

The Impact of a Gay Straight Alliance on Middle and High School Age Students

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this literature review is to take an in-depth look at gay straight alliances (GSA) and potential benefits that a student run organization can play in a student's academic and emotional success. Through the research, this paper will examine historical perspectives of homosexuality among various cultures; it will also examine the responsibilities that school personnel have in protecting their students from discrimination. In addition, this comprehensive study will have an overview of the influences a gay straight alliance may have on a student's social and emotional development along with the importance of creating safe spaces within a school for students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning. This paper will also provide reasons why a gay straight alliance may not be supported and present ideas for creating a successful gay straight alliance within your school. In conclusion to the research, recommendations will be made in regards to the potential benefits of gay straight alliances at the middle and high school level.

Adolescence can be a challenging time for many people; however adding homosexuality into the picture can make things even harder. Students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning may face obstacles everyday at school or home. A gay straight alliance can serve as a support for students facing these obstacles but it can also educate others in hopes of decreasing the amount of discrimination that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning students face at school. According to Frankfurt (2000), a GSA not only can serve as a support system, but can also “take on a more political nature, working with administration to enact nondiscrimination polices and other activities” (p.32). Working together to educate about gay straight alliances can only intensify the impact it has on the members and students in the school

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Chapter I: Introduction

“My name is Kate, and I am a lesbian. It was so liberating. I felt like something huge had been lifted off my shoulders, and finally I had people to talk to” (Elias, 2007, n.p.). According to Kilman (2007), gay-straight alliances are student-run organizations that create a safe place for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) youth and their allies, to enhance awareness and acceptance by educating others to attempt to diminish anti-gay harassment and bullying. Rothaus (2007, n.p.) quoted a sixteen year old student member of a gay-straight alliance (GSA):

Being a straight person, I don't have that perspective, it is a very good viewpoint for the oppression and discrimination (gay people) have that I don't experience. It's certainly made me a whole lot more sensitive that what people make as commonplace comments can be very hurtful.

GSAs serve a purpose like any other student organization. They allow for social development, supportive environments and provide students with the opportunity to build their leadership skills.

Unfortunately, GSAs are not as prevalent as other student organizations in schools across the nation due to a variety of reasons, such as the high level of controversy with religious or personal values, or the idea that personnel in a school may think the school does not have any GLBTQ students. Kilman (2007) reported that gay-straight alliances have been active for more than a decade at the high school level; however, it is less common at the middle school level. The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2006) has reported that they have over 3000 GSAs registered at the high school level and at least 500 at the middle or junior high school level across the nation.

According to the GLSEN website, the first registered GSA began in 1988. In a personal communication through email with Tim Michaels, the GSA for Safe School Program Assistant in Madison, Wisconsin, he stated that Kevin Jennings, the Executive Director of GLSEN, was the faculty advisor for the first GSA. This first time organization took place at “Concord Academy High School, a private boarding school in Massachusetts” (April 28, 2008).

A student’s understanding and acceptance of their sexual orientation can be a challenging thing. Many students are ostracized and harassed prior to coming out and even afterwards. In a 2005 study done by GLSEN,

Over a third (37.8%) of gay students experienced physical harassment at school on the basis of sexual orientation and more than a quarter (26.1%) on the basis of their gender expression. Nearly one-fifth (17.6%) of students had been physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation and over a tenth (11.8%) because of their gender expression (GLSEN’s 2005 National School Climate Survey Sheds New Light on Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Students,

(2006, n.p.).

Those startling statistics support the need for some intervention in the educational setting. Students have a right to feel safe at school, and the statistics reported from GLSEN show that GLBTQ students are often targeted for harassment and assaults. Gay teenagers are coming out younger than in previous years. Elias (2007, n.p.) stated “gay teenagers are ‘coming out’ earlier than ever and many feel better about themselves than earlier generations of gays.” She contributed the cause to be, “growing acceptance of

gays, more supportive adults and positive gay role models in popular media (n.p.).” Elias (2007, n.p.) also stated that “teens are coming out in an era when more Americans than ever consider homosexuality acceptable. In 2006, 54% based on the Gallup polls, found homosexuality acceptable, compared with 28% in 1992.” According to Kilman (2007), the reason why there has been an increase in the number of gay-straight alliances is in part due to younger people learning about these organizations from older siblings, the explosion of online resources available, and the simple fact that sexual orientation is an area that is being discussed more comfortably. The question is posed then, if the acceptance of homosexuality is on the rise, why are the clubs so scarce within our schools?

Madison, Wisconsin, population 208054, is growing rapidly in the number of gay-straight alliances in their schools. In over 90% of the city’s middle schools, a gay-straight alliance exists or is developing. Kilman (2007, n.p) reported “that’s the highest per capita concentration of middle school GSAs in the nation and is starting to reduce the jokes and bullying—mostly subtle, but sometimes not-so-subtle—faced by LGBTQ teens.” Wisconsin’s capital, Madison, has moved progressively against discrimination based on sexual orientations. Kilman (2007, n.p.) reported that “In 2000, the city became one of only 83 local jurisdictions in the country to prohibit discrimination based on gender identity.” Although the city is moving forward in its fight against discrimination, the discrimination still lies below the surface of the schools. Anti-gay slurs are still common in the hallways and classrooms of the Madison area schools. Often students belonging to a school’s GSA will comment that teachers do not interject when students

use derogatory remarks regarding sexual orientation but find that they will intervene when they hear comments aimed at race, ethnicity, or religion.

