Queer During and After School: Understanding LGBTQ+ Youth's School Belonging and After-School Participation

By

Robert Andrew Marx

Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Community Research and Action

May 10, 2019

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

David K. Diehl, PhD

Sarah V. Suiter, PhD

Maury Nation, PhD

V. Paul Poteat, PhD

To the queer youth whose voices, stories, and lives fill these pages and my heart with such joy—to my students, youth group attendees, participants, and friends:
"i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)"

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation would certainly not be possible without the meaningful contributions of so many. Child Trends provided the data for Chapter 1, and I am very grateful for the partnership, support, and mentorship of Dr. Deborah Temkin. The data from Chapters 2 and 3 were collected in collaboration with the GSA Research Consortium, and I am deeply indebted to its members, and especially to Drs. Paul Poteat, Hiro Yoshikawa, and Jerel Calzo for their immeasurable generosity, brilliance, insight, and guidance. Additionally, I am grateful to Cole Mehring for his diligent help with coding for the second and third papers, as well as to Ayla Stephenson who helped with coding for the third paper. I also relied on consultations with Alexandria Hadd, Dr. Kris Preacher, and Dr. David Cole concerning my statistical models.

I am deeply thankful for the time, energy, and thought that my dissertation committee invested in this process and in me. David, some of the most memorable moments of my graduate career were spent in your office, in front of your whiteboard. I'm so lucky that we both came to Vanderbilt at the same time and were able to navigate all of this together. Maury, your kind and critical insight pushed me to think more deeply than maybe I even wanted to, and I appreciate it. Sarah, your theoretical rigor and qualitative expertise were invaluable, and your laughter reminds me that although our work is serious, our lives need not be. Paul, I cannot thank you enough for responding to the email of a random high school English teacher who thought he might be interested in graduate school—you have shaped every step of my journey, from that initial coffee meeting at Athan's to now, and I am very, very certain I would not have been able to accomplish any of this without you.

I am fortunate that my time at Vanderbilt came with a built-in family. I am so grateful

for the mentorship I received from Drs. Emily Tanner-Smith, Emily Hennessy, and Heather Hensman Kettrey; I've learned so much from our collaborations, and I'm excited for the next chapter! To my cohort, and those who were basically in my cohort, thank you for getting me through this—the working dates at coffee shops, the sushi lunches, the self-care nights, the Indian buffets, and all of the laughter made this possible.

Most importantly, I am thankful for my family, both biological and chosen. I am so lucky to have a support system that stretches from Nashville to Boston and beyond—to my book club and Brandeis family, thank you. And of course, I couldn't have done any of this without the love and support of my parents: Mom and Dad, thank you for always believing in me and teaching me to eat a mountain of ice cream one spoonful at a time. Grannie and Grandma, thank you for always being interested in what I'm doing, even when you didn't totally understand it. To my brother, sister-in-law, brothers-in-law, and other sister-in-law, thank you for deftly changing the subject when others asked how far along I was, for making me laugh when I was stressed, and for keeping me full at family gatherings.

Above all else, thank you to my husband, Martin Tobias, whose unwavering support and patience has made all of this possible, whose love reminds me of good in a broken world, and whose boundless intellect is, in equal measures, frustrating and the greatest joy I have known.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

In the bathroom before the meeting starts, Kirkland—a 17-year-old, white, agender high school junior—quickly applies lipstick and eyeshadow, changes into a Hello Kitty t-shirt, and looks themselves over in the mirror. With a shy smile, they rush out to join the rest of the students who nervously mingle before the start of the Gender and Sexuality Alliance meeting, a school-based extracurricular program for queer youth and their allies. Kirkland finds their place in the circle, and when it's their turn, says, "Hi. My name is…Kirkland, and I use they, them, theirs pronouns. My high for the week…" they swallow, look around the circle, smile to themselves, and then start again, "my high for the week is being here, I guess. My low for the week is that my grandpa isn't doing that well, and I'm just kind of worried about him." The person next to Kirkland introduces herself, and Kirkland can quietly reflect on what they've said. It's true, they realize—coming to the GSA is absolutely the high of their week, and spending time here is worth the hour-and-a-half long wait for the late bus that coming requires. As the meeting progresses, Kirkland and their peers flip through magazines, cutting out images to make a collage that represents their external manifestations and internal thoughts about their gender identities. Kirkland may not realize it, but the GSA is the only place they have where they can honestly complete this activity: outside of this space, they lack both the metaphorical and the physical room to explore their gender identity and to depict it in a complete, truthful way. After forty-five minutes, the young people and adult advisor circulate, quietly looking at each other's collages without offering commentary or critique. To close out the meeting, everyone present shares a single word that encapsulates their experience. When it comes to Kirkland, they simply say: "Home."

To observe Kirkland and the twenty-or-so other youth who come to the GSA, the benefits of programming for queer youth seem to be multiple and overlapping: they make friends, they get support, they access resources, they learn about issues affecting the queer community, they advocate and offer support to others—the list goes on and on. And yet, there is a disconnect between the experiences of wholeness, love, and community that these queer youth experience and the discourse concerning queer youth in schools. Much of the research and discussion concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender non-conforming (LGBTQ+) adolescents focuses on their heightened risks, negative outcomes, and poor life chances (Poirier, Mattheis, & Temkin, 2017) without acknowledging the strengths and assets that they possess. This incomplete picture of queer youth does us all a disservice and has material consequences for both queer young people and those who work with them: a vision of queer youth as damaged or at-risk may lead practitioners to make damaging assumptions and researchers to let asset-based models of queer youth development go untested. Indeed, this dissertation argues for a more complete and holistic understanding of queer youth as both targeted by a heteronormative society and gifted with assets and strengths. To fully understand Kirkland's experience in high school, then, we must acknowledge both the fear they experience outside of the GSA and the comfort they experience within it; we must see them not only as the recipient of care and concern, but also as the source of advice and wisdom for their peers. In short, we must acknowledge the assets and resources that queer youth have and can develop.

In mainstream research about cisgender, heterosexual adolescents, scholars and practitioners have taken clear steps to move beyond the deficit-focused framework in order to capture the resources and strengths of youth, especially as they focus on cultivating additional prosocial behavior and positive traits (Forneris, Camiré, & Williamson, 2015;

Rose, 2006; Scales, 1999, 2005; Scales & Leffert, 1999). That work aims to identify assets that young people have that promote healthy development and resilience in the face of adversity. Within the literature on adolescents in schools, much of the focus has shifted from victimization and bullying to the creation of positive school climate that can improve academic, social, and emotional outcomes.

This dissertation aims to incorporate LGBTQ+ youth into the scientific discourse of youth assets, especially those that are associated with healthy development in school: supportive relationships with non-parental adults, strong relationships with peers, supportive school climate, and participation in after- school activities (Scales & Leffert, 1999). First, this dissertation explores the relative strength of these assets, as well as other student- and school-level factors, in predicting students' sense of school belongingness. Then, the dissertation focuses on one specific asset—participation in after-school activities—to better understand students' reasons for joining, engagement in, and leadership of their Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs, also commonly referred to as Gay-Straight Alliances). This work will clearly identify queer youth's assets, rather than solely or primarily focusing on their deficits, and work to understand the ways in which these factors function similarly to their cisgender, heterosexual peers. Additionally, it will provide insight into the motivations students offer for joining their GSAs, encouraging youth to see themselves as agentive forces capable of making needs claims and informing researchers and practitioners about what they desire from the GSA, as well as what skills and assets they bring to the GSA. Finally, this dissertation will explore factors that are associated with students' engagement in and leadership of GSAs, drawing on research that indicates that engagement may be the fundamental component that links after-school participation and a host of positive outcomes (Bartko, 2005; Bohnert, Fredricks, & Randall,

2010; Fredricks, 2011). Taken as a whole, this dissertation will illuminate queer youth's assets and needs, offering researchers and practitioners insight into fostering supportive school environments, creating spaces for queer youth to flourish, and meeting queer youth's needs while still acknowledging their strengths.

Queer Youth in Schools

In the last thirty years, researchers have endeavored to better understand the school and personal experiences of students who are not heterosexual and cis-gender, students whom I will refer to as "queer." It is important to note that queer was once a slur for the LGBT community, but has since been reclaimed and taken on many forms, including an umbrella term for those who are not straight and cis (as I use it) and a political term for those who actively disrupt and rebel against heteropatriarchal society (vital and important work that is not the subject of this dissertation or the intention of my use of the term). Researchers have assessed queer students' rates of truancy and negative academic outcomes (Birkett, Russell, & Corliss, 2014; Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013), substance use (Marshal, Friedman, Stall, & Thompson, 2009), depression and suicidal ideation (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011), feelings of unsafety, and experiences of harassment and victimization (Kosciw et al., 2013; Robinson & Espelage, 2011), and they have fairly uniformly found that queer students have poorer outcomes than their cisgender, heterosexual peers.

This important research on queer youth focuses primarily on the problems that queer youth face, ostensibly documenting the negative state of schools in order to advocate for their improvement and for improved outcomes for their queer students. Indeed, even as scholars and practitioners aimed to reform schools to be safer for queer students, they

focused primarily on preventing problems and forestalling negative outcomes, rather than on students' assets. These efforts often took the form of protectionist anti-bullying policies that aimed to outlaw the victimization and harassment of students for their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. Although district-based anti-discrimination protections are successful, as LGBT students experience greater safety and lower victimization (Kull, Greytak, Kosciw, & Villenas, 2016) and may therefore experience lower suicidality (Hatzenbuehler, Birkett, Van Wagenen, & Meyer, 2014), some offer that these approaches may inadvertently reinforce the very problems they attempt to alleviate. For example, these policies may deter queer students from speaking up or reporting the harassment they do experience (C. Mayo, 2004) and may focus administrators' attention on policing bad behavior rather than on truly improving the school in a holistic, supportive way (Monk, 2011). These policies, then, may continue to reinforce damaged views of queer students, rather than helping students, teachers, and administrators to recognize the complexity of the queer experience and helping queer students themselves have more supportive relationships in schools.

Another means of improving schools for queer youth is the formation of Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs, often known as Gay-Straight Alliances). These student-organized, faculty-sponsored after-school organizations provide a space for queer youth and their allies to engage in a variety of activities. Students may socialize and meet friends, rely on others for support, learn from their peers, or advocate for changes in their schools and communities (Poteat, Scheer, Marx, Calzo, & Yoshikawa, 2015). Research has demonstrated that the presence of a GSA is associated with decreased victimization and harassment (Marx & Kettrey, 2016), less drug use (Heck et al., 2014), and improved mental health (Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013; Walls, Wisenski, &

Kane, 2013), as well as feelings of support, empowerment, and connection (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Mayberry, Chenneville, & Currie, 2013; J. B. Mayo, 2013). Importantly, focusing on queer youth's experiences in and because of GSAs offers fruitful inroads to acknowledging the strengths and assets that queer youth have and can develop; research on after-school activities among straight, cis-gender students has demonstrated their importance in developing youth (Barber, Stone, Hunt, & Eccles, 2005; Eccles & Barber, 1995, 1999; Grossman, Goldmith, Sheldon, & Arbreton, 2009; Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2007).

Asset-Based Understandings of Youth

The three chapters of this dissertation take a view of queer youth as having strengths or assets that serve to promote their healthy development. Researchers identify developmental assets as "the positive relationships, opportunities, competencies, values, and self-perceptions that youth need to succeed" (Scales & Leffert, 1999, p. 1), highlighting the ways that "support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time…commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity" (Scales, 2005, p. 106) are associated with healthy youth development. Research on the asset-based framework identifies that asset-rich young people are more likely to experience success in school and are less likely to experience violence, abuse alcohol, or engage in high-risk behavior (Scales, 2005; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Scales, 1999).

It is important to note that researchers have identified 40 assets, and so a thorough investigation of all assets associated with healthy youth development is outside the scope of this dissertation. Instead, the first chapter draws on several key assets that have been associated with student success: relationships with teachers, relationships with students,

supportive school climate, and participation in after-school activities. The next two chapters focus on one specific asset—participation in after-school activities, and indeed, only participation in GSAs—to better understand students' motivations for participation and to explore predictors of meaningful participation, or engagement. Beyond just highlighting these specific assets, though, this dissertation is asset-oriented: that is to say, it operates from the assumption that queer youth have many assets that can be acknowledged once one recognizes they might exist. In this way, for example, the second dissertation chapter highlights several assets that young people identify within themselves—young people saw themselves as sources of support for their friends, as educators with knowledge, and as change agents who could make a difference in their world. This orientation towards assets and away from a sole focus on deficits and damage guides this dissertation.

Current Study

The current study brings together research on queer youth and an asset-based framework of development to integrate understandings of queer youth's strengths alongside the well-documented negative outcomes they may experience. Starting from the broad view of school belonging, an important aspect of healthy development and a potential indicator of future success, this dissertation will investigate which aspects of students' lives are most strongly associated with greater reports of school belonging, and whether those aspects differ for queer students and their straight peers. Then, this dissertation will focus on one important asset associated with school belonging, participation in after-school activities, to better understand why students join GSAs. This qualitative research adopts a feminist care theory frame to document youth's needs-talk to both empower youth to see themselves as agentive determiners of the care they receive and

to inform researchers and practitioners of the needs and assets that have been ignored. Additionally, within the model of stage-environment fit, this research explores students' self-identified developmental needs in order to better understand the ways in which the GSA setting can meet them. The final paper builds on this needs-talk to investigate whether students' rationale for joining—as well as demographic features and context-level aspects of the GSA—is associated with GSA engagement or leadership. This dissertation is guided by the following research questions. In terms of general school belonging: What individual- and school-level factors are associated with queer students' sense of school belonging? Which factors are most predictive of queer students' sense of school belonging? To what extent does sexual orientation moderate the relationships between predictors of school belonging? That is, is there a significant interaction between sexual orientation and predictors of school belonging? In terms of one of the most salient levers for promoting queer students' sense of school belonging, GSAs: What rationales do students provide for joining GSAs? What is the relative prevalence of these rationales? To what extent do these rationales predict student's engagement in and leadership of their GSAs? What other student- and context-level factors predict students' engagement in and leadership of their GSAs?

This work moves from a broad view of queer students in schools to a more specific examination of queer students within one setting in schools, examining the assets that queer youth may have and exploring how these assets might predict school belonging and how one such asset—engagement in after-school activities—may be predicted by student- and context-level factors.

References

Anderman, E. M. (2002). School effects on psychological outcomes during adolescence. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *94*(4), 795–809. https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-0663.94.4.795

Anderman, L. H. (2003). Academic and Social Perceptions as Predictors of Change in Middle School Students' Sense of School Belonging. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, *72*(1), 5–22.

Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1997). Caring school communities. *Educational Psychologist*, *32*(3), 137–151. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep3203_1

Birkett, M., Russell, S. T., & Corliss, H. L. (2014). Sexual-Orientation Disparities in School: The Mediational Role of Indicators of Victimization in Achievement and Truancy Because of Feeling Unsafe. *American Journal of Public Health*, *104*(6), 1124–1128. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301785

Damon, W. (2004). What is Positive Youth Development? *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *591*(1), 13–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716203260092

Espelage, D. L., Aragon, S. R., Birkett, M., & Koenig, B. W. (2008). Homophobic Teasing, Psychological Outcomes, and Sexual Orientation Among High School Students: What Influence Do Parents and Schools Have? *School Psychology Review*, *37*(2), 15.

Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools*, *30*(1),

79–90. https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807(199301)30:1<79::AID-PITS2310300113>3.0.CO;2-X

Hatzenbuehler, M. L. (2011). The Social Environment and Suicide Attempts in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth. *PEDIATRICS*, *127*(5), 896–903. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2010-3020

Hatzenbuehler, Mark L., Birkett, M., Van Wagenen, A., & Meyer, I. H. (2014). Protective School Climates and Reduced Risk for Suicide Ideation in Sexual Minority Youths. *American Journal of Public Health*, *104*(2), 279–286. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301508

Heck, N. C., Livingston, N. A., Flentje, A., Oost, K., Stewart, B. T., & Cochran, B. N. (2014). Reducing risk for illicit drug use and prescription drug misuse: High school gay-straight alliances and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. *Addictive Behaviors*, *39*(4), 824–828. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2014.01.007

Kosciw, J. G., Palmer, N. A., Kull, R. M., & Greytak, E. A. (2013). The Effect of Negative School Climate on Academic Outcomes for LGBT Youth and the Role of In-School Supports. *Journal of School Violence*, *12*(1), 45–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2012.732546

Kull, R. M., Greytak, E. A., Kosciw, J. G., & Villenas, C. (2016). Effectiveness of school district antibullying policies in improving LGBT youths' school climate. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, *3*(4), 407–415. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000196

Lerner, R. M., Almerigi, J. B., Theokas, C., & Lerner, J. V. (2005). Positive Youth Development A View of the Issues. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *25*(1), 10–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431604273211

Lerner, R. M., Brentano, C., Dowling, E. M., & Anderson, P. M. (2002). Positive youth development: Thriving as the basis of personhood and civil society. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *2002*(95), 11–34. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.14

Lerner, R. M., Fisher, C. B., & Weinberg, R. A. (2000). Toward a Science for and of the People: Promoting Civil Society through the Application of Developmental Science. *Child Development*, *71*(1), 11–20. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00113

Marshal, M. P., Friedman, M. S., Stall, R., & Thompson, A. L. (2009). Individual trajectories of substance use in lesbian, gay and bisexual youth and heterosexual youth. *Addiction*, *104*(6), 974–981. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1360-0443.2009.02531.x

Marx, R. A., & Kettrey, H. H. (2016). Gay-Straight Alliances are Associated with Lower Levels of School-Based Victimization of LGBTQ+ Youth: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *45*(7), 1269–1282. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-016-0501-7

Mayberry, M., Chenneville, T., & Currie, S. (2013). Challenging the Sounds of Silence: A Qualitative Study of Gay–Straight Alliances and School Reform Efforts. *Education and Urban Society*, *45*(3), 307–339. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124511409400

Mayo, C. (2004). The Tolerance That Dare Not Speak Its Name. *Counterpoints*, *240*, 33–47.

Mayo, J. B. (2013). Critical Pedagogy Enacted in the Gay–Straight Alliance: New Possibilities for a Third Space in Teacher Development. *Educational Researcher*, *42*(5), 266–275. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X13491977

Monk, D. (2011). Challenging homophobic bullying in schools: the politics of progress.

International Journal of Law in Context, *7*(2), 181–207.

Moore, K. A. (2017). Commentary: Positive Youth Development Goes Mainstream. *Child Development*, *88*(4), 1175–1177. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12874

Poteat, V. P., Scheer, J. R., Marx, R. A., Calzo, J. P., & Yoshikawa, H. (2015). Gay-Straight Alliances Vary on Dimensions of Youth Socializing and Advocacy: Factors Accounting for Individual and Setting-Level Differences. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *55*(3–4), 422–432. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-015-9722-2

Poteat, V. P., Sinclair, K. O., DiGiovanni, C. D., Koenig, B. W., & Russell, S. T. (2013). Gay-Straight Alliances Are Associated With Student Health: A Multischool Comparison of LGBTQ and Heterosexual Youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *23*(2), 319–330. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00832.x

Resnick, M. D. (1997). Protecting adolescents from harm. Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*, *278*(10), 823–832. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.278.10.823

Robinson, J. P., & Espelage, D. L. (2011). Inequities in Educational and Psychological Outcomes Between LGBTQ and Straight Students in Middle and High School. *Educational Researcher*, *40*(7), 315–330. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X11422112

Russell, S. T., Ryan, C., Toomey, R. B., Diaz, R. M., & Sanchez, J. (2011). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adolescent School Victimization: Implications for Young Adult Health and Adjustment. *Journal of School Health*, *81*(5), 223–230. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2011.00583.x

Walls, N. E., Wisenski, H., & Kane, S. (2013). School climate, individual support, or both?

Gay-straight alliances and the mental health of sexual minority youth. *School Social Work Journal*, *37*(2).

CHAPTER 1

A MULTILEVEL MODELING APPROACH FOR UNDERSTANDING THE STUDENT- AND SCHOOL-LEVEL FACTORS THAT PREDICT SCHOOL BELONGING FOR QUEER AND STRAIGHT STUDENTS

Abstract

Queer youth are often viewed as damaged and without assets, which may have material consequences for their lives and for the research that endeavors to understand them better. This limited understanding of queer youth may lead to their being left out of discussions on promoting healthy development, as researchers and practitioners may view them as only troubled. One important area of research on healthy adolescent development is school belonging, the sense of inclusion, acceptance, and support students feel at school. School belonging is associated with numerous positive academic and mental health outcomes. Research on straight, cisgender youth has demonstrated that school belonging is associated with a number of assets, chiefly supportive relationships with non-parental adults, supportive relationships with peers, supportive school environment, and participation in after-school activities. Limited research, however, has endeavored to investigate predictors of queer students' school belonging or to determine if sexual orientation moderates the relationship between these predictors and queer youth's sense of school belonging. The current study employs multilevel structural equation modeling to determine the relative predictive power of these assets for queer students and their straight peers, and then to investigate any differences based on sexual orientation. Utilizing cross-sectional survey data from 2,464 students at 19 schools, this study aims to offer a more complete understanding of queer students' sense of school belonging. Results indicate that for all students, supportive relationships with peers and teachers and participation in after-school activities were the strongest predictors of school belonging for all students. Additionally, although queer students report significantly lower sense of school belonging and are more likely to report being bullied, there are no other statistically significant differences between queer students and their straight peers. This indicates that the strongly predictive assets—relationships with teachers, relationships with peers, participation in after-school activities, and perceptions of supportive school environment with respect to bullying—are equally predictive for all students, regardless of sexual orientation. Additionally, school-level predictors were non-significant. These findings have implications for researchers, who may endeavor to include queer youth in asset-focused studies, and practitioners, who may reconsider interventions that could improve students' sense of school belonging.

Introduction

Both in popular media and scientific discourse, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender non-conforming (LGBTQ+) adolescents are often framed as deficient, damaged, and deviant, even by those who only aim to improve their experiences. Much of the research on queer students in schools focuses on the bullying, victimization, and harassment they experience, and the negative school and life outcomes associated with such treatment (Poirier et al., 2017). Although understanding LGBTQ+ adolescents' experiences in schools is of tantamount importance, especially as it informs interventions and policies aimed to improve their lives and outcomes, focusing primarily on the deficits that young people face may inadvertently shape our approaches to working with LGBTQ+ youth and provide only a limited view into potential avenues for understanding and fostering their healthy development. A deficit-focused view of LGBTQ+ youth's development could have a number of implications for both our knowledge and our treatment of queer young people.

One way in which this deficit-focused view could have material consequences for queer youth is in a lack of inclusion of queer youth in research on factors that promote healthy development. For example, one salient factor of youth experience that has been explored considerably in the last fifty years is school belonging, or the extent to which students feel a sense of inclusion, support, and acceptance at their schools. School belonging is associated with a host of positive academic, emotional, and physical health outcomes (Slaten, Ferguson, Allen, Brodrick, & Waters, 2016), but there has been limited work exploring queer youth's sense of school belonging. Because school belonging can be considered the result of several assets, including supportive teacher and peer relationships,

supportive school climate, and after-school participation, researchers may be likely to consider queer youth—whom they may not view as possessing assets—outside the scope of research on school belonging. Indeed, a deficit frame would assume not only that queer youth have a significantly lower sense of school belonging than their cisgender, heterosexual peers, but also that their sense of school belonging is shaped primarily by negative factors including their experience of bullying and harassment, peer rejection, or lack of teacher support. However, an asset-based understanding of queer youth may push back against these assumptions to explore whether queer youth's sense of school belonging is even different from their peers and whether any such differences are attributable to more negative school experiences. Perhaps, for example, queer youth draw on similar assets—like relationships with supportive teachers or friendships with peers—as their straight, cisgender peers to develop a sense of school belonging. Unfortunately, limited research has explored queer students' sense of school belonging, and to date, no research has explored the potential differential predictors of school belonging for queer students and their straight peers. This may lead teachers, administrators, practitioners, and researchers to adopt the deficit-focused view of queer youth and assume that their sense of school belonging is lower than their peers and shaped by only the damage they face.

The current study aims to incorporate LGBTQ+ youth into our understandings of school belonging in order to test these deficit-based assumptions. Utilizing a sample of middle and high school students in Washington, D.C., the study employs multilevel structural equation modeling to determine the relative impacts of specific predictors on students' sense of school belonging for both the sample of all students and for LGBTQ+ students specifically. Additionally, the current study employs interaction analysis to understand if sexual orientation moderations key predictors of school climate (i.e., if a

predictor functions differently for LGBTQ+ students than for their straight peers). The study is guided by the following research questions: What individual- and school-level factors are associated with students' sense of school belonging? Which factors are most predictive of students' sense of school belonging? To what extent does sexual orientation moderate the relationships between predictors of school belonging? The results of these analyses have the power to inform interventions and policies designed to improve LGBTQ+ students' sense of school belonging.

Literature Review

Deficit-Based Understandings of Adolescents

At the turn of the 20th century, researchers began to address adolescence as a developmental stage separate from childhood and adulthood (Hall, 1904). Understood as a period of "storm and stress," adolescence was seen as a time of upheaval, instability, and disorder that necessarily created circumstances for risks, problems, and deficits. Therefore, much of the research on adolescents focused on their troubles and difficulties (Benson, 2002) and adopted a distinctly deficit-focused approach (Lerner, Brentano, Dowling, & Anderson, 2002), viewing young people as problems to be solved, rather than as potential solvers of problems. This led to many decades of research on the psychopathology and atypical behavior of deviant youth, during which the study of adolescence was focused on damage and disorder, and healthy youth were infrequently studied (Lerner et al., 2002). Indeed, the majority of models focused on youth development addressed the formation of problem behavior including antisocial conduct, smoking, and delinquency, with little regard for how most youth did not become involved in such behavior or for how to foster development that was not problematic (Damon, 2004).

Much in line with the mental-health oriented model of deficit-focused understandings of adolescence, the adolescent queer experience in American schooling is often depicted as marginalized, alienated, and negative. News stories and academic research abound offering stories of the victimization and abuse students undergo as they attend school. Indeed, adolescents who are perceived LGBTQ+ are at an elevated risk for victimization compared to their straight peers (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2014; Dempsey, 1994; Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). Further, homophobic victimization can have detrimental consequences for the development of LGBTQ+ youth, as it has been associated with negative outcomes such as depression (Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Russell, 2011; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010), substance use (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Espelage et al., 2008; Goldbach, Tanner-Smith, Bagwell, & Dunlap, 2014), and suicidality (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr, & Sites, 2006; Russell et al., 2011). In fact, homophobic victimization is more strongly associated with depression and suicidal ideation than non-homophobic victimization of youth (Patrick, Bell, Huang, Lazarakis, & Edwards, 2013). This picture of queer youth is necessary, as we cannot shy away from or avoid the simple fact that often, schools are unsafe for queer youth and, as a result of heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia, queer youth are at risk for negative life outcomes. Yet, as the broader adolescent development field moves towards an understanding of factors that might promote healthy development, a continued focus on negative outcomes for LGBTQ+ students may serve to further marginalize them.

School Belonging

One key area of research about adolescents' experiences in schools that promotes healthy development is school belonging, a construct that is considered a protective factor

associated with greater academic achievement and higher self-esteem (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004), lower rates of stress and anxiety (Mahoney, Parente, & Lord, 2007), lower rates of depression (E. M. Anderman, 2002), and risky drug use and sex (McNeely & Falci, 2004). School belonging grew out of research on humans' need for belonging as an important step towards eventually reaching their full potential (Maslow, 1943), often understood as a fundamental need for acceptance, support, and connection with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Beyond functioning as a fundamental human motivation, this need for belonging can be understood to manifest itself differently across contexts; for example, familial belonging and attachment is fundamentally distinct from bonding with friends, one's workplace, or other settings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). One particularly salient context for belonging, especially for children and adolescents, is school: because young people spend a considerable portion of their time within the school walls, researchers have endeavored to explore the antecedents and outcomes of school belonging (Slaten et al., 2016). Although school belonging has been defined in a number of ways, a seminal definition is the "sense of belonging or psychological membership in the school or classroom, that is, the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). Researchers sometimes employ slight variants to this definition—including particular references to community (Osterman, 2000), bonding (Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003), or positive school-related affect (L. H. Anderman, 2003)—but being accepted and valued by others within the school is central to all definitions. It is important to note that although a common definition and operationalization is often used, researchers employ a variety of terms when discussing school belonging, including school engagement, school bonding,

school community, school attachment, and school connectedness (Jimerson et al., 2003; Libbey, 2004). Because these terms and definitions often overlap considerably, but not entirely, it is important to consider how school belonging is operationalized in a study to ensure that it does in fact encompass students' sense of acceptance, inclusion, and support in school (Slaten et al., 2016). Moreover, school belonging is not a fixed trait, but rather an adaptable one that can shift and change in response to a host of interactions between an individual and their multiple contexts, including peers, teachers, administrators, and larger school community (Slaten et al., 2016).

Although there is certainly no consensus among researchers in the operationalization and measurement of school belonging, most studies employ an adapted form of the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) among Adolescence scale (Slaten et al., 2016). The full scale contains 18 items which measure the extent to which students feel a part of their school, feel generally accepted by their teachers and peers, are involved in their school, experience a sense of pride in their school, and can express themselves fully in school (Goodenow, 1993). This scale has been shortened and adapted in various forms, but generally includes items that capture the extent to which students feel included, accepted, and welcomed at the school. It is important to note that PSSM and other measures of school belonging often capture a more general sense of interactions with teachers and peers, rather than capturing specific experiences, friend groups, or teacher encounters. For example, these scales might ask students to respond to the extent to which they are "included in lots of activities at (name of school)" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 84), rather than asking students to specifically comment on the number, type, or engagement in these activities.

Researchers have investigated school belonging both as an outcome in and of itself—measuring students' sense of school belonging to evaluate how connected they are to school—and as a predictor of other school related outcomes (Slaten et al., 2016). School belonging is associated with a number of aspects of young people's experiences, including peer and teacher support (Wang & Eccles, 2013) and participation in extracurricular activities (Shochet, Smith, Furlong, & Homel, 2011). Additionally, higher levels of school belonging are associated with greater academic motivations (L. H. Anderman, 2003; School Belonging, 2009); lower levels of suicidal ideation, substance use, and depression (Resnick, 1997); and greater optimism (E. M. Anderman, 2002). The importance of school belonging is made clear when compared to other potential predictors of academic success; for example, school belonging was most strongly related to academic success for middle-class African-American students, even when controlling for self-esteem, parental support, and parental educational values (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004). Similarly, school belonging was a strong predictor of positive affect among middle school students (Shochet et al., 2011) and of avoiding risky behaviors such as school conduct problems (Loukas, Roalson, & Herrera, 2010) and cigarette usage, marijuana usage, and alcohol consumption (McNeely & Falci, 2004). Because much of this research is cross-sectional and does not employ experimental design, researchers cannot always make claims about the directionality of these associations: for example, it stands to reason that students with greater academic motivation are more likely to feel a sense of school belonging, as opposed to school belonging leading to greater academic motivation. However, school belonging theory posits that supportive environments foster connection and belongingness, which in turn fosters more distal outcomes such as optimism or psychological adjustment (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997).

