

INTERROGATING DISCOURSES OF “AT RISK”: AN EXAMINATION OF THE SOCIAL,
POLITICAL, AND EDUCATIONAL IMPACT OF HIGH SCHOOL GAY-STRAIGHT
ALLIANCES

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the experiences of five faculty advisors of high school Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) within Ontario, Canada. Drawing on perspectives of critical pedagogy, queer theory, and critical discourse analysis, I investigated the potential of these student organizations to challenge heteronormative school cultures that label LGBTQ students as an “at risk” population in need of “safe spaces.” Data were collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with faculty advisors, including two one-to-one interviews, one email interview, and one focus group interview. This research not only illustrates how top-down discourses of “risk” and “safe spaces” regulate the policies and practices deemed appropriate for GSAs, but also the possibility for bottom-up discourses of student and teacher resistance to school-based heteronormative ideologies. I conclude with a discussion of how to move GSAs beyond the “safe space” discourse into one where a critical and social justice framework may initiate a school-wide conversation on LGBTQ student rights.

Keywords: Gay-Straight Alliances, Ontario high schools, heteronormativity, homophobia, at risk, safe space, critical pedagogy, queer theory, discourse, youth resistance, social justice

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all the students and educators working to promote LGBTQ inclusion and equity within their own schools. Continue to challenge unquestioned assumptions, to push the boundaries around the current ways of thinking, being, feeling, and knowing sexuality, and to form stronger, more critical, and resilient alliances.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

Nonetheless, as with many educational ideologies, an uncritical adoption of practices associated with at-risk discourses may also contain potential to reinforce the problems that they seek to address or to produce new dangers. - Wotherspoon & Schissel (2001, p. 321)

The broadening of definitions of “at-risk” populations to incorporate increasing numbers of individuals and circumstances has mixed implications, reflecting both genuine concern for learners in troubled situations and potential for intervention with little critical assessment of the nature and need for such action. - Wotherspoon & Schissel (2001, p. 325)

Understanding the Problem of “At Risk” Discourses

The word “risk” is a peculiar word. Depending on its use and its context it can signal a variety of meanings, with both beneficial and negative connotations and consequences. However, within the context of North American institutions, the term risk is often used under the idiom of being, that is, of being “at risk.” One of the institutions in which this idiom is employed most frequently is the institution of education. According to academic scholars, educational systems can be viewed as sites of conflict and contestation, or rather, as sites where democratic values of equality, equity, diversity, and social justice coexist and often conflict with the neoliberal market values of schools that uphold ideas of individuality and conformity (Baglieri et al., 2011; Erevelles, 2011; Giroux, 2011; Graham & Slee, 2008; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). School-based value conflicts such as these have resulted in the increased use of “at risk” discourses to target and label certain student populations who fail to conform to the overall ‘normative’ student standard (Baglieri et al., 2011; Erevelles, 2011; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Quinlivan, 2002; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001).

Thus, certain students become labeled within the discourse of “at risk” through their individual and/or group-level differences or ‘deviations’ when compared to the ‘normal’ student population. In other words, the idea of difference or of being “at risk” becomes pathologized and ultimately, rendered deviant and abnormal within educational contexts. This is typically done in the name of the “best interests” of the student as educators and other school staff, through the use of these “at risk” discourses, are better able to provide for the ‘proper’ interventions, resources, treatments, and/or services needed to alleviate the social and educational risks associated with certain student populations (Erevelles, 2011; Ginwright & Commarota, 2002; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). While it is imperative to identify certain student populations as “at risk” for negative social and educational outcomes, such an approach does little to address the broader systemic and institutional level issues that may be contributing to the oppression and inequalities experienced by certain “at risk” students (Badlieri et al., 2011; Ginwright & Commarota, 2002; Giroux, 2011; Moss & Petrie, 2002; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001).

The purpose of this chapter then is to provide an introduction to the topic under investigation within this research study, which will focus on the deconstruction of the dominant “at risk” discourse within North American schools. While the topic of “at risk” discourses in education is much too broad for the scope of this study, this research will focus on a narrow student population that has been labeled as an “at risk” group within recent years. Overall, this chapter will include a discussion of the background and context of the problem in question, the purpose and significance of the current project, as well as the specific research questions and objectives to be addressed. Secondly, this chapter will discuss the theoretical perspectives that

informed the approach to and analysis of this research, and thirdly, this chapter will conclude with an overview of the entire thesis project, with a brief description of each chapter.

Background and Context of the Research

Within recent years, this “at risk” discourse has become dominant in discussions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, and/or questioning (LGBTQ) students within North American systems of education (Baglieri et al., 2011; Currie, Mayberry, & Chenneville, 2012; Quinlivan, 2002; Savin –Williams, 2001; Talburt, 2004). For example, LGBTQ students are frequently cited within academic research as being “at risk” for a number of social, educational, health, and mental health outcomes. More specifically, studies have shown that LGBTQ students are at greater risk for academic failure, dropping out of school, bullying and victimization, drug and/or alcohol use and abuse, suicide, homelessness, depression, social and emotional isolation, as well as sexual health-related problems (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Bishop & Casida, 2011; Black, Fedewa, & Gonzalez, 2012; Craig, Tucker, & Wagner, 2008; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Kennedy & Covell, 2009; Little, 2001; Miceli, 2005; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010).

Moreover, researchers in the area of student sexualities have suggested that the use of “at risk” discourses functions to label the sexuality of LGBTQ students within a deficit model of abnormality, pathology, and deviancy, suggesting that the problems experienced by these students are individual problems related to their sexual orientation and can, indeed, be “fixed” (Moss & Petrie, 2002; Quinlivan, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2001; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995; Talburt, 2004; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). This strategic use of “at risk” discourses allows schools to target students identifying as LGBTQ on an individual basis in order to provide them with counseling services, resources, and intervention strategies. This allows schools to appear as

though they are upholding values of diversity, democracy, social justice, and equality. However, the discourse of “at risk” also works to justify the lack of institutional efforts being implemented to question and challenge heteronormative and homophobic school climates, since the individual needs of LGBTQ students are already being met. Furthermore, school reform efforts that work to interrogate school-based heteronormativity are often viewed as possible threats to the overall market-image of the school, since they question and challenge normative values of sexuality and gender expression and through the assumed “promotion” of gay-positive policies and practices (Ellis & High, 2004; Quinlivan, 2002; Talburt, 2004; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001).

Defining Gay-Straight Alliances

Despite the individual and group-level discourse of “at risk” applied to sexually and gender diverse students, there still remains an overall lack of educational reform efforts being implemented to counteract the influence of heteronormative and homophobic school environments. This includes a lack of teacher training on the creation and implementation of a sexually inclusive curriculum, a lack of inclusive and anti-discrimination policies that are actually put into practice, and an overall culture of silence around the existence and needs of students who self-identify as LGBTQ, who have sexually or gender diverse families and friends, or straight identifying allies (Currie et al., 2012; Elia & Eliason, 2010; Erevelles, 2011; Ferfolja, 2007; Heck et al., 2011; Jones, 2011; Quinlivan, 2002; Taylor & Peter, 2011). As a result, students with the help of faculty advisors have begun to take action.

Within the past twenty-five years, high schools, as well as post-secondary institutions, have become sites for the rapid emergence of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) across North America (Miceli, 2005; Russell et al., 2009; Toomey, Diaz, & Russell, 2011). High school GSAs are defined as student-lead organizations composed of both LGBTQ students and heterosexual allies,

along with a supportive faculty advisor (usually a teacher or guidance counselor within the school), that come together to provide for a number of functions for students who face sexuality and gender-based discrimination, victimization, and oppression in their school (Herriot, 2011; Miceli, 2005; Toomey et al., 2011). According to Griffin, Lee, Waugh, and Beyer (2004), GSAs can take on a variety of roles within school settings. These include:

- 1) Counselling and support services for LGBTQ students;
- 2) The provision of a safe-space for LGBTQ students and allies to socialize;
- 3) Providing the school with educational efforts and raising awareness of issues affecting LGBTQ students;
- 4) Being a part of a broader social justice and human rights movement

The benefits of GSAs have been cited by several researchers, with a focus on individual-level gains including, for example, decreased levels of bullying, victimization, suicide, and mental health difficulties, as well as increased levels of academic achievement (Heck et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002; Russel et al., 2009; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). In addition, while GSAs are now beginning to emerge as unique spaces to engage in sexual justice efforts and to educate the school body and larger community about sexuality and equality, this area is highly under-researched within academic and educational scholarship (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011; Lee, 2002; Russell et al., 2009; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). Moreover, Currie, Mayberry, and Chenneville (2012) argue that the underlying premise behind some of the above described roles of GSAs implies that LGBTQ students are simply “at risk” and thus, require special measures and adult safeguards in order to succeed in the typical school environment.

While high school GSAs have been the focus of immense criticism and opposition, mainly from certain parental and community groups, as well as religious organizations (Miceli,

2005), academic critics of GSAs have argued that the "safe space" discourse surrounding these student organizations does little to challenge homophobia and heteronormativity at the institutional level. Thus, according to academic critics, the idea of GSAs simply as "safe spaces" serves to reinforce the notion that this student population is "at risk" and in need of certain safeguards and forms of adult protection to ensure an 'equitable' and 'inclusive' educational opportunity (Currie et al., 2012; Erevelles, 2011; Quinlivan, 2002; Talburt, 2004). In other words, the "safe-space" discourse accepts ideas of herteronormativity that makes the existence of GSAs necessary in the first place, while simultaneously ignoring the potential for these student organizations to become sites for the emergence of a critical sexuality pedagogy that could promote discourses of youth resistance, citizenship, and social justice organizing (Conway & Crawford-Fisher, 2007; Currie et al., 2012; MacGillivray, 2005; Mayberry, 2006; Quinlivan, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2001).

Purpose of the Research

While it is important to acknowledge sexual minority discrimination in today's schools, this research study is concerned with the over-representation of the LGBTQ student population as "at risk" and in need of "safe spaces" within media, academic, and educational discourse. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine high school GSAs in Ontario to determine if these student organizations could play a potential role in challenging school-based heteronormativity. Overall, two main research questions will guide the focus of this qualitative investigation, which include:

- 1) Does the LGBTQ student "at risk" discourse limit the roles of GSAs in Ontario high schools to simply providing "safe spaces"? And,
- 2) Can student members and faculty advisors mobilize GSAs to become sites where herteronormativity is actively interrogated, negotiated, questioned, challenged, and/or resisted?

Moreover, this research study will be concerned with both:

- 1) Top-down discourses that regulate the policies and practices surrounding GSAs, as well as the possibility for
- 2) Bottom-up discourses of student resistance and/or compliance to the dominant "at risk" and "safe space" discourses

Furthermore, the recent passing of *Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act* (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2012) in Ontario, providing students with the right to form high school GSAs, opens up a new research arena for examining student social justice efforts in a context that has not been previously investigated. For example, only one published research study was found to investigate high school GSAs in Ontario (see Kitchen & Bellini, 2013) and one unpublished master's thesis (see Lapointe, 2012). Overall, by examining how power, dominance, and inequalities are produced and reproduced within educational discourse, how such language impacts the roles of GSAs, and how students negotiate and/or challenge such discourses, this research hopes to discover how students and faculty *are* or *can* move high school GSAs beyond the provision of a "safe space" to one where critical thinking and social justice efforts are made to challenge school-based heteronormativity (Conway & Crawford-Fisher, 2007; Currie et al., 2012; Freire, 1970; MacGillivray & Whitlock, 2007; Mayberry et al., 2011; Quinlivan, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2001).

Theoretical Framework

"We do not believe there is a choice between 'theory' and 'no theory,' or indeed between 'theory' and 'practice'. Nor that somehow 'evidence' or 'experience' can be neutrally produced and interpreted, and that actions self-evidently and inevitably follow. Theories-whether in the form of academic, political or professional ideas, or offered in the guise of 'common sense'-shape our understandings and govern our actions, whether we recognize this or not, through the concepts and explanations they provide us with to make sense of the world and our experience."

—Moss and Petrie, 2002

According to Moss and Petrie (2002), our understandings of the world and our actions in it are linked to the theoretical frameworks we adopt, whether implicitly or explicitly, in our personal, professional, and academic lives. Within academic scholarship, especially those rooted in critical, feminist, and queer studies, it is imperative for researchers to make their theoretical frameworks known to the reader, because they influence every aspect of the research process including the topics we choose to investigate, the questions we pose, the arguments we make, the research methodologies we use, and the ways in which we interpret our results (Lazar, 2005; MacLure, 2003; Rogers, 2004; Van Dijk, 1993; Delamont, 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this section is to outline the theories and theorists that have influenced the current research investigation. I will begin with an examination of Michel Foucault (1978), with a focus on his work in *The History of Sexuality*. Secondly, this chapter will look to the work of Paulo Freire (1970) and Henry Giroux (2011), with a focus on their theories of critical pedagogy, citizenship education, and social justice. Lastly, this section will discuss components of discourse analysis as influenced by critical, feminist, and queer theories, which highly pertain to the understanding and analysis of key themes and topics within this research study.

Michel Foucault: The History of Sexuality

The work of Michel Foucault (1978) in *The History of Sexuality* has largely informed my approach to and understanding of sex and sexuality discourses within Western societies. Sex and sexuality, understood as socially constructed concepts, emerged from relations of power, knowledge, politics, and language, which inform the way we think, feel, and talk about sexuality in everyday contexts. Within the 19th century, Western culture came to view sexuality as an increasingly dangerous phenomenon and thus, it became subject to greater control and regulation by what Foucault (1978) termed a “system of alliances” (i.e., authority figures that regulated the

sexuality of citizens including doctors, priests, and educators). Thus, dominant discourses of sexuality were, and still remain, shaped by dominant institutions that hold a position of power and authority within Western societies. These can include the institution of education, medicine, psychiatry, law, and religion.

Moreover, Foucault (1978) argued that through these institutions, sexuality became repressed through methods of control. However, control not in terms of how much we talk about sexuality (as he argued sexuality is talked about more and more everyday). Rather, repression of sexuality is carried out by controlling the *ways* in which sexuality *is* talked about. Thus, discourses of sexuality became focused on those who exhibit sexualities outside of heterosexual marriages, including children and young people and non-heterosexuals, whose sexuality became viewed as either abnormal/unnatural, deviant/sick, or a combination of both (Foucault, 1978). Thus, Western educational systems became a major site for the monitoring, disciplining, and regulation of student sexual identities in general, and student non-heterosexual identities in particular (MacLure, 2003). Through what Foucault termed “bio-power,” schools came to regulate student sexuality through two mechanisms: 1) discipline of the body and 2) regulation of an entire population. Within the next chapter, a review of the literature will illustrate how educational systems engage in both of the above mechanisms through the formal and informal sexuality curriculum.

Although some may argue otherwise, I would suggest that discourses of student sexuality in general, and LGBTQ student sexuality in particular, are still subject to adult forms of regulation and control within North American educational systems today. However, Foucault (1978) has suggested that discourses surrounding sexuality are not simply reflective of sexual repression and control. Rather, compliance with or resistance to the dominant discourses among

the citizen population are both equally possible (Foucault, 1978; MacLure, 2003). Therefore, while this research is concerned with the critique of dominant top-down discourses of heterosexism, silence, and risk that limit educational reform efforts and critical reflection in schools, it will also examine student GSAs as potential spaces for bottom-up discourses of student and teacher resistance to heteronormative and “at risk” discourses (MacLure, 2003; Van Dijk, 1993). Overall, this research will examine student GSAs as possible sites for the development of a new “system of alliances” that may serve to alter the relationship current discourses of sexuality have within educational systems today. This new system of alliance could potentially represent the alliances being formed in high schools today between supportive faculty and both LGBTQ and heterosexual students in the form of GSAs.

Critical Pedagogy

The work of Paulo Freire (1970) and Henry Giroux (2011) on the topic of critical pedagogy largely informs my general view on education and schooling, as well as my focused approach to the study of high school GSAs in North American educational systems. In Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he speaks to the importance and need for oppressed groups to come to the realization that their oppressive situations are limiting their overall human potential. He argues that if the oppressed remain unaware of their unfair and limiting situations, they ultimately come to accept their subordination and come to react in a simple and passive manner. Freire (1970) suggests that a form of critical intervention is required through what he has termed “praxis,” which involves the combination of both critical reflection and social transformation. Within educational contexts, this can be done through his concept of “problem-posing” education versus “banking-models” of education. In the former, both teachers and students work in collaboration to become active subjects, co-learners, discussants, and critical

thinkers on topics that impact their lives specifically, as well as the lives of many other students around the globe. Coming from this line of thinking, I see great potential in high school GSAs for students and teachers to come together in a safe environment where they are able to critically engage with and discuss topics of heteronormativity and homophobia, concepts which represent the dominant ideologies and discourses of sexuality that are embedded and reproduced in school policies and practices.

However, since there is very little research on high school GSAs in Canada, it will be my task, in the words of Henry Giroux, “to mobilize the imagination and develop a language of possibility” (2011, pg. 5). Furthermore, he goes on to say that examples of a discourse of possibility and resistance that can be found through an analysis of “schools as democratic public spheres, teachers as public intellectuals, and students as potential democratic agents of individual and social change” (p. 5). Thus, this research project will be seeking out examples from faculty advisers of high school GSAs to determine if and how these student organizations could, or are already, becoming sites where young people can engage with a number of difficult topics in the form of both critical discussion and social action. Such discussions and actions may be relevant to a form of critical sexuality pedagogy, ideas of youth empowerment and agency, social justice efforts, and student rights. Ultimately, it is the task of the researcher to find the potential for GSAs to act as sites where students can come to develop their own discourses of sexuality that are resistant to the current dominant ideologies and discourses of heteronormativity, or in Foucauldian terms, find the potential for a new “system of alliance”.

Critical, Feminist, and Queer Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis in educational research projects is highly connected to both the theories and traditions of Foucault, Freire, and Giroux. According to MacLure (2003) “a

discourse-based educational research would set itself the work of taking that which offers itself as common-sensical, obvious, natural, given or unquestionable, and trying to unravel it a bit- to *open it up* to further questioning” (p. 9). This is precisely the aim of the current project, that is, to examine the ways in which dominant discourses of sexuality work to reproduce a certain type of student sexuality within school contexts, but also to discover ways in which students and faculty negotiate, transform, and resist such discourses. Therefore, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is not only concerned with texts, spoken or written, but also on the social practices and structures that influence the production of texts, as well as the meanings and interactions individuals and groups create within certain texts (Wodak & Meyer, 2011). Moreover, since discourse is structured by dominance, history, and ideology, CDA makes it possible for researchers to analyze both discourses as taken-for-granted societal conventions, as well as forms of resistance to dominant ideologies that often result in unequal power relationships. Resistance, therefore, can be defined as the breaking of common sense conventions or the rupturing of stable discursive practices (Wodak & Meyer, 2011).

Therefore, CDA cannot be described as a neutral approach to educational research since it often takes on an explicit socio-political stance on the topic being investigated. Put simply Van Dijk has been quoted saying “CDA is biased and proud of it” (cited in Wodak & Meyer, 2011, p. 96). However, while different approaches to CDA all share similar characteristics with regards to overall goals and purposes, it is still important to distinguish between big ‘D’ Discourses and little ‘d’ discourses in academic research. While little ‘d’ discourse analysis is concerned with the actual linguistic study of language use, big ‘D’ Discourse analysis rooted in queer, feminist, and critical theoretical traditions represents the study of the relationship between discourse,

social inequality, dominance, and power (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Lazar, 2005; MacLure, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2011; Rogers, 2004; Van Dijk, 1993; Delamont, 2012).

Norman Fairclough's approach to CDA in educational research is one of the mostly widely known and used. His approach seeks to combine the discursive and non-discursive (i.e., the textual and the social) in a three-dimensional model (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Since discourse contributes to the construction of systems of knowledge, social relations, and social identities, discourse can be said to have three primary functions including identity, relational, and ideological functions. Therefore, the three dimensions include the written/spoken/visual text, the discursive practice, and the social practice (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Due to my lack of knowledge and expertise in the field of linguistics, my primary focus within this research project will be on the big 'D' discourses or rather, on the social and ideological implications of the discourses surrounding LGBTQ youth and high school GSAs.

While discourse analysis seeks to understand how unequal relations of power are maintained through dominant discourses presented in text and talk, it also aims to work towards what Freire (1970) termed educational *praxis*, or goals of critical reflection and transformation within the larger school context (Lazar, 2005; MacLure, 2003; Rogers, 2004; Van Dijk, 1993). Thus, discourse analysis is rooted in goals of critical pedagogy as outlined by Freire (1970) and Giroux (2011), as well as in Foucauldian traditions. Overall, this research will be concerned with both top-down discourses of heterosexism, silence, and risk that limit the ability of sexual minority students, as well as the potential for bottom-up discourses of student and teacher resistance and/or compliance with these dominant discourses within Ontario high school GSAs (MacLure, 2003; Van Dijk, 1993).

Thesis Overview

This beginning chapter has provided the reader with an introduction to the topic of “at risk” discourses as they will be studied in the context of high school GSAs in Ontario, Canada. This next section will provide an overview of the entire thesis project with a brief description of each chapter.

Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

This chapter will provide a review of the literature on the topic under investigation in this study. More importantly, it will provide a critical discussion of the approaches, theories, and methods employed in previous studies that have examined high school GSAs, through the lens of my own theoretical paradigm. Therefore, this chapter will first outline the current research examining the experiences of LGBTQ youth within high school settings. This will include a discussion of both the enacted and hidden sexuality curriculum, both of which function to shape heteronormative discourses and school practices that discipline student sexualities. Thirdly, this chapter will examine the current literature investigating high school GSAs, with reference to their differing roles, benefits, and possible limitations. Fourthly, this chapter will engage in a critical analysis of the “at risk” and “safe space” discourses present within the literature surrounding non-heterosexual students and high school GSAs. Lastly, this chapter will examine the current thinking and models of critical pedagogy, youth empowerment, and citizenship to situate GSAs as a potential site for the development of student discourses of resistance.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Within this chapter, I begin by discussing the methodological aspects of the study, which will include a discussion of the methods chosen to collect data for the current research study, as well as a discussion of why the methods were chosen. Overall, semi-structured interviews were

conducted in a variety of formats to meet the needs of participants. This included two one-to-one interviews, one email interview, and one focus group interview. Secondly, this chapter will discuss the participants within the study, which will include a description of the recruitment process, as well as a description of the participants. This will be followed by a discussion of ethical considerations that needed to be addressed within the current investigation, as well as obstacles encountered in the recruitment and data collection process. Lastly, this chapter will conclude with an explanation of the processes and procedures employed when analyzing the data collected. Overall, thematic analyses, in conjunction with methods of critical discourse analysis, were used when analyzing the interview transcripts.

Chapter 4: Analysis of Data

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an analysis of the experiences and narratives of current and recent faculty advisors of high school GSAs in Ontario high schools. More importantly, the focus of this analysis will provide an in-depth examination of the ways in which faculty and student members are working against heteronormative school policies and practices that label LGBTQ students as “at risk” and in need of “safe spaces.” In order to illustrate participant narratives in an authentic, informative, and critical way, I relied heavily on excerpts from the interviews conducted to represent the data. Therefore, this chapter will be divided into two main sections. The first section will provide information on the need for high school GSAs today, the type and significance of the work they are doing, and the school factors that either support or impede the ability of GSAs to challenge heteronormative school cultures. The second section of this chapter will provide an in-depth analysis of the themes that emerged from the critical reading of participant narratives. This will include a discussion of faculty advisors as

public intellectuals and the issues concerning the “at risk” and “safe space” discourse common in high schools today.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the current research study, to restate its objectives, to discuss its significance within the field of LGBTQ inclusion and equity, to acknowledge any limitations within the study, and to discuss any implications for future research studies investigating high school GSAs in Ontario specifically, and heteronormative school cultures in general. Moreover, I will also provide suggestions for policy, curricula, teacher development training, and everyday school practices that may work to challenge school-based heteronormativity and promote a critical and queer-positive approach to the issues facing LGBTQ students today.

Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

“A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest.”

-Michel Foucault (in Kriztman, 1988, p. 155)

The purpose of this chapter is not to provide a simple review of the literature on the topic under investigation, although the chapter title may suggest otherwise. Rather, the purpose of this chapter will be to provide the reader with a comprehensive and critical discussion of the approaches, theories, methods, and findings within previous research studies that have investigated topics such as LGBTQ student experiences, high school GSAs, and school-based homophobia and heterosexism. In addition, topics of youth citizenship, critical pedagogy, and student resistance will also be discussed. The literature presented will be analyzed through the lens of my own theoretical paradigm, previously discussed in chapter one. As indicated in the chapter’s introductory quote by Michel Foucault, this chapter is not meant to look at educational scholarship on high school GSAs and simply state “they aren’t right as they are,” but to take these topics and research studies and analyze them through a more critical lens. Overall, this chapter is meant to challenge, interrogate, and unravel some of the unquestioned assumptions in both research theory and methodology that are relevant to the current research investigation.

Therefore, this chapter will begin by exploring the current research that has examined the experiences of LGBTQ youth within North American high school settings. This will include a discussion of both the *enacted* and *hidden* sexuality curriculum, both of which may appear objective and neutral, but actually function to shape heteronormative discourses and school practices that discipline student sexualities. Secondly, this chapter will examine the current literature investigating high school GSAs, with reference to their differing roles, benefits, and

possible limitations as noted within previous research. Thirdly, this chapter will critically engage with and reflect upon the “at risk” and “safe space” discourses present within the current educational literature. Lastly, this chapter will examine the current thinking and models of critical pedagogy, youth empowerment, and citizenship education to situate GSAs as a potential site for the development of student discourses of resistance.

LGBTQ Student Experiences Today

The research concerning the lives of LGBTQ students within educational institutions tends to focus on either 1) student experiences within the enacted sexuality curriculum, with a focus on the representation and inclusion, or lack of, diverse topics of sex and sexuality within the classroom; or 2) the hidden sexuality curriculum, with a focus on the influence of school environment on the educational, social, emotional, and mental health outcomes of sexual minority students. Within systems of education, both the formal and enacted, as well as the informal and hidden sexuality curriculum, work to reproduce what is considered ‘normal’ student sexuality (Ferfolija, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002).

Before you proceed, it is important to note that it is not my intention to represent LGBTQ students simply as “at risk” and reproduce the unjust, unfair, and unequal labels and language associated with this student population. However, much of the current research reflects this “doom and gloom” position and therefore, warrants discussion. Thus, this section of the literature review will first outline the general experience of LGBTQ students within North American high schools (i.e., the hidden sexuality curriculum) and then will move on to discuss the official sex and sexuality curriculum being implemented (i.e., the enacted sexuality curriculum). The discussion will focus on how both aspects of LGBTQ student experiences serve to discipline, regulate, and monitor student sexual subjectivities.

