

**An examination of the student experience with Gay-Straight  
Alliances in secondary schools**

**Major Research Paper submitted to  
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## **Glossary**

Inclusive language is important when discussing LGBTQ+ issues. Throughout this research project, I will be using a variety of terms associated with sexuality and gender identity. The following is a glossary of words and concepts with a clear and concise definition to help situate the reader and to provide context. The definitions have been provided by *Egale Canada Human Rights Trust* and the *National LGBT Health Education Centre: A Program of the Fenway Institute*. I selected *Egale Canada Human Rights Trust* as resource because of its reputation in leading research for the LGBTQ+ community. More in depth definitions of the terms and concepts will be provided throughout the text.

**Bisexual (adj):** “A person who is attracted emotionally and sexually to both male-identified and female identified people” (Egale Canada).

**Coming out (verb):** “The process by which one accepts and/or comes to identify one’s own sexual orientation or gender identity (to come out to oneself). Also the process by which one shares one’s sexual orientation or gender identity with others (to come out to friends, etc.)” (National LGBT Health Education Centre).

**Gay (adj):** “A person who is emotionally and sexually attracted to someone of the same sex and/or gender—gay can include both male-identified individuals and female-identified individuals, or refer to male-identified individuals only” (Egale Canada).

**Gender binary (noun):** “The idea that there are only two genders, male and female, and that a person must strictly fit into one category or the other” (National LGBT Health Education Centre).

**Gender Identity:** “A person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender—their internal sense of being a man, woman, or another gender entirely. A person’s gender may or may not correspond with the sex assigned to them at birth. Since gender identity is internal, one’s gender identity is not necessarily visible to others” (Egale Canada).

**Genderqueer (adj.):** “Describes a person whose gender identity falls outside the traditional gender binary. Other terms for people whose gender identity falls outside the traditional gender binary include gender variant, gender expansive, etc. Sometimes written as two words (gender queer)” (National LGBT Health Education Centre).

**Gender role (noun):** “A set of societal norms dictating what types of behaviors are generally considered acceptable, appropriate or desirable for a person based on their actual or perceived sex” (National LGBT Health Education Centre).

**Heteronormativity (noun):** “The assumption that everyone is heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is superior to all other sexualities” (National LGBT Health Education Centre).

**Heterosexual (straight) (adj.):** “A sexual orientation that describes women who are emotionally and sexually attracted to men, and men who are emotionally and sexually attracted to women” (National LGBT Health Education Centre).

**Homophobia (noun):** “The fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of lesbian or gay people or those who are perceived as such” (National LGBT Health Education Centre).

**LGBTQ:** “An acronym for “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Two-Spirit, Queer and Questioning” people” (Egale Canada).

**Lesbian (adj or n):** “A female-identified person who is emotionally and sexually attracted to female-identified people” (Egale Canada).

**Outing (verb):** “Involuntary or unwanted disclosure of another person’s sexual orientation or gender identity” (National LGBT Health Education Centre).

**Sexual Orientation:** “A person’s capacity for profound emotional and sexual attraction to another person based on their sex and/or gender” (Egale Canada).

**Transgender (adj):** “A person who does not identify either fully or in part with the gender associated with their birth-assigned sex—often used as an umbrella term to represent a wide range of gender identities and expressions. Transgender people (just like cisgender people) may identify as straight, gay, etc” (Egale Canada).

**Queer (adj):** “Historically, a derogatory term for homosexuality, used to insult LGBT people. Although still used as a slur by some, the term has been reclaimed by some members of LGBT communities, particularly youth. In its reclaimed form it can be used as a symbol of pride and affirmation of difference and diversity, or as a means of challenging rigid identity categories” (Egale Canada).

## **Preface**

In the past two decades, there has been a significant amount of progress for the LGBTQ+ community in Canada, especially in terms of legal advancements and social acceptance,

“In Canada, rights for queer youth are broadly protected by the Federal and Provincial Human Rights Codes. These rights have been firmly established since 1995 when “sexual orientation” was read into the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as a protected class as a result of a landmark decision by the Supreme Court of Canada (*Egan vs. Canada*, 1995)” (Meyer and Stader, 2009, p.3)

Despite these changes, LGBTQ+ people still face many challenges because Gender and sexual diversity are often not discussed as part of the foundational education. The lack of public discussion and experiences of societal stigma and prejudice can leave queer and trans individuals apprehensive about openly discussing their sexuality and gender identity.

The target population for this research project is youth that identify as LGBTQ+. The research project explores their experiences in high school as a sexual and/or gender minority. The objective of the project is to analyze how Gay-Straight Alliances can contribute to an LGBTQ+ student’s experience in high school. The idea for this research project came from personal reflection in the past year. I spent many years questioning my sexuality in silence throughout my teenage years and early adulthood because of the fear of being labeled and having a stigmatized identity. I wondered if I would have been more open about discussing my sexuality if my high school experience had been more inclusive and diverse in terms of sexuality and gender identity. Many of my peers started to disclose their sexual orientation shortly after graduation (in 2010), which makes me question whether it was the high school environment that prevented them from coming out. This research project will provide the opportunity to reflect on my personal journey with sexuality and how it was impacted by the environments that I occupied at the time and by the people I interacted with on a daily basis. I will revisit some of the challenges I faced during that time.

Myths, negative stereotypes and stigma associated with the LGBTQ+ community need to be addressed through more research and education. GSAs aim to help increase awareness and understanding about gender and sexual diversity. I hope to discuss not only the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students, but also the resilience and courage they have acquired from their journey in high school. I will examine both their individual and collective experiences.

School plays a significant role in the life of an adolescent, as it is where they spend most of their time and form relationships. It is a crucial time when youth are discovering and affirming their identities. The implementation of GSAs is relatively new in Ontario and there is little research on the student experience of GSAs. For this reason, I will be researching LGBTQ+ youth and their high school experiences. The research project will incorporate some of the different actors involved in the maintenance of GSAs, including governmental policies, school staff and the student population.

## **Introduction**

Recently, high schools across Canada have initiated Gay-Straight Alliances, which are student-led groups that are often labelled safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students and allies. The emergence of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) has been discussed publicly and their necessity and benefits have been researched (Heck et.al, 2013, p. 163). It has been said that GSAs can facilitate important discussions about sexuality and gender with like-minded peers and supportive teachers/adults in the school (Russell et.al, 2009, p. 2). GSAs are said to be vital for the recognition of LGBTQ+ identities. I explore how GSAs function at the ground level and how students perceive and use this space. Essentially, I explore whether GSA are beneficial and effective in keeping LGBTQ+ youth safe at school. The sense of security at school includes acceptance, openness and freedom from any form of discrimination. I explore students' lived experience in high school from their own perspective through semi-structured interviews.

There has been little research on the use of GSAs and even less research that focuses on their everyday usage from the student's point of view. Previous research reports lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, especially LGBTQ+ youth, experience sexual prejudice and discrimination, suggesting that instances of microaggressions can also be based on sexual orientation and transgender identity (Nadal et.al, , 2011, p.236). There are many research studies that look at the challenges that LGBTQ+ face, and more recently there has been more research studies that focus on the environment in which they engage and interact regularly. In fact, different actors that are involved in schools have invested in different ways of improving the school climate,

“In the past two decades, researchers, practitioners, school personnel, and students have created and implemented strategies aimed at improving school climates in order to promote safety and prevent the victimization of gender nonconforming and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students” (Toomey et.al, 2012,p.188).

This research project asks the following question: How does having a safe space contribute to a LGBTQ+ youth experience during secondary school? The project will present and analyze the perception of the high school environment and GSAs from four individuals. Chapter 1 concentrates on the realities that LGBTQ+ youth face in terms of the environment, coming out and mental health. Chapter 2 explores the theoretical framework of queer theory and queer spaces. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology and the recruitment process for the interviews. Chapter 4 develops the findings from the interviews and categorizes them into different themes. Chapter 5 highlights the different potential solutions for the school environment and the role of different actors. The conclusion regroups the findings from previous research and discuss the results of the semi-structured interviews.

## **1. Research Problem**

### **1.1 The realities of LGBTQ+ youth in the school environment**

This chapter explores some of the realities that LGBTQ+ youth face at school, the challenges of coming out, and the impact that being stigmatized has on one's well-being at school.

The role of the school goes beyond education. It is also a site for discipline, the maintenance of social order and the representation of cultural and social norms. More often than not, the school perpetuates certain social norms such as heteronormativity and cisnormativity both directly and indirectly (Goldstein et.al, 2008, p.50). Egale Canada Human Rights Trust defines cisnormativity as the following:

A cultural and societal bias, often unconscious, that privileges cisgender identities and gender norms, and ignores or underrepresents trans identities and/or gender diversity by assuming that all people are cisgender and will express their gender in a way that aligns with perceived gender norms (Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, p.12)

Homophobia and heteronormativity are systemic problems that persist despite the advances and societal gains for the LGBTQ+ community. Heteronormativity is defined as “the normalization of heterosexuality and the subsequent devaluation or invisibility of nonheterosexual sexualities [...] the view of heterosexuals as superiors and normal” (Logie et.al, 2015, p.316). Schools portrays certain ideas of what is considered to be acceptable and appropriate, like heterosexual relationships, and by doing so it can create a sense of “otherness” or even demonize non-heterosexual relationships. One author explains that, “for sexual and gender minorities, the regime of heteronormativity is still strongly felt within schools, both with respect to official curriculum but also within the informal school culture (“hidden curriculum”)” (Kjaran, 2017, p.97). On a more micro scale, the persistent images of heterosexuality and cisgender normativity through social activities such as prom –school dress codes, affirm gender binaries (Payne and Smith, 2013, p. 23).

In many ways, societal norms have created biases towards certain groups of people; these biases are sustained in different institutions such as politics, the education system, and the justice system amongst others. Similar to other forms of discrimination, homophobia is expressed through beliefs, prejudices and convictions, which filtrate our acts and practices in society (Borrillo, 2000, p.27). Furthermore, “society also delineates clear boundaries for what is considered “normal” and “acceptable” behavior. Schools are often a reflection of society, Armesto and Weisman go on to explain: Our society often views homosexuality as a “lifestyle” outside of the boundaries of acceptability, which leaves many gay and lesbian youth feeling marginalized and with limited social support” (Armesto and Weisman, 2001, p. 145).

The prominence of heteronormativity in schools can be underestimated as it is a part of many daily occurrences:

“In the earliest years of formal education, elementary students understand and engage in the practices of gender regulation and heteronormativity (Renold, 2002; Thorne, 1993). While heteronormativity in schools is expressed through the daily interactions among students and teachers, it is also expressed through institutional practices and policies” (Toomey et.al, 2012, p.188)

The manner in which information about relationships, sexuality and gender is presented by schools can be problematic because it can reinforce a social hierarchy. Smith and Jaffer (2012) explain how heteronormative messages portrayed by schools can create a prejudice: “There is a fundamental bias in the idea that makes sense to teach children about heterosexuality before homosexuality [...] Children and youth pick up on such biases (Smith and Jaffer, 2012, p.93). Images and values regarding sexuality and gender can be transmitted in schools with little to no nuance. For example, there is often a lack of resources in the libraries and little information on LGBTQ+ history and literature in the curriculum (Snapp et.al, 2015, p.256). This underrepresentation and misrepresentation of the LGBTQ+ community can belittle one’s individual experience and sense of self. Moreover, the lack of adequate role models in the curriculum can

severely hinder LGBTQ+ youth's ability to accept and feel proud of their identity (Morrison and L'Heureux, 2001 p.43).