Discrimination and harassment can have powerful effects on students, both academically and emotionally. In GLSEN's 2005 National Report, *School Climate Survey Sheds New Light on Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) students* (2006, n.p.), it was found that "LGBT students were five times more likely to report having skipped school in the last month because of safety concerns than the general population of students." The survey also reported that the average grades of GLBTQ students who were targets of bullying were half a grade lower than GLBTQ students who were not being bullied as frequently. According to Kilman (2007), Eliza Byard of GLSEN noted that teachers can be an influential ally. Their visibility can play a large role in creating a safe environment for GLBTQ students to be successful academically and emotionally. Elias (2007) pointed out that there are many more gay teachers among staff than in past years. By schools having an increasing number of openly gay staff, it can lead to a more comfortable environment for students to seek help; however it could also lead to parents expressing strong concerns.

Sexual orientation has always been an issue within American society; however with the rising number of teenagers speaking out in regards to their sexual orientation, there seems to be more of a need for GSAs than ever before due to the overwhelming statistics of students faced by assaults and harassment based on their sexual orientation. Gay straight alliances can play a vital role in the school environment for many students, gay or straight.

Statement of the problem

The purpose of this comprehensive review of literature is to document the impact gay-straight alliances can have on middle and high school students. In addition to the impact on students, this review will analyze the importance of gay-straight alliances in the educational setting. Upon completion of the review of literature in spring 2008, conclusions and recommendations will be formulated.

Research Objectives

The specific research objectives are:

1. Analyze the current literature about schools with active gay-straight alliances
2. Evaluate the pros and cons gay-straight alliances bring to the educational environment through current literature
3. Analyze through current literature the benefits that GLBTQ students and straight students may receive from gay-straight alliances in schools

Definition of terms

For the purpose of this study certain terms need clarification. These terms were taken from the Safe Spaces Training Manual, 2007, University of Wisconsin-Stout and The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2004.

Ally- is defined as “a heterosexual or GLBTQ person who supports GLBTQ people” (UW-Stout, 2007, p. 9).

Bisexual- is defined as “A person who is emotionally, physically, spiritually, and sexually attracted to members of more than one gender. Also can be referred to as omnisexual and pansexual” (UW-Stout, 2007, p.9).

Bully-is defined as “a person habitually cruel to others who are weaker” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2004, p.93).

Gay- is defined as “Usually, but not always, refers to homosexual men. Also used as an umbrella term for the GLBTQ community” (UW-Stout, 2007, p. 9).

Gender Identity-is defined as “a person's own sense of identification as male or female. The term is intended to distinguish this psychological association, from physiological and sociological aspects of gender” (Wikipedia, 2008, n.p.)

Harassment-is defined as “to create an unpleasant or hostile situation for esp. by one’s verbal or physical conduct” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2004, p. 328).

Homosexual- is defined as “A person who has emotional, physical, spiritual, and sexual attraction to persons of the “same sex”. More of a medical term, it is considered an outdated term when referring to gay people or communities” (UW-Stout, 2007, p. 9).

Homophobia- is defined as “Fear, anger, discomfort, intolerance, or lack of acceptance toward GLBTQ people, or experiencing these feelings about one’s own non-heterosexual preference” (UW-Stout, 2007, p. 9).

Lesbian- is defined as “A woman who has emotional, physical, spiritual, and sexual attractions to other women” (UW-Stout, 2007, p. 10).

Questioning- is defined as “The process of exploring one’s on sexual identity, including but not limited to one’s upbringing, expectations from others (family, friends, church, etc.), and inner motivation” (UW-Stout, 2007, p. 10).

Safe Spaces- is defined as “An identifiable supportive environment where two or more people can talk about sexuality and gender issues openly and constructively” (UW-Stout, 2007, p.3).

Sexual Orientation- is defined as “To whom a person is erotically attracted. Not to be confused with sexual preference. What a person likes to do sexually” (UW-Stout, 2007, p. 10).

Transgender- is defined as:

An umbrella term for people who transgress society’s view of gender and biological sex as necessarily fixed, unmoving, and following from one’s biological sex. They view gender on a spectrum rather than a polarized, either/or construct. This can range from identification to cross dressing, to undergoing hormone therapy, to sex reassignment surgery and/or to other forms of dress/presentation. Transgender people can include transsexuals, cross-dresser, drag kings/queens, masculine women, feminine men, and all those who defy what society tells them is appropriate for their “gender”. Political trans activist seek to create more space around gender, and to create a space and a society where the choice of gender expression/presentation is safe, sane, and consensual. (UW-Stout, 2007, p. 10)

Transsexual- is defined as “A person whose core gender identity is “opposite” their assigned sex. Transsexuals may live as the opposite sex, undergo hormone therapy, and/or have sex reassignment surgery to “match” their bodies with their gender identity” (UW-Stout, 2007, p. 10).

Assumption and Limitations

It will be assumed that gay-straight alliances play a critical support role in students’ academic and emotional success during middle school and high school. A limitation to this study is that GSA’s have only been in existence since 1988 and research

is still somewhat limited, positive ways to present such information to school boards or parents needs to be well planned out.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter will include a brief overview of the history of the treatment of homosexuality in various cultures followed by a discussion of the responsibilities of school personnel to protect the rights of youth in Wisconsin Public Schools who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning (GLBTQ), and then of the influences gay-straight alliances (GSA) may have on the social and emotional development of GLBTQ students. In addition, this chapter will evaluate the importance of the creation of Safe Spaces within schools for GLBTQ students, why some people, communities or groups may be against GSAs in schools and conclude with information regarding the creation of a GSA in your school.

