

4-4-2014

## The Success of Gay–Straight Alliances in Waterloo Region, Ontario: A Confluence of Political and Social Factors

Alex St. John  
*Wilfrid Laurier University*

Robb Travers  
*Wilfrid Laurier University*

Lauren Munro  
*Wilfrid Laurier University*

Renato M. Liboro  
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas, renato.liboro@unlv.edu*

Margaret Schneider  
*University of Toronto*  
Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/psychology\\_fac\\_articles](https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/psychology_fac_articles)



Part of the [Community Psychology Commons](#), [Education Policy Commons](#), and the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#)

### Repository Citation

St. John, A., Travers, R., Munro, L., Liboro, R. M., Schneider, M., Greig, C. L. (2014). The Success of Gay–Straight Alliances in Waterloo Region, Ontario: A Confluence of Political and Social Factors. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 11(2), 150-170. Taylor & Francis Open Select.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2014.878564>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Article in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@unlv.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@unlv.edu).

---

**Authors**

Alex St. John, Robb Travers, Lauren Munro, Renato M. Liboro, Margaret Schneider, and Carrie L. Greig

The Success of Gay-Straight Alliances in Waterloo Region, Ontario:  
A Confluence of Political and Social Factors

Alex N. St. John<sup>1</sup>, Robb Travers<sup>1</sup>, Lauren Munro<sup>1</sup>, Renato Liboro<sup>1</sup>,  
Marg Schneider,<sup>2</sup> Carrie Greig<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

<sup>2</sup>Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

<sup>3</sup>OK2BME Program, KW Counselling Services, Kitchener, Ontario

Keywords: LGBTQ youth, LGBTQ education, Gay-Straight Alliances.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Dr. Robb Travers, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5. Tel: 519-884-0710 ext. 2577. Email: rtravers@wlu.ca

**Abstract**

This paper outlines how gay-straight alliances (GSAs) work to connect youth with community resources, and outlines the political and social context of GSAs in Waterloo Region, Ontario, Canada. Fifteen individuals (youth, teachers and service providers) participated in interviews about the role of GSAs in creating supportive school environments for LGBTQ youth. Apart from providing direct support to LGBTQ students, GSAs in Waterloo Region decrease isolation by connecting youth with other LGBTQ community members, events, and resources. We discuss how the confluence of government and school board policy, and community agency support, facilitates the implementation, maintenance, and success of GSAs.

## Introduction

### Homophobia, Heterosexism and LGBTQ Youth

Although openness about and disclosure of one's sexual orientation or gender identity has been associated with better overall psychological adjustment, openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth face a number of challenges in their lives, including those related to heterosexism and homophobia which take the form of rejection, discrimination, harassment and violence (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001).

The minority stress model, proposed by Meyer (2003), argues that prejudice, stigma and discrimination (i.e., 'minority stress') are the cause of increased mental health problems in LGBTQ individuals. Many lesbian, gay and bisexual youth report feeling overwhelmed and show signs of depression and anxiety (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993), they experience more school problems, substance abuse, homelessness, higher rates of suicidality, are more likely to be involved in a pregnancy, and are more likely to engage in self-harm compared to their heterosexual counterparts (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Gaetz, 2004; Gilliam, 2002; Ray, 2006; Saewyc, Bearinger, Blum, & Resnick, 1999; Scott, Pringle, & Lumsdaine, 2004; Travers, Newton, & Munro, 2011). Moreover, they report considerable access barriers in services designed to meet young people's needs (O'Brien, Travers, & Bell, 1993; Travers, 1996; Travers et al, 2011). A recent Ontario-wide study, shows that trans youth, in particular are at extremely high rate for suicide, especially if they have experience trans-related discrimination (Scanlon, Travers, Coleman, Bauer, & Boyce, 2010) or parents who are unsupportive of their gender identity and expression (Travers, Bauer, Pyne, Gale, & Papadimitriou, 2012).

Egale Canada's *First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia in Canadian Schools* (2011) found that, despite Canada's superior track record

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

supporting LGBTQ rights<sup>1</sup>, youth are still very immersed in a heterosexist and homophobic school environment. In their national survey of 3700 youth, 70% of both LGBTQ and straight youth reported hearing homophobic remarks such as “that’s so gay” every day, while nearly half heard the word “faggot” every day. Youth recounted significant verbal harassment about their perceived gender identity or sexual orientation, with more than 20% being physically harassed or assaulted due to their sexual orientation, and trans youth reported high levels of sexual harassment in school (Egale Canada, 2011). Whereas heterosexual youth may turn to their families, schools, peer groups, and communities to receive support through these experiences, these are often sites of victimization for LGBTQ youth (Rivers & D’Augelli, 2001). Given this lack of support and high rates of physical, verbal, and sexual harassment, it is no surprise that 64% of Canadian LGBTQ youth feel unsafe in their schools (Egale Canada, 2011, p. 8).