Individuals that do not appear to adhere to societal norms can face discrimination and social stigma because of the negative images and stereotypes associated with the LGBTQ+ community. LGBTQ+ youth are often subject to bullying because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Bullying and homophobia are interrelated, and it is referred to as "gender-based, homophobic, and anti-LGBT bias/bullying" (Perez et.al, 2013, p. 63). Recent studies have demonstrated how authority figures and students alike in schools can contribute to maintaining and reproducing homophobic behaviors:

"...en milieu scolaire démontrent que la présomption d'hétérosexualité y est souvent tenue pour acquise, que les manifestations de comportements homophobes sont considérée comme un stade « naturel » du développement des garçons et que certain professeurs sont parfois silencieux devant l'intimidation que certains jeunes subissent" (Thibault et.al, 2013, p.157).

Often times, homophobic comments and behaviours are ignored or go unnoticed by school staff members both intentionally and unintentionally. Sometimes, it is a misunderstanding or lack of experience with LGBTQ+ issues that prevent staff members from intervening. Some staff members do not intervene to stop homophobia and transphobia due to the following reasons:

"(a) lack of knowledge about how to intervene, (b) normalizing the victimization behaviours, (c) believing the victimization experience is a means of learning resiliency and self-confidence, and (d) acting out their own aggressive feelings toward certain minority groups" (Perez et.al, 2013, p. 68)

Teachers and principals are not immune to homophobic ideas and beliefs, which can in turn shape their interactions at school. However, some teachers and principals that want to fight against homophobia and transphobia find themselves ill-equipped. Teachers and principals are in powerful positions to intervene and to be proactive about homophobia and transphobic comments, if they have to the tools to do so (Goldstein et.al, 2008, p.5).

The lack of representation of the LGBTQ+ community in high schools can also have a negative impact on youth as the absence of role models can lead to further isolation. As previously mentioned, adolescence is a crucial time when individuals are learning about themselves and questioning their identity/role in society. It is important for youth to have trusted adults in their lives with whom to have these difficult conversations without judgment. Yet, it is rare, and considered taboo, for teachers or other adults in the school to discuss LGBTQ+ issues.

Many students are obligated to attend school even they do not feel safe and/or accepted by their peers and/or adults. The high school environment for an LGBTQ+ student can be hostile and violent due to homophobia and heteronormativity. Homophobic and transphobic bullying can manifest in various ways, ranging from taunting/teasing and vulgar jokes to physical harassment (Payne and Smith, 2013, p.7). A research study conducted in Quebec surveyed youth, between the ages of 16 and 23 years old that identified as transgender, about their experience at school. The study revealed the severity of transphobia within the school environment. The following statistics demonstrated that :

“87% stipulent avoir été victimes, au cours de la dernière année scolaire, de harcèlement verbal en lien avec leur expression de genre ou l’adoption de conduites non conformes aux normes de genre; 53% révèlent du harcèlement physique (p. ex. des bousculades); 26% mentionnent avoir été agressés physiquement” (Chamberland, 2011, p.4)

Another recent study entitled the *First National Climate Survey on Homophobia in Canadian Schools* published by Egale (Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere), investigated the issue of homophobia by surveying 1700 students from across Canada through an online survey. The findings demonstrated the following the results regarding the everyday harassment faced by LGBTQ+ students:

“Three-quarters of LGBTQ students feel unsafe in at least one place at school, such as change rooms, washrooms, and hallways [...] Half heard remarks like “faggot”, “queer”, “lezbo”, and “dyke” daily. Over half of LGBTQ students,

compared to a third of non-LGBTQ, reported hearing such remarks daily” (Taylor et.al, 2009, p.3).

This survey confirms the severity of homophobia in Canadian high schools. After many instances of bullying and suicides of LGBTQ+ students, the government has put in place policies to protect all minority students. Homophobia and heteronormativity have a psychological, social and emotional impact, and can take a toll on one’s self-esteem and wellbeing. These occurrences take place on a daily basis, making them difficult to avoid. The constant bombardment of heteronormativity coupled with negative comments can be detrimental to an LGBTQ+ youth. The consequences of these hostile environments can cause guilt, anxiety, and depression (Borrillo, 2000, p.101). To illustrate with an example, the suicide of Jamie Hubley from Ottawa in 2011 made national headlines (Kitchen and Bellini, 2013, p.5). Jamie Hubley was an openly gay 15-year-old student who was tormented at school because of his sexual identity. It was Hubley’s intention to create a Gay-Straight Alliance at his school called the Rainbow Club. Unfortunately, his proposal was not well received by his peers and was denied by the school. Like Hubley, many LGBTQ+ youth experience negative reactions when they do not adhere to the dominant expectation of sexuality or gender. That same year in 2011, there were at least 14 queer students who committed suicide due to bullying and harassment that they experienced at school (Anderson, 2014, p.212). Many instances of homophobic and transphobic bullying are unreported and often times LGBTQ+ youth are reluctant to report these events if they perceive that the school authorities are unsympathetic and unwilling to intervene on their behalf (Goodenow et.al, 2006, p. 585).

### **1.1.1 LGBTQ+ identities and “coming out”**

Adolescence is a unique stage in which individuals are discovering their identities and are transitioning into adulthood. LGBTQ+ youth face these changes while confronting the unique challenges and often difficult process of coming out. LGBTQ+ youth encounter challenges on a

daily basis including: “learning how to meet like-minded people, gaining acceptance from others, avoiding potentially violent situations by those who stigmatize gay persons” (Rosario et.al, 2001, p.137). Furthermore, LGBTQ+ individuals have to deal with and reconcile the fact they have a sexual or gender identity that is socially stigmatized (Armesto and Weisman, 2001, p.145). LGBTQ+ youth often perceive that something is “wrong” with them and that they must keep their sexual orientation or transgender identity a secret from their family and friends to not disappoint them (Morrow, 2004, p.90). This is a heavy burden for youth to carry and it can lead to many negative consequences, including having an impact on how they perceive themselves and how they interact with others.

“Coming out” is considered a rite of passage for many LGBTQ+ individuals. The concept of “coming out” has its origins in the gay liberation movement in the United States. Essentially, it means disclosing your sexual orientation or gender identity to others (Chamberland, 1997, p. 10). It is important to define the term “coming out”. Although there are several definitions, one author describes it as a process that is not simply linear or goal-oriented (Guittar, 2014, p. 21).

Coming out is an important step in living openly with family, friends and others, including classmates and colleagues. However, coming out should not be romanticized; it can be met with hostility, violence or social neglect. Coming out to family members can be particularly stressful and invoke anxiety for a young gay person (Merighi and Grimes, 2000, p.40). It is vital that the individual is prepared to disclose and that they are in a safe environment to do so. There can be severe consequences for coming out, ranging from being kicked out of the home to physical violence. Though the process of coming out is different for each individual, there are some recurring elements. Coming out should not be underestimated because it can change the family dynamic immensely, whether temporarily or long-term:

“Many experts maintain that parents’ discovering of their son’s or daughter’s homosexuality generally leads to a family crisis or emotional distress [...] Some researcher have indicated that the discovery involves a gradual process whereby immediate negative reactions give way to acknowledgement and acceptance” (Ben-Ari, 1995, p. 308).

Parental support can reduce a number of risks such as depression, suicidal ideation and drug use (Roe, 2017, p.55). Family rejection can have devastating consequences for LGBTQ+ youth, which can include “higher rates of suicide, substance abuse, and unprotected sex and contributes to the disproportionate number of homeless LGBTQ youth” (Roe, 2017, p. 56). Parental support is vital for an LGBTQ+ youth because other sources of support such as peers or teachers may not be available. Recent studies indicate that young people are coming out earlier; “many LGBTQ youth are coming out at 15 or 16 years of age – and sometimes even earlier” (Guittar, 2014, p. 68). At this age, youth are still typically residing at home and thus needing guidance and support. It is crucial to have a safe environment in which youth can discuss their sexuality with their parents. The youth in this study claimed that coming out to their parents was the most stressful; often they told their friends first (Charbonnier and Graziani, 2013, p.5)

Coming out can also be very liberating, and helpful to the process of self-acceptance of one’s sexuality or gender identity. There are several reasons why a person will choose to come out: “Common reasons given for the disclosure of homosexuality to parents include to be honest and stop living a lie, to open up communication, to strengthen family bonds, to deepen love, and to provide opportunities for mutual support and caring” (Ben-Ari, 1995, p.308). The ability to express their true identity is very important for individuals that identify as LGBTQ+.

### **1.1.2 LGBTQ+ youth and mental health**

As previously discussed, heteronormativity and cis-gender normativity are prevalent in high schools through the curriculum and everyday interactions. Queer-identifying individuals are

also subject to a range of hate crimes from violence, public mockery and refusal of services, to avoidance. Societal norms, combined with homophobia and transphobia, can have a significant impact on a LGBTQ+ person's mental health.

The LGBTQ+ community has had to fight against institutional and social discrimination throughout history. Homosexuality was considered a mental illness, categorized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association released its first "official" listing of mental disorders in the DMS-I and in it homosexuality was classified as a form of sexual deviance (Scherer, 2010, p. 148). Fortunately, in 1973, the American Psychiatric Association Board of Directors voted to remove homosexuality from the DSM, stating that same-sex orientation is not inherently associated with psychopathology (Herek, 2004, p.6). However, gender dysphoria remains in the DSM and is used as a diagnosis. This historical correlation between sexual and gender minorities and mental health problems still has an impact on the LGBTQ+ community.

The negative external perception of the LGBTQ+ community can have a negative impact on one's self-esteem and can even lead to internalized homophobia. The weight of "hiding" can be very detrimental. Internalized homophobia can be described in the following manner:

*"La haine de la société envers homosexuels peut se transformer en haine de soi...il semble difficile d'esquiver les conflits intérieurs résultant d'une non-adéquation a de tells valeurs. De surcroit, les gays et lesbiennes grandissent dans un environnement qui déploy ouvertement son hostilité anti-homosexuelle"*  
(Borrillo, 2000, p.111)

Many research studies indicate that LGBQ+ youth are at a high risk of negative outcomes from their interactions within the school environment. A school climate or school environment can be referred to as the quality and character of school life. A positive school climate fosters development and learning, which encourages productivity and satisfaction (Black et.al, 2012, p.322). However, a hostile school climate may lead to emotional distress, depression, drug use, anxiety and even

suicidal ideation (Birkett et.al, 2009, p. 889). Many research studies have demonstrated that LGBTQ+ youth experience poorer mental health compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. According to 2008 Suicide Prevention Resource Center information, “les jeunes LGB ont entre 1,5 et 3 fois plus de risque d’avoir des idée suicidaires que leurs pair hétérosexuels (Charbonnier and Graziani, 2013, p.2). According to Savins-Williams (1990), there are different individual risk factors that are common among LGBTQ+ youth which can put them at risk for suicide if they: “(1) acknowledge their sexual orientation at an early age (Remafedi et.al, 1991); (2) report a sexual abuse and/or familial abuse history (Gibson, 1994); (3) do not disclose their sexual orientation to anyone (Remafedi et.al, 1994); (4) self-present with high levels of gender non-conformity (Remafedi et.al, 1991) and (5) report high levels of intrapsychic conflict regarding their sexual orientation” (Morrison and L’Heureux, 2011, p.42).

## **1.2 The secondary school climate**

### **1.2.1 New policies: Bill 13 and Bill 157**

After many instances of bullying and suicides of some LGBTQ+ students, the government put in place policies to protect minority students. The Ministry of Education has created new policies and procedures regarding the school climate. These policies include *Bill 157: Keeping Our Kids Safe at School*, an Ontario law that holds educators legally responsible to respond and report all incidents of bullying (Kitchen, 2013, p.27). In addition, the Ministry of Education passed *Bill 13: Education Amendment (Accepting School Act)*, to ensure that all public and Catholic funded schools in Ontario must permit the establishment of Gay-Straight Alliances in every school (Kitchen and Bellini, 2013, p. 458). The emergence of these policies has highlighted the severity of the issue by bringing them to the forefront and addressing the problem at an institutional level. *Bill 157* also introduced a mandatory school climate survey that must be completed in all schools in Ontario every two years by staff and students. The results of these surveys are not made available

to the public, but rather to school boards and the Ministry of Education (Kitchen and Bellini, 2013, p. 26).