The Hidden Sexuality Curriculum: Policed Student Sexualities

The academic research available that has investigated the overall school climate, as experienced by sexual minority students, tends to rely heavily on the discourse of “at risk.” While it is significantly important to acknowledge the high levels of discrimination, harassment, and victimization experienced by this student population, complete reliance on the discourse of risk can serve to diminish the capacities of LGBTQ students, while failing to address the broader issues of compulsory heteronormativity and school-based homophobia (Baglieri et al., 2011; Bishop & Casida, 2011; Erevelles, 2011; Ferfolja, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). However, harassment and victimization on the basis of actual and/or perceived sexual orientation are common realities faced by many LGBTQ youth and pose particular challenges within their daily social and academic lives (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Craig, Tucker & Wagner, 2008; Heck et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010).

For instance, in a study of homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia across Canadian high schools, Taylor and Peter (2011) found that 20.8% of LGBTQ youth reported instances of physical violence in comparison to 7.9% of heterosexual students (Taylor & Peter, 2011). However, Kennedy and Covell (2009) also found that approximately 43.4% of LGBTQ youth are victims of physical abuse. Moreover, 50.8% of LGBTQ youth have reported instances of verbal harassment in comparison to eight percent of heterosexual youth (Taylor & Peter, 2011). Still, others have found that 88.4% of LGBTQ students hear homophobic comments on a daily basis with 17% stating comments often come from teachers and staff (Kennedy & Covell, 2009). What is important to note here is that, despite the high levels of homophobic bullying, whether physical or verbal, the ability of teachers and school administrators to intervene is often minimal

(Bishop & Casida, 2011; Craig et al., 2008; Ferfolija, 2007; Rutter & Leech, 2007). Rather than address homophobic bullying or language in schools, researchers have noted that most of these incidences often go unnoticed. Bishop and Casida (2011) have suggested that this issue represents the role and function of teachers and other school staff as the “gender and sexuality police.” Homophobic bullying and victimization represents the physical boundaries put in place around student sexualities, as well as the policing of non-heterosexual students who pose a threat to the heteronormative ideology. What's more, the silence around these school practices among school staff and teachers further legitimize and condone the surveillance of sexual minority student identities (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Erevelles, 2011; Ferfolija, 2007; Graham & Slee, 2008; Quinlivan, 2002; Quinlivan & Town, 1999)

Furthermore, academic researchers have suggested that high rates of victimization and harassment experienced by sexual minority students often render them at risk for a variety of negative educational, mental health, and health difficulties (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Craig et al., 2008; Heck et al., 2011; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Kennedy & Covell, 2009; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). Homophobic bullying has been found to contribute to the social and emotional isolation experienced by sexual minority students (Bishop & Casida; 2011; Craig et al., 2008; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Little, 2001; Walls et al., 2010) . For example, 64.2% of LGBTQ youth report feeling highly unsafe when at school, in comparison to 15.2% of heterosexual youth (Taylor & Peter, 2011). In addition, isolated school environments can also pose serious problems for LGBTQ students in terms of academic performance (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Ferfolija, 2007; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Little, 2001). For example, the dropout rate is estimated at 28% for LGBTQ youth, which is seemingly large when compared to the overall Canadian average of nine percent (Heck et al., 2011; Little, 2001). Lastly, LGBTQ youth are also

at greater risk for academic failure and disengagement and are also less likely to enroll in a post-secondary institution (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Little, 2001; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010).

This is also a major issue facing schools in other parts of the world as well. For instance, one study of a New Zealand high school and their approach to addressing the issue of LGBTQ student academic disengagement and other related risks is largely revealing. The sexuality of these students was framed as a “barrier to learning” that could be addressed on an individual basis. For example, it was thought that through personalized counseling and intervention services provided by the school staff, students would learn how to overcome their perceived barrier to learning, or rather overcome their sexuality (Quinlivan, 2002). While such an approach served to raise awareness of LGBTQ student issues in schools, and to meet the needs of some LGBTQ students on an individual basis, it still functioned to reproduce the sexuality of LGBTQ students within “at risk” discourses and deficit-models of sexuality that more than often “blame the victim” (Erevelles, 2011; Ferfolija, 2007; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Jennings & MacGillivray, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002 Quinlivan & Town, 1999).

In addition to educational difficulties, the high rates of LGBTQ student harassment and isolation also functions to place this student population at greater risk for psychological problems. For example, high rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as low levels of self-esteem, internalized homophobia, and symptoms of self-hatred have been reported (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Jennings & MacGillivray, 2007; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Taylor & Peter; 2011; Toomey, et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). Additionally, the academic literature suggests that LGBTQ youth are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to employ maladaptive coping strategies to handle issues of social isolation and psychological distress (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Kennedy & Covell, 2009). This

includes higher rates of substance use and abuse, suicide, and trying to pass as heterosexual in order to “fit in” (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Heck et al., 2011; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Little, 2001; Rutter & Leech, 2007; Toomey, et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). More specifically, Little (2001) has found that Canadian LGBTQ youth are 1.6 times more likely to use and abuse substances and 6 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth.

Although the mental health and psychological risks associated with LGBTQ students are real and indeed, need to be addressed, individual-level services and help can only go so far. The fact that many sexual minority students try to pass as heterosexual in order to “fit in” and prevent instances of homophobic victimization illustrates the failure of school’s to protect its students and promote an inclusive, accepting, democratic, and diverse school environment (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Ferfolija, 2007; Little, 2001; Quinlivan, 2002; Quinlivan & Town, 1999).

However, this issue also illustrates how LGBTQ students themselves come to internalize the dominant homophobic and heteronormative ideologies and, in turn, come to police and regulate their own sexuality in the public sphere of the school (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Ferfolija, 2007; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Jennings & MacGillivray, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002).

Overall, it is evident that the daily harassment and victimization of LGBTQ students places them at greater risk for a variety of negative mental health, social, and educational outcomes. However, bullying and victimization on the basis of sexual orientation, as well as homophobic and heterosexist language, also serves to discipline and regulate student bodies perceived to deviate from the heteronormative standard (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Ferfolija, 2007; Foucault, 1978; Quinlivan, 2002; Quinliva, & Town, 1999). In other words, the failure of schools to intervene in instances of homophobic bullying and to implement institutional-level school reform strategies justifies the unequal treatment of sexually diverse students (Bishop & Casida,

2011; Ferfolja, 2007; Walls et al., 2010; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Moreover, it also serves to silence students identifying as non-heterosexual and to limit their rights to participation in a democratic educational system (Giroux, 2011; Quinlivan, 2002; Walls et al., 2010; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Thus, educational institutions, as well as individual staff, teachers, and students, employ what Foucault (1978) has termed “disciplinary power” through the policing, regulation, and control of student sexuality.

Although several schools across North America are now beginning to or have already implemented anti-bullying policies to specifically address the risks commonly associated with non-heterosexual youth, which is an excellent preventative measure and a step in the right direction, some researchers have noted that this further perpetuates the representation of these youth within “at risk” discourses. For example, Ferfolja (2007) and Bishop and Casida (2011) argues that discourses surrounding school-based bullying and victimization are perceived within psychological terms that pathologize the individual student and fail to address broader social and educational issues. Therefore, anti-bullying policies appear to be only a fragment of the solution to the overrepresentation of LGBTQ students within “at risk” discourses. This paper will now turn to a second fragment, which surrounds the lack of or complete exclusion of sexually diverse representations within the mandated sex education curriculum.

The Enacted Sexuality Curriculum: Heteronormative and Exclusionary

According to the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada (2009) one of the most important factors that play a role in the health and overall well-being of Canadian youth is equal access to sex and sexuality education that is both effective and comprehensive. In addition, a rights-based and critical approach to sex education has also been viewed as an effective means to combat issues of discrimination and exclusion on the basis of sexuality and gender identity,

while fostering a diverse and social justice approach to the study of sex and sexuality (Jones, 2011; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003). Yet, current academic research continues to acknowledge the lack of sexually diverse topics that are included within the enacted sex and sexuality curriculum, which serves to exclude a variety of groups within North American classrooms (Eli & Eliason, 2010; Erevelles, 2011; Ferfolija, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Kennedy & Covell, 2009; Stefan, 2012). More specifically, Surtees and Gunn (2010) suggest that despite the available literature and research documenting the negative impacts of heteronormativity within sex education, such practices, policies, and discourses within schools are still largely prevalent.

Thus, the enacted sexuality curriculum can be viewed as a force that employs both implicit and explicit messages that serve to represent and reinforce a hegemonic notion of sexuality that excludes diverse student identities and experiences (Connell & Elliot, 2009; Eli & Eliason, 2010; Ferfolija, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002; Surtees & Gunn, 2010). For example, Erevelles (2011) has stated that:

“Heteronormative in its ideological content, discourses of sexuality, being both restricted and restrictive, play a critical role in defining the “normal” child, while at the same time intervening in the most personal/private space of intimacy. The pregnant teen, the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transsexual Questioning Intersex (LGBTQI) young adult, and the disabled student are some examples of students for whom the mere expression of their sexuality casts them as abnormal” (p. 2157).

While the enacted sexuality education program lacks an inclusive approach that often misrepresents and even excludes multiple and diverse student sexualities, this section of the literature review will focus primarily on students identifying as LGBTQ. However, it is important to acknowledge that gender and sexual minority student identities also intersect with

racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic identities, as well as with disability and age, to create varying levels of exclusion and oppression within the sex education classroom.

To begin, heteronormative discourses are pervasive and are often reinforced through the construction and dissemination of knowledge pertaining to sex and sexuality, which serves to further police and regulate the gender and sexual identities of students (Connell & Elliot, 2009; Erevelles, 2011; Johnson, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002; Surtees & Gunn, 2010). This is done through a variety of means including teaching practices, pedagogies, and the curriculum content (Ferfolija, 2007). However, two common themes continue to emerge in the academic research investigating the enacted sexuality curriculum. Firstly, the current sex education program is often referred to as “the medical model” of sexuality. With a focus on the biological and reproductive aspects of sex, as well as a fear-based approach that places dominance on the prevention of negative outcomes, this model functions to pathologize or label deviant any form of sexuality that strays from the heteronormative ideal (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Connell & Elliot, 2009; Erevelles, 2011; Kennedy & Covell, 2009). Secondly, the enacted sex education curriculum also commonly categorizes sex, sexuality, and gender into dichotomous binaries, which further reflects the issue of herteronormativity, as well as complete invisibility and silence around diverse sexualities (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Ferfolja, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002; Surtees & Gunn, 2010; Taylor & Peter, 2011). This section will now turn to a discussion of each theme in more detail.

Firstly, the conservative approach or “medical-model” of sex education often employs a fear-based approach to the discussion of sex and sexuality within the general classroom. Focus is often placed on abstinence-based lessons that primarily concern the biological and reproductive aspects of sex within the confines of marriage (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Ferfolja, 2007; Jones, 2011; Quinlivan, 2002; Stefan, 2012). By limiting the curriculum content and discussion to

heterosexual individuals and experiences such as reproduction, this approach serves to label heterosexuality as the only ‘normal’ form of human sexual expression, while simultaneously placing diverse sexualities in a category of deviancy. In addition, the focus on reproduction serves to exclude those individuals who come to have a family through other means such as surrogacy or adoption (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Connell & Elliott, 2009; Stefan, 2012; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Temple, 2005). This can include sexual minority groups, but also those with disabilities, single-parent families, and those simply unable to reproduce in traditional ways.

Moreover, research has indicated a complete lack of discussion on topics such as relationships, desire, sexual identity, pleasure, intimacy, and emotions (Erevelles, 2011; Quinlivan, 2002; Stefan, 2012; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Trimble, 2009). All of these topics are equally related to the subject of sex and sexuality education and ensure a more diverse understanding and an equal representation of multiple sexual and gender identities. Thus, the current heteronormative curriculum content plays a critical role in conceptualizing what is defined as ‘normal’ student sexuality. For example, in a Canadian study of LGBTQ student perspectives on Ontario’s sexuality education program, one participant made this issue very clear. She stated that “it was as if there was nothing other than nuclear, heterosexual relationships in this world...it was as if we were not valid enough to be discussed, let alone equally” (Stefan, 2012, p. 23). Thus, this individual was able to articulate the direct impact of the medical model of sexuality and accompanying discourses of heteronormativity that resulted in feelings of illegitimacy with regards to her own and ‘other’ diverse sexual orientations.

Secondly, the medical model of sexuality education within North American schools often relies on the binary categorization of sex, sexuality, and gender. For example, when diverse sexualities are discussed, focus is often on homosexuality in direct comparison to

heterosexuality. By placing heterosexuality and homosexuality as binary opposites, one category becomes labeled as dominant, normal, and superior, while the other becomes aligned with topics of disease, abnormality, and deviancy (Erevelles, 2011; Jones, 2011; Ferfolija, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002; Temple, 2005; Trimble, 2009). Within the enacted program, this primarily involves the direct link often made between homosexuality and topics of “risky and/or deviant sexual behaviours,” which often includes the discussion of homosexuality as related to HIV/AIDS (Connell & Elliot, 2009; Ferfolija, 2007; Kennedy & Covell, 2009; Stefan, 2012; Temple, 2005). The link made between homosexuality and pathology conveys the message that heterosexuality is indeed the norm, while also using silence as a form of student sexual regulation. Surtees and Gunn (2010) define silence as the practice whereby opposing identities, ideologies, and experiences are actively neglected and discredited. This is evident in a study where one participant indicated that “there were never topics about lesbian sexual safe practices...Just gay men and aids issues basically” (Stefan, 2012, p. 31). This quote illustrates that within the current curriculum, the dominant practice is to define sexuality as either heterosexual or homosexual, which serves to link homosexuality with topics of disease and pathology, and to silence and render invisible the discussion and existence of multiple and diverse sexualities.

Overall, it is evident by the above discussion that school districts within North America do little to challenge the current heterosexist curriculum content. Moreover, Johnson (2007) and others have indicated that even when an LGBTQ inclusive sexuality curriculum is introduced, school districts often intervene in its application and enforcement in the classroom. For instance, Temple (2005) found that gay-friendly classroom materials are usually protested and banned from classrooms. For example, topics of the gay-rights movement are often neglected in history classes, family life classrooms rarely acknowledge sexually diverse families, and law classes

often exclude issues regarding discrimination on the basis of sexual and/or gender identity (Temple, 2005). While such topics are often excluded from the curriculum under the guise of being in the “best interests” of the students, Bay-Cheng (2003) has noted that this form of adult protectionism and surveillance, while providing a justification for fear-based methods, limits the scope of sex education to the prevention of negative outcomes and to producing a certain ‘type’ of sexuality. This is odd considering the majority of parents have indicated in national surveys that topics of sexual diversity and sexual rights should be included within the mandated curriculum (SIECCAN, 2009).

In turn, Johnson (2007) calls for a “pedagogy of the closet” while Trimble (2009) calls for a “pedagogy of discomfort” whereby educators and students become active participants in the interrogation of the ways in which “normative” conceptions of sexuality are represented as and how they are discussed within the sex education classroom. This is in line with Jones’ (2011) idea of a critical approach to sex education whereby sexual knowledge is presented, not only in biological terms, but with a social justice paradigm that allows students to rethink and challenge assumptions about sex and sexuality. Such an approach to sex education is needed since both the enacted and hidden sex and sexuality curriculum currently function to regulate, police, and monitor student sexualities.

In conclusion, the construction and transmission of sexual knowledge and beliefs, the growing need for teacher development training, the high rates of homophobic bullying, the lack of teacher intervention, the alignment of homosexuality with disease, the complete silence of diverse sexualities, and the self-silencing among LGBTQ students themselves all function to define ‘normal’ sexuality and to discipline those who fall outside heteronormative standards. Thus, what Foucault (1978) described as a “system of alliances” can be said to be even more

complicated and pervasive today. Curriculum developers, educational policy-makers, individual educators, administrators, and students all compromise agents of sexual disciplinary power within North American schools today. However, a recent and widespread movement of high school student organizations that bring together sexual minority and heterosexual students and educators is attracting much attention among educational and youth sexuality researchers. This paper will now turn to a critical discussion of the research pertaining to the emergence and benefits of North American high school GSAs.

High School GSAs: Roles, Benefits, and Goals

In documenting the emergence of high school GSAs in the United States, researchers have stated that these student organizations first emerged due to the construction of sexual minority students as “at risk” (Black et al., 2012; Draughn, Elkins, & Roy, 2002; Mayberry et al., 2011; Miceli, 2005; Russell et al., 2009). Originally initiated by concerned adults such as community members, teachers, and school administrators, the overall goals of high school GSAs was the provision of support, safety, and counselling services required by the LGBTQ student population (Black, et al., 2012; Draughn, et al., 2002; Miceli, 2005; Russell et al., 2009). This was primarily due to the lack of educational resources and efforts being implemented by school districts to end homophobia and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Currie et al., 2012; Mayberry et al, 2011; Miceli, 2005). The first GSA to emerge in the United States was during the late 1980s in both Los Angeles and Boston (Herriot, 2011; Miceli, 2005), while the first report of a GSA in Canada was during the year 2000 (Herriot, 2011). While GSAs in both Canada and the United States have garnered immense media attention and public protest over the years, they continue to grow in numbers and mark a unique departure from conventional LGBTQ

organizing, which historically excluded the active participation of young people (Herriot, 2011; Miceli, 2005).

However, GSAs eventually came to transform into more student-initiated organizations that were under the supervisor of a faculty advisor. There have been research studies specifically outlining case studies of the process in which students had to go through to initiate and maintain a GSA at their high school (see Macgillivray, 2005; Macgillivray, 2006; Mayberry, 2006; Miceli, 2005). As students came to push for their right to have a GSA in their own high school, research documenting the roles and benefits of GSAs began to grow significantly. Researchers have determined the most common goals of high school GSAs to be the provision of a safe space, counseling and support services, education and awareness within the larger school body, and lastly, broader social and political efforts to combat social justice and human rights issues as they intersect with gender and sexuality (Black et al., 2012; Currie et al., 2012; Draughn et al., 2002). However, with regards to the benefits of high school GSAs, most of the current academic research has focused on individual-level gains as a result of both GSA presence and membership.

Specifically, researchers in the United States have reported positive benefits for LGBTQ youth in terms of both school-based bullying, as well as victimization on the basis of actual and/or perceived gender and sexual orientation. For instance, LGBTQ students attending a secondary school with a GSA have reported decreased levels of both overt and covert forms of harassment, increased feelings of safety while at school, as well as being better able to identify a supportive adult in the school environment (Black et al., 2012; Craig et al., 2008; Heck et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Mayberry et al., 2011; Miceli, 2005; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). Furthermore, research has also documented increased feelings of personal empowerment, which can include an increased sense of agency, comfort and confidence with one's sexual identity, and

greater levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem, both during high school as well as throughout young adulthood (Black et al., 2012; Currie et al., 2012; Lee, 2002; Mayberry et al., 2011; Russell et al., 2009; Walls et al., 2010). Lastly, increased feelings of belongingness, identification with the school, and sense of community have also been reported (Currie et al., 2012; Heck et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Miceli, 2005; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010).

In addition GSA presence and membership, in combination with the benefits discussed above, have functioned to offset the risks commonly associated with LGBTQ students. The current research has illustrated potential positive benefits in terms of both mental health and educational outcomes. For example, LGBTQ students attending a school with a GSA have reported significantly lower levels of general psychological distress, depression, substance abuse, suicide ideation and attempts, participation in risky behaviours, and symptoms of social isolation (Black et al., 2012; Craig, et al., 2008; Heck et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Mayberry et al., 2011; Miceli, 2005; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). Moreover, students have also indicated more confidence in developing open and positive relationships with parents, peers, and school staff, resulting in an overall increase in young adult well-being (Black et al., 2012; Lee, 2002; Mayberry et al., 2011; Toomey et al., 2011). As Conen (2005) suggested, North American high school GSAs have worked to replace silence and isolation with visibility and connection for sexual minority students and their allies. In view of educational outcomes, LGBTQ youth have also experienced decreased dropout rates, greater school attendance and motivation, higher grade levels, and greater post-secondary and career aspirations (Black et al., 2012; Craig et al., 2008; Heck et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Mayberry et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010).

Although there is much research documenting the roles and benefits of high school GSAs within the United States, there is little research examining the impact of these student

organizations within Canada (Kitchen & Bellini, 2013). This could be due to the time of first emergence of a high school GSAs within each of the countries. Because of this, GSAs in the United States have had more time to develop a strong network of support between community organizations, educators, supportive parental groups, other student GSA members, and LGBTQ services and resources. For example, the development of the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (*GLSEN*) within the United States enabled students and faculty advisors to connect with one another and share their stories, resources, and knowledge to further develop and maintain the strength of the GSA movement over the years (Miceli, 2005). This has resulted in greater availability of data for research studies documenting the benefits of GSAs within the United States.

As mentioned earlier, only one research study conducted in Canada was found in the literature search. In their interviews with educators during the first phase of their research study, Kitchen and Bellini (2013) found that GSAs have had a positive impact on levels of bullying and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation and they could have a greater impact if teachers and administrators are actively involved in the larger movement to combat homophobia. GSA faculty advisors in particular were affected in a positive way by gaining more knowledge in areas of school policies and student rights as they pertained to sexuality (Kitchen & Bellini, 2013). However, what was significant about this study was how the activities within this GSA extended beyond the provision of safety and support into educational activities and events that reached the larger school body. This point in a way contradicts the majority of criticisms that have emerged among academics on the goals and benefits of high school GSAs. Although this Canadian study is not yet completed, it points to some contradictions in the arguments made against the benefits

of GSAs. This literature review will now turn to a discussion of these common criticisms that have emerged around the goals of high school GSAs.

Critiques of the “Safe Space” Discourse

Despite the individual benefits of high school GSAs discussed above, several researchers are concerned with the dominant “safe space” discourse surrounding these student organizations, which many argue functions to re-pathologize LGBTQ students as an “at risk” population (Currie et al., 2012; Mayberry et al., 2011; Miceli, 2005; Savin-Williams, 2002). According to some, the “safe space” discourse allows school policies and personnel to limit the roles and efforts of GSAs simply to the provision of intervention and counseling services for LGBTQ students on an individual basis, as well as the provision of a space where LGBTQ students can find safe and supportive relationships with each other and heterosexual allies (Currie et al., 2012; Mayberry et al., 2011; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002). More specifically, MacIntosh (2007) states that several individual educators, as well as school administrators, have difficulty moving beyond the “safe space” aspect of GSAs, especially in light of the immense attention now paid to issues of bullying and victimization, which largely impacts sexual minority students.

Moreover, this focus on safety and the personal impacts of bullying functions to both individualize and pathologize the problems experienced by these students while simultaneously limiting the social justice aspects of high school GSAs. For example, boundaries are often put in place around these student organizations’ differential roles, missions, and efforts thus, leaving school-based heteronormative ideologies and practices unquestioned and unchallenged (Currie et al., 2012; Quinlivan, 2002; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995; Talburt, 2004; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Some have noted that this approach to addressing school-based sexual diversity issues allows schools to appear sensitive and engaged with LGBTQ students without compromising the

marketability and image of the school as “promoting” sexual justice efforts or more specifically, as “promoting homosexuality” (Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995).

Despite this common criticism, research has documented that this “safe space” discourse helps individual students, faculty advisors, and school administrators to better negotiate their right to form and maintain a high school GSA with certain community, religious, and parental groups who are in opposition to such school-based student organizations (Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; Macgillivray, 2006; Mayberry et al., 2011; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002). In other words, by framing the issues experienced by LGBTQ students as one of safety, it becomes much easier for schools to counteract common arguments made against sexually-inclusive school practices. On the other hand, some argue that by looking at high school GSAs as “safe havens” where LGBTQ students are protected and supported, broader social issues of school-based heteronormativity are downplayed, while GSAs become viewed as a solution to the problem of sexuality-based bullying and victimization (Currie et al., 2012; MacIntosh, 2007; Macgillivray & Whitlock, 2007; Mayberry et al., 2011; Mayberry, 2006; Miceli, 2005).

Since the research documenting the individual and psychological benefits of GSAs in secondary schools is widely available, there is a need for research investigating if and how student members of GSAs, along with faculty advisors, negotiate, resist, and transform institutionalized heteronormativity that label them within discourses of risk in the first place. As Mayberry (2006) stated:

“What is largely missing from the dominant literature is an analysis of *how* LGBT students themselves are resisting heterocentric school environments, challenging the institutional structures that impose identity categories (including well-meaning LGBT

supportive educators), and attempting to claim a legitimate (rather than protected) place for LGBT identity in school environments” (p. 17).

Such research is beginning to emerge within the academic literature pertaining to topics of LGBTQ student experiences, sexually-inclusive school pedagogy and policies, and high school GSAs. However, the majority of this research, which has documented the potential of high school GSAs to combat school-based heteronormativity, was done within the United States, leaving Canadian GSAs largely under-researched.

Despite the common criticisms of high school GSAs as being limited to the “safe space” discourse, certain research studies have alluded to the potential of these school-based organizations to become sites in which students can come together and engage in social justice efforts, promote an LGBTQ-inclusive education, and to challenge school-based heterosexism. For example, Schindel (2008) has argued that those students who are a part of the growing GSA movement are engaging in social justice efforts that both extend and move through a variety of institutional spaces including educational policy, educational curricula, community sites, legislative arenas, as well as personal arenas. Schindel (2008) refers to this as a form of ‘mobilizing education’ wherein students and faculty mobilize their resources to create a much stronger force that works towards the transformation of discourses, practices, and policies that allow for institutionalized forms of student oppression (Schindel, 2008). Thus, it is important for academics, teachers, school administrators, and community members to not underestimate the potential for struggle and resistance among LGBTQ students and their allies, as well as the ways these students and faculty are coming together to exercise their agency (Quinlivan, 2002).

In some research studies conducted, predominantly in the United States, high school GSAs and larger GSA gatherings and/or conferences have been found to be critical spaces where

students develop and learn skills in student empowerment, activism, advocacy, social justice organizing, ways to challenge policy, and other tools of resistance (Craig et al., 2008; Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; Macgillivray & Whitlock, 2007; Miceli, 2005; Russel et al., 2009). For example, in a study conducted by Russel et al. (2009), student members of GSAs noted how they became empowered on both a personal and organizational level through “having and using knowledge” (p. 896). GSAs for these students became a space where they could gain knowledge of student rights, forms of sexual oppression, and policies on discrimination, as well as how to strategically use that knowledge to negotiate with the opposition (Craig et al., 2008; Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; Mussman, 2007; Schindel, 2008). In another study on Mexico’s first high school GSA, Macgillivray (2006) found that both membership and participation in a GSA provided students with the opportunity to learn about and experience democracy, as well as important lessons on how to navigate bureaucracy. The development of such skills is necessary within democratic systems such as schools and for lessons in citizenship education.

