of a spark for me in terms of resisting authority, other than your parents, in a, in a social justice kind of way and I've been involved in it ever since, various degrees of activism.

This advisor had participated in social justice activities before and had succeeded. It was not new to him to get involved and be at the forefront. It seemed that becoming a GSA advisor fit in the natural progression of his life.

A science teacher mentioned that she was involved with her GSA in college and has attended different conferences and workshops dealing with various social issues as a teacher. She already knew the values of the GSA and had interest in LGBT issues during college. She also seemed to be involved with other organizations and activities that worked toward social justice and equality.

I was involved with a GSA in college and I thought it was really great and I had a good time with it...In college, I did things with women's groups; ya know, the Take Back the Night kind of stuff...I did crisis intervention work, volunteer crisis intervention work and I and I did work with racism, working with people of color and doing workshops and stuff like that and also did, attended conferences and workshops and things about class differences. I guess a lot of the social issues things have just been an interesting thing to me.

Becoming the GSA advisor fit not only her interest in LGBT issues, but also her interest in helping LGBT youth who are often discriminated at school. It seems natural that she would be interested in becoming involved in the GSA at her high school.

These advisors' past experience with social justice work created a path that perhaps led them to make the decision to become involved with LGBT issues at their schools. This may be an important piece to the motivation of GSA advisors.

Dedication to fairness

GSA advisors are also motivated by their dedication to fairness. The informants (five out of the 14) who supported this theme tended to be heterosexual, and experienced professionals that have been working in schools for an average of 14.3 years. These advisors believed that everyone should be treated equally. If they see something that is unjust, they are motivated to fix it, thus being a GSA advisor was a way to create a fair environment for sexual minority youth. They do not necessarily have a history of fighting for social justice. The idea that LGBT youth are not being treated fairly in school was motivation enough to get involved with being the GSA advisor. It is not necessarily that they want gay rights but equal rights for sexual minority students in their school. One science teacher explained his perspective on how he views people in general.

I think that everyone should be held to the same standards. Everybody should be held to the same cultural norms. Everybody should be held to the same whatever. I'm going to like you because I like you. I don't care if you are gay, black, pink, or purple. Okay. I'm going to not like you because it has nothing to do with your ethnicity or anything else. Some people I like some people I don't. I have a lot of friends who are gay. I have family members that are gay. Um but yet I've worked with gay people that I'd rather not work with or hang out with because ya know. So to me it doesn't matter. Ya know so, special interest, no. I think that everybody should be colorblind, sexual blind, sexual orientation blind, I mean heaviness, shortness, tallness, I don't care what it is. Ya know everybody should be judged on their character and their merits and their skills and what they can do and let it go at that.

He values people based on their character and merit and not on their ethnicity, sexual orientation, or body type. There is an underlining sense of fairness to his argument.

A second informant mentioned that she felt like becoming the GSA advisor was 'the right thing to do.' She did not necessarily have past experience working for LGBT rights, but was drawn to getting involved because she did not like the idea that sexual minority people were not given the same rights as heterosexual people. If heterosexual

people can do it, so can sexual minority people. It was the sense of fairness that was a motivating factor for her.

...what appealed to me was that it was the right thing to do... I mean that even though I wasn't heavily, you know, I wasn't a gay activist or anything at that time. I really did believe that people who are homosexuals were treated as second-class citizens... It's not about sex, it's about humanity and that's been a really good thing to fully understand and to continue to understand that human rights are human rights and to say that two people can't hold hands in public is just, that's ridiculous. If two gay people can't hold hands then why should two straight people be holding hands? Right, ya know. If we watch on television two straight people kissing and whatever, then what makes it evil for two gay people to be kissing and whatever?

There are some advisors propelled to act through this notion of fairness as described above. These advisors feel that a sexual minority student should have the same rights as a heterosexual student. It is a component of their values of equality that initiated the act to become an advisor.

The motivation behind an advisors' decision to become involved with a GSA can vary with having a protective attitude toward LGBT youth, a personal connection with sexual minority people/issues, a reaction to a homophobic incident, a connection to social justice activism, and/or a dedication to fairness. These motivational factors instigated the desire for the advisor to become involved with the GSA, however there also included a process of finally making the decision to take on the advisor position.

Decision making process

Although each advisor eventually decided to take on the role of GSA advisor, it was not necessarily an easy decision to make. Each advisor seemed to weigh the pros and cons to the decision before acting. There were several worries or concerns that came to the forefront of advisors' minds. They worried about the time commitment involved, their possible lack of credibility, their fear about possibly losing their job, their fear about

being accused of recruitment to the 'gay lifestyle' and fear of a general negative community response. These concerns however in some cases were buffered by a sense of security in their job and personal life, such as having tenure or other protections against being fired, and being married.

Time commitment concern

A logistical concern such as having time available to be the GSA advisor was salient for three male advisors. These advisors had other activities going on in their lives besides the GSA that kept them busy and they therefore labeled time commitment as a concern. As one gay advisor pointedly stated, "the cost for me was that it was going to involve some time." He and his partner have young boys at home that they have adopted or are in the process of adopting from the foster care system, so making sure he was available for his family as well as the GSA was paramount.

Another advisor was also a track coach, so balancing his responsibilities to the track team and to the GSA was a worry.

Would I have the time to do it? Um, because ya know when they have a meeting, I'm supposed to be here, but I coach. So coach is supposed to be, ya know I'm not the head coach, but I'm still supposed to be wherever, ya know I'm out on the track or whatever by three o'clock when the meeting starts at three. So to me it was just a matter of trying to shuffle time so I'd be available so they could use the room and hear what they were saying...

These advisors generally wanted to be there for the students and they internally debated about how much time they needed from their schedules to do the club justice before they made the decision to become the club advisor. As another male advisor from a rural high school stated, "I um...I, I was really busy. I knew that it was really important to do, but I didn't know if I'd be able to do what I needed to do for it, if I could do the club justice."

Credibility concern

Another concern or worry was the thought that they lacked credibility to be an appropriate GSA advisor either because they were not LGBT or they did not feel they had the training or skills to adequately advise this club. The advisors that support this theme, except for one bisexual woman, were heterosexual and mostly male. One heterosexual woman questioned her ability to advise a GSA because she was straight and did not have in-group status. She stated:

Also, because I'm not gay, I didn't know if I could accurately speak on behalf of the club/students. It would be the same if we were starting a club for black students. I'm not black; I haven't been there and haven't experienced what it is like to be black.

She was aware that her experiences as a heterosexual woman could be different than those of a sexual minority person. There were three more heterosexual advisors who were male who thought similarly. One male history teacher worried that perhaps the students would feel more comfortable with a gay or lesbian advisor instead of him who is straight and married.

Again, maybe they don't feel as comfortable with me because they know I'm straight, they know I'm married. In some ways I bet they probably would feel more comfortable with a gay advisor, but...I'm what they got [chuckles].

This advisor thought that perhaps because he is straight and married that it might be an issue with the youth in the club and therefore, he was concerned that the youth would not be comfortable with him being the advisor. Another male advisor was worried because he did not know a lot about sexual minority issues to feel competent being a GSA advisor. He stated, "But, as far as politics, I haven't been involved in that at all. In fact, I didn't really feel all that qualified... I had one homosexual friend in college, but I didn't know much. [I'm] not the most educated person."

Two advisors were concerned about their credibility, but not because of their heterosexuality or knowledge about sexual minority issues, but they were unsure whether they had the skills necessary to be a competent advisor. The one bisexual advisor was anxious because she was a fairly new teacher and had never been a club advisor before.

Somebody needs to do it. I was very nervous and anxious about doing it because I just never did it before and I am all alone doing it, but somebody has to do it and boy I just love these kids and 'I don't know exactly what I am doing guys, but we are going to figure it out together.'

She was willing to become the advisor despite her anxiety because of her devotion to the youth. Her lack of credibility was simply in the fact that she had never advised a club before.

A male advisor was concerned about the issues that the youth might bring up in the meetings. He was not sure if they would bring up issues where he would need counseling skills to help the youth or issues where he would need to contact professionals.

My main concern was and still is at times is liability with ya know talking about this, and parents and students, and confidentiality. Like I said, it's not being a counselor, not counselor-savy; you may need to contact parents and the authorities' things about. I've never really had a student come to talk to me about; ya know or ask me questions about things like safe sex or HIV, HIV tests or AIDS. I haven't had that.

There are certain topic areas that he might be uncomfortable talking to the youth about because of his responsibilities as a teacher and the danger of possible liabilities.

Job security concern

Advisors were also concerned about the possibility about losing their job because of their involvement with the GSA. One of the male advisors was worried because he had heard that another advisor from another school had gotten fired because of his

involvement with the GSA and consequently went through a long court battle with the school system.

Right a way I said yes but then after I was kind of like, okay, what am I getting myself into, because I'm sure you're familiar with the case in [another school district] and it's not very far away from us and so I did kind of read up on that to see... He actually, I'm not sure if they're saying that he created the Gay Straight Alliance or whether or not the students came to him and then he was an advisor but, they did start a group over there...the school district was not very supportive of that. I think they found out he had gone to other meetings that were about gay awareness and that kind of thing and they ended up firing him over it. I don't know if he came out at school or not, but being involved in the club basically resulted in him being fired. He then sued and earned a lot of money on it actually...

The story about this other GSA advisor sparked an initial reaction of being afraid of losing his job. However, in this case, the fear was buffered by the belief that he was protected from losing his job because of his family representation in the school system.

I have a lot of people that work in the district that are my family so I figured that might – I don't think that gives me a whole lot of favors all the time but I thought in that case that they're not going to target – I'll know if they're trying to go after me before it happens and I didn't think that they would. I thought that they'd be careful about it if they did.

This same idea of having a layer of protection from getting fired was evident in another case. This advisor was concerned that being a new teacher in the school district and becoming a GSA advisor would put her at risk of not get re-contracted for a second year.

Well, I was a first year teacher and I, when we started talking about the GSA, I said, look, I'm not going to do anything this year because this, in the teaching profession, in your first year they don't even have to give you a reason not to give you another contract really. It's easy to get rid of a teacher after the first year. It's harder after the second, and harder after the third, and impossible after the fourth. Um, so for me I just I knew I wasn't going to do it my first year here and so I said look, ya know well, I'll think about it for next year' [laughs] ...I could end up without a renewed contract, certainly. I mean if you make a big mess in any, in any area your first year teaching, you can end up without a renewed contract and although I think it, you know, the GSA thing is a little dicier than some things, um I think it's fair to say that you can alert the administration to difficulty if you're not careful.

This advisor was comforted by the idea that she was a woman in a science field that is dominated by men. First, qualified science teachers are difficult to locate, and second a female science teacher is even more difficult, so she felt fairly certain that her job was secure with the school even if she did take on the GSA advisor role.

Yeah. I'm a really good teacher. I mean, I say this with a great deal of humility right. I'm a really solid teacher and I'm a solid teacher in an area that is hard to get teachers in, right? I guess I've always felt like if they didn't want me, I'd go to another school. I've been hired. I've gotten every job I've ever interviewed for and there's only been one that I wasn't the only applicant, right. And there's not like there are 300 applicants and they chose me, there was zero other applicants for every job except the year that they hired both [name of other science teacher] and I. There was two and they hired us both. It's like [laughs] ...I feel lucky. Ya know, maybe if I was an English teacher I would have felt differently.

This advisor had worries about taking on the GSA in her first year, but the worries were assuaged by the thought that it is difficult to find science teachers, so her job would be secure.