The institutional response occurred after a series of homophobic and transphobic bullying cases and suicides. These policies help hold teachers and other staff members accountable when they witness homophobic and transphobic behavior. Yet, having an anti-bullying policy is not sufficient; key actors must be proactive about awareness and anti-discrimination.

### **1.2.2 Gay-Straight Alliances in high schools**

Gay-Straight Alliances first appeared in the 1980s, and were used as safe school initiatives in the United States. They started as grassroots clubs mostly initiated by students who wanted to challenge homophobia in their schools. Nowadays, GSAs are more structured, with regular meetings (weekly or bi-weekly), planned activities and support by teachers and/or staff members (Kitchen and Bellini, 2013, p.3). Gay-Straight Alliances have been established in various high schools and even elementary schools across Canada, including in Ontario since 2012. Gay-Straight Alliances can also be referred to as Gender and Sexuality Alliances in order to include gender identity in the title. GSAs across Canada have similarities, which include the following:

“GSAs are typically student-run, non-curricular, after-school clubs that are open to all students, regardless of their sexual orientation, and established for the purposes of providing a safe space for addressing LGBT youth issues such as bullying, harassment, and marginalization” (Liboro et.al, 2015, p. 159)

GSAs can help facilitate important conversations about gender and sexuality in a non-judgmental and open manner with like-minded individuals in a safe setting. In addition, this space can encourage broader awareness of this marginalized population and it is also said, “to be part of the larger LGBTQ movement” (Fetner et.al, 2012, p.1). Being part of the larger LGBTQ+ community can prompt activism and further mobilize people. In short, the GSAs can be the first site of collective action for some youth, which can continue once they graduate high school. GSAs

are said to highly value diversity and inclusiveness and in fact, “GSAs often represent the one legitimized safe space in schools where it’s okay to be different, regardless of what the difference might be” (Smith, and Jaffer, 2012, p.86). Though considered safe spaces, GSAs are not always free from other prejudices and discrimination. According to Hackford-Peer (2010), students of color do not necessarily feel safe in these groups (Fetner et.al, 2012, p.8). This can create barriers for some students who do not feel welcomed into the space.

Though the school board permits GSAs, there is still some hesitation and taboo accompanied with these safe spaces. The group may exist in theory but it is still relatively invisible to the student population and staff. One research study explained that some groups were not able to call themselves gay-straight alliances and had to use generic names such as “equity and diversity” groups in at least five Canadian LGBTQ groups (Fetner et.al, 2012, p.13). The visibility of LGBTQ+ students is crucial and group names that do not explicitly embody the mission and target the LGBTQ+ community can defeat the purpose. On the other hand, an explicit group name like Rainbow Club can make the participants of this group a target for bullying and/or negative feedback. In fact, some students reported a backlash leading to hostility.

Adolescence is a time when youth are looking for a sense of belonging and are often faced with the challenge of “fitting in”. It is important that youth are seen, heard and engaged and that their experiences are reflected in the school environment. Many valuable discussions about gender and sexuality can be tackled within the GSAs. Many advocates for GSAs believe it is one of the best ways to support LGBTQ+ youth because they will be able to socialize and talk about issues that are important to them without feeling threatened. These designated safe spaces can also facilitate peer support from other students who are experiencing the same sentiments. Many LGBTQ+ people will presume that a space is unsafe until shown otherwise, for instance the

presence of a pride flag (Poynter and Tubbs, 2007, p.127). GSAs can provide informal counseling for some individuals who are in search of guidance (Liboro et.al, 2015, p. 159). For some students, actively participating in the school community can increase their confidence and enable a positive attitude towards themselves.

In addition, a GSA can foster a sense of connection to the school, which in turn can decrease potential feelings of isolation (Smith and Jaffer, 2012, p.86). GSAs serve many purposes, ranging from “education and safety, interpersonal support, leadership development, advocacy training and recreation [...] a social space where marginalized youth are empowered to critique and challenge dominant norms for gender and sexuality” (Russell et.al, 2010, p. 11). GSAs have the ability to cultivate an environment that is free from bullying and harassment while enriching the school environment with a positive representation of the LGBTQ+ community. On the individual level, GSA participants have reported that their involvement with the GSA has resulted in an overall improvement in academic performance, relationships with peers, self-esteem and their sense of physical and emotional safety at school (Asakura, 2010, p.365).

### **1.2.3 The concept of safe spaces**

Historically safe spaces have been created for vulnerable groups in recognition of the consequences of social isolation and marginalization. Safe spaces have been linked to social movements and activism. These spaces are often developed to represent minority identities. Safe spaces have existed for many for years for many different reasons:

“For decades, the sociological literature has used the concept “safe spaces” (or equivalent terms such as “free spaces”, “protected spaces”, “havens” or “free social spaces”) to refer to “small scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization [...] these safe spaces produce counterhegemonic ideas and identities, thus building the resources that movement can mobilize for collective action” (Fetner et.al, 2016, p.5).

These spaces can offer people from marginalized groups the opportunity to persevere and build resistance as a collective (Polletta, 1996, p.6). In addition, free spaces, also known as safe spaces, are political in nature because the individuals in these spaces are freely engaged in discussions that are often silenced by the dominant social norms. Free spaces can serve different purposes which include some of the following:

“...free spaces, are the environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue... free spaces are settings between private lives and large scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence and vision” (Evans and Boyte, 1992, p.17)

These types of spaces are a place for mobilization, activism, social network and solidarity for individuals that face some form of oppression. In the following chapter I will discuss further the concept of safe spaces by exploring queer spaces. I will elaborate on the theoretical framework that I will use to address my main research question.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework used for the research project. I address briefly some key elements of queer theory and then provide a more in-depth explanation of queer spaces. This chapter situates the project in terms of understanding how members of the LGBTQ+ community occupy certain spaces. I describe briefly queer theory and how it relates to identity and expression. I also explore the relevance of the concept of queer space and how it relates with GSAs in particular.

### **2.1 Queer Theory**

Queer theory is a large field of study that focuses on the recognition of LGBTQ+ identities. Queer theory emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a critical theory. Queer theory seeks to deconstruct rigid binaries in relation to gender and sexuality. In other words, “queer theory holds that sexuality should not be essentialized into strict identity categories because the meaning and categories of sexuality change and, moreover, vary over space and time” (Smith and Jaffer, 2012, p.25). Queer theories deconstruct and challenge heteronormative discourses and practices (Glassmann, 2012, p.17). In addition, queer theory permits more a more nuanced perspective of gender and sexuality with an emphasis on fluidity. Judith Butler, a prominent queer theorist, explains how individuals express their gender and sexuality:

“In what senses, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (Butler, 1990, p.191)

Queer theory provides the tools to critique and question these behaviors, norms and performances: “its main purpose is to question, disrupt, analyze, and create dialogue in order to change the status quo in society” (Bellini, 2012, p.386). Queer theory can facilitate a discussion about identities that are often considered illegitimate and that have been stigmatized because they differ from the norm.

Furthermore, “queer theory also destabilizes genders (masculine/feminine) and biological sex (male/female), questioning the assumed connectivity between sex and gender, or the legitimacy of presumed scientific classification” (Alexander and Anderlini-D’Onofrio, 2012, p. 23). Queer theory looks at individual identity but at the same time explores collective experience. According to Tierney (1997), as cited by Bellini, “queer theory is about building a community, mobilizing forces, creating group resistance, and fighting oppression” (Bellini, 2012, p. 386). Queer theory incorporates the shared experience of individuals that do not adhere to gender and/or sexuality binaries.

Queer theory is quite vast and therefore I focus on the concept of queer spaces more specifically. Using queer spaces as a concept, I highlight the strength, knowledge and resistance that is created from these spaces. I examine the reality of the interactions within a queer space, more specifically GSAs. I will use queer spaces as a concept that is extended from queer theory because it will allow me to better understand how a space can influence behavior, interactions and sentiments. This concept is best suited for this research project because it helps to challenge the function of a space and how cultural norms about gender and sexuality are maintained in certain environments like a school.

Queer and trans people occupy spaces that are typically heteronormative and cisnormative the majority of their daily lives and therefore queer and safe spaces are quite unique and offer a distinct experience. Although some spaces maybe be inclusive and LGBTQ+ friendly, safe spaces are different because there is typically an objective for the existence of the group whether it be for empowerment, resistance or community. Furthermore, “conceptually queer space occurs at the margin of society, a kind of ‘thirdspace’” (Doan, 2007, p. 57).

### 2.1.1 Queer Spaces

The objective of this research project is to validate the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in safe spaces within high school. The aim is to draw attention to their point of view and to validate them as the experts of their experience.

Queer spaces can exist in different forms, for instance a geographical space (neighborhood), a virtual (online) space and a designated space (GSAs and gay bars). LGBTQ+ friendly spaces are deemed safe and inclusive, while queer spaces are designated for the LGBTQ+ community. Cited by Doan (2007) “to “queer” a space, overt action is taken to create a safe place for people to identify as they choose” (Glassmann, 2012, p.22). Jon Ingvar Kjaran author of *Constructing Sexualities and Gender Bodies in School Spaces*, uses the term queer as a verb. “To queer” can incorporate the meaning of the verbs: transgress, disrupt, destabilize, interrupt, challenge, trouble and disturb” (Kjaran, 2017,p.177). Thus, using queer as a verb, we are able to queer a space by disrupting its heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Queer spaces enable the LGBTQ+ community to define and use the space in ways that affirm and support their marginalized identities (Glassmann, 2012, p.23). To illustrate queer spaces with an example, there are historically gay neighborhoods, such as Chelsea in New York City, West Hollywood and the South End in Boston (Goh, 2018, p.464). These geographical spaces ensure a level of openness and security for the LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, many queer spaces were created during the gay liberation movement:

“During the 1970s and the early 1980s, geographers and social scientists began to observe that gay men and lesbians were creating distinct social, political and cultural landscapes, then dubbed ‘*gay ghettos*’ (Levine, 1979), now more commonly referred to as ‘*gay villages*’, in a number of major western cities” (Casey, 2004, p.447).

Queer spaces, at that time, were created in response to homophobic marginalization and repression.

Depending on the moment in history, queer spaces were more highly politicized as they confronted

normative and dominant ideologies about gender and sexuality. Moreover, queer spaces can combine different elements of politics and social life; “the work of ‘queering’ heralds and makes room for difference, questions the powers behind the purported ‘normal’, and situates pleasure and politics side-by-side” (Giesecking, 2013 p.179).

In conclusion, the framework of queer spaces allows me to explore how a safe space can be created in an already existing heteronormative environment. Much like a safe space or a gay neighborhood, a GSA is designated space with a purpose; “...queer space is space in the process of, literally, *taking place*, of claiming territory” (Reed, 1996, p.64). This framework allows me to examine deeply the significance of the GSA space and the interactions within that space and thus expand on the reality that LGBTQ+ youth face.

### **3. Methodology**

In the previous chapters, I focused on LGBTQ+ youth experiences in the school environment. I discussed heteronormativity and homophobic/transphobic bullying within schools. In this chapter, I discuss the research question and the methods I used for realizing the research project.