Individual and School-Level Predictors of School Belonging

As school belonging is an individual, student-level characteristic that is influenced by context and setting, researchers have endeavored to isolate individual as well as school-level predictors of school belonging. A recent meta-analysis of factors associated with school belonging identified several individual-level variables that have been shown to be significantly associated with school belonging: academic motivation, personal characteristics, parent support, teacher support, peer support, gender, race, and extracurricular activities (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018). . Particularly salient individual predictors include a student's perception of their own safety, engagement with teachers, and interaction with peers, especially in after-school activities (L. H. Anderman, 2003; Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Libbey, 2004; Slaten et al., 2016). Teachers are able to foster an atmosphere of inclusion, acceptance, and support (E. M. Anderman, 2002; Shochet et al., 2011) that is associated with students' increased connection to their schools, especially by holding high expectations and showing genuine concern for students' success (Monahan, Oesterle, & Hawkins, 2010). Students involvement in extracurricular activities, similarly, is positively associated with a sense of school belonging, as their involvement in the goings-on of the school environment may be associated with deeper connections and a stronger sense of identity (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Additionally, students' perceptions of their parents' or guardians' support is also associated with higher levels of school belonging; parental involvement and support was associated with higher levels of school belonging, which were then associated with improved academic adjustment (Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2008).

Additionally, characteristics of the school environment itself can be associated with students' senses of school belonging. For example, students' perceptions of the norms around bullying and safety are associated with school belonging (Cunningham, 2007; Hallinan, 2008; Holt & Espelage, 2003), as are potentially less malleable factors such as location of school (Allen et al., 2018; E. M. Anderman, 2002), size of school (Fowler & Walberg, 1991), and racial and socioeconomic makeup of the school (Benner & Graham, 2011). Although some research has demonstrated that certain school contextual variables can be important, other research indicates that the majority of variation in school belonging occurs within, rather than between, schools (Allen et al., 2018; Ma, 2003) and that school-level factors have a relatively small influence on students' sense of school belonging when compared to individual-level factors (Stewart, 2008). Indeed, much of the research on school belonging documents the importance individual-level predictors, rather than structural or school-level factors (Slaten et al., 2016).

In looking at the predictors of school belonging identified above, many map neatly onto the asset framework of youth development (Scales & Leffert, 1999): for example, asset-based researchers consider strong relationships with teachers, positive experiences with peers, supportive school environment, and constructive use of time in youth programs key assets for healthy adolescent development. It is important to note that researchers on school belonging do not always adopt the language of assets as they discuss correlates of school belonging; however, the asset-based framework may be illuminating in terms of understanding school belonging.

Asset-Based Understandings of Adolescents

In contrast to a deficit-based understanding of youth and their development, positive psychologists focused on the assets that young people have and the ways in which

practitioners can access and increase these assets (Jimerson, Sharkey, Nyborg, & Furlong, 2004). Importantly, these assets take many forms, but one succinct definition of developmental assets is "the positive relationships, opportunities, competencies, values, and self-perceptions that youth need to succeed" (Scales & Leffert, 1999, p. 1). These assets are often incorporated into a strengths framework or an asset framework that identifies the multiple ways young people achieve success through "support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time…commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity" (Scales, 2005, p. 106). This focus on the strengths and assets that young people have and can acquire represents a break from the deficit-model of development that addressed what young people lacked and the ways in which those shortages may be associated with problems (Rose, 2006). Moreover, asset-rich young people are more likely to lead safe, healthy lives, experiencing school success, avoiding violence, and having a healthy relationship with alcohol (Scales, 2005; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Scales, 1999). Assets, of course, can be understood in a number of different ways, and because there are so many potential individual assets—some studies identify and measure up to 40 different assets (Scales & Leffert, 1999)—researchers often limit their focus to a specific subset of domains and the outcomes with which these assets may be associated. For example, research demonstrates that relationships with teachers, especially teachers with high academic expectations, foster academic success for their students (Hallinan, 2008), indicating that addressing boundaries and expectations may be an important aspect of adolescent development. Other research focuses more clearly on the role of social support in youth's success (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986; Solomon, Waysman, & Mikulincer, 1990).

In some ways, researchers on queer youth have picked up this focus on assets, although they may not have labeled their research using this terminology. Scholars have begun to move from examining individual prevalence of negative outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth to investigating potential levers to improve school climate and culture, especially participation in after-school activities, which is a part of the asset framework (Scales, 1999). The most common lever investigated has been Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs; also called Gay-Straight Alliances), student-led organizations for LGBTQ+ students and their allies, supervised by a member of the school staff. Such research has moved beyond examining individual prevalence of negative outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth to investigating potential levers to improve school climate and culture. Still, quantitative evaluations of these student-led organizations for LGBTQ+ students and their allies have primarily focused on students' experiences of victimization (Portnoy, 2012; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012; Walls et al., 2013), drug use (Heck et al., 2014) and mental health (Poteat et al., 2013; Walls et al., 2013). Qualitative research, however, has focused more explicitly on positive aspects of students' experiences within the GSA and the ways in which participation in a GSA led them to feel more empowered, connected, and supported (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Mayberry et al., 2013; J. B. Mayo, 2013). This focus on extra-curricular activities and on the positive associations between involvement and life outcomes fits into the larger understanding of asset-based research, and as research has demonstrated the relationship between after-school activities and school belonging (Eccles & Barber, 1999), this work fits into our understandings of students' connections to school.

Key Assets for Adolescent Healthy Development

Researchers have identified several key assets that are especially important for healthy development: strong relationships with non-parental adults (e.g., teachers), positive experiences with peers, a supportive school environment, and constructive use of time in youth programs (Scales, 2005; Scales & Leffert, 1999). Indeed, some research on asset-based understanding of youth has focused specifically on these assets, asserting "While this deficits model is important, it should ideally be complemented by addressing assets; those factors that develop resilience and promote positive health and wellbeing, such as participating in leisure activities, enjoying a positive school environment and ease of communication with family and friends" (Anderson & Thurston, 2011, p. 30), arguing that a focus on these specific assets are tantamount for promoting youth wellbeing. Strong relationships with teachers have long been understood to promote increased learning, engagement, and positive academic outcomes for students (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Danielsen, Wiium, Wilhelmsen, & Wold, 2010; Hallinan, 2008; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003). Similarly, research demonstrates that supportive relationships with peers play an important part in the development of healthy adolescents (Bolger, Patterson, & Kupersmidt, 1998; B. Brown & Larson, 2009; Cohen et al., 1986; Criss, Pettit, Bates, Dodge, & Lapp, 2002; Solomon et al., 1990; Stewart, 2008). A supportive school environment—another of the key assets in the framework—is also associated with positive outcomes for adolescents, both in terms of academic attainment and long-term health and wellbeing (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; McNeely & Falci, 2004; Voelkl, 1995). Additionally, participation in after-school activities is associated with positive outcomes later in life, including school adjustment, psychosocial wellbeing, and

interpersonal skills (Barber et al., 2005; Bartko & Eccles, 2003; R. Brown & Evans, 2002; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Fredricks & Eccles, 2005).

It is important to note, additionally, that researchers identify "bonding to school" (Scales, 1999, p. 144) as an asset, defining this connection to school simply as caring about their school. School bonding is a related—but distinct—concept to school belonging (Jimerson et al., 2003; Libbey, 2004). Some define school bonding as "attachment and commitment…an emotional link to school…[and] an investment in the group" (Libbey, 2004, p. 274). Additionally, school belonging represents "the degree of closeness or attachment to teachers and commitment to conventional school goals" (Jimerson et al., 2003, p. 8). This sometimes includes academic indicators, indicators of how much students enjoy school and like their teachers, and other measures of the degree to which students are attached to school. This construct is separate from school belonging (Jimerson et al., 2003; Libbey, 2004), as it focuses primarily on feelings of enjoyment and attachment, rather than a sense of inclusion, support, and acceptance (Goodenow, 1993). Although school belonging is not an asset in and of itself, researchers have demonstrated that programs designed to target and enhance young people's development of assets have been associated with higher reports of school belonging (Lapan, Gysbers, & Petroski, 2001; Lapan, Gysbers, & Sun, 1997), demonstrating the notion that school belonging may be associated with the presence or cultivation of assets.

School Belonging and Queer Youth

Unlike the research on heterosexual, cisgender students' sense of school belonging and their assets that contribute to it, there has been limited research addressing queer students' sense of school belonging and their assets. Some research indicates that sexual minority youth are at risk for lower school belonging when compared to their heterosexual

peers (Galliher, Rostosky, & Hughes, 2004). Other research complicates this, indicating that sexual orientation appears to be associated with lower rates of school belonging for adolescent girls, but not for adolescent boys (Aerts, Van Houtte, Dewaele, Cox, & Vincke, 2012). Additionally, students' perceptions of a school's openness to diversity and friendliness to LGB students are also associated with higher reports of school belonging for LGB youth (Aerts et al., 2012). Same-sex attracted, school-age youth reported poorer social relationships with their peers (Bos, Sandfort, de Bruyn, & Hakvoort, 2008), although researchers did not address whether these peer relationships impacted school belonging. In another study, though, homophobic victimization also predicted a lower sense of school belonging for queer adolescent boys, but not for girls (Poteat & Espelage, 2007). More recent research demonstrates that school belonging seems to mediate the relationship between peer victimization and mental health issues for LGBTQ+ youth (Hatchel, Espelage, & Huang, 2018; Hatchel, Valido, De Pedro, Huang, & Espelage, 2018). These studies of school belonging for queer students offer a groundwork for future work, but do not endeavor to explore queer students' assets that may be associated with school belonging or work to disentangle the relative importance of such assets. Additionally, these studies have not explored the extent to which sexual identity may moderate the relationship between students' assets and their sense of school belonging.

Additional research on school belonging for queer students in relation to their cisgender, heterosexual peers is necessary to better understand the potential assets and strengths that queer students have. School belonging has been associated with positive outcomes and developmental growth for all students and for marginalized students, and therefore should be better understood with relation to LGBTQ+ youth. For example, although research on GSAs often acknowledges the healthy growth that occurs within these

spaces, there has to date been limited information about the impact of participation in these clubs relative to other aspects of the school environment in terms of predicting school belonging. Although researchers have shown evidence of which individual- and school-level factors may promote school belonging for all students, research has not yet endeavored to understand the relative impacts of these factors. Additionally, although there is preliminary evidence that school belonging serves to buffer LGBTQ+ youth from the deleterious effects of bullying, what factors and assets contribute to LGBTQ+ youth's sense of school belonging has not been addressed.

Current Study

In order to design, implement, and advocate for policies and programming that best serve queer youth, we must first understand the relative impacts of student- and school-level influences on queer youth's experiences in schools. Although a body of literature has done diligent and robust work in understanding the victimization, substance use, and mental health concerns of queer youth in school, considerably less attention has been paid to the ways in which queer youth may fit into existing understandings of school belonging, as has been examined for straight youth in schools.

The current study aims to bring queer students into the discussion of asset-based understandings of students' experiences in schools, specifically focusing on the assets that may be predictive of school belonging. By examining the predictors of school belonging for all students and for queer students specifically, we can better understand the ways in which queer students' experiences in schools may be associated with similar assets to their straight peers or if sexuality moderates the relationship between assets and school belonging. By situating queer students within the study of school belonging, this study works to correct the deficit-focused research that has dominated the field of queer

adolescent development and incorporate more students into research that focuses on strengths. Additionally, by directly addressing key levers that may increase queer students' belonging in school, the current study works to understand potential policies and interventions that may best benefit queer students and their straight peers. This study examines the relative impact of student- and school-level factors that predict school belonging for all students, as well as the differential impacts of any of these factors for queer students. The paper draws on cross-sectional survey data from middle and high school students in Washington, D.C. collected in winter of 2017.

It is important to note that this study employs multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM) to robustly examine main effects and interaction effects in predicting school belonging. MSEM uses latent variables to allow researchers to decompose all main effects into their unbiased student- and school-level components (Preacher, Zhang, & Zyphur, 2016), rather than conflating or averaging these components. This offers two benefits. First, it enables the straightforward calculation of standardized regression coefficients at all levels, which in turn allows for researchers to compare the relative impact of main effects, determining which predictors are stronger or weaker relative to other predictors. Additionally, this enables researchers to examine the interactions between predictors at each level, without averaging the interaction effects inappropriately. For example, in traditional multilevel modeling (MLM), any interaction term is reported as one coefficient, which may be misleading as it is actually the average of four coefficients—the level-1 interaction between the level-1 components of the two predictors, the two cross-level interactions between the level-1 components of one predictor and the level-2 components of the other predictor and vice versa, and the level-2 interaction between the

level-2 components of the two predictors. MSEM separates out these interaction terms, allowing researchers to examine each interaction rather than the average of the four. Therefore, the current study addresses the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What individual- and school-level factors are associated with students' sense of school belonging? Which factors are most predictive of students' sense of school belonging?

Research Question 2: To what extent does sexual orientation moderate the relationships between predictors of school belonging? That is, is there a significant interaction between sexual orientation and predictors of school belonging?

Methods

Data

The data for this study were drawn from the year 2 data collection (winter 2017) of the Improving School Climate in D.C. project (ISC-DC), a collaborative project between the D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), Child Trends, and Safe School Certification, funded through a grant from the National Institute of Justice's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative. Students from 13 middle schools and six high schools responded to the U.S. Department of Education's School Climate Survey (EDSCLS). EDSCLS is a robust, pilot-tested measure of school climate used nationally, and it addresses three domains of school climate: engagement, safety, and environment. In addition to the five demographic and 68 school climate EDSCLS questions, the protocol added sexual orientation and gender questions, which were piloted to ensure their accurate capturing of gender and sexual orientation information for respondents (Temkin et al., 2017), and survey items from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System to address experiences of bullying and victimization at school.

All procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Child Trends. The data collection focused on all students in seventh and eighth grades (middle schools) or ninth and tenth grades (high schools), at schools that voluntarily agreed to participate in the project. Schools additionally had the option to survey other grades, resulting in survey responses from students in grades 6 through 11. Parents received a letter informing them of the data collection and allowed them to opt their child out of the survey by returning a letter to the school (passive consent). Students were asked to provide assent to participate through a web-based form prior to completing the survey. Surveys were administered via a web-based platform in school with a proctor present.

Sample

Prior to analysis, the sample was filtered to remove participants who did not respond to school climate questions (n = 16), who gave the same response for over 90% of the school climate outcomes (n = 8), or who indicated that they were enrolled in a grade that was not offered at their school (n = 30). These responses were not useful in this analysis either because they did not provide sufficient information, they indicated that students were not truly reading the questions, or because students might be mischievous responders. This yielded a sample of 2,464 students in 19 schools.

Measures

The self-report student and school variables are drawn from EDSCLS, the YRBS, and the additional sexual orientation and gender identity measures.

Student variables. Student demographic variables included student's grade, race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Grade was an ordinal measure denoting student's grade from 5th to 12th. Race and ethnicity were coded into seven categories (Non-Hispanic White, Non-Hispanic Black or African-American, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or

Pacific Islander, Native American or Alaskan Native, Asian American, and Multiracial). Student's gender was coded into three categories (male, female, and transgender) based on students' responses to two questions ("What is your current gender identity, even if it is different than the gender you were born as?" with Male, Female, Not sure yet, and I do not identify as either male or female as response choices; "What gender were you at birth, even if you are not that gender today? That is, what is the gender on your birth certificate?" with Male and Female as response choices). Students who indicated that they did not identify as either male or female, as well as students whose sex assigned at birth did not match their current gender identity, were coded as transgender. Students' sexual orientation was measured by one question ("Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?" with Straight (that is, not gay), Gay or Lesbian, Bisexual, I am not sure yet, and Something else (e.g., asexual, aromantic, pansexual, etc.) as response choices). This was dichotomized into Straight and LGBQ+.

The outcome variable of interest is student belonging, a seven-item scale that measured the extent to which students felt a part of their school. Items included "I feel like I belong," "Students at this school get along well with each other," "I am happy to be at this school," and "I feel like I am a part of this school," with a response scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree) (Cronbach's alpha = .84).

Predictor variables of interest are the following assets: experiencing bullying (analogous to the inverse of supportive peer relationships), relationships with teachers, relationships with students, participation in after-school activities, perception of school's openness to diversity, and perception of the bullying climate at school. Experiencing bullying was measured by a single item ("Since the start of the current school year, have you been bullied on school property?" with binary responses of yes and no). Relationships

with teachers was measured by a five-item scale (items included "Teachers understand my problems," "It is easy to talk to teachers," "My teachers care about me," with a response scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree) (Cronbach's alpha = .82)). Relationships with students was measured by a two-item scale ("Students at this school like one another" and "Students at this school respect one another" with a response scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree) (Pearson's correlation = .70)). Participation in after-school activities was measured by a five-item scale (items included "I regularly attend school-sponsored events," "I regularly participate in extra-curriculars," and "There are lots of chances for students at this school to get involved in sports, clubs, and other school activities outside of class," with a response scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree) (Cronbach's alpha = .65)). Perception of school's openness to diversity was measured by a four-item scale (items included "All students are treated the same, regardless of whether their parents are rich or poor," "People of different cultural backgrounds get along well at this school," and "Boys and girls are treated equally well," with a response scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree) (Cronbach's alpha = .71)). Perception of school's bullying climate was measured by a six-item scale (items included "Students at this school are teased or picked on about their cultural background or religion," "Students at this school are teased or picked on about their physical or mental disability," and "Students often spread mean rumors or lies about others at this school on the internet (i.e., Facebook™ , email, and instant message)," with a response scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree) (Cronbach's alpha = .86)).

School variables. To account for the general school climate in which students found themselves, several individual demographic and predictor variables that have been shown to be theoretically salient were aggregated to the school-level to serve as school

variables. Indeed, prior research has included student compositional characteristics in their understandings of students' school experiences (Geller, Voight, Wegman, & Nation, 2013), as youth's individual perceptions and beliefs about their schooling environment may both reflect and influence the greater school climate (Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009). Because school belonging may be associated with the racial composition of the school (Bonny, Britto, Klostermann, Hornung, & Slap, 2000) and because it stands to reason that queer students may feel a greater sense of belonging to schools with more queer students, the study aggregates these demographic variables to considers a school's proportion of racial and ethnic minority students and queer students. Because a school's bullying norms and bullying prevalence are associated with school belonging (Cunningham, 2007; Hallinan, 2008; Holt & Espelage, 2003), the study aggregates both students' reporting of experiencing bullying and their perceptions of the bullying climate at school. Additionally, because a school's openness to diversity is associated with students' reports of school belonging (Aerts et al., 2012), the study aggregates individual students' perceptions of the school's openness to diversity to obtain a school-level openness score. Finally, because relational characteristics could differ across schools, an additional model that included aggregates of relationships with teachers, relationships with peers, and after-school activity participation was run as a sensitivity analysis to determine if these features impacted the model. This aggregation allows the comparison of individual student responses within and between schools, as well as school averages across schools.

Because there are not clear indications of best practices, a sensitivity analysis was conducted for level-2 predictors: researchers tested one model with only aggregates of race and sexual orientation; one model with race, sexual orientation, experiencing bullying, bullying climate, and openness to diversity; and one model with race, sexual orientation,

experiencing bullying, bullying climate, openness to diversity, relationships with teachers, relationships with peers, and participation in after-school activities.

Missing Data

Missing data ranged from 0.2% to 7.5%. Data were missing completely at random (MCAR), as Little's MCAR test was non-significant (χ^2 = 1302.01, *df* = 1280, p = .33). To account for missing data, multiple imputation in SPSS 25 was used to create five datasets, and the imputed data were pooled to give averages across datasets.

Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics. Before addressing the substantive research questions of the study, descriptive statistics for all students and schools were obtained using SPSS 25. Percentages were obtained for all demographic variables, and means and standard deviations were obtained for outcome and predictor variables. These were obtained for the entire sample of students, and then for subgroups (straight and queer students) in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively.

Multilevel modeling. To address the substantive research questions of the study, multilevel modeling (MLM) was utilized. Multilevel structural equation modeling (MSEM) was conducted in Mplus 8 using Bayesian estimation, as this is best practice for investigating interactions among predictor variables in MLM as it allows researchers to decompose effects into unbiased Level 1—student—and Level 2—school— components using latent variables, unlike maximium likelihood estimation (Preacher et al., 2016). By decomposing effects into unbiased Level 1 and Level 2 components, researchers are able to obtain standardized coefficient estimates and are able to partition variance in order to appropriately calculate interaction effects between Level 1 and Level 2 predictors and

among different Level 1 predictors, as needed to answer the second research question of this study.

Following best practices (Preacher et al., 2016), MSEMs were estimated in Mplus 8 using TWOLEVEL RANDOM models with Bayesian estimators. First, a null model was estimated in order to determine the interclass coefficient (ICC) to determine if MLM were necessary. Following that, a full MSEM model with all level-one predictors was constructed with random intercepts and fixed slopes. Then, additional models were constructed to test level-two predictors, following the sensitivity analysis described above. These models were constructed to answer the first research question, as standardized coefficients would allow for the comparison of demographic and predictor variables to determine which variables most greatly predicted students' sense of school belonging. Second, interaction models were constructed, testing each predictor variables and its interaction with sexual orientation to answer the second research question. Using MSEM, interaction effects were decomposed into their component parts, meaning that for each interaction tested, four separate interaction terms were constructed. For example, when testing the interaction between experiencing bullying and sexual orientation, the model tests four interactions: the level-1 interaction between the level-1 components of bullying and sexual orientation, the two cross-level interactions between the level-1 components of bullying and the level-2 components of sexual orientation and vice versa, and the level-2 interaction between the level-2 components of bullying and sexual orientation. In this way, each individual interaction term could be tested, rather than the average of the four interactions, as is tested in tradition MLM interaction testing (Preacher et al., 2016).

Results

Descriptive Statistics for Students

The final sample included 2,464 students from 19 schools. The sample was 45.7% cisgender male, 51.4% cisgender female, and 1.5% transgender or gender non-conforming (TGNC). The sample was 82.1% straight and 17.9% lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ). The sample ranged from sixth to eleventh grade, with the majority of students (38.5%) in seventh grade. The sample was 44.2% non-Hispanic Black, 22.6% non-Hispanic White, 20.6% Hispanic, 3.2% Asian-American, 0.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 0.2% Indigenous American or Alaskan Native, and 9.0% multiracial. For additional information about the sample, please see Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics

Characteristic	Students (*n* = 2,464)
Grade level, mean *(SD)*	7.84 *(1.10)*
Sixth grade	151 (6.1%)
Seventh grade	947 (38.4%)
Eighth grade	814 (33.0%)
Ninth grade	264 (10.7%)
Tenth grade	264 (10.7%)
Eleventh grade	21 (0.9%)
Gender	
Cis-gender male	1,126 (45.7%)
Cis-gender female	1,267 (51.4%)
Transgender	36 (1.5%)
Sexuality	
LGBQ	422 (17.9%)
Straight	1,927 (82.1%)
Race	
Non-Hispanic white	542 (22.6%)
Non-Hispanic black	1,063 (44.2%)
Hispanic	494 (20.6%)
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	*
Indian/Alaskan Native	*
Asian-American	76 (3.2%)
Multiracial	217 (9.0%)

*For *n*'s less than 10, data has been redacted per the DCPS guidelines.

For the outcome of interest, school belonging, the average score was 19.30 (SD = 4.01) with a range from 7 to 28 out of a possible score of 28. When asked about experiencing bullying, 19.6% of the sample reported having been bullied since the start of the school year. The average score for relationships with teachers was 20.40 (SD = 3.72), with a range from 7 to 28 out of a possible score of 28. For relationships with students, the average score was 4.92 (SD = 1.33), with a range from 2 to 8 out of a possible score of 8. The average score for participation was 14.55 (SD = 2.60), with a range from 5 to 20 out of a possible score of 20. For perceptions of climate of diversity, the average score was 11.55 (SD = 2.32) with a range of 4 to 16 out of a possible score of 16. For perceptions of

bullying climate, the average score was 13.77 (SD = 4.03), with a range from 6 to 24 out of a possible score of 24.

When comparing queer students and their straight peers, queer students had significantly lower senses of school belonging (for straight students: m= 19.42, SD = 3.98; for queer students: m = 18.63, SD = 4.12; F = 13.39, p = .000). Additionally, queer students experienced significantly more bullying than their straight peers (for straight students: m=0.20, SD = 0.39; for queer students: m = 0.26, SD = 0.43; F = 7.72, p = .006). It is important to note that this rate of bullying is lower than has been found in other studies; in one recent study, 70.1% of queer youth reported being verbally harassed at school and 28.9% reported being physically harassed at school (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). Because bullying in this study was not specifically operationalized as either verbal or physical—instead it was simply termed generic "bullying"—it is hard to know if students in this study are reporting their experience of verbal harassment, physical harassment, or a mix of the two. Additionally, other predictors were not significantly different between straight and queer students; for outcome and predictors, please see Table 2.

Table 2
Comparison of Straight and Queer Students' Outcome and Predictors

	Straight Students	LGBQ Students	LGBQ vs Straight	
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	F	p-value
School Belonging	19.42 (3.98)	18.63 (4.12)	13.39	.000
Having Experienced Bullying	.20 (.39)	.26 (.43)	7.72	.006
Relationships with Teachers	20.40 (3.73)	20.18 (3.69)	1.22	.270
Relationships with Peers	4.93 (1.33)	4.82 (1.34)	2.38	.123
Participation in After-School Activities	14.57 (2.64)	14.51 (2.43)	.14	.710
Perceptions of School Diversity	11.54 (2.33)	11.47 (2.37)	.27	.602
Bullying Climate at School	13.71 (4.08)	14.12 (3.86)	3.70	.054

Descriptive Statistics for Schools

The final sample included students from 19 schools. Although the models account for the nesting of the student-level data and model the variation among schools, some detail concerning the range of demographic information and variables may be instructive. Table 3 provides the ranges for demographics and predictor and outcome variables across schools to give a sense of the variability among schools.

Table 3
Demographic Characteristics and Variables

Characteristic	Total Students (n = 2,464)	School Minimum	School Maximum	School Median
Grade level, mean *(SD)*	7.84 *(1.10)*	6.90	9.71	7.44
Gender				
Cis-gender male	1,126 (45.7%)	33.3%	56.6%	45.0%
Cis-gender female	1,267 (51.4%)	40.3%	62.1%	50.7%
Transgender	36 (1.5%)	0.0%	5.6%	0.9%
Sexuality				
LGBQ	422 (17.9%)	8.7%	24.1%	14.3%
Straight	1,927 (82.1%)	66.7%	89.5%	79.0%
Race				
Non-Hispanic white	542 (22.6%)	0.0%	45.1%	0.8%
Non-Hispanic black	1,063 (44.2%)	20.7%	91.3%	57.9%
Hispanic	494 (20.6%)	0.0%	68.1%	11.8%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	*	*	*	*
Indian/Alaskan Native	*	*	*	*
Asian-American	76 (3.2%)	0.0%	8.1%	0.0%
Multiracial	217 (9.0%)	0.8%	15.0%	9.3%
School belonging, mean *(SD)*	19.30 *(4.01)*	15.54	21.05	20.02
Being bullied, mean *(SD)*	483 (19.6%)	4.10%	37.0%	22.3%
Teacher Relationships, mean *(SD)*	20.40 *(3.72)*	17.68	21.42	20.58
Peer Relationships, mean *(SD)*	4.92 *(1.33)*	3.93	5.74	4.95
Diversity Climate, mean *(SD)*	11.55 *(2.32)*	9.86	12.49	11.98
Participation, mean *(SD)*	14.55 *(2.60)*	13.30	15.68	14.23
Bullying Climate, mean *(SD)*	13.77 *(4.03)*	10.77	16.41	13.65

*For n's less than 10, data has been redacted per the DCPS guidelines.

Multilevel Structural Equation Modeling

The first step of any multilevel modeling project is the calculation of the intraclass coefficient (ICC), which provides a sense of the proportion of variance that is between, rather than within, schools. It can also be understood as the relative importance of the level-two nesting variable in the null model. For the null, two-level model, the ICC for school belonging was 7.8% (ICC = .078). This is a relatively low ICC, but it is not so small as to be insignificant, and for both theoretical and empirical reasons, multilevel modeling was pursued.

In order to understand the relative weights of each of the predictors of school belonging, a multilevel structural equation model was constructed with standardized coefficients. This standardization permits the comparison of predictors to provide a sense of their relative importance on the outcome variable of interest, and decomposing the variables into their latent variable components allows for unbiased estimates of the predictors.

Research Question One: Individual- and School-level Predictors of School Belonging

In order to answer the first research question—the extent to which school belonging was predicted by individual- and school-level factors—several multilevel structural equation models were constructed. First, a full model with all individual-level predictors was constructed, offering insight into the student-level variables that may be associated with school belonging. Subsequent models were constructed to introduce school-level predictors into the model. At the student level, sexual orientation, having experienced bullying, relationships with teachers, relationships with students, participation in after-school activities, perceptions of bullying climate, and perceptions of diversity were significant predictors of school belonging. Grade and being Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander were significant demographic predictors. Gender and all other racial identities were not significant predictors of school belonging. At the school level, no predictors in any of the sensitivity analyses were significant; that is, the aggregate values for the demographic and student-level variables did not significantly predict differences in school belonging, regardless of which model they were entered into. See Tables 3 and 4 for the coefficients and significances.

Table 4
Results of the Level One Predictors in the Multilevel Regression of School Belonging

Predictor	β	*p*	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Sig.
Being Bullied	-0.082	.000	-0.117	-0.049	*
Teacher Relationships	0.369	.000	0.324	0.413	*
Peer Relationships	0.409	.000	0.377	0.446	*
Diversity Climate	0.086	.000	0.042	0.123	*
Participation	0.306	.000	0.267	0.342	*
Bullying Climate	0.115	.000	-0.153	-0.079	*
LGB Status	-0.07	.000	-0.101	-0.04	*
Grade	-0.035	.005	-0.068	-0.006	*
Race					
Black	0.012	.285	-0.035	0.052	
Hispanic	0.016	.19	-0.019	0.052	
Native Hawaiian	-0.03	.025	-0.061	-0.00	*
Indigenous	-0.012	.2	-0.038	0.022	
Asian-American	0.004	.43	-0.032	0.029	
Multiracial	0.007	.315	-0.027	0.04	
Gender					
Cis-Female	0.024	.075	-0.006	0.055	
Trans	-0.016	.105	-0.045	0.018	

Note. For race, white is the reference category; for gender, male is the reference category

Table 5
Results of the Level Two Predictors in the Multilevel Regression of School Belonging

Predictor	β	*p*	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Being Bullied	0.00	.495	-0.392	0.42
Teacher Relationships	0.004	.485	-0.494	0.502
Peer Relationships	0.002	.48	-0.578	0.567
Diversity Climate	-0.001	.485	-0.507	0.387
Participation	0.003	.48	-0.465	0.452
Bullying Climate	-0.001	.485	-0.528	0.453
LGB Status	0.00	.445	-0.428	0.341
Race				
Black	0.002	.445	-0.523	0.517
Hispanic	0.001	.46	-0.463	0.44
Native Hawaiian	0.00	.435	-0.322	0.277
Indigenous	0.00	.47	-0.317	0.36
Asian-American	0.00	.45	-0.454	0.392
Multiracial	0.00	.49	-0.422	0.339

Note. For race, white is the reference category. These results reflect the coefficients from the fullest model. The coefficients presented here indicate the coefficients for the full model with all level-two predictors, although level-two predictors were added in blocks At no point during the sensitivity analysis did any of the level-two predictors approach significance.