Furthermore, studies have noted how student members of high school GSAs developed a basic understanding of school-based heterosexism and began to engage with strategies on how to actively challenge it (Lee, 2002; Mayerry, 2006; Mussman, 2007; Miceli, 2005; Russell et al., 2009; Schindel, 2008). More importantly, however is the fact that students learned how the status of LGBTQ youth as an “at risk” population is not a personal problem that can be fixed through individualized treatments or services, but rather an institutional issue that is embedded within educational systems and society at large (Mayberry, 2006; Miceli, 2011). Lastly, Cohen (2008) and Herriot (2011) have also documented how GSA members were tactical in their use of the media to voice their concerns and stories to the larger public and to counteract common arguments made against high school GSAs. More specifically, GSAs became spaces for these

students to voice their rights to participate and organize in a larger social movement for sexual justice, whose efforts extend beyond the boundaries of the high school (Russell et al., 2009; Schindel, 2008). This illustrates how these student members are in the process of developing a collective and politicized consciousness that has allowed them to work collaboratively and to engage in efforts that counteract common issues associated with sexual minority youth and work towards political change (Cohen, 2005; Giroux, 2011; Friere, 2000; Mayberry, 2006).

In addition, other researchers have noted the educational aspect of high school GSAs. For instance, GSAs have been found to be key organizations in educating the broader school community about LGBTQ issues within education and common misconceptions about LGBTQ people (Mayberry et al., 2011; Mussman, 2007), with many initiating school-wide discussions on discrimination policies directly affecting sexual minority youth (Macgillivray, 2005). For example, several GSAs have been found to participate in activities such as the Day of Pink, Day of Silence, as well as forming an LGBTQ awareness week (Ferfolja, 2013; Mussman, 2007). Similar activities have been noted including school wide conferences, workshops, and social justice assemblies focusing on school-based sexuality issues along with grassroots activities including film showings and posting or handing out LGBTQ-inclusive posters, buttons, key chains, etc. (Cohen, 2005). GSAs have also functioned as a space where difficult conversations can take place (Macgillivray & Whitlock, 2007; Miceli, 2005) and where students and teachers can reflect upon their own biases surrounding sexual orientation and to challenge others in the school community to do so as well (Macgillivray, 2005).

More specifically, much research has been done surrounding the arguments and protests made by the public against the rights of students to form GSAs in their high schools. The two most common arguments made against GSAs are that 1) they are dangerous and function to

promote promiscuity and recruit innocent students into homosexual lifestyles and 2) that organizations such as GSAs are unnecessary and have no place within a school setting since topics related to sex, sexuality, and gender should be left to parents within the private realm of the home, not within public settings (Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; Herriot, 2011; Macgillivray, 2004; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002). Despite the strong opposition towards the formation of high school GSAs in North America that still continues today, student members, leaders, and faculty advisors of GSAs have been persistent in fighting for their rights to organize for sexual justice efforts. Thus, the fact that GSAs are still in schools and are growing in numbers illustrates how these young people have demonstrated their abilities and competencies to act as educational leaders, notwithstanding continued public resistance (Craig et al., 2008; Herriot, 2011; Miceli, 2005).

All of these research findings taken together suggest that student members of GSAs, both LGBTQ and heterosexual, are not simply passive victims of heteronormativity and homophobia in schools, but are beginning to implement their own forms of resistance to heteronormative discourses that label them as “at risk” and in need of “safe spaces.” As Macintosh (2007) has pointed out, the problem lies not within high school GSAs themselves, but in the construction of normalcy, or more specifically, sexual normalcy in educational contexts (MacIntosh, 2007). However, despite these few documented instances of resistance within the academic literature, there still remains a persistent attitude among some researchers that students of high school GSAs are unable to question, challenge, and transform their school environments. However, many believe that this has to do with the issue of age. For instance, much of the research reflects upon the status of students as “pre-citizens” making them unable to impact organizational and institutional levels of oppression (Moss & Petrie, 2002; Russell et al., 2009; Stasiulis, 2002).

However, Macgillivray and Whitlock (2007) have stated that since GSAs are still in their infancy stage, the larger social, political, and educational impacts of these student organizations are largely unknown. This is especially true for GSAs in Canadian high schools where research is to a great extent lacking. Therefore, the possibility for Canadian high school GSAs to become spaces for the development of student discourses of resistance is in need of further investigation.

Shifting Discourses: LGBTQ Youth “At Promise”

Research concerning youth development programs frequently criticizes the focus on individual and group-level problems and pathologies, which limits the ability to examine the institutional, social, and political factors that play a role in various forms of youth oppression (Currie et al., 2012; Ginwright & Commarota, 2002; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995). Although youth development programs have shifted their ways of thinking about young people from a view that characterizes them as problems needing to be fixed, rehabilitated, or contained, to emphasizing them as assets in need of further skill development, the underlying premise still assumes that young people themselves need to be changed. This way of thinking serves to neglect the social institutions that perpetuate forms of oppression on the basis of race, culture, gender, class, sexuality, and disability (Ginwright & Commarota, 2002; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006). Therefore, several researchers within the field of positive youth development are now calling for a paradigm shift from one that views youth “at risk” to one that promotes a critical social justice approach and emphasizes youth “at promise” (Ginwright & Commarota, 2002; Jennings et al., 2006; Stasiulis, 2002; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995).

Drawing from the current models of youth development and empowerment, a critical social justice approach should compromise various characteristics and goals to promote young people as active, competent, and knowledgeable beings. While examining the characteristics of

such a model, this paper will also make reference to high school GSAs. To begin, a critical and social justice-oriented model of youth organizing begins with the development of a safe and secure space for youth to feel valued and supported and to develop a sense of collective belongingness (Frieire, 2000; Ginwright & Commarota, 2002; Jennings et al., 2006; Miceli, 2005; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009). Considering the original purposes of high school GSAs in North America, as well as the benefits discussed previously in this paper, it is accurate to assume that most GSAs have already established a safe space within the larger heterosexist and homophobic school environment, although more work is still needed to transform entire educational systems (Currie et al., 2012; Heck et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Miceli, 2005; Russell et al., 2009; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010).

Secondly, youth development research has articulated the need to move these spaces beyond the discourses of safety into arenas for the critical reflection and discussion of the institutional forms of oppression that limit their ability to express their sexuality (Currie et al., 2012; Ginwright & Commarota, 2002; Jennings et al., 2006; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009). This second process requires the meaningful engagement, participation, and voice of student members, as well as an equitable power-sharing relationship between students and faculty advisors (Jennings et al., 2006; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Stasiulis, 2002). Although some GSAs in North America have begun to initiate such discussions, and much research has noted the prominent role students play in the opening and continuation of high school GSAs (Miceli, 2005; Russell et al., 2009), not all have moved into this step of critical reflection. This second process of critical youth social justice is required to enter the third phase, which is to engage in organizational efforts or what Paulo Freire (1970) has termed “praxis,” that is, to actively resist, educate, and transform inequitable social circumstances. In particular, this notion of praxis

involves an integration of critical consciousness with social action that encourages young people to understand and change how inequality structures their educational and social lives (Ginwright & Commarota, 2002).

Conclusion

Overall, high school GSAs are proving to be highly beneficial in terms of individual levels gains, including increased feelings of safety, less school-based victimization, and decreases in negative social, educational, and mental health outcomes (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Craig et al., 2008; Erevelles, 2011; Ferfolja, 2007; Kennedy & Covell, 2009; Little, 2001; Quinlivan, 2002; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Walls et al., 2010). However, the potential of GSAs as sites for critical pedagogy, social justice organizing, citizenship education, and youth empowerment is largely under researched. In addition, while most research on North American GSAs has been conducted within the United States, there is a growing need for research on GSAs within a Canadian context. Specifically, there is a need to investigate if and how Canadian student GSA members and advisors are engaging the critical reflection and discussion of heteronormative school practices that place LGBTQ students in a position of risk and limit their participation in a democratic educational system. Research should 1) voice the perspectives of GSA members and advisors and 2) work towards the rethinking of LGBTQ students as “at risk” and simply in need of “safe spaces” (Swadner & Lubeck, 1995). Overall, high school GSAs may prove to be a unique context that is youth-driven for such a paradigm shift to take place.

Chapter 3: Methodology

“Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a burning building.”

–Paulo Freire, (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 1970)

In order to examine high school GSAs within Ontario to determine if they can play a role in challenging school-based heterosexism, this research has taken on a qualitative approach to the investigation. This research study can be considered exploratory, since it is investigating the phenomenon of high school GSAs in Ontario, a topic that is relatively lacking in research. This study can also be viewed as deconstructive, since its goals are to unravel some of the dominant discourses that shape the roles, goals, and activities conducted by high school GSAs. Lastly, it could also be considered emancipatory, since the goals of this research study are to examine the perspectives and stories of high school GSA faculty advisers to determine the ways in which these organizations can continue to develop towards spaces where critical thinking, social justice, democratic values, and youth agency take on prominent roles.

Overall, this study, which is informed by theoretical understandings of critical pedagogy and methods of discourse analysis rooted in traditions of critical theory, queer studies, feminist studies, as well as the Foucauldian tradition, will analyze, disarticulate, and unravel the “at risk” and “safe space” discourses and their impact on how students and teachers negotiate school-based heteronormativity in the context of high school GSAs (Delamont, 2012; Lazar, 2005; MacLure, 2003; Rogers, 2004; Van Dijk, 1993). Therefore, this chapter will begin by discussing the study design, which will include a discussion of the methods chosen to collect data for the current research study. This section will also explain the reasoning behind the chosen data collection methods. Secondly, this chapter will discuss the participants within the study, including a description of the recruitment process, as well as a description of the participant

sample. This will be followed by a discussion of ethical considerations that needed to be addressed within the current investigation. Lastly, this chapter will provide an explanation of the processes and procedures employed in analyzing the data collected.

Study Design & Data Collection

As indicated in the opening quote of this chapter cited in Freire (1970), it is imperative to include the voices, narratives, and reflections of those being studied or rather, to treat them as participating subjects within the research process versus objects of study. In order to ensure that this task is carried out, interviews with teachers who act as faculty advisers within a high school GSA in Ontario were conducted. While I originally wished to speak to the student members of GSAs directly, ethical considerations for interviewing young people, as well as time constraints, did not allow for student interviews to be conducted. This section will now describe the methods employed in more detail and why they have been chosen to answer the previously stated questions the current investigation raises, which include:

- 1) Does the LGBTQ student "at risk" discourse limit the roles of GSAs in Ontario high schools to simply providing "safe spaces"? And,
- 2) Can student members and faculty advisers mobilize GSAs to become sites where heteronormativity is actively interrogated, negotiated, questioned, challenged, and/or resisted?

Furthermore, this research study will be concerned with both:

- 1) Top-down discourses that regulate the policies and practices surrounding GSAs, as well as the possibility for
- 2) Bottom-up discourses of student resistance and/or compliance to the dominant "at risk" and "safe space" discourses

Within previous research studies investigating high school GSAs, a variety of different data collection methods have been employed. Depending on the research questions asked, each method holds both benefits and limitations. For large scale studies that wished to determine the

impact of high school GSAs on, for example, mental health outcomes, feelings of safety, and overall social and educational outcomes on a large population of youth, surveys or questionnaires were frequently used (Heck et al., 2011; Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). Within these studies, results are more reliable and can be generalized to a larger population. However, while providing compelling statistics on the benefits of high school GSAs, these studies were relatively lacking with regards to in-depth and descriptive discussions of these student organizations. Furthermore, in other studies (Harriot, 2011; MacGillivray, 2005; Mayberry, 2006) textual analyses of newspaper articles on GSAs and other related documents were used to investigate the public's perception of high school GSAs, as well as in combination with other methods such as interviews or surveys to triangulate data. Overall, the majority of studies investigating high school GSAs with a focus on gathering personal and descriptive accounts of these student clubs used a variety of different interview styles. These included one-to-one semi-structured interviews, one-to-one interview guides, as well as focus group interviews with a variety of participants including student members of GSAs, faculty advisors of GSAs, and school administrators (Ferfolja, 2007; Lee, 2002; MacGillivray, 2005; Mayberry, 2006; Mayberry et al., 2011; Russel et al., 2009; Schindel, 2008).

Within the current research study, it was imperative to speak with individuals about their involvement in a high school GSA to determine if dominant discourses of “risk” and “safe spaces” are limiting the efforts made to challenge school-based heterosexism and how high school GSA student members and faculty advisors negotiate, resist, and transform these discourses. Therefore, faculty advisors of GSAs participated in an in-depth, semi-structured interview. According to Seidman (1998), the purpose of interviewing is not to find definitive answers to a question, to evaluate, examine, or judge something, nor to test a set of hypotheses.

Rather, the purpose of in-depth interviewing is to provide access to the context of people's experiences, narratives, and/or behaviours so that the researcher, who has an inherent interest in what the participant has to say, can attempt to understand the meaning behind such experiences (Seidman, 1998; Silverman, 2005).

In other words, if a researcher wants to investigate an educational organization, process, or institution, such as high school GSAs, the primary method to do so is through the narratives of the individual members who make up that organization (Seidman, 1998). However, it is important to understand that in this research study, interview responses will be treated as narratives which are actively constructed by the participants, versus a definitive version of reality and experience (Seidman, 1998; Silverman, 2005). In other words, the purpose of interviewing faculty advisors in this particular research study is not to simply understand and examine the actual experiences of being a part of a high school GSA, but rather to understand how participants talk about their work within a GSA and how they construct their missions, goals, and values for both student members and the larger school community (Silverman, 2005).

Within this study, four interviews were conducted in total between March and April 2014. Two individual interviews were conducted with GSA faculty advisors, one interview was conducted via email as requested by the faculty advisor, and one focus group interview was conducted at a GSA movie night, which included the researcher, two faculty advisors, and one school-based nurse who works with the GSA. Although different formats were used in the interview process, each style carries with it its own set of benefits and limitations, which will be discussed below. Qualitative interviewing in general holds several benefits within research studies. For example, they allow the participants to become expert sources of knowledge as they are provided with opportunities to describe what is meaningful and significant for them in their

own words without the restrictions of quantitative, pre-determined categories (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998; Silverman, 2005). Secondly, interviews are also known as a method that provides high levels of authenticity and face validity, since data are collected directly from the participants narratives. Thirdly, in qualitative interviews, the researcher is able to use their own knowledge and skills to explore a variety of themes discussed by the participants and to probe for more details to ensure the participant understands the questions accurately. Lastly, there is no existing questionnaire or quantitative measures that would be appropriate to gather data on the topic in question (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998; Silverman, 2005).

Patton (2002) has outlined different types of interviews including informal conversational interviews, the interview guide approach, standardized open-ended interviews, and closed quantitative interviews. Each style of interviewing, while providing researchers with access to the narratives and experiences of participants, holds its own set of benefits and limitations. For purposes of this research study, I chose to use a standardized, open-ended interview format whereby interview questions are determined in advance, along with the wording of the questions and the sequence (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998). All interview participants were asked the same basic questions and in the same order. However, questions are worded in an open-ended manner allowing for open-ended responses. This approach increases the ability to compare responses across interview participants and each set of data reflects similar topics of discussion since the same interview questions were used (Patton, 2002). In addition, this approach reduces the likelihood of interview bias since the interview is structured and is a preferred approach for less experienced interviewers such as myself. Lastly, since this interview

adheres to a pre-meditated structure, it functions to promote increased organization for data analysis (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998).

However, despite these strengths, this format of interviewing also holds some limitations. For example, there is less flexibility in the interview to respond to participants' individual experiences and narratives and the questions may fail to get at the core of the issues important and most relevant to the participant (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998; Silverman, 2005). To deter the effects of this limitation, I remained as open as possible to the participants' responses and allowed them to take the conversation to unanticipated places of inquiry (Lichtman, 2006; Patton, 2002). For example, I did not interrupt if participants became sidetracked from the question, as long as I felt it was relevant to the topic under investigation. By doing so, I limited the possibility of missing important information that was not included in the pre-determined questions. In addition to these specific limitations, interviews in general hold particular limitations as well. For example, people do not always tell the truth or do not remember events as accurately as they believe they do, so researchers are putting a lot of trust into the participants' responses. However, since this research is not necessarily concerned with an objective depiction of the experiences in a high school GSA, but more about how faculty advisors talk about their work in a GSA, such a limitation is not of great concern.

Secondly, sometimes participants will simply tell you what they believe they want you to hear, rather than being entirely truthful (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998). In order to overcome this limitation, I engaged in several email conversations prior to the interviews to establish rapport with the participants. Since it was evident that these faculty advisers of GSAs are passionate about their work in these student organizations, I am confident that they were entirely honest about what they are doing and about how they feel within the interview. Thirdly, qualitative

interviews may be viewed as more intrusive than quantitative approaches, and participants may not wish to share as much information in this format (Patton, 2002). This occurred with one participant who did not feel comfortable being audio recorded. When I provided her with different options, which included an in-person interview that would not be recorded with the researcher taking notes or an email interview, she chose the latter. An email interview is an excellent way to access participants in dislocated or dispersed areas making it a very efficient and cost effective method. It also ensures a greater degree of anonymity in a safe and private setting where the participant is free to express their perspectives, while limiting the influence the interviewer may have on participant responses due to factors such as age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, and socioeconomic status to name a few (Delamont, 2012; Meho, 2006).

However, it is important to think about what is lost and how participant responses are affected by conducting an interview via email. For example, there is no personal interaction between the researcher and participant in an online setting so things such as facial expressions, gestures, voice tones, body movement, and hesitations in responses cannot be documented. The high level of personal interaction in face-to-face interviews often results in “richer” data than email interviews can provide for. Secondly, the participant responses may lack reliability and validity. Since the researcher is not present to answer questions the participant may have to clarify a question being asked, or the participant may answer without fully understanding the question being asked (Delamont, 2012; Meho, 2006). However, the participant who participated in the email interview used in this study was very descriptive in her responses and frequently ended an email with “is this along the lines of what you are looking for?” In addition, if I required any clarification, I would send an email back asking for more information in the form of a follow-up email versus a direct probe that would be used in a face-to-face interview. Overall,

Meho (2006) stated that overall data quality in email interviews is equivalent to that in traditional interview methods. In fact, he notes that some have found data quality is even greater since participants remain more focused on the question being asked and have more time to prepare a clear, dense, and informative response.

Lastly, within interviews, different personalities and moods may impact the relationship between the interviewer and the participants. Since the researcher is the instrument of collecting data within qualitative interviews, the “instrument” may be affected by factors such as skill level, experience, knowledge, as well as personality and mood. Thus, it is imperative according to Patton (2002) to remain observant and sensitive to factors such as nonverbal messages, body language, and effects of the setting on the interview. This is particularly important within focus group interviews, where participating members can come from a variety of backgrounds, with a variety of experiences and prior knowledge, and a variety of personalities. In such a research context it is imperative for the researcher or moderator to maintain a healthy and lively discussion without certain members dominating discussion while simultaneously encouraging quieter members to participate in the discussion (Flick, 2006; Patton, 2002). Within this study, the focus group conducted included two GSA faculty advisors from different high schools in the same school board (one very experienced GSA advisor and one new to GSA work), as well as a school-based nurse who works with the GSA and the researcher. Since these individuals were acquainted with one another and shared similar interests in the work they do, this focus group was considered more homogenous and natural than artificially created focus groups (Flick, 2006). This resulted in a very balanced and interesting discussion among the whole group.

While focus groups are often considered efficient, cost-effective, and a method that provides for quality control (i.e., corrections from group members and a shared consensus often

result in more reliable and authentic information being provided), focus groups also act a joint narratives in which opinions, perspectives, and attitudes are shared, discussed, produced, and exchanged in an interactive and natural context more in line with everyday interactions than a one-to-one interview (Flick, 2006; Patton, 2002). As Flick (2006) has stated, “focus groups are seen and used as simulations of everyday discourses and conversations” (p. 199). Thus, it was interesting to witness the discussion among the focus group members with regards to their work in GSAs. More importantly, this method acted as forum in which members were able to learn from one another, share their stories, and indicate what has worked and what has not within their schools. However, focus groups also hold their own set of limitations. For example, results generated from focus group data cannot be generalized to the larger population of GSA faculty advisors. However, that was not the goal of the current project, to find one definitive answer or one true representation of reality for all GSA advisors to aspire to. In addition, it is often more difficult to take notes during focus groups, which is why the session was audio recorded with the consent of all members. Lastly, Flick (2006) has noted that limited questions can be asked in a focus group when compared to an individual interview. However, I was able to address every question I did within the individual interviews since we had ample time to conduct the group interview.

Overall, it has been suggested that the semi-structured, open-ended interviews are of more value to the inexperienced interviewer whether conducted individually, in a group, or online via email (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002). Since this is the first research project taken on by myself that utilizes interviewing as a data collection method, I believe it was a wise choice to sidestep the more popular interview guide approach and use the semi-structured interview. Within this study, interviews were approximately one hour in length and took place in settings

most comfortable and convenient to the participants. The first one-to-one interview was conducted at the York University campus in a private space available for graduate students in education. The second one-to-one interview was conducted in the guidance office at one of the schools where the participant worked. The focus group interview was also conducted at the school where the participants worked in the hallway outside the room where student GSA members were participating in a movie night. The email interview was conducted online. The two one-to-one interviews and the focus group interview were audio-recorded, since all participants agreed to the use of recording devices. Interviews began with brief introductions, a reiteration of the purpose of the study, what would be involved, and a discussion of the participants' rights and possible risks and benefits. Following this, I asked the participants if they had any further questions or concerns that needed to be clarified and then proceeded to obtain the signed informed consent document (Appendix A). Then we began the interview which began with general, easy to answer questions and then progressed into more in-depth and detailed questions. Lastly, the interview concluded by asking the participant if there is anything the interview did not cover that they would like to add (Appendix B). After this, I provided the participant with a list of resources if the interview caused them any distress, along with a feedback letter, which provided the participant with an option of reviewing their data and/or the final report to ensure their narratives and experiences were represented accurately (Appendix A).

Participants

Within the current research study, participants included five faculty advisors of high school GSAs, as well as one school-based nurse who worked with one school's GSA, within Ontario, Canada. To protect the identities of the participants, as well as the identity of the schools, the specific locations of the high school GSAs being discussed in this study will remain

confidential. Overall, the cities and towns/small communities that the teacher advisors worked within were predominantly White, English speaking, and with a high percentage of individuals from the Catholic and Protestant faiths. One GSA faculty advisor worked in a high school located in a large city in Southwestern Ontario. Another faculty advisor worked in a smaller city in Southwestern Ontario. Two other faculty advisors worked in a high school within smaller and more rural communities in Southwestern Ontario and lastly, the email interview was conducted with an individual from a smaller city located in Eastern Ontario.

There is a common practice within high school GSAs where the student members do not have to disclose their sexual and gender identity to the faculty advisor or other student members within the GSA in order to provide for some privacy (Miceli, 2005; Russel et al., 2009; Savin-Williams, 2001). Therefore, the participants were not asked to disclose their sexual and/or gender identity within the interviews conducted, although some did choose to. Based on these personal disclosures, it appears that the faculty advisors were approximately half heterosexual and half LGBTQ. In addition, while it was hoped that this study would recruit participants from a range of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups in order to gain multiple perspectives, this was not the case. All of the participants were White, which is in line with most of the previous research indicating that most high school GSAs are made up of predominantly White, female students and faculty (Draughn et al., 2002; Russel et al., 2009). Moreover, since the interviews were conducted in pre-dominantly White cities and small communities, there was a lack of cultural and racial diversity within the schools' demographics. Overall, I interviewed four female faculty advisors, one male faculty advisor, and one female school-based nurse. All of the participants ranged in age and work experience. At the beginning of the interview participants were asked to share their educational background, career experience, and roles within the high school they worked at.

Below is a direct excerpt from each participant, outlined in a participant profile. All of the participants' names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Participant 1: Jane

I started teaching in 1995. I have taught many different subjects in grades 9-12 at a variety of levels; math, art, drama, English, communications technology, computer engineering, history, and civics. I have also spent a great deal of time working in special education and Student Success. Currently, I am a Student Success teacher where I work in a self-contained classroom/alternative classroom in a mainstream school. I support students with a variety of learning challenges: mental health, behavioural challenges etc. and I work with many LGBTQ students in my classroom...I have been involved in equity, anti-oppression and social justice work since my university days, so I brought this perspective into the classroom. My classroom (regardless of what I am teaching) is a place that celebrates diversity and promotes inclusion and cultural awareness. I'm sure this has played a huge part in students feeling comfortable to share their stories/come out with/to me. So, as a classroom teacher, I was involved in doing anti-homophobia work long before GSAs were on the radar.

Participant 2: Lindsay

So I did my undergrad and completed my teacher candidacy. So when I graduated I... I guess I was told there are no jobs um and so I applied to a Masters as a back up because I didn't know if I would be able to find work at that time. I don't know if it's still like that, I probably suspect so, but there wasn't any funding available for master's students, either full or part time, in the faculty of education there. So I found no reason to do full time schooling because I wouldn't be paid for it so I was lucky enough to get hired with one district school board...I was stationed at one school for most of that time and for one semester I went to another school. And so I was doing my Masters while I was teaching. So I taught for 3 years and did my masters in the same 2.5-3 year block and then I moved to another school to do the PhD program and that's why I am not teaching high school any more at the moment.

Participant 3: Kate

I have my masters in social work and I have been in a number of roles throughout the board. Um I started out as an E.A and then got my credentials in child and youth counseling and then got my B.A in child and youth care and then on to my masters. When I was most involved with the GSA here it was as a child and youth counselor and um at the time when we started there was no GSA in the high school.

Participant 4: Bill

I started teaching in 99, second career for me. My role in teaching has been in guidance, special education, English and history teachers, I coach tennis and ping pong or table tennis and that's my role in our school. And I have also been the teacher advisor for the GSA, our gay-straight alliance, for about 7 years now.

Participant 5: Jen

I have been a teacher since 1987 and um three years in elementary, as well as in secondary, and I have been in this school since 93, part time and then full time here in 1998. Um I'm a guidance counselor and a social science teacher and we just started our GSA this year. And Bill (participant 4) has been very helpful in getting that going. I went to a workshop that was also at their school and started one and it's good.

Participant 6: Leanne

I'm a school-based public health nurse. I have been a nurse since 2009. I first started working with the school in January and I became involved with the GSA because um my employer has a very good relationship with schools and they approached us and asked for our support.

Participants were recruited through various LGBTQ and GSA organizations including Queer Ontario, the Sherbourne Health Centre, PFLAG Canada, and My GSA (a website for Canadian GSAs and information for students, teachers, and parents). These organizations agreed to post information about the research study (i.e., an invitation to participate and informed consent document) on their websites, Facebook groups, and/or sending a message from their email list serves. In addition, information regarding the study was also shared among graduate and undergraduate students in the faculty of education at York University, Toronto, Ontario to recruit participants. Lastly, snowball sampling was also be used since some participants sent out emails to other teachers they knew who might have been interested in participating.