Recruitment concern

There were five advisors who were worried about being accused of recruiting youth to a 'gay lifestyle.' The advisors who supported this theme were male except for one female. The one female advisor was different in her thoughts on recruitment. While the male advisors were worried that they were going to be accused of recruiting, the female advisor was worried that she was really recruiting youth and encouraging them to be gay. It was an internal struggle for her and it took awhile for her to feel comfortable. She stated:

And as an advisor I didn't know how much I could pull resources in without crosses the line of, how shall I say this, of... let me back up... some people were characterizing GSA's as a place where you train people to be gay...And that what you're doing, you're recruiting kids to become tools of other people, so what do I do... am I training young men to become the objects of a pedophile? Well first of

all pedophiles and gay people are two different animals all together, but the idea is ya know what is my role? What are we doing here? Am I luring kids into degradation and all this? And it took several years for [me] to kind of get over the idea that maybe it was a possibility that I was doing that sort of thing that I was encouraging kids to be something they weren't when in fact what I'm really doing is encouraging kids to be something they are and telling them it's okay. It's totally okay....

She finally came to the conclusion that she was teaching youth to be true to themselves, but it was an initial concern for her that she was leading youth down the wrong path.

The other male advisors were more concerned about being accused of recruitment to the 'gay lifestyle' which might be a function of them being male. It could be representative of the misconception that gay men are pedophiles. One advisor was especially worried because he was out as a gay man and had been attacked by the school community prior to becoming the GSA advisor concerning gay recruitment.

My primary thought was that ya know I certainly thought that there were agendas that I'd like to get accomplished, but I had to be very careful this it had to be a student run group so that some of the same accusations didn't fall on my shoulders again because there was the accusation of recruiting, and because I'm gay myself and I was quite public, everything was quite public I had to be sure that I was thinking sort of kind of for my professional reputation that I had to be sure that it was run by students, organized by students, and we wrote our constitution. The constitution wrote that I have no vote which I shouldn't have at any club shouldn't have a vote so ya know. So that kind of what was in my head.

Although he had this concern, he protected himself by making it clear that the students were taking charge of the decision-making and critical events of the club.

Another advisor had the concern of gay recruitment as his initial thought when considering being a GSA advisor.

I could just somehow picture the worst...parents calling and saying 'oh ah hah, I can see why you're teaching these things in your class is because you want my son or daughter to be gay or whatever' and I'm not even sure that's necessarily a totally rational thought on my part but, that's what I thought at first.

Negative community response concern

In addition, among various advisors there was a general worry of negative community response. They knew that there was a possibility that the school and local community would respond negatively to the idea of a GSA being formed. They did not think of specific negative repercussions, it was more like a sense that there would be opposition. The advisors that supported this theme were the initial advisors from when the club began. They were all heterosexual, except for one, and all worked in a school system that did not have an official policy that prohibits sexual orientation harassment or discrimination.

One advisor expected a negative reaction right away. He said, “Oh shit here it comes. I knew that it was going to create...I was expecting the community to really shit a brick...” Another advisor had grown up in the school district and was somewhat aware of the climate on sexuality issues. He stated, “I grew up here by the way. I graduated from here in 1991, so I know this school district. I grew up here myself, so I know how, how people can be and I was just worried that it was going to get really bad and mean.” A third advisor mentioned that the community was conservative, he stated, “I knew that there might be a struggle especially like I said about this community because it is so conservative.” There was a broad sense of worry of a general negative community reaction.

Tenure

Although there were concerns and worries about being the GSA advisor, there were perceived protections that were in place that could assuage some of the worries. The two main themes that emerged as perceived protections were having tenure and being

married. The protection that tenure offers was especially salient for sexual minority advisors. One lesbian advisor mentioned:

GSA's were just first getting talked about when I was working on my teacher credentials in the mid 90's and/or in the early 90's. And it's an issue that's really important to me and I just was really hoping that was something that I could do. Though I wanted to get tenure first because I figured it was going to be a risky thing, or it could be potentially very risky. At that time, our district didn't have anything employment policy about sexuality or orientation or whatever and I just wanted to be careful, because I need a job...

She was worried that without tenure she was possibly risking losing her job, especially since her school district did not have any formal employment policy protecting against sexual orientation discrimination.

The informant who put up the LGBT poster discussed how he would not have done it if he did not have tenure. His fears were buffered by the idea that he had gained tenure and he knew that he would have protection from being fired.

I had tenure. We get tenure after four years... It had impacted my decision to put up the bulletin board as well... Because, truth is, I knew it wasn't really a safe place, and that we've had somebody fighting for sexual orientation included in the protection language and stuff, and the district has just been really bad about it.

Another advisor who happened to be bisexual discussed that it is recommended that a new teacher not take on the role of advisor for any club, let alone a GSA. It is first important for a teacher to establish a sense of credibility and competency as a teacher with the administration and other faculty before taking on extra responsibilities.

Yeah even teachers I know would never recommend you take on a club or anything had you not been tenured. Because you just you have got some safety, you have proven yourself as a competent teacher, which is what I am really here to do. I am here to educate the kids' number one. These things are extra. And this is something extra that is my passion too... I would not have done it had I not been tenured. I think it would have made my job to get tenure harder honestly because administrators don't always share the same viewpoints as me.

She realized that her perspective on sexual minorities might differ with those of the administration and would not sacrifice her opportunity to get tenure to be the GSA advisor. With tenure, she was safe from losing her job and thus felt more secure taking on the role of GSA advisor.

Married

Being married was seen as a protective factor. It tended to alleviate the worry that some advisors had concerning being accused of recruiting youth to the 'gay lifestyle.' In a way, it could speak to the misconception that people may have concerning gay people or single people as predators and/or pedophiles. There was one female, bisexual advisor who is closeted at her high school, and because she is married, she feels protected, especially since she is bisexual.

If they portray me as a straight pretty much together lady than I am not going to be sexually corrupting these young children. I think that is what a lot of people consider anything in the gay community is sexual corruption, something immoral, sinful you know. And I don't know, I, I that is what I want to get rid of. But I think if I was a gay man leading this group I think I would have very challenged, you know a lot of big challenges. With always having to make sure another adult was with me and any young boy. I think more so than if I was a gay female leading it. I think people would be a little bit more comfortable with that, but I would still have a lot of hateful remarks coming my way and a lot of innuendos and you know all of that stuff. But for me it is like hey I am just glad I am married and you know they ask me 'well did you ever do anything before' and I try to answer as honestly and as comfortably as I can. So they just they know I am not like totally straight and narrow and other people would guess. And I am like well you can think whatever you want and just leave it out there for them to guess. It is more fun for them and for me.

Being married affords an advisor protection against harassment that a gay or lesbian may not enjoy. Marriage is a status symbol that may have more credence in the school community than being single or LGB. In a way, a married person is a trusted person.

One informant was comforted because he was married although it was unsettling to him that he should have had to use marriage as a protection.

I remember again not being real. I just got married this year. [Pause] And I think I felt more, again this is not good, but I definitely felt more secure again being in this conservative community by saying 'well at least I'm married' ya know because then, I just... even though I'm tenured and all that kind of stuff, again that's terrible that I even have to think that way but ya do. I mean because that's kind of the reality here of just didn't want to get grief...It scared me a little bit and I thought, well ya know now that I'm married I really can't...I'm protected. I'm safe. Ya know in that way that I can do this and still not worry and that's sad.

This advisor was not the initial advisor to the GSA. When the youth wanted to initially start up the club, they had asked him to be the advisor and at that time, he was not married so he turned down the opportunity. However, a few years later when the initial advisor was leaving the district, the youth approached him again to be the advisor, and he agreed to do it because at the time he was married and felt like he was in a safer place in his life.

Another advisor is married as well, and discussed how his heterosexuality protects him against people being suspicious of his intentions for being a GSA advisor. He felt that if he were gay, he would have a very different experience.

I also knew that being straight man, I would be less vulnerable than if I were gay myself...I think that if I were a gay man, the rumors or suspicions of me and my motives of bringing this [the GSA] into the school would be a whole different thing and um, I don't think that's right, but I think it's reality, political reality and so I felt that um in certain ways maybe I could use being straight, and ya know. I kept emphasizing to everyone that it's the Gay Straight Alliance; you don't have to be gay to be a part of this group. You could be a straight person who supports equal rights of people regardless of their sexual orientation period.

This quote was interesting because this advisor brought up the point that people may often forget that a GSA is a Gay-Straight Alliance. A GSA could be considered a bridge, a united front with a combination of people of all sexual orientations. The decision

making process eventually led to the decision of becoming the GSA advisor. It then becomes necessary to examine what the advisor actually does for the club.

Role of the GSA advisor

The GSA advisor's role is multi-faceted and somewhat complex. The various roles involve interactions with all the hierarchical levels of the school community from the students to the superintendent. The five major roles informants discussed were: (1) a role model or caring adult who is a 'safe' person for students, (2) a teacher of leadership skills, (3) a monitor who ensures that GSA students comply with appropriate school behavior, (4) a liaison between the GSA, teachers, administration and parents, and (5) a resource for the school and broader community.

Role model/Caring adult

GSA advisors serve as role models to the GSA students and the general student body. It is first important to understand the advisors may not have directly used this term, role model, but described themselves in a way that could be interpreted as such. They serve as role models in the traditional sense meaning that they represent someone who the students can aspire to be like (imitate). Prior research suggests that there are few known adult LGBT role models for sexual minority youth in the school community. The advisors who are gay, lesbian or bisexual could be the only visible sexual minority adult that these students know. These sexual minority advisors represent to the youth, people who have successfully survived the 'coming out' process, as well as continue to succeed professionally as a teacher. Because a couple of the advisors are in same-sex partnerships (some with children) they also present an image of a person who is in a successful relationship with someone of the same-sex. In addition, not only the sexual minority

advisors serve as positive role models, but heterosexual advisors do as well. They can be seen as allies for sexual minority people, thus the students at times feel free to disclose their sexual orientation to them. In addition, as role models, the GSA advisors advise and mentor the students dealing with school issues as well as life issues such as religious conflicts.

GSA advisors view themselves as 'safe' people who are there for the students. Four advisors discussed aspects of being a safe person for students. Three of them were male and heterosexual and one was female and bisexual. As one male advisor noted, "with the students, a lot of times, I'm just there; I'm like what do you [call], a safe teacher so they can come and talk to me." Another advisor when talking about how the momentum of the GSA is falling due to unproductive leadership noted that even having a GSA group that might not be completely active in the school community is still positive. He is still there for the students. He stated, "It's [the GSA] still a place that people can come. They know the club exists. They know that there's someone in the school they can talk to who's safe and I see that as a good thing." So even though the club might not be as active as he would like, he is still seen as a safe teacher for students to talk to in the school community.

These advisors in fact may be safe people since students have gone to advisors to discuss their sexuality. Two advisors had students disclose their sexual orientation to them. As one heterosexual male informant stated,

...one girl who's like come out to me. And that's only to me...She's a very confident young lady, so it seems like she's dealing with it as well as about any kid, I guess. But, uh, she's also a kid who said she's known for a number of years that she was gay, so – she's only 14...

The second advisor who is a bisexual woman had eight students come out to her.

I have had eight students come out to me this year, which is more than I have ever known in the last three years that I have taught here. So I am like whoa like this is kids are feeling more comfortable with identifying who they are at a younger age.

These advisors were trusted enough by the students so that they could feel free to discuss with the advisors their sexual orientation.

Like discussed previously, GSA advisors serve as role models in the traditional sense, they represent to students someone that the students could aspire to be like. Five advisors discussed aspects of being a role model and all but one were sexual minority.

One way that sexual minority advisors are role models is that they are visible in the school community. One gay advisor brings a same-sex date to school dances when he chaperones, he stated, "I take same-sex dates to prom or homecoming if I chaperone."