#### **3.1 Research Question**

The primary research question asks: *how does having a safe space (i.e. Gay- Straight Alliance) contribute to a LGBTQ+ youth's experience during secondary school?* The research question highlights the youth's experience from their perspective. Also, the question seeks to understand the significance of having a Gay-Straight Alliance in high schools. Some of the sub-questions include: *what does having a safe space mean to you? do you think attending a GSA had an effect on your high school experience? did you feel comfortable and that you were able to fully express yourself in your GSA?* These types of questions prompt the research participant to reflect on their personal experience with a critical lens. The questions also encourage the participant to explore their perception and experiences inside and outside safe spaces. My intention is investigate how these youth navigate their way through high school by examining the following: (a) their experiences at school (b) their reflections on those experiences (c) their understanding of how safe spaces impacted those experiences.

The research objectives are as follows: 1) Build understanding about the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students in high school; 2) Explore how Gay-Straight Alliances contribute to students' experience in high school; and 3) Use this knowledge to contribute to future research on LGBTQ+ issues in high schools. Overall, the intention of this research project is to validate the voices of LGBTQ+ youth.

Throughout the data collection, I will attempt to capture participants' stories and lived experiences in a respectful manner. When discussing issues concerning LGBTQ+ youth it is

crucial to include their voices because they are often dismissed from the dominant discourse. Despite the large body of research on LGBTQ+ topics, there is a gap in the research concerning students' perspectives. Studying the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth is relatively new, in fact

“...the first public and research attention to young LGBTs focused explicitly on mental health: A small number of studies in the 1980s began to identify concerning rates of reported suicidal behavior among “gay” youth, and a US federal report on “gay youth suicide” (Gibson 1989) became controversial in both politics and research” (Russell and Fish, 2016, p.466).

This research project can help facilitate more discussions about these issues and increase awareness. By representing marginalized voices, we can empower people to tell their stories. The research can also help sensitize and educate society about the discrimination that the LGBTQ+ community still faces.

### **3.1.1 Research Methods**

The research project used qualitative research methods and semi-structured interviews questions. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide the participant the opportunity to tell their story, yet with some guidance. Since the research question focuses on the participants' lived experiences, it is important to allow them the flexibility to go deeply into the responses. In addition to flexibility, the semi-structured interview offers a host of advantages:

“the engagement of the participant with the segments of the interview, each progressively more structured... it allows for considerable reciprocity between the participant and the researcher. This reciprocity, or give and take, creates space for the researcher to probe a participant's responses for clarification, meaning making and critical reflection (Galletta, 2013, p. 24).

I designed my questionnaire in a particular manner that allowed me and the participant to build trust by starting with basic question and gradually progressing to more in-depth questions. The questions built on each other, for instance I began with questions surrounding coming out experiences, then moved onto experiences at school and questions concerning GSAs. The opening questions looked at things like age, ethnic background, position/title and the more personal

questions started with their coming out experience. Sensitive questions were asked in a non-judgmental manner with non-threatening wording to help the participant feel at ease.

The research participant can take the question in the direction they desire because the questions are open-ended. Furthermore, “Semi-structured and unstructured interviewing uses incomplete script and so requires flexibility improvisation and openness. The interviewer should be prepared to explore interesting lines of research” (Myers and Newman, 2007, p.17). These types of questions allow the participant and the researcher to better understand the different dynamics and issues related to LGBTQ+ youth and high school. It was a personal choice to use this method to address the reality that LGBTQ+ youth face in their everyday experience in a school environment that is heteronormative and hostile at times due to homophobia and transphobia.

### **3.1.2 Recruitment**

A small sample size was chosen for the research project because I thought it would be more beneficial to spend more time on each participant and their story in order to obtain more richness in content and more in-depth perspectives.

The research participants were recent high school graduates who identified as LGBTQ+, and who were between the ages of 18-21 years old. Initially, I wanted to interview youth who attended a high school with a GSA but I made the decision to widen my research requirements in order to include those who attended a high school without a GSA. I had access to universities, colleges, and community resource centres in Ottawa, all of which have a safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth. My recruitment strategy was to target any spaces that served the queer and trans community.

The reason I chose to interview youth between the ages of 18-21 years old is because they are no longer in the high school environment and thus can provide retrospective reflections. This distance can potentially provide more of a critique and a reflection. According to Sandelowski, “a life event is not explainable while it is happening; only when it is over can it become the subject

of narration” (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 164). I presumed that participants between the ages of 18-21 years old have the perspective to analyse how their high school experiences impacted them. The research questions focused on a particular time period in their life and within a particular space, rather than their overall experience as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. I included people who identify anywhere on the LGBTQ+ spectrum because GSAs caters to all identities. There is a diversity of voices within the LGBTQ+ community and opportunities need to be created in order to hear these perspective to better understand their experiences.

Initially, I planned to do all my recruitment through the University of Ottawa’s Pride Centre as it is considered a safe space similar to a GSAs but at the university level. I presumed that the people who use the center would be comfortable discussing their sexuality and/or gender identity and that it would be a logical place to recruit participants. Unfortunately, I did not receive any responses from the Pride Centre and thus I decided to proceed with a different recruitment strategy. I received permission from the University of Ottawa’s Women Centre to post my recruitment poster and I received one research participant from that Centre.

The method that resulted in most participants was the “snow-ball effect” also known as word of mouth wherein people who know people relay the information\_(Creswell, 2018, p.159). Since the research questions are highly personal, it was advantageous to have personal contacts and referrals. The LGBTQ+ community is relatively small in the Ottawa-Gatineau area and for this reason I contacted non-profit organizations that work directly with LGBTQ+ youth such as Kind Space and The Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity.

The participants were interviewed individually, in person, during the months of May and June at the University of Ottawa in the Faculty of Social Sciences Building. I conducted one research interview by telephone for the convenience of the research participant. The length of the

interviews varied among the participants, but generally each interview lasted approximately 25 minutes. The interviews were conducted either in French and English depending on the participant.

In order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, I used pseudonyms. The research participant and the main researcher signed the consent form at the time of the interview (Annex 1). In order to mitigate risk, I provided a list of resources that are specific to LGBTQ+ youth but also general services for mental health.

### **3.1.3 Narrative Approach**

The objective of the research is to explore students' experiences as LGBTQ+ students in high school. The narrative approach is fitting because it lends to the idea of recounting a lived experience. The narrative approach focuses on *storytelling*, which allows the participants to speak about issues that are important to them. As one author explains, "narrative analysis focuses on the way individuals present their accounts of themselves and views self-narrations both as constructions and claims to identity" (Burck, 2005, p.252). In this research project, the participants were asked to talk about their views of safes spaces while in relation to their sexual and/or gender identity.

This approach reinforces the idea that the person is the expert of their experience. The narrative approach highlights the fact that no lived experience is the same. In other words, this approach can help honor the uniqueness of each story, as "narrative researchers need to focus on the stories to emerge, recognizing that all people have stories to tell" (Crewswell, 2018, p. 153). The research participants were given the opportunity to reflect and re-evaluate the consequences of having a GSA in their school. The young adults that participated in the interviews were able to expand and elaborate on the research questions that I posed throughout the interview.

As a researcher, I respect the social work value of *empowerment* and thus I chose the narrative approach in order to provide the participant with the space to find their voice throughout

the interview process and to allow questions and comments. I believe my research project is aligned with different elements of social work including social justice and assisting society's vulnerable populations. I believe I created an environment in which the participant felt like their voice were respected and validated by allowing the research participate to take ownership of their experience and identifying their strengths.

### **3.1.4 Thematic Analysis**

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed I identified and defined the main themes and principal ideas using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a process of encoding qualitative information (Boyatzis, 1998, p.4). Thematic analysis can be used as “ a way of *seeing*, a way of *making sense* out of seemingly unrelated material, a way of *analyzing* qualitative information” (Boyatzis, 1998, p.4). Boyatzis explains how thematic analysis is used:

“Thematic analysis enables scholars, observers, or practitioners to use a wide variety of types of information in a systematic manner that increases their accuracy or sensitivity in understanding and interpreting observations about people, events, situations, and organizations” (Boyatzis, 1998, p.5).

Using thematic analysis, I could explore an individual's personal experience, yet identify emerging collective themes and patterns. I read through the transcriptions of the interviews and highlighted key concepts and common words that resurfaced. I also took notes while reviewing the data to familiarize myself with the content. By doing so, I was able to notice elements that were mentioned on several occasions in order to create themes. Notes enabled me step back and observe the data in a more objective manner. Thematic analysis helped me make sense of the participants' experiences. In addition, it fit well with the narrative approach I have used, as it is flexible as it can be conducted in a variety of ways.

### **3.1.5 Limitations to the research**

A limitation of my research project included the lack of focus on religious and cultural diversity. I did not discuss the difference between Catholic and public schools in my research

project. All of my research participants either belonged to the dominant religion of the area or did not practice any particular religion. This information would have provided of an insight to discuss intersectionality, for those students that experience a “double-minority” so to speak. I would have been able to explore how they navigated within the group. Also, I did not interview any participants with a visible disability.

Another limitation was educational background; all of my research participants had post-secondary education partly due to my recruitment process and recruitment sites.

## **4. Findings**

Before presenting the findings from the interviews, I paint a portrait of each research participant, in order to provide context to better understand the findings. Each participant's experience is different because the environment and location of the high school and the participant's level of engagement in the GSA. In order to preserve the anonymity of each participant, their names have been changed and any identifying information changed.

The research participants were interviewed in person and by telephone. They provided a brief description of their age, gender identity, and sexual orientation. They then elaborated on their experience of coming out, followed by more in depth reflections about their experience in high school.

### **4.1 Introduction to the participants**

#### **Mathieu**

Mathieu is 21 years old and describes his gender identity as mostly masculine and his sexual orientation as queer. Mathieu described his ethnicity as white. Mathieu is currently working as a barista and recently graduated from college. Mathieu came out at the age of 17 to his friends from whom he received acceptance and support.

Mathieu took on a leadership role in his high school in the Maritimes by creating a safe space. In this town, there were little to no resources for LGBTQ+ youth, according to Mathieu. He believed that it was necessary to create a sense of community for LGBTQ+ students in his high school. Mathieu took the initiative to create a safe space despite the lack of support from the staff members and other students.

## **Vanje**

Vanje is a 21-year-old male who identifies as gay and is currently completing his Masters Degree in Ottawa. Vanje describes his ethnicity as North African. Vanje came out as gay at the age of 17 to his friends and immediate family from whom he received acceptance and support. Vanje attended a high school in North Africa that followed the French schooling system. His school did not provide a safe space for LGBTQ+ students and allies and the surrounding community did not have many resources specialized for LGBTQ+ youth. Vanje was able to highlight some of the key differences between the Canadian and international school system. He provided a critical perspective of the consequences of the absence of a GSA.

## **Alex**

Alex is a 19-year-old trans activist, organizer and speaker who is currently completing their undergraduate degree in Ottawa. Alex described their ethnicity as white. Alex came out as trans and non-binary in grades 9 and 10. Alex attended a high school in Ottawa that provided a safe space. They had access to different LGBTQ+ resources and services because they lived in an urban area. Alex spoke to the reality of the gender spectrum; Alex was able to provide a different perspective as a non-binary person who faced challenges of being misgendered by teachers and students.

## **Daisy**

Daisy is a 20-year-old bisexual female who is currently completing her undergraduate degree in Ottawa. She described her ethnicity as South Asian. Daisy did not disclose her sexual orientation during high school but recently came out as bisexual to a close friend. Daisy was the co-president of her high school's GSA in Richmond, Ontario. She explained that her GSA was well supported by the principal and one of her teachers who supervised the group meetings.

## **4.2 The Main Themes**

In this study, several findings and themes emerged in relation to the research questions. The following themes emerged: (1) leadership; (2) visibility; and (3) community. Each theme revealed some contradictions, which brought to light a more complex portrait of GSAs in high schools. The first theme of leadership uncovered a sense of responsibility for the GSA members. The second theme of visibility was met with the possibility of being ‘outed’ to others. And lastly, the theme of community raised the question about safety.

