

More Than Just ‘Either Or’: Transgender Students’ Experiences with Gay-Straight Alliances in British Columbia

by

David Kyle Sutherland

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Approval

Name: David Kyle Sutherland
Degree: Master of Arts (Criminology)
Title: *More Than Just 'Either Or': Transgender Students' Experiences with Gay-Straight Alliances in British Columbia*

Examining Committee: **Chair:** Dr. Martin Andresen
Professor

Brian Burtch, PhD
Senior Supervisor
Professor Emeritus

Sheri Fabian, PhD
Supervisor
Senior Lecturer

Gerald Walton, PhD
External Examiner
Associate Professor
Faculty of Education
Lakehead University

Date Defended/Approved: April 13, 2016

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Abstract

Gay-straight alliances (GSA) in high schools are meant to counteract homophobia and transphobia and provide LGBTQ youth with a safe environment to express their sexual or gender orientation. Limited attention, however, has been given to transgender youth and their experiences in a GSA. To address this deficiency, a qualitative interview approach with 11 participants was used. Through inductive analysis, four major themes emerged: (1) need for safe spaces; (2) developing a GSA; (3) aspects of a safe space; and (4) membership and transgenderism in GSAs. Although findings support the notion that there is a need for LGBTQ safe spaces in high schools, transgender participants expressed feelings of exclusion and marginalization in these clubs. Therefore, using transgender theory and a peacemaking criminological approach, recommendations for fostering inclusive environments, with a specific emphasis on transgender individuals, are presented and discussed.

Keywords: transgender; transphobia; homophobia; gay-straight alliance; high schools; social exclusion; qualitative research

*To the 11 individuals who were brave enough to share
their experiences with me. You offered me your trust
and I am forever grateful.*

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Table of Contents

Approval.....	ii
Ethics Statement.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	viii
Glossary.....	x

Chapter 1. Introduction	1
--------------------------------------	----------

Chapter 2. Literature Review.....	5
2.1. Defining Transgenderism and Transphobia	5
2.2. The Gay Rights Movement	6
2.3. Transgenderism and Social Exclusion	8
2.4. Transgender and LGBTQ Issues in High Schools.....	10
2.5. “Hey Teachers! Leave Those Kids Alone”.....	13
2.6. Gay-Straight Alliances	15
2.7. Transgender Theory	22
2.7.1. A Brief History of Transgender Theory.....	22
2.7.2. A Transgender Theory Approach to Gender	24
2.8. Peacemaking Criminology	26

Chapter 3. Research Methods.....	32
3.1. Being a Straight, Cisgender Qualitative Researcher	32
3.2. Sampling and Recruitment Process.....	38
3.3. Interviews and Remuneration	39
3.4. Ethical Considerations	40
3.5. Participants.....	42
3.6. Analytic Procedure	44
3.7. Limitations	45

Chapter 4. Findings and Discussion	47
4.1. Need for Safe Spaces in High Schools	47
4.1.1. Personal Challenges	47
“I’m Coming Out!”	50
4.1.2. School Challenges.....	53
4.1.3. Doing Trans*	63
4.2. Developing a GSA Group	65
4.3. Aspects of a Safe Space	67
4.3.1. Counselling and Support	68
4.3.2. Education and Activism	71
4.4. Membership and Transgenderism in GSA Groups.....	75
4.4.1. Transgender Experiences in GSAs.....	75

Chapter 5. A Peacemaking Approach.....	83
5.1. Policy Recommendations	85
5.1.1. Widening the Scope of the GSA Title.....	85
5.1.2. Informed & Inclusionary Discussion	86
5.1.3. Resources & Training of GSA Leaders	88
5.1.4. Continuing to Break the Silence.....	90
5.2. Conclusion and Future Research	91

References 95

Appendix A. Ethics Application	109
Appendix B. Informed Consent	114
Appendix C. Protocol for Participant Disclosure of Self-Harm and Suicide Ideation	117
Appendix D. Semi-structured Interview Questions	119

Glossary

Bisexual	Refers to individuals with a sexual attraction and/or romantic attraction towards both males and females (Berenson, 2001).
Cisgender	<i>Cis</i> derives from a Latin term meaning “on this side of.” It is defined as “a person whose sex assigned at birth matches current gender identity. The opposite of transgender. ‘Nontransgender’ is used, but implies that being transgender is not a normal variant of human difference” (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2014, p. 11).
Gay	Primarily used to refer to men, the term <i>gay</i> is defined as a person whose sexual orientation is towards the same sex or gender as themselves. This term is sometimes used by lesbians (i.e., gay woman).
Gender	Is both socially constructed and self-constructed. Gender is thus fluid. As such, individuals may identify as male or female, or they may also be “floating in the grey” identifying with both or neither gender identities.
Gender Dysphoria	Refers to “the distress caused by the incongruence between gender identity and biological sex in gender-nonconforming individuals” (Fabris, Bernardi, & Trombetta, 2015, p. 270). Effects of gender dysphoria can range from mild to severe, placing individuals at risk of self-harm, depression, and anxiety. Not all transgender individuals experience gender dysphoria (NASP, 2014).
Gender Expression	A personal expression of one’s sense of their gender to others (e.g. hairstyle, clothing, mannerisms).
Gender Identity	Refers to an individual’s internal sense of how one identifies, be that a male, a female, genderqueer etc. “Gender identity typically forms between 2 and 5 years of age. For most people, gender identity is consistent with sex assigned at birth” (NASP, 2014, p. 11).
Grey-aromantic	An individual with a romantic orientation that is somewhere between romantic and aromantic. Aromantic refers to an individual who experiences little or no attraction to others.
Lesbian	A female whose primary or exclusive sexual orientation is to other women.
LGBTQ	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning.

Intersex	Is defined as “a group of medical conditions that involve congenital anomaly of the reproductive and sexual system” (Koyama & Weasel, 2002, p. 169). In other words, intersex is a combination of what one may consider both “male” and “female” sexual anatomy.
Outing	The act of disclosing one’s gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender status without their consent.
PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)	Promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons, their families and friends through support, advocacy, and education.
Queer	An umbrella term often used in place of the LGBTQ acronym. Historically, this word was used as a derogatory and offensive term. However, efforts stemming from various LGBT movements have reclaimed this term and it is now used to describe sexual and gender diverse communities and individuals (Stechyson, 2013).
Questioning	Individuals who are uncertain of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
Sex	Refers to a person’s biological characteristics and this is conventionally denoted as the binary of male or female.
Sexual Orientation	Refers to “an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, both sexes, transgender people, no one, or all genders. A transgender adult may be attracted to women, to men, to both women and men (bisexual), to no one (asexual), and/or to other transgender people” (NASP, 2014, p. 11).
Trans*	This asterixed term is the abbreviated term for a variety of transgender identities. Like the term <i>transgender</i> , trans* refers to a variety of identities such as female-to-male (FTM), male-to-female (MTF), genderqueer, gender fluid (Veale et al., 2015).
Transgender	Refers to any “individual who violates norms of gender roles and gender identity and/or goes across the boundaries of one gender to another gender” (Papoulias, 2006, p. 522). Moreover, transgenderism encompasses a broad alliance of people who “bend the common societal contractions of gender, including cross-dressers, transsexuals, genderqueer youth, drag queens, and a host of other terms that people use to self-identify their gender” (Stotzer, 2009, p. 171).
Transition	Refers to the process of seeking medical intervention (i.e., hormones, surgery) in order to change one’s gender expression (i.e., male-to-female, female-to-male) (Bradford, Reisner, Honnold & Xavier, 2013).

Chapter 1.

Introduction

There is a famous song called Go With the Flow from...I forget the band¹...but there is a line that says 'I am looking for something worth dying for to make it beautiful to live.' That basically sums up what it's like to be trans*. Going through horrible, horrible pain in order to hope that you find something worth living for. (Lain, transsexual woman/gender fluid/gender nonconforming, age 19)²

Since the decriminalization of homosexuality in Canada in 1969, gay rights have steadily expanded and acquired considerable public support, despite controversy and backlash. Specific to British Columbia, Burtch, Pescitelli and Haskell (2015) allude to its "distinctive legacy of ground-breaking struggles relating to social policies, legal rights, and social acceptance of lesbian, gay, [and] bisexual" (p. 142) persons and communities. Seemingly, British Columbia's "legacy" continues with the Vancouver School Board's 2014 policy adaptation, which allows transgender students to be addressed by the name that corresponds with their gender identity and also gives them the right to use the washroom of their choice. As history has shown, however, with change comes opposition. Critics of this new policy, including two school board trustees, argued that offering these rights to transgender students is not in line with traditional school values. Moreover, enacting such a policy will ostensibly have a detrimental effect on school enrollment, thus decreasing real estate value (CBC News, 2014). As Kundera (1984) once observed, "man [sic] desires a world where good and evil can be clearly

¹ Queens of the Stone Age - Go With the Flow. "...But I want something good to die for, to make it beautiful to live. I want a new mistake, lose is more than hesitate. Do you believe it in your head? I can go with the flow." (Lyrics from <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/queensofthestoneage/gowiththeflow.html>)

² To help ensure voice was given to participants, their pseudonym, gender and sexual identity, and age is stated after each of their quotes.

distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before he understands” (p. 7).

He had said something on Twitter...I actually remember the tweet, it was `oh no! I think I have the symptoms of being gay or something.` And I replied to him saying that being gay is not a disease, you don't get symptoms for that. And he replied `well, you should know that.` (Alex, gay transsexual, age 17)

Thanks to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) social movements, including the homophile movement, gay liberation, and lesbian feminism, the effects of homophobia and, more recently, transphobia, are slowly becoming more understood in society and its various institutions (Beresford, 2014; Jagose, 1996). Despite these efforts, as the recent Vancouver School Board events highlight, transgender and LGB individuals frequently encounter transphobia and homophobia. For LGBT and questioning (Q) youth, the experience of victimization, harassment, isolation, and institutional discrimination in the school setting is often a daily occurrence. This places LGBTQ youth at a heightened risk of developing mental health issues and maladaptive coping mechanisms, thereby increasing suicidality and school dropout rates (Toomey & Russell, 2013). Although homophobia and transphobia still occur in high schools, there have been efforts to counteract these forms of discrimination, including the development and implementation of high school gay-straight alliances, the focal point of this thesis.

Current research on gay-straight alliance (GSA) groups focuses on the development, implementation, and impact of these “safe spaces” in high school settings. The GSA is defined as “student-led, school-based clubs that aim to provide a safe environment in the school context for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students, as well as their straight allies” (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz & Russell, 2011, p. 175). Originally founded in two private schools in Massachusetts, Phillips Academy and Concord Academy, in the late 1980s, GSAs have now spread predominately throughout North America. Researchers have credited these programs with (1) empowering LGBTQ members, (2) addressing prejudices and breaking down segregation, (3) educating students and the community on LGBTQ issues, (4) providing a safer school environment, and (5) helping LGBTQ youth develop effective coping strategies which aid in diminishing feelings of hopelessness, despair, and suicidality

(Russell, Muraco, Subramanima, & Laub, 2009). Lee (2002) contends that there is a “dramatic need for school-based support groups, such as GSAs, in all high schools” (p. 25).

Nagoshi and her associates (2008) argue that GSAs often do not address concerns from a broader spectrum of gender. Specifically, transgender students are often not distinguished from gays, lesbians, and bisexual individuals in the LGBTQ literature. Consequently, little academic attention has been given to how these GSA programs actually support transgender students and address issues surrounding gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation (p. 522).

The thesis was designed to address this deficiency by using a qualitative methodological approach to examine how GSAs can offer social support and provide a safe space for trans* high school students in the greater Vancouver area in British Columbia. In this exploratory study, eleven LGBTQ youth and young adults recount their high school experiences and their memberships, or lack thereof, in a GSA group. In turn, this analysis offers a comprehensive overview of GSAs and their dimensions as a safe space. Moreover, expressions of homophobia and transphobia are discussed along with means of addressing these issues in a high school setting. This introductory chapter sets the scene for this research project and provides an outline of each chapter.

Chapter Two provides an overview of past research studies on and with trans* issues and the LGBTQ communities. The Gay Rights Movement is discussed, followed by an overview of social and personal challenges faced by LGBTQ communities. Narrowing the focus, issues surrounding homophobia and transphobia in the school setting are discussed. These issues include ways in which peers, teachers and administrators do or do not confront these issues. Here, an examination of the GSA is offered. This chapter concludes by presenting two theoretical approaches - transgender theory and peacemaking criminology - which are later used to frame the implications of the findings and to inform policy recommendations.

The study methodology and its research challenges are discussed in Chapter Three. As a straight, cisgender male researching an often-marginalized population, I found it important to discuss the benefits and challenges faced in conducting this

research. Here, I reflect on the qualitative importance of ethical mindfulness, reflexivity, and ethical standards as means of addressing questions around building rapport, informed consent, and the notion of doing no harm. Additionally, an overview of participant recruitment and participant demographics, interviews, method of analysis, and ethical considerations are discussed in detail. Lastly, the limitations encountered in this research study are presented in hopes of guiding future researchers.

Chapter Four presents detailed research findings and discussion. In conducting this research, four major themes emerged: (1) need for safe spaces; (2) developing a GSA; (3) aspects of a safe space; and (4) membership and transgenderism within GSA groups. Several additional subthemes emerged, including (a) personal and school challenges, (b) doing trans*, and (c) activism and education.

The fifth and final chapter draws on the peacemaking criminological approach to crime and social justice. In brief, Quinney (1991) defines the peacemaking perspective as “nonviolent criminology” in which criminality is tied to human suffering. Such suffering stems from afflictions such as hatred, pride, ignorance, inequalities, and a craving for power over others. For example, disunity and separation are part and parcel of capitalist societies. Evidence of disunity and separation is particularly salient when examining the heteronormative marginalization and isolation of the transgender and LGB³ communities. Repairing disunity and separation, according to peacemaking scholars, is based on the development of compassion and understanding of individual suffering. Through this, equality becomes forthcoming. Using this theoretical orientation, along with facets of transgender theory, I conclude by offering various school-based implications aimed at addressing transphobia and homophobia in the school setting. Specific to GSAs, recommendations and strategies are presented with respect to offering a more inclusive environment for transgender youth and students struggling with challenges pertaining to their personal sexual and/or gender orientation. In light of the findings presented here, the current study provides a platform for transgender youth and young adults, as well as their LGB allies, to voice their experiences in a GSA. Lastly, suggestions for future research in this topic area are outlined.

