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One Student at a Time: A Reflection of Support for a First-Year GSA Club and its Impact on Perceived Acceptance for LGBTQ Students

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ABSTRACT

Despite gains in the LGBTQ community, many schools still feel cold and unwelcoming for LGBTQ youth. Identity development is important for adolescents, but LGBTQ students often see the ability to freely share their identity limited in public education. Providing a gay–straight alliance (GSA) club within the school has been shown to increase feeling of acceptance and well-being for LGBTQ students. This article looks at the history of GSA in education, the positive and negative outcomes of LGBTQ inclusion and the author's personal reflection of successes and challenges as a sponsor for a GSA club during its inception year.

KEYWORDS

Adolescents; diversity; effective schools; high school; learning environments; school improvement

Introduction

Identity development and its subsequent protection is not simply vital but paramount to adolescent growth in high school (Mayo 2014). Those who fall under the label of marginalized groups quickly learn that their ability to freely express their individuality can be held in a vice grip by the oppressive majority. One of the most oppressed groups, especially in public education, are those who identify as members of the LGBTQ community, who face an uphill battle in finding both allies and acceptance among peers and teachers. While people of all sexualities face pressure to conform along gender and sexuality lines, with heterosexuality being the only sanctioned orientation in public education, LGBTQ students find themselves uninvited, unwanted, and unwelcome in school (Mayo 2014). In fact, 57.6% of all LGBTQ students stated they felt unsafe in their school because of their sexual orientation, 43.3% felt the same way because of their gender expression, and more than 95% said they heard negative remarks concerning both identifiers (GLSEN 2015). LGBTQ students who experience high levels of victimization are more than three times as likely to miss school, are twice as likely to report that they do not plan to attend college, have lower grade point averages, incur more school discipline referrals, and

report lower self-esteem and sense of school belonging (GLSEN 2015).

One way to help these students find their voice and cultivate relationships with like-minded individuals is through the implementation of a gay–straight alliance (GSA) Club. The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reported that there was a decrease in homophobic remarks and incidents of verbal and physical harassment toward LGBTQ students in 2015, while the percentage of students who reported that they had access to a GSA club in their school was the highest ever reported during that same year. This cannot simply be a coincidence. Inclusion and acceptance among peers and educators can help LGBTQ students attain a better sense of well-being and find their own slice of tranquility within the school system.

History of GSA in education

GSAs are defined as student-led clubs that work to support LGBTQ students, improve school climate for them and their allies, and help others to rethink the societal norms surrounding gender and sexuality to combat bias (Mayo 2014). The historical roots of these clubs, which number more than 4000 in the nation, extend back primarily to the Equal Access Act (EAA) of 1984 (Mayo 2014). The EAA, initially designed to

support students' religious freedom by conservative leaders who felt that student's opportunity to gather for religious-based reasons was being infringed upon, slowly began to apply to all extra-curriculum activities, including the eventual implementation of GSA clubs. However, despite the EAA, many still had to fight in court in order to form their club or were asked to hide the group's purpose under the guise of being a "diversity club" (Mayo 2014, 94). Research on GSA clubs has found they are more commonly located in suburban areas in the western regions of the US (Graybill et al. 2015) and faculty sponsors are overwhelmingly white (Mayberry, Chenneville, and Currie 2013; Poteat et al. 2015). When asked, GSA sponsors claim their choice to serve as a sponsor springs from a desire to support the best interest of the students, that they already have a common link with the LGBTQ community as either a member themselves, have a family member who identifies as LGBTQ, or they serve as an advocate or ally outside of their duties as an educator (Valenti and Campbell 2009).

GSA clubs come in all different shapes and sizes in order to support the needs of students they serve. They can be both structured and unstructured and main goals of the club can range from serving in an activist capacity with corresponding agendas and goals to a group that resembles a group therapy environment where members can share their feelings, concerns, and personal successes or obstacles while in a safe and welcoming environment (Poteat et al. 2015). There is also a tendency for school leaders and peers to think of LGBTQ students only in terms of their being "at-risk" and that their immediate safety is paramount, but sponsors argue that they are equally concerned with the emotional safety of their members and ensuring that they feel welcome in addition to physically safe (Mayberry et al. 2013). Moreover, the "at-risk" label is one that LGBTQ rarely use to refer to themselves and instead think of the GSA club not as a "safe space" but an environment where they can "feel supported, [can] build a sense of community, and ultimately develop the confidence necessary to 'speak out' against antigay behaviors and attitudes in the larger school environment" (Mayberry et al. 2013, 323). Membership among females is also disproportionality higher than males in GSA clubs (Mayo 2014), which could be attributed to the natural female tendency to be a nurturer (Martin 1992) or it could be that the structure of the GSA club is appealing in terms of safety and security along both gender and sexuality lines. Whatever the structure or

reason for membership, one detracting factor of GSA clubs would be that although it provides a supportive environment, it is mirroring the segregation LGBTQ students and allies feel by choosing to congregate in a separate group from the masses (Mayo 2014).