The general student body at these dances can see this same-sex couple together and perhaps demystify gay people for some of the general school population. In addition, the gay advisors are also open with the youth about their lives with their partners and will talk to them about their experiences with being gay. One gay advisor discussed how the youth will talk to him about dating and the intimacy of their same-sex dates. They will also ask him questions about himself and his partner. The advisor stated,

Well, ya know about dating. [Laughs] And ya know um the intimacy of their dates that ya know. Um I would say that would probably be the primary issue and not only that, they'll say things like 'when did you and your partner meet?' and...I'll explain how we meet and stuff like that. So, I think that being gay, me being gay sort of normalizes the situation for them, it makes it easier for them to talk about it. I think also being the advisor what I done in the classroom is I started um using gender neutral language ya know instead of saying to a young woman, 'do you have a boyfriend?' I may ask, 'are you dating somebody' or ya know leave the possibilities of what their life is like open.

This advisor not only openly discusses his same-sex relationship, but also makes it an open environment for students when he uses neutral language when talking to youth about dating.

Another gay advisor stated that at GSA meetings he often gets asked personal questions as well. He sees himself as a role model and talks to the youth about his life because he wants to present an image of life as a homosexual as a life not completely about the bedroom. He wants to show how there are other aspects to being gay besides sexual acts.

Well, the kids will ask me personal questions, ya know, and so...and I feel comfortable talking about myself personally, as any straight teacher does. You know, the straight teachers talk about their wives or their husbands and their kids, and I try to show kids that our sexual orientation is not just what we do in a bedroom. You're, you exhibit your sexual orientation all the time. When you talk about yourself, and your plans for the weekend, or what you're doing for the holiday. So, I feel comfortable to talk to them about my own experiences, because I see myself as a role model for them.

It may be that this advisor believes that it is a common perception that homosexual people are often depicted as very sexual, and therefore wants the youth to realize that being homosexual is more than homosexual sexual acts.

Another lesbian advisor talked about being a role model, but in the sense of being a successful teacher who has completed graduate school, of showing the students that it is possible to continue on with education beyond high school.

I think perhaps the most useful thing that I do is that I am just here and I'm not terribly uptight or concerned ya know, it, once in a while it gets to be funny for them, they'll ask me if I'm married, do I have a husband, and I just and I guess I feel like being who I am in the school where I'm at and, and I mean, it's not just about GSA, it's about going to college, and it's about ya know learning science, it's about making what you want out of your life whatever that might be... I guess I feel like probably the best thing that they can learn from us who are professionals. For most of these kids, we are the most highly educated professionals in their lives, I mean, consistently throughout their lives, their

teachers. We all have master degrees plus. And when you have a community where, I think the rate of bachelor degrees is like 12% in this district among the parents. Ya know so it's like most of these kids don't even know people who've gone through college and made it and we just, we present a model of how you can create what you want in your life and I'm, you know, and I'm one little piece of that. And I'm not, I'm not, I know I don't advertise my orientation, but it doesn't ya know take geniuses, they all know...I think that's probably it, especially in this population. That might not be true at [name of another high school]. I think that's true here.

She works in an urban, lower income community where continuing on past high school is not common. Her being a well-educated teacher serves as a role model for those youth who do not have people in their life that are highly educated. She is someone that the youth could look up to and aspire to be like.

GSA advisors can also serve as leaders who can model protecting and helping all kids. One gay advisor talked about how school districts need to take a stand against people who disagree with the GSA and that it is the school's job is to protect all kids. In a way, by being a GSA advisor, he is being a 'moral leader' in his school building. It may not be school district wide but he is taking a stand in his school community.

I'm still just so glad that the group has been here, so I'm proud of that and pleased with that, and frustrated I guess on the other side just to know that people that I think should be aware of protecting and helping all kids are not doing so, and they're caving in to some kind of perceived political pressure. And I think if you're gonna be a leader in a school district you have to lead the way and that comes down to this issue. Yes, the community may or may not support it, but you have to lead and to teach them that it's right and that comes down to this issue. Yes, the community may or may not support it, but you have to lead and to teach them that it's right.

Although he does not have the authority to make school district administration take on a leading role in protecting sexual minority, in a way by him being the GSA advisor he takes a lead role in his own school community in advising this club.

Other advisors are role models in that they actively speak out against homophobic actions by students. The students can see and hear adults openly stopping homophobic pejoratives. This may not happen with all teachers in all classrooms. They take a stand in creating an environment which is safe for sexual minority students and faculty. One gay teacher stops students in the hallway if he hears someone calling someone else a faggot.

...this is one thing that I might be able to do, but I'm not for sure other teachers would do this, but we hear a lot of 'that's so gay' in the hall and 'fag' and 'faggot this' and 'faggot that', so I hear two young men yelling at each other, you know, 'faggot' this, 'faggot' that. And I pulled them aside and said 'you know, there's really only two people that should be saying that, and that's one faggot to another, and unless you're sure about your friend, I would suggest that you not say it.'

Through his confronting the youth, he lets them know that language is not tolerated. He sets an example of how it is okay to correct this behavior. Other teachers and students could take his example and stop homophobic actions themselves.

Another lesbian GSA advisor will on the first day of class talk to the students about appropriate language in her classroom. She makes it known from the first moment she meets her students that she will not put up with discriminatory language of any kind.

One of the first things I do in my classroom when I have a new group of students is, I set really clear boundaries about what's acceptable and what's not acceptable in my classroom and we talk at length about derogatory epithets. Kids are not allowed, well to the extent that I can keep them from it, which is actually pretty well, pretty good. They're not allowed to call each other stupid; they are not allowed to call other retarded things like that. We talk about all of those sort of epithets and we also, and I talk about 'oh that's so gay', 'you're fruit', all those things. And it's gotten to the point where I have had some upper classes don't even, it's not even...ya know we go over it, it's like 'yeah yeah yeah, we know', so I think it was a lot of it, because of the environment, the atmosphere that I try and make in my classroom and I wasn't like 'out' to my students although I think it was the next year after that one of them asked me if I was a lesbian in class.

These two advisors who actively correct and prevent homophobic pejoratives show the students who are sensitive to sexual minority issues that there are teachers who do not allow discriminatory language.

A heterosexual advisor was a role model in the way he was willing to stand up for the GSA against the vice principal of the school. The assistant principal was trying to dissuade the students from creating a GSA. He thought that the students who wanted the GSA should just meld with the UNITE club which is a diversity club at the school. The advisor after talking to the assistant principal talked to the GSA students about the assistant principal's idea. The students really wanted to start a GSA and were not interested in the activities of the UNITE club, especially since some of the UNITE members brought up religious concerns about having sexual minority issues become part of their club. The advisor was willing to do whatever the students who wanted the GSA decided.

I was behind whatever decision they wanted to do, if they wanted me to start going to the UNITE Club groups and being a presence there, I would, or I would start the group on its own as its advisor. We ended up saying, no; we want to go alone with it. I can tell you that on the side, not with the kids, when the assistant principal did first get the paperwork and hear what was going on, I don't think he realized that I was that strongly for it.

The advisor was willing to stand up for the kids despite his superior (the assistant principal) advising him not to start this club.

Advisors as role models also advise their students on school and life issues. Four informants discussed how as GSA advisors they give life advice to the GSA students. From the four, three were sexual minority. Two of the advisors discussed religious issues surrounding sexuality with their students. Some dominant religions have strong anti-gay

messages and a few of the youth find conflict with the messages that they receive from their religious practices and from their family. One male, heterosexual advisor stated,

I knew that the two girls that had talked to me kind of like expressed like religious concerns with it so I just, since it was like an after school thing, I just told them, I said 'I'm Catholic and the reason that I would want to do this is because I'm Catholic, that it complements how I feel a person should be treated and I don't find any qualms with it but you have to decide for yourself and what's going to work out best with your relationship with your parents' and that kind of thing.

He disclosed to the two students his perspective on how his religion influences his life and how his interpretation of Catholicism actually encourages him to be involved with the GSA. He advised the two students to make decisions that fit them.

A gay advisor had a similar experience with discussing religion. The GSA had invited the Bible Club to a meeting to discuss Christianity and sexual orientation. He knew that some of the GSA youth were struggling with religious issues. The advisor saw that there were GSA students getting upset about what was being said to them by the Bible Club. At one point in the meeting the advisor felt the need to come to the defense of LGBT people.

There was a time where our GSA members invited the Bible Club to come to a meeting to explain their position on homosexuality, and I knew that it was not gonna be pleasant. And they were using, you know the line, 'Oh we love you, but we hate the sin.' And I came to their advice and said ya know I said, and ya know I'm speaking in a public school, 'Listen, if sin is what separates us from God, I gotta tell ya, my homosexuality has never done that. It's only brought me closer.' So I'm talking to the kids, because there were a lot of kids that were really upset. I said, 'Truth is, it's probably hard to live a life that's so scorned by others, and not have faith in something.' And I said, 'And you know when we read these passages of the Bible that people are using, let me put them in context for you.' So, that I think was real helpful to the kids, because a lot of them were struggling about how to be people of faith, and primarily Christian faith they were thinking of, and identify themselves as gay, and so I was telling them, you know, you can, you can be both. There isn't really any incongruence. So I think that was help for a lot of kids. And then the next – that was when one of the mothers who was attending brought a friend of hers in to speak to the kids on another Christian perspective. We call her 'the rainbow cross lady,' [laughs] because she brought all these little

rainbow crosses in, she had them pin them on their backpacks and stuff. Actually, that year at graduation I wore mine at graduation, too.

This advisor offered an alternative perspective on Christianity that perhaps the youth at the meeting did not realize. He conceivably gave some of the youth dealing with the religion conflict a new idea that the two identities could merge and were not necessarily at odds. He also served as a role model by wearing the rainbow cross to graduation. The students in the GSA, other students and faculty perhaps saw that he was willing to present an image of himself as both a Christian and an openly gay man.

A lesbian advisor gave life advice, not about religion and sexual orientation, but about surviving high school and forging on in life. She tried to give them a perspective that high school is just temporary and that in general life gets better after high school.

I tell them [the students] that high school is not your whole life. That the rest of the world does not operate the way this high school operates and if they're having a tough time that if I see a kid that's having a tough time that's one of the first things that I tell them, 'look this is temporary, this is really, really temporary and that when you're in a work place, in a professional environment people, you don't get that kind of hassle. It's just; I mean maybe, I'm sure that there are cases where that happens, but not to the extent that it does in a high school. It's like in every high school and it's not anywhere near in every work environment, so that this is, just surreal.'

She tries to give the youth the hope that in a professional working environment after high school, they will not have to deal with the hassles that happen in the high school setting.

Another advisor gave advice to a student who was getting beaten up in the school parking lot. The student was gay and she was not sure if he was getting beaten up because of his sexual orientation. She never saw it happen, but knew it was indeed happening on school grounds. Because she personally never saw it happen, she was not able to write up an incident report, but urged the student to file an incident report for himself. She was willing to advocate for him to help him stop the abuse.

I told him that I was there as his advocate and that I would meet with people, I would do whatever I could but I wasn't a witness and so I could not, I didn't feel like I could go to the principal and write an incident report about it because I didn't see it happened, I only got that his report or from other kids and that kind of thing and so ya know I told him I don't want how many times, at least four times, at least four times that I told him this, you need to go file an incident report and I will make appointments, like for meetings with your mom, you, with the assistant principal whoever it takes, I would be there with you and I will do whatever I can support you... and he never followed through.

Although the student never did file the report, she kept reminding him to do it and to get help for himself. She tried to advise him to take steps to better his situation at school.

'Sit back' – students in charge

The advisors role as described by seven informants is one of sitting back and letting the students take control of the GSA activities. The GSA advisor was not there to take charge of the content of the group activities or discussion. Interestingly, six of the seven were male and heterosexual. As one advisor stated, "I really try to be just an advisor, and I'm, what I mean by that is it's their time to plan and think about what they want to do and what they want to accomplish, so I just kind of, when we have a meeting, I just simply sort of sit back...". The students make the decisions on what they want to accomplish as a group and plan it out. Another advisor mentioned that the students in the club really do not involve her in the conversations during the meeting.