³ LGBTQ is the most common acronym used in this thesis. It is the most encompassing acronym; however, other acronyms such as LGB are used when discussing specific communities.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

We are real people! My personality is authentic. I understand what I am supposed to be and when people invalidate that I find it really hard. (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

2.1. Defining Transgenderism and Transphobia

Definitions of transgender are in flux and invariably contested (Stotzer, 2009). For the purposes of this study, the term *transgender* will be used as an umbrella term signifying gender non-conformity. It refers to any “individual who violates norms of gender roles and gender identity and/or goes across the boundaries of one gender to another gender” (Papoulias, 2006, p. 522). Moreover, transgenderism encompasses a broad alliance of people who “bend the common societal contractions of gender, including cross-dressers, transsexuals, genderqueer youth, drag queens, and a host of other terms that people use to self-identify their gender” (Stotzer, 2009, p. 171). Currently, the prevalence of transgender students in schools is difficult to determine since transgender youth are often hidden (Meier & Labuski, 2013). In 2011, a Youth Risk Behavioural Survey in various San Francisco high schools indicated that 0.5% of high school students self-identify as transgender (as cited in NASP, 2014). On a national scale, Gates (2011) estimates that within the United States around 0.3% of the adult population self-identifies as transgender.

Transphobia, as defined by Hill and Willoughby (2005), is the “emotional disgust toward individuals who do not conform to society’s gender expectations” (p. 533), a definition that is consistent with that of Sugano, Nemoto and Operario (2006) who suggest that transphobia is “societal discrimination and stigma of individuals who do not conform to traditional norms of sex and gender” (p. 217). Therefore, in contrast to the

term homophobia, which is defined as the “irrational fear, hatred, and intolerance of homosexual men and women” (p. 521), transphobia encompasses a larger issue surrounding gender roles, gender expression, and gender identity, not just sexual orientation (Nagoshi et al., 2008).

2.2. The Gay Rights Movement

The 1950s and 1960s gave rise to the gay rights movement in the United States, Canada and other developed countries (e.g. Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Scandinavian countries) (Hall, 2010). Watershed moments of the movement included the Wolfenden Report of 1957, which stipulated that the criminalization of homosexuality impinges on civil liberties and that consenting adults should not be prosecuted for engaging in this act, as well as the Stonewall riots of 1969, where LGBTQ patrons at the Stonewall Bar in New York resisted a police raid, inspiring a new wave of unapologetic defiance within certain LGB communities. In Canada, the gay movement demonstrations that began in the early 1960s led to the decriminalization of consenting sexual acts between people of the same sex. As prime minister Pierre Trudeau famously noted, “the state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation” (Pare, 2016, para. 15). In turn, as the gay rights movement gained visibility and acceptance, the transgender and gay communities eventually became intertwined in their fight for fundamental rights and freedoms (Stryker, 2008). In fact, while the term “homosexuality” was very much in the forefront of gay liberation and transgenderism was either absent or minimized, Vitulli (2010) indicates that several scholars stipulate “trans and gender nonconforming people have been integral in the gay rights movements from the beginning” (p. 156).

The 1970s signified a defining moment in which the transgender political movement lost its alliance with both the gay and feminist communities (Stryker, 2008). It could be that the “addition of extremely marginalized social groups, such as intersex and transgender, to the LBG(T) movement requires what is perceived as the sharing of scarce movement resources” (Stones, 2009, p. 338). Therefore, in an effort to gain more political legitimacy and to ensure adequate resources, gay and lesbian activists began distinguishing themselves from transgendered individuals in hopes of appearing more ‘normative’ in a world where “heteronormativity is a central structuring principle” (Vitulli,

2010, p. 158). Normativity, in this sense, is based on cisgenderism and the sex binary. In other words, opposite to transgenderism, normativity occurs when an individual's assigned sex at birth matches their current gender identity (Vitulli, 2010). When asked about homosexuality and transgenderism, Lain, a research participant, states that:

In an ideal world they [the gay and transgender communities] would have no real correlation. They are two different worlds, sometimes interconnected only through political issues. This idea that trans people are somehow always inherently gay to some degree implies that transsexuality has anything to do with sexual preference because some people are trans and straight – as they identify as male and interested in females despite being identified as female at birth. So, for them, they are straight. But some people disapprove, saying that they are gay because they were born as female and are attracted to females. So, because of social misunderstandings of what being trans means and how transgenderism works there are a lot of misconceptions behind that. (Lain, transsexual woman, gender fluid, gender nonconforming, age 19)

Despite the ongoing debate of where transgender individuals “fit” in terms of aligning themselves or distinguishing themselves from the gay community, the fragmentation of transgender individuals from the LGB(T) movement created a divide between the gay community and transgender community. This divide has inhibited transgender individuals' progression towards civil rights and freedoms, leaving a rift between the LGB and trans* communities that has yet to be fully repaired (Stryker, 2008). Vitulli (2010) indicates that the early 1990s was a period where transgender activism was reignited through a combination of factors:

1. Coherent trans identities and communities
2. The increased visibility of trans people in the media and entertainment industry
3. The emergence of trans studies in academia
4. The loosening of the medical establishment's strict control over discourses on transsexuality and trans identity – mainly because of the ongoing activism of trans people over the previous four decades (p. 161)

In turn, gay and lesbian organizations began a reformation of past trans* exclusion by restructuring their mission statements to specifically include transgender individuals. For example, PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbian and Gays), which was

founded in 1972, changed their mission statement in late 2001 to include terms such as transgender, transsexual, and two-spirited (PFLAG, 2009). As recently as 2015, Stonewall, a United Kingdom organization advocating for LGBTQ acceptance, became trans* inclusive (Stonewall, 2015). Despite this integration of trans* people into the gay community, there is still a lack of consensus between groups regarding whether or not transgender individuals should be incorporated into the LGB communities (Vitulli, 2010). Moreover, Vitulli notes that although most organizations have integrated changes to their names and mission statements, 'trans* issues' continue to receive limited resources and funding. Because of this, trans* people remain extremely underrepresented within the larger LGBTQ communities (Mananzala & Spade, 2008).

2.3. Transgenderism and Social Exclusion

Even though transgender issues have gained more attention in recent years (Tremblay, 2015), transgenderism and its nemesis - transphobia - are still understudied areas in comparison to the body of work tied to lesbian and gay issues and, to some extent, bisexuality (Reisner et al., 2016; Ritter, 2015). The limited research that has been conducted suggests that those who identify as trans* often face ridicule, exclusion, and hostility brought on by primarily heterosexual ideals (Greene, Britton, & Fitts, 2014; National Association of School Psychologist [NASP], 2014). Examining the extent to which transgender individuals are at risk of violence and discrimination, Lombardi, Wichins, Esq, and Malouf (2008) indicate that out of a relatively large trans* participant pool ($n = 402$), over half had experienced violence or harassment over the course of their lifetime. This notion of victimization, as Stotzer (2009) indicates, is not limited to a single event. Rather, transgender individuals experience high rates of victimization repeatedly throughout their lives.

Economic discrimination has also been identified as one of the strongest predictors of transgender-related violence (Bailey, 2014; Lombardi et al., 2008). Brewster, Velez, Mennicke, and Tebbe (2014) interviewed 139 working professional transgender individuals throughout the United States. Brewster and colleagues indicate that in addition to 'typical' workplace stresses (e.g. deadlines, assignments) many trans* participants experienced added workplace stressors, such as limited employee

protection policies, hostile coworkers, and gendered spaces. Lombardi and associates (2008) added that transgender adults who disclose their trans* status are at a significantly greater risk of being harassed, fired, having their privacy infringed upon, intimidated or assaulted by supervisors and coworkers, having their property defaced, or being murdered.

Although in some cases sex work is voluntary (see Gaetz, 2004; O'Doherty, 2007), research regarding pathways into prostitution support the former findings by stipulating that transgender individuals often have to turn to sex work, sometimes termed 'survival sex,' because of the difficulty in obtaining legal employment while dressed as a woman (Bailey, 2014; Boles & Elifson, 1994; Leichtentritt & Arad, 2004). Workplace discrimination and an absence of anti-discrimination laws and policies addressing gender identity have resulted in lack of job security and unsteady employment for many trans* individuals (Fletcher, 2013). As Lombardi and colleagues (2008) articulate, "both economic discrimination and experiencing violence could be the result of a larger social climate that severely sanctions people for not conforming to society's norms concerning gender" (p. 90).

Outside the workplace, visibly transgender people have reported being harassed, intimidated, and assaulted in public places (Birkett, Newcomb, & Mustanski, 2015; Jauk, 2013). Sexual violence against trans* people is also well documented in the literature (Witten, 2003). Xavier, Bobbin, Singer, and Budd (2005) find that 13% of their ($n = 248$) trans* participants reported being victims of sexual assault and/or rape. In a more recent study, Bradford and colleagues (2013) conclude that over half (57%) of their ($n = 350$) participants believed that one or more of their forced sex incidents was due to their transgender status, gender identity, or gender expression.

Adding to the risk of victimization and social exclusion is the frequent lack of support or even harassment by the police. Miles-Johnson (2015) states that, in general, the transgender community is often reluctant to involve authorities as it can invite additional victimization. Such fears have led to a general lack of police reporting from the trans* community (Xavier, Honnold, & Bradford, 2007). Xavier and colleagues indicate that 83% of transgender participants ($n = 248$) in their study did not report sexual assault to the police. Similarly, researchers of the FORGE (2005) report articulate that nearly

half (47.5%) of their trans* participant pool ($n = 264$) did not report their sexual assault to anyone. Compounding this issue, some participants (4.9%) also reported sexual violence that was perpetrated by police, while others (5.9%) indicated being victims of sexual violence perpetrated by service and health care providers. Seemingly, the lack of political support offered by governing bodies has left the transgender community at a heightened risk of victimization with limited grounds of legal protection. Threatening and harassing behaviour of homosexuals and transgender persons has also been reported in Buenos Aires, for example, where some “men were often threatened with a phone call to their workplace or families to explain the reasons for their detention” (Sempol, 2013, p. 103).

Violence in the household has also been documented when assessing transgender victimization. Kenagy and Bostwick (2005) indicate that two-thirds of their transgender participant group ($n = 111$) experienced violence in their home. Three-fifths of victims indicated that they had been physically abused at some point in their lives. Such findings were also echoed in Kenagy’s (2005) study, which examined HIV/AIDS, suicide, violence, and barriers to health care access among transgender individuals in Philadelphia. Kenagy indicates that 56.3% of his participants ($n = 182$) reported violence in the household and 51.3% indicated being physically abused. As Stotzer (2009) cautions, such “responses suggest that transgender people are not safe even in their own homes” (p. 174). Furthermore, scholars indicate that youth have begun to examine and disclose their sexual and/or gender orientation at an earlier age (Valenti & Campbell, 2009), heightening the importance of ensuring adequate resources for LGBT and questioning youth in school settings. Yet, in a largely heterosexist and gender-limiting high school environment, resources for those with a sexuality or gender identity outside of the mainstream are often limited. In turn, queer youth continue to be at risk of homophobic and transphobic harassment in schools.

2.4. Transgender and LGBTQ Issues in High Schools

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth often experience unique stressors in their lives that are directly related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or how they express their gender. According to Toomey

and Russell (2013), an estimated 10% of youth identify as LGBTQ. They further note that many of these youth struggle with their sexual and/or gender orientation, experiencing varying degrees of shame and emotional conflict as they come to terms with their identity (see also Downs, 2012).

Currently, education administrators are beginning to make positive strides in accommodating individuals with various challenges. Progressive initiatives have sought to address acts of homophobia and transphobia within schools. For example, *Bill 157* requires Ontario School Board teachers to report homophobic and other bullying. Similarly, British Columbia's ERASE (Expect Respect and A Safe Education) Bullying strategy focuses on "ensur[ing] every child feels safe, accepted and respected, regardless of their gender, race, culture, religion or sexual orientation." Despite these positive and much needed initiatives, Kitchen and Bellini (2012) stipulate that there is a "disconnect between policy and practice" (p. 210).

Justification for this statement is evidenced by the Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere (EGALE, 2012) organization which found that LGBT students still report high levels of homophobic bullying in schools (as cited in Kitchen & Bellini, 2012). Moreover, researchers indicate that youth who self-identify as LGBT are likely to encounter homophobia and transphobia in their school setting (Haskell & Burtch, 2010; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Toomey et al., 2011), negatively impacting school performance and contributing to high rates of truancy, suicidality, and dropout (Downs, 2013; Coyote, 2013; Worthen, 2014).

Over 20 years ago, Savin-Williams (1994) contended that much of the physical antigay harassment experienced by LGBTQ youth is premeditated by classmates and often occurs in the school setting; most notably in washrooms and change rooms. In highlighting the prevalence of homophobic and transphobic bullying, Haskell and Burtch (2010) suggest that one-quarter of young people experience physical violence due to their sexual or perceived sexual orientation or gender expression. In a study on school violence, trans* participants described "full-contact hallways" where they would be grabbed, fondled, or pushed as they walked to class (Wyss, 2004). Additionally, participants indicated receiving both verbal and written threats of physical assault, sexual assault, or coercive sex. Similarly, Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002) surveyed

9,188 students in grades nine to 12 in Massachusetts and Vermont and found that victimization at school was disproportionately associated with LGBQ status. Incidents included property damage, verbal insults, and physical assault.

LGBTQ students also document the prevalence of more subtle forms of homophobia and transphobia, such as “name-calling [which includes sayings such as “you’re a fag,” “that’s so gay,” or “you’re so gay”], avoidance, exclusion, and heterosexist or gender-limiting environments” (Haskell & Burtch, 2010, p. 35) such as gym class. For Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin, and Drechsler (2012), “high schools can be sites of bullying and abuse for lesbian, gay, and trans* youth, or for anyone who does not closely conform to traditional gender roles” (p. 190). Unsurprisingly, Lee (2002) reports that over a quarter (28%) of those who dropout are LGBTQ students. This figure is almost three times the Canadian national dropout rate (9%).

McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, and Russell (2010) highlight that “as the need for safe school environments for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth become[s] more understood, attention has begun to shift to the school experiences of transgender youth” (p. 1176). Research on transgender students indicates that transgender youth face even more marginalization than their LGB peers (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006), placing them at a significantly higher risk of multiple forms of harassment and victimization (Langenderfer-Magruder, Walls, Whitfield, Brown, & Barrett, 2015; McGuire et al., 2010). Similarly, Lombardi and colleagues (2008) find that youth who disclose their transgender status are at high risk of being “scorned, attacked and locked into or thrown out of their homes” (p. 98). Once homeless, many of these youths become involved in risky survival strategies such as sex work.

Intensifying these issues is the general lack of access to resources for trans* youth, as many “policies designed to protect LGB individuals do not provide protections based on gender identity or expression” (McGuire et al., 2010, p. 1176). Moreover, often students have more access to knowledge regarding lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, than transgender folk (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2008). In turn, knowledge regarding being transgender stems mostly from the media, limiting students’ education on transgenderism in both the heterosexual and LGBTQ communities. In this sense,

institutions are still failing to provide an adequate supportive and educational environment for youth struggling with gender or sexuality challenges.