Ethical Considerations & Obstacles to Data Collection

During the initial phases of the current research process, I wanted to interview student members of high school GSAs. However, there are numerous ethical issues to consider when interviewing students under the age of eighteen. For example, ethics approval would have to be granted from both the university ethics board, as well as from individual school boards. In addition, students under the age of eighteen also require parental consent to participate in research studies. Since the students I wanted to interview are members of high school GSA's, I did not want them to have to ask their parents or guardians for permission for a number of

reasons. For instance, GSA student clubs are still highly controversial and parents' may not know their child is participating in the club. Secondly, for those students who identify as LGBTQ, I did not want to "out" them to their parents' by requiring parental consent. Although these ethical guidelines are put into place to protect young people, it simultaneously limits their agency and ability to share their perspectives on a research topic that directly impacts their school and personal lives. This is particularly important since I did have teachers within high schools tell me that their students were highly interested in participating in some way in the study. Perhaps it is time to rethink ethical guidelines surrounding young people's ability to participate in academic research since, according to Lapointe (2012) there is a need to "authorize student perspectives" within educational research and more importantly, sexuality research in education, so we may "include their insights in the development of educational policy and practice that address queer issues in education" (p. 64).

I was able to create an online, open-ended questionnaire for students 18 years or older who have or may still be currently participating in a high school GSA. This questionnaire was considered more private, anonymous, and confidential, which provided for more protection for the young students. The questionnaire was created using fluid surveys, a Canadian-based survey website and shared among the organizations listed above that helped with participant recruitment, and also among undergraduate students in the Faculty of Education at York University. However, this method yielded no participation and proved to be an ineffective tool. Therefore, it was decided that this project would solely focus on the faculty advisors themselves. They were still able to provide immensely rich data on student participation and resistance to dominant heteronormative and homophobic school climates. Moreover, since Lee (2002) indicated that while many students in her research were unaware of their ability to challenge

heteronormativity or understand how their actions were making a difference, the faculty advisors were able to describe how student participation within GSAs and in LGBTQ inclusive events and initiatives have the potential to challenge the status quo. Therefore, it is still important to talk to the faculty advisors themselves and the interviews I conducted also illustrated that.

In addition to the obstacles encountered throughout this research project, there were still ethical risks to address when interviewing the faculty advisors as well. While my focus in this research was on student social justice efforts, personal stories of student bullying and victimization, as well as stories of handling opposition to the GSA, were likely to arise and could have led to some form psychological distress including feelings of sadness, anger, frustration, and anxiety. Emotional stories were brought up in some of the interviews, which resulted in very strong emotions among some of the participants. To help with this, I tried to remain calm and sensitive to the issues being discussed and asked if they needed a break or wished to stop the interview. Resources were also provided for participants along with the feedback form at the end of the interview if they wished to see how their data was being used (Appendix A). Resources ranged from mental health services, sexual health services, as well as 24 hour crisis lines. More specifically, I provided resources specifically for teachers, as well as parents and students (both heterosexual and LGBTQ).

Furthermore, because interviews are very personal and interactional, ethical issues involving confidentiality, informed consent, and participant-researcher reciprocity need to be addressed carefully (Patton, 2002). Due to the controversial nature of high school GSAs, it was imperative to keep the identities of the participants, the schools, and any students' name mentioned in the interview completely confidential. To do so, I eliminated any names provided and replaced participant names with pseudonyms. I also provided very vague information on the

location and demographics of the schools to ensure their confidentiality and privacy. Within the informed consent document, all of these issues were covered in detail, and participants were reassured about who had access to their data, where it would be kept, and what would be done with it. Lastly, I provided a feedback form for participants to provide their email address if they wished to have a copy of the final write-up. All participants' requested a copy and all were emailed one upon completion.

Data Analysis

Inherent in queer theory, critical pedagogy, and critical discourse analysis is the need to make visible the unspoken assumptions that underwrite heterosexism and heteronormativity. More importantly, there is a need to rethink the ways we can create inclusive educational environments and where conversations about different ways of understanding sexuality are made possible (Delamont, 2012; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002; Wodak & Meyer, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative that this study, within every process and procedure, to stray from the broader "culture of positivism" and the limits ideas of neutrality, efficiency, and objectivity have placed on the dominant understandings of normalcy and sexuality (Giroux, 2011). As a result, the procedures of data analysis employed within this study needed to engage in more critical, interpretive, and reflective methods than methods of positivist data analysis would typically allow for.

According to Rogers (2004) analysis in CDA is textually, linguistically, historically, and social context oriented. Therefore, the literature review was used to analyze the academic research on high school GSAs and sexual minority youth and to illustrate how dominant discourses of pathology, deviancy, and abnormality have translated over history to represent LGBTQ youth as an "at risk" population in need of rescue from adults, which has taken on the

form of GSAs as “safe spaces.” The analysis of data, which included the two one-to-one interviews, the one email interview, and the one focus group interview conducted, investigated the discourses of GSAs from the frontlines, or put simply, directly from the voices of those involved in GSA social justice efforts (Delamont, 2012; Lichtman, 2006; Patton, 2002). This involved an analysis of text (participant narratives), of linguistics (use of particular words, grammar, and metaphors), and of the social context (high school GSAs in Ontario) (Jorgenson & Phillips, 2007; Lazar, 2005; Rogers, 2004; Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2011).

After the interviews were conducted, the process of transcribing began. While many consider this process to be simply about preparing the data for analysis, it is also a highly interpretive and reflective process (Patton, 2002; Wodak & Meyer, 2011). I completely immersed myself in the data during transcription, which allowed for multiple readings from different perspectives. For example, I revisited the interview audio recordings after some time, which allowed for a more neutral reading of participant narratives. After transcribing, I analyzed the data with a more critical eye and allow for patterns, themes, and consistencies to emerge through the data itself. An attempt to remain entirely objective throughout this research project is inconsistent with qualitative research rooted in critical discourse analysis, critical pedagogy, and queer theory (Jorgenson & Phillips, 2007; Lazar, 2005; Patton, 2002; Rogers, 2004; Van Dijk, 1993). While I acknowledged my own personal and academic biases and the impact of these on the research study, it is my commitment to social justice, equity, and inclusive educational environments that have driven my research interests. More importantly, since positivist research has traditionally examined LGBTQ sexualities in direct opposition to the “normalcy” of heterosexuality, which has largely contributed to heteronormative practices and policies within

educational institutions, it was important to use methods of data collection and analysis that relied on the narratives of those directly involved in GSA work.

Overall, the purpose of this study was to identify how the use of “at risk” and “safe spaces” discourses impacts high school GSAs in Ontario and to identify ways both students and faculty advisors can disarticulate, unravel, and denaturalize heteronormativity that allow for the continued dominance of these discourses (Delamont, 2012; Lazar, 2005; MacLure, 2003; Rogers, 2004; Van Dijk, 1993). Therefore, this research approached the data with a critical and queer eye and open-coding and inductive methods were also used. Put simply, I remained open to the data and allowed dominant themes, patterns, and concepts to emerge directly from the participants’ voices (Lichtman, 2006; Patton, 2002). Data were then organized and analyzed thematically using the conceptual and analytic tools inherent in critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis makes use of themes, codes and discourses to identify fundamental systems of meaning that GSAs hold and their potential to disrupt and unravel heteronormative school practices. I paid particular attention to the role and use of language in the interviews, as well as how the faculty advisors’ narratives employed the use of “at risk” and “safe space” discourses and/or worked against them.

Chapter 4: Analysis of Data

"The job of an intellectual does not consist in molding the political will of others. It is a matter of performing analyses in his or her own fields, of interrogating anew the evidence and the postulates, of shaking up habits, ways of acting and thinking"

– Michel Foucault (1991)

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an analysis of the experiences and narratives of current and recent faculty advisors of high school GSAs in Ontario high schools. More importantly, the focus of this analysis will provide an in-depth examination of the ways in which faculty and student members of high school GSAs are working against heteronormative school policies and practices that place LGBTQ students within the dominant discourse of “at risk,” which ultimately renders them in need of adult protection and “safe spaces.” The benefits of GSAs have been discussed by the majority academic researchers. For example, lower levels of bullying, victimization, and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation have been reported, as well as improvements in mental health, young adult well-being, school attendance, and academic achievement, as well as lower levels of suicide ideation and attempts (Heck et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002; Russel et al., 2009; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). However, others are beginning to see GSAs as more than safe spaces that can provide for individual-level supports and resources. They are coming to understand the potential of these student organizations as unique spaces to engage in sexual justice efforts and to educate the school body and larger community about sexuality and equality, although this area is highly under-researched within educational scholarship (Heck et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Russell et al., 2009; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010).

Overall, Griffin et al., (2004) suggest that high school GSAs take on various roles, functions, and responsibilities within school settings, which include:

- 1) Counselling and support services for LGBTQ students;
- 2) The provision of a safe-space for LGBTQ students and allies to socialize;
- 3) Providing the school with educational efforts and raising awareness of issues affecting LGBTQ students;
- 4) Being a part of a broader social justice and human rights movement

Currie et al., (2012) argue that the underlying premise behind the counseling and safe space aspect of high school GSAs is that LGBTQ students are simply “at risk” and require special measures and safeguards implemented by adults in order to succeed in the typical school environment. However, Currie et al., (2012) also urge these student organizations and faculty advisors to discover ways in which they may move beyond the “safe space” discourse and into a space where a social justice discourse can dominate the discussion of sexuality and equity in education and the rights of LGBTQ students to an inclusive classroom environment. According to Khayatt (1992) “Heterosexuality is normative. It is hegemonic. It is institutionally sanctioned, ideologically affirmed, and socially encouraged and expected” (p. 205). Thus, it becomes imperative for educators and school administrators to examine the current ways of thinking about sexuality within educational contexts and to challenge our commonsense understandings, our taken-for-granted assumptions, and our typical methods of labeling and handling the issues faced by LGBTQ students.

Therefore, this chapter will illustrate the narratives of faculty advisors of high school GSAs that were collected through interviews and analyzed in the form of transcripts with particular focus on the beliefs, values, and stories they shared with me, as well as the language they used to describe their work and the student members of GSAs. Despite the prevalence of “at risk” and “safe space” discourses that dominate the media, as well as academic and educational

scholarship today (Baglieri et al., 2011; Currie et al., 2012; Quinlivan, 2002; Savin –Williams, 2001; Talburt, 2004), I was able to experience firsthand the passion and dedication each faculty advisor holds for student inclusion and equity, not just in terms of sexuality, but for every student in their classrooms and school. However, I was also able to detect areas of struggle for these teachers and the GSA student members as I listened to stories filled with instances of defeat, frustration, and opposition, which also influenced the work these teachers do within the GSA, within their general classrooms, and within their own personal lives, which suggests that there is more work is needed.

In order to illustrate the participant narratives and how these faculty advisors, along with student members, are challenging dominant “at risk” discourses and the larger heteronormative school culture, I relied heavily on excerpts from the interviews to represent the data collected in an authentic way. I also chose to showcase participant responses in this way to demonstrate the power and significance of voice, personal narrative, and conversation in creating spaces where critical thought, resistance, and social justice can become a reality. Therefore, this chapter will be divided into two main sections. The first section of data analysis will focus on the “what” questions surrounding high school GSAs in Ontario. For example, what are these student organizations doing? What is the purpose of them? What values, missions, and goals characterize them? And what has motivated teachers to work as GSA advisors? This section will help to situate GSAs as student clubs not only worthy of being a part of Ontario high schools today, but also as being worthy of further research investigations that will promote the commitment to sexuality and gender equity and diversity. The second section of this chapter will focus on the “how” and “why” questions pertaining to high school GSAs. More specifically, this section will provide an in-depth analysis of the themes that emerged from the critical reading of participant

narratives. This will include a discussion of faculty advisors as public intellectuals and the issues concerning the heteronormative “at risk” and “safe space” discourses common in high schools today.

GSAs in Ontario High Schools: What are they doing anyways?

Within recent years, GSAs in Ontario high schools have begun to grow in numbers despite the continued pushback and opposition they face on a daily basis. In June of 2012, *Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act* (OME, 2012) was passed, which requires that all secondary schools to allow students to form GSAs or other similarly named clubs. In addition, other Ministry of Education policy documents focusing on diversity and inclusion have also encouraged the formation of GSAs, since they are beginning to be recognized as an effective means to provide for the needs of LGBTQ students and to combat school-based homophobia and heterosexism (Kitchen & Bellini, 2013). However, despite the positive benefits of GSAs and their impact on an individual level, there remains debate and uncertainty about the effectiveness of these student clubs to combat heteronormativity at the institutional level and to promote a queer-positive pedagogy within both the enacted and hidden school curriculum (Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; Mayberry et al., 2011; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995). Therefore, it is imperative to research high school GSAs from the perspectives of those directly involved with them in order to critically analyze and determine what types of work they are doing and the significance of such work.

The Need for High School GSAs: Fighting Silence, Marginalization, and Invisibility

Within the interviews with faculty advisors, the participants were very open about why these student organizations were established in the first place. Previous research investigating the high school experiences of LGBTQ youth are dominated by the terms and language couched in

the larger discourse of risk. For example, research studies frequently highlight that sexual minority students are at greater risk for experiencing academic failure, dropping out of school, substance abuse problems, social and emotional isolation, and mental health difficulties including depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Jennings & MacGillivray, 2007; Kennedy & Covell, 2009; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Little, 2001; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Toomey, et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). As these risks become realities, which are reported on far too often within North American research, issues related to LGBTQ students including the high rates of homophobic bullying and language use in schools are becoming topics of great concern amongst school administrators and teachers (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Craig et al., 2008; Heck et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). Many students and teachers have established high school GSAs as one measure to counteract such negative circumstances, just as Kate indicated in the discussion below:

Kate: When I was most involved with the GSA here it was as a child and youth counsellor and at the time when we started there was no GSA in the high school. My own kids had come through this high school and during their time here there was a rash of suicides with young people and a lot of those, there was always questions about if the kids had been questioning their orientation. So I felt really really strongly that the GSA was something that needed to be implemented and um gauging from its popularity that was a good call.

Abby: that's good, so how would you describe the treatment of gender and sexually diverse students within the school?

Kate: now?

Abby: um well I guess before and how it is now?

Kate: ok I think before I think there was an awful lot of stigma, there was a lot of misinformation and I say it was in the years before GSAs became popular in Canada and Ontario there was a lot of homophobia, a lot of homophobic slurs, and kids feeling unsafe. Now there is still homophobia, there is still homophobic slurs, but I don't see it to the same degree that I did before and the kids aren't reporting it to the same degree that they did before. One of the activities that we've done with the GSA network over the

years is to randomly pick a week and then the kids would um quietly just record the number of homophobic slurs they heard.

Abby: oh ok

Kate: and then we would do a big display in an assembly around that you know? Like an educational piece? And so while it's not scientific you know, it's very anecdotal but um the instance of those homophobic slurs has gone down significantly.

In this discussion, it became evident that the negative experiences LGBTQ students face on a daily basis resulted in the unfortunate loss of lives at this school. Although the staff and teachers were unaware of the sexual identity of the students who committed suicide, many suspected the students were in the process of questioning their identity. Such a traumatic event experienced by an entire school and small community pushed this educator to take action with the help of another guidance counselor and students within the school. Kate further indicated that what motivated her to establish a GSA was “my kids lived experiences and... uh the loss of adolescent lives and I just felt very strongly that this was a population that needed an advocate and they didn't have one at the time.” Overall, this participant saw a student population that needed a space where they could voice their perspectives, their concerns, and their stories and have an adult who could advocate upon their behalf and connect them to resources and supports that many students were unable to access at their school in previous years.

In the email interview conducted, a faculty advisor at a different high school GSA made similar observations with regards to the lack of queer-positive school practices, policies, services, and curriculum content. In the discussion below, Jane articulates her motivations for starting a GSA at her high school and discusses how the GSA with the help of other faculty and students came into existence. She wrote:

I am 1 of 3 staff advisors of our grades 7-12 (mostly 9-12) Queer Ally Alliance. I started teaching at the school I currently work at about 3.5 years ago. Two weeks after I started at the school, a lesbian identified student (whom I had only met in passing a few times)

committed suicide. This shook the foundations of my soul and so many others. This young woman was not supported by her family, at the time there were no LGBTQ supports in our small community (I had also just moved to this community) and the school had few supports for LGBTQ students – although there were some supportive staff. A group of students and another colleague of mine, formed an anti-bullying (this student was bullied – well let's name it for what it was: homophobic harassment) club.

This is what students felt comfortable with at the time. The club then became an equity and diversity club with a huge focus on LGBTQ inclusion and then the students decided to call the club a Gay Straight Alliance. However, feeling that the term Gay was not inclusive and that “straight” caused people to have to identify one way or another, the club evolved to its current name: the Queer Ally Alliance. Looking at the evolution of the name, I feel that the ability to embrace LGBTQ terminology in the name came as students started to feel safer in their school. Students at the school also started a Pride parade the summer after the student's death to pay tribute to their friend. HOWEVER, while great inroads were made with the start of the club, our school is still a place where homophobia and transphobia exist; amongst some staff, some students and within the very policies of the school itself.

Within this excerpt, Jane spoke about how the suicide of a self-identified lesbian student initiated the anti-bullying club formed at her school. Although the establishment of this student organization was due to the tragic loss of life, this faculty advisor was well aware of the broader issues within the school and community. The lack of supports available to students, the experiences of homophobia expressed through the very policies and practices of the school, the beliefs of individual teachers, administrators, and students, and the explicit forms of homophobia expressed through physical and emotional bullying and isolation, are common issues cited in previous research studies as well (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Craig et al., 2008; Ferfolja, 2007; Heck et al., 2011; Kennedy & Covell, 2009; Little, 2001; Quinlivan, 2002; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). Moreover, although Jane indicated that the evolution in the name of the club from an anti-bullying club to a Queer Ally Alliance suggests progress and a greater acceptance of diverse sexualities, she is quick to note that there are still issues facing LGBTQ students in the school today.

Within the focus group interview, one participant shared the story of the GSA at his school being established. Bill stated:

We have had a GSA for about 7 years we were the first school in our board to have a GSA. We started uh the first thing we did was a school climate survey and uh we determined that there was a need uh there were very little places that we could discern where students felt comfortable in being gay or lesbian or LGBTQ and they were afraid. We also found that they didn't know where to go for information in a rural setting. So we had an out student who was interested in starting a GSA uh and I was in guidance so I said I would act as a teacher advisor and it got rolling. Um it was very difficult at first in the school because the posters were torn down and it was discouraging, people were teased and um it was difficult. We kept meetings going when only one boy would come but we felt it was important to keep the meetings going on a regular basis, so you know some meetings we had 3 teachers and one kid but nevertheless, every Monday at lunch time we kept it going. And um the following year, it's interesting, we um put an announcement out you know anyone interested in the GSA you know come to a meeting and we had a lot more students come out. Since then it has been running pretty smoothly and we did another school climate survey about 4 years later and we saw very positive changes in the school climate. You can feel the difference in the school as well. Being an observer of that for 7 years you can see the difference too...there's less bullying, there is more acceptance, and the GSA kids were confident enough to the point where they wanted to do an assembly, which I thought was a very brave thing to do. And so uh they organized that and um it went really well and we have done 4 now, we do them on the week of family day because we want to emphasize that families come in all shapes and sizes and sexualities. Um I still think that there is more work to do students are still I think it's different than this city school and kids are still afraid to come out.

Within this statement, Bill acknowledges the issue of social and emotional isolation many LGBTQ students experience while at school, as well as the stigma for being associated with a student club such as a GSA. This is consistent with previous research studies indicating that while several LGBTQ youth report feeling safer at a school with a GSA, many still feel unable to become members due to fear of harassment (Heck et al., 2011; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Little, 2001; Miceli, 2005; Walls et al., 2010). This was also evident in an interview where Lindsay, the GSA faculty advisor at another high school, stated:

I know that my kids like didn't want to be identified as belonging to the GSA so we would have an announcement on the morning announcements that we were having a meeting and then even for a while we stopped that. Like at the last meeting we would be like okay let's set a new meeting and we wouldn't necessarily put it over the

announcements because people felt marginalized just walking into the room where the meeting was.

Moreover, Bill also acknowledged in his discussion the progress being made with regards to the school climate, which was made evident to him through the climate survey the GSA conducted in its first year and then again four years later. He also suggested that you could “feel” and “see” the difference after being a part of the GSA for seven years. Yet, the progress being made was still not enough as he indicated that there is still more work to do so that those students living in isolation may be able to come out one day.

Lastly, when asked about her motivations for becoming a GSA faculty advisor, Lindsay indicated that:

There was one person who was looking after the club and I approached her like hey there is a club here do you want some help? And she was like happy to have someone else come on board. I also was struck by the fact that there was a lot of graffiti in the school on the lockers and all of the graffiti well some of it was racially motivated graffiti but a lot of it was homophobic and so I approached the office a couple of times to see about getting it taken off but I mean I was there [at the school] for 3 years and the graffiti remained, so it just occurred to me that literally there was like writing in the school that was very unfriendly to students and I thought what can we do to sort of counteract that or what space can we create for students to come and even just socialize and talk with each other? The gay alliance that the students had created...the point of it wasn't to create a marginalized club it was for students of all orientations to socialize with each other and to do some, if they wanted to anyways, to do some I guess like advocacy work in the school. But I think some of that fell off the wagon and it became mostly a place to socialize which is fine because I think the club should be what the students wanted it to be you know? Not what I wanted it to be.

In this discussion with Lindsay, it appeared that this particular high school had a higher level of blatant homophobia than the other schools did. However, despite the level of homophobia, it is evident that all of the faculty advisors interviewed for this research study shared common characteristics that made them great allies for the GSA student members, both LGBTQ and heterosexual alike. These characteristics include a commitment to social justice, equity, and inclusive education, queer-positive beliefs and attitudes, knowledge of diverse sexualities and

issues facing LGBTQ students today, and a sense of empathy and ethical responsibility to advocate for these students. All these characteristics of teacher advisors were found in another Canadian study investigating high school GSAs as well (Lapointe, 2012).

Overall, while school boards across Ontario are now implementing policies and practices that promote the inclusion of diverse sexual orientations and have moved to mandate that all schools, both public and catholic, to allow students to form GSAs (Kitchen & Belinni, 2013), common issues facing LGBTQ students are still evident within the participant narratives. In a study conducted in the United States, which examined high school GSAs as a school reform effort, Mayberry et al. (2011) found that while GSA initiatives provided student members with positive experiences, they fell short of deconstructing and questioning larger systemic issues that underwrite school-based heteronormativity and serve to reproduce LGBTQ youth as an “at risk” student population.

Heteronormative discourses, according to Ferfolja (2007), are invasive and persistent within educational institutions and are often reinforced through both the obvious and the implicit practices of silence and invisibility. The curriculum content, the censorship of topics related to sexuality, teacher practices and pedagogies, the lack of staff development training, and the larger homophobic school culture, which is seen in the marginalization and harassment of sexual minority youth, all contribute to the normalizing of heterosexuality and the ‘Othering’ of LGBTQ identities (Currie et al., 2012; Erevelles, 2011; Ferfolja, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002). Therefore, it is important to listen to, critically analyze, and report on the types of activities, initiatives, and goals that faculty advisors and student members of GSAs are participating in, which will be the focus of the next section.

GSA Activities and Initiatives: What are people so mad about?

Although high school GSAs have been mandated as legitimate student clubs within both Canada and the United States, they have not been fully accepted with ease by the broader society. More specifically, research has been conducted on the arguments and protests made by the public against the rights of students and faculty to form GSAs within their high schools. As was previously stated in the literature review, the two most common arguments made against GSAs are that 1) they promote promiscuity and recruit students into homosexuality and 2) that student clubs such as GSAs are unnecessary and have no place within a public school setting since the subject of sex and sexuality should be left to parents (Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; Herriot, 2011; Macgillivray, 2005; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002). Although these views are not shared by the majority of the public, they are held by small parental and religious groups who are very loud, open, and persistent about their beliefs, which have highly impacted the work of faculty advisors and students within GSAs. For example, Miceli (2005) has indicated that a high number of teachers fear taking on the role of a GSA advisor due to possible accusations of recruiting youth into homosexuality. This is particularly true for teachers who self-identify as LGBTQ, and especially true for male teachers who identify as gay (Miceli, 2005). This was an issue discussed by one of the faculty advisors interviewed for this study. Jane stated:

I also face homophobia that my straight ally colleagues do not (although as GSA advisors, I think LGBTQ or Straight – everyone faces a certain amount of homophobia/transphobia by association – and many teachers are reluctant to become involved with GSA's less they are pegged as being gay). I have been accused – as recently as last week of “turning a student gay” by a parent who is not supporting their gay son. I have teachers come up to me and say: “I really like.....but can you tell him to act less gay”. I’ve had a former principal tell me when I came out that I no longer fit in with the culture of the school. So, all this to say there is still a lot of work to be done....I am beyond eternally grateful for my non-LGBTQ colleagues who have stepped up across the board to support LGBTQ and gender minority students. However, it would be nice to have a network of queer staff doing this work.

Within this discussion, Jane was able to articulate the negative impacts the discourses of recruitment and promiscuity have on the ability of educators to take on the role of a faculty advisor within a GSA, but also on the ability of many teachers to act as advocates for sexual minority students. This participant was also able to describe the homophobia experienced, not just by LGBTQ students, but also by LGBTQ faculty and even, by association with the GSA, heterosexual allies as well. These issues have been cited in previous research studies as well (Craig et al., 2008; Herriot, 2011; Miceli, 2005). However, despite the strong opposition towards the formation of high school GSAs in North America that is still prevalent today, many student members and faculty advisors of GSAs have been persistent in fighting for their rights to organize for sexual justice efforts. Thus, it becomes imperative for researchers investigating GSAs to examine the actual goals, activities, and initiatives these student clubs are participating in to begin to dismantle the uncritical assumptions being made about GSAs being nothing more than “sex clubs.”

In an interview with Kate, a child and youth counselor who also advises the high school GSA, she described their student clubs as taking on a number of roles within the lives of students. She stated:

I think it's there's many different functions for it. I think number one it's a social group, so where kids can go to a safe spot...they can meet new friends, they can uh they can grow their current friendships. It also serves to provide an educational forum for the kids in the GSA in terms of answering a lot of questions that they might have, but wouldn't necessarily know where to go for answers. And that took on a number of different roles whether it was to bring in guest speakers, or to have the kids share their coming out stories, or hurdles that they were experiencing, or um you know, how allies got involved. And then the other aspect to it is a broader educational piece to the school population. So I saw it as serving those 3 functions.