Among the significant predictors, the strongest predictors were relationships with students (β = 0.41; SD = 0.02; p <0.000), relationships with teachers (β = 0.37; SD = 0.02; p < .000), participation in after-school activities (β = 0.31; SD = 0.02; p <.000), and perceptions of bullying climate (β = 0.12; SD = 0.02; p <.000). Students' perception of diversity (β = 0.09; SD = 0.02; p <.000), having experienced bullying (β = -0.08; SD = 0.02; p <.000), and being LGBQ (β = -0.07; SD = 0.02; p <.000) were also significant predictors of school belonging. Grade (β = -0.04; SD = 0.02; p = .005) and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander status (β = -0.03; SD = 0.02; p = .025) were significant demographic predictors.

This indicates that students who reported strong relationships with teachers and peers, who participated in after-school activities, and who rated their school's bullying climate as positive reported significantly higher senses of school belonging than their peers who did not. Additionally, these predictors were highly predictive relative to the other significant predictors in the model. Students who perceived their school's diversity climate as positive also reported significantly higher senses of school belonging than their peers who did not, although this predictor was not as strong relative to the other significant predictors in the model. Students who were bullied and were LGBQ reported significantly lower school belonging than their non-bullied and straight peers, although these predictors were not as strong as relationships with peers and teachers or participation in after-school activities. Older students and students who were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander reported significantly lower school belonging than their younger and white peers, although these predictors were weak relative to the other significant predictors in the model.

Research Question Two: The Moderating Effect of Sexual Orientation

In order to understand if sexual orientation moderated the relationship between significant predictors and school belonging, additional MSEMs were constructed. These models tested if the interaction between being LGBQ and significant predictors was significant; that is, they determined whether the impact of being bullied, relationships with teachers, relationships with peers, diversity climate, participation, bullying climate, and grade was different for queer students' sense of belonging than for their straight peers'. This is important as it indicates whether the relationships between assets and school belonging are different for queer youth. Each of these interaction terms was non-significant; this indicates that, for all significant predictor variables, sexual orientation does not moderate the relationship between the significant predictor and school belonging. For

example, this indicates that the relationship between participation in after-school and school belonging is not significantly different for LGBQ+ students than for their straight peers. See Table 6 for these coefficients.

Table 6
Coefficients from Multilevel Interactions for Significant Predictors

Predictor	β	*p*	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Sig.
Being Bullied					
Level 1 x Level 1	-0.250	.500	-0.906	0.842	
Level 1 BB x Level 2 LGB	-0.031	.476	-0.823	0.761	
Level 2 BB x Level 1 LGB	-0.134	.370	-0.728	0.582	
Level 2 x Level 2	.007	.496	-1.750	2.425	
Teacher Relationships					
Level 1 x Level 1	0.222	.495	-0.581	0.817	
Level 1 TR x Level 2 LGB	-0.253	.316	-0.913	0.674	
Level 2 TR x Level 1 LGB	0.981	.228	-0.992	0.999	
Level 2 x Level 2	0.000	.499	-0.324	0.394	
Peer Relationships x LGB					
Level 1 x Level 1	-0.274	.452	-0.661	0.722	
Level 1 PR x Level 2 LGB	-0.353	.269	-0.924	0.723	
Level 2 PR x Level 1 LGB	-0.789	.341	-0.994	0.983	
Level 2 x Level 2	0.001	.469	-1.610	1.029	
Diversity Climate					
Level 1 x Level 1	-0.002	.499	-0.665	0.537	
Level 1 DC x Level 2 LGB	-0.315	.262	-0.907	0.600	
Level 2 DC x Level 1 LGB	0.725	.407	-0.993	0.995	
Level 2 x Level 2	0.000	.497	-0.423	0.383	
Participation					
Level 1 x Level 1	-0.079	.373	-0.419	0.342	
Level 1 P x Level 2 LGB	-0.490	.164	-0.950	0.473	
Level 2 P x Level 1 LGB	0.988	.184	-0.993	0.999	
Level 2 x Level 2	-0.003	.479	-0.672	0.443	
Bullying Climate*					
Level 1 x Level 1					
Level 1 BC x Level 2 LGB					
Level 2 BC x Level 1 LGB					
Level 2 x Level 2					
Grade					
Level 1 x Level 1	-0.242	.273	-0.741	0.421	
Level 1 G x Level 2 LGB	-0.717	.266	-0.977	0.019	
Level 2 G x Level 1 LGB	0.965	.101	-0.881	0.996	
Level 2 x Level 2	0.021	.467	-1.046	1.289	

*The model for bullying climate did not converge, even when provided starting values and over 150,000 iterations.

Discussion

For this sample of Washington, D.C., middle and high school students, the strongest predictors of school belonging were relationships with peers, relationships with teachers, participation in after-school activities, and perceptions of the bullying climate at school. Weaker predictors of school belonging were students' perceptions of school openness to diversity, having experienced bullying, and being LGBQ. Additionally, being in a younger grade and being Native Hawaiian were slightly associated with lower school belonging. Gender—or being trans—was not associated with lower school belonging, although this may be due to low numbers of trans respondents. School-level aggregates, regardless of the model into which they were entered, were not significant predictors of school belonging. These findings are important as they indicate the importance of certain facets of all students' school experiences: for all students, straight and queer alike, strong relationships with peers and teachers, involvement in after-school activities, and perceiving that school is a place where bullying is not tolerated and where people are open to diversity. These findings also indicate that queer youth do have lower senses of school belonging than their straight peers and that all students who experience bullying report lower senses of school belonging than students who do not, but again, it is important to keep in mind the relative impact of these predictors.

Additionally, these data do not support the idea that the predictors of school belonging differ significantly for LGBQ+ youth and their heterosexual peers. This indicates, for example, that although bullying may affect LGBTQ+ youth differently than their straight peers in terms of depressive symptoms (Patrick et al., 2013), it does not appear to impact their sense of school belonging in a way that is different from their peers. We should be cautious not to over-read such findings to state that sexual orientation does

not matter for school belonging, as LGBQ+ students did have significant lower scores on school belonging than their heterosexual peers, but rather that sexual orientation does not moderate other predictors of school belonging. Nonetheless, it is important to note that sexual orientation does not interact with any of the significant predictors to moderate their relationships with school belonging; that is, bullying, for example, is not a stronger predictor of school belonging for LGBQ students than for their heterosexual peers. This is important for a number of reasons. For one, it pushes back against a deficit framing of queer youth: they do not have fewer assets, or significantly lower scores on any measures of their assets, than their straight peers. This indicates that research into queer youth and their assets should not approach queer youth as deficient or lacking; hypotheses need not suggest that queer youth have fewer assets than their straight peers or are less likely, for example, to have supportive relationships with their teachers or peers. Additionally, this suggests that queer youth's school belonging is predicted in a similar way as their straight peers; that is, the assets that are salient for them are no more or less salient for their straight peers. This, too, is important, especially as researchers and practitioners consider interventions that intend to serve queer youth: although homophobic bullying should certain be a focus, researchers should also consider the importance of supportive relationships with students and peers, especially as these relationships are equally important for queer and straight students alike. This finding concerning the lack of interaction between sexuality and bullying may be surprising, especially as considerable literature has documented the deleterious and dangerous effects of homophobic bullying (Dempsey, 1994; Poteat & Espelage, 2007). Again, it is important to note that the rates of bullying for this sample (26% of queer students reported experiencing bullying) may contribute to this finding. Nonetheless, it is important to note that queer students were still

more likely to experience bullying and more likely to have lower sense of school belonging; the findings simply indicate that for this sample, sexual orientation did not moderate the relationship between bullying and sense of school belonging. Further research could explore whether this is particular to this sample—perhaps due to geography or relatively low rates of bullying among queer students—or if it holds true in other settings.

Many of these findings are in keeping with the broader literature on school belonging, especially in highlighting the importance of relationships with peers and teachers. In work with middle school students, researchers found that a community of mutual respect among students was associated with greater school belonging (Anderman, 2003). Similarly, in work with college first years, researchers highlighted the salience of student-teacher relationships in predicting higher levels of school belonging (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). Additionally, research on students' participation in school has linked increased involvement in extracurricular activities with greater levels of school belonging (R. Brown & Evans, 2002).

More telling, potentially, are the weaker predictors and non-significant predictors of school belonging, as they may offer insight into potential misconceptions. In the model, students' perceptions of school openness to diversity, having experienced bullying, and being LGBQ were significant but fairly weak predictors of school belonging. This may be meaningful both in terms of theory and practice. Because so much research on LGBTQ+ youth focuses on their experiences of bullying and the deleterious consequences of their victimization in schools, one may be tempted to consider that experiencing bullying would be a very strong predictor of school belonging. Nonetheless, it was one of the weakest predictors. Although having experienced bullying is associated with lower school belonging, the strength of the association is five times weaker than students' relationships

with peers. Similarly weak was LGBQ status, indicating that although identifying as non-heterosexual is associated with lower school belonging, the relative influence of sexuality was almost one-sixth of that of student relationships. It is important to note that these findings do not indicate that sexuality or experiencing bullying do not matter, but rather that they matter much less than the current conversation around LGBTQ+ youth might lead one to believe.

The weak and specific significance of race and grade is surprising, especially as prior research has documented that race and ethnicity may play a role in school belonging (R. Brown & Evans, 2002) and that school belonging tends to decrease as students' grade increases (Anderman, 2003). However, much of the research on grade, race, and gender is mixed, and researchers have documented no clear, decisive patterns (School Belonging, 2009). Additionally, the non-significance of school-level factors is also noteworthy: according to these findings, a school's racial or sexuality composition has no bearing on students' sense of school belonging, nor do the aggregate levels of student relationships, teacher relationships, climate of bullying, openness to diversity, or experiences of bullying. This is not to say that school belonging does not vary at the school level, as it does, but rather that this variance is not due to school-level characteristics. These data do not support the notion that the more open nature of some schools, or the higher prevalence of bullying at others, is associated with changes in students' reporting of school belonging.

It may be instructive to note that these findings are also in keeping with the broader literature on positive youth development (PYD), the theoretical framework that offers a focus on adolescents' resources and growth and that identifies six key components: competence, confidence, character, caring, connection, and contribution (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005a; Lerner et al., 2002). PYD encompasses more than just school

belonging, as it focuses on the growth that occurs when young people are engaged in supportive, prosocial activities and acknowledges that all adolescents have the ability to have full lives (Damon, 2004). However, one of the key components of PYD is connection, the notion that young people feel a sense of social and emotional bonding to the settings in which they find themselves and the people who surround them (Lerner et al., 2002). This connection can be understood in a variety of ways, as young people are involved in and could feel connections to a variety of settings, but as young people spend much of their time in school, some PYD researchers investigate students' connections to their schools. This focus on school belonging—rather than, for example, on school disconnectedness, truancy, or delinquency—is in keeping with the tenets of PYD and enables researchers to understand the growth young people experience in schools. Moreover, school belonging aligns with the relative plasticity and acknowledgement of context that is central to PYD (Lerner et al., 2002); school belonging is not a fixed trait, but rather an adaptable one that can shift and change in response to a host of interactions between an individual and their multiple contexts, including peers, teachers, administrators, and larger school community. Because the current study offers support for the idea that queer youth may fit into one specific model of PYD, future research should explore the extent to which our understanding of queer youth may be informed by other aspects of PYD.

Strengths

This study represents an important contribution to the literature on school belonging, especially in expanding the focus on LGBTQ+ youth's development. Drawing on a dataset that robustly measures sexual orientation and gender identity, this research is able to make descriptive and inferential claims about LGBTQ+ students and their cisgender, heterosexual peers. Further, this work draws on MSEM, employing cutting edge

statistical methods to ensure that comparisons across predictors are possible and to allow for unbiased interaction estimates. Finally, this work pushes theory forward in terms of what levers are most potent for school belonging, giving researchers and practitioners additional avenues to attempt to intervene in the lives of youth.

Limitations

Although this study was rigorous and robust, there are undoubtedly several limitations. First, the data included are cross-sectional from a single moment in time, meaning that one cannot make any claims about directionality in terms of predictors of school belonging (i.e., one cannot be certain, for example, that higher levels of school belonging do not improve students' relationships with one another, rather than students' better relationships leading to greater levels of school belonging). Also, owing to the fact that this study is secondary analysis of previously collected data, some potential student-level and school-level variables were not measured and could not be included in the analysis. For example, perhaps student drug use is the strongest predictor of school belonging; as the data did not measure student drug use, we cannot include it in the MSEMs. Similarly, the data did not include school size, school location, or urbanicity information, three potentially salient school-level predictors of school belonging. Finally, it is important to note that these data are taken entirely from one major metropolitan region of the United States. Because of the unique nature of Washington, D.C., in terms of its political and social climate, one should be very cautious in attempting to generalize these findings across other settings, especially those settings with less inclusive and supportive communities. Washington, D.C, is a particularly LGBTQ+ friendly community, which may account for the lessened impact of sexual orientation and the greater impact of other predictors. Readers should not assume that this holds true for other areas of the country, let

alone for areas outside of the United States that have their own community and school cultures.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This study moves research on school belonging forward, especially for LGBTQ+ youth. Based on these preliminary findings, researchers should work to better understand what differences, if any, exist for LGBTQ+ youth and their cisgender, heterosexual peers, especially in communities that are less supportive, communities that are more rural, and communities with different demographic makeups. Researchers should also work to go beyond cross-sectional understandings of school belonging to better make claims concerning the directionality of findings and the relative impact of specific predictors of school belonging. Finally, researchers should work to fold LGBTQ+ youth into existing models of asset-based understandings of youth, looking for moments of overlap and areas of shared experience, as well as difference, to better understand the resources LGBTQ+ youth develop over their time in school. Additionally, future research should investigate more closely each of the salient assets identified in these models: participation in after-school activities, for example, may be a promising site for deeper work around queer students' asset development.

Practitioners and interventionists should consider the level and focus of their interventions as they aim to make schools safer and more supportive for LGBTQ+ students and their cisgender, heterosexual peers. Many of the school-level interventions target bullying and biased-based behavior as a means of improving school climate. Although this work is important and timely, youth-workers should also consider interventions that might improve other levers associated with school climate, specifically relationships with students and teachers. If a student's relationships with their peers are five times stronger in

predicting school belonging than bullying, interventionists may want to focus some attention on programming that does not only target bullying, but also provides young people with the space and support to form strong, respectful bonds with their peers. Further, because students' perceptions of the bullying climate are stronger predictors than actually experiencing bullying, interventions may want to target norms and unspoken assumptions that feed into the bullying climate, in addition to preventing the behavior itself. Because of the importance of participation, practitioners may want to support existing opportunities for students to become involved and create additional opportunities, especially along lines of difference that might be met in a specific club. Additionally, those already involved in GSAs and other participation-based activities that may increase school belonging should consider programming that might increase peer relationships and student-teacher relationships, as well as increasing their presence within the school.

Conclusion

In order to ensure that our research and interventions reach all students and encourage the development of all capacities, it is of tantamount importance that LGBTQ+ students are included and robustly studied. LGBQ+ youth have significantly lower scores of school belonging than their straight peers, but TGNC youth do not. Further, however, neither sexual orientation nor bullying is the driving force for school belonging; rather, relationships with teachers, relationships with peers, participation in school, and school's bullying climate are more potent predictors of school belonging. Additionally, sexual orientation does not moderate the relationship between significant predictors and school belonging, meaning that LGBQ+ youth and their heterosexual peers may have similar processes for developing a sense of school belonging. This indicates that bullying, for example, does not impact LGBQ+ youth's sense of school belonging more powerfully than

their heterosexual peers. Therefore, research and interventions should continue to target homophobic and transphobic bullying, but should also increase relationships between students and teachers, provide opportunities for participation in school activities, and foster a perception that bullying is not acceptable. We should not ignore sexuality and gender identity in these interventions, but nor should we assume that LGBTQ+ students are not benefited by both targeted and non-targeted interventions.

References

Aerts, S., Van Houtte, M., Dewaele, A., Cox, N., & Vincke, J. (2012). Sense of Belonging in Secondary Schools: A Survey of LGB and Heterosexual Students in Flanders. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *59*(1), 90–113. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2012.638548

Allen, K., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2018). What Schools Need to Know About Fostering School Belonging: a Meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, *30*(1), 1–34. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9389-8

Anderman, E. M. (2002). School effects on psychological outcomes during adolescence. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *94*(4), 795–809. https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-0663.94.4.795

Anderman, L. H. (2003). Academic and Social Perceptions as Predictors of Change in Middle School Students' Sense of School Belonging. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, *72*(1), 5–22.

Anderson, L., & Thurston, R. (2011). *2011 Children and Young People's Wellbeing Monitor for Wales* (No. WAG11-11204) (pp. 1–264). Cardiff, Wales: Welsh Assembly Government Social Research. Retrieved from https://gov.wales/docs/caecd/research/110328cypmonitoren.pdf

Armstrong, J. G., & Roth, D. M. (1989). Attachment and separation in eating disorders: A preliminary investigation. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, *8*, 141–155.

Aron, A., Aron, E. N., Tudor, M., & Nelson, G. (1991). Close relationships as including other in the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *60*, 241–253.

Barber, B. L., Stone, Margaret R., Hunt, J. E., & Eccles, J. S. (2005). Benefits of Activity

Participation: The Roles of Identity Affirmation and Peer Group Norm Sharing. In J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized Activities As Contexts of Development: Extracurricular Activities, After School and Community Programs* (pp. 185–207). Psychology Press.

Bartko, W. T., & Eccles, J. S. (2003). Adolescent Participation in Structured and Unstructured Activities: A Person-Oriented Analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *32*(4), 233–241. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023056425648

Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Watson, M., & Schaps, E. (1997). Caring school communities. *Educational Psychologist*, *32*(3), 137–151. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep3203_1

Baumeister, R., & Leary, M. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, *117*(3), 497–529.

Benner, A. D., & Graham, S. (2011). Latino Adolescents' Experiences of Discrimination Across the First 2 Years of High School: Correlates and Influences on Educational Outcomes: Latino Adolescents' Experiences of Discrimination. *Child Development*, *82*(2), 508–519. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01524.x

Benson, P. L. (2002). Adolescent development in social and community context: A program of research. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *2002*(95), 123–148. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.19

Berlan, E. D., Corliss, H. L., Field, A. E., Goodman, E., & Austin, S. B. (2014). Sexual orientation and bullying among adolescents in the Growing Up Today Study. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *46*, 366–371.

Bolger, K. E., Patterson, C. J., & Kupersmidt, J. B. (1998). Peer Relationships and Self-

Esteem among Children Who Have Been Maltreated. *Child Development*, *69*(4), 1171–1197. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1998.tb06166.x

Bonny, A. E., Britto, M. T., Klostermann, B. K., Hornung, R. W., & Slap, G. B. (2000). School Disconnectedness: Identifying Adolescents at Risk. *Pediatrics*, *106*(5), 1017–1021. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.106.5.1017

Bontempo, D. E., & D'Augelli, A. R. (2002). Effects of at-school victimization and sexual orientation on lesbian, gay, or bisexual youths' health risk behavior. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *30*(5), 364–374. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1054-139X(01)00415-3

Bos, H. M. W., Sandfort, T. G. M., de Bruyn, E. H., & Hakvoort, E. M. (2008). Same-sex attraction, social relationships, psychosocial functioning, and school performance in early adolescence. *Developmental Psychology*, *44*(1), 59–68. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.44.1.59

Bradshaw, C. P., Koth, C. W., Thornton, L. A., & Leaf, P. J. (2009). Altering School Climate through School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: Findings from a Group-Randomized Effectiveness Trial. *Prevention Science*, *10*(2), 100–115. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-008-0114-9

Brown, B. B., & Larson, J. (2009). Peer Relationships in Adolescence. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*. Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479193.adlpsy002004

Brown, R., & Evans, W. P. (2002). Extracurricular Activity and Ethnicity: Creating Greater School Connection among Diverse Student Populations. *Urban Education*, *37*(1), 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085902371004

Cohen, S., Sherrod, D. R., & Clark, M. S. (1986). Social skills and the stress protective role

of social support. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *50*, 963–973.

Cohen, S., & Willis, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *98*, 310–357.

Criss, M. M., Pettit, G. S., Bates, J. E., Dodge, K. A., & Lapp, A. L. (2002). Family Adversity, Positive Peer Relationships, and Children's Externalizing Behavior: A Longitudinal Perspective on Risk and Resilience. *Child Development*, *73*(4), 1220–1237. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00468

Crosnoe, R., Johnson, M. K., & Elder, G. H. (2004). Intergenerational Bonding in School: The Behavioral and Contextual Correlates of Student-Teacher Relationships. *Sociology of Education*, *77*(1), 60–81. https://doi.org/10.1177/003804070407700103

Cunningham, N. J. (2007). Level of Bonding to School and Perception of the School Environment by Bullies, Victims, and Bully Victims. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *27*(4), 457–478. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431607302940

Cutrona, C. E. (1986). Behavioral manifestations of social support: A microanalytic investigation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *51*, 201–208.

Damon, W. (2004). What is Positive Youth Development? *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *591*(1), 13–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716203260092

Danielsen, A. G., Wiium, N., Wilhelmsen, B. U., & Wold, B. (2010). Perceived support provided by teachers and classmates and students' self-reported academic initiative. *Journal of School Psychology*, *48*(3), 247–267. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2010.02.002

DeLongis, A., Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R. S. (1988). The impact of daily stress on health

and mood: Psychological and social resources as mediators. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *54*, 486–495.

Dempsey, C. L. (1994). Health and Social Issues of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Adolescents. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, *75*(3), 160–167. https://doi.org/10.1177/104438949407500304

Eccles, J. S., & Barber, B. L. (1999). Student Council, Volunteering, Basketball, or Marching Band: What Kind of Extracurricular Involvement Matters? *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *14*(1), 10–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558499141003

Eccles, J. S., & Roeser, R. W. (2011). Schools as Developmental Contexts During Adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *21*(1), 225–241. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2010.00725.x

Eccles, J. S., & Templeton, J. (2002). Chapter 4: Extracurricular and Other After-School Activities for Youth. *Review of Research in Education*, *26*(1), 113–180. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X026001113

Espelage, D. L., Aragon, S. R., Birkett, M., & Koenig, B. W. (2008). Homophobic Teasing, Psychological Outcomes, and Sexual Orientation Among High School Students: What Influence Do Parents and Schools Have? *School Psychology Review*, *37*(2), 15.

Feldman, A. F., & Matjasko, J. L. (2005). The Role of School-Based Extracurricular Activities in Adolescent Development: A Comprehensive Review and Future Directions. *Review of Educational Research*, *75*(2), 159–210.

Fowler, W. J., & Walberg, H. J. (1991). School Size, Characteristics, and Outcomes. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *13*(2), 189–202.

Fredricks, J. A., & Eccles, J. S. (2005). Developmental Benefits of Extracurricular

Involvement: Do Peer Characteristics Mediate the Link Between Activities and Youth Outcomes? *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *34*(6), 507–520. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-005-8933-5

Freeman, T. M., Anderman, L. H., & Jensen, J. M. (2007). Sense of Belonging in College Freshmen at the Classroom and Campus Levels. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, *75*(3), 203–220.

Friedman, M. S., Koeske, G. F., Silvestre, A. J., Korr, W. S., & Sites, E. W. (2006). The impact of gender-role nonconforming behavior, bullying, and social support on suicidality among gay male youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *38*(5), 621–623. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2005.04.014

Galliher, R. V., Rostosky, S. S., & Hughes, H. K. (2004). School Belonging, Self-Esteem, and Depressive Symptoms in Adolescents: An Examination of Sex, Sexual Attraction Status, and Urbanicity. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *33*(3), 235–245. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JOYO.0000025322.11510.9d

Geller, J. D., Voight, A., Wegman, H., & Nation, M. (2013). How Do Varying Types of Youth Civic Engagement Relate to Perceptions of School Climate? *Applied Developmental Science*, *17*(3), 135–147. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2013.804377

Goldbach, J. T., Tanner-Smith, E. E., Bagwell, M., & Dunlap, S. (2014). Minority Stress and Substance Use in Sexual Minority Adolescents: A Meta-analysis. *Prevention Science*, *15*(3), 350–363. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-013-0393-7

Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools*, *30*(1), 79–90. https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807(199301)30:1<79::AID-

PITS2310300113>3.0.CO;2-X

Goodenow, C., & Grady, K. E. (1993). The Relationship of School Belonging and Friends' Values to Academic Motivation Among Urban Adolescent Students. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, *62*(1), 60–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.1993.9943831

Griffin, P., Lee, C., Waugh, J., & Beyer, C. (2004). Describing roles that Gay-straight alliances play in schools: From individual support to social change. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, *1*, 7–22.

Hall, G. S. (1904). *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime and Religion*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

Hallinan, M. T. (2008). Teacher Influences on Students' Attachment to School. *Sociology of Education*, *81*(3), 271–283. https://doi.org/10.1177/003804070808100303

Hatchel, T., Espelage, D. L., & Huang, Y. (2018). Sexual harassment victimization, school belonging, and depressive symptoms among LGBTQ adolescents: Temporal insights. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *88*(4), 422–430. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000279

Hatchel, T., Valido, A., De Pedro, K. T., Huang, Y., & Espelage, D. L. (2018). Minority Stress Among Transgender Adolescents: The Role of Peer Victimization, School Belonging, and Ethnicity. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1168-3

Heck, N. C., Livingston, N. A., Flentje, A., Oost, K., Stewart, B. T., & Cochran, B. N. (2014). Reducing risk for illicit drug use and prescription drug misuse: High school gay-straight alliances and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. *Addictive*

Behaviors, *39*(4), 824–828. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2014.01.007

Holt, M. K., & Espelage, D. L. (2003). A Cluster Analytic Investigation of Victimization Among High School Students: Are Profiles Differentially Associated with Psychological Symptoms and School Belonging? *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, *19*(2), 81–98. https://doi.org/10.1300/J008v19n02_06

Hughes, J., & Kwok, O. (2007). Influence of Student–Teacher and Parent–Teacher Relationships on Lower Achieving Readers' Engagement and Achievement in the Primary Grades. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *99*(1), 39–51. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.99.1.39

Jimerson, S. R., Campos, E., & Greif, J. L. (2003). Toward an Understanding of Definitions and Measures of School Engagement and Related Terms. *The California School Psychologist*, *8*(1), 7–27. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03340893

Jimerson, Shane R., Sharkey, Jill, Nyborg, V., & Furlong, Michael J. (2004). Strength-Based Assessment and School Psychology: A Summary and Synthesis. *The California School Psychologist*, *9*, 9–19.

Kiecolt-Glaser, J. K., Ricker, D., George, J., Messick, G., Speicher, C. E., Garner, W., & Glaser, R. (1984). Urinary cortisol levels, cellular immunocompetency, and loneliness in psychiatric inpatients. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, *46*, 15–23.

Kosciw, Joseph G., Greytak, E. A., Zongrone, A. D., Clark, C. M., & Truong, N. L. (2018). *The 2017 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in our nation's schools*. New York: GLSEN. Retrieved from https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/GLSEN%202017%20National%20School%20Climate%20Survey%20%28NSCS%29%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf

Kuperminc, G. P., Darnell, A. J., & Alvarez-Jimenez, A. (2008). Parent involvement in the academic adjustment of Latino middle and high school youth: Teacher expectations and school belonging as mediators. *Journal of Adolescence*, *31*(4), 469–483. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2007.09.003

Lapan, R. T., Gysbers, N. C., & Petroski, G. F. (2001). Helping Seventh Graders Be Safe and Successful: A Statewide Study of the Impact of Comprehensive Guidance and Counseling Programs. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *79*(3), 320–330. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2001.tb01977.x

Lapan, R. T., Gysbers, N. C., & Sun, Y. (1997). The Impact of More Fully Implemented Guidance Programs on the School Experiences of High School Students: A Statewide Evaluation Study. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *75*(4), 292–302. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1997.tb02344.x

Lerner, R. M., Almerigi, J. B., Theokas, C., & Lerner, J. V. (2005). Positive Youth Development A View of the Issues. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *25*(1), 10–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431604273211

Lerner, R. M., Brentano, C., Dowling, E. M., & Anderson, P. M. (2002). Positive youth development: Thriving as the basis of personhood and civil society. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *2002*(95), 11–34. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.14

Libbey, H. P. (2004). Measuring Student Relationships to School: Attachment, Bonding, Connectedness, and Engagement. *Journal of School Health*, *74*(7), 274–283. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2004.tb08284.x

Loukas, A., Roalson, L. A., & Herrera, D. E. (2010). School Connectedness Buffers the Effects of Negative Family Relations and Poor Effortful Control on Early Adolescent Conduct Problems. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *20*(1), 13–22.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2009.00632.x

Lowenthal, M. F., & Haven, C. (1968). Interaction and adaptation: Intimacy as a critical variable. *American Sociological Review*, *33*, 20–30.

Lynch, J. J. (1979). *The broken heart: The medical consequences of loneliness*. New York: Basic Books.

Ma, X. (2003). Sense of Belonging to School: Can Schools Make a Difference? *The Journal of Educational Research*, *96*(6), 340–349. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220670309596617

Mahoney, J. L., Parente, M. E., & Lord, H. (2007). After-School Program Engagement: Links to Child Competence and Program Quality and Content. *The Elementary School Journal*, *107*(4), 385–404. https://doi.org/10.1086/516670

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A Theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, *50*(4), 370–396.

Mayberry, M., Chenneville, T., & Currie, S. (2013). Challenging the Sounds of Silence: A Qualitative Study of Gay–Straight Alliances and School Reform Efforts. *Education and Urban Society*, *45*(3), 307–339. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124511409400

Mayo, J. B. (2013). Critical Pedagogy Enacted in the Gay–Straight Alliance: New Possibilities for a Third Space in Teacher Development. *Educational Researcher*, *42*(5), 266–275. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X13491977

McNeely, C., & Falci, C. (2004). School Connectedness and the Transition Into and Out of Health-Risk Behavior Among Adolescents: A Comparison of Social Belonging and Teacher Support. *Journal of School Health*, *74*(7), 284–292. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2004.tb08285.x

Meehan, B. T., Hughes, J. N., & Cavell, T. A. (2003). Teacher–Student Relationships as Compensatory Resources for Aggressive Children. *Child Development*, *74*(4), 1145–1157. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00598

Monahan, K. C., Oesterle, S., & Hawkins, J. D. (2010). *Predictors and Consequences of School Connectedness: The Case for Prevention: (597072010-002)* [Data set]. American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/e597072010-002

Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' Need for Belonging in the School Community, *70*(3), 323–367.

Patrick, D. L., Bell, J. F., Huang, J. Y., Lazarakis, N. C., & Edwards, T. C. (2013). Bullying and Quality of Life in Youths Perceived as Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual in Washington State, 2010. *American Journal of Public Health*, *103*(7), 1255–1261. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2012.301101

Poirier, J. M., Mattheis, A., & Temkin, D. (2017). LGBT Youth in Schools. Retrieved January 27, 2019, from http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756810/obo-9780199756810-0190.xml

Portnoy, G. A. (2012). *Perceptions of school climate, psychological sense of community, and gay-straight alliances: A mixed method examination* (Dissertation). Retrieved from 1532601

Poteat, V. P., & Espelage, D. L. (2007). Predicting Psychosocial Consequences of Homophobic Victimization in Middle School Students. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *27*(2), 175–191. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431606294839

Poteat, V. P., Sinclair, K. O., DiGiovanni, C. D., Koenig, B. W., & Russell, S. T. (2013). Gay-Straight Alliances Are Associated With Student Health: A Multischool Comparison of LGBTQ and Heterosexual Youth. *Journal of Research on*

Adolescence, *23*(2), 319–330. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00832.x

Preacher, K. J., Zhang, Z., & Zyphur, M. J. (2016). Multilevel structural equation models for assessing moderation within and across levels of analysis. *Psychological Methods*, *21*(2), 189–205. https://doi.org/10.1037/met0000052

Pryor, J. M., & Ostrom, T. M. (1981). The cognitive organization of social life: A converging-operations approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *41*, 628–641.