The findings address different behaviors and interactions inside and outside the safe space. Overall, the findings reveal that GSAs were a space for coping and finding support within an unsafe and/or non-inclusive environment. This section will recount some of the challenges these former high school students faced inside and outside of the GSA.

### **4.2.1 Leadership and sense of responsibility: Educating others about LGBTQ+ identities**

As discussed in the first chapter, a GSA is a student-led group for LGBTQ+ students and allies. The overall goal of a GSA is to offer support and community. The formalities vary among different GSAs. In addition to support, we discussed how GSAs could create a sense of responsibility in the form of education and advocacy in some cases. Mathieu, Daisy and Alex took on a leadership roles in their GSA, which imposed a greater sense of responsibility but also allowed them to be advocates and to act as spokespeople for the group. In other words, the group empowered them to take on a significant role in their school. As leaders of the group, they were able to provide expert knowledge by sharing their experiences and educating others.

Educating others based on a personal lived experience can potentially create a sense of burden because they are expected to answer questions and address concerns related to their personal identity. The task of educating others requires further support and understanding from the adults in the school because these students are vulnerable in front of their peers. To be effective,

teachers should be present and equally engaged in GSAs to support the students by doing their own research and answering questions if the students are not in a position to do so. Daisy said that she was very appreciative of her school's principal who approved several of their school activities and outings for the GSA.

Some of the students were able to take ownership of their experiences and share them with others in order to facilitate more discussion and increase understanding. Educating others from personal experience can also increase peer support in the school. The experiences of LGBTQ+ students are seen as reputable because they were given the opportunity to share their expert knowledge with others at school. Alex shared their experience on presenting workshops to their fellow students about queer and trans identities. It is important to keep in mind that the curriculum is set by the Ministry of Education and therefore teachers are limited in the subject matter they can discuss. A teacher approached Alex to do workshops in the grade 9 health classes about queer and trans identities.

*“We also gave workshops in grade 9 health classes presented by students so I was giving workshops when I was in high school and then I was in grade 12, **I trained younger students to give those workshops as well so members of the club would go into health classes and give workshops about queer and trans experiences in line with the new grade 9 health curriculum** [...] There was workshops happening in grade 9 classes but only because I was doing them so I don't think like they started happening because a teacher reached out to the group to our club and came to me asking if we would be able to help them and they liked the presentation that we gave so we started giving it in other classes so it was great that teachers were willing to have that happen but it's also it's challenging **because you can't guarantee that there will be students that will want to take all that time out of their classes and go to their peers' classes and “out” themselves** and have those conversations so that shouldn't have to be on students but I was really happy doing that but I think if those workshops stopped happening there would not be nearly as much like content in classes as there should be...” (Alex)*

Mathieu also described a similar experience wherein he and the GSA group members were asked to educate their peers about LGBTQ+ identities. GSAs are not only for the participating members of the group itself but also for the whole student body.

*“Well we did every once in a while we hosted a little kiosk in the school cafeteria to talk about like statistics, it very cold most of the time. Just cause the teachers didn’t want it to be too emotionally charged. So it was like **“stick to statistics and all that let’s avoid talking about personal experiences”**, which was a little frustrating so that’s the main thing that we did” (Mathieu)*

In Mathieu’s case, the information that he was able to share with other students was limited because they presented statistics rather than the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. Mathieu explained that the information presented to his peers was factual but eliminated the human factor which can often create more understanding and empathy. Sharing experiences and knowledge about queer and trans identities is vital, as it can diminish taboo and minimize stigma. Daisy shared a similar experience and explained that their group established certain objectives, for instance creating a gender-neutral washroom for students, fundraising for events and attending the annual GSA conference.

*“We started to use the club as a way to educate people about the LGBTQ community so it was less of a safe space and more of an active club...the way any other club would function[...] we had a presentation that we prepared for grade 9s. To do basic stuff like what does misusing gender mean gender pronoun mean.. what does it mean to be lesbian versus bi versus pan just some basic questions...” (Daisy)*

Conversations, workshops and activities that focused on LGBTQ+ identities increased awareness as well as normalized these experiences. However, it is a major responsibility to place on one person or a small group of people and therefore it should be the responsibility of all members of the school community. Alex explained that he felt a sense of responsibility for having to explain their gender identity. Often, Alex had to lead the conversation about queer and trans

identities to teachers and students alike. Alex did not make any reference to any overt homophobia or transphobia but described the heteronormative and cisnormative undertones of the school. Alex mentioned a lack of awareness, knowledge and openness on the part of some students and teachers. Alex described the GSA in a positive light as it provided a space and time where they could be their authentic selves and not feel the burden of having to explain their identity to others.

Alex also actively participated in advocacy work within the school for trans and queer students and they did receive support from the school for the GSA as well. Alex explained that the GSA continues to exist, but membership is inconsistent and the GSA has some challenges recruiting new members.

Similar to Mathieu and Alex, Daisy took on a leadership role in her GSA. She also engaged in advocacy work in her school, for instance fighting for an all-gender washroom, which they named “an everybody washroom” to demonstrate support for the school’s trans and non-binary students. Daisy also participated in educational workshops and presentations in the school for teachers and other staff members with the approval of her school’s principal. The GSA is still currently running at her high school and she is still in contact with the supervising teacher. Daisy and Alex are still emotionally invested in their GSAs, which demonstrates the significance of the GSA on their lives.

#### **4.2.2 Visibility and Outing**

Each research participant talked about being “outed” in some ways by the GSA as participation often requires revealing one’s sexuality and/or gender identity. To be “outed” in high school can make the person a target for bullying and/or harassment. Visibility and representation of LGBTQ+ identities can come at a cost because of the sense of vulnerability caused by exposure. In Mathieu’s case, the group members were exposed because they were not supplied with a classroom and they did not have the support of a teacher to act as a supervisor.

*“Having an actual classroom provided for us, that was the main one. We didn’t have a set space, which I think would have made it a lot safer because we didn’t have the classroom. We had to do it in the cafeteria with **everyone else where everyone else could overhear our conversation and use it as leverage especially if we talked about vulnerable experiences** and opened ourselves up and can use that against us. Yeah so basically have a classroom provided” (Mathieu).*

Mathieu organized and led the group in the cafeteria during the lunch hour for several months. The group organized some educational activities at school and some outings, for instance a picnic for the group members. Since the GSA did not have a separate meeting area away from other students, they were exposed and at risk of being targeted for homophobic and transphobic bullying. After the group was created, the members faced some backlash from students outside the group, which resulted in termination of the GSA. Prior to the termination of the GSA, the group members met once a week to have discussions and to plan for larger events that included the rest of the student population.

Due to the sensitive nature of the group, further protection and understanding from the adults in the school would have been necessary. The participants mentioned that teachers and other staff members could have taken more initiative to educate themselves and to intervene when necessary at various instances. They would have wanted to see teachers setting an example for how to treat LGBTQ+ students:

*“Um, I think teachers just need to be more comfortable with their own knowledge topics around queer and trans identities because it was very clear to me that most teachers were not comfortable talking to me or **like didn’t know how to correct themselves if they mis-gendered me or things like that**. It was pretty clear they didn’t have the knowledge they needed to have those conversations so that meant if I want to have those conversations it would be entirely on me to manage that because I know that teachers didn’t have the comfort or knowledge to be able to support that happening so if something came up in a classroom where I wanted to have a conversation then it takes pressure off of queer and trans students in the classrooms to have to take all of that on” (Alex)*

*People would get uncomfortable with me people didn't know and then suddenly they knew they got uncomfortable or avoid me sometimes. Some people that were friends and the teachers as well kind of got uncomfortable they kind of like wouldn't sit and chat as long as they use to kind of thing because they knew I wasn't straight. (Mathieu)*

*“I think some of the teachers are homophobic and then I think they will not intervene because of homophobic bullying. They will intervene when there's a kind of bullying because they feel like they have to but it's not because it's homophobic and I think if they... no not necessarily” (Vanje)*

*“...we were definitely outsiders. Um our room where we met up was off the beaten track so students could come without being recognized and we would leave five minutes before the bell so people could go where they needed to go again without being noticed... we were outsiders like I said it was just ignorance people didn't know, when you are living in a conservative town people are not exposed to it as much seeing two girls holding hands or kissing is alarming to some people... we were labelled radical feminist you know rape threats you know all the fun stuff that comes with running a progressive group” (Daisy)*

Although Vanje did not attend a school with a GSA, he provided some criticism and discussed some of potential negative consequences about GSAs and safe spaces in general:

*“So I think okay. It can be a safe space if you are out and you will go there and you don't care about what other people will think about you going there. Even here, even if here on campus we have a safe space like the Pride Centre, it's usually not like full of people because people are either not out or they don't want to be identified as (unclear). They don't want to go there because they can even be afraid to be seen or targeted you know. I don't know, yes it's good but it's also comme oui c'est safe mais aussi ça expose les gens qui vont dans cette endroit donc c'est pas si safe que ça donc” (Vanje)*

The research participants disclosed that they felt unsafe at school despite having the GSA as safe space in their school. Vanje explained that he even resorted to hiding in the washrooms at some points to escape the harassment and bullying. He described some of the homophobic bullying he faced at school by his peers and the lack of support from teachers. He explained that teachers did not intervene in instances of homophobic bullying unless it became physical. Vanje also experienced overt forms of homophobia through derogatory slurs and hateful comments.

Vanje drew a connection between homophobia and sexism; he explained that other students considered his gestures and mannerisms feminine and his peers presumed he was gay. Research studies mention that self-monitoring actions and gestures can contribute to a sense of isolation. When someone is self-monitoring their behavior due to fear of what others may think, say or response, it can increase their level of stress (DeCrescenzo, 1994, p. 80). Certain notions of what it means to be a male or a female are perpetuated and maintained in high school. Moreover, homophobia and heterosexism can exist in subtle ways, “homophobia is usually a successful tool in controlling sex roles definitions and keeping everyone in their place, for example appropriate sport activities...” (Burnett, 2003, p.3) In order to simplify gender and sexual identities, people tend to assign people with labels and place them in boxes they deem fit.

Participants relied on their immediate peer group for support rather than adults in the school. The adults in the school did not acknowledge or recognize that this type of bullying is due to underlying homophobia, heteronormativity and transphobia. All the research participants mentioned that heteronormativity and cisgenderism continue to prevail in secondary schools through the curriculum, and daily interactions and behaviors by both students and staff members. The research participants witnessed and experienced homophobic language and behavior at school. Mathieu described some of his interactions outside of the GSA as unsafe. He explained that he

experienced both overt homophobia in the form of slurs such as “faggot” and other more subtle forms of homophobia by peers and teachers. Vanje also talked the different comments he heard at school.