...a lot of times what I would do is make myself small and out of the way and let them have their conversations. And I would say a lot of the time, especially when they were getting into deep conversations, I didn't even exist as far as they were concerned. It was, they were talking to each other. So, they did not draw me in particularly and ask me pointed questions myself.

The advisor is not there to be apart of the meeting per se, this advisor makes herself 'small and out of the way' and lets the students discuss and talk amongst themselves. One advisor compared himself to a fly on the wall. "I'm usually more of just a fly on the wall

here, you know, but I noticed they just, they talk about issues and stuff like that....” The students dictate what the club is about while the teachers seem to play a secondary role.

Monitor of appropriate school behavior

The role of GSA advisor also entails being a monitor who ensures that students are demonstrating appropriate school behavior. Three of the four advisors who discussed this theme were heterosexual, female, and from an urban high school environment. As one informant mentioned, “The advisor is supposed to play not an advisory role really; it’s supposed to be there to monitor appropriate school behavior. They’re supposed to be there to monitor stuff ...they’re not supposed to take a directive role. It’s really supposed to be student driven.” This advisor explained that in actuality, the term ‘advisor’ may not be an appropriate term since the students dictate what happens during GSA meetings. The advisor’s role is not necessarily to advise, but to make sure that the members act appropriately. In terms of monitoring, another advisor mentioned that she will stop the students from watching parts of the movie if she thinks it is inappropriate for the school setting. “I’m there to support and watch and if anything gets out of hand like, they might be showing a movie in my classroom in school that I might see is heading down a scary path and I might speak up...” She is there to intervene when inappropriate school matter surfaces.

An important question is what exactly is appropriate school behavior? One advisor, once it became known that a GSA was going to be established, was brought into a meeting with the assistant superintendent and the curriculum director to discuss her role in the club.

when we started talking about it seriously the, the uh assistant superintendent and the curriculum director asked me to go to a meeting and we sat down and

basically what I heard they telling me was that I couldn't discuss sex or sex education sorts of topics at the meetings and if there were meetings going on, it was my responsibility to see that those things weren't discussed and if they were, it could be big problems for me and my job. I mean, and I didn't, I like both those men and I think that it could, uh, had we not already had a good rapport, a teacher might have found that like a threat like, but I really didn't and I don't think it was. They were just generally concerned about me and making sure I knew what was going on and so that I didn't get into a situation that I didn't expect because I didn't know. Um and so they told me to be really careful about that and I said that I would and I have been. And it really haven't been, it doesn't come up, it's not like. GSA's don't get together and talk about sex, it's just not...

The assistant superintendent and the curriculum director seemed to want to be sure that the advisor was going to adhere to school standards and, according to the advisor, seemed to be truly concerned that the advisor was not going to be put into a compromising situation.

This same advisor used her role as monitor to advocate for the official establishment of the club. The students who wanted to start the club had been meeting during lunchtime informally without an advisor for two years before initiating a formal GSA. She debated with the administration that as an official club, the GSA would have an advisor to ensure that the students were not displaying inappropriate behavior for school.

...as far my position, it was very easy for me to say, 'look these kids have been meeting for two years with no advisor, do you think that's a good idea?' And so, I guess from my point of view and I think, I think this is also from the administration's point of view; it was bringing a group into the fold and into. I mean when they are just student groups and they have no advisor, they can talk about it and do whatever they wanted and actually by adding me as an advisor it restricted them somewhat, ya know, at their meetings in terms of what they could talk about. So, there was some objection from parents and I, and I think it's fair to say that the administration, certain members of the administration, weren't excited about it, but nobody gave me a really hard time.

The administration could see the benefit of having an official club with an advisor, even though they did not enthusiastically support the idea. They did not give the advisor a difficult time about the club.

Another advisor got a little frustrated with administration because she reiterated quite a few times that the students demonstrate appropriate school behavior during the meetings. She had to dispel some of the misconceptions that the club talks about sex and that the students are asked to disclose their sexual orientation.

I guess they still, even though people knew or we stated that it was legal, that it was the legal right of students to have this group, they were still struggling with whether this was really appropriate ya know for a public high school to. And people were, even though I think I kept explaining a couple of the premises that you don't ask kids what their sexual orientation is and that we don't talk about sex, we don't talk about sex anymore than you'd talk about sex in Band under French Club or whatever but people seemed to have that idea that we must talk about sex. So they just seemed to misunderstand what goes on in the meetings and that got me a little frustrated.

As this advisor stated, the GSA is like any other club such as the French Club or Band and just because it is the Gay-Straight Alliance does not mean that the students break from appropriate school behavior. She kept trying to repeatedly correct this misunderstanding which got frustrating for her.

Liaison

The GSA advisor also serves as a liaison with the various levels of the school community. This theme was supported by all the advisors. There were variations however within this theme. There are three basic ways the GSA advisors serve as liaisons: between (1) the GSA students and teachers, (2) the GSA students and administration, and (3) the GSA students, parents, and administration.

It is first important to understand the term 'liaison.' The advisors may not have directly used this word, but described themselves in a way that explains that they may be the connection between the different aspects of the school community surrounding the GSA. One advisor discussed his role as being the figurehead for the club.

I'm the figurehead where the administration comes to get me if they have a concern. They want me to make sure that the kids know this and they come and get me. And if the kids have a problem, and they have questions about school policy or they want to find out this or that, if they can do this, then I do that.

This advisor, when talking about his role, also used the term 'facilitator' and when he was asked what a facilitator does, he stated,

What does it mean that I facilitate? What it means is that I am the liaison between the administration and the GSA. The students don't typically talk to the administration, I do. And know that I have this wonderful principal, that is just really great, I can come in and just sit down and say, 'hey here's the deal, check this out, this is their newsletter. Look at this.'

Another advisor discussed his role as being a contact person.

I'm the direct contact between you [the GSA] and the administrators; this is what they are going to want to see. We just can't say that we're having an assembly Wednesday morning for all the teachers to attend that, that doesn't work that way. Ya know, so that's kind of my role...with the logistics really.

This advisor mentioned that he would be the person to have the discussion with the teachers setting up a time for the teacher assembly for the GSA. He would handle the logistics.

The GSA advisor serves as a connection between the GSA students and teachers. Many GSA's participate in the Day of Silence which is a day when the students do not speak all day in protest of our society's oppression of LGBT people. One advisor and his co-advisors stood up during a faculty meeting to talk about the Day of Silence and to answer any questions or concerns. In this quote, the advisor was talking to the faculty

about oral quizzes and what should be done about them on this day because one teacher gave an oral quiz on the Day of Silence.

Our main purpose is academics, so we'd have meetings, faculty meetings, and they'd refer to these things like the Day of Silence and say 'well ya know we're not sanctioning this activity', but we [the advisors] just want you to know the kids will be participating in it. So, I had to stand up and explain to them, thankfully that was when it wasn't just me, I had the other two people [advisors] there with me, explaining what the purpose of the Day of Silence was and explain to them about this and that and that the kids should still be held academically accountable that um if they're missing points, then they're missing points. And I believe that personally. Because I think that's a form of the protest too. If you're going to protest something, ya know, if Gandhi, if Gandhi gonna fast he can't sneak food in the middle of the night, ya know. And, part of it is the suffering that you go through, so ya know the whole thing with the not getting points or oral quizzes or whatnot and they can't speak. I personally don't think there's a problem with that at all. Ya know, you take the hit if you feel strongly enough about something that, it's not let it go. But the teachers, nobody talked to me about it, not really. I didn't have good discussions with the teachers who didn't agree with me necessarily.

He with the other GSA advisors explained the reasons behind the Day of Silence. They also explained that the students were still academically accountable for the day even though they may not be able to participate in an oral quiz if a teacher decided to give a quiz on that day.

Just like this previous advisor, another advisor communicated to staff about the Day of Silence. At this school, the GSA was not successful in organizing Day of Silence activities for that year. There was one student however who was graduating, had participated all prior years in Days of Silence, and wanted to participate in his final year. The advisor emailed faculty about this student's decision to participate with information explaining the Day of Silence.

It's good to know that in this building, I'm taking the forefront of this issue on for the student body. So when I contact the staff about an issue. Last week, our student weren't active because we haven't had anyone showing up, was the Day of Silence and um I sent out an email about ya know what it is because I had one student who was a senior and is graduating and have participated in all the years,

done it actively every year, this year I haven't had kids come to meetings, so we didn't pursue it and he said, 'Mr. T_ it's my fourth year and I want to'. I sent out an email [to the teachers] so that the student could get special permission from me, here's some information about the day, why it's happening and let me know... Then I said [in the email message] not just today but listen to what's going on in your classrooms, see how students treat each other and what kind of environment you are creating.

Through email he gave out information to faculty about the Day of Silence giving permission for one student to participate. He also in this email advocated for teachers to be aware of the environment they create in their classrooms.

An advisor from another school was approached by teachers when the club was first initiated who suggested that the club be called a diversity club instead of a GSA. The advisor discussed with the students the feedback given to him by teachers and let the students decide on how they wanted to call their club. In the end, they decided to keep the name Gay Straight Alliance.

Um there was some teachers who came up to me for example and said, 'do you have to use the word gay in the club name?, can't you call it...' and this wasn't even, it wasn't like the principal who was saying 'call it a diversity club' um 'and don't have it be focused on gays.' It was the, a teacher who said, 'fine have a club that's focused on these issues, but just don't call it gay because that...' And ya know, I put that to the kids and I said, 'it's up to you ya know, but this is one of the things I'm getting in terms of feedback from teachers.' And the kids said, 'it's like we're being re-closeted, that's the whole point, there's nothing wrong with the word gay, so accept it'

The advisor brought to the students the issue raised by his colleagues. He served as relay between the faculty and the students.

Many advisors developed communication patterns with the administration concerning the GSA. Some of the communication starts right from the beginning of the GSA inception. One principal talked to the advisor about his concerns and established

certain criteria that the club had to meet. The advisor talked to the students about some of the principal's concerns.

He's, [the principal], he's very supportive of the idea, but he's kind of afraid of the backlash that might come with it ya know from the community or other kids and that sort of thing. He thought maybe cuz when I talked to him about it he's like ya know 'if we start this club for gay rights or whatever you want to call it', he said, 'there will be another club that will want to form that's going to be just the opposite. Ya know, I call it 'the Redneck Society' or something. Um, so he was very concerned about what the backlash might be and that's why he was kind of hesitant about allowing it and that sort of thing, but he did put down some criteria that the kids met. The kids did all the work. Um I just kind of gave them some ideas of what you might want to do, these are questions that some adult might have, or these are some concerns of the administration that sort of thing, so they had an idea of not to go too far, I guess.

This advisor relayed the concerns and criteria that the club needed to meet from the principal to the students.

Another advisor also started communication right from the start with administration. Counselors were trying to change the nature of the GSA, therefore the advisor met with administrators to advocate for the club that the students wanted. The administrators had various concerns about the GSA including a negative reaction from parents and other students.

Well, they started putting road blocks up, ya know not really anything that I couldn't deal with, but they kept trying to change the sort of what the GSA would be. First they wanted it to be something that the counselors did and it was completely anonymous and confidential and all that stuff and so I took that back to the kids and they said 'no that's not what we want'. So, I went back to the administrators and said 'ya know that's not what they want, they want it to be like an after school club' and they [the administrators] had all kinds of concerns, my principal was concerned that parents would be taking out the kids out of my classroom if they found out, and our Athletic Director was worried that kids would be targeted, that would increase the amount of harassment and violence against gay kids or kids that were perceived to be...

One of her roles as GSA advisor was to establish a connection between the students and the administration. The advisor was the main person talking to administration on behalf of the students and to the students on behalf of the administration.