History of treatment of homosexuality in cultures

Documentation of a gay, lesbian and bisexual presence has been around long before most people would think. Bullough (2004) reviewed the book, written by Louis Crompton, called *Same sex relations in history and culture: An up-to date synthesis*. In his review he stated that “Just as Crompton found homosexuality widespread in France, he also found it prevalent in England during the 16th and 17th centuries, with royalty, poets, and nobility involved” (n.p.). Bullough (2004) also stated that in Crompton’s book there is a comparison of Rome and Greece as early as 480 B.C.E. and that “same-sex relationships were a major element in the lives of poets, playwrights, emperors, and others” (n.p.).

Over time, some laws began forming forbidding same-sex relations, beginning as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in European countries and would eventually making it overseas to the American Colonies. These new laws were mostly

developed by religious organizations and leaders. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's website, the Catholic Church "started to appeal to a conception of "nature" as the standard of morality, and drew it in such a way so as to forbid homosexual sex." The website later went on to indicate that "Whoever shall be found to have committed that incontinence, which is against nature, shall be punished." (n.p). Bullough (2004) stated:

As Christianity gained force in the Roman Empire, anti-homosexual laws began to appear. The Christian hostility was reinforced by a new development in biblical exegesis, namely a reinterpretation of the Sodom story that emphasized homosexuality as the major sin.

(2004, n.p.)

According to the Public Agenda website, in 1610, the Virginia Colony passed its first anti-sodomy law in America. This law would forbid anyone of the same sex to engage in sexual behavior with another member of the same sex. In *Understanding human differences: Multicultural education for a diverse America*, written by Koppelman (2008), he explained that although English society was homophobic, wealthy families sent their sons to all boy boarding schools. Here at the boarding schools the students learned to read Latin and Greek text, some of which contained homosexual themes. Later found in memoirs, Koppelman reported that the English boys engaged in homosexual activities referred to as "Greek Love" (p.237).

During this same time period, Koppelman (2008), wrote that some Native cultures valued homosexuality. They viewed homosexual people as being "special human beings" (p. 237). They viewed these people as special human beings because they were

thought to be advantaged in possessing both masculine and feminine traits. Likewise, in some Polynesian and Caribbean cultures, they too viewed homosexual behavior as being acceptable. A question that comes up is why do some cultures view homosexuality as acceptable and others do not?

This negative attitude against homosexual behavior can be placed partially on the response of the Catholic Church. According to Kopplemen (2008), the early church played a large role in the condemnation of homosexuality in Europe. The church viewed homosexual behavior as a sin. These same views carried from Europe to the American Colonies and to other Christian beliefs. Kopplemen (2008) explains it as the “heterosexual assumption” (p. 232). The heterosexual assumption among Western cultures assumes that “all people were born heterosexual and that being attracted to the opposite-sex partners was the natural condition of human beings” (p. 232). This belief claimed that people who were homosexual were making deviant and unnatural choices and according to Kopplemen’s (2008) book, “the Bible was often used to justify beliefs about normal or deviant sexual behavior” (p. 232). Later, Kopplemen (2008) went on to state that “even twentieth-century psychologists reinforced the assumption by regarding homosexuality as a mental illness” (p. 232). These assumptions may have lingered among many Americans for many years.

It was not until 1924 that the first gay rights group was formed within the United States. Over the next fifty years many events occurred for gay rights. According to the Historical Timeline (2006) from the American Civil Liberties Union cited on the Public Agenda’s website, “in 1951, Henry Hay, Bob Hull, and Chuck Rowland found the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles. The society is created to provide aid and comfort to

gay men and lesbians and to educate the general public on gay issues” (n.p.). Then later, in 1972, East Lansing, Michigan became the first city in the U.S. to adopt a nondiscrimination hiring policy based on sexual orientation and two years later in 1974, the first openly gay person was elected to a state legislature. Although the United States and other countries may be making some progress towards a more accepting society, there are still issues that need to be addressed within our country.

The understanding and acceptance of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is an issue that we are still faced with today. Hate crimes against people who are GLBTQ have been an ongoing problem for many years. The About.Com website, shared a story of a young man who was victim to a hate crime. In 1984, Charles O Howard, a twenty-three year old college student living in Bangor, Maine, was attacked by “three local teenagers who beat him for being ‘flamboyantly gay.’ Afterward, they cast him off the side of the State Street Bridge into the Kenduskeag Stream where he suffered an asthma attack and drowned” (n.p.).

Hale, (1999) author of, *Remembering Brandon*, wrote about a twenty one year old transgendered female, living as a man. Born Teena Ray Brandon, but going by the name Brandon Teena, this individual was raped and assaulted by two Nebraska men who threatened his life if he reported these crimes. These assaults took place after the men had kidnapped Brandon and two other people, pulled down Brandon’s pants and forced his current girlfriend, Lana Tisdell to prove that Brandon was really a woman. Despite the threats, Brandon reported these crimes to local law enforcement; however, the men remained free. On December 31, 1999, one week after the initial crimes had occurred; John Lotter and Marvin Thomas Nissen murdered Brandon Teena.

Another case in the United States took place in Wyoming. According to the Matthew Shepard Foundations website, in October, 1998, Matthew Shepard, a college student from the University of Wyoming, was a victim of a hate crime due to his sexual orientation. According to an article written by Brooke (1998) from the New York Times, hours before his attack, Shepard attended a meeting of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered association with a friend. Afterward, they were at one of Shepard's favorite bars, the Fireside Bar, when he was approached by two men. Shepard indicated he was gay and they said they were too. Matthew Shepard left the bar around midnight with the two men, who then beat him in their car in the bar's parking lot and drove him to a remote location in Laramie, Wyoming. Here he was ruthlessly beaten and left out in the cold to die.

