

Safe Spaces: Gay-Straight Alliances in High Schools

The idea of building “safe spaces” for vulnerable groups is a common-sense notion that recognizes the negative consequences of social isolation and marginalization, but few studies have specified clearly what “safe spaces” are and how they support the people who occupy them. Using qualitative interviews with young adults in the United States and Canada who have participated in gay-straight alliances,

Tina Fetner and her team from McMaster University examine a social location typically understood to be a safe space: gay-straight alliance groups in high schools.



Gay-straight alliances are a form of social support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) high-school students. Over the last two decades, gay-straight alliances have spread throughout high schools across North America, with the aid of the Internet and several social movement organizations. These alliances are generally student-run social clubs akin to other high-school social groups, such as drama clubs, math teams, or yearbook clubs. Gay-straight alliances exist to provide support to LGBTQ students in difficult personal circumstances or in hostile school environments, and to advocate for LGBTQ students.

This article is among a growing body of work on gay-straight alliances which considers the extent to which these groups reduce stress on LGBTQ students, eliminate bullying, improve LGBTQ dropout rates, or prevent LGBTQ teen suicides.

The Need for Safe Spaces in High Schools

The LGBTQ high school experience can be extremely challenging; high schools can be sites of bullying and abuse for lesbian and gay youth, or for anyone who does not closely conform to traditional gender roles.

The U.S. Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) ran six surveys on high-school climates between 1999 and 2009; the most recent report indicated that based on their sexual orientation,

- 61 percent of LGBTQ students feel unsafe;
- 72 percent hear derogatory remarks;
- 85 percent are verbally harassed;
- 40 percent are physically harassed;
- almost 70 percent of transgender students have been verbally harassed in the previous year;
- among LGBT students of color, 80 percent were verbally harassed, and 60 percent were physically harassed.

Findings from Canada's first National Climate Survey on Homophobia by [Egale](#), a human rights advocacy organization to advance equality for Canadian lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and their families, indicate an equally hostile school climate for LGBTQ students:

- three-quarters of LGBTQ students feel unsafe in at least one place at school (i.e. change rooms, washrooms, and hallways);
- half of straight students agree that at least one part of their school is unsafe for LGBTQ students;
- 95 percent of transgender participants feel that their school is unsafe.

Given that LGBTQ youth are at greater risk of a host of social problems, including depression, suicide, dropping out of school, homelessness, and drug use and that these youth are more likely to experience stress, conflict with their families, personal homonegativity, and sexual risk-taking, the provision of safe spaces for LGBTQ students in high schools is widely understood to be necessary and urgent.

Gay-straight alliances are often put forth as the solution to LGBTQ students' distress, as they may

- improve the safety of LGBTQ students and reduce depression and drop-out rates;
- work to fracture heterosexual space in public schools;
- provide alternatives to heteronormative school activities such as the prom;
- aid in fostering an inclusive learning community that values diversity as essential to the creation of safe schools;
- positively affect school experiences even for youth who are not group members.

Method and Findings

In the McMaster study, the team conducted 57 online interviews between 2005 and 2008 with young adults, ages 18–25, who had participated in gay-straight alliances or similar LGBTQ groups (while) in high school.

Breakdown of Participants

Gender	Sexual identity	Race and/or ethnicity	Nation	Involvement
29 female	18 gay	35 White	31 Canada	38 gay-straight alliance recognized by school
23 male	7 lesbian	1 Black	26 United States	
2 transgender	4 homosexual	3 Asian		19 informal or external LGBTQ group
1 all genders	10 bisexual	1 Hispanic		
1 gender variant	5 straight	2 Jewish		
1 no response	5 queer	1 Armenian		
	3 pansexual	8 mixed background		
	2 asexual 2 heterosexual	4 no response		

The McMaster researchers sought to understand three dimensions of safe space, or “environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills and values of cooperation and civic virtue”, in terms of:

1. context: hostility in the home, school, and community that defines the need for safe spaces, membership, and activities,
2. issues of membership and resulting subculture in gay-straight alliances; and
3. the ways that gay-straight alliances allowed students to engage in educational activities and activism on behalf of LGBTQ students.