2.5. “Hey Teachers! Leave Those Kids Alone”⁴

Despite most of the homophobic and transphobic slurs coming from other students, researchers conclude that as many as a quarter of the harassers are faculty, staff, and administrators (Kosciw, Greytak & Diaz, 2009; Peters, 2003). For example, Fetner and colleagues (2012) indicate that, in developing a GSA in their school, LGBT youth encountered physical abuse and verbal harassment from parents, teachers, and administration.

The inability or refusal by practitioners, teachers, and administrators to adequately respond to homophobia and transphobia within the school settings is another hurdle many LGBTQ students have to contend with (Little, 2001). In an exploratory research study on school climates, Rebecca Haskell interviewed 16 LGBTQ former high school students about their experiences of homophobic and transphobic harassment in British Columbia high schools. In general, participants praised teachers who did stand up against homophobia and transphobia, but many believed that their teachers were not dealing effectively with homophobic and transphobic putdowns or threats (Haskell & Burtch, 2010). Similar to past research findings (see Peters, 2003; Robinson, 2009), participants noted losing faith in their teachers' ability to provide a school environment that was LGBTQ-friendly. As Loutzenheiser (1996) states, “what schools fail to realize... is that by not confronting homophobia [and transphobia], they are likely condoning it” (p. 59).

In addressing LGBTQ bullying in Canadian schools, Catherine Taylor, a leading researcher in the field of LGBTQ bullying, and her associate Tracey Peter (2011) argue that Canadian laws to protect sexual minorities are not in play within the public school system. In this sense, these educational institutions are not fulfilling “...their ethical and legal obligations where sexual and gender minority youth are concerned” (p. 275). Using

⁴ Waters, R., 1979, *The Wall* by Pink Floyd.

a large participant pool ($n = 3,607$) obtained through social media and random sampling in 40 school districts across Canada, Taylor and Peter surveyed students on school attachment, institutional interventions, harassment, and school climates. The researchers suggest that schools are neither safe nor respectful for sexual and gender minority students. Taylor and Peter stipulate that teachers most often did not intervene when witnessing a homophobic or transphobic incident. Moreover, teachers who did intervene were reported as being ineffective at appropriately addressing transphobic and homophobic bullying.

Similar to Taylor and Peter's findings, researchers from the 2011 National School Climate Survey report that over half (60.4%) of LGBT participants ($n = 8, 584$) who had experienced harassment and assault did not report it to school administration based on the belief that no action would be taken or that it may worsen the situation. Over one third (36.7%) of those who did report their victimization indicated that the school administration did nothing to help stop the harassment. Students who experienced various forms of homophobia or transphobia were more likely to skip school compared to those who experienced little to no harassment (57.9% and 19.6% respectively) (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). As Taylor and Peter (2011) conclude, it is understandable why many LGBTQ students see school as a place to avoid.

Birkett, Espelage and Koenig (2009) examined contextual factors that influence school climates, such as homophobic victimization and bullying in middle schools (7th-12th graders) in order to determine the negative effects these factors have on LGB and questioning students. Utilizing data from the Dane County Youth Assessment (DCYA), Birkett and colleagues assessed the opinions, concerns, attitudes, behaviours, and experiences of 7,376 seventh and eighth grade students from a large Midwestern county. On the one hand, schools with positive climates, signified by the participant's belief that they were obtaining a good education, respected by others, and cared about by adults at their schools, had beneficial outcomes indicated by the lowest levels of depression/suicidality, drug use, and truancy among LGBQ students. On the other hand, LGBQ students who attended schools that were perceived as having a negative school climate experienced higher levels of depression/suicidality, drug use, and truancy.

Experiencing such hostile school environments can lead to severe health risks for LGBTQ students. As Bradford et al. (2013) indicate, LGBTQ students are at a greater likelihood, when compared to their heterosexual counterparts, of developing mental health problems and maladaptive coping mechanisms, including substance abuse, risky sexual behaviours, suicide attempts, and skipping school. Little (2001) contends that while the provincial and federal governments have taken positive steps to uphold human rights and combat discriminatory behaviour against sexual minorities within the school setting, school boards are still drawing on mainstream expectations about gender and sexual orientation, and often failing to adequately address issues surrounding homophobia and transphobia.

In sum, transgender and LGB students regularly encounter victimization, harassment, isolation, and institutional discrimination within the school setting. Although homophobia and transphobia still occur in schools, there have been efforts to counteract these forms of discrimination, including more comprehensive research studies, reconsideration of district policies, and the development and implementation of high school GSAs (Birkett et al., 2015).

2.6. Gay-Straight Alliances

GSAs are defined as “student-led, school-based clubs that aim to provide a safe environment in the school context for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, as well as their straight allies” (Toomey et al., 2011, p. 175). Some authors have extended this definition to include students who are questioning (Q) their sexuality and/or gender and to family members who are LGBT (see Valenti and Campbell, 2009).

Although GSAs are dynamic in the sense that they are vulnerable to internal (i.e. leadership and teacher support) and external (i.e. school environment) factors, researchers credit these programs with four essential roles:

- (a) Counselling and support
- (b) A primary vehicle for raising awareness, increasing visibility, and educating about LGBTQ issues in school

- (c) A part of a broader school effort for raising awareness, increasing visibility, and educating about LGBTQ issues in schools
- (d) Providing a safe space (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004, p. 7)

In support of the first role, (a) *counselling and support*, Lee (2002) examined the impact of belonging to a high school gay-straight alliance group. She used individual and focus group interviews with seven Utah high-school students. Although her participants experienced hopelessness and despair as gay youth, these individuals were able to find empowerment and support through their affiliation with the GSA club. Participants noted that their GSA involvement offered them the ability to (1) gain stronger identities expressed through their educational, personal, and social lives, (2) acknowledge that the personal problems they were facing were actually a reflection of society's problems in general and not theirs personally, and (3) members of the GSA program expressed their changing perspectives regarding high school. Specifically, as Lee notes, "no longer did they see school as a place to avoid, but rather a place to challenge heterosexism" (p. 24). Through this critical analysis, and despite drawing on a small sample of students, Lee concludes that there is a "dramatic need for school-based support groups, such as GSAs, in all high schools" (p. 25).

In a research study by Toomey and colleagues (2011), former LGBT high school students in the San Francisco Bay area were asked to reflect on their experiences as members of a GSA. Findings from this study indicate that college/university-level educational attainment and adult well-being was associated with high school GSA participation. Substance abuse was also noted to be lower among individuals who had participated in a GSA in high school. When assessing victimization side-effects, Toomey and colleagues indicate that LGBT individuals who experienced low levels of bullying and harassment (less than two incidents) and who were members of a GSA in high school reported lower levels of adult depression and suicide compared to non-GSA participants.

GSA groups had no impact on adult depression or suicide for individuals who experienced high levels of LGBT victimization, defined as "few-to-many" occurrences (Toomey et al., 2011). In this sense, "GSAs in schools cannot be accepted by schools as the only solution for creating a safer school climate for LGBT youth" (Toomey et al.,

2011, p. 183). However, such findings strengthen the belief that GSAs have the potential for reducing maladaptive coping mechanisms and long-term health risks based on the supportive nature and counselling offered to its members. Additionally, LGBT youth who felt isolated and disconnected from their school community found a connection through the support offered by their GSA advisors. Valenti and Campbell (2009) indicate that GSA involvement can also provide support for the adult advisors. Although many GSA advisors expressed fears and hesitations when initially taking on this role - such as lack of credibility, loss of job, and being accused of recruiting youth to the “gay lifestyle” or a gay agenda (Walton, 2014), all of the adult participants in Valenti and Campbell’s study expressed the positive personal impact it had on their lives along with the beneficial outcomes, such as the ability to protect students from harassment.

The second and third roles the GSA plays, according to Griffin and colleagues (2004), are *(b) being a primary vehicle and being part of a broader school effort for raising awareness, increasing visibility, and (c) educating the larger student population about LGBTQ issues* (p. 7, italics added). These two roles have been highlighted in numerous studies assessing the impact of GSAs (Robinson, 2009; Russell et al., 2009; Worthen, 2014). For example, Lee (2002) stipulates that in addition to providing support for LGBTQ students, a GSA can provide straight students with a forum to ask questions and learn about different gender and sexual orientations. These groups allow for the development of a respectful atmosphere and encourage students to learn and appreciate gender and sexual diversity.

Miceli (2005) found that both GSA faculty advisors and GSA student leaders believed that the GSA created positive changes by improving the way faculty dealt with homophobia and antigay harassment which allowed LGBT students the ability to feel included on their high school campuses. Similarly, Heck, Flentje, and Cochran (2011) conclude that the presence of a GSA helps to decrease isolation, invoke positive risk taking, increase visibility of LGB issues in schools, and positively influences a new vision for school climates and culture. Similarly, Worthen (2014) suggests that the presence of a GSA in high schools may have a lasting positive effect on students with regard to developing prosocial attitudes towards LGBT individuals which can carry on to college or university. Expanding on this, Worthen states that a high school GSA can have a positive impact on the surrounding community, strengthening parents and students

understanding of LGBT issues. As Perrotti and Westheimer (2001) articulate, “having an organization (GSA) that [brings] together people with a common goal of fighting oppression strengthens both the school and the community” (as cited in Worthen, 2014, p. 19)

Davis, Stafford, and Pullig (2014) and Szalacha (2003) reported that schools with a GSA were significantly more likely to be welcoming places for LGBT students than schools that did not have these programs. On a daily basis, students reported hearing significantly fewer antigay slurs in schools where GSAs were operating. Lastly, Szalacha found that students were three times more likely to agree that LGBT students can be open about their sexuality in schools with a GSA.

Offering a more comprehensive approach to GSA research, Mayberry, Chenneville, and Currie (2011) assessed ways in which GSAs do or do not impact the school climate. On the one hand, findings demonstrate that members felt a sense of safety, empowerment, support, and community by having a GSA in their school. Pro-social activist attitudes were also noted by Mayberry and colleagues who state that the GSA inspires members to more readily speak out against antigay slurs in both the school and community context. Furthermore, individuals found a sense of collective empowerment through GSA involvement, which in turn inspired students to publicize and inform other students about the negative effects of homophobic and transphobic bullying and harassment.

On the other hand, Mayberry and colleagues (2011) suggest that the impact GSAs have on creating LGBTQ+ friendly school environments is still unclear. The researchers indicate that despite the presence of a GSA, teachers and students were often reported as remaining silent when an antigay comment was said. Similar findings were also brought forth by Fetner and colleagues (2012) who assert that although many of the GSAs were successful in bringing attention to LGBTQ issues by hosting events such as the day of silence⁵ which protests the bullying and harassment of LGBT students and

⁵ Day of Silence refers to a day in which individuals “refuse to speak...to draw attention to the cultural silence around LGBTQ issues” (Fetner, 2012, p. 202).

their supporters, as well as pride prom,⁶ many GSA programs failed to create a more LGBTQ-friendly school and/or reverse certain heterosexist policies that they had originally intended to (e.g., restricting prom dates based on gender) (see also Stead, 2015). Regardless, as Lee (2002) contends, “GSAs can play a major role in the daily lives of LGBT youth by creating a safe arena within which students can develop positive relationships with their peers and build relationships with understanding adult mentors” (p. 14).

The last role the GSA plays is providing students with a (d) *safe space* in a seemingly hostile environment (Griffin et al., 2004). As indicated, LGBTQ youth are at a greater risk of a host of social problems, including depression, suicide, dropping out of school, homelessness, and maladaptive coping mechanisms (Fetner et al., 2012; Haskell & Burtch, 2010; Hatzenbuehler, 2011). These youth are also more likely to experience homophobia and transphobia, conflict with their families, and unique stresses in coming to terms with their personal sexual and/or gender orientation (Downs, 2012; Stengel, 2010; Stryker, 2008; Sullivan, 2012; Taylor & Peter, 2011). Therefore, as Fetner and colleagues (2012) suggest, “...the provision of safe spaces, [such as gay-straight alliance groups], for LGBTQ students in high schools is widely understood to be necessary and urgent” (p.191).

Fetner and colleagues (2012) note, however, that to date, only a handful of scholars have attempted to define and/or develop a conceptual framework of what a safe space is. Thus, the term *safe space* is a highly used concept that is under-theorized and more of “...a vague notion rather than a clear conceptual framework” (p. 204). Therefore, defining gay-straight alliance groups as a support system set in place to protect LGBTQ students from hostile school environments, Fetner and colleagues (2012) examined GSAs in both Canadian and American high schools to develop a conceptual framework of *what a safe space is*. In doing so, the authors identified three key dimensions of a safe space: (1) context (safe from what?), (2) membership (safe from whom?), and (3) activity (safe to do what?).

⁶ Pride Prom provides a safe environment for LGBTQ youth and their allies to celebrate their high school graduation.

Regarding the first dimension, *context*, it is suggested that the environment in which an individual interacts plays a major role in meeting this requirement for a safe space. It is noted that individuals who perceive higher-levels of hostility or insecurity, understandably, have a greater need for safe spaces. Researchers have indicated that many LGBTQ students report experiencing verbal harassment and physical abuse from their parents, peers, teachers, and administration within the high school context (Birkett et al., 2009; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Valenti & Campbell, 2009). Because of this, the surrounding social challenges and lack of acceptance experienced in each high school examined in the research, Fetner and associates (2012) suggest that high schools are a suitable context in which to develop a safe space. Specifically, they state that “just about every participant interviewed indicated that gay-straight alliances did provide the kind of safe space needed to withdraw from a hostile climate” (p. 199).

The second dimension of a safe space, according to Fetner and associates (2012), is *membership*. Membership refers to those who are welcomed and those who are left out of the safe space. GSA groups, in theory, are designed to be a welcoming environment for LGBTQ students and their straight allies. Authors indicate that the inclusion of straight students within GSA groups may be beneficial as it allows a cover for students who are questioning or not comfortable disclosing their sexual identities (Haskell & Burtch, 2010). Interestingly, Fetner et al. indicate that trans* students, along with Black students, were among the most likely to be marginalized by these groups. As McGuire et al. (2010) suggest that “the importance of the GSA for queer youth has been found in other studies, but most studies do not specifically focus on the GSA as an important tool for transgender youth” (p.1186). Nonetheless, such findings suggest a lack of diversity in educating members on gender identity challenges.

The last dimension identified by Fetner and colleagues (2012) is *activity*. In much of the social movement literature “safe spaces have been credited with producing radical identities, training movement leaders, and allowing for the development of counterhegemonic ideologies” (Fetner et al., p. 189). Unlike past research (see Conway & Crawford-Fisher, 2007; Griffen et al., 2004; Russell et al., 2009), however, Fetner and colleagues found that GSAs had limited to no effect on policy changes in their school and community. Supporting this notion, Sullivan (2012) states that a “sense of safety for queer students, especially within the neoliberal context of the post-secondary education,

has the potential to constrain the possibility of enacting queer politics on campus” (p. 3). Extending this, Fetner and colleagues contend that despite what social movement literature might suggest, the GSA, and its ability to be a safe space, does not necessarily encourage activism or mobilize students. Arguably, however, activism is dependent on leadership and the surrounding social climate in which this group is situated. In this sense, more attention must be given to the variation in GSA leadership and how homophobia and transphobia are addressed in the school context.