Resnick, M. D. (1997). Protecting adolescents from harm. Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*, *278*(10), 823–832. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.278.10.823

Rose, H. A. (2006). Asset-Based Development for Child and Youth Care. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, *14*(4), 236–240.

Russell, S. T. (2011). Challenging homophobia in schools: policies and programs for safe school climates. *Educar Em Revista*, (39), 123–138. https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-40602011000100009

Russell, S. T., Ryan, C., Toomey, R. B., Diaz, R. M., & Sanchez, J. (2011). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adolescent School Victimization: Implications for Young Adult Health and Adjustment. *Journal of School Health*, *81*(5), 223–230. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2011.00583.x

Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Scales, P. C. (2005). Developmental Assets and the Middle School Counselor. *Professional School Counseling*, *9*(2), 104–111.

Scales, P. C., & Leffert, N. (1999). *Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific*

research on adolescent development. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

Scales, Peter C. (1999). Reducing risks and building develomental assets: Essential actions for promoting adolescent health. *The Journal of School Health*, *69*(3), 113–119.

Schneider, S. K., O'Donnell, L., Stueve, A., & Coulter, R. W. S. (2012). Cyberbullying, School Bullying, and Psychological Distress: A Regional Census of High School Students. *American Journal of Public Health*, *102*(1), 171–177. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2011.300308

Sedikides, C., Olsen, N., & Reis, H. T. (1993). Relationships as natural categories. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *64*, 71–82.

Shochet, I. M., Smith, C. L., Furlong, M. J., & Homel, R. (2011). A Prospective Study Investigating the Impact of School Belonging Factors on Negative Affect in Adolescents. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, *40*(4), 586–595. https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2011.581616

Sirin, S. R., & Rogers-Sirin, L. (2004). Exploring School Engagement of Middle-Class African American Adolescents. *Youth & Society*, *35*(3), 323–340. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X03255006

Slaten, C. D., Ferguson, J. K., Allen, K.-A., Brodrick, D.-V., & Waters, L. (2016). School Belonging: A Review of the History, Current Trends, and Future Directions. *The Educational and Developmental Psychologist*, *33*(01), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1017/edp.2016.6

Solomon, Z., Waysman, M., & Mikulincer, M. (1990). Family functioning, perceived social support, and combat-related psychopathology: The moderating role of loneliness. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, *9*, 456–472.

Stewart, E. B. (2008). School Structural Characteristics, Student Effort, Peer Associations,

and Parental Involvement: The Influence of School- and Individual-Level Factors on Academic Achievement. *Education and Urban Society*, *40*(2), 179–204. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124507304167

Toomey, R. B., McGuire, J. K., & Russell, S. T. (2012). Heteronormativity, school climates, and perceived safety for gender nonconforming peers. *Journal of Adolescence*, *35*(1), 187–196. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.03.001

Toomey, R. B., Ryan, C., Diaz, R. M., Card, N. A., & Russell, S. T. (2010). Gender-nonconforming lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth: School victimization and young adult psychosocial adjustment. *Developmental Psychology*, *46*(6), 1580–1589. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020705

Trout, D. L. (1980). The role of social isolation in suicide. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, *10*, 10–23.

Voelkl, K. E. (1995). School Warmth, Student Participation, and Achievement. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, *63*(2), 127–138.

Walls, N. E., Wisenski, H., & Kane, S. (2013). School climate, individual support, or both? Gay-straight alliances and the mental health of sexual minority youth. *School Social Work Journal*, *37*(2).

Wang, M.-T., & Eccles, J. S. (2013). School context, achievement motivation, and academic engagement: A longitudinal study of school engagement using a multidimensional perspective. *Learning and Instruction*, *28*, 12–23. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2013.04.002

CHAPTER 2

"AND WHY ARE YOU HERE?": TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF RATIONALES FOR JOINING GSAS

Abstract

Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs, also known as Gay-Straight Alliances) offer students an important opportunity for development and growth in a safe and supportive environment. Much research has focused on the benefits of having a GSA in a school, but less work has focused on why students may join their GSA. The current study explores these reasons and allows students to express and interpret their needs within the GSA, which offers important insight for aspects of queer youth's experiences that researchers have missed. This work to understand students' needs is necessary to ensure that students' environments are appropriately suited for their students, drawing on person-environment and stage-environment fit theory. Further, by engaging young people in the process of defining and articulating their needs, this work empowers young people to be citizens who recognize themselves as both able to make needs-demands and able to fulfill others' needs. The current qualitative study draws on semi-structured interviews with 44 GSA members in seven schools across Massachusetts. The research team coded each interview to determine themes and subthemes for students' rationales for joining the GSA. Seventeen subthemes emerged that were coded into four main themes: intrapersonal and identity development, interpersonal socialization, interpersonal safety and support, and political reasons. All students offered multiple rationales for joining their GSAs, and students identified both needs they wanted the GSA to meet and assets they hoped to offer their GSA. These findings are placed within a socioecological context of development. Implications for researchers and practitioners are discussed.

Introduction

In the last twenty years, research has consistently demonstrated that Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs; sometimes more commonly known as Gay-Straight Alliances, student-led, faculty-sponsored extracurricular organizations that often intend to provide students with a safe space in their schools) are associated with reports of greater students' well-being and schools' climate. The quantitative research, which is associational and most often done at the school-level, compares students at schools with GSAs to students at schools without GSAs and has focused on students' fewer experiences of victimization (Portnoy, 2012; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010), less drug use (Heck, Livingston, Flentje, Oost, Stewart, & Cochran, 2014) and better mental health (Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2012; Walls, Wisnecki, & Kane, 2013) at schools with GSAs. Qualitative research has focused more explicitly on students' experiences within the GSA and the ways in which it has led them to feel more empowered, connected, and supported (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Mayberry, Chenneville, & Currie, 2013; Mayo, 2013).

Importantly, emergent research on GSAs has begun to explore the relationship between members' developmental needs and the GSA as a setting (Calzo, Poteat, Yoshikawa, Russell, & Bogart, 2018). This work, which demonstrated that students whose reported desires matched what they received from their GSA reported higher bravery, civic engagement, and agency, drew on person-environment fit theory in after-school activities (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). This theory suggests that individuals thrive in settings that meet their developmental needs, motivations, and goals, indicating that when there is a match between what individuals identify as needs and what they perceive a setting to offer,

they derive greatest benefit. By identifying the two aspects of this equation—the person's needs and their environment—researchers identify two fruitful avenues of inquiry: better understanding individuals' needs and more deeply engaging with the setting, the GSA. This chapter explores one half of this equation, endeavoring to document the variety of students' perceived needs from their GSA.

In order to better understand GSA members' needs, feminist theory may be instructive, as it highlights the importance of allowing care-receivers—in this case, GSA members—to articulate and interpret their own needs, empowering them to provide their own accounts of what they need, rather than relying on what care-givers assume they 'should' need (Tronto, 1993). Feminist theory posits that ethical care requires care-givers and care-receivers to be in dialogue, especially dialogue that allows care-givers to be receptive and attentive to care-receivers articulations of their needs (Tronto, 1993). Although feminist theory is concerned with ethical—rather than efficient or effective—care, the central tenet of care-givers' attentiveness and receptiveness to care-receivers needs can also have important implications for researchers and practitioners who desire both ethical and efficient care. As those concerned with person-environment fit seek to better understand the needs of individuals in their environment, feminist theory provides a model for being attentive and responsive to those needs. It also opens up discussions about needs that experts may not have identified, offering researchers additional outcomes to explore. Therefore, better understanding students' needs can improve both service delivery and research on youth development in these spaces. In addition to empowering students to have agency over determining their own needs and increasing the range of outcomes that researchers measure, understanding students' rationales for joining the GSA could improve the functioning and efficacy of the organization.

As research has demonstrated the positive outcomes associated with GSAs and as theory indicates the importance of understanding youth's needs in joining their GSA, the current study aims to better understand the multiple reasons students provide for joining their GSAs. Drawing on 44 qualitative interviews from students at seven schools in Massachusetts, this research investigates youth's own reports of the needs they identified which led to their joining their GSA. This work both serves to offer young people agency in determining their own needs and to add to our understanding of youth's rationales for joining their GSA.

Literature Review

Extracurricular Activities: Person- and Stage-Environment Fit

Research on young people in after-school contexts demonstrates the importance of ensuring that an environment meets a students' needs. The person-environment (P-E) fit model asserts that the utility of an organization is dependent on the extent to which the environment is compatible with a person's needs, goals, and desires especially insofar as the environment can meet them (Kristof, 1996). Within the organizational literature, the concept of person-organization (P-O) fit more specifically addresses individuals' congruence with the organizational environment in which they find themselves. The borders delineating P-O fit are sometimes porous, as P-O fit has been defined in a number of ways and has not always been distinguished from P-E and other types of fit (Judge & Ferris, 1992; Kristof, 1996). It may be most useful to consider that P-O is understood as "the compatibility between individuals and organizations" (Kristof, 1996, p. 3), specifically focusing on the relationship between an individual and their organization, rather than other aspects of their environment. This compatibility could take several forms, but most central is the extent to which "an organization satisfies individuals' needs, desires, or preferences"

(Kristof, 1996, p. 3). Although much of the research on P-O fit focuses specifically on firms as organizations and on hiring practices and employment agreements, researchers have also investigated individuals values, goals, needs, and desires. Specifically, organizations supply "physical and psychological resources as we as the task-related, interpersonal, and growth opportunities that are demanded [by individuals in the organization]" (Kristof, 1996, p. 4).

Because P-O fit has taken on several forms and has nebulous boundaries, researchers have operationalized it in a number of ways, which has led to a profusion of measurement techniques (Kristof, 1996). One operationalization is the "needs-supplies" perspective, "defining fit as the match between individual preferences or needs and organizational systems and structures" (Kristof, 1996, p. 5). This operationalization in turn gives rise to the need to measure individuals' preferences or needs from an organization in order to understand the extent to which they correspond to an organization's system, structure, and resources. This correspondence or fit can be measured either directly or indirectly (Kirstof, 1996), meaning that researchers can either explicitly ask individuals about the extent to which they feel their organizations' systems and structures match their needs or they can infer this fit indirectly by asking individuals about their needs and assessing the organizations' ability to meet those needs. Although both methods have their strengths, researchers who are interested in both fit as congruence and in the specific aspects of individuals and organizations that constitute that fit may be better served by indirect measurement of fit (Kristof, 1996), which can be accomplished by investigating individuals' needs and organizational features separately.

P-O fit—and P-E fit more broadly—has been further refined as stage-environment fit, which acknowledges that people may have different needs and desires from their

environment depending on their developmental stage. For example, as students move through middle school, they report a desire for increased opportunities for autonomy and for having a voice in classroom decisions, yet they do not see their classrooms meeting this desire (Eccles et al., 1993). This mismatch between individual students' needs and the environment in which they find themselves can lead to decreased academic motivation and disconnection with school (Eccles et al., 1993). Moreover, as there is variation in individuals' development, so too can there be variation in fit within the same organization; for example, more developed students expressed greater desire for autonomy than their less developed peers in the same class and therefore reported less fit, even within the same classroom (Eccles et al., 1993). Indeed, these findings suggest that settings for adolescents must change and adapt to their students' developmental needs to ensure engagement and motivation (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). This research has focused primarily on students in classrooms and then expanded to the other ecological settings which govern students—school buildings, districts, and policies.

Scholars on after-school activities have urged researchers to investigate the role of person-environment fit to better understand "the extent to which systems are developmentally optimal and synchronous for adolescents" (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005, p. 197). Moreover, as development is not a stable or uniform experience for youth, adolescents join after-school activities for a variety of reasons and to meet any number of needs (Dawes & Larson, 2011).

This fit between a person and their environment has been thoughtfully applied to the GSA setting, as well (Calzo et al., 2018). Researchers considered that as adolescence can be a time of particular struggle for queer youth, some young people may be motivated by a desire for community, information, and opportunities for activism (Calzo et al., 2018).

Moreover, congruence between adolescents' needs and the mission and goals of a GSA is associated with greater benefits for student members. In light of the importance of a perceived match between students' motivation for being a member of the GSA and the GSA itself (Calzo et al., 2018), additional research is needed to more fully explore students' rationales and motivations for joining their GSAs. Previous research on GSAs has adopted the expert view of students' needs, relying on researchers' and practitioners' views—in this case, a need for community, resources, and activism—rather than asking students directly what needs they identified in deciding to join their GSASs. In order to better ensure that GSAs are an organizational setting that meet students' developmental needs, research must investigate students' own understanding of why they joined their GSAs.

It is important to note that person-environment fit research focuses on students' needs, motivations, goals, and desires without necessarily working to disentangle or explore the nuances among these terms (Eccles & Roesser, 2009). That is to say that although a student's need may be different from what they desire or what motivates them, the term 'need' is used throughout to encompass these slightly different concepts. In this chapter, then, *need* refers generically to an individuals' motivations, desires, goals, and needs.

Feminist Theory and Needs-Interpretation

In considering ways of understanding students' needs, motivations, goals, and desires, feminist care theory may offer useful inroads. In many ways, we can understand students' joining behavior as a form of expressing their desires and needs: the act of attending a meeting or joining an organization is an enacted expression of a need or a desire. As this decision to join involves the attempt to meet a conscious or unconscious

need, feminist care theory offers important insight into the importance of allowing students to express and interpret these needs, especially in settings like GSAs which are founded as student-led and student-directed (C. Mayo, 2004; Miceli, 2005). Indeed, interpreting needs is a political act, as "needs-talk is a medium for the making and contesting of political claims" (Fraser, 1990, p. 199). It provides the opportunity for discourse around what an environment lacks, what inequalities it may perpetuate, or what resources are not distributed effectively. Traditional models for care delivery tend to enact and maintain stable divisions between those who require care and those who provide it, and they privilege those who provide care as experts who determine what is truly needed by those who receive it (White, 2000). This unequal power division between those who provide and those who receive care has material consequences: it serves to render natural and unquestioned needs that are by their very definition contestable and political, needs which are embedded in patterns of domination (White, 2000). This could forestall discussions of needs that have not been identified and interpreted as salient by care-providers, removing the agency from recipients of care to determine what they need. Instead, ethical care must engage recipients of care as citizens who are empowered to make demands, articulate their needs, and work towards having them met (Tronto, 1993).

Although much of this theory building has centered on state-funded welfare programs, these ideas map neatly onto extracurricular activities and GSAs in particular. In the ideal configuration of care theory, care-providers would engage in passive listening and observation of queer young people to allow the young people to determine and interpret their own needs. This can happen in several ways, as care-providers can observe organizations to investigate the needs they may have overlooked, conduct focus groups with young people involved in the organizations, and can explicitly and directly ask young

people about their needs and desires. This first stage of care, attentiveness, is the noticing of needs of others and allowing others to give voice to their needs (Tronto, 1993). By engaging young people in the process of identifying and articulating their needs, care-providers can move away from treating these needs as self-evident and uncontestable, instead allowing for young people to articulate their own needs, even as they may be complicated, contradictory, or messy. Allowing queer youth the opportunity to identify their own needs and engage in needs-talk might complicate existing power structures; for example, queer youth may identify that they need a radically transformed schooling environment in which activities and bathrooms are not sex-segregated, making manifest the latent domination of cisgender teachers, students, and administrators over trans and gender non-conforming students.

It is vital to engage youth in the process of stating and interpreting their own needs, especially as they may contradict and push against the established needs highlighted in the provision of care. Moreover, research needs to offer a clear understanding of students' perceived and articulated needs, both to improve the knowledge around youth and to ensure that programming for youth is as effective and targeted as possible.

Current Study

It is therefore important to understand students' needs for two distinct but salient reasons. Stage-environment fit argues that researchers must work to understand students' needs, motivations, desires, and goals in order to ensure that their environments maximally benefit them, and feminist theory argues that researchers must engage students in articulating their own needs to fill in the gaps missing from care-providers' understandings. In light of these two compelling reasons for better understanding students' needs, this study explores students' own accounts of and reflections on why they joined the organization—

their own expression and interpretation of their needs, goals, motivations, and desires. The current study aims to better understand the range of rationales and motivations students provided for joining their high school GSAs, specifically as a means of capturing the nuance and differences among members across grades, schools, races, gender identities, sexualities, and other experiences. The study was guided by the following research question: how do students understand their own rationales for joining their GSA?

Methods

As this study aims to explore students' reasons for joining their GSA, the primary research concern is describing the phenomenon of joining by students who had joined their GSAs. Therefore, this study employs phenomenological methods aimed at achieving an in-depth description of students' experiences (Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017). Moreover, this study focuses on understanding students' specific meaning-making and sense of a particular phenomenon. Therefore, the study employs interpretative phenomenology and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), two distinct but highly related theoretical lenses which intend to unearth practical knowledge that participants in social situations are conscious of but may not have expressed (Gill, 2014). IPA requires researchers to both attend to participants' voice and reflection and to contextualize these voices within psychological theory (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

Study Context

This research is part of a larger investigation of GSAs in high school and their role in promoting mental health, critical consciousness, and discussions of intersectional oppression. This work is situated in Massachusetts, a progressive commonwealth that has implemented a Safe Schools Program for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning Students since 1993, which provides training and technical assistance, support

for GSAs, and resources concerning protections for LGBTQ+ students ("Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ Students - Student and Family Support," n.d.). This early adoption of protections for LGBTQ+ students is important to note, as all students in this sample attend Massachusetts public schools and therefore enjoy at least nominal protection in terms of their race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Additionally, though, this does not mean that all schools and areas of Massachusetts are equally supportive, or even supportive at all; 18.5% of all hate crimes reported in 2016 in Massachusetts were anti-LGBTQ (Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety & Security, 2016).

Research Team

The research team includes a primary researcher who identifies as a white, cisgender queer man and a research assistant who identifies as a white, bisexual trans man. Additionally, the larger research group investigating broader aspects of GSAs (comprising two white, cisgender gay men; two Asian-American, cisgender gay men; and one white, cisgender lesbian woman) provided feedback at each major step of the process. The primary researcher has served as a high school English teacher, a Gay-Straight Alliance advisor, and an adult advisor to a community youth group for LGBTQ+ young people. The research assistant, an undergraduate student, has both lived experience as a member of a high school GSA and strong connections to the LGBTQ+ youth community. The larger research team has collectively authored over thirty articles on GSAs and has considerable experience concerning the design and implementation of research on LGBTQ+ adolescents.

Sampling and Recruitment

Participants were identified by GSA advisors who had taken part in an earlier wave of research with the larger research group investigating broader aspects of GSAs. Of the

twenty potential GSAs, seven were identified because they represented diversity in terms of school size and urbanicity, as well as GSA size and racial and ethnic composition. GSA advisors were encouraged to reach out to six to eight students of various grades, experience within the GSA, tenure within the GSA, and demographic characteristics including race and ethnicity, gender identity, and sexuality. All interested students were approached for consent and assent according to IRB protocol and then scheduled for an interview.

Participants

Data collection resulted in 44 interviews with participants from seven schools (range of participants per school = 2-9; mean = 6.29; median = 6). The shortest interview was 12 minutes and the longest was 68 minutes, with a median of 44 minutes. Participants were in eighth to twelfth grade, with a mean grade of 10.41 and a median grade of 10 (mean age = 16.07; median age = 16). The majority of participants (65.9%) were non-Hispanic white, with the remainder identifying as non-white Hispanic (18.2%), black (6.8%), white-Hispanic (4.5%), and Asian-American (4.5%). The plurality of participants were cis-women (47.7%), with the remainder identifying as cis-men (15.9%), trans-men (15.9%), non-binary (11.4%), genderfluid (4.5%), bigender (2.3%) or male-non-binary (2.3%). The plurality of participants were bisexual (22.7%) or pansexual (22.7%), with the remainder identifying as gay (13.6%), straight (6.8%), lesbian (4.5%), queer (4.5%), bisexual questioning (4.5%), lesbian asexual (2.3%), asexual (2.3%), bisexual aromantic (2.3%), pansexual queer (2.3%), questioning (2.3%), straight questioning (2.3%), "no label" (2.3%), "it's complicated" (2.3%), or "I like girls a lot" (2.3%). For additional demographic information about the participants, please see Table 1.

Table 1. Student demographic information.

Student*	School	Grade	Race	Gender	Sexuality
Angelica	1	9	white	cis-woman	queer pansexual
Aie	1	11	white	cis-woman	lesbian asexual
Jasmin	1	11	white-Hispanic	cis-woman	lesbian
Matt	1	9	white	trans-man	pansexual
Table	1	9	white	cis-woman	bisexual
Nicole	1	12	white	cis-woman	bisexual
Parker	2	11	Hispanic	male-non-binary	gay
Phillip	2	10	Hispanic	bigender	queer
Mason	2	9	Hispanic	cis-man	bisexual questioning
Natasha	2	11	Hispanic	cis-woman	straight
Luna	2	9	Hispanic	cis-woman	bisexual
Amanda	2	10	Hispanic	cis-woman	bisexual
Casey	2	9	Asian	cis-woman	bisexual
Neptune	2	9	Asian	non-binary	pansexual
Mary	3	9	black	cis-woman	bisexual aromantic
Matt	3	12	white	trans-man	bisexual
Ezra	3	11	white	cis-man	pansexual
Marielle	3	10	white	non-binary	pansexual
Rose	3	11	white	cis-woman	straight
Greg	3	10	white	trans-man	bisexual
Jack	4	12	white	cis-man	Straight questioning
VK	4	10	white	non-binary	pansexual
Geen	5	9	white	trans-man	"I like girls a lot"
Bailey Jackson	5	9	white	cis-woman	lesbian
Amelia Flowers	5	12	white- Hispanic	cis-woman	no label
Rebecca Goldberg	5	12	black	cis-woman	questioning
Michael	5	11	black	trans-man	pansexual
Robert Smalls	5	12	white	trans-man	Bisexual questioning
Crystal	5	11	white	cis-woman	queer
Angel	5	11	Hispanic	genderfluid	pansexual
Felix	5	10	white	trans-man	asexual
Benjamin	6	10	white	non-binary	gay
James	6	12	white	cis-man	gay
Gabriel	6	11	white	cis-man	gay
Kallyn	6	10	white	non-binary	"it's complicated"
John	6	12	white	cis-man	gay
Riley	6	12	white	genderfluid	pansexual
Kristina	7	8	Hispanic	cis-woman	bisexual

Rose Williams	7	11	white	cis-woman	bisexual
Ezra	7	9	white	cis-man	gay
Lucy	7	10	white	cis-woman	pansexual
Elizabeth	7	10	white	cis-woman	Bisexual
Abby	7	10	white	cis-woman	pansexual
Venus	7	12	white	cis-woman	straight

**Note:* Students selected their own pseudonyms, so all names that appear in the results are code names.

Data Collection

The primary researcher developed the semi-structured interview protocol and then shared a draft with the larger research group, who offered extensive feedback and support with the development of the instrument. The questions were then piloted with six students who were members of a Nashville-based community youth group for LGTBQ+ youth, which resulted in refinement of the questions for additional clarity. These students did not participate in the research and their interviews were not recorded or transcribed, as they were not necessarily members of their schools' GSAs.

The primary researcher conducted all semi-structured, face-to-face interviews on site at the participants' schools, either during the school day or after school. The 30- to 45-minute interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The primary researcher also took notes during each interview, recording key phrases as well as notes concerning his impressions, observations, and feelings over the course of the interview. These field notes not only surfaced important thematic elements but also served to highlight and isolate preconceived notions and biases during the interviews.

Data Analysis

Because this study is guided by research questions concerning participants' understanding of their rationales and motivations for joining their GSAs, the data analysis

process followed a traditional phenomenological method, first bracketing the key research focus, then identifying the main horizons, then clustering those horizons into themes, and then organizing those themes into a coherent explanation of the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1994). First, the primary researcher outlined his preconceived notions and potential rationales for joining a GSA, surfacing these ideas in a memo that served to bracket the data as the sole focus of the research (Moustakas, 1994). The primary researcher and research assistant independently coded the first interview to identify the emergent horizons, or key moments needed for understanding, and assign codes to each horizon. The primary researcher and research assistant then met to establish consensus and ensure that we were identifying similar horizons and understanding these moments in comparable ways. The research team then continued, reading transcripts in batches of five, meeting weekly to establish consensus and to iteratively create a codebook outlining the key themes. This modified thematic coding followed a constant comparative technique that required comparing new themes with previously identified themes to determine whether a new theme could be subsumed within a previous code or stand alone as a new code (Glaser, 1965). The research team then revisited each transcript to reapply these finalized codes to ensure that no important moments were missed. Finally, the research team created individual profiles for each participant based on the key themes that applied to them.

Analytic Rigor

To ensure analytic rigor and ensure the validity of the findings, researchers engaged in best practices for qualitative research. The semi-structured interviews—conducted by a researcher who was unknown to participants and therefore might elicit honest and direct responses—allowed for participants to be agents in determining their narrative. The interviews provided the space for participants to authentically represent their own voice

and story, and the methods utilized allow for participants to express the multiple meanings, complicated understandings, and nuanced views of their own needs, in keeping with the tenets of feminist care theory. As participants endeavored to explain their motivations, the semi-structured interviews allowed them to express their multiple, and sometimes contradictory, explanations, with the interviewer attempting to probe them to further explore their own rationales, rather than providing words for them. The interviewer endeavored to seek clarification from the participants throughout the interview, rather than imposing his own view on their rationales, to preserve participant authenticity and to minimize the interpretive leaps necessary to understand participants' messages. In this way, the qualitative methods used enabled participants to explore and express their motivations in their own voices.

In addition to seeking as unmediated and authentic participant voice as possible, the researcher followed best practices in the conduct, coding, and analysis of the transcripts. Researchers took detailed field notes, collected copious data in the form of interviews, interviewed a broad swath of GSA members, and engaged in careful reflection (Tracy, 2010). Moreover, researchers intentionally explored disconfirming examples and participant responses that that did not correspond to existing themes or that contradicted narratives we had constructed (Saldaña, 2013). Additionally, the primary researcher and research assistant took on the role of 'critical friend,' aiming to provide alternate explanations and potential challenges to horizons, codes, and themes that the other put forth. Finally, we engaged in peer debriefing, as the primary researcher and research assistant discussed their findings with each other, the larger research group, and high school students, GSA advisors, and others with experience working with LGBTQ+ adolescents (Saldaña, 2013). This was done to ensure that the lead researcher and research

assistant were as authentic and honest to the participants' voices as possible. The team was not, for example, asked if themes made sense or if the needs identified seemed plausible; instead, they were asked if the verbatim quotations provided mapped onto the categories researchers identified. In this way, the peer debriefing served as a check on the researchers' misinterpretations and over-interpretations of participants' responses and a way to ensure that participants' voice was heard as clearly as possible.

Results

Participants provided a range of rationales, with all students offering a combination of motivations for joining their GSA. Researchers identified 17 individual themes. These themes were then grouped into four overarching categories: the intrapersonal sphere, the interpersonal socializing sphere, the interpersonal support and safety sphere, and the political sphere.

The most common of the 17 themes provided were joining: because their friends were involved or invited them (61.4%), to make new friends (54.5%), to get support (54.5%), to meet queer people (43.2%), to have a safe space (40.9%), for identity development and self-exploration (38.6%), and to feel like part of a community (34.1%). Most students offered more than one theme; students offered an average of 5.30 (median = 5) themes each.

When these themes were grouped into the four overarching categories, 65.9% of students indicated that they joined for intrapersonal identity and development, 90.9% joined for interpersonal socializing, 79.5% joined for interpersonal safety and support, and 56.8% joined for political reasons. Students rationales also often fell into more than one overarching category: students offered an average of 2.93 themes (median = 3). These overarching themes are discussed in turn below. For additional information concerning the

themes and typology, please see Figure 1 and Table 2.

Figure 1. Typology of rationales for joining.

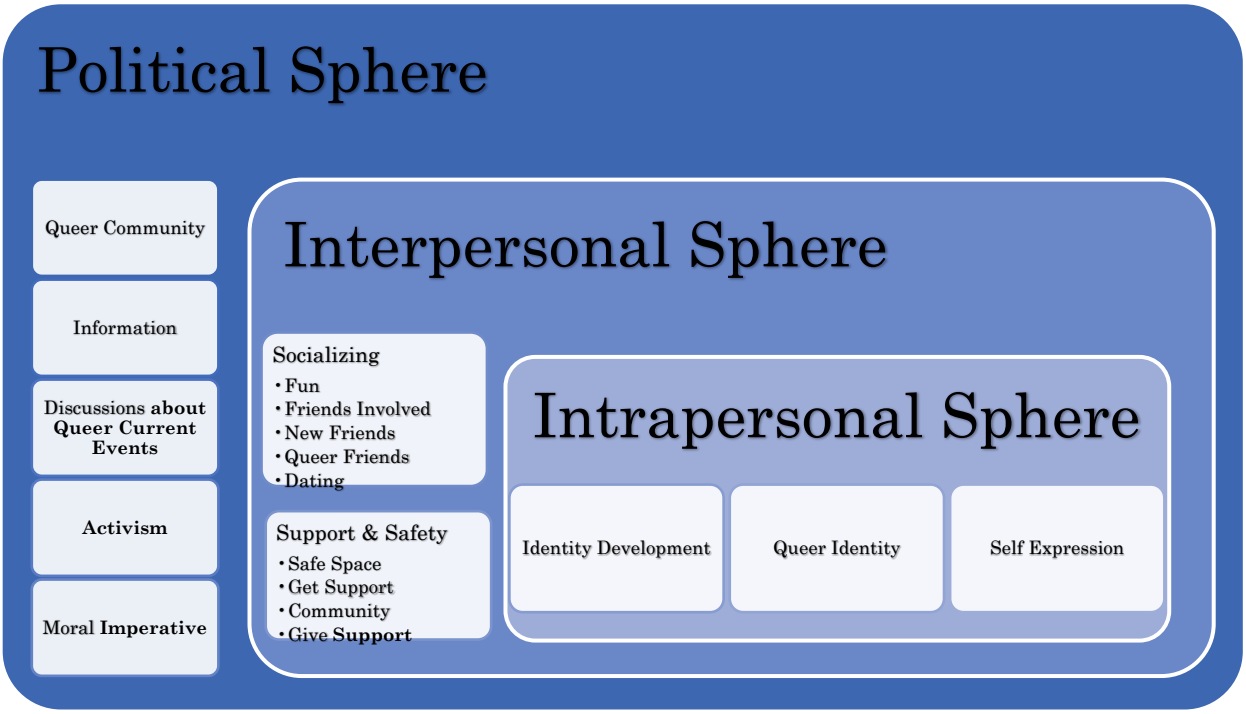


Table 2. Typology of rationales with exemplars.