The role of liaison does not stop for the advisor once the GSA is formally or informally established in school. This connection seems to continue once the GSA is formed and organizing activities. There was one GSA who was having problems in the school with Day of Silence activities. There was a protest against the Day of Silence by a group of students. These students created t-shirts mimicking the students participating in the Day of Silence on the front of the shirt with perceived offensive writing on the back. The students were selling these t-shirts before the Day of Silence in school during school hours which is breaking school rules. The advisors (there were three) approached the principal where together they devised a plan to send the students wearing the offensive shirts to the principal's office where they would be forced to take off the perceived offensive shirts.

We went to the principal and talked about it and explained it to them and said, 'look it, ya know the GSA, regardless whether or not its school sponsored, it promotes acceptance, tolerance, respect. Okay this is one of our NCA goals, National Accreditation Association; we're supposed to be fostering respect' ...these objectionable shirts is fostering separation, divisive, humiliating kinds of things' and I said, 'look it, if someone were to come in and wear a swastika or, or have a picture of a, of a Black person with a gag and say keep [name of school] white on it, you couldn't have it' ...I said, 'what's the difference? We've got these students with these shirts. You can't, you can't have people coming in with Nazi shirts on, it's just not'. He agreed with us. He said, 'those shirts will come off. They will not be allowed to wear those shirts on the Day of the Silence'. I said, 'Great. Thank you so much for doing this', ya know. And um, then the Day of Silence arrived about a week later. And since that time I was able to get one of the shirts...I showed that shirt to [name of principal] our principal at the time... it was just 'keep [name of school] on the straight and narrow', but it had this demeaning depiction on the front. So, he said, 'You know, great for showing me this and that ya, everything fine'. He also gave us permission, [names of GSA's student co-presidents], to make out a sheet to put in all the teacher's

mailboxes that said, 'if you see these shirts send them to the office because that's not respectful'. They need to bring those shirts in. And that letter also explained the Day of Silence and what's it supposed to symbolize. It's symbolizing silence and discrimination and that, really what it is, it's not broadcasting and advertising homosexuality, what it is, is it's just going against discrimination. So we put all these things in their mailboxes

Anyway the Day of Silence came and there were students wearing the anti-Day of Silence t-shirts. The students wearing the shirts were sent to the principal's office where the principal did not make them take the shirts off. The advisor and the student presidents of the GSA met with the principal to discuss the ordeal.

Anyway, they didn't have to take their shirts off and so [names of student co-presidents] and I were 'what is going on? Ya know, they were supposed to take them off. We just had this long discussion', but they couldn't talk. It was the Day of Silence. So, we had to go in there to talk to [name of principal] and they couldn't talk, so they are writing these things down and I'm reading the things. And he tried to explain it and he's just being kind of patronizing and just make us really upset. And he says, 'well, I've thought it over and I've decided that we're going to do it this way and if the students aren't actually advocating violence, we're going to send them back to their classrooms so long as the teachers don't have any objections to them being in their class, so as long as it doesn't cause a learning disruption', he said, 'we can let them have their shirts on'

The advisor was there with the students in the principal's office communicating their concerns and frustration with the anti-Day of Silence students who are allowed to wear their offensive t-shirts. The advisor was the connection that the GSA students used to communicate with the principal.

Not only does the advisor serve as a liaison between staff at the school, but with parents as well. One advisor described a situation where she got involved helping a student who perceived getting harassed on a sports team by members and the coach. The student told the advisor the story of getting harassed, and she ran interference with the parents and coach with correcting the situation and bringing the truth out in the open. As a faculty member, she went to the students' house directly to talk to his parents.

Um, we had a gay student on a sports team and the kid and the coach had a conflict. The kid felt like the coach was really unsupportive and that the kid felt like the coach would, um, was not um was sort of out to get him, or didn't want him on the team...the kid told me, and what the story the kid told me was ya know outrageous, and I went and I talked to the faculty member and I talked to the principal. Ya know, there was a lot of things that went on. And what came out of it, is that the faculty member got a good picture of where the student was at and um was able to correct the misinformation. The kid was actually very wrong about his opinion about the teacher. And then the parents were upset and I guess, I got to run interference with the parents. I went to the kids house and I sat down with the parents and I said 'This is what your son told me had happened and I'm willing to help. I don't have an official role in helping, right, I'm just another faculty member, but this is what I can do'. And I did those things and I felt like it dissipated more quickly because I could be a faculty member and help, help resolve things a bit. And actually the coach was really, I thought very clear and very strong. He said he'd have, he'd rather not have a team than have that kid leave over issues of orientation. He said if the other kids won't be on the team with him, we won't have a team... the issue was some of the kids were saying that they didn't want to change in the room with the gay kid. And I don't know how the miscommunication occurred or what exactly happened, but somehow the kid got the impression he wasn't welcome. That actually wasn't the case at all. The coach was really uptight about the, upset at the other kids... What the coach did is talk to the captain of the team, whose actually he's a really good leader...the coached talked to him about how he could set an example for the other kids and the, the leader of the team, the captain of the team just said, 'Look, get over it' and to the kids that were having the hard time. And he happened to be a well respected kid and they did, they got over it.

This advisor participated in helping a student by creating communication between the coach, administration and his parents to get a problem solved.

Another advisor when the club was just beginning was advised by the principal to bring some of the GSA students to a PTA meeting where they could answer some questions and concerns raised by the parents. The principal who advised her to do this was new, supportive of the GSA and thought that it could help dispel some of the miscommunication about the club.

...we had a new principal this year... had had a big GSA in his previous high school and he I think he was really overwhelmed with the change from an inner city high school to suburban upper middle class high school. So I think the one issue he felt really comfortable with was the Gay Straight Alliance because he

had a lot of experience with that. So he was almost cavalier about it as opposed to the previous principal who had been so uptight about it. So he said 'why don't you just bring some of the students and speak to the parents our parent group', which is kind of like a high school PTA called the Spirit Parents something and so that was on the agenda and a group of parents or some of the right wing parents found out and so maybe five or six of them came to the meeting and sat in one corner of the room together and started asking kind of combative questions of the students and after awhile the principal, we had the students leave because it was getting unpleasant and one of the sad things was and then he had us, the advisors leave, but the mother of the boy who had started the GSA was there and of course the other parents didn't know her so she was very, very upset by some of the comments that were made um...well they were very angry that parent permission wasn't required for kids to be well in the GSA. They ya know just stated their beliefs that it, we shouldn't have such a group and that kids were being recruited for the gay lifestyle um and even that there was some accusations and I have a little trouble remembering what was said in the meeting versus some of the phone calls and visits to me later where ya know that the gay lifestyle leads one to get AIDS and HIV and die and so I was facilitating the death of students you know by having this group or helping to have this group...

The advisor represented the GSA with a group of GSA students at a PTA meeting. She also received some phone calls and visits by parents later, after the meeting.

Resource

GSA advisors serve as a resource in the school community. They give resources out to their peers about sexuality issues, educate peers through in-serves and presentations, and give resources to students and community members.

One advisor discussed her role as a point person for sexuality issues. If there is something going on in school concerning gender or sexual orientation, this advisor is told to provide her perspective.

I mean there have been a few situations and um, I guess as the, being the advisor, one nice thing is that now I'm well known as the point person for these sorts of issues. Ya know, we had a student this year who doesn't want to wear a dress, she hasn't worn a dress since 4th grade and she's graduating and the requirement is that you have to wear a dress and this, ya know [laughs] and a couple teachers take me aside and say this is going on, okay, I guess I like knowing what's going on and being able to provide them with factual or legalistic information if I have it. Um, so I think there's among the staff an increased ability to do things

properly because I could be a resource.... I feel like they, I feel like, you know um when an issue comes up surrounding GLBT issues, somebody lets me know what's going on, sometimes the students let me know something's going on, sometimes the faculty lets me know what's going on and I'm glad to do that because I probably do know more about these things than anybody else on the faculty. I would guess, so I'm glad that they let me know and let me give some input and do what I can to help.

She provides the school community legalistic or factual information if it is needed in certain situations. The community looks to her as a resource for these types of matters.

Another advisor gave a colleague who was teaching government information about hate crimes that he could add to his curriculum. By serving as a resource for information, he feels like he is making a difference in his school community.

I think I helped in that way too, of passing along my resources, like there's another colleague who teaches government, and this all is about the Fourteenth Amendment due process laws and I gave him... I found resources on Matt Sheppard and other hate crimes, too and stuff like that. He took that up as part of the curriculum, so things like that. I like to think I'm making a difference.

He passed along resources to his colleague so hate crimes could be added to his colleague's curriculum.

During the Day of Silence, one advisor set out GLSEN lesson plans, ribbons, and door signs that other teachers could take to teach about sexual orientation issues during class. She gave resources that the teachers could take.

I have a Day of Silence and we have GLSEN lesson plans... so I set those out on the teacher's like counter by our mailboxes and just said ya know had our ribbons, and these are lesson plans and these are signs for doors if you want to have kids come in your safe room...

If other teachers want to include sexual orientation into their curricula or let students know that their classroom is a safe space by putting up a sign on their door, the resources are there. The advisor placed them near the mailboxes so teachers could take them if they wanted.

GSA advisors have also given presentations and in-services to other faculty members about the GSA and youth sexual orientation issues. There was one advisor who gave a presentation to staff where a teacher asked how they should present the information to the class and how they should handle possible personal conflict during class discussion.

That's the other thing, teachers are also asking me too about – um, I did an in-service about working with LGBT issues and this was an in-service for teachers. And I told one woman, she was saying about how she felt she needed to preface when she was going to be talking about LGBT issues and you know, if a parent, you know, 'I know that all of you might not agree with this or blah blah blah,' and I said, 'Would you do that with anything else you taught in your social studies class?' And she said, 'No,' and I said, 'Don't do with this either.' I said, 'Teach it, and, yeah, some of them are gonna disagree and some of them are gonna agree, but you need to stop sort of apologizing,' 'cause that was kind of the reaction I was getting from teachers, I felt like they sort of like, 'Ya know, I'm gonna teach this, but I know some of you aren't gonna like it.' And ya know, trying to keep parents happy, and you know, it's like ya know don't, because what you're already saying there is that you're putting some judgment on it, and that may be unintentionally, but I feel like people pick up on that. Just, ya know, teach it. And let the students decide where they fall in this spectrum.

This advisor served as a resource because he talked to his colleagues about LGBT issues and gave advice on how to present the information without 'apologizing.' He advised them to just teach it and let the students decide how they want to handle the information.

Another advisor had a co-advisor who gave training about sexual minority youth to the school staff. The co-advisor had done national trainings prior and was well versed in sexual minority youth issues.

I was gonna say, my co-advisor, um, [name], he actually, um, presents nationally. He, um, he does national training ... He's done training actually in the district, he does national training for different, uh, different conferences. We had a training a few years ago that he did, we have, um, professional development hours, we have a professional development institute where twice a year, staff members will do training on different topics, and uh, basically, you know, education for educators, and, uh, he did a session for, um, sexual minority youth. And actually, some the peers, my peers went, and said great, wonderful things. realized, Hey, I had to

recognize what it was I do in my classroom, how I...ya know, even just how you answer questions, just making general assumptions that every guy has a girlfriend and every girl has a boyfriend, ya know. Realizing that you need to be more inclusive. Um, so, he does that. Um...[trailing off]

Although this advisor who was interviewed did not do the training, his GSA co-advisor did. His co-advisor served as resource by giving the training.

Advisors also give out resources to students during meetings or individually. One advisor gave a coming-out book to a student whose friend was dealing with coming out as a lesbian. This advisor discussed giving out the book through a story that she told about a confrontation with the friend's parent over the phone.

when I talked with this mom on the phone I said 'you know your daughter was came to me, actually her daughter didn't even come to me her daughter's friend came to me and said '(respondent's name) I have a friend that thinks she might be a lesbian' and I said well here I have got this book that has like coming out stories. Give it to your friend, have her just read it, get some ideas about what other students have felt like and what they did when they came out and then if she wants to she can come and talk to me. So the next week she came and talked to me and we sat down and talked about some of the stories in the book and she said 'I am just so scared if I tell my mom she is going to kick me out and it is going to be really bad' and I was like okay 'well it might be kind of bad for awhile' I was like but pointers are don't do it on the holiday, don't do it you know those are kind of cool things to know so she was going to go do it.