Bringing us closer to understanding the complex dimensions of a safe space, Fetner and colleagues (2012) conclude, like Griffin and associates (2004), that GSAs provide their members with a safe haven in a seemingly hostile school environment. However, not all GSAs are the same. Based on the variety of experiences each participant articulated, Fetner and associates suggest “that consideration must be given not only to whether high schools have gay-straight alliances, but also to the variation in the qualities of these groups and the safe spaces they create for LGBTQ students and their straight allies” (p. 204).

In sum, GSA groups play a vital role in providing a safe space for LGBTQ students and their allies. Transgender individuals, however, are often not distinguished in the LGBT literature from gays, lesbians, and bisexuals students (Nagoshi et al., 2008) and may experience exclusion within these groups (Fetner et al., 2012). Currently, to my knowledge, limited research has undertaken the task of specifically examining GSAs and how they cater to transgender students and their struggles surrounding gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation. Therefore, in hopes of gaining a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of GSA groups, I explore the dimensions of these safe spaces within the high school setting by assessing how GSA groups actually support transgender and questioning students. Before doing so, however, a brief overview of two critical theoretical frameworks will be offered, beginning with transgender theory and followed by peacemaking criminology.

2.7. Transgender Theory

When we walk into a restaurant and we see another transsexual person, we look the other way, we pretend we don't exist. There's no sly smile, no secret wink, signal, or handshake. Not yet. We still quake in solitude at the prospect of recognition, even if that solitude is in the company of our own kind. (Bornstein, 1995, p. 60)

Gender, as expressed by Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010), is a key in "how one identifies people, organizes relationships with others, and develops meaning through natural and social events" (p. 432). Historically, the nature of gender and gender identity has been a strong focus in feminist thought, and more recently, queer theory. Arguably, however, these theoretical orientations have not fully captured the complexities of gender and sexual identity, thus inspiring the evolution of transgender theory (Beresford, 2014). In exploring the roots of transgender theory, a brief overview of feminist and queer theory approaches to gender and sexuality will be offered. Moreover, after highlighting the strengths and limitations of both these theoretical perspectives, a discussion of transgender theory will be presented in hopes of offering a more comprehensive understanding of gender and sexual identity.

2.7.1. A Brief History of Transgender Theory

The social relationship between gender and sexuality has undergone significant changes over the past 25 years. Historically, 'first wave' and 'second wave' feminist approaches, as defined by Cameron (2005), organized around the concept of binary differences between men and women, often retaining an essentialist view which attributes gender identity formation to one's biological sex. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) explain, "gender performances are available to everyone, but with them come constraints on who can perform which personae with impunity. And this is where gender and sex come together, as society tries to match up ways of behaving with biological sex assignments" (p. 10).

With one's gender being synonymous with their sex, it is the essentialist feminists' standpoint that to properly understand and empower women, the social consequences of being born female, and how those consequences differ from those born as male, must

be examined and addressed. Due to this, gender has been contextually defined in numerous ways, including ideological frameworks of sex roles, analytic categories, and power differentials used to highlight social inequalities of women, such as discrimination, sexual objectification, oppression, and patriarchy (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). As Nagoshi and Brzuzy highlight, however, the feminist essentialist perspective becomes problematic when addressing transgenderism.

In examining this limitation, Heyes (2003) and Nagoshi and Brzuzy (2010) note that the fixed binary conception of gender identity creates rigidity in the theoretical construct of gender, impairing notions of gender fluidity based on social performance. Moreover, the essentialist feminist view “would make one’s body a proxy for identity, with female-to-male (FTM) transgenders being betrayers of their oppressed identities, while male-to-female (MTF) transgenders, who had relinquished male privilege, still would not be considered ‘real’ women” (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 435). Therefore, essentialist feminist theorists’ inability to incorporate the fluidity of gender as an integral theoretical conception provided ‘third wave’ feminist scholars and queer theorists with an opportunity to advance the understanding of gender identity.

With respect to queer theory, despite a significant number of queer theorists not explicitly acknowledging its roots, scholars note that the queer theory perspective stems from an outgrowth of both personal and political social movements, including the homophile movement, gay liberation, and lesbian feminism (Beresford, 2014; Jagose, 1996). The title ‘queer theory’ is unique in the sense that it is “not a clearly unified body of work but one that continues to evolve, and is characterized by sets of ‘theories’ which utilize the term ‘queer’ for a variety of purposes” (Watson, 2005, p. 68). According to Beresford (2014), the term ‘queer’ is by definition:

Whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, and the dominant, and aims to destabilize dominant ideas of identity, whether that identity is sexual, gendered, ethnic, national, and political and so forth. Queer is not an identity, rather, it is a critique of identity and of identity construction. (p. 763)

Similar to ‘third wave’ feminist thought, queer scholars propose that *identity* is based on repeated performances. In this regard, gender is viewed as a performance (Butler, 1990); something that one “does” rather than an innate or irreversible process

(West & Zimmerman, 1987). In extending the view on gender, 'third wave' feminists and queer theorists argue the notion that identities are socially constructed and thus identity can be reconceptualised and re-assigned. Unlike the essentialist perspective that "link[s] gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation tightly within a binary, biologically based, heteronormative gender schema" (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 434), queer and 'third wave' feminist theorists postulate that one's identity, be that man or woman, is based on social rituals, symbols, and linguistic exchanges that transform social differences into social facts (Campbell & l'Anson, 2007), highlighting the fluidity of gender and gender expression.

Although feminist and queer theorists' push to redefine conceptions and understandings queer identities, roles, and orientations allowed for an expansion of theoretical thought, the social constructivist view often assumes that gender is based off either a male or a female categorization, weakening this theoretical orientation's applicability to those who fall outside the "either/or" categorization. In this sense, transgender theory developed as a critique of queer and feminist theory, challenging both the essentialist and the social constructivist perspectives on the nature of gender and gender identity.

2.7.2. A Transgender Theory Approach to Gender

Katrina Roen (2001) has been credited with being an inspirational force behind the development of transgender theory. She moves beyond the "either/or" queer theorist approach and presents a "both/neither" conceptualization of gender identity. Articulating this notion, Roen describes *transsexuality* "as a state of being that assumes the pre-existence of two sexes between which one may transition" (p. 501-502); whereas *transgenderism* "draws from post-modern notions of fluidity (for both bodies and genders)" (p.501), and is viewed as "transgressing the gender binary, not necessarily as physically transitioning from one gender category to the other" (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 435).

Expanding on this, Roen (2001) argues that, on the one hand, transsexuals do not necessarily identify themselves as transsexuals continually over the course of their life. Rather, under the assumption that a transsexual individual will seek out sex

reassignment surgery, one might refer to themselves differently based on their physical progression; for example, moving through an identity of “formerly transsexual,” and then ultimately ending with the declaration of “woman” or “man” (Roen, 2001, p. 502). Because of this, transsexuals seemingly promote the gender binary by accepting various gender-role stereotypes as a means of “passing” as one’s desired gender and sex.

On the other hand, Roen (2001) points out that for certain transgender individuals, gender identity is expressed as more fluid and more pluralistic, breaking away from the restraints of the body and biology. In contrast to transsexuality, according to Roen, transgenderism is viewed as disrupting gender categories, such as man, woman and transsexual, and is a step “toward[s] gender transgression, gender transcendence,” and, desirably, the “eventual abandonment of [gendered] categories” (p. 502). Thus, transgender theory emerged as a response to the “need for a theory of gender identity that would incorporate both fluid self-embodiment and a self-construction of identity that would dynamically interact with this embodiment in the context of social expectations and lived experiences” (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 435).

Since the emergence of transgender theory, scholars have credited this theoretical orientation with providing critical insight into the “physical embodiment of intersecting identities,” and offering researchers a stronger “understanding of how the narratives of lived experiences integrate the socially constructed, embodied, and self-constructed aspects of identity” (Campbell & l’Anson, 2007; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010, p. 437). Like other theoretical orientations, transgender theory is not, however, without its limitations.

According to Elliot and Roen (2001), transgender theory runs the risk of encountering similar problems as feminist and queer theories. For instance, certain transgender theorists stipulate that there are only two possible subject positions in relation to normative gender: (1) conformity, or (2) deviance. As Elliot and Roen suggest, having two opposing groups “denies the complexity and fluidity of identity” and “denies the possibility of a sexual politics that might find support in either group” (p. 239). Moreover, as Hausman (2001) articulates, transgender theorists might exaggerate embodiment as a “free-floating experience” (p. 474) without adequately depicting the historical or psychic weight attached. Lastly, the “newness” of transgender theory raises scepticism with regard to the theoretical worth of this perspective.

Despite these limitations, transgender theory offers a strong theoretical framework in which to view the nature of gender and gender identity. With this in mind transgender theory is used to offer insight into the complexities of gender roles, gender identity, and sexual orientation. It is noted, however, that similar to queer theory – in its purest form – transgender theory “might be so entangled in and enamoured with literary and cinematic tropes that it cannot offer living subjects any practical tools that can better their lives” (Dalton, 2016, p. 19). As such, through this application, I seek to expand the theoretical breadth of transgender theory by integrating facets of this perspective into a peacemaking criminological approach to building inclusive safe spaces for LGBTQ students. Before doing so, however, an overview of peacemaking criminology will be offered.

2.8. Peacemaking Criminology

Criminological knowledge has been used to regulate queer lives in unjust ways, and for many years, queer people were spoken about by criminologists, sexologists, and others seeking to ‘know’ about those considered sexually deviant. (Ball, 2014, p. 544)

Early criminological work has been criticized by queer scholars for its depiction of LGBTQ people as ‘defective sexual species’ as well as researchers’ overuse of ‘deficit’ or ‘deviancy’ models as means of informing the research study on how these individuals might be cured and controlled (Dwyer, Ball, & Crofts, 2016). Although a shift in criminology has occurred since the late 1990s thanks to growth of queer criminology, Dwyer and colleagues state,

...while people who identify as LGBTIQ⁷ are often included in large criminological research projects, many of those projects often remain focused on broader and more traditional criminological concerns (factors influencing offending, victimisation, and one’s criminal justice experience), resulting in the unique issues related to a person’s LGBTIQ status being glossed over or ignored. (p. 2)

⁷ LGBTIQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer

In this regard, queering criminology pertains to “directly address[ing] the heteronormativity of mainstream criminology by responding to the needs of LGBTIQ communities, and providing a space within which queer perspectives can be drawn into criminology” (Dwyer et al., 2016, p.4). Therefore, in furthering the integration of ‘queering criminology,’ a peacemaking criminological framework will be used to provide theoretical insight as means of addressing unique issues related to queer youth, with a specific emphasis on transgender students.

Quinney and Pepinsky (1991) were among the first scholars to integrate the notion of peacemaking into the field of criminology. Although the peacemaking orientation is still a relatively new concept in the field of criminology (Fuller & Wozniak, 2006), the notion of adopting a peaceful approach to justice is rooted in the early writings and teachings of the Taoists, Confucists, and Buddhists, dating back thousands of years (Klenowski, 2009). Focused on concepts of mindfulness, peacefulness, and connectedness within society, these philosophical doctrines became an inspirational force behind the peacemaking criminological approach to crime and justice.

Rooted in radical, conflict, and early critical theory, Quinney (1991) defines the peacemaking approach as “nonviolent criminology” which views criminality as a result of human suffering. For Quinney, past theorizing and public policies that fail to articulate the importance of ending human suffering have impeded society’s ability to resolve and understand crime and crime causes. Supporting this claim, he contends that Western society still remains crime-ridden despite the tireless efforts put forth by government, law, and social policy agencies. It is a peacemaking criminologist’s belief that crime itself will be ended through the development of individual compassion and understanding found in the awareness of human suffering. Awareness is obtained through the understanding that everything is temporary and “every action brings a certain result” (Quinney, 2011, p. 314).

Actions that result in suffering, causing disunity and separation within society, stem from afflictions such as hatred, pride, ignorance, greed, delusion, and a craving for power over others (Quinney, 2011). Based on this, Quinney suggests that to end global suffering individuals must develop, within themselves, “compassion and loving-kindness towards others” (p. 316). Through compassion and understanding, equality becomes

forthcoming which leads to the elimination of poverty, racism, sexism, and violence of all kinds.

In order to become peacemakers, Quinney and Pepinsky (1991) specify that individuals must develop an understanding that everyone within society is connected and has value and worth. Based on this insight, the authors raise the importance of helping and serving one another as a fundamental aspect of ending suffering (Klenowski, 2009). However, for this to occur, a restructuring of values must take place, beginning at the individual level. Klenowski stipulates that people must conduct a self-evaluation, assessing daily practices, beliefs and attitudes held towards others. To avoid contaminating these views, Quinney (1991) specifies that one must avoid media propaganda (e.g. the overrepresentation of ethnic minorities as “criminal” or “deviant”) and false government truisms (e.g. “tough on crime” approach to deter offenders) regarding actions of justice. Instead, Quinney believes that an individual’s self-evaluation must stem from peace, spirituality, and faith (Klenowski, 2009, p. 215; see also Braswell, McCarthy, & McCarthy, 2002). In reality, as Klenowski terms it, the peacemaking criminological approach encourages individuals to rethink current criminal justice systems, society, and the social impact of “living by the sword” (p. 215). It is through the recognition of our own suffering that acceptance, compassion, and transformative thinking will occur, allowing for a society built around the understanding of human suffering, forgiveness, rehabilitation, and treatment (Quinney & Pepinsky, 1991).

Critics of peacemaking criminology insist that the core proposition of the peacemaking approach is built on a utopian philosophy that presents an unrealistic and unachievable premise, inhibiting its ability to be placed into policy (Klenowski, 2009). Evidently, some researchers suggest that “peacemaking criminologists have paid considerable attention to thinking about peace, but rather less to actually making it” (McEvoy, 2003, p. 334; see also Currie & MacLean, 1995) for a number of reasons.

Firstly, quantitative researchers suggest that Quinney and Pepinsky (1991) fail to offer empirically testable definitions of the fundamental pillars of peacemaking criminology, such as spiritual transformation, awareness, connectedness, and peace (McEvoy, 2003). In turn, narrowing and conceptualizing these terms can bring about immense difficulties, impairing the testability and, thus, validity of this theoretical

orientation (Klenowski, 2009). Secondly, peacemaking criminologists suggest that to become a peacemaker, individuals must undergo a spiritual awakening centered on selflessness and the understanding of human suffering (Quinney, 2011). However, as Klenowski argues, individuals may not be willing or capable of developing an in-depth perspective on various social inequalities that impart suffering on targeted groups, let alone enlightening their human spirit.