Positive outcomes of LGBTQ inclusion

Despite the relatively few numbers of GSA clubs, research has shown that they can have a positive impact on not only LGBTQ students, but also school environment as well. LGBTQ students who had access to a GSA club in their high school were shown to have a reclaimed sense of hope and a greater sense of school connectedness (McCormick, Schmidt, and Clifton 2015), members significantly associated GSA membership with increased well-being and educational attainment, and also a positive impact on self-esteem (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, and Russell 2011). Moreover, LGBTQ students who benefited from a GSA club also found solace outside of the school walls as they encountered fewer negative experiences, had a lower risk for suicide and depression, and had fewer incidents of substance abuse (Mayo 2014).

Members claim one of the most positive results of GSA participation is learning to appreciate individual uniqueness and better understand the differences of others (McCormick, Schmidt, and Clifton 2014). These feeling of security and self-confidence might account for the reason why many GSA sponsors note that membership is often made up of mostly underclassmen, as members often leave the nest during their junior and senior year (Poteat et al. 2015). As the world continues to be more accepting of different gender and sexual identities, shown by the legalization of same-sex marriage by the US Supreme Court (Liptak 2015), the ability for transgendered soldiers to now openly serve in the armed forces (Rosenberg 2016), and the inclusion of gay history in the required California curriculum (Jordan 2011), the hope is that more schools follow suit. These accomplishments concerning LGBTQ acceptance make it easier for teachers and schools to find ways to increase inclusion of LGBTQ history and issues into the school curriculum and environment without fear of retribution.

Obstacles and losses without LGBTQ support

While leaps have been made in the world towards better inclusion and acceptance for LGBTQ people, the steps in education have resembled a more tentative

gait. Students will admit that when they can see themselves reflected in their own school curriculum, they feel more hopeful about their future. However, LGBTQ students' state schools and educators often miss opportunities for diverse sexuality and gender expression inclusion in classes like sexual education, history, and English (Snapp et al. 2015). As teachers shirk from helping all students by allowing for discussion and inclusion of different gender and sexual identities, this unfortunately models for adolescents that there is something to fear from not only the LGBTQ community, but also from being an LGBTQ ally (255).

The most common approach in public education toward LGBTQ students is to act in a reactive instead of proactive manner. Granted, a pedagogical change is not an easy feat, but simply addressing LGBTQ concerns only when bullying and oppression occurs is not enough to create a welcoming and supporting school environment (Mayo 2014). Silence is often the chosen approach concerning LGBTQ issues in schools under the guise that if one simply ignores the issue, there is no chance of drawing the ire or retribution from those who do not want to see LGBTQ inclusion within the school system (Mayberry et al. 2013). This fear of reprisal can come from upsetting not only the administration, but also the parents and community members of the students teachers serve. Moreover, the fear of job loss is further compounded when the teacher is a member of the LGBTQ community, where many states still function under the rule that teachers can be fired for hiding their own sexual orientation or for simply being gay (Mayo 2014).

While students will eventually leave school and venture out into the world, one would hope that LGBTQ students would feel more included in society. However, acceptance in society often mirrors the segregation that GSA clubs can create within a school. LGBTQ exclusion is again modeled through the community centers that are unwelcoming and the churches that view alternative gender or sexuality identities as immoral (Mayo 2014). Mayo argues that homophobia often has little to do with sexual orientation, but is simply a reflection of the cultural disparagement toward femininity (41), which is seen quite regularly in our male-dominated world (Martin 1992). This lack of acceptance—both in and out of school—is further compounded among adolescents when there is not a GSA or similar group where support can be found, especially if those LGBTQ students are also members

of another minority group, giving them an extra dose of marginalization from their peers (Poteat et al. 2015). LGBTQ teenagers are given two options in order to survive in high school: live their life being true to their gender or sexual identity at the cost of being victimized by their peers or live their life in “stealth-mode,” thus denying themselves from being able to share openly all facets of their identity with others (Mayo 2014, 44). While teachers may not take the Hippocratic Oath in the same manner that doctors do, teachers have an unwritten rule to support all students and protect them from harm, so a percentage of that student population being forced to live their life hiding who they really are is not only unsupportive, but it goes against the comfort and caring that educators vow to offer.

Support and reflections of a first year GSA

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) School Climate Report of Oklahoma indicates that not only are vast numbers of LGBTQ students victimized in schools, but local support and resources are scarce (GLSEN 2014). According to GLSEN's report, only 3% of the state's school systems have a comprehensive anti-bullying and harassment policy that specifically includes LGBTQ language, while only 21% of students had access to a GSA or similar club within the school environment. Fortunately, LGBTQ students in my city have access to GSA clubs at two of the three local high schools, including the one where I am a sponsor. Both the past and current presidents of our GSA club shared their opinions on the local resources available for LGBTQ youth and what they would like to see change to increase support and acceptance both in school and in the community. Both presidents pointed out that the club does have a relationship with the LGBTQ ally and support club at the local college; yet, the relationship is tenuous at best, while the online resources for the college group is incomplete and hard to navigate as a non-member. Acceptance at local churches continues to be rare, although one local church has quite recently openly offered their support to the LGBTQ community, but this may be at the behest of my fellow co-sponsor who happens to be a member and serves on the church's staff. The past president worked hard to secure the ability to form the student-led club, working with an extremely supportive head principal to secure approval. However, after the club was approved