Ten years later these hate crimes are still occurring. According to Harris (n.d), author of the article *Lawrence king-student who was murdered for being gay-to be honored with the national day of silence*, in February 2008, fifteen year old Lawrence King was brutally shot for being openly gay. Larry was killed over a valentine's that he gave to a classmate, it appears that Larry was constantly being taunted for his sexuality from the other boys in his grade on a daily basis. King attended school in California; his killer was a fourteen year old boy from his school who now faces charges of murder and commission of a hate crime. He is being charged as an adult and faces fifty years in prison.

People who are GLBTQ have been around through documented history and will continue to be a part of our communities for years to come. The need for a supportive environment, awareness and acceptance can only be increased as we progress into the

future. GSA can serve as a tool for support, awareness and acceptance within our schools.

Responsibility of school personnel to protect the rights of GLBTQ students

In her book *GLBTQ: The survival guide for queer and questioning teens*, Huegel quoted a fifteen year old boy named Robert, in which he described his experiences with homophobia and harassment at school,

Daily, more and more people would use those words-fag, homo, queer, sissy. Eventually things moved from not only words, but also to violence and pranks. The word 'faggot' was written on the locker next to mine because they made a mistake of which locker was mine. People put gum in my hair, stuck papers on my back, and threw things at me. There was physical violence, death threats. The school did 'the best they could do,' as they put it. In my mind, little was done.

(2003, p.32)

Students like Robert face battles like these far too often, and educators hold responsibility for protecting their students. Students are entitled to a free and appropriate education, and within this education, students are entitled to receive this education in a safe and non-discriminative environment. According to Bitter (1994) who is employed by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, author of, *A Bill of Rights for female and male, culturally and linguistically diverse, gay, lesbian and bisexual, and...children and youth in Wisconsin public schools*, students have:

1. The right to attend schools free of verbal and physical harassment, where education, not survival, is the priority.

2. The right to attend schools where respect and dignity for all is a standard set by the board of education and enforced by every school principal and educator.
3. The right to have access to accurate information about themselves, free of negative judgment, and delivered by trained adults who not only inform them, but affirm them.
4. The right to positive role models, both in person and in the curriculum.
5. The right to be included in all support programs that exist to help children and youth deal with difficulties.
6. The right to legislators and other policy makers who guarantee and fight for their constitutional freedoms, rather than ones who reinforce hate and prejudice.
7. The right to a heritage free of crippling self-hate, rage and unchallenged stereotyping, bias, prejudice, and discrimination.
8. The right to safe and intellectually demanding schools that are culturally, linguistically and developmentally appropriate for each and every child.
9. The right to respectful, fair and equitable treatment by all school personnel and other students in the schools they attend.
10. The right to high quality academic programs that lead to the achievement of challenging content and performance standards and to post school success for each child.
11. The right to a curriculum that is relevant to all students in the community, that promotes self esteem and awareness as well as respect and appreciation for

racess, cultures and social or economic groups different from one's own, and that provides a balanced and inclusive picture of the contributions of women and men of every race, culture, and ability infused into every subject.

(Bitters, 1994, n.p.)

Gay-straight alliances in schools can provide an opportunity for students to be supported by their peers. GSAs at times can assure that some of the GLBTQ students are receiving the support and comfort they need in order to be successful in school.

According to Laura Sorenson of Affirmations Lesbians and Gay Community Center in Michigan, "Taunting at school is still common. Cyber-bullying is 'the new big thing.' Kids are getting hate mail and taunts on MySpace or Facebook" (cited in Elias, 2007, n.p.). With the help of GSAs, students are able to talk about these taunts and hate mail they received. Educators have a responsibility to see that these students are receiving the same educational opportunities and experience the same safe environment as the remaining population.

In the case of *Jamie Nabozny v. Mary Podlesny, William Davis, Thomas Blauert, Ashland Public School District* (1996), these opportunities were not given to a student named Jamie during his middle and high school years in Ashland, Wisconsin. In the seventh grade, Jamie realized that he was gay and decided to keep his sexual orientation quiet; however, his classmates soon began harassing him, including some physical abuse. Jamie went to his counselor and asked for protection. His counselor attempted to seek disciplinary measures against the students guilty of the harassment; however the guidance counselor was later replaced by another counselor. At this point, Jamie confided in his new counselor, again asking for protection. This counselor directed Jamie to his

principal, Mary Podlesny. Principal Podlesny agreed to this protection, yet did nothing to stop the harassment. A few of Jamie's classmates mock raped Jamie in front of his other peers. Jamie was able to escape this situation and went to seek out middle school principal Podlesny. Her response to this harassment was, "boys will be boys" and she told Nabozny that if he was "going to be so openly gay," he should "expect" such behavior from his fellow students. Eventually, this harassment led Jamie to attempt suicide, unsuccessfully. Jamie finished out his middle school years in a Catholic school. Unfortunately, the high school in Ashland was a public school, so Jamie returned for high school and the harassment and assaults started again.