### **Gay-Straight Alliances**

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are school-based organizations that provide a safe and supportive place within schools for LGBTQ youth and their allies to meet. Allies, a term introduced by Washington and Evans (1991), are youth who do not identify as LGBTQ, but work against oppression and advocate for LGBTQ youth. The functions of GSAs fall into one of four main categories: (a) as a counselling and support group for LGBTQ youth; (b) as a “safe” space for LGBTQ youth, and their friends; (c) as the primary vehicle for education and awareness about LGBTQ issues in schools; or (d) as part of wider school efforts, such as a safe schools task force, to educate and increase awareness in schools (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer,

---

<sup>1</sup> Same sex marriage was first legalized in Ontario in 2003, and nationwide in 2005. The Canadian federal government, and all provinces and territories recognize sexual orientation as a prohibited ground of discrimination in their human rights legislation (Canadian Heritage, 2009).

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES  
2003). It should be noted that GSAs may not fit distinctly into one of these categories, and may serve a unique purpose for each member.

Researchers have outlined a number of positive impacts that GSAs can have on the school environment and on LGBTQ youth's lives, including enhancing safety and feelings of personal empowerment. According to Szalacha (2003, p. 62), sexual diversity climate, or the "level of safety, tolerance, and atmosphere of respect for sexual minority individuals," is significantly higher in schools with GSAs, and highest in schools which combine GSAs, staff training to combat homophobia, and an explicit anti-homophobia policy. Students who attend schools with GSAs are significantly less likely to report being victimized based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity (Goodenow, Szalacha, Westheimer, 2006; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Better outcomes related to truancy, dropouts (Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010), alcohol use, depression, and general psychological distress have also been found among LGBTQ youth who attend schools with GSAs (Heck et al., 2011). Egale Canada (2011) found that students from schools with GSAs are more open about their sexual orientation and gender identity, more likely to perceive their school climate as becoming less homophobic, and more likely to see their school communities as supportive of LGBTQ youth.

GSAs also play a significant role in empowering youth (Russel, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009), helping them to develop a positive LGBTQ identity (Lee, 2002; Garcia-Alonso, 2004), and providing them with their own rituals, such as dances (Garcia-Alonso, 2004). GSAs increase the visibility of LGBTQ issues, challenge heteronormativity and heterosexism in schools, and work to normalize and legitimize the issues facing LGBTQ youth (Garcia-Alonso, 2004). Finally, GSAs politicize LGBTQ issues, which allow youth to see their personal

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES  
experiences with isolation, exclusion and marginalization as public issues stemming from oppression (Mayberry, 2007).

While GSAs are important, there are a number of systemic factors that facilitate or hinder their implementation, maintenance, and success. These include: (a) government policies and programs, backed up by legal, financial, and technical resources; (b) supportive administrators, in particular school principals; (c) community participation; and (d) student leadership (Griffin & Ouellet, 2002). Griffin and Ouellet (2002) further emphasized the importance of understanding the impact of GSAs within the context of these other systemic factors.

### **GSAs and the Shifting Political Environment**

Herriot (2011) placed the development of GSAs in Canada over the last 10 years within the shifting political, legal, and social context in Canada. Herriot's analysis of Canadian newspaper coverage of GSAs outlined a number of key successful human rights cases for LGBTQ people and argued that "It is against the backdrop of these legal, political, and social contexts of both schooling and Canadian culture that GSAs emerged" (p. 220, 2011).

Researchers have identified multiple challenges related to GSAs. Mayberry (2007) argued that there are two prominent discursive strategies that are used when discussing school-based programs for LGBTQ youth: the 'identity formation discourse', which is characterized by a focus on resolving developmental problems associated with having a stigmatized identity, and the 'public health discourse', which examines the role of the school environment in contributing to or preventing risky behaviours such as alcohol and substance abuse. Mayberry argued that these discourses are problematic because they individualize and depoliticize the experiences of LGBTQ youth, as well as overlook the underlying heterosexism that exists beyond the school environment.

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

While the research presented in this article still incorporates some of the problematic discursive strategies) criticized by Mayberry (2007), this paper will respond to these critiques by considering the social and political context of GSAs in Waterloo Region, Ontario, Canada. In particular, the Province of Ontario, Ministry of Education's introduction of the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* will be considered in terms of its impact on the social and political context of Waterloo Region GSAs. Nearly all research on GSAs to date is based in the United States, highlighting the importance of work that can explore the unique Canadian context.

### **Research Objectives**

This paper draws on data collected from an ongoing study of GSAs in Waterloo Region which aims to further understand the impacts of GSAs on local youth and high schools. The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (a) to outline how GSAs in Waterloo Region work to connect youth with broader community structures and resources, and (b) to outline how the political and social context of GSAs in Waterloo Region impacts their functioning.