*“As soon as I become president of the committee and other people knew that the committee got created, people started referring to me as...um so like there’s multiple Mathieu’s so if they didn’t know which Mathieu they were talking about they would be like “was it studious Mathieu **or faggot Mathieu?**” So they used slurs to refer to me as soon as they found out that I was the president of the committee because I guess they didn’t know I wasn’t straight even though I thought it was pretty obvious but (laughs) so **they started referring me as the slur which wasn’t fun**” (Mathieu).*

*“Typical things, ok I heard les insultes, insulte quelqu’un, moi j’ai reçu **beaucoup d’insultes, les commentaires homophobes, les critiques sur le façon d’être, les façons de se comporter, les gestes et des choses parce que quand j’étais a l’école j’étais pas “out” mais parce que j’étais féminine comme les manière de femme et donc les gens pesait d’assume automatiquement j’était gaie. Étant j’avais les commentaire sur ça qui était genre homophobe mais aussi sexiste vu que c’est féminine c’est que la même chose, c’était les commentaires vraiment de haine, les commentaires et things that I heard et aussi il a eu la violence physique**” (Vanje).*

LGBTQ+ students still face prejudice from their peers and staff members. In addition to overt homophobia, the research participants experienced some form of exclusion from their peers because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

#### **4.2.3 Safety and Community**

A common topic that the research participants described was safety and acceptance. The research participants explained that they felt reassured in the GSAs whereas outside of the group they tended to be apprehensive about disclosing their gender or sexual orientation to others. The participants explained that the GSA offered a sense of community where like-minded people were able to connect. They explained that the GSA was a space for gender and sexual diversity where they could celebrate and embrace those identities. Daisy talked about how the GSA attempted to

deconstruct the gender binary and challenge heteronormativity for the larger student population. Furthermore, Daisy also talked how they established a sense of community and provided support for one another within the group:

*“The strengths? **The sense of community we created for each other like I still hold a lot of those friendships dear to me now** even though I’m not in school high school anymore. I still talk to them and keep in contact with them. It was fun to share experiences. **Everyone was open-minded** and got the chance to talk about all kinds of stuff” (Mathieu).*

*“**Every year we had a coming out party.** We did it at the beginning of September....because that was the easiest way to get people out to hang out, bring food, just kind of have music. Make it like an open space people would kind of come and go during the lunch hour as they pleased [...] we would play some music, we called it like the **“Gay Anthem”** we had a bunch of songs that people felt were really representative of the LGBTQ community. It was a lot of Lady Gaga. It was just a fun way to start off the year [...] **It was just a way for people to accept themselves.** They didn’t necessarily have to use labels” (Daisy)*

The group members of the GSA were able to build a social network in and outside of school, providing support beyond high school and breaking the feeling of isolation. Moreover, GSA members had a great deal of respect for each other because of the sharing of intimate and personal subject matter. The older group members were able to act as mentors and even as a source of inspiration:

*“ I think that during the time I was running the club, which way most of time I was in it like my interactions tended to be more of a **mentorship capacity, where younger students or people who were coming out recently would come and ask me questions about things** most of the people in navigating things most of the people who were closer to my age in were in the club I was already friends with from outside of the club” (Alex).*

*“It was **comforting place** where everyone could just be themselves um when we weren’t organizing activities we would just talk. We felt like **we could talk about***

*struggles like a lot of kids would talk about “oh I’m not out to my parents” or “oh my parents would never let me date a guy or a girl or whatever”. And that was just nice for us to reassure them especially in a conservative setting that like it’s going to be out. You will get through this and you will be able to find somebody and your parents will either come around and if they don’t maybe they don’t deserve to be in your life if they are not going to be accepting of you [...] It was like **a little home for a lot of the kids for a long time**” (Daisy).*

Mathieu described the interactions within the group as positive and enriching. He mentioned the heterosexual participants were open-minded and asked many questions. According Mathieu, the GSA helped him embrace his sexuality, create new friendships and strengthen existing friendships. Vanje expressed concern that GSAs could lead potentially to further isolation and create more distance between members of the group and other students. Vanje expressed his concerns about the GSA being the only safe area for LGBTQ+ students; he explained that there will need to be more initiatives to make the school safe.

Affirming queer and trans identities in public spaces helps lessen isolation, as students are able to have their voices heard and be among others with a similar experience. Though some research participants said that participation rates in their GSA were low, the students were aware that there was a place to go should they need it. The existence of the GSA is significant regardless of the number of attendees because it demonstrates a certain level of acceptance and acknowledgment of queer and trans identities.

The following chapter will revisit the main themes that emerged from the interviews. It will also answer the main research question and explore the different objectives of the research study by linking existing literature with the interviews. It will also address some specific issues regarding GSAs and discuss future recommendations and future interventions for high schools.

## **5. Discussion**

In this chapter, I analyze the themes that emerged from the research interviews. I look at the content through the lens of queer theory, more specifically queer spaces. This chapter attempts to answer the main research question and address the research objectives. The research question asked: *how does having a safe space contribute to a LGBTQ+ experience during secondary school?* The research objectives were to: (1) Build understanding about the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students in high school (2) Explore how Gay-Straight Alliances contribute to students' experiences in high school (3) Use this knowledge to contribute to future research on LGBTQ+ issues in high schools.

In short, the school environment for LGBTQ+ students can be hostile and unwelcoming and, for this reason, safe spaces are necessary. LGBTQ+ students must learn to navigate through spaces that can be unsafe and often they interact with people on a daily basis who do not respect their identities. Many LGBTQ+ students have to learn to combat direct and indirect heteronormative messages from their peers, the school staff and the school's curriculum.

In this chapter, I explore the following topics: (1) social interactions and the school environment, (2) representing LGBTQ+ identities in school, and (3) participating in a GSA. I combine the content from my research interviews and existing literature to find some correlations and identify some of the gaps in the research. Finally, I elaborate on recommendations and suggestions for future interventions.

### **5.1 Social interactions and the school environment**

The social environment can influence the manner in which people interact with a space; for this reason I have used spaces as a theoretical concept to better understand GSAs. To elaborate, GSAs can be akin to queer spaces in neighborhoods where the space is transformed based on individuals in the space and how they interpret the space. Similarly, gay neighborhoods/villages

historically have been a place where individuals could seek refuge from homophobia and transphobia. Queering spaces can mean reclaiming a space, “to ‘queer’ a city therefore means to implicitly recognize the heteronormative nature of most urban spaces (Bell et.al, 1994) and through overt action create a safe place for people who identity as queer” (Doan, 2007, p. 57). The purpose of a GSA is to queer and claim a space that is safe for LGBTQ+ students. GSAs can also foster and support dialogue between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ students and they are able to learn from each other. In some ways, GSAs have the potential to create an alternative space that counters the norm. Queer spaces and GSAs can have a similar effect; namely, “...queer spaces provide some form of a psychologically protective umbrella...” (Doan, 2007, p. 66). On several occasions, the participants talked about the impact it had on their participation and sense of belonging at school.

The school environment presents narrow definitions of sexuality and gender based on social conventions that are perpetuated by the larger society. The school environment and some of the individuals within it deem certain behaviors, clothing and gestures appropriate or acceptable for female and male. These norms are perpetuated constantly; in fact “sexual and gender norms do not just exist, they regulate, they coerce and they enforce narrow modes of sexual and gendered existence” (McDermot and Roen, 2016, p.29). Messages of heteronormativity can have an influence on the LGBTQ+ youth’s behavior and how they interact with others. Daisy mentioned that some of her peers displayed a lack of knowledge towards LGBTQ+ issues and she accredited this ignorance to the lack of information from the school or dominant ideologies. Furthermore, LGBTQ+ youth may be hesitant to disclose and talk openly about their gender identity or sexual orientation to others at school.

It is important to note that there have been efforts to ensure the safety of LGBTQ+ students at school, for example through changes to legislation. Under Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty,

the government carried out an action plan on bullying in schools. The policy supported GSAs in all Ontario publicly funded schools, including Catholic district school boards. “The Accepting Schools Act” (2012) requires school boards to “support pupils who want to establish and lead activities and organizations that promote a safe and inclusive learning environment” (John et.al, 2014, p.166). Furthermore, the Ontario government has acknowledged the issue of homophobia in schools and has put in place strategies to address it at the institutional level: “the 2009 Ontario government policy explicitly highlights homophobia as an unacceptable form of discrimination” (John et.al, 2014, p. 152). Even with these changes to the legislation, daily interactions can still pose many problems as teachers’ and other staff members’ knowledge, experiences and level of acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities will vary.

Other studies have concluded that the overall school atmosphere is still problematic. Colorosso (2003) and Safe Schools Action Team (2005) explain:

“...the fact that school climate remains a challenge for many sexual minority students, despite enhanced legislation and policies, reinforces the critical role that teachers and administrators have in successful anti-bullying initiatives” (Kitchen and Bellini, 2013, p.6)

The research participants that I interviewed highlighted the importance of support from staff members. Daisy mentioned that her school principal, who demonstrated an interest in the LGBTQ+ community, approved all activities and outings of the GSAs. She also spoke of support from the supervising teacher that helped to plan activities for the student body. Alex discussed the encouragement they received from a health teacher to do workshops and presentations to their fellow students. Unfortunately, Mathieu received little support from staff members at his school which was detrimental to the success and safety of the group which led to the group disbanding. Some studies demonstrate that teachers ignore and often deny the fact that homophobia and heterosexism exists, and that many incidents of bullying are often overlooked, unreported or

minimized (Bellini, 2012, p. 382). This was the case for some of the research participants who felt as though their teachers were not equipped to deal with such situations based on personal experience. For example, Alex talked about how some of the teachers were not familiar with trans and non-binary identities and therefore they were hesitant to intervene in those situations. Schneider and Dimito (2008) surveyed 152 Ontario teachers and found that 82% reported little to no exposure to gay and lesbian issues in their teaching training. Another study by Jennings and Sherwin (2007) revealed that 44.4% of elementary and 40% of secondary teacher education programs did not include queer issues in the curriculum (Bellini, 2012, p. 384). Daisy interpreted the lack of intervention on the part of the teachers in her school as ignorance, being ill informed and a lack of education on the issue.

LGBTQ+ identities are rarely discussed in classrooms, which silences queer and trans voices. There are serious consequences when LGBTQ+ identities are not included in the dominant discourse. In fact, one study revealed that:

“...a lack of GLB content in classes and teaching may increase suicide risk for GLB youth [...] Not only do GLB relationship issues get largely ignored in middle and high school curricula, but safer sex practices for same-sex sexual behavior are rarely introduced” (Morrison and L’Heureux, 2001, p.43)

Several research studies discussed depression, feelings of hopelessness, anxiety, suicidal ideation and self-harm in regards to sexual and gender minorities. Although my research participants did not discuss mental health directly, they did speak about their overall well-being at school.

The time of adolescence is a period of transitions wherein young people are exploring and affirming their identities. As mentioned previously, LGBTQ+ students face unique challenges that their heterosexual counterparts do not experience, for instance coming out:

“L’annonce de son homosexualité, spécifique aux LGB, est fréquemment une expérience stressante (Wong et Tang, 2004) durant laquelle la personne se définit comme différente (Bonet, Wells et.al, 2007) et qui implique la possibilité d’un

rejet de la part des personnes destinataires de l'annonce (D'Augelli, 2002; Meyer, 2003)" (Charbonnier and Graziani, 2013, p.3).

Although, there is increased openness and acceptance of queer and trans identities, there are still challenges and barriers. People's perceptions and behaviours may change solely because of their LGBTQ+ identity. For example, Mathieu mentioned that some of his peers and teachers distanced themselves from him because he was the president of the GSA. The lack of LGBTQ+ role models in schools can have a negative effect on self-esteem: "LGBT students are disproportionately susceptible to a variety of vulnerabilities that are linked to unaffirming school and social environments" (Macgillivray and Jennings, 2008, p. 170). LGBTQ+ youth receive implicit and sometimes explicit signals that their sexual orientation or gender identity is inferior to heterosexuality and cisgenderism.

The perception of the GSAs from the rest of the student body varied. Some GSAs received negative responses, especially in Mathieu's case, which hindered the success of the group. In Alex's case, people seemed to be indifferent to the group and Alex explained that he did not receive any direct feedback from non-group members. Daisy explained that her GSA and its members were seen as outsiders, which created a sense of "otherness" where they felt further isolated from the general student population. It also seems to have engendered an independence that emboldened them to act to improve the visibility and situation for LGBTQ+ members of the broader school community. GSAs help to connect students with other LGBTQ+ students. A qualitative study conducted in the United States reported that, "most gay youth feel completely alone and believe they are the only ones in their entire school who are gay [...] As a result of forming the GSA, the students started to feel "a part of" rather than "apart from" (Lee, 2001, p.25). LGBTQ+ students that participate in the GSA must find a balance between the safe space and the existing spaces that make up the rest of the school.