In this discussion of the purpose the GSA serves, Kate articulated that the student club took on a variety of functions for the student members and for the larger school community. This is in line

with the roles Griffin et al., (2004) have outlined in their discussion of high school GSAs. This includes the provision of counseling and support services for LGBTQ students; the provision of a safe-space for LGBTQ students and allies to socialize, raising awareness of issues affecting LGBTQ students, as well as promoting further education and professional development among both students and staff. In addition, although Kate did not explicitly state it, all of the functions taken together do serve the last function as outlined by Griffin et al., (2004). That is, tackling the barrier that LGBTQ students face in gaining information about their own sexuality, providing for individual support, providing these students with a space in the larger school to call their own, and working to educate the school community are all a part of a broader LGBTQ social justice and human rights framework (Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; Griffin et al., 2004; Mayberry et al., 2011; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002).

Similarly, in another interview with Lindsay, who was an academic advisor of a high school GSA 6 years ago before going to graduate school to obtain her PhD, she articulated that their GSA served as more of a social space for LGBTQ youth and heterosexual allies. When asked if the negative treatment of sexual minority youth at their high school was the reason for establishing the GSA she stated:

I don't know I don't know how long the club had been going on for and I didn't ask too many questions about it um but I know the students expressed to me that they were like happy to have the club and...there may have been like a core group of 10 students who would show up but there was always new people coming and going and it just felt like a place where people could come if they wanted to and I guess maybe the students needed it for that but I don't really know why it was originally created.

While Lindsay was unaware of the reasons behind the establishment of their GSA, she discussed how it was a place she felt that the students needed. Since a high percentage of LGBTQ youth experience social and emotional isolation on a daily basis, both at school and at home (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Craig et al., 2008; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Little, 2001; Walls et al., 2010), which

can result in other negative outcomes such as mental health difficulties and academic struggles (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Heck et al., 2011; Jennings & MacGillivray, 2007; Kennedy & Covell, 2009; Little, 2001; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Toomey, et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010) having a space dedicated to this marginalized student population was highly beneficial in this participants viewpoint. However, in a subsequent conversation, Lindsay further indicated that the head teacher advisor of the GSA she worked with had some concerns about what was actually going on in this student club:

I know the other teacher advisor sort of indicated um that she had been head of the club for a while so she has seen like as certain students graduate then new students are kind of up and coming as like the leaders in the club but the 3 years that I was there she sort of expressed some dissatisfaction that the club that there wasn't really that much leadership for different reasons. Like I think she wanted it to be more of a political or like an activist place but the students didn't seem that interested in that so when she would kind of like come with ideas the students would be happy to participate but they didn't want to take any ownership or leadership in terms of like doing anything really and I think that at some point the other teacher advisor expressed some frustration with that. And I sort of thought, well I mean fair enough, but these students aren't really looking for that so I think that especially the mandate of the club became a place where people can come and eat their lunch and talk with each other and socialize... but again it's hard to say. I don't really know what the students wanted from the club like I did my best. I brought in a couple of guest speakers and they were open to showing up and like participating in something like that. I also took them to a board wide event that gathered people from different schools to have a day. So I found out about it and advocated for students to be able to go and drove them there and like they were happy to participate in that sort of thing. And we had like a movie night and that kind of stuff but they didn't really want to do advocacy things. I don't know I feel like that's okay. I think they just wanted to eat their lunch somewhere safe you know? And I feel that's fine, like if that's what the club could offer them and that's what they were looking for, then so be it.

In this conversation, Lindsay articulated that the head teacher advisor for the GSA was unhappy with the lack of student leadership and initiative to tackle common issues facing LGBTQ youth within their school. Although both advisors worked to present the students with ideas and activities to participate in, many were unwilling to take on a project of their own. However, the other GSA advisors interviewed also indicated that the ability of the GSA to tackle queer-

positive initiatives was highly dependent on the students involved. This will be further discussed on the section on the roles of students. Furthermore, even though these particular student members lacked leadership skills, the teacher advisors still pushed these students to participate in board-wide events surrounding homophobia and sexuality-based issues in schools. Allowing these students to participate in such events serves to promote a better understanding of why LGBTQ students experience marginalization and oppression within schools and the broader society. Such discussions promote the first steps inherent in critical pedagogy, where oppressed groups need to come to understand that their oppression is not due to their own sexuality, but due to broader systemic issues of heterosexism within school cultures (Freire, 1970; Giroux; 2011).

Furthermore, even though GSAs have been criticized for being nothing more than “sex clubs” where homosexuality is promoted among students, these student clubs do serve as a space where sexual minority youth can discuss topics of sex, sexuality, and relationships that pertain to them specifically. This was evident in the conversation below:

Abby: Do you think GSAs could provide students with opportunities to discuss issues concerning student sexuality and kind of deconstruct what sexuality even means? Did conversations like this ever happen?

Lindsay: Yeah well the once place it occurred to me that sometimes they were wanting to talk about things and with me in the room maybe it was hard. I think essentially they wanted to talk about sex with each other but having a teacher in the room is a pretty big downer for that so I would like kind of step in and out sometimes to give them a little bit of space to talk about that. Um I also brought in someone...and she brought in female condoms and talked to them about safe sex and what it means to identify on the spectrum and what it might mean to have different kinds of sex with different kinds of people. She gave a lot of different information and the students were really happy about that and felt excited about it, especially because she was pretty young. I don't know, I felt like she connected with them...So I think the club offered that place for them, but I think it was a place where as much as they needed me to be their teacher advisor they also needed me out of the room.

Abby: Did different sexualities ever get talked about in like sex ed. Classes or um family life classes at the school?

Lindsay: Yeah we had like um a human ecology class I think it was called where they did like sewing and cooking and family stuff and many of my kids were in that course. Many of them expressed to me that sex ed., had been a place where they felt let down in the curriculum, like not just in high school but in elementary school too, that they hadn't heard positive messages or even the words gay and lesbian before. And I think for them to be sitting in a room where like somehow officially the curriculum is saying you are mandated now. Yay! We can talk about sex officially. But then to be outside of that conversation again, many of them felt super left out and disappointed by that. I don't know how much sex can even be educated anyway? Like whether those lessons were even meeting straight students' needs, I don't know. I know that not even being on the radar was very frustrating for them.

Since several studies have been done on the lack of LGBTQ inclusive sex education programs in Canadian schools (Connell & Elliot, 2009; Elia & Eliason, 2010; Erevelles, 2011; Ferfolija, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002; Stefan, 2012; Surtees & Gunn, 2010) it makes sense that these students want to talk about such topics within the space the GSA provides. This participant indicated that the majority of the student members expressed frustration with the lack of information they were provided with in both elementary and high school. The issue of "being outside of that conversation" further speaks to the lack of resources, information, and services to sexual minority youth in schools and the larger community. If we wish to prevent risky sexual behaviours and negative outcomes of sex, which is one of the primary goals of Ontario's sexual health education program (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003), then it is imperative that LGBTQ students are provided with information that addresses their particular sexualities as well.

In addition to being a space where LGBTQ youth can go to be connected with information, resources, and services specific to their sexual needs and identities (Black, et al., 2012; Draughn, et al., 2002; Miceli, 2005; Russell et al., 2009), GSAs within the focus group discussion served multiple purposes as well. For example, in the discussion below there appears to be two different conversations happening with regards to the purpose, mission, and goals of the two GSAs being discussed.

Bill: we initially started in the first year we had the GSA and developed a mission statement because I strongly believe it has to be student-driven. If it isn't, I wouldn't think it would work very well so I have always been kind of the guide on the side, and if they come to me with questions. I attend every meeting, we meet weekly on Mondays at lunch time and there is a president, there is a leader and we do minutes. It's a combination of social and I don't know if you call it political or not, but its awareness raising is what it is and they want to, the mission statement says they want to raise awareness of LGBTQ issues, about positive role models, and I don't remember the rest of it but they have 4 or 5 initiatives over the year that they build up to each time and there is a school-wide assembly. Um we have a rainbow week where we do a different activity every day, in the announcements we have a "homo-moment" ... there's a public roles models in October LGBTQ month and you can get a lot of resources free off the internet and we have a showcase as well. So again I tell the students you have to run this, you have to organize this, I'm not going to do it for you, I will definitely help, I will make things happen um but it's got to come from you. And I think that's important. I can't direct them, I don't believe in that; I think they have to do it for themselves.

Abby: does the leadership vary from year to year?

Bill: yes it does. It's been a new leader each year and it's been good. Now we have our incoming leader who will be the leader of next year's GSA... she's going to a week-long GSA conference in Toronto in June. It's set up by Jer's Vision (Canada's Youth and Diversity Initiative) and she's quite excited about that. So she should come back from that pumped I would think. I have to attend one day of it but she's there for 5 days.

Jen: oh wow that's awesome

Abby: does your GSA have a mission statement?

Jen: no I never thought of doing that so that's good... We should get more into that stuff like assemblies the problem is trying to book assemblies and with administration.

Bill: yup it is a lot of work

Jen: yeah and the rainbow week too so I need to get started

Bill: we find if we have these little goals every so often, like something to work towards, otherwise they tend to drift and the group loses focus and direction. So if they have something to work towards and they organize it too like they're in charge of the bake sale, the float, and whatever and they have done well with it and they have fun too, they have fun.

Abby: that's always an important thing too. Now I know you talked about the leadership of the students and how that was important, do you find that important here as well?

Jen: well we don't have a president or anything like that; I wasn't sure how much to throw at them the first year. Like I mean I was looking at that my GSA website and they talked about how you can have formal meetings, a secretary with minutes, you can have very formal and you can have informal. Basically from that Egale presentation, a lot of it was how to have a safe space to start, so I just thought let's see and have a safe space and people can start to feel more comfortable coming out to the GSA and seeing who else is there. Um that's what I started with, I'm going to do baby steps first (laughs) but I feel that we should have a president and a mission statement.

Within this discussion, the GSA advisors indicated that their student clubs take on a variety of roles as well, including a safe space for socialization, a space for political advocacy, as well as an educational forum to help raise awareness about LGBTQ issues, which is consistent with research by Griffin et al., (2004). However, what was particularly interesting was the difference between the recently established GSA and the older one. For example, Bill indicated that his GSA, which had been active every school year since its establishment seven years ago, while definitely a social student club, it also took on the role of providing queer-positive education to its members and to the entire school. More importantly, he described how his GSA promoted active student involvement in all aspects of its functions. Not only did the students create a mission statement with pre-defined goals to work towards throughout the year, they also attended conferences designed for LGBTQ youth and student allies, engaged the larger student body in activities and discussions such as their "homo-moment" on the morning announcements and school-wide assemblies that provided information about their initiatives.

Overall, inherent in the theories of queer and critical pedagogy is the need to push the current boundaries of knowledge, expose learners to different ways of thinking and understanding issues facing LGBTQ students in schools, and to question dominant definitions of concepts such as "normal" and "abnormal" with regards to sex, gender, and sexuality (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Lazar, 2005; MacLure, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2011; Rogers, 2004; Van Dijk, 1993; Delamont, 2012). By pushing these students to take on the

challenge of developing and organizing GSA initiatives for their schools and attending both province-wide and nation-wide GSA conferences, Bill has promoted these youth not only as active learners, but also as valuable and resourceful members of their school community. However, Jen's GSA was established November of 2013. She indicated that her GSA was primarily social even though she seemed hopeful that their GSA could continue to push towards more elaborate goals. Her statement about how she "wasn't sure how much to throw at them the first year" and about taking "baby steps first" are indicative of a teacher with great intentions, but who is also unsure of what to take on. However, Jen indicated that she had attended different workshops and presentations for students and educators starting a GSA and that she has found different resources online for ideas. What was particularly important during this focus group interview was the power of communication. Jen and Bill were able to participate in a conversation where the sharing of ideas and stories allowed them to develop as GSA advisors and as educators. Thus, GSAs are not only powerful spaces for students. They also allow for the continued learning and professional development of teachers as well.

Lastly, in the email interview conducted with Jane, who has a very active and engaged student organization called the Queer Ally Alliance (QAA), she described how her student club also serves the needs of a variety of student members. When asked to describe her GSA, she stated:

At the start of every year, the QAA gets together to decide on goals for the year and what they would like to accomplish. At the end of the year we have an end of the year review and wrap up party to look at what we have done and to identify some of the directions we could go in next year. Often what we do is thematic focuses around key events such as Day of Pink, Anti-bullying week, International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, etc. Most events/activities that we undertake are student driven. Last year, students spent a lot of time doing advocacy work in response to perceived needs i.e.: homophobic bullying and harassment on the buses – our group – staff and students met with the school board psychologist, a trustee and superintendent of safe schools to try to tackle this issue.

This year, students and staff have been invited to speak out about our group's successes and challenges. Students can decide to participate in these opportunities if they feel comfortable to do so. We have presented to staff and students across the board, in our community and I have spoken about GSAs in small and rural schools to ETFO members in Toronto. That said, some of our students are not comfortable with this activist role, so they come to the meetings for a safe space to hang out with like minded people.

Our QAA has also become home to some students who do not identify as LGBTQ and are allies in so much as they come to the club. These students are marginalized in their own right for a variety of reasons and the QAA is also their safe space. We do not have a formal structure within our QAA in terms of a group president etc, and students take turns leading events/activities in which they are interested.

Within this statement, Jane articulated that the QAA she advises provided all student member with a space that served their specific needs. She stated that the student club involved members who were both LGBTQ and heterosexual, while acknowledging that the straight allies often felt marginalized in some way within their own lives as well and/or simply felt connected in some way to the oppression of LGBTQ people. This is in line with previous research conducted on straight allies as well (Lapointe, 2012). Overall, what is particularly important here is the idea that GSAs can be spaces for safety and socialization, as well as for the broader purposes of education, advocacy, and political activism; it does not have to be one or the other. The majority of academics have argued that GSAs do little to challenge school-based heteronormativity and homophobia and need to do more, which requires a shift from the reliance on the discourse of "safe spaces" to one that promotes a social justice framework (Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; Mayberry et al., 2011; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995). However, I feel that more research needs to be done on the work GSAs are currently doing within North American schools and the impact and significance of such work before we can confidently criticize these student organization.

Based on these excerpts, as well as on the larger conversations I had with GSA advisors, it became evident that the ability of GSAs to take on a social justice framework and engage in more educational and advocacy work was dependent on a number of factors. However, these particular faculty advisors were able to demonstrate how student members of GSAs are, in fact, engaging in a number of activities that serve to challenge heteronormative school practices and policies. For example, Lee (2002) has suggested that the mere presence of GSAs in high schools today has altered the level of silence and invisibility surrounding the existence of LGBTQ youth in the education system. Even though some GSAs in this study may be more developed, hold a more clearly defined mission, and who are lucky to have students who act as strong leaders, all of the GSA advisors interviewed shared experiences where students were either participating or organizing events to educate themselves and others about sexuality issues in education. From simply socializing with likeminded individuals, to finding information on LGBTQ identities and sexual health-related information, to participating in GSA conferences, student members and faculty advisors are beginning to make change and are starting a province-wide conversation about the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion. This next section will focus on the roles of various agents involved in ability of GSAs to promote social change.

Factors that Promote and Impede the Work of GSAs

Throughout this study, it has become evident that GSAs are working to promote a queer-inclusive pedagogy within Ontario high schools. The need for these student clubs is evident in the faculty advisors' narratives and the work they are taking on through school-wide initiatives such as assemblies, guest speakers, workshops for staff and students, as well as in the participation of faculty and student members of GSAs in school-board and province wide events, such as GSA conferences. However, it was also evident that there are many factors that function

to either promote or limit the abilities of GSAs to challenge systemic issues of heteronormativity rooted within the very policies, practices, and pedagogies of educational institutions today (Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; LaPointe, 2012; Little, 2001; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002; Walls et al., 2010). This section will discuss the factors that are working to either promote or impede the work of high school GSAs in Ontario. This will include a discussion of the role of student members and the need for supportive teaching staff, administrators, and inclusive policies.

The Role of Student Members: Active Agents of Social Change

Within the previous research investigating high school GSAs across North America, the role of the student members in establishing, organizing, and promoting queer-positive knowledge and attitudes cannot be underestimated. Although GSAs began in the United States as teacher-initiated clubs due to the perceived need for safe spaces among the LGBTQ student population, they have rapidly emerged as student-driven organizations, sometimes even in opposition to the adults working in the educational system (Miceli, 2005; Russel et al., 2009). Overall, several of the faculty advisors interviewed for this study indicated that there was a need for the GSA to be student-driven. This became evident in the conversation below with Kate.

Kate: So it was really important for the GSA to be student driven and it very much depended upon the student leadership in the GSA in terms of whether you had a really dynamic year or if you had a really lack-luster year. And we had some really dynamic years and we had some really lack-luster years too...the group itself evolved. It started out as a GSA. The kids identified that that name was too limiting, that it was very binary itself. It was either gay or straight and didn't leave room for anything in between so they came up with the name kaleidoscope for the group to uh to reflect that diversity and to make it a little more open and accepting for students. Now having said that there were still, we weren't reaching out and um and able to convince all of the students to come and join the GSA, you know? It was a pretty fluid membership and even still we have some social cliques that just don't want to be a part of a GSA and that's fine that's their choice.

Within this statement, Kate was able to speak about the importance of student leadership within the GSA and how that impacted the type of year they had. In a subsequent conversation, she further elaborated on this point:

The students as I said there is a real need for student leadership and sometimes they would have co-leaders so that not one of them was taking on the brunt of everything. And then there were varying levels of involvement depending on the students comfort level so they could just simply come...there was no obligation for them to come every week, they could come you know once a month or whenever they wanted to. The students who did attend needed to be respectful of others in the group and that was really about all we asked of them, and confidentiality to a certain degree. So it needed to be a safe space for the kids who were in there. The other thing that was also really important was to not put up the barrier of uh cost in there, so any field trips that we took uh they were always paid for by school budgets.

Within her responses, Kate was able to identify the students within the GSA as key agents in promoting GSA efforts and an overall queer-positive image. This is in line with theories of queer and critical pedagogy wherein the students must become active learners rather than passive recipients of knowledge in order to promote positive social change (Delamont, 2012; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011; Lazar, 2005; Mayo, 2007). In order for this to occur, faculty advisors must assume the role of co-learner and facilitator in the understanding of LGBTQ oppression and marginalization, in order to guide student members to take on leadership roles within the context of their high school GSA (Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; Friere, 1970; Giroux, 2011). Her discussion of the students' critique of the name of the GSA as being too limiting to the diversity of student sexual identities illustrates the capacity of the student members to critically examine the way language can be exclusionary and restrictive to certain groups. These students were then able to work collaboratively to decide on a group name that would function in a more welcoming and inclusive way. Thus, these students exemplified their skills and abilities to be critical, active, and empathetic citizens within their school community.

However, other faculty advisors expressed sentiments of frustration and confusion with regards to the difficulties and challenges associated with promoting leadership and citizenship skills among student members of GSAs. For example, in the excerpt below, Lindsay shares how the head faculty advisor was bothered by the lack of initiative the students took within the GSA, while she herself questioned whether these students should have to become active in the promotion of queer-positive practices in schools.

Abby: Who were the key decision makers within the GSA like if they wanted to do something, like the movie night, did the students come to plan and design it or was it the faculty?

Lindsay: well again like the other teacher advisor expressed frustration that there was a lack of leadership in the club so we would, like if they were talking amongst themselves like there is a lack of places for us to socialize or go, then either myself or another teacher would be like oh well would you guys be interested in a movie night? And of course they would but it wasn't really them coming up with the ideas necessarily and I think that was also because some of them didn't want to do any of the work to put together a movie night, which is like fine. There just wasn't a lot of leadership in some way but yeah I guess I did as much as I could and I didn't want to overstep, like it's their club and they should be able to do what they want to do. Like if all they want to do is come and eat lunch together then by all means. They were up for things sometimes and they were excited about them. There just wasn't that one kid in the room to be like "hey were doing this and you're going to bring this". They didn't do that so I took it upon myself sometimes to be like hey let's have a movie night. We also had a potluck once where we invited some of the students from the knit club and they came which was cool. They just uh they just weren't into it and I don't know why?

Within this statement, Lindsay articulated that the head faculty advisor was frustrated with the lack of leadership among the students and had mentioned in a previous conversation that she believes this teacher wanted the club to be more about political activism than a social space. Based on the entire interview conducted with Lindsay, it became evident that this particular GSA was the least organized, active, and situated within a large city high school that presented itself as more homophobic and marginalized for LGBTQ students when compared to the experiences shared by the other advisors. While the lack of leadership may have been due to the personalities

of these particular students in so much as they didn't represent "that one kid" who typically becomes involved and active in their school environment, there are many social and citizenship skills that GSAs could help to promote. These advisors could have engaged the students in a conversation about the lack of spaces they have and ask them "well what can we do about this?" Rather than simply suggesting a movie night.

Furthermore, the majority of faculty advisors interviewed for this study frequently referenced free online resources available to educators and students working in the area of sexuality inclusion in schools. Many of these resources are made available through nation-wide organizations such as EGALE Canada (Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere) and PFLAG Canada (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). These organizations often have local chapters within major cities of Canada and connect with local school boards and other youth organizations to promote queer-positive practices within schools and the broader society. EGALE Canada in particular has a website called "My GSA" that provides resources specific to GSAs including lesson plans for teachers, meeting ideas, activities, and topics for discussion. This particular website also allows GSAs to connect with others across the province and to share experiences with one another. All school boards should be connecting with these organizations and making their resources readily available to all educators since other studies, as well as the advisors within this study, have indicated a general lack of resources, services, and materials for LGBTQ students and for those involved in GSA work (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Ferfolja, 2007; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Little, 2001; Quinlivan, 2002; Taylor & Peter, 2011).

However, despite the lack of information and resources for GSA advisors and student members, other GSAs have been able to engage their students in debates and discussions surrounding day to day issues faced by LGBTQ students. For example, in the focus group

interview one GSA advisor discussed how their school had created a transgender bathroom for incoming students who identify as such, in order to prevent any instances of homophobic bullying within the washrooms. However, there was debate about whether or not to have the transgender bathroom labeled as such among the staff so this GSA advisor brought the students into the conversation:

Jen: I asked my students do you think we should have a sign saying “trans bathroom” and some said yes. Our principal doesn’t want that because she doesn’t want that as a target for people who may be homophobic who may seek it out and we don’t generally advertize it as a trans bathroom. Like it’s not huge but we tell the people we know who register, often it comes up so I don’t know. We have a new principal so I have been asking if anyone has thoughts on that, but right now there is a trans bathroom but it’s not advertized well in the school. You don’t walk into the school and see washroom “trans” right? But we created that because there were a few M to F and F to M students and we thought we didn’t want any instances in the washrooms and especially for those who actually converted their names, their identities, so this is a place they can go to use the washroom without anyone knowing about it.

By bringing the GSA student members into this conversation, this advisor is allowing the students to actively contribute to an important discussion going on within the school that concerns the rights of LGBTQ students. By seeking the students input, this advisor is bridging the gap between the adults in power within schools and the students who are often viewed as passive learners and switching the script, so to speak, to place the students in a position where their perspectives hold greater legitimacy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011; LaPointe, 2012). More specifically, since GSAs have been found to promote the development of citizenship skills and values, which includes an understanding of concepts such as democracy, equity, and inclusiveness (Lee, 2002; MacGillivray, 2005; MacGillivray, 2006; MacIntosh, 2007; Mayberry, 2006; Miceli, 2005; Russel et al., 2009), these conversations, teachable moments, or instances of possibility need to be researched further. Overall, despite the criticisms of GSAs as not “doing

enough” to challenge heteronormativity, this GSA advisor is alluding to the potential of these students to act as democratic citizens within their schools, if given the opportunity.

Overall, several researchers are beginning to question the lack of student voice in educational issues that directly affect their daily lives and many are recognizing that we simply lack confidence in the abilities of young people (Giroux, 2011; Lapointe, 2012; Stasiulis, 2002; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). The idea of young people as incompetent, irrational, and incapable of critical thinking was challenged in this GSA advisor’s story about an assembly his GSA was organizing:

Bill: we had some parents I know who called in and wouldn’t let their high school students go to the assembly. There is about 3 or 4 that called and I know 2 of the kids went to the assembly anyway and I saw one recording the assembly and I thought what am I going to here? How am I going to handle that? I didn’t do anything, I let it go and talking to the kid after he said I just want to show my mom how normal this is.

Everyone: oh wow

Bill: yeah and I didn’t hear back and I thought oh well we’re going to get another call and we didn’t so yeah sometimes good things happen when you expect bad things to happen and sometimes bad things happen when you expect bad things to happen.

The student referred to within this conversation shocked everyone within the focus group interview. His ability to question why GSAs are considered “abnormal” and to take initiative and challenge such assumptions within his own home greatly speaks to the ability of our youth today. While the level of leadership and commitment to social justice issues will vary every year within a high school GSA, all students have the potential to engage in GSA activities and conversations, whether in the form of a political activist, an educator, a student wanting to learn more or raise awareness, or a student who simply wants other students to socialize or network with (Lee, 2002; MacGillivray, 2005; MacIntosh, 2007; Mayberry, 2006; Miceli, 2005; Russel et al., 2009). GSA advisors need to discover new ways to educate and discuss LGBTQ issues in education within

the context of GSAs, as well as within the larger school environment, that will promote LGBTQ students and heterosexual allies as ethical, empathetic, critical, and active citizens. However, student members and faculty advisors alone cannot alter the heteronormative school culture that is still prevalent today. This next section will focus on teaching staff and administrators and their roles in promoting or limiting GSA efforts.

The Role of Staff and Administration: Supportive Role Models or Boundary Police?

Educators and researchers interested in the promotion of queer-inclusive classrooms and school systems have suggested that the effectiveness of high school GSAs are largely dependent on the acceptance and support provided by the teachers and administrators (Craig et al., 2008; Ferfolja, 2007; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Lapointe, 2012; MacIntosh, 2007; Miceli, 2005; Taylor & Peter, 2009; Quinlivan, 2002). This was particularly true for Bill who stated that “we’ve had very supportive administration at our school too, which has been really really good. And I cannot say enough about the importance of that in any high school, you know? Having the teachers and the administrators on board” when discussing how his school GSA was established. Numerous policies have been implemented within Ontario high schools that promote the inclusion of LGBTQ identities within all aspects of schooling including both the enacted and hidden curriculum, as well as in safe school and anti-homophobia policy initiatives (Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; Lapointe, 2012). However, there is still a large divide between the theoretical understandings of equity and sexuality within the policies themselves, and how those translate into practice.