Lastly, as mentioned, Quinney and Pepinsky (1991) emphasize numerous aspects of the criminal justice system that are inhibiting peace and rehabilitation. Yet both scholars fail to present a logical and practical solution for addressing these problems. As Klenowski (2009) bluntly states, “it appears that peacemaking criminologists are guilty of adding to the hypocrisy of the criminological field by failing to acknowledge the importance of formulating a plan which others, especially scholars and practitioners, may attempt to follow and apply” (p. 217).

Despite these criticisms, the subjective nature of peacemaking criminology, along with its fundamental ideas, should not be “cast aside by the overly objective scholars of criminology” (Klenowski, 2009, p. 216; Pepinsky, 2013). Rather, this subjectivity can be a strength as it offers theoretical malleability and flexibility in its application to various situations. To date, the peacemaking criminology approach has been applied in numerous contexts and to social phenomena including counterterrorism (Gaskew, 2009), corporate crime (Wozniak, 2009), conflict resolution (Scimecca, 1991), community policing (Jesilow & Parsons, 2010), prisons (Rucker, 1991), and homelessness and poverty (Barak, 1991; Wozniak, 2008). More relevant to the current research study, however, is peacemaking criminology’s applicability to the context of the education system.

Setting the context of peacemaking and education, Sanzen (1991) argues that the education system currently in place focuses on values of control and repression, which are characterized by hostility, alienation, exploitation, domination, and segregation. Although guilty of embellishing negative aspects of the education system, Sanzen raises the important argument that an educational shift must occur that places more emphasis on the peacemaking approach. The researcher maintains that educators must focus more on humanitarian studies, such as anthropology and sociology, in order to foster

cooperative living that reinforces integration and acceptance. Sanzen (1991) adds that the teaching of peacemaking:

Increases people's power to do things *with* others rather than *to* others by building trust, acceptance, respect, love, nurture, and caring – all of which integrate rather than separate people...In turn, the peacemaking perspective] encourages students to break down those aspects of themselves that cause conflict – tools of segregation such as prejudice, competition, power, superiority – and helps them realize that we all need each other to be whole, regardless of how people have been labeled. (Italics added, pp. 240–242)

In support of Sanzen's approach, Braswell and Whitehead (2002) assert that the teaching and learning of peacemaking and justice issues can bring about 'wholesight' (synthesis of heart and mind) for teachers and students. They observe that wholesight transforms learning into wisdom. In turn, it encourages mindfulness and a deeper sense of awareness of, and connectedness to oneself, as well as others around them. Braswell and Whitehead suggest that achieving wholesight through teaching can be done through elevated learning, such as bringing in ex-inmates to speak to a class about capital punishment. Arguably, Braswell and Whitehead seemingly underestimate the difficulties of attaining wholesightedness. For students, each individual must acquire a vested interest in learning to understand one another, a challenging task rooted in self-reflection, discipline, and a level of maturity that might escape a young teen demographic. Yet, staying true to Pepinsky's (1991) original notion that learning peacemaking is through doing it, Braswell and White provide core insight into how the peacemaking model of teaching can broaden students' perspectives on the criminal justice system and social issues in general.

Arguably, some aspects of peacemaking criminology are currently reflected in high school GSA programs. As indicated, GSAs have been credited with (1) addressing prejudices, (2) breaking down segregation, (3) educating individuals on LGBTQ issues, and (4) providing a safer school environment. However, some evidence suggests that GSAs are failing at specifically supporting transgender students. Therefore, through the application of the peacemaking theoretical model, which is rooted in easing individual suffering through the notions of compassion and understanding, I highlight the various dimensions of peacemaking criminology in order to guide policy on how GSA groups can

offer its members a safer and more inclusive environment. The next chapter outlines the development of a qualitative research project designed to explore the impact of GSAs and future directions for resources for LGBTQ students.

Chapter 3.

Research Methods

We must not see any person as an abstraction. Instead, we must see in every person a universe with its own secrets, with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish, and with some measure of triumph. (Elie Wiesel, as quoted in Skloot, 2011)

3.1. Being a Straight, Cisgender Qualitative Researcher

As a straight, cisgender⁸ male, I am often asked, ‘*what got you into this area of research?*’ Generally speaking, working with ‘at risk’ youth has been an important part of my life, with over six years of experience in this field.⁹ Upon entering graduate school, I was exposed to the specific challenges facing transgender youth and the community at large. One interview became particularly salient in furthering my interest in this area.

You become the bag lady. You are carrying everything that you own in garbage bags and you start feeling pretty forgotten. And it can happen to anybody. And yeah, it makes it tough sometimes to keep going, really tough. (Michelle, intersex, age 60)

This quote is from my first qualitative interview for a graduate research methods course. Michelle (a pseudonym I gave her to protect her identity) is a 60-year intersex woman blessed with a gift of poetry. She was also a sex worker in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside until the age of 55. Her stories and poetry were captivating, and for

⁸ *Cisgender*, derived from the Latin prefix *cis*, meaning “on this side of” and refers to one’s personal gender identity matching their assigned sex at birth.

⁹ Work experience includes Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada In-School Mentoring Program for troubled youth, Kennedy House Youth Centre for male youth in conflict with the law, and the Bethesda House Women’s Shelter where I developed and implemented a ‘Guys for Change’ summer camp program for at risk male teen victims of domestic violence.

a first time qualitative researcher, it was hard not to become emotionally invested as she described some of the horrors she had lived through. For example, Michelle was often a target for police ridicule:

There was a lot of humiliation at the hands of the cops. I was a decoy for local law enforcement to harass, humiliate and victimize...I'd get jacked up with a bogus charge to bring me in to put on a show when they'd strip search me. Other members of the force would come downstairs and line up against the back wall on the opposite side I was kept. There would be a lot of upbeat chatter and chuckles as I was stripped naked. With arms and legs spread out like a star, as I faced up against the wall, I'd hear a loud sassy voice call "and what colour of G-string are you wearing today?" They all have a good laugh when my panties are finally revealed, right before being removed. Leaving me naked, nothing concealed. There is a light celebration to the shuffling money tune. All bets are satisfied to the correct colour guess. I am then turned and photographed naked. I hold a couple of poses like a vogue, showing all of my tattoos. This circus would happen all over again when I was snatched up the next time for a show to place some bets on what colour of thong the Queen of First Ave would be wearing under her dress.

When analyzing Michelle's poetry, expressions of discontent and exhaustion signified the readiness to leave the sex work industry:

Apathetically numb. The power to draw my satisfaction from being a whore. Day after day, year after year, with little hope, going nowhere, nothing changing in a detesting life. Dying slowly like some flower being tangled by the weeds. I need to work on myself to enrich my own spirit.

In doing this research, what became glaringly obvious was the impact that social exclusion had on this individual's life and how this exclusion forced her to live within the marginalized spaces of society. So, in addition to a few friendly nudges from Dr. Brian Burtch to research areas pertaining to LGBTQ issues, Michelle's experiences as an intersex woman became the impetus to my research interests. That said, I was curious to find out what was currently being done for youth who identify as transgender.

As a straight, cis male I became very aware of my 'outside' status as an individual conducting LGBTQ research. Reflecting on this, I realized that there are both strengths and challenges to conducting qualitative research as an outsider. With regard to the

latter, Levy (2013) indicates that “insiders have historically been viewed as more authentic and trustworthy” (p. 199). Many insiders possess common knowledge surrounding the research area, automatically allowing the researcher to build rapport, openness, and trust with their participants. Because of my *outsider* status and newness to this field of study, I wanted to be sure I had a strong foundational knowledge regarding transgenderism and the LGBTQ communities in general before beginning my research. In support of this, Levy recommends that “researchers should first develop knowledge about the population of study. Even if they consider themselves to be primarily insiders, scholars must be familiar with a population’s history, educating themselves on culture, values, and traditions of the group” (p. 202) (see also Gasman & Payton-Stewart, 2006). This required me to do a substantial amount of research on areas of gender and sexuality before I felt comfortable discussing these topics with potential participants.

In addition to familiarizing myself with various LGBTQ scholarly readings, I began attending Simon Fraser University’s *Out on Campus* weekly meetings to acquaint myself with LGBTQ-friendly spaces. Here, I was able to clarify questions that arose and acquire knowledge that I would implement in my study. For instance, *Out on Campus* began each meeting by allowing members to introduce themselves and indicating their personal pronouns. As Charlie states:

...being misgendered, which is using the wrong names and pronouns, can be hugely traumatizing to a trans kid. It can cause panic attacks, trigger depression. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

Using this safe space strategy, I began every interview by asking participants to indicate their personal pronouns. This permitted me to address participants accordingly, which aided in developing rapport, trust, openness, and a comfortable space for each individual. Additionally, I found it important before each interview to identify myself as a trans* ally and discuss *how* and *why* I became involved in this area. This granted individuals the opportunity to ask me questions and gain a better understanding of my research intentions.

Reflexivity also became a vital tool as an ally¹⁰ and an outside researcher. In developing the study, I often questioned my own status and reflected on the power, privilege, and positionality I have within society as a straight, white male. I found myself frequently journaling ideas on how to ensure sensitivity in my research and properly represent a disenfranchised and marginalized group. Gasman and Payton-Stewart (2006) advise outside researchers, however, that despite your best intentions, individuals within a community could challenge your research. Although I found the majority of my interactions with LGBTQ communities extremely positive and welcoming, I did have one experience with a transgender male who expressed his disdain towards me and my research, stating that the trans* community does not need my help nor will my analysis be representative because I am not transgender myself. Despite trying to explain my research intentions, I was unable, according to him, to justify my involvement in this research area. Heeding the words of Gasman and Payton-Stewart who wisely advise scholars to “be open, respectful and understanding of those who challenge your research” (p. 145), I thanked the individual for sharing his concerns and left my contact information if he cared to meet with me in the future.

This interaction caused self-doubt as to whether I was suited to undertake a research project involving transgender individuals, and if my presence within this community was causing heightened feelings of marginalization among the trans* youth I was speaking to. As Levy (2013) points out,

Given the tumultuous history of sexuality studies, it is important for researchers who do this work to attend to ethics and be sensitive to participants’ situations. This is especially true for researchers who do not identify as LGBTQ and consider themselves to be outsiders. (p. 198)

Yet, there is also a danger in automatically accepting dismissive approaches that are essentially *ad hominem* fallacies; that is, an attack on one’s character or abilities rather than the merits of the research or argumentation. Historically, some of the most fruitful contributions in the social sciences have come from researchers who fall ‘outside’

¹⁰ At the thesis defence (April 13, 2016), Dr. Gerald Walton cautioned that declaring oneself as an ally does not guarantee that one’s work will be welcomed within the LGBTQ communities. It is often crucial to be active in standing up for issues within this community.

the given community or area in which they are studying. For instance, Alexis-Charles-Henri Clérel de Tocqueville, a French political thinker and historian, travelled to the United States in 1831 to study prisons and collect information on American Society. Through his work, de Tocqueville published two volumes (1835 & 1840) entitled *Democracy in America*, which immediately gained popularity in both Europe and the United States. To date, *Democracy in America* has become a classic work of history, social science, and political science, and has been praised for being the one of the best books written about democracy and America (Holt, 2001).

Similarly, John Howard Griffin, author of *Black Like Me*, examined the plight of African-Americans in the South (e.g. New Orleans, Mississippi, Alabama) in the early 1960s. To do so, Griffin, a Caucasian journalist from Texas, underwent a course of prescribed medication, sunlamp treatment, and skin cream in order to appear as a Black man. Taking an arguably 'controversial' approach to immersing himself in the Black South, Griffin was able to depict the physical and psychological toll of Southern racism by highlighting the difficulties of obtaining simple necessities, such as finding food, shelter, and bathroom facilities. Once released in 1961, the book became a best seller and was credited with awaking "significant numbers of white Americans to truths about discrimination of which they had been unaware or had denied" (Yardley, 2007, para. 3).

Both Griffin and de Tocqueville exemplify the importance of having 'outsider' variation in the context of research and social impact. Notably, however, when conducting research, scholars' perceptions are influenced by their 'maps of consciousness,' comprised of personal attributes such as class, gender, nationality, and race (Haraway 1991). "A researcher's knowledge is therefore always partial" as the unique positionality, along with the location in time and space, "will influence how the world is viewed and interpreted" (Mulling, 1999, p. 337). Arguably, then, the depth and completeness of research is dependent on both 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives intertwining to create a critical and comprehensive articulation of a given research area. Thus, the measurement of a researcher should not be placed on their 'in' or 'out' status, but rather their ability to conduct research with compassion, understanding, and high ethical standards.

Specific to my suitability to undertake this research, Levy (2013) articulates that no population is homogeneous, meaning that the T in LGBTQ represents individuals with a variety of unique and diverse experiences. In this sense, “holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that group. Likewise, not being a member of a group does not denote complete difference” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60, as cited in Levy, 2013). Furthermore, “researchers and allies may be better received by some audiences and thus may have a better opportunity to change minds” (Levy, 2013, p. 207). Consequently, my suitability does not depend upon my gender and/or sexual identity; rather, it pertains to my ability to be compassionate, understanding, and representative of my participants’ voices.

Although I experienced several challenges as an outsider, I also experienced benefits to this status. Levy (2013) suggests that participants who view researchers as insiders might be at risk of omitting details in their explanations based on the assumption that the researcher already has an understanding. As an outsider, I felt comfortable asking participants for clarification or more detail as they explained various situations. Participants were very patient and understanding when explaining terms and concepts that I was not familiar with. More personally, exploring issues of gender expression, sexual identity, and resistance to oppression granted me the opportunity to challenge my own assumptions on homosexuality, transgenderism, and heteronormative perceptions.

In sum, qualitative researchers, as indicated by Levy (2013), “are unique in that they often have considerable contact with participants and very rarely take on the role of a distant and neutral researcher” (p. 199). Therefore, throughout this research process, I found it imperative to critically reflect on the importance of ethical mindfulness, a concept describing five main ethical characteristics: (1) Avoid getting caught up in ‘doing research’ and acknowledge the potentially ethically important moments; (2) Be alert and responsive to these moments, not dismissive; (3) Acquire a comprehensive understanding of ethical principles and know how to put them into practice; (4) Be reflexive; (5) Critically question your beliefs and practices about how you conduct research, and expose yourself to self-doubt (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009, p.296). I relied on these ethical practices and standards to properly address questions around building rapport, informed consent, and the notion of *doing no harm*.

3.2. Sampling and Recruitment Process

As an outside researcher of the LGBTQ communities, gaining access and developing trust with a marginalized population was a challenging task. Levy (2013) recommends that “researchers should first develop relationships with gatekeepers” (p. 204). As such, I reached out to various LGBTQ community groups throughout the greater Vancouver area. Additionally, I contacted colleagues at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology to assist with finding participants. Developing a sense of trust and rapport with gatekeepers and support group leaders became an imperative part of my recruitment phase. It was through these relationships that I was able to recruit participants for this research study.