The Intrapersonal: Identity and Development	Identity development and self-exploration	"I'm questioning, so I was just like, 'Maybe I'll figure out myself a bit more through this route.'" (504) "I was hoping to get more insight on my own sexuality." (701)
	Hold a Queer Identity	"I knew that I was trans…and I knew that I was bi." (302) "I thought it like, it might be something interesting to join, um, relating to, you know, me uh as a gay person." (602)
	Self-expression	"It's like for me, it kinda means like, I get used to everybody around here so like I can just naturally do like anything I want, like just be myself around everyone." (207) "Um, I was hoping to find like an area where I could just, like, be myself, my identity, and everything." (604)
The Interpersonal: Socializing	Fun	"I was hoping it would be fun." (601) "So it was just another club that just sounded like people said it was fun, and it was a good time, and it was a good thing to be a part of. I really honestly had no idea what to expect. I didn't know what the fun was. I just…it sounded like people enjoyed it that were in it, so I wanted to be a part of it." (706)
	Friends Involved and/or Invited Me	"I have this one senior friend, and it's like, uh, I made friends with her and she's like, 'Hey, come join

		this club.' And um, I'm like, 'Sure." (501) "A lot of my friends were doing it and going into it." (705)
	Make New Friends	"I just thought this experience, you know to you know see these people, um, you know, get to know more people at my school and kind of know, you know, just you know what kind of happens kind of in like their daily lives." (204) "I think I was hoping to kind of just, you know find some friendly faces, you know, in the school because I was kind of new at that point. Um. And just—it's—it's kind of like a link between you and another person." (101)
	Make Queer Friends	"I just wanted to relate to more people since a lot of my friends were mainly just gay, or lesbian, or trans. I didn't know many people who were just other than that, so I figured I'll try and find people who are in the wider variety." (402) "I could meet like other underclassmen that had similar experiences…I think I just really wanted to meet other people because I think at the moment like I had like other friends, but I think I might have only had like one friend who's also a part of the community." (603)
	Dating	"I, like, expected to find someone. That didn't happen though, so, hmm. [Interviewer: did you go in

		thinking, like, "Oh, maybe this could be like a dating thing"?] Well, I was like, I guess, like, there's new gay people here." (103)
The Interpersonal: Support and Safety	Safe Space	"We all need a safe space…a place where I can be with people where I won't be judged. Where I won't be like hurt. Where I…people…and both hurt physically and like verbally." (508) "When I started coming, it felt like a place where, I don't know, judgment free, you could be yourself. It was like a safe space." (201)
	Get Support	"Do I really need support because I'm not getting it anywhere else? So I might as well go…when people don't have that support at home, it's awful. You know, I mean, you think: What am I doing wrong, like, why am I disgusting? But at the same time, that's why people go to GSA." (503) "I didn't really have any expectations, I just hoped….maybe it would be like a support kind of group, um, to be there with me while I was sorting everything out about my identity." (705)
	Feel Community [Not Isolated]	"Not feel so, like, isolated as a gay person." (103) "It was more just to be included, I suppose." (506) "Just knowing that there was other people like me…knowing that there's more LGBT kids and I'm not alone in this." (606)

	Give Support	"I just, I really like helping people. So if people don't think that they're getting support from the, um, the entire environment, then I would like to give them the support they need." (502) "It just makes me feel like, like, when they're talking about it, it's like, okay, I can give them support and I can give them like, someone to vent to, but I can't really talk in this discussion." (305)
The Political: Advocacy and Activism	Desire to be Part of the Queer Community	"I wanted to be more involved in the LGBT community." (402) "Grow in terms of…as a member of the LGBT community." (303)
	Get Informed about Issues	"I thought, like, we go here, and we learn about the community and stuff…that's also, like, another reason I went, because I didn't know too much about it. Like, I knew some stuff, but like, I just wanted to, like, also learn more about the community." (301) "it was that I want to be educated in the subject rather than have opinions about something I don't know anything about, so I decided to join…the subject as in LGBTQ+ topics and how people feel." (401)
	Discussions about Current Events and Queer Topics	"So I was in GSA more, cause I could…GSA is kinda, not like debate, but we talk about like, current events, so…and then, a lot of times we give our opinions on it and sometimes we disagree, but it's like, so

		much more…I don't know. Like just good." (305) "I'm just very, like, interested in, like, news and what's currently happening politically, too….I wanted more, like, to see and talk to people and adults who also were interested in it." (101)
	Activism	"to try to help the [local city] community, because if this keeps on growing in [this city], then [this city] would be finally open to same sex couples and all that. And it would actually help out families." (205) "I heard that we like did charity stuff, just to do some of that…like we go to the Pride Parade…we do fundraisers…we, um, talk about a lot stuff like for the teachers to get it, like we invite people to talk to teachers about stuff…I just wanted to like, do something. I guess, I don't know how else to describe it. Just like do something important." (306)
	Moral Imperative	"I was like, I mean, someone has to do it…I'm very privileged to be in that spot where I am out of the closet, and so I might as well use that privilege that I have to, like, be out of the closet." (103) "It's a GSA, I should go to it…I should go, like my presence should exist in that area." (102)

The Intrapersonal Level: Individual Identity Development

Many GSA members identified that they joined their GSA in the hopes of exploring and understanding their personal identity more thoroughly, and in turn expressing that identity to themselves and others. Some young people were early in their self-understanding and came to the GSA in the hopes of disentangling their own gender identity or sexual orientation, but others were confident in their ambiguity and came to the GSA to simply express their identity.

Identity development and self-exploration. Students, especially those who identified as questioning, explained that they joined the GSA to explore their identities and get a better sense of who they were, with special attention to their gender identities and sexual orientation. Nicole, a white bisexual cis-woman, explained:

> I've come out like five different times. I thought I was bisexual, and then asexual for several years and everything, and then back to bisexual and a lot of stuff in between…I was struggling with my identity at the same time thinking I was asexual for about two years. So I wanted to be able to like really know more about that.

Neptune, an Asian pansexual non-binary person, offered that they joined "because I kind of feel like I don't know myself and I should just like sort myself out and this is like a place to kind of do it." John, a white gay cis-man, said he joined "I guess like learn more about myself…I guess coming to terms you know with being gay." Ezra, a white pansexual cis-man, shared that he joined because he wanted help "finding my place in the world. It's useful to have…kind of get in touch with my identity." Because the GSA explicitly names itself as a place where gender identity and sexual orientation will be discussed and accepted, many students are drawn to the GSA to "figure out [themselves] a bit more," as Rebecca Goldberg, a black questioning cis-woman put it.

Queer identity. Many students noted that their queer identity was a strong motivation for their joining the GSA. No student *only* said they joined because of their queer identity, but students echoed what Aie, a white lesbian-asexual cis-woman said, "Ahh, okay, well, I mean, obviously I'm pretty gay, um, says the person wearing all the rainbows ever." John, a white gay cis-man, said he joined the GSA because "I thought it like it might be something interesting to join. Um, relating to you know me, uh as a gay person." Students, then, joined the GSA because they held a queer identity, and this identity motivated their joining what they saw as an affinity group.

Self-expression. In addition to the GSA being a space where young people could act and think without fear of judgment, some students offered that they joined the GSA as a place where they could fully express themselves. Mason, a Hispanic bisexual cis-man, offered that he joined "so, um, I was able to be more of like myself. Instead of before, having to act a certain way so that I can fit it. But then, you know, again, coming here, I was able just to be me." Matt, a white pansexual trans-man said, "it was like a place where I could really express my gender identity more." Casey, an Asian-American bisexual cis-woman, said that she joined because "I can just naturally just be myself around everyone here." Kallyn, a white non-binary person who describes their sexuality as "it's complicated," similarly said "I was hoping to find like an area where I could just like be myself, my identity and everything." Students offered that they joined the GSA in order to find a place where they could fully express themselves, hoping to fully inhabit their true selves.

The Interpersonal Level: Socializing

When reflecting on why they joined their GSA, many students reported that they were interested in socializing, that is spending time with or endeavoring to make friends.

Researchers grouped any responses that dealt broadly with having fun, spending time with friends, meeting new people, making new friends who were specifically queer, or being invited by friends under the broader label of socializing. Oftentimes, a single description of rationale fell into many of these subthemes; for example, Natasha, a straight Hispanic cis-woman related that a friend:

> was telling us, she's like a senior and she was like, 'you guys have a lot of fun there, sometimes you go on field trips, they give you snacks, you do Kahoots, and you meet, like, really cool people.' So I just looked at my friend, I'm like, we should go.

Here, she identified that a friend invited her and was therefore involved, but she also noted that she expects fun and to meet new people. Others were more direct, like Benjamin, a gay white non-binary person, who said "it's better to be sociable than just be alone, you know?" Here, they express that they joined the GSA because they preferred to be around other people—to socialize—than be alone.

Fun. Many students explained that they joined their GSA to have fun or because they thought it would be fun. Although, of course, fun can be defined broadly and differently from person to person, participants who expressed the fun they hoped to have at the GSA were grouped with those who expected to socialize, make friends, and meet new people. Phillip, a queer Hispanic bigender person, said "I heard it was fun, so I decided to come and it was pretty fun." Geen, a white trans-man who "likes girls a lot" described his decision to join as, "I'm like one of those upbeat, happy people, who's like, friends with everybody…and it sounded fun from like, all the other people." Although these students did not provide clear, explicit definitions for "fun," it is clear that their motivation to join was for enjoyment, especially the enjoyment of other people's company and conversation.

Friends' involvement or invitation. Students identified that having friends involved or being invited by friends motivated them to join their GSAs. Many students noted that they only went because a friend invited them and would not have gone without that invitation; Marielle, a pansexual white non-binary person said she would have required someone she knew there "'cause it's nice to see a familiar face." Rose, a straight white cis-woman said that "a friend had an older brother in GSA…he just, like, talked about it with his friends who were in GSA and so I kinda, like, noticed, and then my friend's like, 'Do you wanna come with me, I'm going?' and I said, 'Sure.'" These students make clear that they needed a slight push from a friend, showing the importance of friends' involvement and encouragement to attend.

Other students expressed that it was not an invitation from a friend, but rather the presence of friends in the group that motivated their initial attendance. Kallyn, a white non-binary person who describes their sexuality as "complicated," related that they were hoping to have "a good time with my friends…Cause, like a lot of my good, my closest friends were in the GSA, too." Similarly, when asked why she joined her GSA, Lucy, a white pansexual cis-woman, said "um, well, I did already have some friends in GSA." Young people stress the importance of having a friendly face, of knowing people in the club, or of being invited by a friend when they decide to attend a GSA meeting.

Making new friends. Students often expressed that they joined the GSA in the hopes of meeting new people and making new friends. For example, Amanda, a Hispanic bisexual cis-woman, said "I've always wanted to be in a GSA club. Just so I can make new friends and be able to socialize with people like that." Similarly, Robert Smalls, a white bisexual trans-man, said "honestly, I think it was just because I wanted more friends because when I came here." Crystal, a white queer cis-woman, offered that one of her

hopes was "to gain new friends, cause new school, new people. It would be nice to know other people and get to know them, so it was kinda like building up my friend group." Students hoped that by joining their GSAs, they would have a new group of friends with whom to socialize.

Making queer friends. Although some students expressed a general desire to find new friends, some more specifically joined their GSAs to find queer friends. Some, like Natasha, a Hispanic straight cis-woman, were hoping to find these friends to potentially broaden their horizons: "I mean, one of the reasons—I did want to join GSA kind of…you know I wanted to have more LGBTQ friends. And because, you know, like I said, I don't think you should push someone away just because your religion's against it." Others hoped to find friends that may have had similar experiences because of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Greg, a white bisexual trans-man, said "[I wanted to] just make friends that I knew would, I don't know, work out. Or something, or would be similar to me because we're all gay." Matt, a white bisexual trans-man, said, "I knew that I was trans, I was just realizing that at the time sort of. I was just coming out about that, and I knew I was bi, and I was figured it was worth a shot to see if I can find like people…people with similar experiences, other trans people, other queer, or bi people." Many students, then, wanted not only to find a new friend group, but more specifically to find friends who were similar to them along lines of gender identity or sexual orientation, hoping to find queer friends.

Dating. Although the theme arose infrequently, one student specifically referenced that she joined the GSA for the express purpose of finding a partner to date. Jasmin, a white-Hispanic lesbian cis-woman, said, "I, like, expected to find someone. That didn't happen though, so, hmm. [Interviewer: did you go in thinking, like, 'Oh, maybe this could

be like a dating thing'?] Well, I was like, I guess, like, there's new gay people here." In spite of being an infrequent motivation for joining, it is a logical one—queer students might see the GSA as a pool of potential date-mates and may therefore join in the hopes of meeting someone new.

The Interpersonal Level: Safety and Support

In addition to joining their GSAs for socialization and new friends, some students identified that they joined their GSAs to be in an environment of safety and support. Many students expressed that their schools were unsupportive. For example, James, a white gay cis-man, expressed that "we have students in the school who may identify as transgender…but in the hallways they don't feel safe being out that much, so they present themselves as their original gender." In these schools, and even in schools that students felt were supportive or open, young people were motivated to join their GSAs by a desire for safety and support around their gender identities and sexual orientations. Some offered vague expressions of a desire for generic support, but others were very specific about their need for a space where they could try out different identities, express potentially controversial beliefs, or feel a connection with their peers.

Safe space. Many students expressed that they were initially motivated to join their GSAs because of their need for a safe space. The term 'safe space' appeared frequently and was deployed in slightly different ways, but most students offered a definition that corresponded with Marielle's, a white pansexual non-binary individual: "a place where you don't get like judged and where people are like really nice….just like a place where you don't have to be afraid." As Parker, a gay Hispanic cis-man, said "I started in sophomore year coming like the middle of it. When I started coming, it felt like a place where, I don't know, judgment free, you could be yourself. It was like a safe space." Similarly, Ezra, a

pansexual white cis-man, offered a more detailed discussion of what a safe space means to him, as he shared that he started coming because:

> I really just wanted, like, a place where I could really feel safe…That's kind of what I was really wanting… a place where…you can talk about these issues, where we can like discuss issues that affect us…and have it be like, have it be number one, confidential unless said otherwise, unless you're gonna hurt someone or hurt yourself, obviously. And a place where it's gonna, like, a place where we can talk about our sexuality, gender, gender whatever, that is, without being judged, and without being like, made fun of over it, you know?

Many young people relate that they initially came to their GSAs because they needed a space that was free of judgment and negativity around issues of gender identity and sexuality, either because their school did not provide a safe space or because they desired a place that was explicitly judgment free.

Receiving support. Students conceived of support in a number of different ways—some termed it acceptance, others as a welcoming place to be. Amelia Flowers, a white-Hispanic cis-woman who prefers "no label" as a sexual orientation marker, explained her thought process for joining, saying "That was kind of my struggle as being, like, 'Okay, do I really need to go…do I really need support because I'm not getting it anywhere else? So I might as well go.'" Benjamin, a white gay non-binary person, said that he felt the GSA "would be a good place for me to be at the time because I don't really know what I was doing at that point…just provide some support." Later, Benjamin says that he joined the GSA so that he could say "I have support and I have people like me around…because [tearing up] being a teenager is, kind of, hard, you know? But it's really helpful." Mary, a black bisexual cis-woman, expressed a desire to get support from the GSA, joining because

"this was like a group of people that like, didn't like, weren't like, you know close-minded, or just like low-key racist. Like, they were actually, like, you know understand, like, struggles and stuff, because they've had to struggle." This idea that students wanted a group of people who could understand and support them through their struggles was prevalent. Students expressed that they joined their GSA so that they could be in a supportive environment, a welcoming group that accepted them.

Feeling not isolated. Students shared that sometimes, being a queer young person can be isolating and lead to detachment. Many therefore joined their GSAs to have a sense of connection, to feel less isolated. Felix, an asexual white trans-man, shared "it can be isolating being LGBT…I think it's cool that we can gather…because acceptance is hard to find in some schools and in general. And like, we have a club for that." Riley, a white pansexual genderfluid person said they joined to feel less solitary: "just knowing there was other people like me, I guess is the easiest [laughs] way to put it…like knowing that there's more LBGT kids and I'm not alone in this." This feeling of commonality, that young people are not alone in their queer identity, motivated some students to join their GSAs.

Giving support to others. Many students explicitly named themselves as people who support others, noting that they joined the GSA in order to provide support to others. Lucy, a white pansexual cis-woman, said:

> I just wanted people to know that, like, I was there and that I was supporting them whether they knew I was like – quote unquote – 'part of the community'…I just wanted people to know I was there, and because I do have, like, a lot of friends that are part of the community.

This desire to serve as a supportive force in the lives of others offer surfaced as a motivating factor for students' joining. Venus, a white straight cis-woman, noted that:

> I started because one of my really good friends who did drama club with me, he came out as gay. And, um, my other best friend, she was like, 'hey, like, have you heard of GSA?' And I was like, 'no.' She was like. 'do you wanna join in support of my best friend?' because they were best friends, too. And I was like, 'yea, definitely, like, sure. Let's go for it.'

These students, and others, were motivated to join the GSA to provide support, to offer acceptance, help, and guidance to their peers who may be going through difficult times.

The Political Level: Activism and Advocacy

Students identified a variety of political or proto-political rationales for joining their gay straight alliances. Some had begun to recognize their politicized identity as a member of the queer community and wanted to explore the ramifications of that identity. Others identified that they joined because they wanted to educate themselves more about specific aspects of genders and sexualities, gaining more information about the members of the queer community to be better citizens. Some students expressed that they were motivated to join their GSAs to be involved in the advocacy and activism they expected would be taking place in the club. This took many forms, and not all students who desired advocacy and activism defined the terms in the same way. Some felt that having discussions around current events and political topics was their form of advocacy and activism, while others discussed planning events that would help the school or educate the community. Some students shared that they felt a sense of duty to their queer community, a sense that they joined the GSA out of a moral imperative that led them to believe it was the correct course of action.

Desire to be part of the queer community. Separate from wanting queer friends, some students expressed that they specifically wanted to be a part of the LGBTQ+

community. For example, Jasmin, a white-Hispanic lesbian cis-woman, shared that "there was just like an urge in me that like just really wanted to get into the gay community and like really wanted to be a part of that…I was very interested in the history and like the kind of cultural aspects of it." She later went on to say that she joined because "it's like that type of thing of like, carrying on that legacy, and like, that is a culture that I want to have." Similarly, Angelica, a white queer-pansexual cis-woman said, "I first joined because—I mean—the LGBT community is something that I'm passionate about…I went and I learned so much more history about it." Ezra, a white pansexual cis-man, reflected that "I think after I came out I kind of wanted to get more, like, be involved more with my community." This motivation is distinct from those students who wanted new friends or queer friends; rather than a desire to socialize, students who joined to be a part of the queer community wanted to plug into the history and culture of LGBTQ+ people, viewing their membership in the GSA as a part of a larger historical movement.

Information about LGBTQ+ related issues. In order to develop as citizens and members of the queer community, some students identified a need for education around LBGTQ+ issues so that they know "how not to offend anyone when I meet them in the real world when I'm leaving [local town]," as Luna, a Hispanic bisexual cis-woman put it. Mary, a black bisexual cis-woman, said, "that's also, like, another reason I went, because I didn't know too much about it. Like, I knew some stuff, but like, I just wanted to learn more about the community." Jack, a white straight-questioning cis-man, said he joined the GSA "to be educated in the subject" and said this education was important "so that if I was voting I wouldn't be voting as an ignorant." Elizabeth, a white bisexual cis-woman, said "I wasn't sure what I wanted to know or what there was to know, so that's why I thought going to the club would be a good place to learn and just see the LGBT community." These

students joined the GSA in the hopes of learning more about the LGBT community and queer issues, specifically to educate themselves, rather than to explore their own sexuality, which would be captured in identity development and self-exploration.

Discussions about current events and queer topics. Students often expressed that they joined their GSA in order to have a space to engage in political conversations, especially about topics related to LGBTQ+ issues. Although this is not outward facing work, as activism is, students expressed that these discussions were a form of engaging in advocacy for the queer community, especially as they prepared students to discuss these topics in more hostile climates. Angelica, a white queer-pansexual cis-woman, said she joined "because I just—I'm very, like, interested in, like, news and what's currently happening politically, too…I wanted more information on it. And I wanted more, like, to see and talk to people and adults who also were interested in it." Nicole, a white bisexual cis-woman, said that she was going so that she could have these conversations "about like things that went on, like politically and socially, and everything." Rose, a white straight cis-woman, explained why she joined, saying:

> so I was in GSA more, cause I could…GSA is kinda, not like debate, but we talk about like, current events, so…and then, a lot of times we give our opinions on it and sometimes we disagree, but it's like, so much more…I don't know. Like just good.

These students joined their GSAs to have political conversations about current events and queer topics, and in doing so, engage in a form of advocacy.

Activism. Although students had varying definitions of activism—from planning events within the school to raise awareness to educating community members to having tense conversations with family members—students invoked the term as they discussed

why they were motivated to join. Table, a white bisexual cis-woman, said:

> because activism in general is important to me. Especially because it's a group I identify with. [Interviewer asked: what does activism mean to you]. [sighs] That's a good question. [laughs] I guess like working on issues that are affecting groups of people…working to fix problems in our society and work on causes that are important to me.

Other students took a more general view of their activist goals. As VK, a white pansexual non-binary person shared she was hoping to

> just spread awareness for the LGBT community…so more people can understand that being LGBT isn't a bad thing. Because, I've heard of a lot of different opinions from a lot of different people. And some of them see it as, like, bad or wrong. And I just wanted to show them it's not bad or wrong.

Luna, a Hispanic bisexual cis-woman, described her reasons for joining when she says:

> So I wanna change that because I wanna show that LGBT people are the same, they have the same people, and I wanna change how people say like, 'Oh all gays are going to hell,' and all that because they're committing a sin. And how we're not people. But G-d made us equal, G-d's gonna love us either way. So I wanna change that, I wanna put that in the mind that we're all human beings, we all have emotions, we all have a heart…I wanna change their views.

This desire to change and improve their schools, communities, and worlds characterized the views of students who joined their GSAs to support activism.

Moral Imperative. In line with the notion that students joined the GSA to advocate for LGBTQ+ people and to improve the world, some students expressed that they joined out of a sense of moral responsibility. This desire to ensure that the GSA exists, to ensure

that there is a welcoming and supportive place for others, is its own type of advocacy and activism, as it creates the conditions necessary for other students to be themselves and it ensures that the school will continue to have such a space. Aie, a white lesbian-asexual cis-woman, expressed this motivation as she said:

> It's a GSA; I should go to it…I should go, like my presence should exist in that area…It's something like just makes sense for me to show up and like I should be there. Being who I am, I should be at the GSA…it's very lightly the idea of obligation, but not like forcing you to do anything.

Jasmin, a white-Hispanic lesbian cis-woman, offered a similar sentiment when she says, "I was like, I mean, someone has to do it. [laughs]…I'm very privileged to be in that spot where I am out of the closet and so I might as well use that privilege that I have to, like, be out of the closet." This sense that students felt a responsibility towards the GSA, that they are motivated to go out of "light obligation," is in line with a general sense that the GSA does important work and that these students want to maintain its presence. While not the activism of protesting or marching, this almost behind-the-scenes activity ensures that the other activities of the GSA are possible.

Discussion

Student members provided a wide variety of rationales and motivations for joining their schools' GSAs. Some students joined for intrapersonal reasons, either because of a stable queer identity they already held or because they wanted the time and space to explore and understand their burgeoning queer identities. Additionally, students noted the importance of having a place where they could express their identity—stable, fluid, or otherwise—and truly be themselves. Students also joined for interpersonal reasons, which largely were either related to socializing or to support and safety. In terms of socializing,

students joined for fun and to make new friends, as well as because friends invited them or would be present. Students also joined for safety and support, as they saw the GSA as a safe space where they could both give and receive support and feel a sense of community. Finally, some students reported an understanding of the larger sociopolitical forces at play in their lives and joined for more political reasons. These students were at various stages in their sociopolitical development, from a desire to be involved in the larger queer community to a need for more information about related issues and topics. Some young people expressed the desire for a space to have political conversations and to plan activities that would educate and change their schools and communities. At times, students were motivated to join by a moral imperative they felt, a sense of civic responsibility for the existence of a GSA.

Moreover, care theory provided a useful lens for understanding the nuances and interpretations of students' needs. Rather than relying on preconceived notions or outsiders' views of students' needs—and therefore their rationales for joining—this study investigated students' own understandings of their needs and empowered them to be agentive determiners of what care they wanted. Further, this study exposed expressed needs that researchers had not explored; for example, students expressed a need to support others, a need to educate and change their schools, and a moral obligation to participate. In this way, the study offers researchers, practitioners, and experts additional insight into young people's declared and expressed needs.

These needs are important in their own right, but additionally, stage-environment fit theory argues that organizations are maximally effective when they are developmentally appropriate and suited to meet students' needs. In this way, the identification of the many divergent rationales that students provided for joining their GSA offers important insight

into the needs students may bring to their environmental context. These needs are important for GSA advisors, researchers, and practitioners to understand, as they shape student experiences. Further, because stage-environment fit theory stresses the importance of context, it may be instructive to examine the ways in which the four categories—intrapersonal identity development, interpersonal socializing, interpersonal support and safety, and political reasons—fit into larger understandings of students' contexts and development.

Ecological Understandings of Youth's Activities

The findings from these interviews shed light on both young people's needs and the contexts in which they are embedded. Indeed, the data emerged in a way that corresponded roughly to the systems proposed by socioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), as students described their needs in terms of the spheres in which they find themselves: intrapersonal needs, interpersonal needs for friends and support, and larger community and political forces. This model for youth development has been fruitfully applied specifically to schools and school climate (Rudasill, Snyder, Levinson, & Adelson, 2018). In addition to the primary spheres, this close examination of a systems view of school climate posits that within the microsystem, there are many nanosystems within which students interact: for example, students may have several distinct peer groups in school, as well as classroom environments and extracurricular activities. Further, these school-based nanosystems are embedded in a school microsystem that includes the structures, rules, climate, and context of the school, and community-based nanosystems are similarly embedded in a community microsystem that may include the neighborhood, house of worship, or other non-school-related activities. The data from these interviews support such a model, as students reported a variety of forces that impact them as they move through the hallways of their

schools: their own internal processes, as well as their peers, teachers, and administration, and larger forces that impact each member of these nanosystems.

Individual identity development. Many young people reported that they joined their GSA for individual identity development, the process of constructing a coherent self that is stable, recognizable, integrated (Kroger, 2006). Research has demonstrated that the development of what some call an achieved identity status (Marcia, 1966), which involves commitments to a clear set of beliefs and values that is holistic and integrated into a young person's worldview and sense of self, often occurs through the participation in voluntary afterschool activities (Eccles & Templeton, 2002).Such participation fosters opportunities for self-reflection, self-exploration, self-consideration, and self-understanding (Barber et al., 2005; Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2002; Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003), as such activities provide spaces for young people to consider important questions of who they are, who they want to be, and how they understand themselves. Moreover, these decisions about self-beliefs are made at the time of selecting an activity, as well as in the course of persistence in the activity (Barber et al., 2005), meaning that identity formation and exploration may be a salient motivator for youth's decision to participate in an afterschool activity. This notion that a youth engages in an extracurricular activity because it personally expresses their identity to themselves and others is termed *attainment value*, and this self-definition process may have layered implications (Barber et al., 2005). For example, participation in traditionally gendered activities, such as sex-separated sports, may be associated with gender identity development and may create a sense of a stable, coherent identity for the young people who participate (Eccles & Barber, 1999). The interviews with GSA members support these previous findings, as youth reported that they joined their GSA in order to develop a sense of self or to understand themselves better.

Moreover, the GSA may be an especially important setting for individual identity development for queer youth. Even more than joining the chess club or the swim team may solidify a young person's social identity as an athlete or a brain (Eccles & Templeton, 2002), joining the GSA may be an important part of a young queer or questioning person's identity development, as the GSA is specifically and explicitly about gender and sexuality. During adolescence, youth develop some understanding of their sexuality, regardless of their status as straight, queer, or questioning (Petersen, Leffert, & Graham, 1995; Russell, 2005; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Notions of positive sexual development and *sexual selfhood* (Tolman & McClelland, 2011) posit that young people develop understandings of themselves as sexual beings with desires, wishes, and fantasies. Further, for queer students in particular, the high school years may be particularly important for sexual identity development, as it is when many young people are first engaging in queer relationships or experimenting sexually (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011). Although only one student explicitly referenced dating as a reason for joining their GSA, many students expressed their desire to develop a uniquely queer identity, to understand their gender or sexuality more profoundly, which is in keeping with the larger research on queer adolescent development.

Socializing. Many young people highlighted the importance of the GSA in terms of their ability to socialize, either by spending time with friends or making new friends. Research demonstrates that after-school spaces can help to form and solidify peer groups, as young people meet new people and deepen their relationships with existing friends (Barber et al., 2005; Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012). Young people gain interpersonal and social skills (Hansen et al., 2003), as they interact with and develop bonds with their peers. Moreover, young people with peers involved in structured activities are more likely to be

involved themselves (McLellan & Youniss, 2002; Persson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2007). Unsurprisingly, youth reported that after-school activities were fun and enjoyable (Perkins et al., 2007), another potential reason for joining. Indeed, as all voluntary after-school activities involve other youth engaged in a variety of activities intended to elicit positive emotional responses, young people would naturally report that these spaces provide the opportunity for fun, socializing, making new friends, and deepening existing relationships. Young people in this study repeatedly highlighted the fun and social aspects of their GSA, explaining that they joined to spend time with friends or to make new friends.

Support and safety. Young people articulated that they joined their GSAs for support and safety. This in keeping with a wide variety of literature spanning sociology, leisure studies, and adolescent development that demonstrates that spending time in afterschool spaces also affords young people with the opportunity to develop bonds of mutual support (Eccles & Templeton, 2002) and guidance (Carnegie Council on & Adolescent Development, 1992; Dworkin et al., 2002; Hansen et al., 2003; J. Kahne et al., 2001; Reis & Diaz, 1999). Moreover, research indicates that GSAs may serve as an important context for support and safety, especially around issues of identity and oppression. Queer students have reported that they were more likely to frequent a place that made them feel safe and supported (Eisenberg et al., 2018), and GSA members have reported that being a part of a GSA brings a sense of community and support and provides a safe space (Porta et al., 2017). Indeed, as queer youth are at increased risk of victimization in schools and may feel unsafe (D'augelli & Bontempo, 2002), it stands to reason that members reported that they were motivated to join for the interpersonal safety and support that they perceive a GSA would provide.

Sociopolitical development. As young people also are imbedded in a sociopolitical

context that transcends relationships with peers to focus on the broader, macrosystemic forces in place, it is logical that many students indicated that they joined their GSA for political reasons. The process of recognizing and understanding the factors and powers that combine to create our inequitable political and civic system in order to act against them is known as sociopolitical development (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003), and it encompasses both an acknowledgement of and an orientation towards acting against oppression in its myriad forms. Researchers have demonstrated that participation in after-school activities is associated with increased voting and increased civic engagement (Eccles & Templeton, 2002), including political awareness, participation in the political process, and political activism, as well as the engagement in democratic processes and discussions (Ballard, 2014). Members' responses that they joined the GSA to gain more information about queer issues or to participate in activism offer support to the notion that after-school activities serve this important function.