### **Method**

#### **Waterloo Region**

This research focuses on GSAs in the Waterloo Region of Ontario, Canada, a municipality of approximately 500,000 people, consisting of three smaller cities (Cambridge, Waterloo and Kitchener) and their environs, approximately an hour's drive west of Toronto. It has a median income of \$29,449, one of the highest in Southern Ontario (Region of Waterloo, 2006), and is home to two universities and one college. The Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) contains 17 high schools, all of which have GSAs. There is also a publicly funded, religiously-affiliated (Roman Catholic) school board in Waterloo Region. However, this paper focuses solely on GSAs in the WRDSB.

**Community Partnership**

The data used in this article were drawn from a study that emerged as a result of an ongoing research partnership between Wilfrid Laurier University and the OK2BME program of KW Counselling Services, an organization based in Kitchener, Ontario that offers a variety of therapeutic counselling programs to the community. The OK2BME program, offers counselling and support groups to LGBTQ youth, as well as education, and training to service providers and school-based stakeholders. OK2BME also works with WRDSB GSAs to provide education, resources, and one on one support to LGBTQ students in high schools. As partners on this project, service providers from the OK2BME program provided invaluable input into the development of the objectives, design, recruitment strategy and interview guides for the current study.

**Sample**

Youth, teachers, and other key informants directly involved in GSAs in Waterloo Region were recruited through a variety of strategies. Youth were recruited through the Waterloo Region GSA conference, which bring together youth from across the region to network, discuss issues relevant to GSAs, and participate in workshops by LGBTQ community members. Youth who attended the conference were selected because of their past or current membership in local GSAs. An additional e-mail was circulated through OK2BME's e-mail network and an advertisement placed on their website. Teachers and key informants were also recruited at the GSA Conference and by invitation through the personal and professional networks of the research team. At the time of this analysis, nine youth from six different high schools, five teacher GSA sponsors from five different high schools, and one key informant service provider participated in semi-structured, open-ended interviews.

**Data Collection**

Participants were interviewed at either Wilfrid Laurier University, or at a community location of their choice. Interviews were between one and two hours in length and were conducted by either the principal investigator or research coordinators working in the Equity, Sexual Health and HIV (ESH-HIV) Research Group affiliated with Laurier's Centre for Community Research, Learning and Action. All participants provided informed consent prior to their interview and youth received a \$25 honorarium following their participation. A secondary incentive of \$10 was provided to youth participants who recruited additional youth. One of nine youth were recruited through the secondary incentive. Youth also completed a demographics questionnaire detailing age, sexual orientation, gender identity and high school (see Table 1, for youth demographics). Teachers were asked about the school they taught at and the age of the GSAs in their schools (see Table 2, for teacher demographics).

**Analysis**

Our research used a modified version of the grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis (Miles, & Huberman, 1994). Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and then coded using NVivo 9 software. After reviewing the transcripts, the research team developed a categorical coding framework based on the research objectives, interview guide questions, experiences of interviewers, and transcript data.

In the second stage of coding, one youth, one teacher, and one service provider interview were coded independently by two members of the research team in order to ensure intercoder reliability. Codes were developed inductively, through the use of 'open' coding, while using the coding framework as a guide for sorting the data. Next, the coders came together to reach consensus regarding any codes which they disagreed about. At the same time, research team

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

members began to make connections between codes and discuss potential theories. Once consensus on the thematic codes was achieved from the first three interviews, a single research team member coded the remaining transcripts using the established coding framework while making appropriate changes as new information emerged from the data.

During the final stage of coding, we identified emerging themes, patterns, and relationships within and between participants' responses. A process of triangulation between service provider, teacher and youth responses was used to enhance the credibility of the data. Themes were also appraised by the research team, so that alternate explanations could be explored and discussed.

## **Results**

GSAs play a crucial role in connecting youth with others, both inside and outside their respective schools, and provide opportunities for youth to engage with the broader LGBTQ community and community supports. In Waterloo region, GSAs experience a high level of support through the OK2BME program, the Equity and Inclusion Office (a branch of the Waterloo Region District School Board), and Province of Ontario Ministry of Education policies.

### **GSAs Connect Youth with Each Other**

GSAs play an important role in LGBTQ youth's lives. In particular, the ways in which GSAs connect students with other LGBTQ community members and resources was cited as one of the most significant outcomes of being involved in a GSA. These connections decreased feelings of isolation and helped to build a sense of community, allowing youth to see beyond their high school experiences:

I think one of the big pieces that we've put together, that the kids have responded the most to, is networking outside their school... we try to tell them all the time that this is just a little pond and the world's a big place... get them together with other people, that seems to be helpful. – Teacher 1

In describing how one school dealt with the suicide of a GSA member, a service provider recounted how the connection between the GSA and the OK2BME Program enabled her to connect youth with local resources and supports. This service provider also helped youth to understand that they can draw upon the broader network of GSAs as a source of support, something that teachers and students may overlook:

I talk about “what are some positive social supports in our community that you can use and do”, including OK2BME, but other things and talk about the relevance of GSAs. That’s a network right there, and sometimes we don’t see that or the teachers don’t realize that and the youth don’t see that. – Service provider

This sentiment was shared by youth who enjoyed new relationships with friends and their community because of their GSA. GSAs made youth more aware of the LGBTQ community in Waterloo Region, and connected them with LGBTQ friendly businesses, organizations, and events:

Well I’ve gotten more friends from [GSA]. Um I’ve gotten more aware of the LGBTQ community in [Waterloo Region]... I know about places I can go, I know about events I can go to, because of the GSA... and I know about support groups... other than GSA. – Youth 3

Youth described relationships they formed within their GSAs and through GSA networking opportunities, and expressed the importance of these connections for reducing their isolation. This youth came to understand that she was not alone, and that she was not the only youth experiencing challenges related to homophobia and coming out, “I could connect with them and I was like, wow, I don’t feel so alone, I’m not the only person... that feels this way. It really made a big difference” – Youth 1.

Youth highlighted the importance of the local GSA conference, in particular, for connecting them with accepting people, developing a stronger group identity, and a sense of

## Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

community. Seeing other youth that were ‘like them’ worked to validate and normalize their identities, thereby reducing isolation:

Everyone [at the GSA conference] being in the same room and being accepting, and realizing “hey, look they’re not different, they’re not some weird freak, they’re just like me” and like I think those are the big things that we found with GSA that when we did the conference we’re like “wow, you never feel like everyone’s like you, you’re not by yourself.” – Youth 1

GSAs also connected youth with leadership opportunities and helped to strengthen and build the local LGBTQ community. A service provider highlighted the important role that GSAs play in linking youth with leadership opportunities that could help continue to build momentum within the LGBTQ community in Waterloo Region. These leadership opportunities also facilitated positive identity development and built self-esteem among youth:

The GSAs promote this camp so that youth can go and become youth leaders... that’s the piece that for me is so important, that these youth figure out how they can carry this momentum because I’m going to retire someday and they need to get that empowerment, that piece that says, “Yes I’m gay, yes it’s ok, yes I have a good self-concept, yes my self-esteem is ok, yes I’m a part of the GSA, yes I believe in what I’m doing.” – Service provider

### **The Political and Social Context of Waterloo Region GSAs**

The success of GSAs was mediated by their connections with other important institutions including the WRDSB and the OK2BME program. In addition, participants discussed broad shifts that were occurring in making schools a safer place for LGBTQ youth in the province of Ontario and their influence on Waterloo Region GSAs. While they mentioned the importance of GSAs to school safety, they also maintained that GSA capacity was impacted by broader policies which support LGBTQ youth.

#### **Connections with community agencies.**

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

GSA in Waterloo Region move beyond the provision of direct support for youth. For example, GSAs not only focus their energies within individual school settings, but build broader capacity in Waterloo Region to support LGBTQ youth through annual GSA conferences and quarterly GSA teacher sponsor meetings. In these forums, awareness of LGBTQ youth issues are raised, skills-building opportunities are provided, and both teachers and students are able to build lasting and meaningful connections with each other and their community. Furthermore, GSAs often perform an important referral role for OK2BME by connecting students with its services. A service provider highlighted the role that she played supporting GSAs and connecting youth with services and resources in the region:

They [youth in GSAs] didn't know how to bring [bullying and suicide] up and talk about it and so it was my job to come in that day and just kind of put it on the table and say it happens sometimes, it happens, when it happens we need to talk about it and again here's your group of supports. – Service provider

The same service provider was also instrumental in assisting GSAs with getting started, building structure and in ensuring they have the resources required to support students:

Um she [an OK2BME staff person] actually came in today to talk to our Vice Principal because you know we're having our first meeting on the 24th of this month so we kind of want to have that structure and we talk with her and she's actually planning on possibly getting us ...resources and stuff like that. – Youth 6

### **Supportive government and school board policies.**

A number of policies that were developed and implemented by the Province of Ontario's Ministry of Education, and highlighted in Ontario's *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (Ministry of Education, updated in 2009), were said to help to support the efforts of the WRDSB Equity and Inclusion Office, specifically related to their Equity and Inclusion Policy (2007). The Equity and Inclusion Policy was developed by the WRDSB to “provide a safe, inclusive environment free from inequity, discrimination and harassment” and specifically delineates “sex,

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

sexual orientation, gender identity or expression,” as protected grounds from discrimination. This policy, which led to the creation of the Equity and Inclusion Office at WRDSB, has become an important symbolic and substantive support for GSAs:

Yeah, that’s fairly new in terms of having actual equity and inclusion officers hired at the [school] board... the Ministry implemented those changes and said this is what’s needed... we luckily get to be a part of that because it helps us and we help them. – Service Provider