This advisor served as a resource for student who was coming-out. She provided a book and information that the student could use in coming out to her mother.

One advisor has a GSA bulletin board and an information folder that he keeps out in his classroom where students can look through it if they wanted resource or information about sexual orientation.

I don't really do much of anything except for having that board [point to board near his desk] in the corner. That's the GSA board over there, the Alliance board. And they just elected their leadership board for next year and so they have that up there. So, I think it helps me out a great deal... We have our little folder here with our information in it and it's all cool and organized. We have the harassment

form too. [shows interviewer the file] We have all kinds of informational stuff they can get to. If students want magazines and things, with all kinds of stuff.

This advisor provides resources not only to the GSA students, but to any student who's in his classroom and wants to look up information from the bulletin board or folder.

Another advisor served as a resource for students, but in a different way. There was a lesbian student couple who were getting harassed in the hallway before class by a group of guys. The lesbian couple mentioned this to the advisor who made sure that he would be out in the hallway to deter the situation from happening.

We had two young women that were dating and, like a lot of couples, would kiss goodbye before they'd go off to their classes, and that's it, they kissed goodbye. Well, at one point they came to me and they said, 'We have, there's all these guys gathering.' There's like there must have been like 50 to 75 guys gathering and they're hootin' and hollering and they're saying stuff. There's a barricade and then there's like a balcony over there, and they said they're hanging over the balcony and this and that. And I said, 'I'll just go out there between classes with you sometime and see what's going on.' And I was a little nervous, cause I'm thinking 'oh, that many guys I'm not gonna be able to do anything.' I saw it and security was there and administration was there at the same time, so someone must have sort of alerted them as well. And I thanked them both for being there, and I remember [name], she's our assistant principal in charge of discipline... I said, 'Thanks. You know, I feel like this is the first time somebody did the right thing for the right reason.'

He served as resource not necessarily because he gave out information, but because he could be there to help the lesbian couple against the group of guys if they needed it.

GSA advisors are resources to community members, including parents. One advisor had teachers from other schools call her and ask how to start a GSA. She has also had students from other schools sit in on meetings to see how the group was organized.

I've had teachers and people call me and say 'how can I start a club in my school?' ... then I had um some kids come and visit our group to see how the group was organized, what kinds of things they talked about, get some ideas about how to start their club.

Another advisor had a similar experience when a small town near where his school is located wanted to start a GSA. He also had students from other schools visit because they are interested in GSA activities. This advisor served as a consultant for a small town high school in starting a GSA.

Because this has been for years, the only GSA in this county, we've had students from other schools interested in what we're doing and how we're doing it and can they come to our social functions and so on. It's been open to them, like that Laramie Project night with Maya Angelou readings, we've had several kids from other schools come in. I actually recently had consulted with someone at [name of high school] which is a real small town where the original GSA members used to joke, 'yeah we'll never have one at [repeats name of high school]. ' They've got one going on or they're starting one out in [name of small town].

This advisor's GSA was the only GSA in his county for a while. He served as a resource in a nearby town when they wanted to start a GSA.

A parent came to one of the GSA meetings to talk to the GSA advisor about her son who was gay. She wanted to try to make the school environment safe for her son.

I had a parent came to me, and she outted her son to me at one of our initial meetings and um [laughs] she kind of figured I was gay as well. But, ya know she said, 'what can you do to make this environment safe for my son?' and that was in '98 when I put up the display in '98 as a way to sort of, to see her son to see himself reflected both disciplinary program, to see himself reflected in culture, in science and ya know other areas...

This advisor put up a display about LGBT issues so this woman's son could see himself reflected in the school environment. The GSA advisor was someone that the mother went to, to try to create a safe environment for her son.

Knowledge seeker

In order for a GSA advisor to serve as a resource, the advisor must be knowledgeable enough to serve as one. The advisor role consists of finding information and developing expertise so they are informed, especially of their legal rights. A few

advisors needed to be informed of their legal rights in a few situations. A couple of advisors looked up information about the federal Equal Access Act from 1984 to see what legal rights the club had in public school. They used this information to fight for the establishment of the club. One advisor did research on this act and added it into the club proposal that was sent to administration.

I did some research, or the kids maybe already knew about the federal Equal Access Act and I did some research on it. I included in the proposal something on the bottom that said, 'under the federal Equal Access Act this is something that is by law, something that has to be permitted in any school that has any other clubs' and I might have even cited a case or two where recently the courts have ruled in favor of GSA's and I put out there that this federal law that you have to do this. Somewhere along the lines the lawyer got called in. I did not call him. I didn't even know who this attorney was for the district. He was very cooperative with me in sitting down and the principal and talking out here are the different options. There wasn't any opposition really from within the school administrative structure or the school board.

He was able to cite some federal court cases in the proposal. The school district's lawyer was called and the talks began about the club.

Another advisor was having a difficult time with administration in accepting the GSA as a school club. She gathered resources and evoked the ACLU which halted the opposition.

And finally I guess it was -- I think it must be in January or so, I finally gathered enough resources and I found a letter -- an open letter to administrators and teachers about the rights of students to have a GSA and I made copies of that letter and gave it to all of them. And once I evoked the ACLU, they pretty much left me alone [laughs].

She found information and knew her rights so she could use the information to get the GSA established in school without more opposition.

The teacher who had the anti-Day of Silence t-shirt incident as previously mentioned sought information through the ACLU. He contacted them in regards to

whether it was legal for the students to wear the anti-Day of Silence t-shirts because they were offensive.

We contacted the ACLU about the shirts, by the way and the lawyer that we spoke with said that there was nothing we could do about getting them removed because they didn't have violent language on them. They didn't promote violence, necessarily. That's what the lawyer said. The symbolism, but that's interpretive. He said he needed something that wasn't gonna be in court and an interpretation - issue, he needed something like the IHN part. That's not, the use of that word is a hate term, so if it had hate terms on that shirt, they couldn't wear them. They are just toyin' with that that edge of acceptability and it's in a grey area...

This advisor contacted the ACLU so he could gain knowledge on whether the students who wore the shirts were breaking any discrimination laws.

Teacher of leadership skills

As previously discussed, students take on the role of leading the GSA meetings in content. The leaders of the group may not be experienced in leading groups or activities; therefore one of the roles of the advisor is to help students hone their leadership skills. The advisors tended to do this in two ways, by teaching: (1) logistic leadership skills such as helping leaders develop meeting agendas and organizing activities and (2) emotional leadership skills such as guiding them to make mature decisions, strategize effectively, and act professionally.

A GSA advisor may help the group think about activities and plan them out. The advisor takes the knowledge that s/he has about the school environment and helps them execute various school activities. As one advisor stated,

I help them with ways to think of something, like the different activities that we have done, and to help try to consider how to plan it, how to carry out, how to consider what kind of reaction it's gonna get. So, I think of myself as just a voice in their head that just kind of is the experience or knowledge of the district to let them know how to tackle or how to handle certain things... it has to be student-initiated and it has to be student-run.

Again this advisor reiterated that the GSA should be student run, and the students are in charge of their own activities. The advisor is there to help GSA students make their ideas a reality by helping them think through the steps of planning an activity. Through helping the students with planning activities, the students may indirectly learn the needed steps and skills to independently create and execute activities in the future.

Another advisor felt like the president of the club needed to take on more responsibility of leading the group. The president had not been correctly planning agendas for the meeting and thus, the group was not being productive.

...I would with the leadership I'm working with, I gave her [GSA president] sort of an ultimatum, I said, 'You know, you have to have a written agenda for me at least at the beginning of the day, otherwise we won't be meeting.' ...but the truth was that I really – the group, if it's not gonna be active in a way that is a contribution, which really we're hoping for to just create a safe space if we can get it, but also to be an educational component, both within school and the community, and if we don't have any agenda to do that or we don't have any plans or ya know sort of strategies to do that. And then, you know [laughs]...[what he says to the president] communicate with me and I'll, you know, I can advise you as to how to gather materials, and what kind of fund-raising things are available and this and that. But, you know, if you just come in and you're wingin' it or you got no agenda at all, then I'm, sorry. Nine months – er, eight months they've had to figure this out, so...

He gave the GSA president eight months to try to figure out on her own how to lead the group. After that long, he confronted the GSA president and advised her to start making meeting agendas and planning activities. He offered her help with gathering materials. Through having her create agendas he may help her develop the leadership skills that she could use in other leadership positions.

Part of the job of GSA advisor is keeping them on task and getting the students to begin to think about what they want to accomplish. He asks the students the necessary

questions to get them started on how to execute activities such as helping resolve a problem of unsupportive staff.

So, we are like a safe environment. They run when they come in, they end up sharing all sorts of information, hanging out. So, at times I have to be 'okay, we need to get some stuff done, stop the social hour, ya know we have this plan now and how are we going to this done?' ... I throw out ideas um but, I really want to be, where do they think the need is, what do they see is the problem in the building and what could we do to kind of change it? Earlier in the year we had one of my students um wanted to really, felt as though that we needed to do something for the staff again. After some discussion, they've come up about oh people hearing things, staff not being as supportive in the classroom as they should as I said, 'Well okay if you think that is a need well then lets put together some sort of plan to present to the staff' so they came up with some ideas. And then my role is to say, 'well if we are going to do this, these are the hoops that we have to jump through, these are the processes, these are the steps.'

This advisor took what the students were saying about the staff not being supportive and then helped them generate a plan for the staff. He provided information about the various steps the students needed to take to follow through on dealing with the problem. After a while, the students could perhaps learn from the steps that the advisor generated and apply the steps to different situations for solving other problems in the school community.

Not only may students be taught the logistics of leading a group by the GSA advisor, the students may also be taught the emotional side of leadership. Being a leader takes more than knowing how to plan and execute activities. There are also personal and emotional aspects of leadership, such as being mature and professional. GSA advisors advise the students on how to approach possible conflict. One advisor talked to some of the GSA students on how to approach the administration about the sexual orientation harassment problem in the school. One of the students in particular wanted to confront

administration with a lawsuit right away. The advisor advised him to be delicate with his wording with the administration or they were going to react negatively.

...I'm a teacher I have some insight as to what the administration might want more than the kids. So, I'd say 'why don't you try it this way or why don't you say, when you write your letter ya know put this kind of thought into the letter, don't come at him like [hangs on the table] ya know so demanding and it's got to be like this rah rah rah, we're going to get lawyers'. That would be a great way to start, ya know. I said, 'basically go in there, even if you don't think it or you don't ya know want to do it. I said go in there with humility and this is what we want to do, could we do this please?' And ya know, and so I think because when they first started the one guy, my daughter's friend, 'we're just going to go right in there and say we've got to have this or I'm going to get a lawsuit' and I'm like, 'no, that's not going to work'. So ya know ... 'try it this way, it'll be more positive, you'll get farther'. So, ya know that's kind of the things that I did. I didn't do a whole lot, but ya know that was, just trying to show them the right direction to do it without getting all super passionate about it and turning people off before they could get started...I think I was just a, maybe a squirt gun with a big fire ya know or a grill that gets out of control because when they started this ya know the friends are like, 'I'm sick and tired of being harassed' ya know so he was very upset and he thought this was a great idea, but he wanted just to blast in there with guns firing. And ya know so I had to like, 'okay slow down a little bit, you go in there like that, they are definitely going to say no because I know that I would ya know chill out a little bit'. So I just had to like pull the reins on him and not let him go to fast, too strong or something like that to get, because if he just would have gone in there the principal would have just squashed him and said 'bring on the lawsuit' ya know. So, teenagers can be passionate so ya know that sort of thing... And I've learned over the years, 'okay this is what you're going to do, okay sit back and chill out for a week and then, and then start thinking about it ya know' so, I've been there. So I think ya know just teach him to chill out a little bit would be good.