Importantly, many of the students reported that their interest in sociopolitical development and political activism was specifically related to their queer identities. As queer students exist at the center of at least one and often multiple intersecting forms of oppression—as they may be queer students of color, undocumented queer students, or queer students with disabilities, for example—their recognition of and work to overcome social inequities is particularly important. Queer students in GSAs reported that their membership in the GSA offered them information about current political issues and gave them the opportunity to protest, get involved in civic action, and become more involved in the LGBT community (Porta et al., 2017). GSA members also shared that their participation led to a sense of personal and collective empowerment, as young people felt that they had a voice in shaping their world and pushing back against inequity (Russell,

Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). As research has demonstrated that after-school activities that explicitly draw on communal identities are more likely to engage students in sociopolitical development (J. E. Kahne & Sporte, 2008; McFarland & Thomas, 2006), students' reports that they joined their GSA for political reasons is logical.

Extensions of Existing Literature

Although much of what students identified as needs and rationales for joining map onto existing literature on extra-curricular activities, students did offer several novel and surprising motivations for joining. Most notably in this study—and absent from most studies of after-school activities—is the notion that GSA members also joined to give support, rather than only to receive support. This finding is in line with the tenets of asset-based understandings of youth that stress the strengths and assets that young people bring to the world (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005b; Rose, 2006; Scales, 2005; Scales & Leffert, 1999). Queer students, especially, who are often viewed as damaged or as having only deficits are noteworthy in reporting that they were motivated to join in order to support their peers. Further, students' strong desire for activism and expression of a need for political development demonstrates a more nuanced understanding of queer youth. Students' reporting of their desires to improve their communities and contribute to the larger world indicates not only sociopolitical awareness but also a need to contribute, one of the central tenets of positive youth development (Lerner et al., 2005b, 2002; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). This again raises the importance of understanding queer youth as individuals who have clear strengths and who endeavor to use their assets to improve the world. Considering the notion that so many young people join their GSAs for political reasons, it is puzzling that GSA membership is not associated with significantly higher plans to vote (Toomey & Russell, 2013). The incongruence between joining a GSA for

political reasons and displaying no greater intentions to vote is worthy of greater study.

Holistically, in looking at the four main domains of students' rationales—the intrapersonal, the interpersonal socializing and interpersonal support, and the political—it is noteworthy that students offer motivations that are at all developmental stages for each domain. For example, some students joined the GSA because they did not understand their identity, while others joined specifically because of their identity. Similarly, some students joined because they needed support, while others joined in order to provide support. Some students recognized that they were early in their sociopolitical development and simply desired increased information, while others felt a keen sense of awareness that motivated them to join the GSA in order to act. In order for GSAs to meet these diverse needs, one must first be aware of their existence, and their existence often on a spectrum of development.

Finally, this research integrated feminist care theory to offer a warrant for asking about and interpreting students' needs. Because inviting students to discuss their needs allows for students to be agentive determiners of their needs and the care they receive, rather than passive receptacles for care, feminist care theory offers grounds for the importance of this work. Needs-talk is a tool that can be used to further democratize GSAs, ensuring that advisors and policymakers are not positioned as experts who unilaterally determine queer youth's needs and then endeavor to meet them. Moreover, bringing feminist care theory to the world of after-school activities makes manifest the contestable and political nature of students' needs; this enables researchers to move beyond describing needs and towards understanding the settings and circumstances that render specific needs salient. By providing the space for students to identify and interpret their own needs, we can ensure that GSAs are a democratic space in which all members are seen as citizens

who can advocate for themselves and determine their own desires. Because GSAs are specifically student-led, it is tantamount that all students—and not just student-leaders—are allowed to be experts on their own needs. In this way, feminist care theory allows us to be attentive to the multiple hierarchies and forms of domination that may be enacted in the traditional care model within GSAs: advisors and practitioners over members, student leaders over other students, and even more outgoing, self-advocating students over their more reticent peers.

Limitations

Although this research was conducted with high ethical and methodological standards, there are several limitations to note. Primarily, readers must consider that although students were asked to report their initial rationales and motivations for joining, students did so retrospectively; all students had joined their GSAs at least six months before the time of their interviews, and so these findings rely on students' recollections of their initial motivations. These motivations were likely altered by their experiences over their time in the GSA. Future research should endeavor to recruit students at the beginning of the year and at the beginning of their involvement with the GSA to avoid this issue. Additionally, although the sample was purposively recruited to maximize diversity, all participants lived in Massachusetts, a progressive state with a supportive climate for queer people. Some students reported living in explicitly hostile and unwelcoming areas or attending schools that were unsafe, but it is important to note that their experiences are still within the broader context of the progressive Northeast, and these findings may not generalize to other locales and contexts. Future research should aim for more geographic diversity, especially as larger political forces may have important ramifications for access to and resources at meetings (Calzo et al., 2018) which may lead to different

developmental needs; for example, students attending schools in less supportive, rural communities may need information and support (Fisher, Irwin, & Coleman, 2014), while students attending schools in more liberal areas may view GSAs as safe spaces where they can connect to broader resources in the community (Porta et al., 2017). Future research should explore any differences based on geography, racial or ethnic identity, gender and sexuality, class, ability, and other features. It is also important to note that all interviews were conducted by the primary researcher, a white gay cis-man in his mid-thirties. Although every attempt was made to make students comfortable and feel as though they could be candid, it is likely that a younger interviewer, a non-white interviewer, or a non-cis-man interviewer might receive different responses. Perhaps young people were less likely to share certain rationale—for example, dating or other reasons that might seem frivolous or selfish—for the sake of social desirability. Future research should endeavor to explore alternate means of soliciting data, including auto-ethnography, youth participatory action research, or youth interviewers.

Implications

These findings have implications for both researchers and practitioners, especially those who work with GSAs and other identity clubs. Researchers who work in the field of after-school activities and leisure time studies should endeavor to explore if these findings hold true in other contexts; although we have considerable knowledge concerning the benefits students derive from extracurricular activities, our knowledge of their rationale for joining is limited. It would be fruitful to understand if these patterns of joining hold for other organizations, especially organizations that bear less resemblance to GSAs. Are students who try out for swim team initially motivated by a sense of community? Does a desire to bolster one's résumé guide more students to join National Honor Society than we

found in these data? Additionally, once a sufficiently robust framework for joining behavior has been developed, multi-source research that draws on students' qualitative responses and survey responses, or the responses of students and their advisors, would shed important light on the patterns of behavior in terms of joining the GSA, and importantly which outcomes these patterns are immediately related to. Pairing qualitative data with larger survey data would increase sample size and diversity and allow researchers to make claims about the associations between joining behavior and student outcomes. Further, as we know that GSAs that provide a closer match for their members' desires are associated with greater reports of bravery, civic engagement, and agency (Calzo et al., 2018), researchers could expand this research in the hopes of better capturing the match between students' initial motivations and their eventual access of and outcomes from participation.

For practitioners, especially GSA advisors and those who work with queer youth, these findings have several important and immediate implications. Advisors should consider the variety of rationales that youth have offered for joining their GSAs and evaluate the extent to which their organization is meeting them. Advisors could also endeavor to conduct their own internal surveys of students' motivations in the hopes of better matching their needs, either by conducting informal conversations with students at the beginning of the year or by having an intake form that offers students the space to describe why they have come. This would allow students to author their own needs and remove some of the hierarchy that might be present when advisors situate themselves as experts concerning what GSAs should do. Another important note for practitioners is the variety of development young people report, even within the same broad category for initial membership. For example, advisors should keenly note that many youth joined to provide support for other students and may have therefore recognized the assets they

already possess. Advisors should also note that some students reported initially joining to gain information, while others joined to educate others. This synergy and compatibility of rationales should be reflected in student-led and student-centered programming that allows all students to meet their developmental needs.

Future research should also take note of the practical importance of students' rationales for joining their GSAs and other organizations. Beyond the importance of understanding these rationales to improve service provision and to empower youth to see themselves as more than passive recipients of care, researchers should evaluate the practical implications of students' various motivations for joining their GSAs. These rationales may have important implications for students' experiences in their GSAs: students who join for socializing reasons, for example, may access their GSA in different ways than their peers who joined to learn about the queer community. Indeed, students' access of their GSA, their interest in their GSA, and their involvement in the day-to-day organization of their GSA may be associated with their reasons for joining. Some relationships may follow logically—students who joined for advocacy and to plan events for the school may be more natural leaders of their GSAs—although others may be less immediately apparent—perhaps students who joined to make new friends are more engaged in their GSA than their peers. Future research should explore these associations to better understand the practical implications of students' rationales for joining their GSAs, helping to document the ways in which the reasons that get students in the door may impact their experiences once they have entered.

Conclusions

The current study complements the existing literature on both GSAs and after-school activities. By offering insights into the rationales young people offer for joining

their GSAs, we better understand their participation, needs, and desires. Moreover, we see clearly how these needs and desires align with many of the benefits and outcomes found in the larger after-school activity literature. This understanding is vital for practitioners as they aim to provide the best possible activities for queer youth and for researchers who strive for a more complete picture of the multiple and different benefits youth derive from after-school activities in general and GSAs in particular.

References

Ballard, P. J. (2014). What Motivates Youth Civic Involvement? *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *29*(4), 439–463. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413520224

Barber, B. L., Stone, Margaret R., Hunt, J. E., & Eccles, J. S. (2005). Benefits of Activity Participation: The Roles of Identity Affirmation and Peer Group Norm Sharing. In J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized Activities As Contexts of Development: Extracurricular Activities, After School and Community Programs* (pp. 185–207). Psychology Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, *32*(7), 513–531.

Calzo, J. P., Antonucci, T. C., Mays, V. M., & Cochran, S. D. (2011). Retrospective Recall of Sexual Orientation Identity Development Among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Adults. *Developmental Psychology*, *47*(6), 1658–1673. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025508

Calzo, J. P., Poteat, V. P., Yoshikawa, H., Russell, S. T., & Bogart, L. M. (2018). Person-Environment Fit and Positive Youth Development in the Context of High School Gay-Straight Alliances. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12456

Carnegie Council on, & Adolescent Development,. (1992). *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Out-of-School Hours. Recommendations for Strengthening Community Programs for Youth*. Carnegie Corporation Of New York. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED391573.pdf

D'augelli, A. R., & Bontempo, D. E. (2002). Effects of At-School Victimization and

Sexual Orientation on Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual Youths' Health Risk Behavior. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *30*, 364–374.

Dworkin, J. B., Larson, R., & Hansen, D. (2002). Adolescents' Accounts of Growth Experiences in Youth Activities. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 10.

Eccles, J. S., & Barber, B. L. (1999). Student Council, Volunteering, Basketball, or Marching Band: What Kind of Extracurricular Involvement Matters? *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *14*(1), 10–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558499141003

Eccles, J. S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C. M., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C., & Mac Iver, D. (1993). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in schools and in families. *American Psychologist*, *48*(2), 90–101. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.48.2.90

Eccles, J. S., & Roeser, R. W. (2009). Schools, Academic Motivation, and Stage–Environment Fit. *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, *1*, 404–434.

Eccles, J. S., & Templeton, J. (2002). Chapter 4: Extracurricular and Other After-School Activities for Youth. *Review of Research in Education*, *26*(1), 113–180. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X026001113

Eisenberg, M. E., Mehus, C. J., Saewyc, E. M., Corliss, H. L., Gower, A. L., Sullivan, R., & Porta, C. M. (2018). Helping Young People Stay Afloat: A Qualitative Study of Community Resources and Supports for LGBTQ Adolescents in the United States and Canada. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *65*(8), 969–989. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1364944

Fisher, C. M., Irwin, J. A., & Coleman, J. D. (2014). LGBT Health in the Midlands: A Rural/Urban Comparison of Basic Health Indicators. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *61*(8), 1062–1090. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2014.872487

Fraser, N. (1990). Struggle over needs: outline of a socialist-feminist critical theory of late-capitalist political culture. In *Women, the State, and Welfare* (pp. 199–226). Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Fredricks, J. A., & Simpkins, S. D. (2012). Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Organized After-School Activities: Taking a Closer Look at Participation of Ethnic Minority Youth: Organized Activities. *Child Development Perspectives*, *6*(3), 280–287. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2011.00206.x

Freire, P. (1970). Cultural freedom in Latin America. In *Human rights and the liberation of man in the Americas* (pp. 162–179). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Gill, M. J. (2014). The Possibilities of Phenomenology for Organizational Research. *Organizational Research Methods*, *17*(2), 118–137. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428113518348

Giorgi, A., Giorgi, B., & Morley, J. (2017). The Descriptive Phenomenological Psychological Method. In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 176–192). SAGE Publications.

Glaser, B. G. (1965). The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis. *Social Problems*, *12*(4), 436–445. https://doi.org/10.2307/798843

Hansen, D. M., Larson, R. W., & Dworkin, J. B. (2003). What Adolescents Learn in Organized Youth Activities: A Survey of Self-Reported Developmental Experiences. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *13*(1), 25–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/1532-7795.1301006

Judge, T. A. & Ferris, G. R. The elusive criterion of fit in human resource staffing decisions. *Human Resource Planning, 15*(4), 47-67.

Kahne, J. E., & Sporte, S. E. (2008). Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning

Opportunities on Students' Commitment to Civic Participation. *American Educational Research Journal*, *45*(3), 738–766. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831208316951

Kahne, J., Nagaoka, J., Brown, A., O'Brien, J., Quinn, T., & Thiede, K. (2001). Assessing After-School Programs as Contexts for Youth Development. *Youth & Society*, *32*(4), 421–446.

Kristof, A. L. (1996). Person-Organization Fit: An Integrative Review of Its Conceptualizations, Measurement, and Implications. *Personnel Psychology*, *49*(1), 1–49. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1996.tb01790.x

Kroger, J. (2006). Identity Development During Adolescence. In G. R. Adams & M. D. Berzonsky (Eds.), *Blackwell Handbook of Adolescence* (pp. 205–226). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470756607.ch10

Larkin, M., Watts, S., & Clifton, E. (2006). Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 102–120. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp062oa

Lerner, R. M., Almerigi, J. B., Theokas, C., & Lerner, J. V. (2005). Positive Youth Development A View of the Issues. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *25*(1), 10–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431604273211

Lerner, R. M., Brentano, C., Dowling, E. M., & Anderson, P. M. (2002). Positive youth development: Thriving as the basis of personhood and civil society. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *2002*(95), 11–34. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.14

Lerner, R. M., Fisher, C. B., & Weinberg, R. A. (2000). Toward a Science for and of the People: Promoting Civil Society through the Application of Developmental Science. *Child Development*, *71*(1), 11–20. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-

8624.00113

Marcia, J. E. (1966). Development and validation of ego-identity status. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *3*(5), 551–558. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0023281

Mayo, C. (2004). The Tolerance That Dare Not Speak Its Name. *Counterpoints*, *240*, 33–47.

McFarland, D. A., & Thomas, R. J. (2006). Bowling Young: How Youth Voluntary Associations Influence Adult Political Participation. *American Sociological Review*, *71*(3), 401–425. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240607100303

McLellan, J. A., & Youniss, J. (2002). Two Systems of Youth Service: Determinants of Voluntary and Required Youth Community Service, 12.

Perkins, D. F., Borden, L. M., Villarruel, F. A., Carlton-Hug, A., Stone, M. R., & Keith, J. G. (2007). Participation in Structured Youth Programs: Why Ethnic Minority Urban Youth Choose to Participate—or Not to Participate. *Youth & Society*, *38*(4), 420–442. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X06295051

Persson, A., Kerr, M., & Stattin, H. (2007). Staying in or moving away from structured activities: Explanations involving parents and peers. *Developmental Psychology*, *43*(1), 197–207. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.43.1.197

Petersen, A. C., Leffert, N., & Graham, B. L. (1995). Adolescent development and the emergence of sexuality. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, 25*, 4–17.

Porta, C. M., Singer, E., Mehus, C. J., Gower, A. L., Saewyc, E., Fredkove, W., & Eisenberg, M. E. (2017). LGBTQ Youth's Views on Gay-Straight Alliances: Building Community, Providing Gateways, and Representing Safety and Support.

Journal of School Health, *87*(7), 489–497. https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12517

Reis, S. M., & Diaz, E. (1999). Economically Disadvantaged Urban Female Students Who Achieve in Schools. *The Urban Review*, *31*(1), 31–54.

Rose, H. A. (2006). Asset-Based Development for Child and Youth Care. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, *14*(4), 236–240.

Rudasill, K. M., Snyder, K. E., Levinson, H., & L. Adelson, J. (2018). Systems View of School Climate: a Theoretical Framework for Research. *Educational Psychology Review*, *30*(1), 35–60. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-017-9401-y

Russell, S. T. (2005). Conceptualizing positive adolescent sexuality development. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *2*(3), 4–12. https://doi.org/10.1525/srsp.2005.2.3.4

Russell, S. T., Muraco, A., Subramaniam, A., & Laub, C. (2009). Youth Empowerment and High School Gay-Straight Alliances. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *38*(7), 891–903. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-008-9382-8

Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ Students - Student and Family Support. (n.d.). Retrieved December 8, 2018, from http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/lgbtq/

Scales, P. C. (2005). Developmental Assets and the Middle School Counselor. *Professional School Counseling*, *9*(2), 104–111.

Scales, P. C., & Leffert, N. (1999). *Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific research on adolescent development*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

Tolman, D. L., & McClelland, S. I. (2011). Normative Sexuality Development in Adolescence: A Decade in Review, 2000-2009: ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *21*(1), 242–255. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2010.00726.x

Toomey, R. B., & Russell, S. T. (2013). Gay-Straight Alliances, Social Justice

Involvement, and School Victimization of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Youth: Implications for School Well-Being and Plans to Vote. *Youth & Society*, *45*(4), 500–522. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X11422546

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative Quality: Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *16*(10), 837–851. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121

Tronto, J. (1993). *Moral boundaries. A political argument for an ethic of care*. New York: Routledge.

Watts, R. J., Williams, N. C., & Jagers, R. J. (2003). Sociopolitical Development. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *31*(1–2), 185–194. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023091024140

White, J. (2000). *Democracy, justice, and the welfare state: Reconstructing public care*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Young, I. M. (2013). Five Faces of Oppression. In *The community development reader* (pp. 346–355). New York: Routledge.

CHAPTER 3

COURTING ENGAGEMENT: AN EXPLORATION OF GSA MEMBERS' CLUB ENGAGEMENT EMPLOYING MULTILEVEL MODELING

Abstract

Research on after-school activities has moved from simply tallying participation in organizations to investigating meaningful engagement, as this engagement may be the asset that serves as the missing link between after-school activities and the positive outcomes with which they are associated. GSAs, student-run organizations for queer students and their allies, may naturally have variation in engagement as they serve a variety of purposes and may meet many developmental needs. As this variation in engagement may have meaningful consequences for the youth who attend, participate in, or lead their GSAs, it is important to better understand what student- and context-level factors may predict engagement in and leadership of GSAs. Drawing on survey data from 179 youth at 17 schools, this study employs multilevel modeling to determine whether student demographic characteristics, context-related factors about the GSA, and students' motivations for joining the GSA predict students' engagement in and leadership of their GSAs. Results indicate that older students; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer students; and trans and gender non-conforming students are more likely to have higher levels of engagement and to lead their GSA than their younger, straight, cisgender peers. Context-level factors and students' motivations for joining their GSA are not associated with higher levels of engagement or leadership of their GSAs. These findings have implications for researchers who aim to better understand the positive outcomes associated with the asset of after-school activities and for practitioners and GSA advisors who may wish to consider the variety of rationales students offered and the notion that they may need to actively appeal to younger students to ensure their engagement.

Introduction

As the school bell rings to end the day, many students do not pack up for home; instead they choose to spend an additional one to three hours within the school walls, participating in extracurricular activities. Their attendance provides adolescents with time to engage in self-exploration, skill building, and interpersonal development, as they learn about themselves and the ways they interact with their peers (Valentine, Cooper, Bettencourt, & DuBois, 2002), and therefore, these extracurricular spaces may shape young people's developmental trajectories (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). For many adolescents, these after-school activities are a site for development, growth, and learning; young people gain key skills, interact with their peers, and form meaningful attachments with their school and its faculty (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Moreover, research has demonstrated the positive outcomes associated with students participating in structured out-of-school time, as participants demonstrate higher academic achievement, greater hope, and greater school engagement (Barber et al., 2005; Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Indeed, participation in after-school activities is widely understood as an asset for youth development (Forneris et al., 2015; Rose, 2006; Scales, 1999, 2005).

As research has demonstrated the importance of after-school activities and situated this after-school time within the asset framework of understanding youth, scholars concerned with the growth and development of queer youth have focused on gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs, also known as gay-straight alliances), school-sponsored organizations for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+ or queer) students and their allies. These organizations are student-led and faculty-sponsored, and their presence in school is associated with fewer experiences of victimization (Marx &

Kettrey, 2016; Portnoy, 2012; Toomey et al., 2012; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011; Walls et al., 2013), less drug use (Heck et al., 2014), and better mental health (Heck, 2015; Poteat et al., 2013; Walls et al., 2013), as well as increased empowerment, connection, and support for members (Griffin et al., 2004; Mayberry et al., 2013; J. B. Mayo, 2013). More recent research has moved from examining the presence of a GSA to studying members themselves, endeavoring to document not only potential positive outcomes from participating in a GSA but also the variability of experience of GSA members along a number of lines, including race, gender, sexuality, and school setting (Porta et al., 2017; Poteat, Yoshikawa, et al., 2015).

One important aspect of individual variability within GSAs that has not yet been considered is student engagement. Because GSAs are student-led, there may be a great degree of variation in terms of student engagement: some students may merely attend meetings, others may be actively involved in the discussions at meetings, while others may have leadership roles within the GSA. Unlike in some other after-school organizations, then, students can take on a number of different roles, and engagement may be understood as manifesting in a number of different ways. For example, a student may be an elected leader of their GSA—one clear indication of engagement—but another student may not have been elected, but may still organize meetings sometimes. Another student may not be involved in the leadership or organization of meetings, but may be actively engaged in the discussions in the GSA, may seek out the GSA advisor to discuss topics, and may help out with events that the GSA has organized. Better understanding students' engagement in and leadership of their GSAs is vital, as broader research on after-school activities has identified that engagement, rather than participation, has important social and emotional benefits for program attendees (Hansen et al., 2003; Mahoney et al., 2007; Shernoff, 2010).

Indeed, many researchers view engagement as the potential "missing link" between students' participation in after-school activities and the benefits that researchers have observed (Bartko, 2005; Bohnert et al., 2010; Fredricks, 2011) and argue for the need for scholarship that focuses explicitly on factors that endeavor to explain students' engagement in their after-school activities (Dawes & Larson, 2011).

Researchers have identified several salient factors associated with engagement in after-school activities that may be brought to bear on our understanding of students' engagement in and leadership of their GSAs. One salient factor in student engagement in after-school activities is the extent to which those activities are developmentally appropriate and meet students' needs (Mahatmya, Lohman, Matjasko, & Farb, 2012), as a match between the students' developmental stage and their environment (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Roeser, 2009) may be central to the positive outcomes associated with engagement in after-school activities. As students grow, change, and acquire new skills, their needs similarly change, and they are more likely to be meaningfully engaged in settings that meet these needs and allow young people to engage in developmentally appropriate tasks (Eccles et al., 1993; Mahatmya et al., 2012). This focus on meeting student needs has led some to work to better understand the ways in which students' motivation—the need that they are trying to fill—may lead to engagement (Ballard, 2014; Dawes & Larson, 2011; Fredricks, Hackett, & Bregman, 2010). They argue that students' motivation, or rationale for participating in an after-school activity, may be the key driver for their engagement, as better understanding what drives a student to join a club may inform how the student meaningfully participates in its activities. Because GSAs serve a variety of purposes, including support, socializing, resource provision, and political activism (Porta et al., 2017) and specifically target and center sexual orientation and gender

identity, as well as important intersecting factors such as racial identity, documentation status, or ability, GSAs may attract students at a variety of developmental points. Moreover, because GSAs can serve a wide variety of purposes, they may involve students who initially join for any number of reasons. For these reasons, it is important to understand which student rationales for joining are associated with subsequent engagement in and leadership of their GSAs.

In addition to focusing on motivation, researchers have identified additional individual and context-level predictors of engagement in after-school activities. In terms of individual predictors of engagement, researchers identified that gender and race are associated with differential engagement in extracurricular activities (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Fredricks, 2011; Mahoney et al., 2007). Researchers have also identified context-level factors; some posit that students display increased engagement in spaces where they are challenged but also see themselves as valuable and important members of a team, able to contribute, make plans, and have autonomy (Fredricks, 2011; Larson, 2000). Further, researchers have identified the association between engagement and the club's organizational structure, the relationships of peers and teachers, and developmental appropriateness of the organization (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Bohnert et al., 2010; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fredricks, 2011; Mahoney et al., 2007). Therefore, in considering GSAs, it is important to understand if demographic factors—such as race, gender, and sexuality—and contextual factors—including the structure of the GSA, the extent to which GSAs are student-led, and the openness of the GSA to civil discussions and disagreements—are associated with students' engagement in and leadership of their GSAs.

The current study draws on cross-sectional, multilevel survey data of student members in GSAs to explore the relationships among individual and contextual factors and

student engagement in and leadership of their GSAs. More specifically, the study aims to employ multilevel modeling to determine whether individual factors, such as students' race, gender, age, free or reduced-price lunch status, motivation for joining their GSA, and contextual factors such as advisors' reports of meeting structure, degree of student involvement in GSA leading, and student agency within the meetings, predict students' engagement in and leadership of their GSAs.

Literature Review

Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs)

The term *gender and sexuality alliance* (GSA, also gay-straight alliance) refers to a host of student- and school-organized clubs and organizations aimed at providing a space for gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, queer (LGBTQ+) students and their allies to meet. This differentiates GSAs from earlier groups such as Project 10 in California that served as school-based social supports for LGBTQ+ students and focused on providing counseling and emotional services, rather than issues around the interaction between LGBTQ+ students and their straight peers (Miceli, 2005). The modern GSA traces its roots back to the late 1980s, when three GSAs formed in the greater Boston area (Fetner & Kush, 2008). Since this initial founding, GSAs as an organizational form have proliferated, and there are over 4,000 GSAs across the United States and several organizational networks that link them. The expansion of GSAs as a model for student organizations can be attributed to several factors. Early advisors conducted small workshops for Boston-area educators and communicated with other like-minded teachers to diffuse information and expertise (Miceli, 2005). Further, Concord Academy GSA advisor Kevin Jennings went on to found and direct the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN), a major proponent of GSAs. In the early 1990s, GLSEN was instrumental in advancing the Massachusetts

Safe Schools Program, an initiative that offered four recommendations for creating safer schools for LGBTQ+ students, one of which was the founding of GSAs (Miceli, 2005). Since the early 1990s, the Safe Schools Program and GLSEN have continued to provide resources to students and faculty interested in starting, registering, or expanding their GSA, with a recent focus on inclusion and intersectionality.

GSAs can play a variety of roles for students, sometimes acting as a social outlet, a support group, an advocacy organization, or an educational space (Poteat, Scheer, et al., 2015). Students, therefore, may join their GSAs for a variety of rationales. Students may join for intrapersonal and identity development, as joining the GSA may be an important part of a young queer or questioning person's identity development, as the GSA is specifically and explicitly about gender and sexuality. GSAs may also serve as a site for interpersonal relationship building, especially with fellow queer students and their allies. GSAs may also serve as an important context for support and safety, especially around issues of identity and oppression. Interviews with 58 GSA members highlighted the salience of safety and support for queer students in GSAs (Porta et al., 2017): members report that being a part of a GSA brings a sense of community and support, as queer students share their experiences, struggles, and triumphs with their peers and get advice and help. Indeed, as queer youth are at increased risk of victimization in schools and may feel unsafe (D'augelli & Bontempo, 2002), they may be motivated to join for the interpersonal safety and support that they perceive a GSA might provide. Students may also join the GSA for sociopolitical reasons. Membership in the GSA can offer information about current political issues, provide opportunity to protest, get involved in civic action, and become more involved in the LGBT community, and give a sense of personal and collective empowerment, as young people felt that they had a voice in shaping their world

and pushing back against inequity (Porta et al., 2017; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009).

In addition, GSA members play a variety of roles within GSAs. Because of the organizational structure of GSAs, some students serve as leaders (Griffin et al., 2004; Herdt, Russell, Sweat, & Marzullo, 2007; Russell et al., 2009), while others help to organize specific events in the GSA including the day of silence, ally week, and other activities ("Student Action," n.d.). Indeed, GSAs provide a variety of ways for students to get involved and engaged (Miceli, 2005), as students can fulfill a number of roles, manage responsibilities, and organize themselves and their peers to make change in the school environment (Russell et al., 2009).

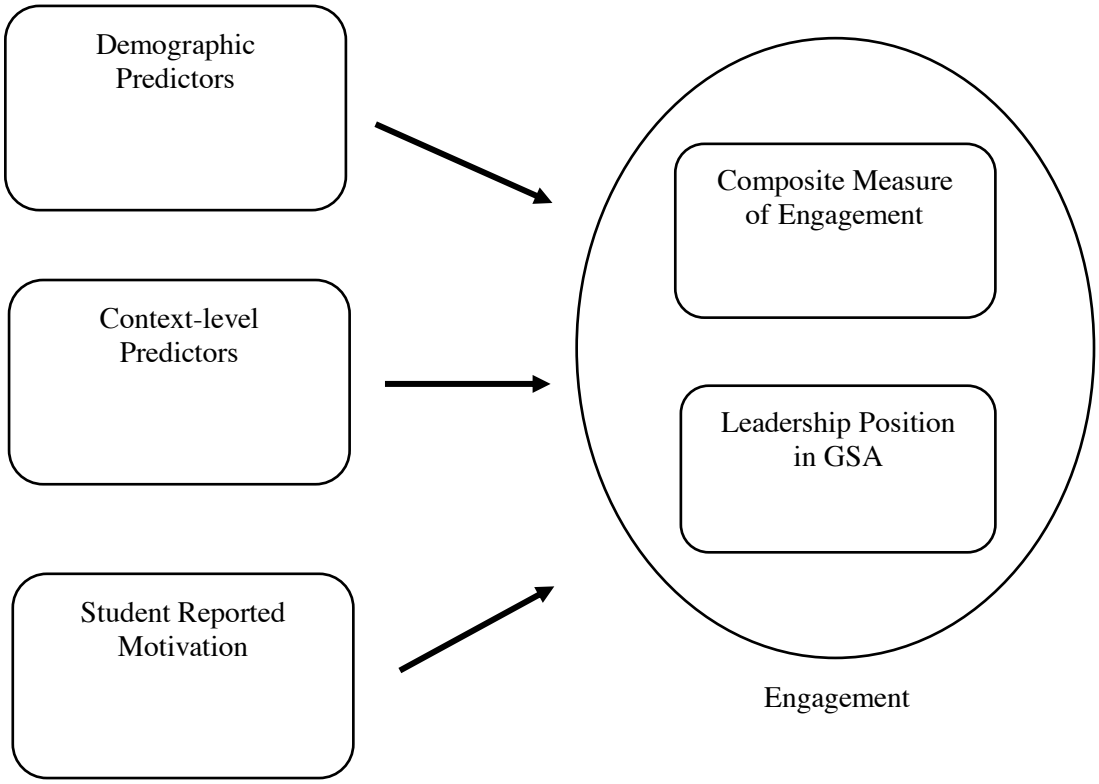
Theoretical Model of Engagement

In the following sections, engagement as a construct, as well as its potential predictors and subsequent outcomes, will be discussed. Engagement in after-school activities is understood as an asset, a supportive resource that is associated with healthy youth development (Rose, 2006; Scales, 1999). Some research has argued that engagement itself, rather than simple participation, is the important asset for development on which studies of youth should focus (Forneris et al., 2015). In order to ground this asset-based understanding of engagement in the current study, a clear theoretical model may be instructive. For the purposes of this study, engagement will be operationalized in two ways. The first is through a composite measure that captures students' attendance at GSA meetings, participation in conversations, leadership roles in activities and events, discussions with GSA advisor, and helping with GSA projects. This captures many aspects of engagement, including active participation, effort during GSA meetings and events, and intellectual interaction with the advisor and peers. The second way that engagement is

operationalized is in a simple binary indication of whether students have a leadership role in their GSA. This rougher proxy for engagement may lack some of the nuance of a composite measure, but it does encompass the key aspects of engagement: in order to have a leadership role, students should be behaviorally engaged in the GSA, attending meetings and events; intellectually engaged in the GSA, offering advice and participating in the meetings; and affectively engaged in the GSA, feeling a sense of belonging that led to a desire to lead. It is important to note that this may be an idealized version of a student leader—and certainly not all leaders are engaged across these three dimensions—but the additional measure of leadership is meant to capture more formal engagement than the composite measure.