1. Context: Safe from What?

The marginalization of homosexuality within the school system is evident in both the Canadian and American contexts. Some school boards, parents, administrators, and fellow students who are opposed the formation of gay-straight alliances can create barriers to stop it.

For example, study subjects pointed out that their opponents’ efforts kept some gay-straight alliances from being officially recognized. Some students formed

groups informally or outside school, and in other cases, students succeeded in forming gay-straight alliances and equity and/or diversity groups despite this opposition. The climate at some schools was such that LGBTQ student organizations were not allowed to call themselves gay-straight alliances and instead had to use generic names that made invisible their connection to lesbian and gay students – evident at least five Canadian LGBTQ groups in our sample who were forced to broadly identify as “equity and diversity” groups.

Some students found that their participation in gay-straight alliances provoked a backlash, making visible some of the hostility to LGBTQ people that had previously been hidden. Students experienced verbal harassment and physical abuse from their peers, teachers, administration, and parents. Anti-gay graffiti appears to be a common struggle that many LGBTQ youth in our study dealt with at school.

Instead of addressing issues of harassment, teachers were often the source of anti-gay harassment. In some cases, this took the form of ongoing harassment, such as running jokes at the expense of LGBTQ students. At other times, harassment from teachers involved physically separating students they believed to be dating or intimately involved.

The hostile climate found in many schools also extended beyond the confines of high school, into the families and communities of many respondents. Not only did participants encounter difficulties with their parents accepting their sexuality, but some were also discouraged from hanging out with LGBTQ friends.

Almost every participant indicated that gay-straight alliances provided the kind of safe spaces they needed to withdraw from this hostile climate.

2. Membership: Safe for Whom?

Gay-straight alliances and other LGBTQ organizations may be safe for some students while unsafe for others. For example, the T in LGBTQ (Transgender), or people with gender identity issues, and many students in gay-straight alliances were unwilling to disclose their sexual identities during meetings, for fear of repercussions from fellow students.

Participants to a large extent hailed the sexual diversity of the group as a positive aspect of the safe space that the group created, and the straight students were a particularly helpful and encouraging part of the alliances. The inclusion of straight students was considered a way to make connections and educate the larger heterosexual community; straight allies in the club provided cover for students who were not ready to disclose their sexual identity, or who were questioning their sexual identity. Straight allies were crucial to creating a space in which closeted kids could participate.

3. Activities: Safe to Do What?

For many students, the sheer existence of the group and access to a comfortable social space was what made high school a bearable experience. Students involved in gay-straight alliances were instrumental in planning and carrying out a variety of activities, many of which brought a profound sense of accomplishment to those involved and demonstrated their persistence and effectiveness at drawing attention to larger issues within their school community.

Many gay-straight alliances in schools promoted a wide range of activities – i.e. the “pride prom” and the “Day of Silence” (participants refuse to speak for a day to draw attention to the cultural silence around LGBTQ issues). Efforts of other students extended beyond their immediate high school to reach students from other high schools, as a much-needed act of inclusion.

Other gay-straight alliance members participated in activities that benefited the larger community: raising supplies for a local women’s shelter, starting an AIDS fundraising campaign, participating in and raising money through AIDS walks, assisting in the development of education packages for a local school board, and publishing an article regarding LGBTQ issues in a local newspaper.

Conclusion

Overall, gay-straight alliances provided a safe space from threats to LGBTQ student safety and opportunities for activism, social exchange, and dialogue. However, the safe spaces of gay-straight alliances failed to achieve many of the goals that participants had for their groups. While many students wanted their alliance to create an LGBTQ-friendly school, to reverse some heterosexist policies like restricting prom dates by gender, or to launch some activism in their larger communities, this was seldom possible among our respondents due to outside interference by parents, teachers, and school boards.

This study is a part of the growing body of work on gay-straight alliances across Canada and the United States, which may contribute to a better understating of safe spaces in and around other social movement organizations such as anti-poverty groups, social justice groups, feminist groups, LGBTQ groups, and anti-racism groups, among others.

By Tina Fetner, Athena Elafros, Sandra Bortolin, and Coralee Drechsler of McMaster University

Originally published in Review of Sociology by the Canadian Sociological Association/ La Societ ´e canadienne de sociologie, CRS/RCS, 49.2 2012

Edited by Leah Morrigan