This advisor tried to guide the students to take a more lower-key approach when dealing with administration. Threatening a lawsuit right away would not be an appropriate strategy and would perhaps close doors on any communication to resolve the harassment problem.

One GSA planned an activity where all the students during their rest period watched a video about sexual orientation issues that they created. The video was meant to create awareness and sensitivity to sexual orientation issues, but it backfired. In response

to the video, there were members of the general student body who reacted negatively and started name-calling and harassing the GSA students overtly. The advisor addressed the GSA students about their anger and resentment toward some of the student body.

...they, they [GSA students] were hurt, I mean, it was... Then they were angry, because, you know, kids were talking about it, and they were overhearing conversations and they were mad, so... It got them riled up, and then ya know... Sometimes, those types, my types, my students may get riled up and they can, they can do the things that I tell them not to do. They can be just as bad as the people that are harassing them or being mean. And that too, that's always my basic message to them that, ya know, think about the message you're trying to send. If you're gonna resort to their tactics, their low level of, ya know, name-calling, ya know, all that sorta stuff, you know better than that... that's where I have to sit down and kind of, as my role is to say, 'Listen, ya know, this is, ya know, this is the perfect world we think we should live in, this is reality. And you need to know how to deal with people in a real world. Sometimes you gotta bite your lip, ya know, but don't resort to those tactics, because that's not gonna get you anywhere in the long run.' And ya know, I use the examples of, ya know, look at the civil rights movement and those sorts of things. Ya know, with violence, where'd it get certain groups, and where did peacefully protesting get other groups. So that's kinda always my message to them, too. Think about it, 'cause students that do tend to come, and the students that have been active tend to be more above average students, ya know, kids that care about social issues. Um, you know usually very supportive, intelligent parents, so they're usually, ya know, very level-headed and they realize, 'Yeah, I shouldn't get mad, I shouldn't do that.' But sometimes tempers win.

This advisor advised the students to take the mature approach and not stoop down to the level of the name-callers and tactics used against them.

When the GSA at one school was just beginning, the administration was giving opposition to the club. Some of the students that wanted the GSA were going to represent the club at a school board meeting to advocate for the club to be established in the school community. Before the school board meeting, the students came to the advisor to get advice on the upcoming meeting. The advisor tried to prepare the students to the possible negativity they might encounter.

The students did everything. And they'd come to me for like advice and things and sometimes they didn't like to hear the advice that I had to give um and I got in fights and stuff, verbal altercations with [the first two co-presidents of the club] where they got upset with me. Um, I'd try to tell them the way the world was and that they had to face the facts that ya know, this is the way that they are going to react, and they didn't like to hear some of those things. So, I'd try to advise them and just prepare 'em because I knew that they were going to go through a lot of difficult times trying to trail blaze the GSA to make it happen.

The advisor did not want the students to be surprised or taken off guard with the reaction from administration. Even though the co-presidents did not want to hear what the advisor had to say, he advised them to be prepared for opposition.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated what factors motivated GSA advisors to become involved with their school club and what roles the GSA advisors play in the school environment. In sum, the results overwhelmingly point to the protective drive of the GSA advisors in keeping students safe and comfortable in the school environment, as well as the risks and benefits that coincide with accepting the GSA advisor role. As shown throughout the results, these advisors seem to care genuinely for the well-being of their students, and have their best interest at heart. They take on the role of advisor despite the potential risks to themselves.

Although protectiveness was a key motivator for GSA involvement, there were elements of advisors' protective attitude throughout the other themes and sub-themes. GSA advisors had almost maternal/paternal feelings for the youth, wanting to create an environment that keeps youth safe and free from discrimination. This is shown through some of the roles that the advisor plays in the GSA. They serve as role models, are seen as 'safe' people, give life advice, and are resources for the youth. These roles could be seen as reinforcing their original motivation for becoming involved by wanting to protect the youth. For example, by being seen as a role model and caring person who is there for the youth to talk to, the GSA advisor perhaps helps to create an environment where the youth can feel 'safe.' In addition, by giving life advice and resources, the advisors may be seen as helping the youth develop skills for successful living which reinforces that they care about the youth and want them to succeed. In some respects, through these roles, the advisors become a mother/father-like figure for the youth. GSA advisors become another adult in their lives for advice and opportunities to foster positive youth development.

Deciding to become a GSA advisor came with some fear of risks, such as losing one's job or being accused of recruiting youth to the 'gay lifestyle.' For some advisors, becoming involved with LGBT issues did bring about some confrontation with administration, fellow teachers, and parents. For example, one advisor was involved with a lawsuit concerning a display that he put up in his classroom about LGBT history, another advisor was approached by other teachers about calling the club a diversity club instead of a GSA, and one advisor had a confrontation with a parent who accused the advisor of facilitating the death of students from HIV. Although these are negative experiences, none of the advisors interviewed had their job seriously threatened, and some had no serious confrontations at all. It is not known however if other GSA advisors who did not participate in this study had lost their job or had their job threatened as a result of being the GSA advisor. The advisors in this study who did face the confrontations held to their convictions and beliefs. While discussing the problems that they faced or are currently facing, the advisors seemed to become more solid in their beliefs that they made the 'right' decision to become the advisor. No advisor disclosed that they were considering abandoning the GSA or becoming so 'worn down' by the conflict. In fact, the opposite seemed to be true. The fears that a GSA advisor should be handled seriously however even though their fears in some cases did not become reality. One advisor during member checks mentioned, "...but I do think it is important that our fears are usually worse than the reality. The real backlash is (in my experience) much less powerful than we fear it will be. Fear silences more effectively than anything else."

The reasons why advisors became involved with the GSA are synergistic with the existing activist literature. One study and one theory seem especially relevant to the

results: Faver's (2001) study of activists and the social exchange theory. According to Faver (2001), activists are motivated through (1) ensuring the rights of individuals and feeling responsible for taking care of people, (2) restoring relationships and building community and (3) believing that everyone deserves basic rights. All three aspects documented by Faver were supported in this study of GSA advisors' experiences. Ensuring rights of individuals and supporting people were consistent in the protective attitude theme in the current data. These advisors tended to be concerned about the welfare of sexual minority students, could empathize with the struggles of LGBT youth and were motivated by wanting to protect and help them in their school environment. The second aspect of restoring relationships and building community was noticed in the specific topic of support under the protective attitude theme. The advisors were motivated through offering support by listening. According to past research on LGBT youth, many feel isolated from the school community. Being a GSA advisor and offering support provided a way in which these youth could find a connection in the school community. The third aspect, everyone deserves basic rights, was consistent with the protective attitude theme and the dedication to fairness theme. The advisors who endorsed these themes were motivated by their knowledge of the discrimination that LGBT students face in the school environment, as well as the idea that everyone deserves to be treated equally regardless of sexual orientation.

Social exchange theory, also known as political economy theory, takes into consideration the risks, costs, and benefits of participation in activist activities. People weigh the risk and costs of participation with the benefits of participation before deciding to get involved. Social exchange theory may partially explain involvement in GSAs

because risk and benefits were relevant in the motivation and decision making process to becoming a GSA advisor. The GSA advisors who participated in this study discussed risks and costs (e.g. potentially losing their job, being accused of gay recruitment, time commitment) as well as the benefits (e.g. protecting youth from harassment) of deciding to become the GSA advisor. There seemed to be a third component with the GSA advisors that was not discussed in this social exchange theory, potential buffers to possible risks/costs (e.g. marriage, tenure). These buffers seem to work in accordance with the risks. It may be without these buffers, the risks or fear of risks would have been too great to take on the role of GSA advisor.

Other studies and theories examined in the literature review were not as consistent with the current findings, although there is partial evidence of support. For example, Jones (2002) noted that activists tend to have (1) a family history of activism, (2) strong beliefs, values and perceptions of the world, (3) a heightened sense of personal power and resiliency, and (4) a constant reminder of oppression since all participants were sexual minority people. Although a *family* history of activism was not an emergent theme from this analysis, a *personal* history of past activism was an emergent theme with informants participating in Earth Day, college GSAs, or local protests. The informants also tended to have strong beliefs, values and perceptions of the world which is shown through the theme of fairness. Some advisors were motivated by the idea that there were certain students who were not being treated fairly in the school community or society. The other two tendencies that Jones (2002) recognized, a heightened sense of personal power and resiliency, and a constant reminder of oppression did not emerge as themes during analysis. This may not have emerged due to the advisors were not all sexual minority

identified and may not be constantly reminded of oppression. These tendencies seem to be more relevant to the specific population she studied, lesbian and gay leaders of a radical street activist group.

The findings of this study are also somewhat consistent with the results from Jennings and Anderson's (2003) investigation of movement-specific participation with AIDS quilt activists. They found that if someone knew someone who died of AIDS related causes, the severity of the pain and loss stimulated participation in volunteering for the AIDS quilt demonstration. Although the current study did not examine AIDS related activism, the central theme of their findings is applicable to GSA advisors. The theme of personal connection to someone who is gay or lesbian was clearly relevant to the GSA advisors who participated in this study. The advisors who knew someone or who identify as LGB could understand the discrimination that comes with being sexual minority. Although discrimination is not as severe as death as with the AIDS activists; discrimination became an impetus to act for the GSA advisors. It was not the only impetus, however.

The mobilization model provides useful insight, but it provides an incomplete explanation for GSA advisor involvement. This model emphasizes that participation is a response to contextual cues and political opportunities structured by the individual's environment (Leighley, 1995). This theory does not seem to adequately explain GSA advisor participation. There were a few advisors who had participated in college GSA's or GLSEN previously before becoming an advisor which would afford them resources, but many advisors became involved with little knowledge of GSA activities and LGBT issues. There also seemed to be few LGBT resources in the school community and little

open support for sexual minority issues. However, there was one advisor who did take advantage of a contextual opportunity through a result of his public lawsuit with the school system concerning censorship. There were students as the result of this incident that wanted to start a GSA. It could be that this public lawsuit provided a political opportunity to start a GSA.

Homophobia was also central in explaining GSA advisor motivation. Using Herr's (1997) definition involves interrelated mechanisms of silencing: systematic exclusion which involves rendering LGB people invisible, and systematic [negative] inclusion which when discussing sexual minority people they are put in a negative context. There was evidence of systematic exclusion such as the administration trying to convince GSA supporters to join the diversity club, lack of repercussions for the students who wore the anti-Day of Silence t-shirts when it was previously decided they were not allowed to wear them at school, and the superintendent demanding that a bulletin board with LGB history be taken down. There were also elements of systematic [negative] inclusion such as the perception that during GSA meetings the students talk about sex and that gay people have HIV such as the one parent who accused the advisor of facilitating the death of the students. It is interesting to note that heterosexual advisors as well as the sexual minority advisors experienced the affects of homophobia. Literature and past research focus on the experiences and affects of homophobia on homosexual people, but the effects of heterosexual people who may be allies could be just as great. In addition, there is a tendency to focus on the gay part of the Gay-Straight Alliance while ignoring the straight element of the club. It is an alliance meaning that these two groups (gay and

straight) meet together to discuss issues. It is important to consider what message that sends to the straight students as well as the gay students.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study that should be noted. During member checks, one participant wrote, “the only missing aspect is the people who decided not to be the advisor... people who said ‘No’ would have provided more insight. Those are the people who can tell which things ‘really’ discourage GSA advisors.” This is an important point because they may be able to provide more information concerning the costs and benefits of participation. Perhaps the people who declined the GSA advisor position imagined more risks than benefits or did not have the buffers in place as described by the advisors in this study that made them feel that taking on the GSA advisor position would be a safe decision. Their perception of risks attached with the GSA may be much greater. Finding people who turned down the GSA advisor position would also be a challenging undertaking and adding this group of participants would perhaps best fit in a separate study. This means however that the results from this study can not be assumed to cover the experience of those teachers or staff who ultimately decided not to accept the role of GSA advisor.