In recruiting participants, I employed various strategies to develop interest in this research study, which included (1) sending out posters and emails describing my research to various LGBTQ community centres, (2) doing small research presentations to community groups, and (3) offering potential participants a \$10 monetary payment as a token of appreciation for contributing to this research study. I found the most effective strategy was participating in various LGBTQ community activities (e.g. volunteering at queer youth centres where I would interact with its various members; attending Out on Campus meetings). Here, I was able to develop a sense of rapport with participants and establish a sense of trust.

A purposive method of sampling was employed with respect to participant selection. As described by Palys and Atchison (2014), this form of sampling is used when researchers are looking for certain individuals that meet a specific criterion. The focus was on youth and young adults, with ages ranging from 16-30 years old, who self-identified as transgender, or of LGB status, and who had experience with gay-straight alliance groups.

An additional hurdle in the research process pertained to gaining minimal risk ethics approval for this research. Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2006) declare that “it is one thing to decide for yourself about interest, appropriateness, accessibility and ethics; it is quite another to get all of the relevant parties to go along with your plan” (p. 33). Simon Fraser University has both an internal research ethics committee - Office

of Research Ethics (ORE) - and an external independent research committee, the Research Ethics Board (REB). Ethics approval was obtained by the ORE and two interviews were conducted; however, I was later notified by the REB to terminate the study until certain conditions were met (see Appendix A.). For example, I was required to collaborate with a mental health resource agency - the B.C. Crisis Centre - to arrange counselling services that would ensure anonymity, if needed, for participants who disclose imminent self-harm or suicidal ideation. Accompanying this was a three-step protocol for participants who disclosed suicidal thoughts or intentions of immediate self-harm (see Appendix C.). As some participants had not disclosed their gender identity or sexual orientation to their families, the protocol was devised to ensure the participant could receive aid without breaking confidentiality or being “outed.” Additionally, a list of local crisis and support contacts was made available to all participants (see Appendix B.). After satisfying the REB requirements and approval was reinstated, an additional 9 individuals were contacted and interviewed, totalling 11 participants for this research project.

3.3. Interviews and Remuneration

Given the exploratory nature of this study, a semi-structured, in-depth interview approach was taken with each of the 11 participants. More specifically, nine of the participants were interviewed individually and two participants were interviewed in a group setting. Retrospectively, the private, one-on-one setting enabled deeper discussion regarding various social and personal matters. In contrast, owing to its more public nature, the group interview allowed for a wider range of experiences to be shared, with less focus on personal matters. One follow up interview was completed with Alex to clarify and expand on concepts in the participant’s narrative.

Each participant was offered a \$10 monetary payment as a token of appreciation for contributing to this research study. Based on the right to withdraw from this study without penalty, remuneration was given to all participants regardless of whether they choose not to answer certain questions and/or withdrew from the study. Two participants refused remuneration.

The interview questions (see Appendix D) focussed on family life, experiences as a transgender or LGB individual, the need for a safe space, issues of transphobia and homophobia, experiences with GSA groups, and aspects of a safe space. Upon completion of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to clarify any questions they had pertaining to the interview or the research project in general.

Face-to-face interviews occurred in various locations throughout Vancouver and surrounding areas. As Levy (2013) states, “because researchers may be asking vulnerable participants to talk about sensitive and very personal information, it is important that participants feel safe” (p. 205). Therefore, to ensure participants felt comfortable, I encouraged participants to pick the interview location. If the interviewee was unsure on where to go, I would offer to reserve a quiet study room at one of the three SFU campuses to ensure that we had a convenient, private and comfortable place to conduct an interview.

With the participants’ permission, all interviews were digitally recorded. The interviews ranged from 45-95 minutes in length. In addition to recording each interview, for quality purposes, handwritten notes were taken and used to highlight key themes for follow-up questions and eventually some notes were incorporated into the thesis write-up.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Given the tumultuous history of sexuality [and gender] studies, it is important for researchers who do this work to attend to ethics and be sensitive to participants’ situations. (Levy, 2013, p. 198)

Simon Fraser University’s ethics policy R 20.01, section 5.18, stipulates that the age of majority in British Columbia is 19 and individuals who fall below the age of majority require parental consent to participate in a research study. However, upon adequate justification by the principal investigator (PI), exceptions can be made to these REB requirements. In highlighting past research to the REB on the potential emotional, physical, and familial risks of the reactions of parents to the disclosure of an LGBTQ identity (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Downs, 2012; Stengel, 2010; Stryker, 2008;

Sullivan, 2012; Taylor & Peter, 2011), I was permitted to allow participants 16 years of age and older to act as mature minors and provide their own consent.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) insist that “informed consent is at heart an interpersonal process between researcher and participant” (p. 272). Through this process, the prospective participant gains a thorough understanding of the research goals and their role as a participant. Moreover, informed consent can reduce the hierarchical nature of the research process by allowing the individual to make an informed decision on whether or not to engage in the proposed research study.

As such, consent from participants was obtained orally before each interview was conducted. Formal signed consent forms were avoided to establish a sense of trust and rapport with each of the participants. Individuals were informed that their participation in this study was strictly voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time without consequences. Participants were also informed that they could exercise the option of removing any information given in the interview or may refuse to answer any questions they were not comfortable with. They were also informed that they could stop the interview at any time without explanation or apology.

Additionally, two main ethical principles guided this study: (1) acceptance and (2) confidentiality. With regard to the first aspect, *acceptance*, Finklehor (1986) suggests that when interviewing/researching a sensitive population, such as transgender youth, it is important not to convey stigmatized attitudes towards participants. Keeping this in mind, I often began interviews by identifying myself as a trans* ally and stating my research intentions. Furthermore, Levy (2013) insists that during data collection, it is fundamental that researchers listen attentively and show discretion, knowing *what* and *when* to ask various questions. Extending this, I also ensured that participants were aware that they could skip a question or stop the interview at any time without penalty. In turn, following these steps during the interview process helped convey acceptance, respect, and build rapport with each participant.

With regard to *confidentiality*, those undertaking qualitative research are primarily interested in individual views, experiences, and circumstances. It is important to remember, however, that “qualitative researchers are simply guests in the private

spaces of the world” (Stake, 2003, p. 154). Therefore, in accordance with Simon Fraser University’s R20.01 which ensures that research involving human subjects meets high scholarly and ethical standards, participants were assured that any information that was obtained in connection with this study and that could be identified with them would remain confidential and would be disclosed only with the participant’s permission. Additionally, after transcribing and anonymizing the interview content (see section 3.6), the original recordings were securely stored and passcode protected.

3.5. Participants

Hard to reach populations often include transient youth and young adults, sex workers, incarcerated individuals, IV drugs users, and members from other vulnerable populations, such as the transgender community (Abrams, 2010; Levy 2013). Understandably, then, obtaining a subject pool of LGB and transgender youth was quite challenging. In total, 11 participants partook in this research project. Nine participants were Canadian and two participants were born outside of Canada (Singapore and America) but were now living in Canada. As for sexual and gender identity, two individuals identified as gay, one identified as queer, one identified as bisexual, one identified as agender and gender-fluid, and six individuals identified as transgender or gender variant.

Given the highly sensitive nature of the material being discussed, I felt it was necessary to use pseudonyms to avoid placing participants at risk. As Berg (2009) notes, *doing no harm* is the fundamental tenet of ethical social science research. Therefore, before the beginning of each interview, participants were allowed to choose their own personal pseudonyms. Additionally, to honour the participants’ voices and to ensure that their gender is properly identified in the research, each individual’s personal pronoun was retained in the analysis and the write up of the thesis results. Below, each participant’s identity related information is presented, ending with a quick overview of the general nature of the sample.

Participant 1: Alex is a 17-year-old who identifies as gay/transsexual and uses she/her/hers pronouns. Alex was involved with a community-based LGBTQ

program. Additionally, Alex is politically active in her high school, developing and implementing their first GSA program. Alex emigrated from Singapore to Canada at a young age.

Participant 2: *Charlie* is a 19-year-old who identifies as pansexual, grey-aromatic, and gender nonconforming, and prefers they/them/their pronouns. Charlie has over four years of experience attending and running a GSA program.

Participant 3: *Jordon* is a 16-year-old who identifies as a bisexual woman and uses she/her/hers pronouns. Jordon is currently an active leader in her high school GSA program.

Participant 4: *Art* is a 26-year-old who identifies as gender variant/gender neutral and prefers they/them/their pronouns. Art was active in developing the first GSA program in their high school and active in similar programs throughout university. Art is currently living in Vancouver, Canada and they are originally from Orange County, California.

Participant 5: *Lain* is a 19-year-old who identifies as a transsexual woman who is gender fluid and gender nonconforming and uses they/them/their pronouns. Although Lain had a GSA in their high school, Lain only attended this program a few times.

Participant 6: *Mary* is a 19-year-old who identifies as cisgender, queer, and uses she/her/hers pronouns. Mary has extensive experience (over 5 years) in developing and attending GSA programs throughout her high school and university career.

Participant 7: *Michael* is a 27-year-old who identifies as a cisgender gay male who uses he/him/his pronouns. Michael has extensive experience (over 5 years) in developing and attending LGBTQ safe space programs throughout high school and university. Michael preferred that his real name be used in this research study.

Participant 8: *Eric*, who also preferred that his real name be used in this research, is a 30-year-old gay male that identifies with he/him/his pronouns. In addition to his work as the National Director at PFLAG Canada, he is also a Youth Outreach Coordinator at the AIDS Committee of Durham Region. Furthermore, Eric does anti-bullying talks at various schools in the Toronto, Canada area – including talks to GSA groups.

Participant 9: *Smalls* is a 21-year-old who identifies as a transgender male. He uses the he/him/his pronouns. Although Smalls had a GSA in his high school, Smalls only attended this program a few times (estimated at fewer than six times).

Participant 10: *William* is a 19-year-old who identifies as a transgender male and prefers they/them/their or he/him/his pronouns. Although William had a GSA in his high school, William only attended this program on less than six estimated occasions.

Participant 11: *Normandy* is a 19-year-old who identifies as agender or gender neutral, which is defined as ‘without gender,’ and uses they/them/their pronouns. Although Normandy had a GSA in his high school, they only attended this program a few times (less than six).

In addition, the sample is comprised of mostly White, English speaking, middle class participants with a high school education or higher. Future research would benefit from acquiring a more representative sample comprised of non-English speaking, ethnically diverse, varying levels of social economic status, and rural populations. Having outlined some aspects of the participants’ identities, involvement with GSAs, and their work and volunteer activities, I now turn to a more detailed discussion of the analytic procedure in the research project.

3.6. Analytic Procedure

Upon conducting each interview, the recorded media files were uploaded into NVivo 10, a qualitative analytic software program, where they were transcribed using an

edited transcription style into a Word document. This method was used to retain the meaning and purpose of the interview while omitting parts of the audio file that were off topic (e.g. exchange of pleasantries). Before coding each transcript, I began by reading through each typed interview. Here, Corbin and Strauss (2015) suggest that the first read through is to “enter vicariously into the life of participants, feel what they are experiencing, and listen to what they are saying through their words” (p. 86). I found this process to be important for re-familiarizing myself with the interview itself and the context in which things were said and described.

Upon reading the interviews, I began the initial coding stage. During this process, an inductive methodological approach was used. General themes, based around the research questions, were used to categorize the data. As Corbin and Strauss (2015) term it, I began “mining” the data, a process in which the researcher “dig[s] beneath the surface to discover the hidden treasures contained within it” (p. 88). In addition to general themes, subthemes were created to offer a more in-depth understanding of the topic area. Themes and nodes that emerged through participant narratives were scrutinized by the researcher and cross-compared to the original transcript to ensure an accurate depiction of the participants’ voices.

3.7. Limitations

Like other research studies, this analysis has its limitations. To begin, Haskell (2008) articulates that the age of participants who partook in this research study are “at an age when identifying as transgender or transsexual would be especially difficult... [and] outing themselves could quite literally threaten their existence” (p. 64). This made it increasingly difficult to obtain a large participant pool. Moreover, although this research project has been ongoing for over a year and a half, my *outsider* status, coupled with the marginalization the transgender and LGB communities continue to experience from many in the heteronormative community, meant that it was increasingly challenging to fully establish myself within this community during the time frame allotted for this research project. Based on this, a sample size of 11 participants was obtained for this research.

Only one interview was conducted with each of the participants, with the exception of one participant who had a follow-up interview. Although these 11 interviews provided a comprehensive and in-depth data set, a few questions and themes emerged throughout the transcription process that could not be followed up on, thus leaving gaps in participant narratives, including extensive family background factors. In turn, this lack of information limited the ability to explore multiple factors of intersectionality specific to each participant. Additionally, issues of socially desirable responses and underreporting tend to arise when conducting qualitative research (Palys & Atchison, 2014). Arguably, however, given the in-depth information provided by each individual, it is likely that the participants felt comfortable openly sharing their experiences. Moreover, straight allies were not interviewed, thus limiting an understanding of heterosexuals' experiences in these clubs as well as these members' views and practices towards the inclusion of transgender students. Lastly, the sample is limited to primarily Caucasian, middle-class participants. To expand the breadth and understanding of trans* experiences, future research would benefit from acquiring a larger and more diverse sample size, including various ethnicities, non-English speaking, and rural populations. Despite these limitations, the following chapter presents the final themes derived from each participant's narrative and offers a discussion on the impact of GSAs as a resource for LGB and transgender students.

Chapter 4.

Findings and Discussion

Through inductive analysis of the transcribed data, four major overarching themes emerged: (1) need for safe spaces; (2) developing a GSA; (3) aspects of a safe space; and lastly, (4) membership and transgenderism within GSA groups. Additional subthemes emerged in each section and are discussed accordingly.

4.1. Need for Safe Spaces in High Schools

A stifled identity of any sort is so suffocating. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

This content area is highlighted by three subthemes, each of which had varying degrees of influence on participants' need for a LGBTQ safe space: (1) personal challenges; (2) school challenges; and (3) *doing trans**.

4.1.1. Personal Challenges

Most of us are not seeking perfection when measured against external stereotypes; rather, most of us are seeking an internal sense of comfort when measured against our own sense of ourselves. (Green, 2004, p. 90)

LGBTQ youth often experience unique stressors in their lives that are directly related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression (Downs, 2012). According to Little (2001), one tenth (10%) of youth struggle with their sexual and/or gender orientation, experiencing varying degrees of shame and emotional conflict as they come to terms with their personal identity. This notion of personal acceptance was

prevalent when discussing participants' individual struggles with their identity or sexual preference.