Within this study, participants encountered both supportive administration and teachers who presented themselves as advocates and allies, as well as unsupportive staff who functioned as barriers to the implementation of GSA initiatives and educational events. For example, Jane

suggested that the treatment of gender and sexually diverse students was largely dependent on individual perceptions and beliefs of LGBTQ identities, which impacted how their Queer Ally Alliance (QAA) was perceived. Within our email interview she stated:

From an administrative point of view, both our VP and Principal are very supportive of our QAA and its students. This support has included attending meetings and community events, enforcing school anti-homophobia/transphobia policies and assisting students logistically, emotionally and socially with obtaining community supports. Some teachers in the building also function on the same approach as the admin. However, there are several teachers in the building who have expressed discomfort and or homophobic/transphobic sentiments in regards to LGBTQ students. Comments such as “can you have the student act a little less gay” have been made on several occasions. For these teachers the more students themselves become comfortable with their sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, the less comfortable they become. These are also the same teachers who will turn a blind eye to homophobic/transphobic/sexist language in the classroom or walk by it in the hallway. That said, we still have LGBTQ students who identify the school as their “safest” place. There are many teachers in the building who are continuing and genuinely trying to learn more about how to support LGBTQ students. This has looked like having myself and some of the students in our QAA come to the class to present on LGBTQ experiences. My colleagues who co-advise the QAA with me have also presented to staff on LGBTQ inclusion and encouraged staff to engage in an equity audit of their classrooms.

Within this discussion, Jane demonstrated how she experienced both supportive and unsupportive school staff throughout her work as a GSA advisor. The support of the vice principal and principal presented itself through their level of involvement with the GSA and different events, the implementation of safe school policies, and connecting LGBTQ students to outside resources and services. The ability of school communities to implement sexuality-based inclusive policies and practices requires the support and efforts of all members (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Craig et al., 2008; Ferfolja, 2007; Lapointe, 2012; Miceli, 2005; Walls et al., 2010). From the level of policy, to the curriculum content and teaching pedagogies, to the individual beliefs and attitudes of school staff, it is imperative that all members are involved, supportive, and committed. However, although Jane was supported by the principal, she still felt a level of “discomfort” amongst other teachers within the school, which was expressed through

both homophobic and transphobic attitudes, and the ignoring of homophobic language use and bullying within the school. This is in line with other research indicating the lack of teacher intervention in instances of homophobic bullying, as well as the high reports of LGBTQ students hearing homophobic sentiments from teachers and staff (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Ferfolja, 2007; Stefan, 2012; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Walls et al., 2010).

What is important to take from Jane's statement is how she and the other faculty advisors of the GSA and the student members, negotiated with the levels of homophobia and heterosexism within their school. By going to classrooms and educating students and staff about LGBTQ inclusion and allowing students to discuss LGBTQ student experiences themselves, Jane and the others involved in the GSA are engaging in a queer and critical pedagogy. For example, a critical pedagogy promotes a critical reflexivity wherein the connection between knowledge and power is analyzed, understood, and critiqued and the knowledge of oppressed groups is not simply processed but transformed as an integral part of the larger struggle for human rights and social justice (Freire, 1970; Ginwright & Commarota, 2002; Giroux, 2011; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Jennings et al., 2006). Overall, this faculty advisor and her student members are becoming knowledgeable about the homophobic and heteronormative practices that serve to marginalize LGBTQ youth in schools and the larger society and are taking that knowledge and using it to engage the school community in a conversation of LGBTQ student rights to social justice, equity, and inclusion.

Furthermore, when asked about any educational policies that have been put into place that have promoted queer-inclusive school practices among teachers and administrators, Kate stated "yeah for sure. The provincial mandate that high schools should have GSAs has helped to support um putting more focus on equity in the schools, safe and inclusive schools and all of

that. That has made a difference. Um and I think that's made a difference because it's really helping the staff to become educated about what the issues are and um how to make a safer environment." In this statement, Kate is referring to the recently implemented *Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act* (OME, 2012), which has provided the right to students to form GSA clubs in their schools, has also clearly outlined the roles and responsibilities of teachers and administrative staff. This involves becoming educated about safety issues facing certain student populations including LGBTQ youth, ways to address homophobic bullying, harassment, and discrimination that involves the whole school, and connecting students to resources and services pertinent to their successful development and education. However, this bill was only passed in 2012, which is relatively recent and many schools have a great deal of work to do in order to put this policy into practice.

In one interview with a GSA faculty advisor, Lindsay was able to illustrate common barriers many LGBTQ students and GSA members face in terms of accessing information, knowledge, and resources specific to their daily lives:

Lindsay: yeah well one thing the library had some resources in it but unfortunately a lot of them weren't open, they were books that were not on the shelves so they were like tucked underneath in a special area. So essentially a student would have to go to the librarian and be like hey do you have some gay books? And then the librarian would get them out, which was just really weird um I didn't really understand why the books weren't just like books you know? Like why were they "gay books" that needed to be hidden? And the students various times to me expressed frustration about that. They felt like there was a stigma about books and that translated to a stigma about people you know? Cause like stigmatized people had to go ask for stigmatized books, which was really bizarre. But the librarian was really great. She felt tied by the rules in terms of the VP and also the parent council. The parent council at the school... was not fond of the GSA at all. They were pretty vocal about not liking certain books. So it wasn't the failure of the librarian, but like the context of the school she was working... she would sometimes give me books she would find like she would be like oh this is a young adult novel and I think she was essentially giving them to me because I could give them to the students so we had like a secret trade-book-situation, which is like whatever I don't know... it was sort of like an underground railway or something but I don't know I guess that was one way... And the only other thing in terms of events is that we held a movie

night but again that was like I had to twist the VP's arm she didn't want it announced she didn't want the parent council to know basically she told me that we don't want to advertize that "kind" of event so that was like frustrating. I just sort of felt that if any other club asked for a movie night there wouldn't have been questions of that sort but I think perhaps she also had eyes on her like doing what she knew best to do which was allowing the movie night but ask that we don't tell everyone its happening, you know?

In this discussion, Lindsay articulated the barriers she and her student members of the GSA faced on a daily basis. The fact that any books related to LGBTQ identities and expressions were hidden in the library and only accessible if students would ask for them is a marginalizing and exclusionary practice. Every student, regardless of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and age should be provided with relevant and current information needed to be successful in their personal and academic lives (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Jones, 2011; Kennedy & Covell, 2009; Taylor & Peter, 2011).

More specifically, Lindsay's discussion highlights the lack of administrative support that was afforded to her and her students involved in the GSA, as well as to the librarian. School administrators should, according to the newly implemented *Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act* (OME, 2012), be advocating for student rights to access knowledge and information and negotiating and educating the larger school community about LGBTQ student experiences in order to better handle instances of parental pushback. If school staff can take on this approach to addressing LGBTQ inequalities in education, they will by default, promote principles of critical pedagogy by acknowledging their ethical and legal responsibilities to sexual minority students and demonstrate their willingness to engage with what Giroux (2011) calls a "politics of possibility" whereby texts, images, and events are critically examined and transformed into a queer, critical, and public pedagogy.

Furthermore, much of the academic research on inclusive sexuality education have reported that the presence of self-identifying LGBTQ teachers and other school staff not only

provides sexual minority youth with adult role models, but also helps to normalize non-heterosexual identities (Lapointe, 2012; Miceli, 2005). For example, in the email interview conducted Jane stated “I am beyond eternally grateful for my non-LGBTQ colleagues who have stepped up across the board to support LGBTQ and gender minority students. However, it would be nice to have a network of queer staff doing this work.” Similarly, during the focus group interview Bill stated that “we had a student teacher who is openly gay who came to work at our school and it was really positive across the school.” Therefore, having both LGBTQ teachers and staff, as well as teachers who act as heterosexual allies, are equally needed in the fight for equity and inclusion on the basis of sexuality. However, LGBTQ identifying teachers are marginalized in their own way and feel the need to hide their sexuality. This was evident when one participant was discussing her attempt to connect with LGBTQ teachers at her high school:

Lindsay: I also approached through the other faculty advisor, there was a lesbian couple who taught at the school and I wondered like they weren’t really... it was like people knew but wouldn’t talk about it I guess. And so I asked her once but she like very much didn’t want to confirm if they were lesbian or not. She like shut down that conversation with me but I was looking to see if there were other resources we could find in our school but it was like don’t ask me that don’t talk about it, no way.

Lindsay was looking to connect with other teachers in order to find more resources and information for the LGBTQ students in her GSA. When she found out about a lesbian couple who both taught at the school she wanted to approach them and discuss any resources or ideas they may have known of for their GSA. However, Lindsay was faced with teachers who were very reluctant to comment on their sexual orientation and ultimately “shut down” that conversation before it could even happen. Several researchers and theorists have pondered whether LGBTQ teachers should come out to their students. For example, while some suggest that LGBTQ teachers should come out in order to act as role models and promote acceptance of diverse sexualities, others question why they should have to come out at all when heterosexual

teachers are not called upon to do so (Khayatt, 1992). The sexuality of teachers is often assumed to be heterosexual and the coming out process for teachers is often of great concern since many have become the targets of the common discourse of “recruitment” discussed earlier in this chapter (Craig et al., 2008; Herriot, 2011; Miceli, 2005).

Although there is much debate about whether LGBTQ teachers should or should not come out to their students, the faculty advisors in this study, as well as student perspectives presented in other studies have suggested that having open LGBTQ teachers serves a variety of functions. These teachers not only act as role models for LGBTQ students but also as connections to LGBTQ curriculum content, community services, and resources. Moreover, having open LGBTQ teachers also serves to normalize LGBTQ identities and to unravel some of the common myths associated with such sexual orientations (Craig et al., 2008; Lapointe, 2012; Miceli, 2005). However, despite having LGBTQ and heterosexual teachers within a school, lack of administrative support from principals, vice principals, superintendents, and other members will often result in feelings of defeat among teachers doing GSA work. This was true for Lindsay whose interest in LGBTQ equity work was slowly eroded due to lack of administrative support. When asked if her work in a high school GSA impacted her either personally or professionally, she stated:

I was doing my masters at the time and I was reading a lot of queer theory and so it was like my life as a student was also informing my life as a teacher, which was also informing the work I was doing within the GSA. So like those things I am the same person and even though I was doing all these different things they were like leading into each other. Um and I think part of that is why I had to stop teaching cause I was like this is the kind of teacher I want to be and I can't be it, or at least I can't do it here right now. It was too much, like it was exhausting, and it felt sometimes like we were all ducks or something like in the water and my head was sticking out a lot and its exhausting to be the one sticking your head out. But I didn't know how to teach any other way so for better or worse that's what it was and that's why I had to stop. So yeah it impacted me and it's the reason why I had to teach no more.

This participant indicated that she felt she was unable to be the teacher she wanted to be within her high school and the GSA, as well as within the larger school in general. She spoke about constant battles she had with the school administration when organizing events or activities for the GSA members to participate in. Her use of the “ducks in the water” metaphor clearly illustrates the frustration and feelings of defeat many educators must feel when advocating for certain student populations with little to no support from other school staff. This discussion clearly highlights the need for a whole-school approach to LGBTQ inclusion and equity within schools today (Craig et al., 2008; Ferfolja, 2007; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Lapointe, 2012; MacIntosh, 2007; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002). More importantly, it highlights the need for educators to continue developing as teachers and engage in more critical and difficult conversations so that they may work with students to form a critical queer pedagogy that promotes the transformation of heteronormative discourses (Ferfolja, 2007; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011; Quinlivan, 2002).

GSAs Promoting a Critical Queer Pedagogy:

Negotiating, Unraveling, and Questioning Heteronormativity

The previous section of the data analysis has revealed the need for GSAs in Ontario high schools today, common barriers faced by faculty advisors and student members, the work these members are carrying out in the context of their high school’s GSA, the significance of such work in fostering critical consciousness, as well as the factors that either promote or impede the work of these student clubs. This included the need to actively involve students and the importance of supportive school teachers and administrators. Throughout this discussion of the findings, it has become evident that high school GSAs are doing more than simply providing a safe space for LGBTQ youth and their heterosexual allies to socialize. These student clubs are

working to engage the broader school community including teachers, staff, students, community organizations, and parents in a critical conversation about LGBTQ equity issues and inclusive education (Draughn et al., 2002; Ferfolja, 2007; MacGillivray, 2005; Lee, 2002; MacIntosh, 2007; Mayberry, 2006; Mussman, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002; Russel et al., 2009). However, there is still more work needed to eradicate the influences of heteronormative school discourses, practices, and ideologies within the entire institution of education. This next section will engage in a more in-depth analysis of the themes that emerged from the critical reading of participant narratives. This will include a discussion of GSA advisors as public intellectuals and the impact of the “at risk” and “safe space.”

Internal Struggles with “At Risk” Discourses: The Need to Shift Perspectives

In her discussion of LGBTQ youth constructions, Talburt (2004) discusses how adolescence has been viewed as a time of both biological and psychological change within the field of science. It is a time characterized by instances of “turmoil” and “instability,” a time where young people must be monitored, protected, and guided towards their future roles as citizens. However, Talburt (2004) also discusses how LGBTQ youth identities in particular are subjected to certain viewpoints, which limit the positions of LGBTQ youth in schools to being predominantly “at risk” for a variety of negative health, mental health, social, and academic outcomes. This is apparent in the academic literature investigating LGBTQ student experiences, which relies heavily on the discourse of “at risk” (Erevelles, 2011; Ferfolija, 2007; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Jennings & MacGillivray, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002) as well as the lack of research investigating LGBTQ youth agency, resiliency, and resistance (MacIntosh, 2007; Mayberry, 2006; Mayberry et al., 2011). Although some academics are beginning to question the usefulness

of “at risk” discourses, little research has been done with educators specifically working with LGBTQ youth in schools.

Therefore, this research purposefully discussed the issue of “at risk” discourses within the faculty advisor interviews conducted. Since tenants of queer theory, critical pedagogy, and critical discourse analysis argue that a researcher in this field must take on an explicit political stance within their work (Giroux, 2011; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Wodak & Meyer, 2011; Van Dijk, 1993; Delamont, 2012), I felt it necessary to clearly and openly ask the participants about their views on the label of “at risk” and how it impacts how LGBTQ students and GSAs are understood within high schools today. While faculty advisors interviewed expressed how depression, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, academic failure, dropping out of school, and isolation are very real risks associated with LGBTQ students, they also showed instances of internal struggle with the term. For example, when asked if she sees LGBTQ youth or the student members of her GSA as “at risk,” Lindsay replied:

You know I always feel squeamish when I hear “at risk.” It feels like, I don’t like it and I don’t like the way being “at risk” then frames everything, it’s like a filter or something. So if you hear a group is “at risk” it’s like this weird catch all phrase through which you then look at that population. So yeah, like I’ve heard the stats, I get that young people are at greater risk for homelessness or dropping out of high school and like harassment and bullying and like death, and those things we have to take seriously because enough young kids are dying like I’m so sick of it you know? And we need to be sick of it in order to do something, but I don’t know... I don’t like to think of my kids as “at risk” because they were vibrant and they were alive and they were excited. Many of them were just like waiting to get done high school you know? They were survivors and everyday they were there, one day closer to graduation, because many of them felt like once they graduated they could move out of their parents houses and so on. But some of them had like supportive parents and they weren’t that typical kid who you think of. I think kids are smart and we need to give them more credit because they are going to be fine. I think you know I think calling people at risk then also puts adults in like a super privileged position to save them and I think we need to check ourselves a little bit because I think the kids they know where they are. The teens that I taught anyway were like super resourceful and super capable and they are not, it’s not like youth are the solution or the answer to the worlds homophobic problems, but I think adults need to shut up and listen sometimes

because young people do have a lot to teach us. And when we call them at risk we just position ourselves as ones who can say so and it makes me really mad.

Within this response, Lindsay was not only able to illustrate how LGBTQ youth are at risk for negative outcomes, but also how the discourse of risk can limit the way we view this student population. Research has suggested that “at risk” labels target certain populations for various intervention strategies and services, which can be highly beneficial to the individual student. However, they often fail to address the larger systemic issues ingrained in organized institutions, like the education system, and the many agents involved including the ideologies, policies, curriculum content, and teaching practices, as well as the individual teachers, administrators, parents, students, and community members (Ferfolja, 2007; Ginwright & Commarota, 2002; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Jennings et al., 2006; Savin-Williams, 2001; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995; Quinlivan, 2002; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001).

More importantly, when Lindsay discussed the student members of her GSA, she used terms such as “vibrant,” “alive,” “resourceful,” and “capable,” which all go against common perspectives about LGBTQ youth. For example, Stasiulis (2002) has argued that young people in general are often viewed as innocent, vulnerable, incapable, and irrational beings in need of adult forms of protection and regulation. These definitions of young people are often exacerbated when LGBTQ youth who go against “normal” sexual development are brought into the picture, with terms such as “at risk,” “abnormal,” and “deviant” being added to their student definition (Erevelles, 2011; Jones, 2011; Ferfolja, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002; Trimple, 2009). Furthermore, Lindsay was able to question the authority of adults within schools today when she described how LGBTQ “at risk” discourses place adults in a “super privileged position to save them” and how we need to “check ourselves” and “shut up and listen.” These views are characteristic of a queer and critical pedagogy wherein power imbalances between students and teachers are

eradicated as both parties become co-learners (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011). If we are to challenge heteronormative school practices, students and teachers must learn to listen to one another, develop an ethical responsibility towards one another, and combine ideas in order to actively define and transform the heteronormative school cultures.

Within the focus group interview conducted, another discussion took place with regards to the dominant “at risk” discourse:

Abby: Now one thing I wanted to ask about, when I was doing my literature review reading all these research studies that have been done on LGBTQ students and GSA’s, LGBTQ youth are frequently referred to as an at risk group. I was just wondering what your thoughts are on that label?

Jen: at risk as far as not graduating, self-harm, etc.

Abby: yes and I understand that they are all very real realities for them

Jen: yes I would say so

Bill: yeah I would agree

Leanne: I would agree, not being you know LGBTQ but just the social aspects that come along with it put them at greater risk. I don’t like the term at risk though and we struggle with that in the health field because we don’t have a program for people at risk for this, but were having discussions of changing that language. And then you know sometimes they will use the word vulnerable and we don’t like that either so it’s difficult to...

Bill: yeah you know you play syntactic gymnastics with all of that, at risk for what?
(Everyone laughs)

Abby: I have always had a hard time with that term too because aren’t we all at risk for something?

Bill: I know!

Leanne: especially for mental health it could happen to anyone so

Bill: but I think LGBTQ students are targets and that puts them at physical risk sometimes it actually does if you, you know, stick to that terminology, self-esteem, their own awareness, their own feeling good about themselves, I think that it can be very challenging to deal with

Abby: mhmm

Jen: and I think being able to connect with students from other schools

Bill: yeah they love this

Jen: but they love connecting with others

Bill: yeah they connect with Facebook too with other schools and our kids knew what movies they wanted to watch tonight and our guys they do a Facebook page for the GSA to help communication

Within this focus group discussion, the two academic advisors and the public health nurse were able to discuss the issues LGBTQ youth face on a daily basis that put them in a position of “at risk.” Bill and Jen both acknowledged issues such as self-harm, dropping out of school, bullying and physical harassment, as well as self-esteem issues as being connected to LGBTQ youth (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Craig et al., 2008; Heck et al., 2011; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Kennedy & Covell, 2009; Miceli, 2005; Taylor & Peter, 2011; 2010). However, they were quick to change the conversation near the end to address how GSAs also allow these students to connect with other GSA members in different schools through events such as movie nights and through social media, which helps to foster a shared consciousness and promote ideas of inclusion within their school board (Giroux, 2011; MacGillivray, 2005; MacIntosh, 2007; Mayberry, 2006; Mussman, 2007; Russel et al., 2009). Moreover, the public health nurse, Leanne, was the one who brought up the idea of how language use can be marginalizing even if it is designed to help certain student populations. Since her work as a nurse has allowed her to understand that issues of mental health are not specific to any one person, sexuality, race, ability, or age, she was able to bring that critical piece into this discussion.

The topic of language use continued in other interviews as well, which is evident in the participant narrative below. When asked about the term “at risk,” Kate said:

We had a lot of really strong um leadership kinds of kids in GSA and had you asked me that before I did my thesis I would have said no I don't see them as at risk. However, when I took those graduated students and had interviewed them, the common thread that I had heard from all of them was about the level of fear they experienced during their high school years. And that fear was of rejection by their families, it was of rejection by their friends, by their classmates, and to a certain extent by the other adults in this building. So even though outwardly the kids didn't seem like they were at risk like we had some real high achievers academically. They certainly weren't kids who were at risk of dropping out of school at the moment, however you throw in that factor of fear for them you know when they had back up plans for how they were going to leave their home if they got kicked out that certainly could have turned into homelessness and drop outs very quickly. Thankfully for most cases they were accepted, not for all unfortunately, but for the majority they were. So I don't know, personally I have a problem with a lot of the labeling that gets done at risk youth is one cause aren't all kids at risk right? The other is the term GSA because what I mentioned earlier is that it is so very binary and wouldn't we be better off maybe to call them QSAs? Queer straight alliances and then that way you've got more of an umbrella term. I think in some ways the GSA might set up its own form of discrimination, not intending to, but I think that that maybe some kids don't see themselves reflected in that GSA.

In her discussion, Kate suggested that prior to her master's research, she would not have thought of LGBTQ youth as "at risk." However, her research suggested that most of the sexual minority students who graduated suffered in school due to fear and isolation, a common finding in previous research studies (Bishop & Casida; 2011; Craig et al., 2008; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Little, 2001; Walls et al., 2010). Even though she has an issue with the term she still felt that many LGBTQ youth are "at risk" for certain negative outcomes. She also brought up the issue of how the GSA itself can be exclusionary. For instance, research has suggested that the majority of GSAs in North America are composed of White, female members with a high percentage identifying as straight allies. Therefore, certain LGBTQ students may feel marginalized within the GSA itself due to cultural and racial differences, or simply due to the lack of male members (Draughn et al., 2002; Lapointe, 2012; McCready, 2004; Miceli, 2005). Kate also suggested that the very term GSA itself is binary and that other names such as Queer Straight Alliance would be more inclusive. This was evident in the GSAs discussed by the faculty advisors within this study,

whose student members chose to use names like Queer Ally Alliance or Kaleidoscope to encompass a larger spectrum of identities and expressions.

Overall, the work these advisors are doing with student members of GSAs does not present these young people as an “at risk” group. The fact that these students are coming together to discuss the name of their clubs and the impact certain terms may have on certain student identities illustrates how these youth are acting as active, critical, and engaged citizens concerned about the lack of inclusion and equity of LGBTQ people. More specifically, other GSA advisors have discussed the level of participation and active engagement among their student members, which counteracts the common “at risk” label. For example, Bill discussed taking his student members of their GSA to a nation-wide conference. He stated:

Bill: Last year we went to Canada’s first nation-wide GSA conference in Toronto and that was called outshine... students and young people from all over Canada came and it was a wonderful experience for the kids and they had great workshops throughout the 3 days, it was packed, and they had a film festival um so we got a lot out of that conference and we made beyond that we made some contacts with others through EGALÉ and PFLAG. We have had speakers come into the school and do workshops and help with the assemblies and presentations and we appreciate the support from the local PFLAG chapter too, which is in a close town and were saving up on fundraising for next year’s outshine conference, which is in Winnipeg so were hoping to get to that too.

Abby: What did they discuss in the workshops? Like what types of topics? Did they vary?

Bill: Oh uh the topics are varied. They would discuss everything from how to run a GSA to um transgendered students... one of the interesting ones I went to was uh the sexuality of disabled people... like what if you’re a DD (developmentally delayed) kid and you’re gay? Like how does that all work? So there’s a company that pursued that and they did a film on it and they brought the actors from the film in who weren’t really actors they were real people who had developmental delays who were still functioning and who were gay or lesbian and they came and talked to our group in that workshop so that was fascinating. And they had um I bet 60 or 70 different ones and some were for teachers and students and some were for students only and uh some of them were fairly “x-rated” too, they weren’t too shy.

Within Bill's statement, he has shown how the student members of the GSA, both LGBTQ and heterosexual alike, are engaging in a variety of events, activities, and conversations that are pushing the boundaries of what is considered "normal" sexuality within schools. By doing so, these students are presenting themselves as active, critical, engaged, interested, rational, and driven students dedicated to learning about LGBTQ identities, sexuality and gender-based oppression, social justice and human rights topics pertaining to sexuality, and general ideas of equity, diversity, and acceptance of all people. This is similar to previous research studies conducted in North American high schools, which have illustrated the possibilities for GSAs to promote critical thinking skills, social justice organizing, and the formation of future democratic citizens (MacGillivray, 2005; MacIntosh, 2007; Mayberry, 2006; Mayberry et al., 2011; Schindel, 2008).

Although the advisors illustrated how student members of GSAs are actively involved in their education and are working to challenge heteronormative school cultures through participation in conferences and workshops, through educating their fellow peers and teachers about LGBTQ student experiences, and other school-wide initiatives, the dominance of the "at risk" discourse is still evident. Although these discourses have functioned to promote school-based policies and practices to help LGBTQ students on an individual basis and to more effectively deal with instances of homophobic bullying, they have done little to challenge the broader heteronormative ideologies rooted within education system (Conway & Crawford-Fisher, 2007; Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; MacGillivray, 2005; Mayberry, 2006; Quinlivan, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2001).). This is because the "at risk" discourses have functioned to frame the issues facing LGBTQ students today as an individual problem versus a systemic one, which has resulted in the widespread educational concerns of safety and bullying.

This next section will now discuss the issue of the “safe space” discourse surrounding high school GSAs.

Boundaries, Limitations, and the “Safe Space” Discourse: Are any of us really safe?

As LGBTQ students are being increasingly viewed as an “at risk” population, educators, school administrators, and policy makers have framed the issues facing these students as an issue of safety (Bishop & Casida, 2010; Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; MacIntosh, 2007; Macgillivray & Whitlock, 2007; Mayberry et al., 2011; Mayberry, 2006; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002). This is evident in the recent passing of *Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act* (OME, 2012), which builds on Ontario’s broader *Equity and Inclusive Education and Safe Schools Strategies*. These policies have mandated specific ways for addressing homophobic harassment and have placed a greater ethical and legal responsibility on school administrators and teachers to provide for services, interventions, and supports to students affected by bullying in general and homophobic harassment in particular. However, several academics have argued that framing the issues faced by LGBTQ students solely as an issue of safety reinforces the idea that these students are simply “at risk” (Currie et al., 2012; Mayberry et al., 2011; Miceli, 2005; Savin-Williams, 2002). Ultimately, by directing focus to the individual, we are left with a limited understanding of heteronormative ideologies that permeate every aspect of schooling, (Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; MacIntosh, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002).

However, in their discussion, Currie et al., (2012) have suggested that the “safe space” discourse holds both possibilities and limitations in terms of how LGBTQ issues in education are handled. For example, they speak about how the provision of safety can foster a greater sense of inclusion, social cohesion, affiliation, and engagement with the school community. This is similar to participant discussions about the benefits of GSAs to student members. In the focus

group interview excerpt below, the participants discuss how individual student members have benefitted from their involvement with the high school GSA:

Abby: Do you see students' gaining anything from their participation in the GSA? Whether in their personal life, academic life?