This study was designed as an exploratory, phenomenological investigation of GSA advisors motivation and role. It focused on capturing the overall experience of the advisors without looking at variation among demographic variables. There were noticeable trends discussed, but a larger sample size would be needed to be able to analyze within those specific dimensions such as locality (urban, suburban, and rural), gender, and sexual orientation. There may be differences and interesting comparisons

among these groups. For example, GSAs in urban school settings may be different than those in a suburban or rural environment. It may be that the GSA advisor who works in a rural setting may have a more confrontations about the GSA than larger cities or vice versa. It would also be interesting to notice how gender influences the GSA advisor experience. Perhaps women who decide to advise the GSA experience less conflict than men because women in this culture are often seen as emotional and caring, thus it would more likely fit into their schema of helping sexual minority youth. In addition, sexual orientation may affect the GSA advisor experience especially since there is a perception of recruitment. Perhaps there is a greater fear of recruitment among those advisors who are LGBT then those who are heterosexual. To begin to separate out comparisons between groups, a much larger sample size would be needed to reach saturation. In addition, there is little known about GSAs in general, therefore a study that attempts comparisons might not be as appropriate as obtaining information about the overall GSA experience.

In addition, only one interview was conducted with each participant. It seemed that during the interview, the informants were initially prepared to talk about the students and the GSA, but not about themselves. Some seemed surprised at first that the questions also included their personal history or perspective on why they decided to become the GSA advisor even though they were given prior notice of the interview purpose. They did not resist answering these questions, but some did not seem initially prepared to answer those questions. Perhaps multiple interviews would have brought about more depth because the participants would have had time to think about the topic in-between

interview sessions. This means that some more in-depth information might have been lost which could have added more thick description to analysis.

Future research

Because little is known about GSAs, there are various avenues for future research. One avenue involves interviewing the various stakeholders surrounding the GSA. Including not only the advisors, but the students involved with the GSA, teachers, parents, and administrators would provide a more holistic view of GSA activities and motivation for participation. The youth could add insight into why they asked this particular person to become the advisor as well as their thoughts surrounding why this particular person (advisor) might be interested in the GSA. They could also give their perspective of the GSA advisor role. Youth could also be asked why they got involved with the club, how the club benefits them, what they think the impact of the club has been on the school environment. Administrators could also provide information based on their perspective. This perhaps would be best implemented through a case-study where in-depth knowledge would be generated to provide a more complete picture of GSA experiences.

Future research could also apply quantitative methodology to explore GSA advisors' motivation, decision making process, and role. This current study utilized qualitative methodology which allows for thick, rich data, but has inherent limitations. The results of qualitative research does not allow for much generalizability besides those participating in the research study. There is a small sample size where diversity of perspective is limited. Quantitative methodology would allow for a greater sample size where there is greater input and diversity of perspective which would allow for greater

generalizability of the findings to the broader GSA advisor population. Quantitative methodology may also capture more quickly information such as the institutional challenges that GSAs face. In addition, a mixed-methods study would perhaps be beneficial in providing a more complete picture of the GSA experience since both the richness of qualitative data as well as the generalizability of quantitative data would be captured.

Implication for practice

The data from this study could be used by the GSA advisors in multiple ways. First, the data could be used to minimize misconceptions concerning GSA activities by some people in the school and in the community. Some people have the perception that during GSA meetings, the youth talk about sex, are asked their sexual orientation, and that GSA advisors recruit students to the 'gay lifestyle.' The results begin to elucidate the motivations behind GSA advisor involvement, what the GSA is about, and the involvement of GSA activities. The GSA activities adhere to appropriate school behavior, which includes not discussing sexual activities. The advisor is there to ensure and monitor appropriate school behavior. The advisor's motivations for advising the GSA are not to recruit and convince youth to become gay. They are motivated by wanting to protect the youth from harassment, and strive to create an environment where youth feel 'safe.' The advisors seem to genuinely care for the youth and want to see them succeed. These results could be used to support a GSA establishment in a school setting where there are people opposed who espouse these misconceptions. These data could also be disseminated to the general public to inform them as to what is really happening in public high schools surrounding sexual minority issues.

It is unknown whether all the GSA advisors were aware of the legal protections surrounding GSA establishment such as the Equal Access Act of 1984. There were many GSAs who were denied official club status that participated in this study. There were also a few advisors who used the threat of contacting the ACLU as a defense when facing administrative opposition to gain formal establishment in the school community. Perhaps when GSA advisors read the results from this study they can begin to become familiar with strategies that other advisors used to support the establishment of the GSA such as seeking out the legal protections guaranteeing the right to a GSA. Through this knowledge they could also perhaps gain increased confidence that they have every right to have a GSA at their school.

Some GSA advisors in this study faced various challenges and difficult confrontations. One benefit of this study is that it documents for advisors that they are not alone in their challenges. Perhaps starting an online support group or chat room for GSA advisors might be beneficial for sharing stories and giving advice to one another. This might be especially helpful for those advisors who have never advised a club before. They could establish a connection with other advisors across the state to discuss what has worked and what has not worked when dealing with sexual minority issues in high schools. There could also be an internet group that connects GSA youth from other schools where they can exchange activity ideas and learn from each other.

The reasons that GSA advisors become involved as shown from the results of this study seem to be altruistic with the best interest of the youth in mind. They often, when deciding to take on the position, contemplate the benefits and risks to their job. The roles that the advisors play in the GSA are reflective of their reason for getting involved, which

is mainly to help protect the youth from discrimination and harassment by being role models, caring adults, and resources for the school and community. It is perhaps through the GSA advisor and club members that advances toward educating and eliminating ignorance in the community about sexual minority issues can be made where eventually a GSA may be unnecessary. GSAs may be part of the solution in creating a community where people of various sexual orientations are valued and accepted.

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APPENDIX

Consent Form for Participation of Human Subjects in Research Michigan State University

Project Title: An untold story: GSA advisors in Michigan public high schools

Primary Researcher: Maria Valenti, Graduate Student of Psychology
Rebecca Campbell, Ph.D. Department of Psychology

What is this Project About?

The purpose of this research is to explore the working experience and role of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) advisor in the high school setting. As part of this research, we are conducting interviews with GSA advisors from high schools within the state of Michigan.

What is Involved in Participating in this Project?

If you volunteer for this research study, you will be asked to participate in one interview that will take approximately 90 minutes to complete. The interview questions will include questions about the history of the GSA at the high school, the perceptions of the high school community concerning the GSA activities, the GSA advisors role as an advisor, as well as questions concerning the resources available to the GSA through the school system. There are no experimental procedures used in this research. There are no treatments provided in this research.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. In other words, you may choose whether or not you want to participate in the interview. Also, you have the right to refuse to answer any question or to stop the interview and end your participation in this study at any time with no penalty or negative consequences.

What Are the Potential Risks of Participating?

There are no physical or financial risks to you in participating in this study. The interview does contain some personal questions. If there are any particular questions that you do not want to answer, you don't have to; you can stop the interview at any time or request that certain responses not be included in the final analysis. You can also ask that the tape recorder be turned off at any time. There will not be any negative consequences for these requests.

How Will Confidentiality Be Protected?

All information that you give us will be kept strictly confidential, and your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. Your name or any other identifying information will not be placed on any form. Instead we will assign you an ID number that will be used to mark your interview and the interview tape. Your interview will be kept in a locked file cabinet in a locked office. Your identity will not be revealed in any reports of the research findings; instead, all of your

information will be combined with the rest of the participants' information and reported as a group.

Who Can Be Contacted With Questions?

If you have any questions as we proceed through the interview, please ask me. If you have any questions about this study at a later date, please contact, Maria Valenti, Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, 139B Psychology Building, East Lansing, MI 48824-1118. Email: valent60@msu.edu. Phone: (517) 353-5402. Or Dr. Rebecca Campbell, Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, 130A Psychology Building, East Lansing, MI 48824-1118. Email: rmc@msu.edu. Phone: (517) 432-8390.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact – anonymously if you wish – Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Chair of the University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS) by phone: (517) 355-2180, fax (517) 432-4503, e-mail: ucrihs@msu.edu, or regular mail: 202 Olds Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Consent to Participate:

With your permission, we would like to tape record the interview. The purpose of tape recording is to supplement our written notes. The tape will not be distributed. The only people who will listen to the tape are the members of the research staff. During the project the tape will be kept in a locked file cabinet and after the project is completed the tape will be destroyed. If you withdraw from this research study, your tape and accompanying notes will be destroyed immediately. In addition, if there is any question you would like to answer but would prefer to do so “off the record”; you may ask to have the tape recorder turned off at any time.

You will receive a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Do we have your permission to tape record the interview? ☐ YES ☐ NO

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Participant signature

Date

Interview Protocol

You are being asked to participate in this study because of your role as a GSA advisor within your high school. I am very interested in hearing about your perspective and experiences with advising this club. For example, I am interested to hear about the history of your GSA, the perceptions of the high school community concerning GSA activities, what it's like to be the advisor, as well as about the resources available to the GSA at the school. I have some questions planned; however I'd like them to serve more as a guide. Feel free to discuss any issue or topic without restraint as it fits with your role as GSA advisor. My goal is to obtain a complete picture of your experience. Do you have any questions before we begin?

I'd like to first start the discussion talking about some background and history of the GSA at your school.

Background

1. Do you know when the GSA first began at your high school?
2. Why did the GSA get started?
3. A. [***If informant worked at school when inception of the GSA***] How was the formation of this club received by your:
Peers?
Administration?
Students?
Parents?
- B. [***If informant was NOT present at inception***] Do you know how the formation of the GSA was received by:
Teachers?
Administration?
Students?
Parents?
4. Currently, what is the environment like in your school with homosexuality issues?
Please describe how your school handles sexual orientation issues.

Now that you shared the history of the club, I'd like to next discuss with you your personal experience as an advisor.

Personal history

5. Have you ever been a club advisor before? Is so, how has this experience as a GSA advisor compare to that other experience?
6. What prompted you to decide to become a GSA advisor?
7. What is it like to be a GSA advisor?

8. What role do you play with the GSA?
9. How has your sexual orientation identity affected your experience as a GSA advisor?

I'd like to next lead the discussion to talking about the resources and support that is available to you as a GSA advisor.

10. What would help you be a better advisor to this club? [Institutional changes, more resources...]?
11. Are there LGBT resources accessible to you and the GSA students at your school?
12. In what way has your school provided resources to help you be a successful GSA advisor?
13. Do you feel like your school administration supports you as an advisor to the GSA?
14. What has your relationship been like with peers/administration/students/parents since becoming a GSA advisor?

Now, I'd like to talk with you about the students that attend the club and the activities that they participate in.

GSA Activities

15. Could you talk to me a little bit about the students that attend the GSA meetings?
 - a. What do they talk about?
 - b. What do they do during GSA meetings?
16. How do you feel your GSA has impacted the school environment?
17. Is there anything that you think I should have asked, or would be important to know about GSA's that I didn't ask? Anything else that you would like to share?

Finally I'd like to ask some general questions about yourself and your school.

Demographics:

18. How long have you worked at the school?
19. Would you describe the school setting as rural, suburban, or urban?
20. SES of school?
21. Is specified sexual orientation harassment prohibited in school policy?
22. Education of LGBT issues in school?

Thank you for your time to talk to me about being a GSA advisor. If you think of any additional questions or comments after I leave, you may contact me 517-353-5402, which is my office number.

If I have any additional questions, is it okay if I contact you? YES NO

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