Life at school became increasingly worse for Jamie. One incident of assault led to Jamie collapsing with internal bleeding and yet the school still did nothing to protect him. Eventually, Jamie and his parents withdrew from the Ashland district moving to Minneapolis, Minnesota. Here Jamie was diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. "On February 6, 1995, Nabozny filed the incident suit pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 against Mary Podlesny, William Davis, Thomas Blauert, Steven Kelly, and the District, alleging, among other things, that the defendants violated his Fourteenth Amendment rights to equal protection and due process." According to the case notes of *Nabozny v. Podlesny, William Davis, Thomas Blauert, and the Ashland Public School District* (1996), the Wisconsin State Statute section 118.13(1) says,

regulating general school operations, provides that: No person may be denied participation in, be denied the benefits of or be discriminated against in any curricular, extracurricular, pupil services, recreational or other program or activity because of the person's sex, race, religion, national origin, ancestry, creed,

pregnancy, marital or parental status, sexual orientation or physical, mental, emotional or learning disability. (Nabozny v. Podlesny, William Davis, Thomas Blauert, Ashland Public School District, 1996, n.p.)

After the decision was made through the court, Jamie was awarded nearly nine hundred thousand dollars in damages. Jamie and other students like him deserve and are entitled to an education free from discrimination. Gay-straight alliances can provide a space where students can feel safe and protected. In Jamie's case, a GSA may not have been enough to protect Jamie; however, it would have at least been something more than he was offered.

Influences gay straight alliances may have on the social and emotional development of GLBTQ students

With any adolescent, school can have its ups and downs. Bullying is quite common at this age; however, add to the mix GLBTQ students, and bullying can become much more severe and often leads to harassment. It seems as though most states are not aggressively fighting this battle. According to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) 2006 report, "only nine states and the District of Columbia have comprehensive anti-bullying laws that specifically address bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation" (n.p.). According to Rothaus (2007) this harassment has led to many other effects, such as a drop in school attendance and a decrease in performance, not to mention self-esteem.

In personal communication, through email with Timothy Michael, GSA for Safe Schools Program Assistant in Madison, Wisconsin, he suggested from his personal experience, that GLBTQ students are about three times more likely to attempt suicide

than other adolescents their age. According to Warren J. Blumenfeld and Laurie Lindop's article, *Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Youth Suicide*, (n.d) "adolescent suicide has increased threefold in the last 10 years; making it the second most frequent cause of death among youths aged 15-24 (10 per 100,000 deaths per year)" (n.p.). Suicide is not the only alarming truth of GLBTQ teenagers; the prevalence of depression is also quite high. Huegel (2003) listed some warning signs of depression in teens, categorized into four areas: emotional, physical, behavioral, and thinking. Some common signs in these could include: a change in sleep and eating habits, troubles with concentration, loss of interest in things that were enjoyable, feelings of anger, guilt, loneliness, and sadness, aggression, poor hygiene, or abuse of drugs and alcohol. Depression and suicide are closely related, many severely depressed individuals often have suicidal ideation. As school personnel, being able to identify some warning signs of depression and suicide can save a student's life. For those schools that have created a safe environment for all their students, these suicidal thoughts may decrease.

Gay-straight alliances can provide a place for gay youth to go and receive support from peers. This support can help them treat feelings of isolation, depression, and suicidal thoughts. According to Frankfurt (2000) a GSA not only can serve as a support system, but can also "take on a more political nature, working with administration to enact nondiscrimination policies and other activities" (p.32). Frankfurt also suggests that a school that does not believe there are any homosexual students within the student body is obviously not a safe environment for a homosexual student to feel they can be open about their sexual orientation.

A GSA is not all about being gay, it serves another important purpose and that is educating others and working on ending discrimination. In Rothaus' (2007) article about gay and straight teenagers working together, he quoted a high school student, from Coral Springs Florida, as she shared her experience with a GSA, "Just knowing that there are other kids like me, or who care about the same issue that I do, it makes me feel great. Less alone. That life is not hopeless," says Kelcie, 17, a junior at J.P. Taravella High who came out as a lesbian about four years ago (2007, n.p). Rothaus (2007) talks to several non-gay students about their experience in a GSA. Alexandra Flores, another Taravella student said that attending the GSA "has helped broaden my horizons" (n.p.).

Later a parent in Rothaus' article stated that "A lot of people think that being gay is a disease, they need to be educated. A gay man is not going to make a pass at a straight man. Society has taught that being gay is wrong, that you are going to get AIDS. Who am I to judge? It's between you and your maker" (n.p.).

Students who are GLBTQ many encounter homophobia on a daily basis. According to Huegel (2003), "homophobia can cause a student to feel scared, isolated, depressed and just plain worn out" (p. 31). Huegel (2003) continued to state that those students who are faced with the battle of homophobia and harassment daily can feel as though they are being demoralized. This adverse environment can hinder relationships or lack thereof for students who are GLBTQ. The safe and comfortable environment that a GSA can provide can help students build new relationships. Lee (2002) said in her article *The Impacts of Belonging to a High School Gay-Straight Alliance*, several students spoke of the new friendships they had gained. They believed these new relationships were a direct result of their participation in the group. Lee reports that when Keysha first came

to the GSA she had very few friends, but that changed quickly. During a presentation to the Board of Governors of The Council for Exceptional Children, Keysha shared her experiences of making new friends and the meaning of those friendships:

The GSA has changed my life immensely. I began going to meetings at the beginning of this year, and since then I've made a lot of new friends (I think this is probably the most friends I've ever had at one point in time) and I feel a lot better about myself. I have a much higher self esteem. These students that are a part of the club now are some of my best friends, and I hang out with them all the time. Before (the Alliance) I was really cautious about what people were thinking of me and now that I have all these new friends it's like I don't care. They like me for who I am. I'm glad that I have this group.