Bill: yes

Jen: I think so just the fact that they're not alone, it's ok to be in this group. Certainly when I was in school you would never have done this. My kids went to a rural school and when we started the GSA my daughter said you would never be able to do that at my school, they would not be talking about it there, students there would not come out because there is more of a stigma to identify. Here we have more students who are more confident to identify without fear.

Bill: I do know and I have dealt with personal cases. It has made a difference, more so with male graduate students who have come to me and cried and said I saved his life

Jen: wow

Bill: It gave him a place, it gave him a voice, so if it did it for one it had to have for others, so I know it has and it has helped them to be able to stand up

Abby: that's great

Leanne: And it just gives them that sense of belonging and a place to connect with people. Like I am not here all the time, I don't know who they hang around with, but I get a sense that in that room they are talking and socializing with people that they probably wouldn't have otherwise when they are not in that group

Jen: I had a parent who phoned me before Christmas holidays and wanted to thank me for taking her daughter to the GSA. She said her daughter is becoming more confident and I said wow you know, like we have only been meeting for a few weeks and to go to that and connect with other people over Facebook and just talks about it more so that was really nice to hear. So I thought well this is all worth it just to hear something like that, for a parent to say that to call and thank me. Staff members, people don't understand that we're all here on our own time...um there was a snow storm when we were driving somewhere and I was like oh I'm good with this. By the time I drove each kid home and got back to my house it was like 11 o'clock and I was like you know what? It's good, for the kids to feel connected...it is worth it, for one kid you think alright I am sold on this.

In this focus group discussion, the GSA advisors and the public health nurse were able to identify how the GSA has worked to improve the lives of LGBTQ students and their allies.

Again, the sense of community and inclusion, being able to connect with different students, engagement with LGBTQ issues, and finding their own voice in the larger school are all benefits cited in previous research as well (Lee, 2002; MacGillivray, 2005; Mayberry, 2006; Miceli, 2005; Russell et al., 2009). Moreover, these participants were reassured that the work they are doing within the GSA is moving in the right direction when they were approached by previous student members who have told them that the GSA saved their lives, or through comments by parents who have seen improvements in their child's life. This was a common theme throughout all participant interviews, who indicated that being able to help "that one kid" makes it all worth it.

Currie et al., (2012) have also suggested that the "safe space" discourse allows schools and individual staff to better negotiate community and parental pushback. Since GSAs have been criticized for being nothing more than "sex clubs" that recruit students into promiscuous and homosexual lifestyles (Craig et al., 2008; Herriot, 2011; Miceli, 2005), framing LGBTQ students as "at risk" and in need of "safe spaces" makes it easier to market the benefits of GSAs to opposing groups (Ferfolja, 2007; Miceli, 2005). This was affirmed by Kate who stated that:

They looked at it as bullying. Um the number one selling point, as far as the GSA, was to sell it to staff so that required a fair bit of staff education. Um and as the years have gone by, you know, the ministry has said here's how schools need to deal with this. The school board has come up with a response and that is very concrete policies around dealing with homophobic slurs and um bullying. School admin is very good about following up with those. I wouldn't say that 100 percent of staff are on board uh as of yet. I think it's progressing slowly um but you do still get some teaching staff who will make those homophobic slurs themselves, so that's not a good thing.

In her discussion, Kate identified that her school framed LGBTQ issues in education as an issue of homophobic bullying in order to "sell" the idea to staff. Ferfolja (2007) has suggested that schools who visibly support LGBTQ youth and promote queer-positive pedagogies risk their market potential "because they are seen to be supporting a 'deviant lifestyle'" (p. 151). Thus,

selling GSAs as a safety concern and focusing on anti-bullying and anti-homophobia initiatives is much easier for schools than working to interrogate broader socio-political issues of institutionalized heteronormativity and heterosexism (Bishop & Casida, 2010; Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; MacIntosh, 2007; Miceli, 2005; Quinlivan, 2002).

However, in their discussion of the limitations of the “safe space” discourse, Currie et al., (2012) have noted that it not only leaves normative constructions of student sexuality intact, it also serves to place boundaries and limitations on the work of GSAs. For example, when asked if her GSA student members connected with other GSA members in different schools through events and activities, Lindsay stated:

Well the one time we wanted to do that was when the students were having a movie night they wanted to invite GSAs from other schools that were nearby and that's when I approached the VP she said no, like the brakes were put on that she didn't want us... I don't know what she didn't want. But that was like a non-starter and that happened like right at the beginning of when I started teaching there so the message was clear like you can have the club but you cannot... I don't know.

Lindsay discussed how her GSA student members wanted to host a movie night and invite GSAs from other schools to attend. Although having an event such as this does little to educate the broader school community about LGBTQ issues or to eradicate heteronormative beliefs and practices, it does function as a social event that allows student members to connect with one another. This provides LGBTQ students and heterosexual allies with a space to socialize and to share common experiences, which can help to eliminate the negative factors associated with the high levels of social and emotional isolation reported by LGBTQ students (Currie et al., 2012; Heck et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Miceli, 2005; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). Being able to connect with other student members could possibly promote the development of a shared political consciousness, which could lead to more educational and social justice work in high

school GSAs (Freire, 1970; Ginwright & Commarota, 2002; Giroux, 2011; MacIntosh, 2007; Miceli, 2005; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Jennings et al., 2006).

What is even more important to take note of within Lindsay's statement is how the school administration quickly denied the students' request to invite other school GSAs, without considering the benefits of such an event. In a subsequent conversation, Lindsay brought up the issue with the movie night again. She stated:

Like I had to twist the VP's arm, she didn't want it [the movie night] announced, she didn't want the parent council to know. Basically she told me that we don't want to advertize like that "kind of event" in quotations, so that was like frustrating. I just sort of felt that if any other club asked for a movie night there wouldn't have been questions of that sort but I think perhaps she also had eyes on her like doing what she knew best to do which was allowing the movie night but ask that we don't tell everyone its happening, you know?

In both of these interview excerpts, it is evident how the "safe space" discourse functions to set up boundaries around what is considered appropriate and inappropriate GSA activities. When Lindsay stated that "the message was clear like you can have the club but you cannot..." and how the Vice Principal did not want the school to advertize that "kind of event," it is apparent how language use can create binaries between student clubs and the GSA clubs, between heterosexual identities and LGBTQ identities, and ultimately between us and the "other" (Erevelles, 2011; Jones, 2011; Ferfolja, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002; Temple, 2005; Trimble, 2009).

Although Lindsay suggested that the VP may have handled this situation in this way to satisfy the different parties involved in the school community, it still demonstrates the impact of the "safe space" discourse and how some school administrators create invisible boundaries around GSAs activities. Put simply, within this particular high school, the GSA was thought to be nothing more than a "safe space" for LGBTQ youth and their allies to socialize and hang out and any activities or events that strayed from this mandate that may cause community or parental

pushback was not allowed. Currie et al., (2012) and others have argued that the framing of GSAs solely as safe spaces limits the abilities of these student clubs to take on social justice initiatives, promote further education and development among staff and students, and reach out into the larger community in any capacity (Ferfolja, 2007; MacGillivray, 2005; MacIntosh, 2007; Mayberry, 2006; Mayberry et al., 2011; Quinlivan, 2002).

Although previous research investigating high school GSAs has indicated an overreliance on the “safe space” discourse, some participants within this study indicated mixed feelings towards its effectiveness. They were able to provide suggestions in terms of moving the discussion of LGBTQ inclusion beyond the lack of safe spaces to one that encompasses broader school reform efforts. For example, when asked about GSAs as safe spaces, Kate replied:

I don't know like uh my feeling is that if you want to set it up as a club to ensure safety for kids you're not doing that because people are seeing them walk into that room for their club meetings and you might be setting them up to a certain extent. I think if maybe you open it up as more of a social entity and make it a safe environment, both within the school and within the club, then it's going to foster school-wide safety as opposed to just focusing on the safe corner where we're going to put our LGBTQ kids... You can have a GSA in a school and still have a very hostile school.

Within this excerpt, Kate was able to identify the limitations of GSAs in combating school-wide homophobia and heterosexism. She acknowledges how student members of GSAs, both LGBTQ and heterosexual alike, can experience forms of marginalization by association with the GSA, which has been found in other research as well (Lapointe, 2012; Russel et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2012). Moreover, she discussed how there is a need to shift focus from the safe space of the GSA and focus more on the entire school culture. We are now beginning to see this as Ontario schools are implementing a variety of initiatives, strategies, and policies to promote student safety, inclusion, and equity (Kitchen & Bellini, 2013; OME, 2012).

However, other researchers suggest that in order to truly change the heteronormative culture of education systems, we need to begin to address not only the issue of safety in terms of homophobic bullying, but also the normalizing of heterosexuality in the mandated curriculum content, as well as within the hidden curriculum of the school (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Bishop & Casida, 2011; Connell & Elliot, 2009; Erevelles, 2011; Ferfolja, 2007; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Quinlivan, 2002). One participant within this study was able to identify the beginning stages that need to be implemented in order to combat heteronormativity and promote a critical and queer inclusive pedagogy within the institution of education. Lindsay stated:

I don't think that any place is safe, ever. Like I hear this garbage about creating a safe space in your classroom but learning for me has got to be one of the most vulnerable positions you can put yourself in. So to talk about a gay straight alliance as a safe space is like a load of garbage because those kids will also pick on each other. Like the trans student who didn't feel comfortable going anymore, you know that was a gender issue. She was welcomed as a lesbian, but she wasn't as welcomed as a trans. So I don't think that the gay straight alliance was safe. I think it offered them a place to come and eat their lunch and get to know each other but it's not like it was this gay straight alliance that was safe while the school was horrendous. I think the school had some horrendous stuff going on and it had some great stuff going on and the gay straight alliance offered a good place for people to come, but just because you are gay it doesn't mean you are going to get along. Just because you are gay it doesn't mean that all other differences along lines of class, race, gender, ableism, etc. don't exist. So those dynamics were still happening within the group and at times the group may have come together against this other thing that they saw to be their beast or some oppositional thing they were fighting against, but at times they were fighting with each other. Especially when they would like have sex with each other it would just be like oh someone slept with someone's girlfriend now they can't come to lunch now. You know it was just like this huge circle of animosity as much as it was a welcoming circle. So safety is this thing we want to tell ourselves to feel good. But like even if a teacher said their classroom is safe, ask the kids what's going on they will tell you. It's not and that's okay. Why do we need places to be safe? Why can't we think of conflict as being generative you know? And difference. I think we can.

Within her discussion, Lindsay illustrated numerous issues with the idea of GSAs as safe spaces. One of the more interesting points she brought up was the issue of bullying and marginalization within the GSAs themselves. Savin-Williams (2001) has stated that the majority of research on sexual minority youth often represents them as a homogenous population, in direct opposition

with “normal” developing heterosexual youth. Just because GSA members are connected in terms of their non-heterosexual identities or, for allies, for being aligned with LGBTQ rights, it does not mean that their GSA will be free of conflict and opposition. Like Lindsay stated, differences of class, race, gender, ableism and other factors are just as common in GSAs as they are in entire schools and communities. Furthermore, GSA members are still young people in high school who date and have friendships, which can result in break ups and other conflicts typical among this age group. Therefore, experiences of bullying and marginalization can surface within the “safe spaces” afforded by GSAs.

Lastly, I would like to discuss Lindsay’s last comment within this interview excerpt. When she questioned the need for safe spaces in the first place and stated “why can’t we think of conflict as being generative you know? And difference. I think we can” she brought up an issue that is highly relevant to the formation of a critical and queer positive pedagogy. Several academics within that field suggest that LGBTQ identities constitute “difficult knowledges” that challenge the dominant, unquestioned, and common sense understandings of sexuality, which can unsettle and upset some individuals (Currie et al., 2012; Erevellas, 2011; Ferfolja, 2007; Giroux, 2011; Quinlivan, 2002). The need to have difficult conversations, to embrace conflict and difference, and to use it to improve current circumstances is something that does need to happen in order to shift from our current focus on safety to the larger systemic issues of heteronormativity. Lindsay suggested that learning for her is “one of the most vulnerable positions you can put yourself in” and perhaps if all educators could use this vulnerability to push discussions of student sexuality into new arenas, or to engage in a “pedagogy of discomfort” (Ferfolja, 2007; Giroux, 2011; Johnson, 2007; Jones, 2011) we may begin to tackle the broader issues and develop educators who are capable and willing to take on such a task.

Heteronormative School Discourses & the Need for Public Intellectuals

Within their critique of high school GSAs, Currie et al., (2012) suggest that there is a need to shift discourses from the ever-prevalent language of student safety and “safe spaces” to one that utilizes a social justice framework. If schools begin to operate from a social justice model, GSAs could begin to challenge heteronormative school policies, practices, and curricula. This would require, according to Quinlivan (2002) an organizational strategy where spaces are provided in the school where both heterosexual and LGBTQ identities can be centered as normal and where heterosexuality is discussed not assumed. It would also involve a pedagogical strategy where teachers and students come together to discuss heteronormative discourses that silence LGBTQ identities in schools. This would allow students and teachers to work collaboratively, to educate one another, and to challenge the invisibility of non-heterosexual identities (Currie et al., 2012; Quinlivan, 2002). Lastly, this would require a systemic strategy where all stakeholders including students, parents, community organizations, teachers, and school administrators are brought together to tackle social justice and equity issues experienced by all members in the school (Currie et al., 2012; Quinlivan, 2002).

However, the approach schools are currently taking to address the issues faced by LGBTQ students and staff within Ontario educational systems does little to challenge the inequities and biases inherent in the entire system. For instance MacIntosh (2007) has suggested that educators often struggle with moving beyond the safe schools discourse and its focus on bullying, thus negating their ethical and legal responsibility to confront and interrogate school-based heteronormativity. For example, when asked how her school frames the issues facing LGBTQ students today, Jane stated:

I don't think education in general sees itself as heteronormative or can conceive how that concept plays itself out on a daily basis. We have worked really hard this year as a

School Board to address the experiences of LGBTQ students across the board, but we are in the infancy stages of doing this work.

Jane suggested that while her school and the school board are working to address the issues faced by LGBTQ students in education, she describes their work as being in the “infancy stages.”

Moreover, she was able to address how issues of homophobic attitudes and bullying often cloud the larger issue of heteronormativity, which limits the ability of schools to understand how it plays out on a daily basis through educational policies, practices, and curricula, as well as within the unquestioned assumptions of heterosexuality seen within social interactions among students and staff (Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; MacIntosh, 2007; Mayberry, 2005; Mayberry et al., 2011; Mussman, 2007). Therefore, academics are calling for a pedagogy that refuses to label LGBTQ students as victims of pathology, deviancy, and abnormality, and ultimately as an “at risk” group (Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; MacIntosh, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002).

If we are to begin to promote a critical and queer-positive pedagogy within both the enacted and hidden sexuality curriculum, we need to find individuals who can lead the way and initiate such a conversation. While many have indicated that it is the students who are leading the way in social justice and human rights initiatives for LGBTQ identities, others believe it is unfair to place that onus entirely on young people (MacIntosh, 2007; Miceli, 2005; Mussman, 2007; Russel et al., 2009). For example, in the conversation below Lindsay was asked if students should be urged more to take on social justice initiatives within GSAs and brought up a number of important issues.

Lindsay: Yeah I don't know that's a good question. They expressed to me that they had like made posters and they had done a survey a couple of years ago The older people in the club remember being the younger members when the survey was taking place and essentially it was about like homophobia and how people use language in the school and they took it upon themselves to do this really interesting survey. They went around and posted results of it um and so anytime they said to me they would put up posters of any kind for the GSA, or like gay positive stuff, it would get ripped down by other students.

So sometimes in the club...we would make kind of gay positive signs and put them up around the school but inevitably in a day or two they would get torn down or homophobic things would be written on them. So I think the students at least felt like why should they be the ones to do the work of educating others because they were already in like a marginalized position and maybe that's where the straight ally aspect comes in because if a straight person belongs to the club they may be in a better position perhaps to advocate. I don't know, I'm not sure, but they definitely felt frustrated and I think they felt sick of creating signs and then getting them ripped down. They were proud of the survey that had been done however many years before them, but it felt like the survey was a glaring reminder of the kinds of homophobia that was circulating in the school and they would also even say to me that they would hear things or even they would hear teachers say things so it was like they couldn't even look to teachers to be the ones to like break up some of the homophobia because teachers were responsible for some of the homophobia. And I have witnessed that myself... I would overhear things in the staff room, so it wasn't just the kids saying that, I heard it too. So if you can't even ask teachers to be leaders like who's going to do the work? Is it going to be the grade 9 gay boy like standing up and educating people, like I don't think so?

Abby: yeah so there's got to be kind of like a shift in how the teachers are handling things before the students can even take on that kind of...

Lindsay: I think so but I don't really know and also I mean people were saying homophobic things but I don't think that everyone is like a raging homophobe or anything. I think people sometimes say stupid hurtful things but it doesn't mean that they are terrible people or that they necessarily mean to be homophobic. I think it's just like the everyday language that people don't think about. It's the gay kids that are hearing that ringing in their ears and it was like, I don't know, I think they feel a little bit beaten down by it because it is exhausting work. But I think high schools are places where everyone is still figuring out where they are in the pecking order or figuring out how they identify... I don't know, work certainly needs to be done, but I don't even know where to begin with it. And they certainly didn't feel like they were in a position to like bring it on, but they were certainly like fighters you know? They stood up and said quite it when they could but how often can you say that?

Within this interview excerpt, Lindsay discussed how the student members of her GSA attempted to make visible LGBTQ issues in education through their own school climate survey and the posting of information around the school. However, the ripping down of the posters, the homophobic language written on them, and the lack of progress made since the school climate survey eroded the ability and drive of these students to take on LGBTQ educational initiatives. According to academics, this serves to silence and render invisible the existence of LGBTQ

identities entirely (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Ferfolja, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002). Lindsay stated that these students were already marginalized and the lack of school support limited the effectiveness of their GSA work. More specifically, she discussed how homophobic language has become so common in the everyday language of young people, which suggests that the larger issue of heteronormativity needs to be brought into the discussion. Overall, instances of homophobic bullying and language use have become increasingly common and normalized, just as heterosexuality has been normalized for so many years (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Ferfolja, 2007; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Quinliva, 2002).

Furthermore, Lindsay suggested that it is unfair for GSA student members to be the ones to take on the challenge of LGBTQ social justice and equity work when they cannot depend on the teachers and other adults in their lives to support them and promote LGBTQ education and inclusion in their own classrooms. Therefore, it is necessary to begin with educational researchers, educational policy makers, teachers, and school administrators and encourage them to become not only allies in the struggle for LGBTQ inclusion, but also to continue to educate themselves, engage in professional development workshops, and learn to interrogate not just homophobia but heteronormativity in schools as well (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; MacIntosh, 2007; Mayberry et al., 2011; Quinlivan, 2002). In essence, there is a need to move all those involved in the institution of education to become what Giroux (2011) has termed “public intellectuals.”

According to Giroux (2011), the role of the public intellectual is to cultivate critical consciousness, to destabilize and unravel dominant ideologies, discourses, and social relations, and to interrupt common sense and unquestioned ways of being, acting, knowing, and understanding the world. Public intellectuals need to link theory and practice within their work,

they must become self-critical and engage others in critical dialogue, and they must begin to explore and transform the limiting and oppressive conditions experienced by certain groups and individuals (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011). Overall, I was able to see glimpses of emerging public intellectuals throughout the interviews with the faculty advisors of GSAs. For example, in her discussion of her roles and responsibilities as a faculty advisor, Jane stated:

I am one of 3 staff advisors for the QAA at our school. We all take on different roles at different times. At the most basic level we have the responsibility of regular club business, coordinating club activities with student council, accounting for our club money, helping to run the clubs weekly meetings and special events, etc. This is the most basic level. As GSA advisors, we are also the "go to" people for everyone in our school who has questions, concerns, or complaints or downright homophobic/transphobic ideas around LGBTQ experiences. This means we do a lot of advocating in the school outside of the club. We meet with admin when students feel they have been victimized (thankfully we have very supportive admin.) who attend club meetings when they can. We advocate for students with homophobic/transphobic or "homo-unaware" staff for students. We present about LGBTQ inclusion and safe schools at staff and department meetings. We become life-lines for LGBTQ students who are struggling with mental health, are homeless or are facing other obstacles. In this capacity we connect students with community agencies and through our work at school and my work as the Chapter Leader for our local PFLAG, we work with community agencies by giving presentations and looking at policies to help to ensure that they are LGBTQ friendly. We have made some fantastic partnerships with Victim Services, Children's Mental Health, Interval House, the Public Library and the local United Church. Last year, we brought the Superintendent of Safe Schools and our School Board Chief Psychologist to our QAA meetings to discuss the HUGE problem of homophobic harassment on buses. Our students were amazingly articulate and honest about what was taking place and it has led to our transportation board coming to some of the LGBTQ training taking place

We have worked really hard over the years to move the board forward on LGBTQ inclusion and this year, we have seen a real shift for the better. My 2 colleagues at the school along with 2 other teachers from the Board have presented across the Board on LGBTQ inclusion, GSA's in small and rural school contexts, and are in the process-along with our school boards newly formed Equity and Inclusion Network. HOWEVER, this is not enough. Rural/small town Ontario is a tough place to be for anyone at this point. Loss of jobs, social services etc. means that there is not a lot of hope and I see this lack of hope (ability to conceive that there is anything at all beyond the community we live in) in many of the students I work with through Student Success. I feel our LGBTQ youth experience this at an even bigger level because it is hard to see themselves reflected in much of anything in the community. We have a Pride week - started by the youth from my school and it is an amazing time. However, beyond this celebration, we

do not have much to offer. Starting next month we are going to start a once a week LGBTQ youth drop in centre at the library and hope that is a positive for our youth.

Within our email interview, Jane demonstrated her knowledge of both homophobia and heterosexism within educational systems and has shown her abilities to take that knowledge and conduct her work in a way that is highly related to the role of a public intellectual. Although she acknowledged that the work of her high school GSA is still in the “infancy stages” and that there is more work needed, she has the ability and the compassion to not only act as an advocate for LGBTQ students, but to initiate a school-wide conversation about the influences of heteronormativity. Moreover, her work in the field of LGBTQ inclusion extends beyond the individual high school by connecting students to organizations in the broader community and by expanding the knowledge of students, teachers, school bus drivers, and members of the school board. In essence, she is promoting a common critical consciousness among those in the school and trying to make visible the existence of LGBTQ identities, which directly negates the ideologies of heteronormativity (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011).

Furthermore, research has documented the need for more teacher development training within the area of sexuality issues in education (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Connell & Elliot, 2009; Elia & Eliason, 2010; Ferfolja, 2007; Jones, 2011; Kennedy & Covell, 2009; Quinlivan, 2002). Although all of the teacher advisors interviewed within this study showed potential to become public intellectuals in the fight for LGBTQ equity and inclusion, there were instances where it became evident that GSA advisors and teachers in general have a limited understanding of heteronormative school practices and how they impact every aspect of schooling. For example, this was illustrated in the following focus group interview excerpt:

Abby: ok um do you believe that GSAs provide students with opportunities to discuss other terms other than homophobia like topics like heteronormativity and heterosexism?

Bill: yeah definitely we covered all of that

Jen: what's heteronormativity? I don't know that term

Abby: the belief that heterosexuality is the only normal form of sexuality and some people think that that's more of the prevailing issue in society rather than homophobia just the fact that people assume it

Bill: this week we had a staff training that discussed that and they said you know when you're talking to a guy don't ask him how your girlfriend is? Don't just assume cause he might be gay that type of thing

Jen: okay

Bill: we try to address that too

Jen: I suppose were not supposed to, well I always say "you guys" to girls too so yeah we have to watch language. We do have a member of our GSA who is gender fluid and this person does not want to be called "he" but prefers "they/them" and when I see this student in my guidance section and I'll I say to my students I'm an old person and not grammatically incorrect so I am going to struggle with that the student's English teacher told me the same thing and I said I will try but you have to realize it takes a lot of training for us I said I could do the "ze" and he said "I don't like the ze" okay so said I will keep that in mind and I will make mistakes just correct me I will try for this person and I say this person because no gender is to be attached so it's hard to train old people to switch (laughs) when you referred to this student as one gender for 2 or 3 years now switching its hard. I explain that and most people are good and it's not that I'm doing it to disrespect

Within this conversation, Kate who is a new to the role of a GSA advisor was unaware of the term heteronormativity. MacIntosh (2007) made a similar argument when she stated that many teachers are unable to move beyond the discourse of "safe spaces" that puts focus on homophobic language use and bullying. However, Bill was able to interject and discuss how he participated in a staff training session where heteronormativity was the subject of discussion. When we began discussing the term and its meaning it was evident that these advisors held a very basic understanding of the term and how it plays out at the micro-level of social relations, student and teacher interactions, and more specifically, the use of personal pronouns. While these

are very important factors to consider, there was a general lack of knowledge of how heteronormativity plays out at the macro level of curriculum development and delivery, LGBTQ-related policies, the hidden sexuality curriculum, and the general frameworks that dominate the way educational systems themselves view LGBTQ issues (Currie et al., 2012; MacGillivray, 2005; MacIntosh, 2007; Mayberry et al., 2011; Quinlivan, 2002). Therefore, there is still a need for more in-depth and critical discussions of sexuality and education within professional development training sessions and in teachers college as well.

Despite the need for further teacher education on LGBTQ issues, faculty advisors of GSAs were able to make suggestions on what needs to happen in order to initiate a conversation of heteronormative beliefs and practices. For example, when Lindsay was discussing the issues she faced with the school administration and the parent council, she demonstrated the need to engage in difficult conversations or a “pedagogy of discomfort” in order to move past homophobic attitudes and beliefs. She stated:

If bigots on parent council have an issue let's just sit back and watch that bigotry you know? And talk about it but like they [the school administration] were nervous I think to unleash this thing they thought might get unleashed and I wasn't nervous. I was like well let it out, if there's bigots and homophobes on parent council let's watch them, let's just sit back and see what they do or don't do but let's not not do the thing we want to do because we're afraid of what might happen. Let's go and do it and deal with what happens afterward and then at least we know where we are because it always felt like we didn't know where we were.

Lindsay expressed frustration with the way her school administration handled parental opposition to the GSA and its activities. Instead of confronting the homophobic and heterosexist attitudes of the parent council, they avoided any sort of confrontation whatsoever. However, Lindsay indicated that we need to have these community meetings about issues all members of the school are concerned with, even if those issues are about non-heterosexual identities and make people feel uneasy and uncomfortable. Before we can move forward and begin to

transform heteronormative school practices, we must engage in these difficult and critical conversations, provide spaces where LGBTQ individuals can come together to understand the roots of their oppression and work with allies committed to social justice and equity work, and to put into practice queer-positive and critical pedagogies within our schools (Currie et al., 2012; Freire, 1970; Ferfolja, 2007; Giroux, 2011; Mayberry et al., 2011 Quinlivan, 2002).