### **5.1.1 Representing LGBTQ+ identities in schools**

As previously stated, LGBTQ+ identities are not largely represented in the school environment and that "...lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) youth continue to make up an invisible minority" (Lee, 2001, p.4). In fact, Daisy explained that her GSA met effectively "in secret", meaning they met in a designated room known only to the group members and would leave before the bell rang in an effort to avoid being seen by others in the hallways when exiting the GSA meeting room. For Daisy, privacy and anonymity was important. A recent research study discussed how much mental energy it requires to self-monitor and hide one's LGBTQ+ identity:

"On an everyday basis, practices of silence and secrecy, performances that camouflage and hide queer possibilities and the endless surveillance of the self and others are more less subtly underway as young people seek to negotiate their heteronormative sociocultural worlds. Such negotiation takes an emotional toll through means that may be harder to detect than bullying, but whose effect is no less destructive" (McDermot and Roen, 2016, p.32).

This citation demonstrates the emotional hardship some LGBTQ+ students face. Whether being "closeted" or "out", both have consequences on emotional well-being.

There is no single way to be part of the LGBTQ+ community and the coming out process is not a linear experience for all. Being "out" is not necessarily the end all goal for each individual; it could be to feel comfortable enough expressing their sexual orientation or gender identity to others. In fact, each individual's self-discovery phase is different: "there is a discourse of LGBT pride, it is understood that one can 'succeed' as LGBT by coming out and being proud. But this is not a path that is viable or appealing to all" (McDermot and Roan, 2016, p. 98). Daisy was one of the research participants who was not out during high school but was highly involved in the GSA. Daisy talked about organizing activities for the general student population, including a "coming out party" which was hosted at the beginning of the school year to introduce the GSA to the new incoming students.

Daisy, Alex and Mathieu talked about their willingness to educate their fellow peers and to share their experience. In order to educate others about a personal experience, it takes courage, strength and resilience because of the vulnerability and visibility required. The role to educate others also requires emotional and intellectual work, but the benefits are invaluable. One research study indicated that, “many LGBTQ youth demonstrate agency through their visibility as LGBTQ, or LGBTQ-positive allies in their schools” (John et.al, 2014, p.152). The GSAs helps to empower LGBTQ+ youth to engage in the process of telling their stories; “empowerment through having and using knowledge” with others (Russell et.al, 2009, p. 7).

### **5.1.2 Participating in a GSA in high school**

First and foremost, participating in a GSA is a personal choice and there is no obligation to stay in the group. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there are different leadership opportunities in the GSA, for instance advocacy work and educational roles. The GSA can be used by the participants for different reasons: “a single GSA may be an important source of informal counseling and support for some youth, while other youth who may not need the same support may use the GSA for advancing political dialogue and action” (John et.al, 2014, p.153). The research participants talked about effective change in the school through different initiatives, for instance gender-neutral washrooms. For some of the research participants, the group was also a recreational group, in other words, a space where the members could simply be themselves:

“Many GSAs exist as an alternative social environment in the school, a place to “hang out” that is safe and supportive for a wide range of “alternative” students who do not fit in to the dominant culture of the high school” (Russell et.al, 2009, p.3)

In the GSA, the participants can build meaningful relationships where a sense of solidarity and collectiveness is formed. The group members are able to act as role models for each other, which is an invaluable resource. The GSA can help to reduce the feeling of isolation: “the presence of a

network of friends to whom youth can be out has been linked to measures of health and well-being” (Snapp et.al, 2015, p.426). Daisy and Alex discussed building a support network with the incoming students at their high school. They made it a point to engage with the younger students in order to pass the GSA to its future leaders to encourage them to make a positive contribution to their school while building a sense of community.

The presence of the GSA can help to normalize queer and trans identities and by educating others it can help demystify LBGTQ+ identities and address stereotypes. These school-based clubs are partnerships between sexual and gender minority students and their allies that can foster a positive change in the school climate by promoting sexual justice, and supporting LGBTQ+ students (Russell et.al, 2009, p. 2). A study conducted in 2010 in the United States with 7,000 LGBTQ+ students, found that the presence of the GSA meant fewer homophobic comments from peers and less victimization related to sexual orientation and gender expression. Many other research studies presented similar findings; however, the participants in my research still experienced homophobic and transphobic bullying in their schools. They did not feel the school was safer because of the existence of the GSA, but rather from awareness-building and education initiatives from the GSA.

Existing research highlights the benefits of the GSA but presents little to no information about the potential consequences and some of the risk factors associated with being a member of a GSA. The research participants mentioned that some students might be hesitant to join the group because of the potential backlash and the risk of being a target for bullying (slurs, hate speech, and physical acts etc.). Not only do the members of the GSA need to be protected from harm; they also need to be offered emotional support. Social support is an important protective factor for the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ students.

### **5.1.3 Recommendations and Future Interventions**

In order to normalize LGBTQ+ identities, it would be beneficial to continue to invest in different activities for the entire student body, both educational and social. These social activities could include film screenings, LGBTQ+ trivia, or a drag show to highlight some elements of LGBTQ+ culture and history. I would also recommend smaller activities that include discussion circles where the members can share their stories, express their concerns and address some of the challenges they face but also call attention to their successes in their leadership roles. It would be pertinent to give the members of the GSA a platform to expand the opportunity to grow by collaborating with other GSA groups in the area. I believe these discussions need to take place outside of the GSA; therefore, I would encourage the members of the GSA to have similar discussions with their peer groups and families if they feel safe to do so in order to increase awareness and understanding of queer and trans identities.

Moreover, a safe space such as a GSA needs safety measures set in place, which includes designated meeting areas and supervising staff members at the school. I would recommend more outreach and resource-sharing in and outside of the school. The existing GSA members can advertise the group by providing a brief presentation to each class about the function of the group and the activities that will take place throughout the year. The school staff members can make appropriate referrals for external services and perhaps invite those services to the school to offer workshops and/or presentations. Teachers and other staff members should practice more empathy and active listening when students are sharing their experiences (Unks, 1995, p.62). In addition, they should respect students' preferred pronouns and intervene when they witness or hear homophobic and transphobic comments and behavior. When teachers intervene in homophobic or transphobic instances, they should go beyond punitive measures and elaborate on LGBTQ+ issues in order to address the discrimination directly. The students that engage in homophobic and

transphobic behavior should understand why these actions are unacceptable and that they will not be tolerated at school.

Furthermore, the school board can invest more resources to provide staff members with anti-homophobia education and programs that focus on addressing the needs of queer and trans youth. These workshops and information sessions should be presented by an experienced person from an organization that specializes in LGBTQ+ issues who can provide current and relevant information. These workshops should be tailored specifically to school professionals since they operate within a particular context. After receiving the information from the program, staff members should be aware and monitor their own behavior when a situation arises. All members of the school, including students, need to stop behaviors (slurs, anti-gay comments and transphobic comments, etc.) that encourage a hostile atmosphere for LGBTQ+ students (Unks, 1995, p. 62). The school board could also develop strategies for homophobia and transphobia among students in a concrete manner that includes more awareness building. It would be advantageous to develop a program evaluation for the policies and practices. The evaluation should be given to both students and staff members to measure the effectiveness of these safe space policies. Once the evaluations have been reviewed, new changes could be put in place based on the feedback and comments from staff members and students.

It is important to educate the student population as a whole about these issues. By doing so, not only will LGBTQ+ youth be safer but the other students will also be more conscious about gender and sexual diversity. It goes without saying that adolescents have the capacity to learn and grow just as much as they have the capacity to harm.

## **Conclusion**

The participants were able to look beyond the positive contributions of the GSAs and explore some of the challenges, hurdles and backlash they received. The participants were able to highlight the importance of safe spaces while critiquing the overall school climate.

Despite the small size of the sample, I was able to obtain some diversity in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation. Another advantage was that most research participants were “out” during high school, and the one participant who did not disclose her sexuality during high school was still a leader in her GSA. Furthermore, the participants went to high schools in different areas - one international, one outside Ontario, and two in Ottawa (urban and rural areas). The location of the schools also impacted on the atmosphere of the school because of the influence of the community culture.

The discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ youth often includes reference to mental health (depression and anxiety) and suicide rather than resistance and strength:

“International research demonstrates that experiences of stigma-related prejudice, discrimination and victimization frequently characterize the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals. Such experiences have been linked to a range of negative outcomes including psychological distress” (Kelleher, 2009, p. 373)

Their experiences and perspectives have to be heard, respected and validated, as this is what can incite change that result in more inclusive policies and programs for queer and trans youth. The participants revealed new ideas about GSAs and delivered insight on their inner workings. The interviews also uncovered some contradictions to the safe spaces. The participants talked about managing heterosexism and navigating coming out to others. This research project captured how complex it is to navigate an environment that is supposedly inclusive, but fails to do so on several accounts. The participants mentioned instances of anti-gay jokes, shunning, misgendering and slurs. It has been well documented that the LGBTQ+ community is at risk of being victimized by

peers and school staff and that there are higher rates of suicidal ideation and dropping out compared to their heterosexual peers. In the midst of these challenges, LGBTQ+ students have demonstrated a significant resilience. GSAs have the potential to serve individuals outside of the group, the school and even the surrounding community.

New policies and programs can improve the current school climate for LGBTQ+ youth by holding staff members and students accountable for their behavior, comments and actions. Policies have the potential to transform society, for instance Bill 157 and Bill 13 which legitimize the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth at school. These policies ensure that everyone is respected and protected from potential harm. Many research studies demonstrate that GSAs can also have a positive impact on the students' attendance and academic performance and overall well-being at school.

“Beyond whether a school has a GSA or not, research finds that being a member of a GSA is associated with better academic achievement and interpersonal relationships (Lee, 2002; Mayberry, 2006), and more comfort with one's own sexual orientation (Lee, 2002) and personal empowerment” (Toomey et.al, 2011, p.176)

The school climate can have a profound impact on an individual's experience for instance it can affect how a student performs at school, engages in the school community and interacts with others (Cohen et.al, 2009, p.185).

I hope GSAs will highlight a larger societal issue that not only affects marginalized communities, but impacts everyone. For the purpose of this research study, I focused on experiences within GSAs and how these impact on the atmosphere of the school in general. Schools need to demonstrate a higher level of commitment to protecting LGBTQ+ students.

LGBTQ+ youth are often told that their situation will get better, which may or may not be true. This idea of “it gets better” implies that little can be done about the present situation, which is not the case. Within the past decade, there has been an increase in the visibility of LGBTQ+ issues

and an overall increase in public awareness that has facilitated more discussions and prompted institutional changes. The research participants expressed their concerns regarding the more subtle forms of homophobia and transphobia that often go unnoticed. For this reason, an educational approach is necessary to ensure that all youth have a better understanding of the LGBTQ+ community.

In some cases, GSAs were able to foster a sense of pride and act as a form of resistance from the dominant heteronormative and cis-normative culture. In the LGBTQ+ community, there is the notion of the “chosen family” which has been vital building support and maintain a sense of community. Muraco (2006) explains the significance of these connections and the origin of chosen families:

“Chosen family networks are important for gay men and lesbians who, historically, have had compromised access to families of origin because of rejection or geographical distance resulting from a move to live in lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans gender (LGBT) communities” (Muraco, 2006, p. 1314).