(2002, p.13)

The importance of creating safe spaces within your school

The literature suggests that establishing a safe environment within your school is critical for students who are GLBTQ; however, in order to do so, teachers and staff must take a stand and make it known that they do not have a tolerance for derogatory remarks. School personnel set the bar for students. If a student sees a staff member behave a certain way, chances are the student may in turn act the same. Crane (2007) reported “Over 80% of LGBT students say faculty or staff never or rarely intervenes when present and homophobic remarks are made” (n.p.). Crane continued to state that “36% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth report hearing homophobic remarks from faculty or school staff” (n.p.). In an article written by Lori Brickley (2001), a bisexual high school teacher from California, she shared a story from the first meeting of the student GSA.

“The bell rang for lunch. They came....and came....45 students and 23 teachers!” (p. 8). A teacher rose and said “We are here for you, we support you and what you are doing” and “You can tell us whenever you feel threatened or harassed” (p. 8). Later in Brickley’s (2001) article, an openly gay male student spoke up with tears in his eyes and asked “Are all these people here to support ME?” (p. 8). Having staff members and adults involved in a GSA allow a student to see that there are people that care and support them.

In January 2002, GLSEN developed an article entitled *Ten things that educators can do*, to create a safe environment for all students:

1. Do Not Assume Heterosexuality- It can be offensive for gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender students. It is important for both the school and staff to be inclusive in their language and attitudes.
2. Guarantee Equality- GLBTQ students should understand that their school will protect them against discrimination. Sexual orientation policies should be addressed in the handbook’s harassment policies.
3. Create a Safe Environment- It is the responsibility of the school to be proactive in preventing bullying and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.
4. Diversity Library and Media Holdings- Infusing the school’s library with up to date and accurate information regarding sexuality and gender issues. Materials should reflect diversity.
5. Provide Training for Staff- Educators are responsible for serving all students regardless of their beliefs and need to have the skills to serve a variety of students.

6. Provide Appropriate Health Care and Education- Students are supposed to gain knowledge in health issues regarding sexuality including GLBTQ issues.
7. Be a Role Model- Make a conscious effort to demonstrate an appreciation for all human beings. Use respectful language and actions and avoid discriminatory language.
8. Provide Support for Students- Be an ally.
9. Reassess the Curriculum- Integrate GLBTQ issues into lessons.
10. Broaden Entertainment and Extracurricular Programs- Activities can set the tone for the community, adding activities and programs that include GLBTQ issues.

(2002, n.p.)

Literature suggests that another thing that can help increase the awareness and acceptance of GLBTQ issues is to stay up to date with current literature, events and issue. Utilizing the multiple resources for parents and friends of individuals who are GLBTQ can help provide support, answer questions and present timely information on current issues. Some resources include PFLAG (parents, families & friends of lesbians and gays), GLSEN (gay, lesbian and straight education network), and GLADD (gay and lesbian alliance against defamation)

In New York, in 1979 The Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth was developed primarily for students that are gay, lesbians, bisexual, transgender or questioning. Doctor Emery Hetrick and his life partner, Dr. Damien Martin were the co-founders. The school would later change its name from The Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth to The Hetrick-Martin Institute. According to the Hetrick-Martin Institute homepage, www.hmi.org, the goal of the school was to provide young people

the skills and support that are necessary for their advancement through adolescence successfully and securely. Like a GSA, the Hetrick-Martin Institute created an environment for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth that was free of discrimination, bullying and harassment. The Hetrick-Martin Institute allows for students that have had similar experiences and hardships to come together and feel comfortable.

Reasons why GLBTQ students and organizations may not supported

This topic of a gay-straight alliance has caused many controversial discussions by school personnel, parents, activist, religious leaders and community members. Some do not agree with the lifestyle of homosexual people and feel that by showing support in school, it approves that type of lifestyle. In Knight's (2002) article, he quoted Reverend Tim York of Heritage Temple Free Will Baptist Church in Cannonsburg, KY, who has been leading an anti-GSA campaign, "A petition is being circulated asking the school to set up a class that teaches overall tolerance without promoting homosexuality." York said, "We are concerned about homosexuality being promoted on school time as a normal lifestyle." "I think the Gay-Straight Alliances are the ACLU's poster child," he told Culture & Family Report. "They just come right in with them." The ACLU is the American Civil Liberties Union, which serves to protect an individual's first amendment rights and provide equal protection under the law. The ACLU also focuses on protecting a person's right to due process and privacy.

Mission America is a Christian based group developed by Linda Harvey, which focuses on current cultural and social trends and what that means for the Christian faith. Their website, www.missionamerica.org, provided a list of *Red Flags to watch for*:

Tactics Being Used to Promote Homosexuality at School....and Silence Objectives, relative to GLBTQ issues in schools. This list of red flags can be used by parents, students or community members to evaluate the level of acceptance or promotion of students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or questioning.

1. A non-discrimination policy on “sexual orientation” for teachers and students. It’s usually part of a bigger policy saying, “We do not discriminate based on race, religion, etc.” This policy will be used to label anything the activists don’t like-including too much emphasis on traditional families and heterosexuality-as “discrimination.”
2. An “anti-harassment,” “safe schools” or “anti-bullying” program that singles out *sexual orientation*. These programs claim to protect students, but why protect the behaviors of homosexuality, bisexuality and cross-dressing? Conduct codes already exist for actual bullying and real harm to any student. The hidden agenda here is to associate all objections to homosexuality with “hate” and “violence,” thus intimidating those who disagree. The result is that many parents, teachers and students don't speak out about the risks of homosexuality.
3. A homosexual club for students. Students are trained to be activists who will pressure school boards, be very "out" and visible to other students, and become the darlings of their sympathizers in the media. Club meetings feature "X" rated topics and dwell on rejection of traditional values, particularly religious beliefs that don’t accept homosexuality. “Straight” supporters also attend and may be encouraged to explore alternate sexuality. Students with

same sex attractions will be cheered on by club members if they begin this behavior.