Although high school GSAs are not the single answer to solving the issues faced by LGBTQ students within Ontario high schools, they do provide spaces for educators and students that hold the possibility for the development of a critical sexuality pedagogy. Moreover, GSAs provide not only student, but teachers as well, with opportunities to learn about and confront their own personal biases they are unaware of. For example, when asked how working with a GSA impacted her, both personally and/or professionally, Kate stated:

Oh that was interesting. That was a very interesting journey. When I initially got involved with the GSA I thought that I didn't have any kind of homophobia at all and I found out really quickly that wasn't the case and I had to recognize it, own it, and then work on it because my fear was if we've got a really conservative staff here does my being involved give them impression that I am gay? I mean it's ridiculous now that I think about it and look back, but at the time I had to recognize it as something that was internal homophobia for me and I had to work on that. So I think that it was a real growth experience for me. Um and I learned all the time from the kids I learned at a very visceral level what it was that they were having to deal with and encounter and just how normal they were too, you know? We talked about at risk earlier right? They didn't have to be handled with kid gloves, you know? What they needed was equity within the school and to be safe. So yeah it was a real learning experience for me.

Although you can see the “safe space” discourse resurfacing within this response, it is important to note this advisor's account of her own personal and professional growth within the GSA, which she referred to as a “journey.” She suggested that through her involvement with the GSA, she was able to identify personal homophobic biases she was previously unaware of. More importantly, she talked about how, in order to address these internal biases and move past them, she had to “recognize it, own it, and then work on it.” Paulo Freire (1970) who was known for

his criticism of banking-models of education promoted an alternative, which he referred to as a problem-posing education. In the latter, educators and students become co-learners who together look at the knowledge and information they gain from formal schooling in order to find ways to transform the oppressive conditions of individuals and groups (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011). In other words, educators and students come to work collaboratively to translate theory into practice.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have illustrated, with the help of participant voices, the need for GSAs in Ontario high schools today and their role in challenging LGBTQ marginalization and invisibility, as well as the type of work these student organizations engage in. Despite common criticisms of high school GSAs, the work these students and faculty advisors are conducting promotes communication, critical thinking, social inclusion, and LGBTQ education, which serves to normalize non-heterosexual identities. Moreover, I also discussed common factors that can work to either promote or impede the work of high school GSAs, which included the levels of leadership and engagement of the students involved and the level of support provided by other teachers and the school administration. Then I moved on to discuss the effects of “at risk” and “safe space” discourses within the particular GSAs investigated within this study. Although these discourses can serve a tactical purpose in terms of targeting students for participation in intervention strategies and services or better negotiating with parental and community groups who opposed GSA initiatives, they can also limit the abilities of students involved in LGBTQ social justice work and place boundaries around the “types” of activities GSAs can organize. Lastly, I discussed the focus on homophobic bullying and school safety within Ontario schools

today, which negates the importance of confronting heteronormativity in schools and the development of educators as public intellectuals.

Although there is much debate about whether GSA student members should be leading the way in LGBTQ equity, inclusion, and social justice, this study cannot answer that question entirely. When asked if GSA student members should be engaging in more LGBTQ political activism one participant, Lindsay, stated:

I think in order to have activism you have to have resources so like and resources in terms of like time, money and I don't know what funding looks like in those schools that are able to do that stuff right? That's a question I would ask. But I guess you also would have to wonder what the young people want from the GSA and like cause asking young people to do activism is important but if they don't want to be doing that work like it's hard to be gay sometimes but being told you should be taking on the world as well that's a big ask you know? Should your sexual orientation dictate the kinds of like places you invest your time in within the world. Like just because you are straight it doesn't mean you will join the straight club and do social justice work so why if you're gay do you have to?

Lindsay suggested that it is unfair to assume that all LGBTQ students who join a GSA are interested in political work around issues of sexuality. This debate within the academic research is a heteronormative assumption on its own. Just because LGBTQ students identify as such, it should not dictate that they need to be engaged in social justice work. We should be looking to both LGBTQ identifying teachers and students, as well as to heterosexual allies who want to take on the work of promoting a queer-positive critical pedagogy within schools. While GSAs may be one piece to the larger puzzle to eliminating LGBTQ oppression, marginalization, and exclusion, we must also look to other avenues at the level of policy, curriculum development, and teacher training in order to reach all areas influenced by heteronormative school discourses.

Chapter 5: Conclusion, Study Limitations, and Implications for Future Research

“The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering.”

-Ben Okri

This thesis has examined the experiences and narratives of five GSA faculty advisors within Ontario high schools as well as one school-based public nurse. Due to the over-representation of LGBTQ students as an "at risk" population within media, academic, and educational discourse, this group of students have become labeled as one in need of adult forms of protection, regulation, and safety measures (Baglieri et al., 2011; Currie et al., 2012; Erevelles, 2011; Quinlivan, 2002; Savin –Williams, 2001; Talburt, 2004). These discourses of “at risk” and “safe spaces” have been implemented in schools through anti-bullying and anti-homophobia policy initiatives, as well as through the provision of “safe spaces” in the form of high school GSAs (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Currie et al., 2012; Ferfolja, 2007; Quinlivan, 2002). Therefore, this research was designed to investigate high school GSAs in Ontario from the perspectives of those directly involved to determine if these student organizations could play a role in challenging school-based heteronormativity. Again, two main research questions guided the focus of this qualitative investigation, which included:

- 1) Does the LGBTQ student "at risk" discourse limit the roles of GSAs in Ontario high schools to simply providing "safe spaces"? And,
- 2) Can student members and faculty advisors mobilize GSAs to become sites where herteronormativity is actively interrogated, negotiated, questioned, challenged, and/or resisted?

The theoretical perspectives that informed this research study, as well as my general interest in critical and inclusive pedagogies, provided a framework for the understanding, critiquing, and questioning of dominant discourses in schools and how they play out at various levels of

educational institutions (Delamont, 2012; Foucault, 1978; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Lazar, 2005; MacLure, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2011; Rogers, 2004; Van Dijk, 1993). For example, this study was concerned with the top-down discourses in education that serve to regulate the policies and practices surrounding GSAs. This was analyzed primarily within the review of the literature through my discussion of the discourses of pathology, deviancy, and abnormality rooted within the enacted sexuality curriculum, as well as the need for further teacher development training in areas of sexuality issues in education. This also included an analysis of the hidden sexuality curriculum and the practices of sexual regulation exemplified through the policing of student sexual subjectivities, the high rates of homophobic bullying and language use, the lack of teacher intervention in instances of homophobia, the complete silence of diverse sexualities in all aspects of schooling, the self-silencing among LGBTQ students themselves, and the general assumption of heterosexuality in the very school policies and pedagogies that make up North American systems of education (Bishop & Casida, 2011; Connell & Elliot, 2009; Elia & Eliason, 2010; Ferfolja, 2007; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Jones, 2011; Quinlivan, 2002; Taylor & Peter, 2011). These factors, in addition to the information collected from the faculty advisors presented within chapter four, all function to define ‘normal’ sexuality and to discipline those who fall outside heteronormative standards.

Secondly, this research was also concerned with the possibility for bottom-up discourses of teacher and student resistance to the dominant heteronormative "at risk" and “safe space” discourses. The recent passing of *Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act* (OME, 2012) in Ontario, providing students with the right to form high school GSAs, has allowed for a new research arena for examining student social justice efforts in a context that has not been thoroughly investigated in Ontario. Overall, by examining how power, dominance, and inequalities are

produced and reproduced within educational discourse, and how such language impacts the ability and significance of GSA work, this research was able to illustrate how student members and faculty advisors of high school GSAs have the ability to move these student organizations beyond the “safe space” discourse to one where critical thinking and social justice efforts are made to challenge school-based heteronormativity (Conway & Crawford-Fisher, 2007; Currie et al., 2012; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011; MacGillivray, 2005; Mayberry et al., 2011; Quinlivan, 2002; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995).

Overall, this research study has provided insights into the roles of GSAs in Ontario high schools today. Although I have suggested that GSAs have the potential to promote a critical and queer-positive pedagogy through both the critical reflection and the transformation of current heteronormative school cultures, other researchers have argued that GSAs alone are neither the answer nor the solution (MacIntosh, 2007; Miceli, 2005). In order to eradicate the heteronormativity ingrained in all levels of schooling, including the policies, teaching practices, and curriculum content, as well as within the individual-level beliefs, attitudes, language, and social interactions among students, teachers, and administrators, much more work is still needed. Therefore, this chapter will discuss the limitations of the current research study, the implications for future research, as well as suggestions for faculty advisors and students of high school GSAs.

Limitations & Implications for Future Research

As with any research investigation, the current study holds various methodological and analytical limitations that need to be addressed. Within the methodology section, the limitations of how data were collected (i.e., interviews) were already discussed. However, the primary limitations within this study involve the participant sample. Not only was the participant sample small, but the five GSA faculty advisors interviewed were all White, which is consistent with the

communities and larger cities where the high schools were located. Although I was unable to see the socioeconomic, gender, racial and cultural make-up of the GSAs within this study, the high schools were described by participants as mostly White, middle class, with the GSAs being largely female dominated. Therefore, this study cannot be generalized to the larger high school GSA teacher and student population due to lack of class, gender, racial, and cultural diversity. Since theoretical and practical research investigations have indicated the different forms of oppression and marginalization experienced by LGBTQ students on the basis of race, culture, ability, gender, and class background (McCready, 2004), high school GSAs with diverse student and teacher populations should be further investigated. Such studies could shed light on how different forms of oppression are connected and promote the formation of alliances among students to fight not just for racial equality or LGBTQ acceptance, but for the inclusion and commitment to social justice for all students.

Furthermore, this study could also be limited by the potential for researcher bias. However, this study is qualitative in nature and since interviews were used to gather data, the researcher could have unintentionally influenced both the way in which participants' responded to questions within the interview, as well as the way data were analyzed. For example, although the analysis of data was approached with a critical and queer eye, open-coding and inductive methods were also used when analyzing the interview transcripts. In essence, while I attempted to remain open to the data and to allow dominant themes, patterns, and concepts to emerge, transcript analysis is still a highly interpretative process and thus, also subject to the influence of research bias (Lichtman, 2006; Patton, 2002). However, by relying heavily on the participant narratives, it was thought that this limitation would be minimized. Studies that employ the use of mixed methods would also be highly beneficial to the research on GSAs in Ontario. For

example, studies that could combine interviews with participant observations of GSA events, discussions, and activities or a textual analysis of GSA materials and resources would promote a greater understanding of GSAs and illustrate more directly the type and significance of the work these students and teachers are organizing and participating in.

Lastly, this research study was also limited by the lack of student voice within the research investigation. I was able to describe the issues with gaining access to GSA student members and both the benefits and risks associated with student participation within the methodology chapter. However, student voice is imperative when investigating LGBTQ social justice and equity initiatives, which has been illustrated in other studies as well (LaPointe, 2012; Miceli, 2005). Therefore, I believe there is a need for an action-oriented research project within the topic of high school GSAs and sexuality issues within education. For instance, researchers could collaborate with different GSAs and work with both student members and faculty advisors to develop LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, lists of classroom resources and books, policies, workshops for teachers, conference topics, etc., to promote a more critical and queer-positive pedagogy within schools. Studies such as this would not only provide young people with a space where they would be viewed as competent, knowledgeable, and critical citizens, it would also allow them a space to actively engage and collaborate with others to work towards the transformation of current heteronormative school cultures.

Overall, despite the current study's limitations, it has provided significant insight into the current work GSAs are doing in Ontario high schools today. More importantly, it has situated GSA student members and teacher advisors as active agents in the struggle for sexually inclusive school environments and has validated these student clubs as worthy of future research investigations. Moreover, since only one published research study was found to investigate high

school GSAs in Ontario (Kitchen & Bellini, 2013) and one unpublished master's thesis (Lapointe, 2012), it is imperative that educational researchers further examine these student clubs in Ontario and build off the current research findings. This chapter will now shift focus to conclude the current study and to provide suggestions for future GSA advisors, student members, and all school community members.

Conclusion: Suggestions for High School GSAs

Within the editors note on youth resistance for the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* (2006), the author stated that “in order for resistance to be personally empowering and socially liberating, it must be praxiological” (p. 1). Paulo Freire (1970) defined praxis as the combination of both critical reflection and social action in order to transform oppressive and limiting conditions experienced by certain groups. Various researchers within the area of positive youth development are beginning to draw on the theories of critical pedagogy to develop and implement programs for “at risk” youth. Since traditional youth programs have historically viewed common youth problems as individual and/or group-level issues of “risk,” “deviancy,” “pathology,” and “sickness,” broader and more complex social, political, and educational forces (i.e., classism, sexism, racism, able-ism, and heterosexism) affecting the lives of young people remain unexamined (Ginwright & Commarota, 2002; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Jennings et al., 2006; Swadner & Lubeck, 1995). However, several researchers within the field of positive youth development have specifically drawn on Freire's (1970) notion of praxis within their social justice approach to youth development programs.

For example, researchers have suggested that in order to develop a critical approach to youth development, it must begin with a welcoming and safe environment where young people can feel valued, supported, and respected so that they may learn to take risks and push their own

personal and social boundaries (Ginwright & Commorato, 2002; Jennings et al., 2006). Since GSAs are already working to ensure a certain level of safety and fostering a sense of belongingness (Craig et al., 2008; Heck et al., 2011; Lee, 2002; Mayberry et al., 2011; Miceli, 2005; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010), Ontario high school GSAs need to begin to move beyond the dominant “safe space” discourse. Secondly, in a critical youth development program, young people must be afforded opportunities for meaningful engagement and participation where they may make authentic contributions to the group and develop leadership and citizenship skills (Freire, 1970; Ginwright & Commorato, 2002; Giroux, 2011; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Jennings et al., 2006). Within this study, the teacher advisors provided numerous examples where student members were engaging in activities and conversations that promoted active participation and critical thinking. However, several advisors indicated that not every student is willing to take on an active leadership role. Therefore, teacher advisors need to find ways to encourage active and critical engagement with GSA activities in a way that pushes students beyond their comfort zones while simultaneously ensuring a sense of wellbeing and inclusion.

Thirdly, any adults involved with critical youth development programs must learn to provide guidance and support when needed, but to also know when to step back and let the young people take an active role in organizational and decision-making processes (Freire, 1970; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Jennings et al., 2006; Stasiulis, 2002). The advisors interviewed for this study suggested that the effectiveness of the GSA is highly dependent on the active role of students, and within their narratives, it was demonstrated how these adults were providing a space where an equitable power-sharing relationship between student and teachers was promoted. Fourthly, young people must be afforded spaces where critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes, conditions, and systems will allow for an

understanding of the very structures and practices that affect their daily lives (Freire, 1970; Ginwright & Commorato, 2002; Giroux, 2011; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Jennings et al., 2006). Although some of the advisors indicated that topics of heteronormativity were sometimes discussed within the GSA, there still appears to be a focus on the individual-level issues of homophobic forms of language use, bullying, and victimization. Therefore, teacher advisors need to continue their own education and professional development so that they may act as public intellectuals and foster a greater understanding of heteronormative school practices and encourage young people to critique, question, and unravel the oppression they experience (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011).

Lastly, young people must be encouraged and guided to participate in the transformation of oppressive conditions and systems within their own personal lives and within their broader social community (Freire, 1970; Ginwright & Commorato, 2002; Giroux, 2011; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009; Jennings et al., 2006). Although GSAs have not yet reached the point of social transformation, it is a common goal among many faculty advisors. For instance, when asked if she had anything to add to the interview, Kate stated: “I just hope I live to see the day when we don’t need them [GSAs] you know? That would be my goal.” In order for this to happen, it is going to take a shift within our school cultures and in the ways we think, label, talk, approach, research, and develop programs, policies, and curricula to help young people who are “at risk.” The dominance of “at risk” and “safe space” discourses have functioned to place responsibility on the individual student, to place boundaries around the work of student clubs such as GSAs, and have focused on issues of school-based homophobia while doing little to challenge the boarder issues of heteronormativity. Overall, further work is needed by those willing to take on the role of a public intellectual who can work to promote the deconstruction and destabilization

of “at risk” and “safe space” discourses and begin to mobilize forms of education that, according to Swadener and Lubeck (1995), promote all students, LGBTQ and heterosexual alike, as youth “at promise.”

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Appendix A: Informed Consent & Feedback Letter

Letter of Invitation and Informed Consent

Project Title: Interrogating Discourses of “At Risk”: An Examination of the Social, Political, and Educational Impact of High School Gay-Straight Alliances

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Invitation:

I, Abby Stefan, Masters Student, from the Department of Graduate Studies in Education at York University, invite you to participate in a research project entitled *Interrogating Discourses of “At Risk”: An Examination of the Social, Political, and Educational Impact of High School Gay-Straight Alliances*.

Purpose of the Research:

Within recent years, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) students have become regarded as an “at risk” student population within North American schools. While it is important to acknowledge sexual and gender minority discrimination in today’s schools, this research is concerned with the over-representation of LGBTQ students as “at risk” within the media, academic research, and schools themselves. Therefore, this research will examine the most common school reform effort designed to promote LGBTQ inclusive practices, that being high school gay-straight alliances (hereafter GSAs). More specifically, the purpose of this research is to examine GSAs in Ontario high schools to determine if these student organizations could possibly play an important role, or already are, in challenging school-based heterosexism. Two main questions will be asked, which include 1) does the “at risk” discourse limit the roles of GSAs to simply providing “safe spaces”? And 2) can student members and faculty advisors enable GSAs to actively challenge and transform heteronormative school climates?

What is involved?

To participate in this research, student participants should be between the ages of 16 and 20 and are either currently involved or have been recently involved in a high school GSA. Teachers wishing to participate in the research should be active faculty advisors of high school GSAs. The sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation of the participants will not be restricted. Any students and faculty advisors may participate regardless of their identity.

As a student member or leader either currently or recently involved with a high school GSA, you will be asked to participate in an online questionnaire. Questions will be open-ended, meaning there is no right or wrong answer. This project is looking to voice the perspectives, experiences, and stories of student GSA members to further knowledge and research. This questionnaire does not require participants to self-identify their sexual and/or gender orientation to the researcher. Participation will take approximately 30 minutes of your time. Please see the attached copy of sample discussion questions.

As a faculty advisor to a current high school GSA, you will be asked to take part in an individual interview. The researcher will be present to pose questions relevant to the research study and to guide discussion. Interview participation will take approximately 45 minutes of your time. Faculty advisors will not be asked to disclose their sexual and/or gender orientation to the researcher. Questions will focus

on the school environment, GSA initiatives and efforts, etc. Interviews will be video recorded and notes will be taken during the interview.

Potential Risks and Discomforts

Possible risks involved in this research study are primarily psychological. These risks involve discussing topics and events surrounding experiences in a high school gay-straight alliance. While my focus will be on social justice efforts, personal stories of bullying, victimization, and discrimination on the basis of actual and/or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity may arise, which could lead to some psychological distress and unpleasant feelings such as sadness, anger, frustration, and anxiety. I have provided a variety of sources including crisis intervention and mental health services, educational services, and LGBTQ youth-specific services at the end of this document. Lastly, since GSAs themselves have a code of confidentiality, participants will not be asked to share their sexual and/or gender orientation with the researcher.

Potential Benefits

Possible benefits the participants may experience involve the opportunity to voice personal opinions and experiences surrounding their involvement in a high school GSA in a confidential and private setting. Participants will be provided with the opportunity to share their stories, which will contribute to theory and research on LGBTQ inclusive educational practices, as well as youth social and sexual justice efforts. This will further our knowledge on the benefits and limitations of high school GSAs, other school reform efforts, the climate within Ontario schools, issues of diversity and representation, and strategies for broadening the goals and efforts of GSAs.

The researcher will also benefit from this research. Firstly, this thesis research is a major component of the Masters Program, which is required to graduate. Secondly, the researcher may seek possible publication once the project is complete. Lastly, this is a topic that the researcher is passionate about. Being able to research and work with students and faculty advisors is also a benefit on its own.

Anonymity & Confidentiality

Confidentiality in this research study will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law. This study does not require participants to provide the researcher with personal information that could be used to identify them. The only information required is date of birth, general location of school, and type of secondary school attended. Participants will not be asked to disclose their names or sexual and/or gender identity. If a participant does include personal information, it will not be included within the final report and replaced with a pseudonym.

This research also involves an online questionnaire that will be created using survey tool website called fluidsurveys.com, which is located in Canada. All responses are stored within Canada and since this company is subject to Canadian laws, authorities can access records of internet service providers. It is important to understand that this could possibly limit confidentiality, if such a circumstance should arise. Since participants are not asked to provide personal identifiers, data will remain anonymous. Student participant data will be stored on fluidsurveys.com, using a password protected account, which will be deleted upon completion of the project in the spring/summer of 2014. I will also keep the interview video recordings, the written transcripts, and a copy of the questionnaire responses on my computer as well as on an external storage device, both of which are password protected. These will be securely stored on my for a period of three years and then permanently deleted off of the devices.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation in the research is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. You may also stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship

with the researchers, York University, or any other group associated with this project either now or in the future. In the event that you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Publication of Results

Results of this study may be published in professional journals and presented at conferences. If you wish to provide your email address to obtain a copy of the final report, you may. Or you may also contact the primary researcher Abby Stefan with the contact information provided above if you wish to obtain a copy.

Questions about the research?

If you have any questions about the research in general or your role in the study you may contact the researcher Abby Stefan or the research supervisor Didi Khayatt with the contact information cited at the top of this form. The graduate program office may also be contacted:

Graduate Program in Education

282 Winters College, York University
4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON, M3J 1P3
Tel: 416-736-5018
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Email: gradprogram@edu.yorku.ca

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, you may contact the Senior Manager and Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University, telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

Consent Form:

I _____ (*participant's name*), consent to participate in the research study *Interrogating Discourses of "At Risk": An Examination of the Social, Political, and Educational Impact of High School Gay-Straight Alliances* conducted by Abby Stefan. I understand the nature of this project and wish to participate. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Participant Name (print): _____ **Date** _____

Participant Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Principal Investigator: _____ **Date:** _____

Feedback Letter

I would like to thank you for participating in this research study. The information you have provided will be very valuable to the project as a whole. If participation in this research project has caused any distress or anxiety, there are several resources you may look into for social services and support.

If you would like a copy of the final report once it is completed please include your email address below. This email address will not be included in the final research project and will be deleted from the researcher's email records:

Email Address: _____

Since personal identifiers will not be included in the research, this is my way of acknowledging your contributions to the project as a whole. You may also contact the primary researcher if you wish to provide feedback. You will be able to receive a copy of the final research project upon completion (April of 2013).

Thank you,

<p>Principal Investigator:</p> <p>Abby Stefan, Masters Student Faculty of Graduate Studies in Education, Winters College, York University, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON, M3J 1P3 Email: abby_stefan@edu.yorku.ca</p>	<p>Faculty Supervisor:</p> <p>Didi Khayatt, Professor 258, Winters College, York University 4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON, M3J 1P3 Email: dkhayatt@edu.yorku.ca Phone: 416-736-2100 Ext. 88758</p>
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Appendix B: Interview Questions

Introduction

My name is Abby Stefan and I am a master's student in the Department of Graduate Studies in Education at York University. Today, I will be interviewing you about your role as a faculty advisor within a high school gay-straight alliance for my thesis research. There is no right or wrong answer so feel free to answer in any way you feel will give me the most information on this topic. Participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not feel comfortable answering a certain question or wish to stop at any point in time, you may without any consequences. Your identity and the GSA you are discussing along with students will all remain confidential and any names will be eliminated from the write up or replaced with a pseudonym. This interview will also be video recorded as long as you provide your consent.

Questions

1. Do you believe your school is accepting of student diversity? How would you describe the treatment of gender and sexually diverse students? How does your school frame the issues concerning LGBTQ students?
2. Do you believe the climate of your school made the development of your GSA necessary? Why?
3. How did you come to be a faculty advisor? What motivated you? Please describe your roles and responsibilities as a faculty advisor of a GSA?
4. How would you describe your GSA? What are the missions, values, and goals that characterize it? What are the motivations behind these goals and values?
 - Social?
 - Safe space?
 - Social justice oriented?
 - All of the above?
5. How would you describe the roles of the students within your GSA?
6. What types, if any, of resources, texts, materials, events, conferences, and/or workshops does your GSA engage with or provide to students? What is the impact of engaging with such materials or events?
7. Do you personally connect with other educators and school staff within your school to promote your GSA efforts? Do you connect with other GSA faculty advisors within your community, province, country, etc? If so, how has this impacted your GSA?
8. Does your GSA connect with other student organizations within your school and/or outside community organizations? If yes, how has this impacted your GSA efforts and goals?

9. Does the aspect of the “heterosexual ally” play an important role in your GSA? If so, why?
10. Do you believe GSAs provide students with opportunities to discuss, engage with, and deconstruct issues of student sexuality? Please provide some examples.
11. Who are the key decision makers within your GSA? Examples? Do you believe topics such as youth agency, citizenship, and social justice have a place in high school GSAs? Why?
12. Do you believe the existence and actions of your GSA have impacted school-based heterosexism and homophobia? How so? Who do you believe are the key agents of change in terms of heterosexism and homophobia? Have you introduced student members to terms such as heterosexism, sexual oppression, etc?
13. Please describe what school practices help your GSA efforts? What school practices hinder them?
14. Has your GSA encountered issues from groups or individuals opposing your GSA? (EX. community members, parents, religious groups, school staff, etc?) How did you and the student members handle or negotiate such opposition?
15. Sexual minority students or LGBTQ students are often referred to as an “at risk” population within media, academic, and educational discourse. Do you see LGBTQ students generally as “at risk?” What about those sexual minority students involved in your GSA? Does your GSA engage in any efforts to challenge this label?
16. Do you feel framing GSAs as an issue of safety is harmful or beneficial?
17. Does your GSA engage in any social justice efforts to challenge school based homophobia or heteronormativity and what are the significance of such efforts? Do you see the student members resisting and transforming heteronormative school practices and policies? Please provide some examples.
 - Probes: events such as the Day of Pink, Day of Silence, or anti-homophobic workshops, GSA conferences, educative assemblies, individual forms of resistance, policy changes, etc.
18. Has your work within the GSA allowed you to grow and develop as an educator? How has it benefitted students, both heterosexual and LGBTQ?
19. Is there any experience within your GSA that you would like to share? Is there anything that was not asked in this interview that you would like to cover?