My biggest problem more than anything else in high school - even more than the bullies or like school itself - was myself because I kept myself purposely closeted and kept myself unaware of myself and what these feelings meant, even though I knew full well what these feelings meant. (Lain, transsexual woman/gender fluid/gender nonconforming, age 19)

This inner struggle was also articulated by Art and Charlie:

I remember talking to my friend and saying 'I wish I didn't have this damn female body and like these boobs or whatever.' (Art, gender variant, age 26)

It's weird because you feel like you were supposed to have found who you are at this point and then you realize you haven't...when I did find myself it was kind of like realizing you exist in a weird way and like your feelings are an actual real thing. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

In general, youth have begun to examine and disclose their sexual and gender orientation at an earlier age (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). As Alex recalls:

When I was a child, I always related to the female characters. I wanted to be the women being saved rather than the super hero. I would put towels on my head to pretend I had long hair and I would walk around in my mom's high-heeled shoes. (Alex, gay/transsexual, age 17)

Dwyer (2014) suggests that the "coming to terms" process can place many youth at risk of social and emotional isolation, increasing an individual's vulnerability and risk to a range of different health and mental problems (see also Ryan & Futterman, 1998), including chronic depression, substance abuse, school failure, and relationship problems (Veale et al., 2015). Many of the youth and young adults I spoke with indicated that they had struggled, or continued to struggle with, various health and/or mental health related problems.

When you feel like things hurt so bad you want to self-harm or just stop living...I had nights like that...I was very by myself. (Alex, gay/transsexual, age 17)

I was suicidal in high school and I had anxiety. I wasn't good with attendance or handing things in because my motivation was sub-zero. I wanted to do stuff but I never ended up doing it. When I tried to do stuff, depression was like 'no, you're not.' (Normandy, agender, age 19)

For Smalls and Lain, self-denial and personal uncertainties caused anxiety, often leading to various harmful coping mechanisms:

Before I admitted to myself I am trans, I was at a very low point. My coping strategies consisted of alcohol and not thinking about it. But yeah, there was no real positive coping strategies to deal with it until you just get it off your chest. Honesty is the best way to deal with it. Other than that, your coping is going to be shitty until you find a way to handle it. (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

There was one point where I completely did not want to live because I didn't understand why I was so angry with myself and I didn't like myself so much. (Lain, transsexual woman/gender fluid/gender nonconforming, age 19)

In conducting the Canadian Trans* Youth Health Survey, researchers surveyed over 923 trans* youth participants from 10 provinces and one territory and found that “nearly two-thirds reported self-harm in the past year; a similar number reported serious thoughts of suicide; and more than 1 in 3 had attempted suicide” (Veale et al., 2015, p. 2). Similarly, Grossman and D'Augelli (2007) found that a sexual minority status is a key risk factor for life-threatening behaviours. More specifically, they showed that almost half (45%) of their transgender youth sample ($n = 55$) had seriously considered taking their own life. Moreover, just over a quarter of participants had a history of life-threatening behaviour (i.e. a suicide attempt); all of which stated that at least one of these attempts was based on their transgender status.

Issues surrounding suicidality are compounded as many queer youth do not seek support because they fear rejection (Little, 2001) or lack a suitable confidante. As Veale and colleagues (2015) assert, 1 in 3 trans* youth do not have adult family members they are able to discuss problems with. As Alex expressed:

Like when I was really, really depressed I didn't really talk to anyone about it because I couldn't and I felt that people around me won't

understand. So I had to resort to, umm, leaning on myself. (Alex, gay/transsexual, age 17)

Researchers specify, however, that having supportive adults, both inside and outside the home, can greatly benefit transgender youth (Dysart-Gale, 2010). For instance, one study found that trans* youth were four times more likely to report good or excellent mental health when they had a supportive adult in their life (Veale et al., 2015). Likewise, trans* youth with a supportive adult mentor were far less likely to have considered suicide (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007). Such findings speak to the importance of prosocial adult involvement in helping to ensure healthy development among trans* youth.

“I’m Coming Out!”

In addition to developing a personal sense of self-acceptance, youth and young adults in this study expressed their fear of telling friends and family members of their gay, lesbian, or transgender identity. This reluctance to disclose is understandable as much of the research on LGBTQ communities shows the potential emotional, physical, and familial risks of parental reactions to the disclosure of an LGBTQ identity (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Downs, 2012; Stengel, 2010; Stryker, 2008; Sullivan, 2012; Taylor & Peter, 2011). For some participants, feelings of personal isolation and inadequacy were heightened based on the lack of acceptance experienced at home:

I came out to them [parents] probably when I was 18 or so...and that made it really hard for the next couple years... My mom was like, 'you are going to hell.' (Art, gender variant, age 26)

Originally, I held it back from my family. I told my sister and she was so scared of their [parents] reaction that she told me not to tell them. She said 'you can never tell them, you are going to have to move out and move away and just deal with it on your own.' So she told me that a year before I told them. But I knew I had to. (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

My mom had to sleep it off. But afterwards she has mostly come to terms with it with regard to accepting that this is something I need to do [referring to a gender re-assignment surgery]. But she has not come to terms with me dressing the way I want to. So I try to keep signs that I am transgender to a minimum for now until she is able to cope with it. (Lain, transsexual woman/gender fluid/gender nonconforming, age 19)

For Alex, disclosing her gay/transsexual identity to her parents still remains a challenge to be faced.

I have a very traditional family...there was one time I asked my mom what she would do or how would you feel if your child is gay or lesbian. She said she is fine that people are like that but she would not want her kids to be like that. So yeah, it has been tough for me when I think about my family in the future. I don't know how I am going to deal with them. (Alex, gay/transsexual, age 17)

To my knowledge, limited research has specifically examined the transgender experience of *coming out* to family members and loved ones. Unique to transgenderism is the option of sexual reassignment surgery, which may physically alter one's appearance. Arguably, such physical alterations may elicit stronger responses of exclusion, isolation, and verbal or physical abuse from parents and guardians. LGB researchers indicate that youth who experience intolerance from their family are often kicked out of their home or leave to avoid verbal, physical, and sexual abuse (Dwyer, 2014; Veale et al., 2015). Little (2001) further contends that approximately half of street-entrenched youth struggle with sexual orientation issues. Once on the street, youth are often left without the necessary skills and resources to cope (Shelby, 1998).

They see you as dressing up every day or in a costume every day. Like, we are real people. My personality is authentic. I understand what I am supposed to be and when people invalidate that I find it really hard. (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

In this sense, transgender youth "must balance the relative safety and isolation of remaining in the closet with the risk that they will be met with a negative response if they come out" (Schneider & Travers, 1997, p. 51). Not all participants, however, had negative 'coming out' stories despite indicating their original nervousness before they told family, friends, and/or love ones. Reflecting on this, Mary reveals that:

It took a lot to say what I needed to say. It took me about ten minutes because I was crying and I couldn't get the words out. But it finally came. Umm, my mom was really upset. She was crying and I wasn't really sure why at first. But she told me that 'it doesn't matter who you are or how you identify, I just don't want life to be hard for you.' So it relieved me due to the fact she wasn't upset that I came out...My dad and stepmom were very accepting as well. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

Similarly, Smalls recounts:

I remember calling my best friend at the time saying I was about to tell my parents so you might need to come pick me up in about 10 minutes because I might be homeless...[when I told my parents I was transgender] my dad just started balling, like he just started crying. So that was really hard. But my parents were understanding and I didn't end up getting kicked out. They said "we obviously love you for who you are, we are not going to kick you out." (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

For Michael, acceptance from his mother was a slow but eventually successful process.

He states:

I told my brother and sisters on Christmas Eve one year and my oldest brother was like 'fuck, about time.' My sisters asked if I was going to tell my mom and I said probably not. My mom was like the head of a religious group. When I told my mom, there was the typical lots of crying...however, over time it became a very positive coming out experience. (Michael, gay, age 27)

Lain expressed the benefit of having their stepfather as a supporter when they came out as transgender:

...as for my stepdad, he has always been a very open person so he really hasn't had any issue at all and defends me in terms of being able to identify how I want. (Lain, transsexual woman/gender fluid/gender nonconforming, age 19)

Generally speaking, most participants indicated the importance of positive family and friends and the personal benefits of acceptance. Such findings are consistent with Grossman and D'Augelli (2007), who find that trans* youth who lack parental or family support are most vulnerable to engaging in life-threatening behaviours. Youth who find support and acceptance in their family or peer group are less likely to consider suicide or self-harming behaviour (see also Proctor & Groze, 1994; Veale et al., 2015). In this study, understanding was often a precursor to acceptance. Articulating this notion, Smalls states:

...So to help them [his parents] understand it, I started sending them videos and links about children who are transgender. And they were like, 'oh my god, this was you as a child. You always wanted to play

with trucks and shit.’ So they started to understand it but it took them a very long time to become comfortable with it...But they are great about it now...It is always weird when people are just getting to know what [transgenderism] is. Like the unknown is the biggest fear. (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

Here, the focus is not only on providing adequate support for transgender youth and young adults, but also on providing accessible outreach and support programs for their families. Although more research in this area is needed, gaining a stronger understanding of transgenderism and equipping parents and guardians with effective support techniques could create a safer home environment for trans* youth while providing necessary support for parents and guardians. In addition to the challenges of ‘coming out’ and self-acceptance, youth and young adults in this study also describe the fear of peer rejection and homophobia/transphobia in the high school setting as influencing their decision to be openly “out” or to conceal their sexual orientation and gender expression.

4.1.2. School Challenges

Inadequacy, isolation, and marginalization were reflected in many of the participants’ narratives regarding their high school experience. As Little (2001) contends, education systems have made tremendous strides in “accommodating for individuals with physical challenges, and increasingly, cognitive and emotional challenges” (p. 100). More recently, increased efforts by Canadian school boards have focused on providing adequate support for youth struggling with challenges surrounding gender identity and sexual orientation (Craig, Doiron, & Dilon, 2015; Taylor & Peter, 2011).

Despite these efforts, one of the major challenges LGBTQ youth continually contend with in the school setting is bullying (Greene, Britton, & Fitts, 2014). Smith and Sharp (1994) define school bullying as a “systematic abuse of power” (p. 2) consisting of taunting, harassment, physical aggression, and ridicule (Greene et al., 2014). Walton (2015) suggests that bullying predominantly stems from “social difference on any number of grounds, including race, gender expression, real or perceived sexuality, class, physical ability, mental ability, physical attractiveness, body size and shape, social

competence, and so on” (p. 21). In discussing school safety and the importance of addressing issues of bullying, Charlie insists:

We definitely need to work on making the entire school as safe as possible and obviously administration can have a big part in that ...You don't see kids questioning elevators for students with a wheelchair or walking impairments. You don't question people sitting in the front of the class because they can't see. You don't question integrated classes anymore. I hope eventually schools will become like that [for LGB and trans students]. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

In drawing attention to the prevalence of homophobic and transphobic bullying in high school, Haskell and Burtch (2010) report that approximately one-quarter of young people experience some level of physical violence due to their sexual or perceived sexual orientation or gender expression. The researchers also find that victimization usually involves interactions that fall short of physical violence, often taking the form of taunting or shunning, creating an exclusionary environment for individuals who fall outside the confines of heteronormativity. When discussing physical victimization, most participants in the current study stated that they had been fortunate enough to avoid this form of bullying. The few participants who had been physically victimized recounted being hit with fists or having objects thrown at them. For example, Smalls, a transgender male, recounted a smoothie drink being thrown at him as he walked through the school hallway:

I only had a couple of bad experiences, like when people walked down the hallway and yelled out shit. There was one point where a kid walked by and threw a smoothie at me. So that was probably the worst thing that ever happened to me. (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

Taking a more physical approach to dealing with transphobia, William described his experience in high school of fighting back against another student:

...especially after I fought that guy. They left me alone after that. Because there was like a big group of dudes and they smacked me in the butt and I turned around and punched one in the face. (William, transgender male, age 19)

Programs in British Columbia high schools, such as ERASE (Expect Respect, and A Safe Education), have sought to address bullying by providing anti-bullying resources for teachers, parents, and students. Although these anti-bullying programs have begun to create positive changes in certain school environments, students, with an emphasis on those of a sexual minority status, are continuing to face more inconspicuous forms of bullying (Stotzer, 2009). Participants in this study suggested that more subtle, yet pervasive forms of transphobia and homophobia took place in their high school setting, including name calling, exclusion, and avoidance.

Bullying is not nearly as obvious as people take it to be. Continually misgendering someone and knowing what you are doing is a form a bullying...this can be hugely traumatizing to a trans kid. It can cause panic attacks, trigger depression. Trans youth have some of the highest suicide rates out of anybody. And having a healthy school environment can change that a lot. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

The increase in subtle forms of bullying supports Jeong and Lee's (2013) notion that anti-bullying prevention programs may increase bullying, stipulating that bullies adapt their behaviour based on what they learn in these programs (see also Walton, 2015). Even in "fun," persistent patterns of unwelcome behaviour, such as name calling, can lead to lasting negative effects on someone. For example, in reflecting on his grade school experiences, Alex states:

People would call me gay and they would call me tranny. Now at the time people were joking calling me that, but it was a form of bullying...I haven't forgotten any stuff like that. (Alex, gay/transsexual, age 17)

The Canadian Trans Youth Survey identified relatively safe and unsafe locations for trans* youth in schools. Libraries and classrooms were reported as the safest spaces, while washrooms and change rooms were the least safe areas (Veale et al., 2015, p. 57-58). In this study, participants reported that being behind closed doors or away from listening teachers often presented opportunities for homophobic or transphobic bullying or harassment of LGBTQ classmates. Bathrooms, locker rooms, and corners of the classroom were noted as high-risk areas for verbal victimization.

You had a lot of girls that would go in [to the bathroom] and get bullied for the way they dressed, a lot of those girls were bi or tomboyish and would get bullied all the time in the bathroom. (Art, gender variant, age 26)

Talking about their experience in the change room during gym class, Normandy indicated feelings of isolation brought on by fellow students:

Once people find out you are a lesbian, they give you the biggest space ever; like I had a whole bench to myself. Or they do not talk to you while they are changing or they will go into the bathrooms to change. Everyone seems to care a lot about it. (Normandy, agender, age 19)

William also expressed experiencing exclusion in gym class based on his trans* identity:

In grade 12 they use to have guys on one side and girls on the other. And I would go stand on the guys' side until they would move me. Like physically move me. They [male students] would usually say 'you can't be a real man because you do not have a penis.' (William, transgender male, age 19)

From a transgender theory perspective, many, if not all, transgender individuals face the challenge of redefining the fixed binary conception of gender identity and roles. In a school setting, gym class often revolves around the cultural-historical context and biological premises of gender, making it especially difficult for youth who do not conform to these traditional roles. In the classroom setting, Mary recalls how a fellow student took advantage of the loud group work activity to express her distain towards Mary's queer identity:

In class one time this girl stood up and told me I should go to hell because of how I identify...Our desks were all together in groups. It was like a work on your own type thing. But the class was fairly loud so I don't think the teacher heard and I didn't take it upon myself to go tell her (the teacher) and no one else really did anything. But I did realize that everyone around me ignored the fact she had said it. But I just kind of laughed it off and made it not a big deal, but...I don't know. What do you say, right? (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

Subtle forms of victimization and harassment can have detrimental effects on LGB youth, such as lowering their school performance and increasing truancy, suicidality, and

dropout rates (Coyote, 2013; Downs, 2013; Lee 2002; Worthen, 2014). Most at risk, however, are transgender youth, who report even higher levels of victimization than LGB individuals (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). Ryan and Futterman (1998) add that “gay youth who witness pervasive anti-gay abuse in schools and community settings [come to] the realization that this could happen to them, fear of discovery increases anxiety, thus reinforcing the sense of devaluation” (p.24). Arguably, the same can be said for trans* youth or others who do not adhere to heteronormativity and mainstream gender expressions.