4. Diversity or tolerance lessons to stop “homophobia.” Such lessons equate acceptance of homosexuality with religious/racial tolerance. Many such programs are now in middle and elementary schools. In reality, they portray traditional values (and thus, parents and communities holding them) as “hateful.” Note: federal and state money sometimes supports these lessons! The “Safe and Drug Free Schools” section of federal education law and some state education agencies as well, distribute funds to schools for developing and teaching so-called “tolerance” or “anti-bias” lessons. Some lessons classify objections to homosexuality as “bigotry” just like racial prejudice. Many of these programs are blatantly anti-Christian, and oppose traditional values.

5. Pro-homosexual literature in libraries, and in language and social studies classes. The number of homosexual-themed novels and storybooks has exploded in response to the demand created in schools; it would be impossible to list all the books being used. Most are “coming out” stories, or tales about children with homosexual parents. Middle and high school books are often very sexually explicit.

6. Special events: days of “diversity,” “pride” days, and a “day of silence.” Organized by a handful of students and teachers, the whole school is intimidated into going along. The goal is to portray homosexuality as a civil right. These school events will soon move down into the elementary school

level.

7. Diversity and “sensitivity” training for teachers. This is done behind the scenes to make teachers support the agenda. Usually, no exceptions are available for teachers who have personal beliefs that differ.

8. AIDS speakers, “safe sex” health education classes. This was the first avenue into the schools. Validity of alternate “families” and homosexual practices are often basic assumptions of today's health ed, and graphic instruction in condom use is typical as a method for AIDS "prevention."

Actually, such lessons encourage promiscuous sex among teens, including experimentation with homosexuality.

9. Hiring a staff “support” person for homosexual students, or training all guidance counselors to affirm homosexuality. These adults mislead kids and encourage them to enter the homosexual lifestyle. Often such adults become internal activists for the homosexual cause, and may even keep track of “hate speech” incidents. There are even schools who refer students to the most radical of outside adult 'gay' groups like PFLAG for so-called "support."

10. Openly homosexual teachers and staff. These teachers then become role models, in-house activists, and possible confidants for students who want to start homosexual behavior. Student molestation becomes a real risk.

11. Liaison with community homosexual youth groups. Ostensibly to “support” youth with same sex attractions, these groups welcome even 12 or 13 year olds, and parental notification is not required. Students socialize on site with older practicing homosexuals. Many schools now refer students to

these groups, and if your school has a homosexual club, the members will probably have a close relationship with this outside group, which is not accountable to parents or a school board.

12. “Safe” zones throughout the school. Usually symbolized by an inverted pink triangle, these are classes or counselors’ offices “safe” to discuss homosexuality, where no disapproval will be given. Sadly, it’s those who facilitate this unsafe lifestyle, not those who disapprove, who present a safety risk.

13. Pro-homosexual counseling. Counselors refer students to community groups without parental knowledge. *The ACLU* and other groups warn schools not to advocate heterosexuality as the norm in counseling students with same sex desires, nor to discuss the fact that many people have overcome homosexual feelings! Schools who tell students the whole truth are may face suits by these radical organizations.

(n.d., n.p.)

These red flags from Mission America show that homosexuality is still seen as unacceptable by some religious groups. Mission America is not the only group that is against homosexuality in the United States. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center link on the Tolerance.org website, there are nine recognized primary anti-gay hate groups throughout the United States. Included in these states are; California with four groups, Washington D.C, Kansas, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts and Washington. One of these groups, from Kansas, The Westboro Baptist Church has created their own website entitled, godhatesfags.com. This website consists of similar information and

material as the Mission America website did. The purpose is to express their concern and disapproval for the homosexual lifestyle.

People that are homosexual are still faced with discrimination from people with traditional views and values. Despite some of these views, some laws have been established to protect the rights of homosexuals, included in these laws are GSAs. In David Buckles' (2000) article, *Gay-straight alliances and other gay-related support groups*, according to the federal Equal Access Act (EAA); "public secondary schools must recognize gay related-groups where the school receives federal assistance and has limited-open forums" (p. 2). Later the EAA states that schools must provide a gay-related student group with access to the school that is equal to the access provided to other student groups" (p. 2).

Creating a Gay Straight Alliance

According to the 2005 National School Climate Survey done by The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) "75.4 % of students heard derogatory remarks such as "faggot" or "dyke" frequently or often at school, and nearly nine out of ten (89.2%) reported hearing "that's so gay" or "you're so gay"-meaning stupid or worthless-frequently or often" (2000, n.p). A gay-straight alliance is a student run organization that hopes to create a safe environment for gay youth and their allies. The purpose of GSAs is to increase the acceptance of gay youth and minimize those derogatory remarks and bullying these students face daily so that they can focus on learning instead of combating feelings of worthlessness and shame.