to begin the following year, the district swapped our principal with another one in the district, but the new principal remained supportive of the club during its inception year. Our current president pointed out that although group development and focus was slow, it was successful over the course of the year as we offered weekly meetings, participated in the National Day of Caring, attended the local college's Matthew Shepard Candlelight Vigil and come-as-you-are homecoming dance, created gender and sexuality awareness signs for the hallway, hosted a LGBTQ-themed movie night, and simply offered a welcoming environment for fellow LGBTQ students and allies. Both presidents are most proud of the fact that we helped to establish a sense of community among members and sponsors, allowed everyone (members and visitors) to feel welcome within the club, and maintained privacy concerning gender and sexual identity of members so no one was outed accidentally or maliciously. Our current club president hopes to add to last year's successes by participating in more events, including preparing for the National Day of Silence in the spring in order to hold an evening event and that will be open to the community. Other areas in which both presidents felt our school and community needed to improve in order to better support LGBTQ adolescents included, more discussion of LGBTQ and gender identity history and concerns in middle school and high school curriculum, working to develop a willingness to learn about these issues among peers and teachers to reduce the lack of general understanding, securing access to LGBTQ-friendly counseling and therapy to assist families and individuals in talking safely about gender and sexuality issues without fear of conversion or prejudice, and developing a GSA-style support group outside of school for local adolescents who do not have a GSA at their school or are homeschooled.

While there was much success during the first year of our club, there were still many barriers and obstacles that the GSA members faced. Club visibility within the school was quite limited at first as—maliciously or not—reminders of our meetings were sometimes left out of the afternoon announcements and on the school calendar. Some of our handmade signs were torn down, defaced or destroyed with no visible repercussion or investigation and antigay slurs or attitudes were often ignored or left unaddressed both in the hallways and in the classroom environment by administration and faculty. However, one of the biggest obstacles came at the

end of the year when a parent made an anonymous call to our district office threatening to “go to the media” if the rainbow flag that our past president personally purchased was not taken down from the classroom of my fellow co-sponsor. Despite our efforts and that of our principal, we were directed that we were only allowed to hang the flag in the classroom during our club meetings.

As a LGBTQ ally and faculty sponsor for our club, this choice did not come without barriers for me as well. When it was initially announced to our faculty that we would be welcoming GSA to our list of extra-curricular clubs, the question, “who do they think they are going to get to sponsor as club like that” was murmured at my table just before our principal announced that I was to be one of them. Needless to say, that mumbling teacher failed to make eye contact with me for the remainder of the meeting and has seldom spoken to me since. I did have many teachers offer words of support for our willingness to sponsor this club throughout the year, but those comments were more often spoken to me like a secret when we happened to be alone as only one or two voiced their support for the club publicly. We have seen a few parents offer their support, but they more often are parents of our members since we are yet to try to include or illicit support from members of the community. With the loss of my co-sponsor after this first year, the club found another faculty member for this upcoming year. Initially he was reluctant to say anything about it for fear that his conservative family would not be supportive of his decision. Thankfully, he chose to share his ally status, because I could not help but worry about the message it would send to our members if they learned that he was OK with being an ally, but only if certain people did not find out.

During the course of our inception year, I did witness two major successes I feel are worthy of noting. First, student support for this club has been extremely positive within the school. This was never more prevalent than during our final senior assembly when our two senior members stood on stage, hand in hand, rainbow flag held high, and received one of the loudest rounds of applause during the entire ceremony. Of course our members still sometimes see inflammatory words written on their posters and antigay slurs still slung around the hallways overall, the climate of inclusion and support for LGBTQ students within our school has increased during that first year with the GSA club. Second, one of our members found

the support from his fellow GSA members to share his desire to be identified as male despite being born as female. While this generally quiet student identifies as his birth-assigned gender in all other school-related functions, when he is with us each week, he sheds that shy exterior and we get to see a vocal and vibrant young man because he finally can stop residing in that “stealth-mode” and get to be himself.

Conclusion

Just as the world has made gains in terms of LGBTQ acceptance, so has our school environment done the same. Each passing day, our little club is finding that they are being met with less resistance and more acceptance, but we still have ample work ahead of us to cultivate the environment befitting total acceptance and inclusion. Mayo (2014) reminds us that we must try to avoid talking and thinking about LGBTQ students only in terms of bias and oppression. It is kind of like not seeing the forest for the trees because the focus is on only the negative part of being a member of this diverse community. Opting to shut down bias and oppression by funneling an overabundance of positive LGBTQ curriculum and learning throughout the environment is the only way to cultivate inclusion. Once more people begin to associate LGBTQ students less with the “at-risk” label and more as a unique, vibrant, and diversifying element of our world, these students will see that hiding in the shadows does not have to be the only way in which they can survive their high school years.

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