Staff from the WRDSB Equity and Inclusion Office attended quarterly meetings with GSA teacher sponsors to discuss successes and challenges within GSAs in the region, as well as supported events such as the GSA semi-formal dance. Teachers highlighted the important role of the Equity and Inclusion Office in garnering support for GSAs at the school board level which, in turn, supports teacher sponsors in starting and maintaining successful GSAs:

[The Equity and Inclusion Officer] performed an equity audit here at the [school] board and through that came a number of recommendations... and helping support GSAs was one of those. That’s when things started to open up a little more, to be safer for those of us who teach, to be able to more fundamentally say we’re behind GSAs. Now that the board has a policy, it’s a little more visible, it’s starting to get some more air time at the board and there’s some more acceptance at the board, so it was easier for us to come out and initiate more GSAs. – Teacher 4

Another teacher described the role of the Equity and Inclusion Office in connecting GSAs with each other, with the school board, and with OK2BME to discuss both concerns and successes:

I don’t know if they’ve done anything recently on that, programming for staff. Certainly they do that, they offer GSAs at least an opportunity to get together and talk about GSA concerns which is where I usually come across them and that’s been great, really supportive of things like the conference or the prom, or you know those kinds of things that are being done in the schools. – Teacher 5

Beyond providing ‘behind the scenes’ support for GSAs, a service provider pointed out the importance of the physical presence of the Equity and Inclusion officer at GSA-related

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES  
events: “Our equity and inclusion officer was there [at Pride Prom]. Actually, so was a school board trustee... which was really cool and cool for the kids, I think. As long as they knew who she was, I think they did.” – Teacher 5

### **Discussion**

Our work on high school GSAs, builds upon the findings of other studies, by including the perspectives of youth, teachers and a service provider centrally involved in supporting the implementation and maintenance of GSAs in Waterloo Region. The inclusion of multiple perspectives, particularly service provider and teacher perspectives, results in a more holistic picture of the social and political context of GSAs. Whereas youth experience the impacts of policies firsthand, teachers have a more complete understanding of how government policy interacts with and impacts individual school boards and classrooms, and we highlight some of this depth with our data. Research to date has also tended to narrowly focus on the positive individual psychological and emotional impacts that GSAs have on LGBTQ youth. While understanding such outcomes are important, it leaves a gap in our understanding of what GSAs more fully accomplish. Further, only one study (Griffin & Ouellet, 2002) has adequately considered the political, social and community level determinants of the successes of GSAs. The research presented in this article builds upon Griffin and Ouellet’s earlier work by outlining two essential supports that facilitated the success of GSAs in Waterloo Region; community agency support and government and school board policy.

#### **The Effectiveness of GSAs in Waterloo Region: A Confluence of Supporting Factors**

In Canada, education falls under the purview of the various provincial and territorial governments. As such, Ontario’s Ministry of Education has significant influence on individual school board policy and practice. In 2009, the Ministry of Education introduced its *Equity and*

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

*Inclusive Education Strategy*, which outlined a number of guidelines for schools in order to foster a safe and supportive school climate for all youth. This document includes references to the Ontario Human Rights Code, and specifically highlights against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2009). The Ministry of Education website communicates their equity commitment: “Students in our publicly funded education system – regardless of background or personal circumstances – must be given every opportunity to reach their full potential,” (2009).

Prior to the introduction of the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, the WRDSB was already well on its way to addressing issues of equity and inclusion in Waterloo Region schools. The WRDSB *Equity and Inclusion Policy* was first approved in 2006 and has always explicitly included protections on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. This policy led to the commissioning of an Equity Audit Report in 2007, which recommended that an Equity and Inclusion Office be created along with two permanent Equity and Inclusion Officer positions. In 2008, an Assistant Superintendent position was added to the Equity and Inclusion Office structure (D. Ahluwalia, personal communication, August 15, 2012). The WRDSB Equity and Inclusion Office is focused on ensuring equitable school experiences for all youth in the Waterloo Region – work which is supported by both the WRDSB *Equity and Inclusion Policy* and Ontario’s more recent *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*.

In addition to government and school board policies, GSAs in Waterloo Region are supported by their connection with the OK2BME Program of KW Counselling Services. OK2BME has been an integral partner with individual schools and with the WRDSB Equity and Inclusion Office in supporting and facilitating the implementation, maintenance, and success of GSAs in Waterloo Region. An OK2BME staff person is present for the quarterly GSA advisor

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

meetings and hosts the annual GSA conference, which brings together diverse GSA stakeholders from across Waterloo Region to network, discuss issues relevant to GSAs, and build knowledge and skills. The unique combination of school board policies and structures, government policy, and the role of OK2BME form the basis for a supportive environment in which Waterloo Region GSAs are able to flourish.