In this model, engagement is predicted by three domains of predictors: demographic, context-level, and motivational. Demographic predictors include age, gender, sexuality, race, and free and reduced-price lunch status. Context-level predictors include the advisor's indication of the openness of the GSA climate, the extent to which the GSA is structured, and the extent to which the GSA is student led. Additionally, the model posits that engagement is predicted by students' motivation, as reported by students' indication of why they initially joined their GSA.

Figure 1. Model of Engagement



Engagement

In order to understand the variety of ways in which students may become engaged in their GSAs, it is important to focus on how engagement has been conceptualized and operationalized in the broader research on students in and out of schools. The literature on school engagement draws from many sources and has its roots in school climate, learning, educational psychology, and motivation (Bartko, 2005; Fredricks, 2011). Engagement is a malleable feature of students' experiences (Bartko, 2005; Fredricks, 2011; Mahatmya et al., 2012) as it is alterable and shaped by many factors in the school environment that can be controlled. Engagement is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that incorporates affective, behavioral, and cognitive components (Bartko, 2005). Engagement, therefore, is often understood as the combination of students' emotional responses

including feelings of belonging, their behavior and effort, and their intellectual involvement in the events that surround them. In reference to after-school activities in particular, engagement encompasses the warm feelings of support and belonging, the mental exertion required to attend and participate in events, and the development of skills that the events require (Bartko, 2005; Bartko & Eccles, 2003).

Engagement, therefore, may encompass the link between participation in after-school activities and benefits (Bartko, 2005; Bohnert et al., 2010; Fredricks, 2011), especially as some research has indicated that active engagement, rather than hours spent or simple attendance, is the key driver for certain outcomes, including community belonging and social responsibility (Forneris et al., 2015; Mahoney et al., 2007; McGuire & Gamble, 2006). This stands to reason, as engagement is a strong predictor for continued participation in an after-school activity (Bartko, 2005); the more engaged a student is, the more likely they are to return to after-school activities and derive the benefits associated with membership. Importantly, this engagement may protect youth from suicidal behavior, as meaningful engagement moderated the relationship between depression and suicidal ideation for youth involved in after-school activities (Armstrong & Manion, 2015). This may be because sustained participation and engagement in after-school activities was associated with the development of assets such as support, commitment to learning, and positive identity (Forneris et al., 2015). Additionally, more engaged students were more likely to be rated as highly competent by their teachers (Mahoney et al., 2007).

With the understanding that engagement in after-school activities is associated with positive outcomes, some researchers have expanded their view of engagement to include student-leaders. In some ways, leading an after-school activity can be seen as an outgrowth of high engagement, as well as a higher form of engagement. Adolescents involved in

after-school activities that empower them by allowing them to serve as leaders or organizers of club activities have stronger leadership skills and greater self-efficacy (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). Research demonstrates that some demographic features are associated with leadership roles in after-school activities, as women and older students are more likely to be club presidents and captains of sports teams than their peers (Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2008). Beyond this, though, little is known about who becomes a leader of a club or organization and why. Perhaps students who join an organization because they have a strong connection to its mission are more likely to become leaders, or perhaps students who joined to socialize with friends are less likely to be involved in organizing club meetings.

Predictors of Engagement

Because of the benefits associated with engagement, researchers have endeavored to explore the individual and contextual factors related to increased engagement in after-school activities. As adolescents often desire increased autonomy, have greater cognitive abilities and emotional control, and seek both romantic and friendship partners, after-school activities can be particularly salient settings for young people to grow and learn (Eccles et al., 1993; Mahatmya et al., 2012). Parental support for after-school activities was associated with greater engagement (J. C. Anderson, Funk, Elliott, & Smith, 2003; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001), as was being in younger grades (Denault & Poulin, 2009). Additionally, though, research has demonstrated that white students and girl-identified students are more likely to be engaged in after-school activities (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney et al., 2007).

In understanding engagement in after-school activities, researchers have also focused on the importance of a match between students' developmental needs and their

environment, exploring contextual factors that may be associated with engagement (Eccles et al., 1993). Researchers have identified several key features of environmental context that are important levers for engagement in after-school activities: fostering a sense of security, providing clear and direct rules and norms, offering opportunities to be included, allowing students to develop autonomy, and teaching skills (Bartko, 2005; Bohnert et al., 2010; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Fredricks, 2011; Mahoney et al., 2007). More simply, research demonstrates that four contextual factors are most important in cultivating engagement: supportive teachers, supportive peers, adequate structure, and developmental appropriateness (Fredricks, 2011). After-school activities, then, must be spaces in which students are appropriately challenged by new and relevant tasks, supported by teachers and peers who care about their success, and are guided by a structure that allows for students to know what is expected and how to succeed. Taken together, these results indicate that students' engagement may be the result of a complex interplay between individual and contextual factors.

Motivations for Engagement in After-School Activities

As the study of engagement encompasses many related literatures and traditions, some scholars have also explored the role that motivation plays in engagement (Bartko, 2005; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Indeed, motivation may be the precursor to engagement: it provides the initial push to get a student through the door, attracting a student to attendance, which may lead to participation, engagement, and even leadership (Ballard, 2014; Dawes & Larson, 2011; Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Fredricks et al., 2010). There are a variety of reasons for which adolescents become involved in extracurricular activities; some young people join to spend time with friends, to get more involved in their school, to satisfy a requirement, to appease a parent or guidance counselor, to learn more

about a topic, or to connect with the activities' goals, missions, or events (Dawes & Larson, 2011; Herrera & Arbetron, 2003; McLellan & Youniss, 2002; Perkins et al., 2007). Moreover, because after-school activities promote prosocial development (Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012; J. Kahne et al., 2001), adolescents may join after-school activities to meet a perceived need. As adolescence can be a time of identity exploration and cultivation of a purpose or drive, some students may join after-school activities to learn new skills, develop a sense of agency and purpose, feel a sense of belonging, socialize, or work through difficulties (Eccles & Templeton, 2002).

Indeed, although most research focuses on the benefits students derive from participating in after-school activities, rather than on their motivations for initially joining, we can understand that adolescents may join these organizations to accrue these benefits. For example, after-school activities provide spaces for students to engage in self-reflection, self-exploration, self-consideration, and self-understanding (Barber et al., 2005; Dworkin et al., 2002; Hansen et al., 2003). Some young people may join organizations for the purpose of considering their own identities and determining who they want to be. Additionally, after-school activities offer a setting for socializing and interacting with peers, as young people meet new people and deepen their relationships with existing friends (Barber et al., 2005; Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012). Some young people may join to gain these interpersonal and social skills (Hansen et al., 2003), or simply because they find such activities to be fun and enjoyable (Perkins et al., 2007). Young people may also join these organizations for support and safety, as these spaces provide adolescents with access to other youth who can offer support and guidance (Carnegie Council on & Adolescent Development, 1992; Dworkin et al., 2002; Hansen et al., 2003; J. Kahne et al., 2001; Reis & Diaz, 1999). Finally, young people may join after-school activities in order to become

more involved in their school and community political landscape, as participating in after-school activities can foster sociopolitical development (J. E. Kahne & Sporte, 2008; McFarland & Thomas, 2006). In these ways, we can understand that young people may join after-school activities to derive benefits or meet developmental needs including identity formation, socializing, support, and sociopolitical growth.

Current Study

In order to better understand students' engagement in their GSAs, the current study investigates student- and context-level predictors of engagement in and leadership of their GSAs. As research stresses the importance of meaningful engagement, this study aims to better understand the relationships among students' demographic characteristics, their motivations for joining their GSA, and contextual factors related to the GSA setting, with engagement in the GSA. Better understanding which factors are most predictive of engagement will enable GSA researchers to focus on the variability of those factors most important for engagement. Additionally, practitioners and advisors will be better able to cultivate students' meaningful engagement in their GSAs. The current study employs multilevel modeling of student survey responses to better understand students' engagement in and leadership of their GSAs and determine which factors are most important.

The current study addresses the following research questions: what individual- and context-level variables predict student engagement in and leadership of their GSAs? More specifically, to what extent do age, race, gender, sexual orientation, and free and reduced-price lunch status predict engagement in and leadership of GSAs? To what extent do the different student motivations for joining their GSA predict engagement in and leadership of GSAs? To what extent do advisors' ratings of the inclusion of student voice and autonomy, meeting structure, and degree of student leadership of the GSA predict students'

engagement in and leadership of GSAs?

Data and Methods

Data

The current study analyzes cross-sectional survey data collected as part of a larger study exploring mechanisms of health promotion in diverse youth through GSAs, the result of a collaboration of researchers at Boston College, New York University, and San Diego State University. Research was conducted in Massachusetts, both in urban and suburban locations in the hopes of capturing demographic and geographic diversity. Researchers administered a survey to GSA members and advisors at the end of the school year in 2018. The survey, as part of the larger study, captured a variety of outcomes; the current study explores the demographic questions, GSA access questions, and the open-ended question that asked why students joined their GSA. The data collection process complied with the Institutional Review Board requirements at Boston College and Vanderbilt University.

Sample

Prior to analysis, the total sample was filtered to remove students who did not provide a rationale for joining their GSA ($n = 4$) and who reported that they were not in 9th-12th grade ($n = 4$), as this study examined only students in traditional high school grades. This yielded a total sample of 179 students in 17 schools. In addition, GSA advisors at the 17 schools completed surveys, and their responses were included as context-level predictors. See Table 1 for demographic details of the sample.

Table 1.
Predictors and Outcomes

Characteristic	GSA Members (*n* = 179)
Age, mean *(SD)*	15. 78 *(1.27)*
Grade level, mean *(SD)*	10.1 *(1.13)*
Ninth grade	74 (41.3%)
Tenth grade	35 (19.6%)
Eleventh grade	41 (22.9%)
Twelfth grade	28 (15.6%)
Gender, *n* (%)	
Cis-gender male	28 (15.6%)
Cis-gender female	100 (55.9%)
Transgender	17 (9.5%)
Non-binary	33 (18.4%)
Sexuality, *n* (%)	
Gay/lesbian	29 (16.2%)
Bisexual	82 (45.8%)
Questioning	13 (7.3%)
Straight	19 (10.6%)
Asexual	19 (10.6%)
Queer	13 (7.3%)
Race, *n* (%)	
Non-Hispanic white	122 (68.2%)
Non-Hispanic black	7 (3.9%)
Asian/Asian-American	6 (3.4%)
Latinx	20 (11.2%)
Multiracial	21 (11.7%)
Race not otherwise listed	3 (1.7%)
FRPL Status, *n* (%)	
Yes	50 (27.0%)
No	107 (59.8%)
Unsure	14 (7.9%)
Contextual Predictors, mean (SD)	
Openness	4.52 (0.48)
Structured Meetings	14.87 (1.95)
Student-led Meetings	3.46 (1.66)
Students' Motivations, *n* (%)	
Intrapersonal Development	46 (25.7%)
Interpersonal Socializing	68 (38.0%)
Interpersonal Safety and Support	70 (39.1%)
Political Reasons	45 (25.1%)
Other	3 (1.7%)
Outcomes	
Composite Engagement, mean (SD)	2.32 (1.10)
Leadership Role, *n* (%)	32 (17.9%)

Measures

Because the dependent variables for this study were students' engagement in and leadership of their GSA, students were asked to report their participation in their GSAs in two ways. Students were asked if they were leaders of their GSA (yes or no) to determine if they had a formal leadership role in their GSA. Additionally, students were asked more specifically about their engagement in the GSA. Engagement was measured by five questions about student involvement in their GSA (on a scale from one to five, with higher numbers indicating greater frequency: I attend GSA meetings or other GSA events, I participate in conversations at GSA meetings, I take leadership roles in activities and events in my GSA, I have discussions with my GSA advisor(s) about GSA-related matters, and I help with events or projects in my GSA; Cronbach's alpha = .90). This composite score was then averaged. It is important to note that the composite measurement of engagement does ask students if they take leadership roles in their GSA, which may be similar to their binary indication of leadership status. However, the composite measure of engagement includes additional components of engagement, and the moderate, significant correlation between them ($r = .50, p = .000$) indicates that although the two are related, they are different constructs.

In addition to information on engagement in and leadership of GSA, the self-reported student data provided demographic information and their initial rationale for joining their GSA. The survey asked students for the following demographic information: their age, gender identity (check all that apply: male, female, genderqueer, gender fluid, non-binary, and other), sexual orientation (please choose one of the following that you best identify with: gay or lesbian, bisexual, questioning, heterosexual/straight, pansexual, asexual, queer, and other), race/ethnicity (non-Hispanic white, black or African American,

Asian/Asian American, Latino/a, bi/multiracial, Native American, Middle Eastern/Arab or Arab-American, and other), and free and reduced-price lunch status (do you receive a free or reduced-cost lunch at school: no, yes, I don't know). Finally, students were asked to respond to the open-ended question: Could you share why you decided to join your GSA?

The final question, intended to assess students' initial motivations and rationales for joining their GSAs, was transcribed verbatim by research assistants, and then coded into categorical variables by the research team that consisted of the primary researcher, an undergraduate research assistant, and a high school research assistant. The research team used a typology for categorizing rationales developed by the research team in their analysis of qualitative interviews of GSA members, dividing the rationales first into primary motivations and into overarching themes (see Dissertation paper 2 for more detail). The overarching themes were intrapersonal identity and development; intrapersonal socializing; intrapersonal support; and political reasons. These rationales were not coded as mutually exclusive categories; that is to say, a student could provide multiple reasons for joining and have all of those reasons included in the data. For more information about students' motivations, please see Appendix A.

In addition to individual-level measures, GSA advisors completed surveys about their organizations. These data are included as context-level predictors. Advisors were asked about the openness of the GSA climate (four items, each rated from one to five, with five indicating greater frequency: From November until now, in our GSA, students have a voice in what happens; could disagree with the advisor, if they were respectful; could disagree with each other, if they were respectful; were encouraged to express opinions), meeting structure (four items, each rated from one to five with five indicating greater frequency: We did check-ins at the beginning of GSA meetings, we followed up about

things that were discussed in the last GSA meeting, our GSA meetings followed an agenda, I or a student(s) led/co-led meetings), and student leadership (on a scale of one to seven with lower scores indicating greater student leadership, to what extent was the GSA led by students or by you as the advisor?). All responses were converted to numerical values These three measures were included as contextual variables for the GSA at level two; that is, an advisor's ranking of student leadership, for example, was included as a variable such that each student in that advisor's GSA had the same score on student leadership. Please see Table 1 for additional information concerning predictors and outcomes.

Missing Data

Missing data ranged from 0.0% to 4.5%. Data were missing completely at random (MCAR), as Little's MCAR test was non-significant ($\chi^2 = 127.40$, $df = 138$, $p = .73$). Because data were so infrequently missing, pairwise deletion was used.

Statistical Analyses

Descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics for all student outcomes were obtained using SPSS 25. Percentages were obtained for all demographic variables, and mean and standard deviation were obtained for GSA involvement. Because students' rationales for joining have not been explored quantitatively in other research, cross tabulations were conducted for rationales and grade, race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and free and reduced-price lunch status. Because rationale categories are not mutually exclusive, these tables cannot be statistically evaluated using a chi-squared test of independence, and therefore the tables are provided in their entirety. See Appendix A for these tables.

Multilevel modeling. Because all data for this study are nested—students are nested in schools, and therefore students in the same GSA might provide more similar

responses than students in GSAs at different schools—multilevel modeling was employed to account for and model any school-based dependencies in responses. Multilevel regression and multilevel logistic regression were conducted in Mplus 8, using two-level maximum likelihood estimation. Two models were constructed to model engagement: a model with individual and contextual predictors and a model with individual predictors, contextual predictors, and motivation. Because of the relatively small sample size of level-2 schools and within each school, variables were dichotomized when possible to conserve statistical power (i.e., gender was dichotomized into cisgender and trans and gender non-conforming (TGNC) youth; sexuality was dichotomized into straight and queer; race was dichotomized into white and non-white). Standardized coefficients and p-values are provided for each predictor for each model.

Results

The aim of this study was to determine the extent to which demographic characteristics, contextual factors, and student motivation for joining predicted students' engagement in and leadership of their GSAs. For each outcome—engagement and leadership—two models were conducted in order to separate the more conventional predictors from the more novel: one model that included demographic characteristics and contextual factors, and one model that included demographic characteristics, contextual factors, and student motivation.

Engagement

The models built for the first outcome, composite score of engagement, were designed to understand the extent to which students' composite engagement in their GSA—that is, their attendance, their participation in discussion, their leadership of activities, their conversations with their advisors about GSA-related topics, and their

helping out at GSA events—was predicted by student-level demographic characteristics, context-level factors, and student motivation.

Model One. The first model documents the extent to which students' composite scores of engagement in their GSA are predicted by student demographic characteristics—age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and free and reduced-price lunch status—and contextual factors of their GSA—openness, structure, and student-led meetings. The model indicates that age, gender, and sexual orientation were significant predictors of engagement in the GSA. Context-level predictors (advisor's rating of the GSA's support of students' agency, open climate, and structure) and race and free- and reduced-price lunch status were non-significant. Older students were significantly more likely to be engaged than their younger peers ($\beta = 0.23$, SE = 0.08, $p = .005$), as were non-cisgender (that is, transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer) students ($\beta = 0.23$, SE = 0.07, $p = .002$) and non-straight students ($\beta = 0.22$, SE = 0.08, $p = .004$). For full details, please see Table 2.

Table 2
Results of Demographic and Context-Level Predictors of Composite Engagement

Predictor	β	SE	*p*	Sig.
Age	0.231	0.081	.005	*
Gender	0.233	0.074	.002	*
Sexual Orientation	0.216	0.075	.004	*
Race	-0.140	0.079	.077	
Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	-0.052	0.075	.490	
Openness	0.827	1.078	.443	
Structure	-0.574	1.128	.611	
Student-led meetings	0.454	0.897	.613	

Note. For gender, cisgender is the reference category. For sexual orientation, straight is the reference category. For race, white is the reference category. For free and reduced-price lunch, no is the reference category.

Model Two. The second model documents the extent to which students' composite scores of engagement in their GSA are predicted by student demographic characteristics—age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and free and reduced-price lunch status—and contextual factors of their GSA—openness, structure, and student-led meetings—along with students' reports of their motivation for joining their GSA. This more complex model indicated that age ($\beta = 0.24$, SE = 0.08, $p = .005$), gender ($\beta = 0.24$, SE = 0.07, $p = .002$), and sexual orientation ($\beta = 0.23$, SE = 0.07, $p = .004$) were still significant, and students' rationale for joining the GSA was not significant. For full details, please see Table 3.

Table 3
Results of Demographic, Context-Level, and Student Motivation Predictors of Composite Engagement

Predictor	β	SE	*p*	Sig.
Age	0.236	0.083	0.005	*
Gender	0.235	0.074	0.002	*
Sexual Orientation	0.225	0.077	0.004	*
Race	-0.139	0.08	0.082	
Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	-0.048	0.076	0.53	
Openness	0.507	0.985	0.607	
Structure	0.845	1.16	0.466	
Student-led meetings	0.527	1.099	0.632	
Intrapersonal Development	0.046	0.084	0.58	
Interpersonal Socializing	0.014	0.114	0.902	
Interpersonal Support and Safety	0.035	0.103	0.735	
Political Reasons	0.071	0.102	0.487	
Other	0.047	0.081	0.568	

Note. For gender, cisgender is the reference category. For sexual orientation, straight is the reference category. For race, white is the reference category. For free and reduced-price lunch, no is the reference category.

Leadership

In a similar manner to understanding composite engagement, models were conducted to determine the relationship between having a leadership role in the GSA and student-level demographic characteristics, context-level factors, and student motivation. To separate the more conventional predictors from the more novel, two multilevel logistic models were run: model one contains student-level demographic characteristics and context-level factors, and model two contains these demographic characteristics and context-level factors in addition to student motivation for joining their GSA.

Model One. The first model documents the extent to which students' leadership role within their GSA is predicted by student demographic characteristics—age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and free and reduced-price lunch status—and contextual factors of their GSA—openness, structure, and student-led meetings. The model indicates that age and sexual orientation were significant predictors of engagement in the GSA. Context-level predictors (advisor's rating of the GSA's support of students' agency, open climate, and structure) and gender, race, and free and reduced-price lunch status were non-significant. Older students were significantly more likely to be engaged than their younger peers (OR = 2.54, SE = 0.58, p = .008), as were non-straight students (OR = 7.04, SE = 0.17, p = .000). For full details, please see Table 4 and Table 5.

Table 4
Results of Demographic and Context-Level Predictors of Leadership Role

Predictor	B	SE	*p*	Sig.
Age	0.931	0.227	.000	*
Gender	0.965	0.533	.07	
Sexual Orientation	1.954	1.174	.096	
Race	-0.27	0.565	.632	
Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	-0.022	0.52	.967	
Openness	-0.397	0.559	.478	
Structure	0.318	0.163	.052	
Student-led meetings	0.161	0.159	.313	

Note. For gender, cisgender is the reference category. For sexual orientation, straight is the reference category. For race, white is the reference category. For free and reduced-price lunch, no is the reference category.

Table 5
Odds Ratios for Demographic Predictors of Leadership Role

Predictor	OR	SE	*p*	Sig.
Age	2.538	0.576	.008	*
Gender	2.626	1.4	.246	
Sexual Orientation	7.042	0.166	.000	*
Race	0.763	0.431	.583	
Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	0.978	0.509	.966	

Note. For gender, cisgender is the reference category. For sexual orientation, straight is the reference category. For race, white is the reference category. For free and reduced-price lunch, no is the reference category.

Model Two. The second model documents the extent to which students' leadership roles in their GSA are predicted by student demographic characteristics—age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and free and reduced-price lunch status—and contextual factors of their GSA—openness, structure, and student-led meetings—along with students' reports of their motivation for joining their GSA. This more complex model indicated that age (OR = 2.71, SE = 0.67, p = .01) and sexual orientation (OR = 5.15, SE = 0.24, p = .001) were still significant, and students' rationale for joining the GSA was not significant. In this more

complex model, the structure of GSA meetings was also predictive (B = 0.41, SE = 0.18, p = .022) as was gender (B = 1.25, SE = 0.58, p = .032). For full details, please see Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6
Results of Demographic, Context-Level, and Student Motivation Predictors of Leadership Role

Predictor	B	SE	p	Sig.
Age	0.996	0.246	.000	*
Gender	1.249	0.583	.032	*
Sexual Orientation	1.64	1.212	.176	
Race	-0.211	0.574	.713	
Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	0.08	0.528	.879	
Openness	-0.206	0.583	.724	
Structure	0.413	0.181	.022	*
Student-led meetings	0.1	0.163	.539	
Intrapersonal Development	0.022	0.625	.973	
Interpersonal Socializing	1.492	0.774	.054	
Interpersonal Support and Safety	0.567	0.721	.432	
Political Reasons	0.525	0.79	.506	
Other	-14.25	0	999	

Note. For gender, cisgender is the reference category. For sexual orientation, straight is the reference category. For race, white is the reference category. For free and reduced-price lunch, no is the reference category.

Table 7
Odds Ratios for Demographic Predictors and Student Rationale for Leadership Role

Predictor	OR	SE	p	Sig.
Age	2.709	0.667	.01	*
Gender	3.488	2.035	.221	
Sexual Orientation	5.155	0.235	.001	*
Race	0.81	0.464	.682	
Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	1.083	0.573	.884	
Intrapersonal Development	1.022	0.638	.973	
Interpersonal Socializing	4.444	3.439	.317	
Interpersonal Support and Safety	1.762	1.27	.549	
Political Reasons	1.69	1.335	.605	
Other	0	0	999	

Note. For gender, cisgender is the reference category. For sexual orientation, straight is the reference category. For race, white is the reference category. For free and reduced-price

lunch, no is the reference category.

Discussion

For this sample of Massachusetts GSA members, several demographic factors were predictors of students' engagement in their GSA and leadership of their GSA. Older students, LGBQ students, and TGNC students were more likely to have higher composite engagement scores. Similarly, older and LGBQ students were more likely to be leaders of their GSA. Additionally, students in GSAs whose meetings were more structured were more likely to have leadership roles. This may indicate that students-leaders themselves are the driving force for this structure, as they may set the agenda and ensure that topics are followed-up on. Alternatively, this could simply indicate that in GSAs whose meetings are more structured may in fact have more officers and official leadership positions. Importantly, race and free and reduced-price lunch status were not predictive of greater engagement, and students' motivations for joining their GSA were also not associated with engagement. For both engagement in and leadership of GSA meetings, context-level features were also not predictive.

In some ways, the significant findings are logical and in keeping with the literature on after-school engagement. Older students are likely more developmentally able to engage with the discussions and experiences at the GSA, and the GSA might be more appropriate for them as they navigate autonomy and the larger political world (Mahatmya et al., 2012). Additionally, the findings that LGBQ and TGNC students are more likely to be engaged and to lead their GSAs are in keeping with the idea that GSAs may be a specific context that appeals to students' desires to be a part of the organization. As the GSA explicitly names gender and sexuality in its mission, queer students may be more engaged with these topics, either cognitively or affectively (Bartko, 2005; Bartko & Eccles, 2003) .

The non-significant findings may, in some ways, be slightly more surprising. As previous research has documented racial differences in engagement in after-school activities (Fredricks et al., 2010; Mahoney et al., 2007), one might expect that race would be a significant predictor of engagement in GSAs. It is important to note that the sample was predominantly white, and this lack of racial diversity might account for the non-significant findings. Potentially, though, these GSAs may be doing a good job of being racially inclusive, such that students' racial identity is not associated with their engagement. On the other hand, it is possible that students' racial identity is less salient in GSAs and therefore less associated with engagement than it might be in other clubs, especially in clubs that are not nominally focused on specific, non-racial identities. Similarly, one might expect that the motivations that students provided for joining the GSA would be predictive of their subsequent engagement, based on research into how motivation shapes engagement (Ballard, 2014; Dawes & Larson, 2011; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Again, a lack of variability may obscure any potential predictive power of student rationale: because most students provided more than one rationale and because there was not considerable variation in rationales, the models may not have been able to detect any predictive power of students' motivations.

Nonetheless, the frequencies of motivations can be illuminating: students joined for community, to engage in activism, to spend time with friends, and to make new friends. In terms of major themes, more students joined for interpersonal support and safety and for interpersonal socialization, and many students joined for intrapersonal and identity development and for political reasons. It is important to note that students join their GSAs for a variety of reasons—to understand themselves better, to make new friends, to improve the world—and that in many cases, students joined the GSA because they felt they had a

strength or talent they could share with their peers and their school.

Strengths

This study offers several strengths in moving the research on GSAs and after-school activities forward. By focusing specifically on student engagement and by considering various forms of engagement, the study provides new and important insight into the factors associated with the positive outcomes that are often observed from after-school activities. By employing multilevel modeling, the study accounts for dependencies within the data and accurately models the data, including both individual and context-level predictors of student engagement. Additionally, focusing on GSAs offers important insight into a specific type of organization, one which serves a variety of purposes and may offer students a number of different opportunities for engagement and leadership, thus making it an integral space to begin to explore engagement.

Limitations

These findings should be understood within the context of the limitations of the study and its data. Because all data are cross-sectional, no assumptions of causality or directionality can be made; although straight students may be less likely to serve in a leadership capacity, we cannot draw conclusions about the effects of a heterosexual identity, for example. Additionally, these data are from Massachusetts, a politically progressive state, which may limit the generalizability of the findings and may impact students' motivations for joining. It is also important to recognize the lack of diversity in the included sample; because the sample was overwhelmingly white and bisexual, all conclusions should be tempered with the understanding that this sample is not representative of the broader population. Moreover, because of the sample size limitations, several variables were dichotomized, rather than kept as categorical variables that captured

the nuances and differences (for example, between non-binary and trans students, who were grouped together as TGNC). Additionally, the sample was purposive and not randomly selected, indicating that the findings are not representative of GSA members. Finally, there was a lack of variability among student rationales; potentially recruiting from more disparate settings would result in more pronounced differences in students' motivations for joining.

Implications for Theory

The findings from this study indicate that researchers should explore various levers for engagement in after-school activities. As some student demographic features were salient predictors of engagement, future research should more carefully consider the nuances and granularities of identities that may be salient for engagement. For example, sexuality was salient for engagement in GSAs, but for other organizations, there may be different demographic features that are important. Additionally, researchers should continue to explore the setting-level features of organizations that may be associated with greater engagement: exploring the climate and culture that advisors and students co-create, as well as aspects of the structure of organizations and meetings that might foster engagement.

It is also important that researchers acknowledge that, within the variety of rationales for joining, many adolescents report that they have joined an organization not to help themselves or for a specific deficit they believe they have, but because of a desire to improve the world or because of a particular strength they have. This can be seen clearly as some students joined their GSAs to provide support to others, and other students joined in order to take an activist approach to issues in their schools and communities. This should encourage researchers to acknowledge the strengths and assets that young people bring to

these after-school spaces, instead of solely focusing on students' deficits.

Implications for Practice

Practitioners, especially adults who work in after-school spaces with adolescents, should consider the ways in which the findings from this study can impact their interactions with young people. Primarily, practitioners should consider the importance of engagement and endeavor to increase all students' meaningful participation in club activities. This can be done in a number of ways, but attention to the norms and structures of club meetings may be one simple way for advisors to increase engagement. Additionally, advisors could work to engage younger students, as all models indicated that being older was associated with greater engagement or leadership in the GSA. Reaching younger students may ensure sustained, meaningful engagement. Practitioners should also consider the wide variety of reasons for which students may attend after-school activities and should work to overcome their own assumptions and biases about what students might want or need from the space. Advisors would be well served to incorporate an informal survey or questionnaire at the beginning of each year to assess the reasons students joined and to ensure that the club may meet those needs and desires, as well as to better understand which students would want to organize or lead meetings. Additionally, advisors should consider that their activities and events should address the variety of needs and should encourage programming that serves several purposes; as some students will certainly have joined to make new friends, while others may join to get support or to educate peers, advisors should work to balance the goals and activities of the group so that all students are able to experience some level of fulfillment and feel that their needs are being met within the space. Finally, advisors should work to ensure that their clubs live up to the expectations and needs of students; for example, many students joined their GSA

because they needed a safe space where they could be themselves without fear of judgment and reported greater leadership and organization of meetings when the climate was open (and which was demonstrated in the Model Two for Leadership, see Table 7), so advisors should work to ensure such an atmosphere exists.