GSAs can be spaces for some individuals to find to their “chosen family” and to build their social network within the LGBTQ+ community. In sum, based on the feedback that I received from the research participants, GSAs were a space where they felt as though they could express themselves, be open with others and explore their identities without fear of judgment and without a social cost. GSAs are a part of the larger picture of increasing acceptance and understanding of the LGBTQ+ community in schools. GSAs can have a significant impact, “currently, the establishment of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) in schools is one of the most visible and widely adopted strategies for calling attention to and addressing the needs of LGBTQ students” (Griffin and Ouellett, 2002, p.2). GSAs can be considered a step in the right direction when properly supported by the school community and the surrounding community which includes parents and local organizations. There is a need to document safe schools strategies in order to identify the challenges, areas of

improvement as well as for tracking process. This type of research will help to guide school staff, parents, and other actors involved in the decision-making process to create effective school policies that address the needs and concerns of LGBTQ+ students. That being said, policies are not the only things that need to change:

“In order to make a real impact in a curriculum, these dialogues cannot be limited to just club meetings and conversations among allies; rather, they must be integrated across all curricular areas and with great frequency in order to enact any real change. Schools need to provide professional development opportunities for staff that will allow for them to confront their own biases and to examine their own worldviews” (Conway and Crawford-Fisher, 2007, p.127)

People’s attitudes, behaviors and comments can be more inclusive. The future research should incorporate both the systemic context as well as everyday interactions that contribute to the success of the safe school policies.

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## **Annex 1 – Interview Guide**

### **A look into the student experience of Gay-straight Alliances in secondary schools**

**Research question:** how does having a safe space contribute to a LGBTQ+ youth experience during secondary school?

#### **Opening question and introduction**

First, I will ask you some brief introductory questions about yourself.

- a. How old are you?
- b. What high school did you attend?
- c. How do you define your sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.)?
- d. How do you define your gender identity?
- e. What is your ethnicity?

Before continuing with the interview, do you want to add anything information?

#### **Experience as LGBTQ+ youth**

Now, we will continue with the theme of sexual orientation and gender identity. Firstly, I would like to address your experience with coming out as LGBTQ+.

- a. Describe your coming out; to whom, when, how etc.
- b. Did you have a support system during your first coming-outs?
- c. Have you ever been confronted with uncomfortable situations because of sexual orientation or gender identity? If yes, explain in detail.
- d. How does your sexual orientation or gender identity affect your daily activities and interactions?

Before continuing with the interview, do you want to add anything information?

#### **Safe spaces- Gay-Straight Alliance**

Now, I would like to discuss the role and influence that Gay-Straight Alliances played in your high school experience.

- a. Did you participant in the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) group in your high school? If so, why did you join the GSA?
- b. What does having a safe space in high school mean to you?
- c. Was your GSA diverse in terms of age, gender, race and sexual orientation? If so, please elaborate.
- d. What kind of activities did the GSA plan (i.e. Pink Day, Day of Silence etc.)? Did your GSA have any particular goals?
- e. Can you describe a typical GSA meeting? For example, was there a particular structure followed for each meeting?
- f. Can you describe your interactions with the other members of the GSA? For instance, did you create new friendships or strengthen existing friendships in the GSA?
- g. How did the students outside the GSA perceive the group?
- h. What were the strengths of the GSA?
- i. What were the limitations of the GSA? How could it have been improved?
- j. Did you feel comfortable and that you could fully express yourself in your GSA?
- k. Did the GSA help you become more comfortable and embrace your sexuality or gender identity?

Before continuing with the interview, do you want to add anything information about GSAs or safe spaces in general?

### **The school social climate**

We will now discuss your experience at school as an LGBTQ+ student.

- a. What are some typical things you heard at school that can be considered homophobic/transphobic?
- b. Did teachers step in to intervene with instances of homophobic bullying? Do you feel teachers are equipped to deal with such situations?
- c. Did you feel safe at school? Please, explain your answer.
- d. Have you had any negative experiences at school because of your sexuality?
- e. Do you think your school included LGBTQ+ friendly content? Are LGBTQ+ issues discussed in class?
- f. What can teachers and staff members do to make it more comfortable for you to explore and talk about your sexuality or gender identity?
- g. What can other students do to make it more comfortable for you to explore and talk about your sexuality or gender identity?
- h. Did you feel included or excluded by your peers? Please, explain your answer.

Before continuing with the interview, do you want to add anything information regarding the school climate?

### **Conclusion**

The interview is now coming to a close, but before we leave I would like to ask you a few more questions.

- a. Would you recommend other students to join a GSA at their school?
- b. What would you like to say to other LGBTQ+ students that may be hesitant to join a GSA?
- c. What other LGBTQ+ resources do you use outside of school (i.e. Kind Space, Family Service Ottawa, Community center etc.)?
- d. Are there any questions you would like to come back to or answers that you wish to clarify?
- e. Do you have any questions or comments?

## Annex 2- Ethics Approval Letter, University of Ottawa

07/02/2018

**Université d'Ottawa**  
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche



**University of Ottawa**  
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

### CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

<b>Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number</b>	S-01-18-266
<b>Titre du projet / Project Title</b>	A look into the student experience with Gay-Straight Alliances in secondary schools
<b>Type de projet / Project Type</b>	Mémoire de maîtrise / Master's major research paper
<b>Statut du projet / Project Status</b>	Approuvé / Approved
<b>Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)</b>	07/02/2018
<b>Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)</b>	06/02/2019

#### Équipe de recherche / Research Team

<b>Chercheur / Researcher</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>	<b>Role</b>
Abiola AKANDE	École de service social / School of Social Work	Chercheur Principal / Principal Investigator
Marjorie SILVERMAN	Faculté des sciences sociales / Faculty of Social Sciences	Superviseur / Supervisor

**Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments**

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## Annex 3 – Consent Form



### CONSENT FORM

uOttawa

**Title of the study:** A look into the student experience of Gay-straight Alliances in secondary schools

#### Principal Researcher's Name

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Ottawa, ON  
K1N 6N5  
613-562-5800 poste 3456  
[marjorie.silverman@uOttawa.ca](mailto:marjorie.silverman@uOttawa.ca)

#### Invitation to Participate:

You are invited to take part in the research project *A look into the student experience of Gay-straight Alliances in secondary schools*. The project is led by Abiola Akande, Masters Student in the School of Social Work at the University of Ottawa under the supervisor of Marjorie Silverman, PhD.

#### Purpose of the Study:

The project aims to examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in secondary school. The research objectives are as followed: 1) Build understanding about the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students in high school; 2) Explore how Gay-Straight Alliances contribute to the students' experience in high school; and 3) Use this knowledge to contribute to future research on LGBTQ+ issues in secondary schools.

The research project asks the following question: *how does have a having a safe space contribute to a LGBTQ+ youth experience during secondary school?*

**Participation:**

I understand that the criteria for participation in this study are as followed:

- a. I am between the ages of 18-21 years old.
- b. I self-identify as LGBTQ+.
- c. I have attended a high school in Ontario with a Gay-Straight Alliance.

My participation will consist of an audio-recorded interview that will take approximately 1.5 hours. During the interview I will be asked about my personal experience as an LGBTQ+ youth in a secondary school with a Gay-Straight Alliance. I will determine the place, date and time of the session according to my availabilities. I will be asked to answer open-ended questions about my sexual identity and my experience in high school.

**Risks:**

I understand that my participation in this research means that I will disclose personal information. My participation in this study might entail emotional or psychological discomfort (i.e, anxiety, stress, loss of confidence, regret for the disclosure of personal information) due to the sensitive nature of the research topic.

I have been assured from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks. The lead researcher (Abiola Akande) will take the necessary precautions to ensure my anonymity and confidentiality. All the information that I will communicate will be secured in a locked place that only the lead researcher and the thesis supervisor have access. In addition, any information liable to compromise my anonymity will be censored or removed from the verbatim. As for my name, it will be replaced by a pseudonym. In addition, the lead researcher will provide me with contact information for community organizations in the area that provide support and support services.

**Benefits:**

My participation in this study will contribute to building more understanding regarding the realities that LGBTQ+ youth experience in secondary school. I will have the opportunity to have my voice heard and validated. This study will contribute to knowledge advancement and will stimulate more discussion about the everyday lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth inside and outside of Gay-Straight Alliances in secondary schools.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:**

I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I expect the content will be used only to better understand the role of Gay-Straight Alliances in secondary schools for LGBTQ+ youth. I expect the content to be used in a confidential manner: raw data audio recordings, verbatim, field notes, consent forms, etc.) will be kept in a secure location either in the supervisor's office that will be locked. Only the lead researcher and the supervisor will have access to this data. Any information that could jeopardize my anonymity will be censored as soon as the interviews are

transcribed. My anonymity will be protected in the following manner; my name will be replaced by a pseudonym.

**Conservation of data:**

Data collected during the interview such as audio recording will be encrypted, transferred to an external hard disk and deleted from the main researcher's tape recorder. Subsequently, verbatim transcription will be done in a safe place where only the principal investigator and the supervisor of the major research paper, if necessary, can hear the audio recordings. The verbatim will also be encrypted and transferred to the external hard drive. In addition, the file that will contain the audio records and the verbatim will be protected by a password that only the main researcher and the thesis supervisor will have access to. The external hard drive (containing audio recordings and verbatim), the researcher's field notes, consent forms and any other empirical data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the office of the thesis supervisor, which is also locked. All the above empirical data will be retained for a period of five (5) years following the filing of the principal investigator's thesis.

**Voluntary Participation:**

I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed, the audio recording will be destroyed and the verbatim will be deleted.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Abiola Akande from the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, under the supervision of Marjorie Silverman, Assistant Professor.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5  
Tel.: (613) 562-5387  
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature:

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature:

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Available Resources

<b>Organizations</b>	<b>Contact Information</b>
LGBTQ Youth Services – Centretown Community Health Centre	(613)233-4443, ext.2109 (613)233-4443, ext.2171 <a href="http://www.centretownchc.org">www.centretownchc.org</a>
Family Services Ottawa – LGBTQ Inclusive Counselling 18+	(613)725-3601, ext.117 <a href="http://www.familyservicesottawa.org">www.familyservicesottawa.org</a>
Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa – Spectrum LGBTQ Community Youth Group	(613)241-7788, ext.413 <a href="http://www.ysb.ca">www.ysb.ca</a>
The Youth Line Ontario’s provincial LGBT peer support and info line	1-800-268-9688 <a href="http://www.youthline.ca">www.youthline.ca</a> .
Gai Écoute Quebec’s provincial peer support line	1-800-505-1010 <a href="http://www.gaiecoutte.org">www.gaiecoutte.org</a> .
Kids Help Phone	1-800-668-6868 <a href="http://www.jeunessejecoute.ca">www.jeunessejecoute.ca</a> .
Jeunesse Idem	(819)776-1445 <a href="http://www.jeunesseidem.com">www.jeunesseidem.com</a>
Kind.	(613)563-4818 <a href="http://www.kinspace.ca">www.kinspace.ca</a>
Pride Centre of University of Ottawa	(613)562-5800, ext. 3161 <a href="http://www.sfuoc.ca/pride/">www.sfuoc.ca/pride/</a>
Carleton University Gender and Sexuality Resource Centre	(613)520-3723 <a href="http://www.cusaonline.com/glbtc/">www.cusaonline.com/glbtc/</a>

Annex 4 – Recruitment Poster



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Exploring  
**SAFE SPACES**

A look into the student experience  
with Gay-straight Alliances in  
secondary schools

Are you between the ages of **18-21 years old**?  
Do you identify as **LGBTQ+** ? Have you  
attended a secondary school with a  
**Gay Straight Alliance (GSA)**?

If you are interested & meet the  
above requirements, please contact:

Abiola Akande at  
[\*\*aakan047@uottawa.ca\*\*](mailto:aakan047@uottawa.ca)

Under the supervision of:  
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