The Ontario government's explicit support and recognition of LGBTQ youth is a key factor influencing GSAs in Waterloo Region. Government policies, such as the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, that mandate the creation of school board policies to combat homophobia and heterosexism in schools, as well as the connections between community organizations and GSAs, were identified as essential supports for GSAs by teachers, service providers, and youth. Ensuring that GSA teacher sponsors feel their jobs are secure if they support GSAs is an essential step to ensuring the successful implementation of GSAs. Furthermore, teacher sponsors working for school boards with explicit equity and inclusion policies may feel more supported in encouraging their GSAs to engage in activism, education and awareness activities. Engaging in activism has the potential to elevate the function of GSAs from local support groups and safe spaces for LGBTQ youth into primary vehicles for change regarding LGBTQ issues in schools or as part of broader school efforts to educate and increase awareness in schools (Griffin et al., 2003).

#### **'Group Level Resources': Why is this a good thing for LGBTQ youth?**

Meyer (2003) discussed a number of stress-ameliorating factors that intervene in the relationship between minority stress and health, distinguishing between individual and group level resources, with the latter being available to all LGBTQ people. Group level resources available to LGBTQ people include: (a) the establishment of their own structures and values, and

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

(b) the experience of environments in which they are not stigmatized by others. Access to these group level resources may be facilitated by GSAs. While much research has considered the direct impacts (e.g., psychological impacts, school performance etc.) of GSAs, this article more closely analyzes the ways in which GSAs are able to connect youth with resources, supports and the local LGBTQ community. In particular, this paper shows the importance of GSAs in connecting LGBTQ youth to their peers outside of their schools through a local community agency, through GSA events such as conferences and dances, and through other networking opportunities. In the case of Waterloo Region, we believe that the provision of such group level resources is facilitated by the convergence of Ontario government-specific policies, school board policies, and community agency support. This speaks to how GSAs in Waterloo Region provide group level resources, specifically LGBTQ community structures and values, and environments in which LGBTQ youth are not stigmatized by others (Meyer, 2003). By connecting youth with the broader LGBTQ community, and with alternative structures such as the annual GSA conference, GSAs in Waterloo Region may increase the sense of community experienced by youth. Youth may begin to compare themselves to other GSA or LGBTQ community members, rather than to the dominant majority, which may enhance self-esteem. While Meyer argues that individual personality characteristics are important determinants of LGBTQ people's access to these group level resources, GSAs may also facilitate access. The provision of support and access to these group level resources may help to buffer the relationship between minority stress and adverse health outcomes for LGBTQ youth.

Garcia-Alonso (2004) discussed the important legitimizing and normalizing effect that GSAs can have. This is echoed in our findings where decreased feelings of isolation due to community connections garnered through GSAs occurred. Opportunities for LGBTQ youth

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

leadership and mentorship provide social roles that allow youth to feel both legitimate and valued in their community. These connections and opportunities may further legitimize and normalize LGBTQ identities for youth.

### **Implications**

It is our hope that this research avoids the narrow individualizing and depoliticizing discursive traps described by Mayberry (2007). While both an identity formation and public health lens are evident in our findings, the present research also clearly considers the political and social context of GSAs. Similar to the work of Herriot (2011) and Griffin and Ouellet (2002), this research emerges from the belief that we need to understand the development and success of GSAs within their respective political and social contexts. The success of GSAs in Waterloo Region needs to be understood within a framework of change that includes the consideration of shifting political landscapes and key connections with community organizations. GSAs alone are not enough to significantly alter the social context of youth's lives, however, the study's data indicates that GSAs in combination and connection with other policies, activities and organizations, work to reduce youth's feelings of isolation by creating group level resources. In December 2011, after data were collected for this paper, Ontario Premier, Dalton McGuinty, released the Ontario government's next action plan on bullying – enforcing government policy supporting GSAs in all Ontario publicly funded schools – including those that fall under the jurisdiction of Catholic District School Boards (Office of the Premier, 2011). The action plan included the *Accepting Schools Act*, which requires that school boards “support pupils who want to establish and lead activities and organizations that promote a safe and inclusive learning environment.” The *Accepting Schools Act* (2012), which became law on June 5, 2012, is an example of explicit legislative policy support for GSAs and other student

groups, and may be a further crucial and important step in ensuring the ongoing success of GSAs.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As previous researchers have stated, longitudinal research is needed in order to understand the long term impacts of GSAs on LGBTQ youth and schools (Garcia-Alonso, 2004; Goodenow et al., 2006; Heck et al., 2011). Understanding the contextual distinctions between GSAs is also of vital importance. Most youth in this study came from schools in an urban, rather than rural, setting. Due to geographic restrictions, rural youth in GSAs may not have access to the same resources as the youth described in this paper, making geographic context an important consideration for future research. In order to attend to the diversity of contexts GSAs are situated within, focused case studies of individual schools may produce a more holistic understanding of the contextual factors that affect the impact potential of GSAs.