Conclusions

As focus shifts from counting participation to measuring engagement, researchers and practitioners should consider features of organizations that may be associated with higher engagement and leadership. Moreover, as adolescents report a variety of needs from and assets offered to after-school activities, researchers and practitioners should consider these motivations when evaluating and implementing programming in these spaces. Students deserve developmentally appropriate, targeted spaces that meet their needs and that appeal to their gifts, and by better understanding their engagement and leadership in these spaces, as demonstrated by the research in this study for GSAs, we can ensure that all students are receiving the high-quality extracurricular activities that promote development and growth. Because students join these organizations for many different reasons, researchers and practitioners must be cognizant of the variability of experience within these organizations and must work to address the multiplicity of viewpoints and needs that coexist within them.

References

Anderson, J. C., Funk, J. B., Elliott, R., & Smith, P. H. (2003). Parental support and pressure and children's extracurricular activities: relationships with amount of involvement and affective experience of participation. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *24*(2), 241–257. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0193-3973(03)00046-7

Armstrong, L. L., & Manion, I. G. (2015). Meaningful Youth Engagement as a Protective Factor for Youth Suicidal Ideation. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *25*(1), 20–27. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12098

Ballard, P. J. (2014). What Motivates Youth Civic Involvement? *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *29*(4), 439–463. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558413520224

Barber, B. L., Stone, Margaret R., Hunt, J. E., & Eccles, J. S. (2005). Benefits of Activity Participation: The Roles of Identity Affirmation and Peer Group Norm Sharing. In J. L. Mahoney, R. W. Larson, & J. S. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized Activities As Contexts of Development: Extracurricular Activities, After School and Community Programs* (pp. 185–207). Psychology Press.

Bartko, W. T. (2005). The ABCs of engagement in out-of-school-time programs. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *2005*(105), 109–120. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.110

Bartko, W. T., & Eccles, J. S. (2003). Adolescent Participation in Structured and Unstructured Activities: A Person-Oriented Analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *32*(4), 233–241. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023056425648

Bohnert, A., Fredricks, J., & Randall, E. (2010). Capturing unique dimensions of youth

organized activity involvement: Theoretical and methodological considerations. *Review of Educational Research*, 576–610.

Carnegie Council on, & Adolescent Development,. (1992). *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Out-of-School Hours. Recommendations for Strengthening Community Programs for Youth*. Carnegie Corporation Of New York. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED391573.pdf

D'augelli, A. R., & Bontempo, D. E. (2002). Effects of At-School Victimization and Sexual Orientation on Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual Youths' Health Risk Behavior. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *30*, 364–374.

Dawes, N. P., & Larson, R. (2011). How youth get engaged: Grounded-theory research on motivational development in organized youth programs. *Developmental Psychology*, *47*(1), 259–269. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020729

Denault, A.-S., & Poulin, F. (2009). Intensity and Breadth of Participation in Organized Activities During the Adolescent Years: Multiple Associations with Youth Outcomes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *38*(9), 1199–1213. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-009-9437-5

Dhuey, E., & Lipscomb, S. (2008). What makes a leader? Relative age and high school leadership. *Economics of Education Review*, *27*(2), 173–183. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2006.08.005

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., & Pachan, M. (2010). A Meta-Analysis of After-School Programs That Seek to Promote Personal and Social Skills in Children and Adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *45*(3–4), 294–309. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9300-6

Dworkin, J. B., Larson, R., & Hansen, D. (2002). Adolescents' Accounts of Growth

Experiences in Youth Activities. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 10.

Eccles, J. S., & Barber, B. L. (1999). Student Council, Volunteering, Basketball, or Marching Band: What Kind of Extracurricular Involvement Matters? *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *14*(1), 10–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558499141003

Eccles, J. S., Midgley, C., Wigfield, A., Buchanan, C. M., Reuman, D., Flanagan, C., & Mac Iver, D. (1993). Development during adolescence: The impact of stage-environment fit on young adolescents' experiences in schools and in families. *American Psychologist*, *48*(2), 90–101. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.48.2.90

Eccles, J. S., & Roeser, R. W. (2009). Schools, Academic Motivation, and Stage–Environment Fit. *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, *1*, 404–434.

Eccles, J. S., & Roeser, R. W. (2011). Schools as Developmental Contexts During Adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *21*(1), 225–241. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2010.00725.x

Eccles, J. S., & Templeton, J. (2002). Chapter 4: Extracurricular and Other After-School Activities for Youth. *Review of Research in Education*, *26*(1), 113–180. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X026001113

Feldman, A. F., & Matjasko, J. L. (2005). The Role of School-Based Extracurricular Activities in Adolescent Development: A Comprehensive Review and Future Directions. *Review of Educational Research*, *75*(2), 159–210.

Fetner, T., & Kush, K. (2008). Gay-Straight Alliances in High Schools: Social Predictors of Early Adoption. *Youth & Society*, *40*(1), 114–130.

Forneris, T., Camiré, M., & Williamson, R. (2015). Extracurricular Activity Participation and the Acquisition of Developmental Assets: Differences Between Involved and Noninvolved Canadian High School Students. *Applied Developmental Science*,

19(1), 47–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2014.980580

Fredricks, J. A. (2011). Engagement in School and Out-of-School Contexts: A Multidimensional View of Engagement. *Theory Into Practice*, *50*(4), 327–335. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2011.607401

Fredricks, J. A., Hackett, K., & Bregman, A. (2010). Participation in boys and girls clubs: motivation and stage environment fit. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *38*(3), 369–385. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20369

Fredricks, J. A., & Simpkins, S. D. (2012). Promoting Positive Youth Development Through Organized After-School Activities: Taking a Closer Look at Participation of Ethnic Minority Youth: Organized Activities. *Child Development Perspectives*, *6*(3), 280–287. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-8606.2011.00206.x

Griffin, P., Lee, C., Waugh, J., & Beyer, C. (2004). Describing roles that Gay-straight alliances play in schools: From individual support to social change. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, *1*, 7–22.

Hansen, D. M., Larson, R. W., & Dworkin, J. B. (2003). What Adolescents Learn in Organized Youth Activities: A Survey of Self-Reported Developmental Experiences. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *13*(1), 25–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/1532-7795.1301006

Heck, N. C. (2015). The Potential to Promote Resilience: Piloting a Minority Stress-Informed, GSA-Based, Mental Health Promotion Program for LGBTQ Youth. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, *2*(3), 225–231. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000110

Heck, N. C., Livingston, N. A., Flentje, A., Oost, K., Stewart, B. T., & Cochran, B. N. (2014). Reducing risk for illicit drug use and prescription drug misuse: High school

gay-straight alliances and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. *Addictive Behaviors*, *39*(4), 824–828. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2014.01.007

Herdt, G., Russell, S. T., Sweat, J., & Marzullo, M. (2007). Sexual inequality, youth empowerment, and the GSA: A community study in California. In *Sexual Inequalities* (pp. 233–252). Berkley, CA: University of California Press.

Herrera, C., & Arbetron, A. J. A. (2003). Increasing opportunities for older youth in after-school programs. Public/Private Ventures.

Hofferth, S. L., & Sandberg, J. F. (2001). How American Children Spend Their Time. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *63*(2), 295–308. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2001.00295.x

Kahne, J. E., & Sporte, S. E. (2008). Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students' Commitment to Civic Participation. *American Educational Research Journal*, *45*(3), 738–766. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831208316951

Kahne, J., Nagaoka, J., Brown, A., O'Brien, J., Quinn, T., & Thiede, K. (2001). Assessing After-School Programs as Contexts for Youth Development. *Youth & Society*, *32*(4), 421–446.

Larson, R. W. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist*, 170–183.

Mahatmya, D., Lohman, B. J., Matjasko, J. L., & Farb, A. F. (2012). Engagement Across Developmental Periods. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (pp. 45–63). Boston, MA: Springer US. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-2018-7_3

Mahoney, J. L., Parente, M. E., & Lord, H. (2007). After-School Program Engagement:

Links to Child Competence and Program Quality and Content. *The Elementary School Journal*, *107*(4), 385–404. https://doi.org/10.1086/516670

Marx, R. A., & Kettrey, H. H. (2016). Gay-Straight Alliances are Associated with Lower Levels of School-Based Victimization of LGBTQ+ Youth: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *45*(7), 1269–1282. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-016-0501-7

Mayberry, M., Chenneville, T., & Currie, S. (2013). Challenging the Sounds of Silence: A Qualitative Study of Gay–Straight Alliances and School Reform Efforts. *Education and Urban Society*, *45*(3), 307–339. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124511409400

Mayo, J. B. (2013). Critical Pedagogy Enacted in the Gay–Straight Alliance: New Possibilities for a Third Space in Teacher Development. *Educational Researcher*, *42*(5), 266–275. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X13491977

McFarland, D. A., & Thomas, R. J. (2006). Bowling Young: How Youth Voluntary Associations Influence Adult Political Participation. *American Sociological Review*, *71*(3), 401–425. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240607100303

McGuire, J. K., & Gamble, W. C. (2006). Community service for youth: The value of psychological engagement over number of hours spent. *Journal of Adolescence*, *29*(2), 289–298. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2005.07.006

McLellan, J. A., & Youniss, J. (2002). Two Systems of Youth Service: Determinants of Voluntary and Required Youth Community Service, 12.

Miceli, M. (2005). *Standing Out, Standing Together: The Social and Political Impact of Gay-Straight Alliances*. New York: Routledge.

Perkins, D. F., Borden, L. M., Villarruel, F. A., Carlton-Hug, A., Stone, M. R., & Keith, J. G. (2007). Participation in Structured Youth Programs: Why Ethnic Minority Urban

Youth Choose to Participate—or Not to Participate. *Youth & Society*, *38*(4), 420–442. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X06295051

Porta, C. M., Singer, E., Mehus, C. J., Gower, A. L., Saewyc, E., Fredkove, W., & Eisenberg, M. E. (2017). LGBTQ Youth's Views on Gay-Straight Alliances: Building Community, Providing Gateways, and Representing Safety and Support. *Journal of School Health*, *87*(7), 489–497. https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12517

Portnoy, G. A. (2012). *Perceptions of school climate, psychological sense of community, and gay-straight alliances: A mixed method examination* (Dissertation). Retrieved from 1532601

Poteat, V. P., Scheer, J. R., Marx, R. A., Calzo, J. P., & Yoshikawa, H. (2015). Gay-Straight Alliances Vary on Dimensions of Youth Socializing and Advocacy: Factors Accounting for Individual and Setting-Level Differences. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *55*(3–4), 422–432. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-015-9722-2

Poteat, V. P., Sinclair, K. O., DiGiovanni, C. D., Koenig, B. W., & Russell, S. T. (2013). Gay-Straight Alliances Are Associated With Student Health: A Multischool Comparison of LGBTQ and Heterosexual Youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *23*(2), 319–330. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00832.x

Poteat, V. P., Yoshikawa, H., Calzo, J. P., Gray, M. L., DiGiovanni, C. D., Lipkin, A., … Shaw, M. P. (2015). Contextualizing Gay-Straight Alliances: Student, Advisor, and Structural Factors Related to Positive Youth Development Among Members. *Child Development*, *86*(1), 176–193. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12289

Reis, S. M., & Diaz, E. (1999). Economically Disadvantaged Urban Female Students Who Achieve in Schools. *The Urban Review*, *31*(1), 31–54.

Rose, H. A. (2006). Asset-Based Development for Child and Youth Care. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, *14*(4), 236–240.

Russell, S. T., Muraco, A., Subramaniam, A., & Laub, C. (2009). Youth Empowerment and High School Gay-Straight Alliances. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *38*(7), 891–903. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-008-9382-8

Scales, P. C. (2005). Developmental Assets and the Middle School Counselor. *Professional School Counseling*, *9*(2), 104–111.

Scales, Peter C. (1999). Reducing risks and building develomental assets: Essential actions for promoting adolescent health. *The Journal of School Health*, *69*(3), 113–119.

Shernoff, D. J. (2010). Engagement in After-School Programs as a Predictor of Social Competence and Academic Performance. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *45*(3–4), 325–337. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-010-9314-0

Student Action. (n.d.). Retrieved February 14, 2019, from https://www.glsen.org/students

Toomey, R. B., McGuire, J. K., & Russell, S. T. (2012). Heteronormativity, school climates, and perceived safety for gender nonconforming peers. *Journal of Adolescence*, *35*(1), 187–196. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2011.03.001

Toomey, R. B., Ryan, C., Diaz, R. M., & Russell, S. T. (2011). High School Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs) and Young Adult Well-Being: An Examination of GSA Presence, Participation, and Perceived Effectiveness. *Applied Developmental Science*, *15*(4), 175–185. https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2011.607378

Valentine, J. C., Cooper, H., Bettencourt, B. A., & DuBois, D. L. (2002). Out-of-School Activities and Academic Achievement: The Mediating Role of Self-Beliefs. *Educational Psychologist*, *37*(4), 245–256. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15326985EP3704_4

Walls, N. E., Wisenski, H., & Kane, S. (2013). School climate, individual support, or both? Gay-straight alliances and the mental health of sexual minority youth. *School Social Work Journal*, *37*(2).

Appendix A

Coding scheme and frequency

Major Theme	Frequency	Subtheme	Frequency
1. The Intrapersonal: Identity and Development	46 (25.7%)	1. Identity development and self-exploration	7 (3.9%)
		2. Hold a Queer Identity	24 (13.4%)
		3. Self-expression	14 (7.8%)
2. The Interpersonal: Socializing	68 (38.0%)	4. Fun	8 (4.5%)
		5. Friends Involved and/or Invited Me	28 (15.6%)
		6. Make New Friends	9 (5.0%)
		7. Make Queer Friends	24 (13.4%)
		8. Dating	0 (0%)
3. The Interpersonal: Support and Safety	70 (39.1%)	9. Safe Space	25 (14.0%)
		10. Get Support	8 (4.5%)
		11. Feel Community [Not Isolated]	31 (17.3%)
		12. Give Support	10 (5.6%)
4. The Political: Advocacy and Activism	45 (25.1%)	13. Desire to be Part of the Queer Community	2 (1.1%)
		14. Get Informed about Issues	11 (6.1%)
		15. Discussions about Current Events and Queer Topics	2 (1.1%)
		16. Activism	30 (16.8%)
		17. Moral Imperative	3 (1.7%)

Major Theme	Subtheme	Sample Responses
The Intrapersonal: Identity and Development	1. Identity development and self-exploration	"I was questioning my gender/sexuality so i thought it would be good support"
	2. Hold a Queer Identity	"cuz i'm gay"; "because I came out as asexual biromantic"
	3. Self-expression	"I wanted to try a club where I could be more open with my identitity, never had the chance before"
The Interpersonal: Socializing	4. Fun	"seemed like fun"; "because it looked interesting"
	5. Friends Involved and/or Invited Me	"A friend suggested it at the begining of freshman year, and it sounded like a great place"; "a lot of my friends are in it"
	6. Make New Friends	"to meet interesting people"
	7. Make Queer Friends	"I wanted to meet more queer people"; "I wanted to make friends in the community"
	8. Dating	NA
The Interpersonal: Support and Safety	9. Safe Space	"It seemed like a safe space where i could feel free to be myself"; "I needed a place whre I knew I could feel safe with my gender and sexuality"
	10. Get Support	"I've been closeted for 3 years, I need support"; "wanted a supportive environment that I can't find anywhere else"

	11. Feel Community [Not Isolated]	"to find a community"; "it was a place where I felt I could belong"
	12. Give Support	"I wanted to show support for my friends"; "because I have friends in the LGBTQ community and I wanted to support them"
The Political: Advocacy and Activism	13. Desire to be Part of the Queer Community	"b/c I wanted to connect with my LGBTQ community and embrace"
	14. Get Informed about Issues	"I want to learn more about the community and see what it was all about"; "to broaden and expand my knowledge on LGBQ+"
	15. Discussions about Current Events and Queer Topics	"to broaden and expand my knowledge on LGBQ+"
	16. Activism	"to do more for my community"; "because I'm in the community and I'd like to educate people"
	17. Moral Imperative	"I thought it was important to have in our community"
Other	18. Other	"I did something similar to GSA in middle school so I just transitioned from there to here"; "this is my first time here"

Cross-tabulations for Rationales and Demographic Characteristics

Grade

	Intrapersonal/ Identity	Interpersonal Socializing	Interpersonal Support	Political Reasons	Other
9 (n = 74)	22 (29.7%)	26 (35.1%)	30 (40.5%)	13 (17.6%)	2 (2.7%)
10 (n = 35)	6 (17.1%)	14 (40.0%)	16 (45.7%)	10 (28.6%)	1 (2.9%)
11 (n = 41)	13 (31.7%)	16 (39.0%)	15 (36.6%)	12 (29.3%)	0 (0.0%)
12 (n = 28)	5 (17.9%)	12 (42.9%)	8 (28.6%)	10 (35.7%)	0 (0.0%)

Note. Percentages do not sum to 100% within each row as a student could provide more than one rationale; the percentages indicate the fraction of the specific demographic providing a specific rationale (for example, fraction of grade nine students who joined for interpersonal support)

Race

	Intrapersonal/ Identity	Interpersonal Socializing	Interpersonal Support	Political Reasons	Other
White (n = 122)	34 (27.9%)	50 (41.0%)	43 (35.2%)	31 (25.4%)	2 (1.6%)
Black (n = 7)	0 (0.0%)	2 (28.6%)	3 (42.9%)	1 (14.3%)	1 (14.3%)
Asian-American (n = 6)	1 (16.7%)	4 (66.7%)	2 (33.3%)	2 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Latinx (n = 20)	3 (15.0%)	6 (30.0%)	9 (45.0%)	5 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Multiracial (n = 21)	8 (38.1%)	6 (28.6%)	11 (52.4%)	5 (23.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Other (n = 3)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (66.7%)	1 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)

Note. Percentages do not sum to 100% within each row as a student could provide more than one rationale; the percentages indicate the fraction of the specific demographic providing a specific rationale (for example, fraction of Asian-American students who joined for interpersonal support)

Gender

	Intrapersonal/ Identity	Interpersonal Socializing	Interpersonal Support	Political Reasons	Other
Cis-Female (n = 100)	23 (23.0%)	38 (38.0%)	38 (38.0%)	29 (29.0%)	2 (2.0%)
Cis-Male (n = 28)	7 (25.0%)	11 (39.3%)	10 (35.7%)	8 (8.6%)	0 (0.0%)
Non-binary (n = 33)	10 (30.3%)	14 (42.4%)	15 (45.5%)	3 (9.1%)	1 (3.0%)
Trans (n = 17)	6 (35.3%)	5 (29.4%)	6 (35.3%)	5 (29.4%)	0 (0.0%)

Note. Percentages do not sum to 100% within each row as a student could provide more than one rationale; the percentages indicate the fraction of the specific demographic providing a specific rationale (for example, fraction of cis-male students who joined for interpersonal support)

Sexual Orientation

	Intrapersonal/	Interpersonal	Interpersonal	Political	Other

	Identity	Socializing	Support	Reasons	
Asexual (*n* = 19)	4 (21.1%)	6 (31.6%)	9 (47.4%)	2 (10.5%)	2 (10.5%)
Biplus (*n* = 82)	25 (30.5%)	38 (46.3%)	31 (37.8%)	14 (17.1%)	0 (0%)
Gay (*n* = 29)	7 (24.1%)	10 (34.5%)	11 (37.9%)	10 (34.5%)	0 (0%)
Queer (*n* = 13)	4 (30.8%)	6 (46.2%)	7 (53.8%)	2 (15.4%)	0 (0%)
Questioning (*n* = 13)	4 (30.8%)	4 (30.8%)	5 (38.5%)	6 (46.2%)	0 (0%)
Straight (*n* = 19)	2 (10.5%)	4 (21.1%)	4 (21.1%)	10 (52.6%)	1 (5.3%)

Note. Percentages do not sum to 100% within each row as a student could provide more than one rationale; the percentages indicate the fraction of the specific demographic providing a specific rationale (for example, fraction of straight students who joined for interpersonal support)

Free and reduced-price lunch status

	Intrapersonal/ Identity	Interpersonal Socializing	Interpersonal Support	Political Reasons	Other
No (*n* = 107)	27 (25.2%)	42 (39.3%)	43 (40.2%)	27 (25.2%)	3 (2.8%)
Yes (*n* = 50)	14 (26.0%)	19 (38.0%)	19 (38.0%)	13 (26.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Unsure (*n* = 13)	43 (0.8%)	5 (38.5%)	4 (30.8%)	2 (15.4%)	0 (0.0%)

Note. Percentages do not sum to 100% within each row as a student could provide more than one rationale; the percentages indicate the fraction of the specific demographic providing a specific rationale (for example, fraction of FRPL students who joined for interpersonal support)

School

	Intrapersonal/ Identity	Interpersonal Socializing	Interpersonal Support	Political Reasons	Other
1 (*n* = 9)	2 (22.2%)	2 (22.2%)	4 (44.4%)	2 (22.2%)	0 (0.0%)
2 (*n* = 8)	1 (12.5%)	6 (75.0%)	3 (37.5%)	2 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)
3 (*n* = 15)	2 (13.3%)	10 (66.7%)	7 (46.7%)	1 (6.7%)	0 (0.0%)
4 (*n* = 5)	2 (40.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (60.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (20.0%)
5 (*n* = 11)	5 (45.5%)	4 (36.4%)	5 (45.5%)	2 (18.2%)	0 (0.0%)
6 (*n* = 15)	5 (33.3%)	8 (53.3%)	4 (26.7%)	4 (26.7%)	0 (0.0%)
7 (*n* = 6)	2 (33.3%)	4 (66.7%)	2 (33.3%)	2 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)
8 (*n* = 9)	3 (33.3%)	2 (22.2%)	3 (33.3%)	3 (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)
9 (*n* = 16)	6 (37.5%)	6 (37.5%)	5 (31.3%)	5 (31.3%)	1 (6.3%)
10 (*n* = 22)	6 (27.3%)	3 (13.6%)	12 (54.5%)	6 (27.3%)	0 (0.0%)
11 (*n* = 12)	2 (16.7%)	8 (66.7%)	5 (41.7%)	1 (8.3%)	0 (0.0%)
12 (*n* = 13)	5 (33.3%)	4 (26.7%)	5 (33.3%)	3 (20.0%)	0 (0.0%)
13 (*n* = 7)	0 (0.0%)	1 (14.3%)	2 (28.6%)	4 (57.1%)	0 (0.0%)
14 (*n* = 11)	2 (18.2%)	4 (36.4%)	4 (36.4%)	3 (27.3%)	1 (9.1%)

15 (n = 4)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
16 (n = 4)	1 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (75.0%)	1 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)
17 (n = 10)	2 (20.0%)	6 (60.0%)	3 (30.0%)	2 (20.0%)	0 (0.0%)

Note. Percentages do not sum to 100% within each row as a student could provide more than one rationale; the percentages indicate the fraction of the specific demographic providing a specific rationale (for example, fraction of students at school 7 who joined for interpersonal support)

CONCLUSION

This dissertation integrated queer youth into an asset-based framework, acknowledging the strengths that they may have that help cultivate a sense of school belonging and exploring the variety of rationales they provide for participating in after-school activities. This work is necessary because although research on adolescence has endeavored to understand young people as more than a collection of risks and negative traits, researchers have mostly ignored queer youth in these discussions. Additionally, research that focuses on queer youth often operates from a damage- and deficit-focused model that seeks to quantify the negative outcomes queer youth face and document their poor performance relative to their cisgender, straight peers. Moreover, it is important that researchers and practitioners acknowledge the strengths and assets that queer students offer; we must endeavor to focus both on their need for support and the support that they provide to others, for example. This dissertation is the first to compare the relative importance of student- and school-level factors on school belonging for queer students and their peers, exploring the extent to which LGBQ status may moderate the traditional levers by which straight, cisgender students develop senses of school belonging. Additionally, this dissertation explores youth's experiences in after-school spaces, specifically GSAs, to better understand why they initially joined and what they hoped to get out of their participation. Although research has explored the benefits that young people, and that queer young people in particular, may derive from after-school activities, this dissertation is the first to robustly explore students' rationales for joining as a means of understanding how GSAs can meet students' developmental needs. Additionally, although research has explored students' participation in GSAs, this study is the first to highlight and explore the role of meaningful engagement in understanding youth's experiences in GSAs.

A Multilevel Modeling Approach for Understanding the Student- And School-Level Factors That Predict School Belonging for Queer and Straight Students

The first empirical chapter of this dissertation demonstrated that although LGB youth and youth who have experienced bullying have significantly lower senses of school belonging than their peers, these variables were far less predictive of school belonging than asset-based constructs related to healthy development. Relationships with teachers, relationships with peers, and participation in after-school activities were the most strongly predictive of school belonging for queer youth and their straight, cisgender peers, and were at least six times more predictive than LGB status or than being bullied. Indeed, students' perceptions of the bullying climate at their schools was more predictive of school belonging than their own personal experiences with having been bullied. The findings also indicated that no school-level factors were significant predictors of school belonging.

Further, the results also demonstrated that sexual orientation does not moderate the relationship between significant predictors and school belonging. This indicates that, for example, relationships with peers are not significantly more or less important for queer students than for their straight, cisgender peers. This indicates that although LGB students have significantly lower school belonging, the assets which predict this sense of school belonging are not sexuality dependent. Therefore, interventions and programs that aim to increase school belonging can focus on similar levers for all students—increasing supportive and safe relationships with peers and teachers, offering after-school activities in which students can participate, and cultivating a school that has a supportive, anti-bullying climate. These findings are based on cross-sectional data that are limited in geographic scope to Washington DC, a politically liberal and supportive environment, so future researchers should endeavor to replicate

these findings with a more geographically diverse sample.

"And Why Are You Here?": Towards A Typology of Rationales For Joining GSAs

The second empirical chapter of this dissertation further explored one important asset associated with school belonging, participation in after-school activities. In particular, this chapter drew on semi-structured qualitative interviews with GSA members to explore their rationales and motivations for joining their GSAs. Findings indicated that students joined for a wide variety of reasons that represented many stages of a developmental spectrum. For example, some students joined because they wanted to better understand their burgeoning queer identities, while others joined because they strongly identified as queer. Some students joined because they knew little about the queer community and wanted to be a better ally, while others joined because they wanted to give education and change the culture of their schools.

Rationales clustered in four distinct levels, mirroring a socioecological model of joining behavior. Some students joined for interpersonal and identity development, individual-level reasons that included wanting to explore an identity or wanting to be able to fully express their identity. Others joined for interpersonal socializing, often to make new friends, spend time with existing friends, or have fun. Some joined for interpersonal support or safety, citing the GSA as a safe-space, a space where they felt a sense of community, or a space where they could give or receive support. Finally, some students joined for political reasons, wanting to engage in critical discussions, learn more about LGBTQ+ topics, or engage in activism and advocacy for queer youth in their schools and communities.

These findings demonstrate the variability of motivations among students who were GSA members, indicating that a one-size-fits-all model of programming or research will not capture the diversity of experiences and needs that members may have. Additionally, the findings

indicate the need to view GSA membership through the lens of assets and strengths, as young people expressed joining either to cultivate new strengths—like social skills, information about the world, or self-understanding—or because they already had assets they wanted to share—such as strong friendships, clear perspectives on issues, or empathy. These data come from just one state, Massachusetts, and only represent students who joined and remained in their GSA; future research could explore both geographic differences and the ways in which students who stopped coming to their GSA differ from their peers who continued.

Courting Engagement: An Exploration of GSA Members' Club Engagement Employing Multilevel Modeling

The third empirical dissertation chapter drew on the typology of rationales offered in chapter two as well as student- and context-level predictors to explore students' engagement in and leadership of their GSA. Using a cross-sectional sample of GSA members who completed a survey at the end of their school year in Massachusetts, the chapter employed multilevel modeling and multilevel logistic regression to determine if students' demographic characteristics, GSA's contextual-features, or students' rationales for joining were predictive of students engagement in or leadership of their GSAs. Findings indicated that many students offered more than one rationale for joining, and that on average, students were fairly evenly divided among the four main categories proposed in chapter two. At least a quarter of the sample listed each of the four reasons.

Findings from the regression analyses indicate that older, queer, and trans and gender non-conforming students reported higher engagement than their younger, straight, cisgender peers, and that older and queer students were more likely to report being leaders in their GSA than their younger, straight peers. Age, race/ethnicity, and free and reduced-priced lunch status

were not significant predictors of engagement or leadership. In terms of context-level predictors, only the degree of structure to club meetings was predictive of leadership in the GSA, indicating that students were more likely to report being a leader in their GSA if their club was more structured. Additionally, student-provided rationales were not predictive of GSA engagement or GSA leadership.

These findings may indicate that although it is important to understand why students joined the GSA and what they hoped to get out of it, these rationales may not be associated with students' engagement or leadership. However, the sample was fairly evenly split among the four rationales, and it is possible that a sample with more variability might, in fact, reveal certain associations. In light of these findings, though, advisors should be cognizant that younger students and straight, cisgender students may be less likely to be engaged or to serve as leaders, and may want to make special effort to reach out to these students, if appropriate.

Implications and Future Directions

The findings from these three empirical papers suggest several important directions for future research. Researchers who focus specifically on queer youth in schools should work to incorporate theories that acknowledge the strength and assets that all youth—and especially queer youth—have and can develop. By measuring and studying both the adversities queer youth face and the resources and strengths upon which they can call to overcome them, researchers can offer a more complete and complex understanding of queer youth. This will not only fill in gaps in our knowledge of queer youth and the ways in which they survive and thrive in schools not set up for their success, but it will also have material consequences for queer youth themselves. Practitioners who wish to cultivate greater school engagement and belonging, for example, should move beyond a model that aims only to protect queer youth from the damage that awaits

them, and should instead incorporate the power of healthy, supportive relationships with teachers and peers. Interventions that see the whole of queer youth's humanity will not only address what queer youth lack, but will also acknowledge what they offer and what skills they can grow.

Additionally, these chapters indicate that queer students have a variety of assets that are associated with school belonging and that they wish to offer to their peers in GSAs. Students have relationships with peers, participate in after-school activities, offer support to their friends, engage in outreach to their communities, and educate their peers and classmates. These resources should not go unacknowledged in future research, and studies of queer youth should endeavor to capture these skills and strengths. Additionally, researchers must continue to address the variability among queer youth—as these findings demonstrate, queer youth join their GSAs for a variety of reasons and experience their schools very differently from their other queer peers. For this reason, studies of queer youth, and queer youth in after-school activities, should continue to document the differences that exist within similar spaces, especially as they try to understand what works, when, and for whom.

Future research should tackle these questions head-on by diversifying samples to include geographic, racial, gender, and sexual diversity, especially in areas of high and low support for queer students. Although these findings demonstrate the strength of queer youth in schools in Washington DC and Massachusetts, vital work must be conducted in areas of the country that do not have supportive climates, that do not foster students' sense of belonging, and that may not even have GSAs. This work will continue to examine the important differences within the queer community.

Queer youth, then, must be included in models of healthy youth development, as researchers should explicitly acknowledge the strengths and resources they have and can

develop. Scientists and practitioners cannot ignore the suffering and deficits that some queer youth certainly face, but they similarly must not ignore the capacities and assets that these young people offer the world. Practitioners especially should be aware that queer youth are not always already damaged and hurt; many report great relationships with their peers and teachers, strong connections to their schools, and the desire to help their classmates and communities. Acknowledging this positivity, this hope for the future, will ensure that the next generation of queer youth are seen as whole, complex, beautiful people who can offer the world humor, love, support, and light.