The number of GSAs has risen over the years. According to Kilman (2007), at the end of the 2005-06 school year there were more than 3000 registered GSAs at the

high school level nationwide. However, there is not just a need for GSAs at the high school level; the middle school is just as important. The reason for this is that gay-straight alliances are not only for gay youth, they serve students with family members or friends who are gay, as well as younger students coming out. Kilman (2007) identifies over 500 GSAs at the middle school level, which breaks down to roughly one out of every twenty middle schools/junior high schools nationally. Since the need for gay-straight alliances is there, creating a GSA can be easily done if there is support in the district. The GSA Network website, www.gsanetwork.org/resources/start/html, provides ten helpful tips for starting a GSA at your school in an article entitled *How to Start a Gay-Straight Alliance*:

Follow the guidelines-use the student handbook in following protocol for establishing a student organization in your school

Find a faculty member to serve as the advisor-keep in mind that having a staff member that has expressed acceptance around issues of sexual orientation might a good start for finding the advisor

Inform administration-the earlier you can let your administration know about your plans the better. In some cases they may serve as an ally to you with teachers, parents, and community or school board members. Keep in mind that GSAs are protected under the Federal Equal Access Act!

Inform counselors or school social workers-these individuals may know of students that would have an interest in joining

Pick a meeting place-find a place that can provide privacy and confidentiality to members

Advertise, Advertise, Advertise-post flyers, send out emails, and make daily announcements. Be persistent and do not get frustrated if your flyers get torn down-just put them up again!

Have food at your meeting-free food is a great tool to attract more people to your meetings

Plan your first meeting-allow members to discuss why they are there and what they hope to accomplish during the year

Develop rules-ask members to participate in this process. Make sure rules include: confidentiality, safety and respect. Also talk about avoiding assumptions of member's sexual orientation. This may provide a more comfortable environment for everyone-gay or straight

Plan for the future-brainstorm and develop goals for your GSA. Contact other GSAs to gain ideas about more ways to get involved

These steps that the GSA Network has illustrated can help anyone form a GSA. In doing these simple steps and starting an organization, many students will gain the support they are in need of, along with an opportunity to team up with other peers to change the environment of their school. These students will be able to take ownership over their creation. The larger obstacle is addressing the school board or parents. The presentation must be well planned out and there are many resources to help with this process. A key thing to remember when proposing such a group is that a GSA is protected under the Federal Equal Access law, therefore mandating school districts to provide the same opportunities as any other student organization. The need for GSAs has

clearly been documented; the need is there for someone to take the initiative to form a group of this caliber.

Chapter III: Summary, Critical Analysis, and Recommendations

This chapter will provide a complete summary of the key points as well as a critical analysis of the findings from the literature review. In addition to these areas, recommendations will be made in regards to this study.

Summary

This review of literature looked at the impacts that gay-straight alliances (GSA) can have on students at the middle and high school levels. The study focused on several areas in particular: the history of homosexuality among cultures, the responsibilities of school personnel in protecting students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning (GLBTQ), and the emotional and social influences associated with GSAs. Also included in this study was the importance of safe spaces within schools for GLBTQ students, the reasons why some people may be against GSAs in schools, and how to create a successful GSA in your school.

Throughout the research, it has been clear that the advantages of GSAs outweigh the disadvantages by far. Gay straight alliances and safe environments for GLBTQ students have been shown to assist in the improvement in grades, attendance, and self-esteem among students who have faced harassment and homophobic remarks during their educational experiences. Research has shown that the rate of suicide appears to be higher for individuals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning, possibly due to the amount of bullying, harassment or assaults that they face at school as well as negative societal and familial messages. Students who are GLBTQ are estimated to be three times more likely to commit suicide than students who are straight. The history illustrated that the need for a GSA and an awareness of GLBTQ issues is there. Acceptance of

homosexual people stems back as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and perhaps much longer. The literature has shown that the Catholic Church has played a significant role in the lack of acceptance of homosexual people as homosexual behaviors are referred to as being unnatural and sinful. The literature has also shown that hate crimes against people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning are still occurring across the nation. A GSA can help to eliminate some of these hate crimes as its purpose is to educate and attempt to decrease the amount of discrimination towards people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning and increase the acceptance of that population.

Often times a parent may not want to admit their child is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered or questioning their sexuality or they may have a negative response to it. Along with the possibility of negative response from a parent comes the possibility of negative societal messages as well. School, however, is one place where a student can hop to have support.

As shown throughout the research, GSAs are out there; however the numbers are quite low. In order to increase the number of recognized GSAs, there must be someone within the school willing to start up a chapter. As challenging as the creation of it can be, there are many resources that can walk you through initiating a GSA to your administration, finding an advisor, and setting up meetings. Creating an environment where all students feel safe and accepted can have many benefits, and implementing a GSA in your school can be the beginning of this change.

The research has also shown that students are coming out younger and there is a need for support within the schools. The number of GSAs is on the rise and continues to

grow as the benefits are shown stronger than ever. Although there are people that are not supportive of GSAs in schools for personal, religious or other reasons, a GSA serves a purpose within the four walls of the school. The information given through research has supported the idea that Gay-Straight Alliances have a positive impact on student's overall personal and academic well being as well as having an impact on straight or heterosexual students and faculty.

Recommendations

A school has a responsibility to the students of that school and often times are reported in the school's mission statement. According to the Eau Claire, Wisconsin Area School District's home page, their mission statement is "to educate our children in partnership with the family and the community to live responsible, creative, and fulfilling lives in a rapidly changing world." (September 2007, n.p.) Creating a supportive and safe learning environment for students and staff who are GLBTQ would seem to be a necessary part of this mission

At this time it seems a wise choice for schools to evaluate the implement of gay straight alliances as a part of the clubs and organizations available for students. The student run organization is not exclusively for those students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning but rather it allows all students and staff the opportunity to share in a unique supportive experience. Together these students and staff can work to minimize hatred and homophobia. A GSA can also serve as a support and ally for those students who have a friend or family member who is gay. A GSA can help to eliminate hatred and improve a schools multicultural educational service.

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