While GSAs are lauded as safe spaces for all LGBTQ youth, it is important to acknowledge that, for various reasons, not everyone is equally represented in the composition of individual GSAs. Trans youth are one such group whose experiences require more intensive and focused research. As there were only two trans youth included in our study, we were not able to adequately discuss their experiences in local GSAs. Many researchers have noted a lack of ethnoracial diversity within GSAs (Adams & Carson, 2006; Griffin, 2003; McCready, 2003). Our sample was comprised entirely of Caucasian youth, further highlighting the need for research endeavours that explore the experiences of racialized youth and the need to “de-normalize the perceived Whiteness of queer youth identity” (McCready, 2003, p.48). Focusing on the experiences of youth with multiple marginalized identities should be a consideration for future research in this area. While this article attempted to highlight themes that emerged from

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

the data, individual GSAs throughout Waterloo Region varied significantly; some had been operating for three or four years, whereas others were only in their first year of existence.

Individual GSAs may vary in connectedness based on their longevity, and research that explores individual determinants of connectedness may be needed. Furthermore, three of the youth participants were in the beginning stages of starting GSAs and could not speak significantly about past experiences with their GSAs. Moreover, our findings show the important role that policy plays in supporting GSAs, and the Accepting Schools Act (2012) may add an additional layer of explicit support, helping to further develop GSAs. This is a question that future studies can examine.

### **Conclusion**

GSAs may be a starting point for school boards looking to improve the lives of LGBTQ youth. They may help to grow group level resources by connecting youth with resources and the larger community. However, schools looking to implement successful equity, inclusion, and safety interventions should create GSAs that work in partnership with other initiatives at the community, school board, and government level. Other communities looking to support GSAs should foster networks of GSAs, support connections with community agencies, and ensure that GSAs are connected with supportive administrators at their respective school boards. These partnerships are important for supporting the success of GSAs and ensuring that GSAs continue to connect youth with their community.

### References

- Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act.* (2012). 2nd Reading Apr. 19, 2012, 40th Parliament, 1st session. Retrieved from the Legislative Assembly of Ontario Website:  
[http://ontla.on.ca/web/bills/bills\\_detail.do?locale=en&BillID=2549&detailPage=bills\\_detail\\_status&Intranet=](http://ontla.on.ca/web/bills/bills_detail.do?locale=en&BillID=2549&detailPage=bills_detail_status&Intranet=)
- Canadian Heritage (2009). *Sexual Orientation and Human Rights*. Retrieved from Canadian Heritage website: <http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/pdp-hrp/canada/sxrnt-eng.cfm>
- D'Augelli, A. R., & Hershberger, H. L. (1993). Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth in Community Settings: Personal Challenges and Mental Health Problems. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 21*, 421-448.
- Egalé Canada Human Rights Trust. (2011). *Every Class in Every School: Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools. Final Report*. Toronto, ON: Taylor, C. & Peter, T., With McMinn, T. L., Elliott, T., Beldom, S., Ferry, A., Gross, Z., Paquin, S., & Schacter, K.
- Gaetz, S. (2004). Safe streets for whom? Homeless youth, social exclusion, and criminal victimization. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice, 46*, 423-456.
- Garcia-Alonso, P.M. (2004). From surviving to thriving: An investigation of the utility of support groups designed to address the special needs of sexual minority youth in public high schools. (Doctoral dissertation). *Dissertation Abstracts International, 65*, 3A (UMI Number: 3126026).
- Gilliam, J. (2002). Respecting the rights of GLBTQ youth, a responsibility of youth-serving professionals. *Transitions, 14*(4), 1-2.

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

- Goodenow, C., Szalacha, L., Westheimer, K. (2006). School support groups, other school factors, and the safety of sexual minority adolescents. *Psychology in the Schools, 43*, 573-589.
- Griffin, P., Lee, C., Waugh, J., Beyer, C. (2003). Describing roles that Gay-Straight Alliances play in schools. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education, 1*, 7-22.
- Griffin, P., Ouellett, M. L. (2002). Going beyond Gay-Straight Alliances to make schools safe for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. *ANGLES: The Policy Journal of The Institute for Gay and Lesbian Strategic Studies, 6*, 1-8.
- Heck, N. C., Flentje, A., Cochran, B. N. (2011). Offsetting risks: High school Gay-Straight Alliances and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. *School Psychology Quarterly, 26*, 161-174. doi: 10.1037/a0023226.
- Herriot, L. (2011). Trends in Canadian newspaper coverage of Gay-Straight Alliances, 2000-2009. *Journal of LGBT youth, 8*, 215-233.
- Herek, G.M. (1986). On heterosexual masculinity: Some psychical consequences of the social construction of gender and sexuality. *American Behavioral Scientist, 29*, 563-577.
- Herek, G. M. (1990). The context of anti-gay violence: Notes on cultural and psychological heterosexism. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 5*, 316-333.
- Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Diaz, E. M., Bartkiewicz, M. J. (2010). *The 2009 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools*. New York: GLSEN.
- Lee, C. (2002). The impact of belonging to a high school gay/straight alliance. *The High School Journal, 85*, 13-26.

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

Mayberry, M. (2007). The story of a Salt Lake City Gay-Straight Alliance: Identity work and LGBT youth. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education, 4*, 13-31.

Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological bulletin, 129*, 674–697.

O'Brien, C., Travers, R., & Bell, L. (1993). *No safe bed: Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth in residential services*. Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services.

Office of the Premier (2011, December 12). *Ontario getting tough on bullying*. Retrieved from: <http://www.premier.gov.on.ca/news/event.php?ItemID=19785&Lang=EN>

Ontario Human Rights Code, Revised Statutes of Ontario (1990, c. 33). Retrieved from the Service Canada website: [http://www.elaws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws\\_statutes\\_90h19\\_e.htm](http://www.elaws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_90h19_e.htm)

Ontario Ministry of Education (2009, August, 4). *Greater Equity Means Greater Student Success*. Retrieved from: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.html>

Ray, N. (2006). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth: An epidemic of homelessness*. New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless.

Region of Waterloo (2006). *Census Bulletin 1*. Waterloo, ON: Planning, Housing and Community Services, Planning Information and Research. Retrieved from [http://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/discoveringTheRegion/resources/Bulletin\\_11.pdf](http://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/discoveringTheRegion/resources/Bulletin_11.pdf)

Rivers, I., & D'Augelli, A. R. (2001). The victimization of lesbians, gay, and bisexual youths. In A. R. D'Augelli, & C. J. Patterson (Eds.), *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities and youth: Psychological perspectives*. (pp. 199-223). New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press.

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

Saewyc E. M., Bearinger L. H., Blum R. W., Resnick M. D. (1999). Sexual intercourse, abuse and pregnancy among adolescent women: Does sexual orientation make a difference?

*Family Planning Perspectives, 31*, 127-131.

Scott, S. D., Pringle, A., & Lumsdaine, C. (2004). *Sexual Exclusion: Homophobia and Health inequalities: A Review of Health Inequalities and Social Exclusion Experienced by Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People*. London: UK Gay Men's Health Network.

Szalacha, L. A. (2003). Safer sexual diversity climates: Lessons learned from an evaluation of Massachusetts Safe Schools Program for gay and lesbian students. *American Journal of Education, 110*, 58-88.

Scanlon, K., Travers, R., Coleman, T., Bauer, G., Boyce, M. (2010). Ontario's Trans Communities and Suicide: Transphobia is Bad for our Health. *Trans PULSE E-Bulletin, 1*(2).

Travers, R., Newton, H., & Munro, L. (2011). "Because it was expected": Heterosexism as a determinant of pregnancy among sexually diverse youth. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health, 30*, 65-79.

Travers, R., & Schneider, M. (1996). Barriers to accessibility for lesbian and gay youth needing addictions services. *Youth & Society, 27*, 356-378.

Travers, R., Bauer, G., Pyne, J., Gale, L., & Papadimitriou, M. (\_\_\_\_). *Impacts of Parental Support for Trans Youth*. A report prepared for Children's Aid Society and Delisle Youth Services

Walls, N.E., Kane, S.B., Wisneski, H. (2010). Gay-Straight Alliances and school experiences of sexual minority youth. *Youth & Society, 41*, 307-332.

Running Head: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES

Washington, R. L., & Evans, N. J. (1991). Becoming an ally. In N. J. Evans & V. A. Wall (Eds.), *Beyond tolerance: Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals on campus* (pp. 195–204). Alexandria, VA: American College Personnel Association.

Waterloo Region District School Board (December, 2007). *Board Policy 1008: Equity and Inclusion*. Retrieved from: <http://www.wrdsb.ca/about-us/board-policies>

Table 1

*Youth Demographics (N=9)*

Participant number	Age	Trans	Gender	Sexual orientation	Membership	City	Ethno-racial background
1	17	No	Female	Lesbian	3 years	Kitchener	White-Canadian
2	14	Yes	Male	Bisexual	1 year	Cambridge	White-Canadian
3	17	No	Male	Gay	1 year	Cambridge	White-Canadian
4	16	No	Female	Straight	1 year	Kitchener	White-European
5	16	No	Male	Straight	0	Cambridge	White-European
6	17	No	Male	Gay	0	Kitchener	White-Canadian
7	17	No	Female	Straight	2 years	Cambridge	White-European
8	17	No	Female	Bisexual	1 week	Kitchener	White-Canadian
9	18	Yes	Female	Straight	4 years	Cambridge	White-European

*Note.* Trans = does the participant identify as trans; membership = length of membership in GSA; City = the city that their high school is in.

Table 2

*Teacher Demographics (N=5)*

Participant number	Age of GSA	Grade level in school
1	3.5 years	9-12
2	2-3 years	9-12
3	3 years	7-8
4	4 years	9-12
5	2 years	9-12

*Note.* To protect the confidentiality of our teacher participants we chose to provide limited demographic information.