I think because we [LGBTQ students] hear a lot of negative stories of people coming out in high school...I didn't come out based on fear. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

This notion of anticipated trauma was expressed by Smalls and Charlie:

There was only one other transgender student in the school that I knew about. But everyone was like 'oh man, he is a freak' so I was like 'well I am not transgender, that's weird.' (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

Luckily, I have not been physically harassed 'cause that is scary. But that is a real life thing and that was one of the real reasons I waited until grade 12 to come out as non-binary in high school because everyone knew me and they all knew where my locker was and where my classes are...So if anyone was going to have a problem with it, they were going to know where I was all the time. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, 19)

Similar to finding family acceptance, LGBTQ youth must find a balance between the feelings of isolation based on a closeted status or being at risk of potential homophobic or transphobic harassment if they come out - or are perceived as – anything other than heteronormative. Participants noted that they struggled with determining whether or not to be openly trans*, gay, lesbian, or bisexual in school. Mary explains that approaches such as the 'It Gets Better' campaign may not be entirely positive:

The advice that you always hear in high school that adults give to younger students is just wait until you are on your own. 'Cause then if something bad happens, you'll be able to support yourself. So, really, I do understand that narrative but it is kind of a terrible thing to tell a kid because it is the assumption that you will not be accepted right off the bat. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

Arguably, the 'It Gets Better' campaign has great value through countless expressions of encouragement and examples of people establishing rich lives after leaving school. One drawback to this approach is that it might focus too heavily on the future, offering little immediate support for youth struggling with their gender identity or sexual orientation. It is important that ongoing issues of bullying in schools are addressed in the here and now so that queer youth are not left vulnerable to repeated victimization. Recently, however, the 'Make it Better' program complements the 'It Gets Better' project, providing LGBTQ youth and their allies with immediate tools and resources to make their schools safer. As Stengel (2010) notes, the inability to express one's personal identity can lead to discomfort and pain, impeding learning and individual growth. This central theme emerged when discussing the 'coming to terms' process with participants. Lain states:

I had great grades in high school but not as good grades in university just because of the extra part that takes extra time away from my school life because I basically have to do another course worth of work on a regular basis because there is a lot of research you need to know in order to survive. Like right now I am reading a book called '*Trans Bodies, Trans Selves*' and that is a textbook-size book. Although it is a good resource because it is very detailed and very specific on a lot of things, it is a lot more complicated than a women's studies textbook that I have to read. But that is something I am reading through because I believe that it is something I need to be completely aware of and understand what I am going into. I need to know the fact that although Vancouver is not as transphobic as other places in the world, it is something I need to be fully aware of and what I am getting myself into. (Lain, transsexual woman/gender fluid/gender nonconforming, age 19)

Similarly, Alex notes:

I was shy and wasn't able to do stuff. I think I wasted those three years [time spent coming to terms with her gender/sexual identity]. Because a lot of people start planning their university careers when starting high school, but I totally didn't even think about that because I was so wallowing in self-pity [laughs]. (Alex, gay/transsexual, age 17)

For teachers and administrators, detecting and addressing subtle forms of homophobia and transphobia can be challenging and, at times, simply overlooked. Haskell and Burtch (2010) report that subtle forms of homophobic and transphobic

bullying (HTB) that occurred in school were often 'ignored' or dealt with less seriously by teachers and administration. They attribute this to the emphasis by school administrators on physical harassment, which often leads to overlooking or trivializing less tangible forms of homophobia or transphobia. Emphasizing the need to address subtle forms of HTB, Mary expressed:

I remember once I was sitting in class and we had announcements over the P.A. system and they were advertising the gay-straight alliance and a whole bunch of people in the class started laughing at it. They thought that it was funny...I looked at the teacher and he just sat there and didn't really say anything. I think that happens a lot. The teachers are more bystanders. Not necessarily that they are homophobic or anything, I feel like they just don't know how to deal with the situation. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

Unease among heterosexual teachers to address issues of homophobic and transphobic bullying has also left LGBTQ youth vulnerable to victimization (Walton, 2004). In an online study of 3,450 U.S. students (ages 13-18), over three-quarters of participants said that homophobic remarks occurred at least sometimes in the presence of a teacher, and, of these incidents, many students reported that teachers failed to intervene (Harris Interactive & the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2005). In keeping with this survey and other contemporary reports on homophobia and transphobia in schools (e.g. Taylor and Peter, 2011), participants in this study indicated that the heteronormative school culture was further amplified by the refusal or inability of faculty, staff, and administrators to confront homophobic and transphobic comments made in the classroom or school setting.

People get their asses slapped in the hallways and get called terrible names by other people. And nobody cares because half the time you are upset about it you'd get in trouble because you were distracted in class or you were disrupting the class. But people don't get in trouble for that shit because they say they are just young! But if you don't tell them it is wrong when they are young then they are going to grow up and be jerk-hole adults who think that saying shit is fine. So people are perpetuating it. (Normandy, agender, age 19)

As Charlie points out:

Whether or not we want to say it, we do look up to teachers at certain points...If a teacher has a safe space pinned on their board and said

nothing when someone makes a rape joke or when somebody uses the T-slur, then that's not doing anything and it's obviously not a safe space. It's just ally abuse. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

Responsiveness towards homophobic or transphobic harassment is oftentimes the determining factor in condoning or disallowing said behaviour. Thus, teachers and administration must be diligent in identifying and addressing all forms of homophobia and transphobia. However, echoing the words of Taylor and Peter (2011), "even if teachers were to intervene whenever they saw harassment occur, a great deal of abuse would continue unchecked" (p. 295). Due to this, teachers and staff must develop cooperative learning techniques that facilitate prosocial values in the school community as means of minimizing homophobic and transphobic bullying.

As discussed previously, the heteronormative climate can contribute to feelings of self-hatred and may intensify internalized homophobia and transphobia (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). In addition to teachers' and administrators' inability or refusal to adequately respond to homophobia and transphobia in a school setting, some report that up to one quarter of harassers are faculty, staff, and administrators (Kosciw et al., 2009; Peters, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1994).

I know my chemistry teacher was very open about her homophobia, saying that homosexuality is not a topic for the classroom and if this is something you've come upon you should talk to your parents and you need to seek real help because something is wrong there. (Art, gender variant, age 26)

Comparable findings were also reported by Birkett and associates (2009), who highlight that LGB youth, at times, can be victims of harassment by teachers and staff. Other researchers corroborate these findings by stipulating that trans* youth report being mocked or called names by teachers (Grossman et al., 2009), or having sexually harassing comments and gestures directed at them by teachers (Grossman and D'Augelli, 2006; McGuire et al., 2010). Summarizing this issue, Charlie stated:

In school, teachers are bullies, bullies are bullies...No teacher should shame a kid or disrespect a kid for identifying themselves in one way or another...I feel like teachers' actions need to be held accountable and we need to make sure people are not just sweeping it under the rug because it is important. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

What most youth and young adults in this study called for was a shift in the school environment, one that places more emphasis on safety and respect.

I think a lot of teachers going through the system aren't really getting a lot of training, specifically with trans issues. They are getting a lot of 'how to deal with queer students' but not on trans issues and what that's like. If you are not trans you have no idea what a trans person goes through. As educators, I think they need to be supportive of LGBTQ programs and educate themselves on these issues. (Michael, gay, age 27)

Acceptance needs to be talked about. Acceptance is a good thing. So promote that. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

Schools need to be a nurturing environment...If teachers are not going to uphold that, the other students definitely are not. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19).

Greytak, Kosciw, and Fischer (2007) find that teachers who acquire an understanding that LGBT youth oftentimes do not feel safe at their school are more likely to address homophobic language. In this sense, raising efforts to increase awareness of LGBT issues may help provide a safer school environment through heightened teacher empathy and, ultimately, intervention.

Although each participant faced challenges pertaining to the silence of certain teachers and administrators when it came to addressing homophobia and transphobia in the school setting, some participants credited teachers for their positive impact in addressing discriminatory acts.

The French Immersion teachers at my school would do this thing where they would put rainbow pride flags on their doors. It seems like not that big of a deal, but for people who identify with that symbol it made a difference because we knew that space was an inclusive space which was nice. So I felt that, although it was only five teachers out of the school, it was nice to have that support. I had one English teacher during my grade 12 year state a list of rules on the first day of class which stated that he would not tolerate any homophobia or transphobia and not sexism or racism which I thought was really cool. So he implied that if he hears anything of this nature then you would get in trouble. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

Teachers who informed students that hate speech would not be tolerated in the classroom were often acknowledged and held in high regard by participants. Michael

recalled a fellow student using a homophobic slur during a class group exercise. Knowing that there were other LGBTQ students in his class, he felt it necessary to bring it to the teacher's attention:

I remember bringing it up to the faculty member and saying 'I just wanted you to know, I don't really have a problem with it, but I think some other folks in class might have a problem with it.' We ended up having a two part series on language that she suspended class for. So she took it on and did it and it was awesome...Language is really important and it's so important we are addressing it.

Other participants discussed similar scenarios, highlighting the importance of teachers' involvement in addressing homophobia and transphobia in the classroom and school hallways.

I had an English teacher that said you can't discriminate sex/age/race and then they added sexuality...The one English teacher even made it a point to make it a class discussion and I thought that was really great. (Art, gender variant, age 26)

I know that there are quite a few teachers at my school who call out 'oh, that's so gay' and said 'hey, that is not acceptable.' So my teachers have done a really good job. I have seen the level of 'that's so gay' go from medium to quite low actually. (Jordon, bisexual, age 16)

Teachers had little signs that said 'no homophobic slurs.' Whether or not the teachers did anything about it was up to the teacher. [Name deleted] teacher was awesome. She would call kids out. She was rad. (Normandy, agender, age 19)

Kosciw and colleagues (2009) point out that the sheer overuse of homophobic slurs, such as 'that is so gay,' by students might be overwhelming for teachers and, at times, seemingly unmanageable to deal with on a regular basis. Demonstrated in this study, however, is the positive impact single teachers can make when they take initiative to address HTB. Moreover, by addressing subtle forms of homophobia and transphobia, such as name-calling, teachers can have a positive impact on the school environment while offering assistance to youth dealing with bullying and harassment. As mentioned, positive adult support can greatly improve the mental health of transgender students while reducing the likelihood of attempting and/or considering suicide (Dwyer, 2014; Veale et al., 2015).

Despite the positive strides forward occurring in schools across Canada and the United States, youth who self-identify as transgender are still at a high likelihood of encountering homophobia and transphobia in their school setting (Birkett et al., 2009; Haskell & Burtch, 2010; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz & Russell, 2011; Valenti & Campbell, 2009). As Stryker (2008) suggests, although “transgender issues are now clearly at the cutting edge of the social justice agenda...much work remains to be done” (p. 153).

4.1.3. Doing Trans*

The sociological understanding of an individual’s gender and how it is expressed is often attributed to their social, rather than biological, processes (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Thus, *doing gender* (West & Zimmerman, 1987) “involves managing social situations in such a way that one’s behaviour and display are regarded as gender appropriate or inappropriate” (Westbrook & Schilt, 2014, p. 33). In the past, the notion of doing gender has often been discussed by scholars as it pertains to transgenderism. Arguably, however, more attention must focus on how transgenderism is accomplished, and who is accepted or unaccepted under the transgender umbrella. In hopes of starting this discussion, the last subtheme to emerge when assessing the need for a safe space in a high school setting is the notion of *doing trans**.

To effectively understand the conceptualization of doing trans, it is first important to note what West and Fenstermaker (1995) termed ‘doing difference.’ In expanding our ethnomethodological perspective of how gender, race, and class operate simultaneously with one another, West and Fenstermaker present the notion of “difference” as an “ongoing interactional accomplishment” (p. 8). In this sense, *difference* is conceptualized as a social doing, which, as West and Zimmerman (2009) explain, can reproduce social hierarchy and inequality (p. 114). Doing difference, then, is defined as the process in which members of society create distinctions among themselves – “as incumbents of different sex categories, different race categories, and different class categories” (West and Zimmerman, 2009, p. 114). Arguably, this notion of *doing difference* can also be applied to individuals who identify themselves as transgender.

To expand on this, participants in this research study indicated that the marginalization experienced by trans* youth is compounded when individuals who identify as trans* do not neatly fit within their “normative” transgender alignment. Articulating this notion, Charlie, who identifies as non-binary and non-transitioning, indicates:

Being non-binary, you get shit from straight people, cis people, and trans people depending on the group you are with. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

In discussing the challenges faced when disclosing their identity, participants expressed that certain groups of individuals who identify as transgender believe that there are certain requirements ascribed when identifying as transgender, such as wanting to transition medically, taking hormones, and experiencing dysphoria in certain ways and forms.

So, it's like you're too queer for us from the straight people but you're not trans enough from the trans people. And it gets really weird...I was made to feel very afraid of coming out. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

Some people believe that you cannot be trans until you start taking hormones and you start getting surgeries and stuff. Like I can't pay \$400 bucks a week to get an injection in my butt, let's be real! (William, transgender male, age 19)

Through this creation of distinction among themselves the notion of doing difference comes to fruition. As West and Zimmerman (2009) explain, “once the distinctions have been created, they are used to affirm different category incumbents” (p. 114). Arguably, the social construction of categories, such as straight, gay, or transgender, can exert power over individuals, “especially for those who do not fit neatly within their normative alignments” (Valocchi, 2005, p. 753). In this sense, not only are transgender participants experiencing marginalization from heteronormative society, but seemingly, those who fail to ‘do trans*’ correctly may also experience isolation and marginalization in the trans* community when their identities do not neatly fit within a “normative” transgender alignment. The intersectionality of multiple oppressive variables impacting transgender youth demonstrates why trans* individuals are among the most vulnerable for victimization and suicidality. Due to this, inclusive safe spaces for LGBTQ

students in high schools are not only urgent, but understood to be necessary (Lee, 2002).

4.2. Developing a GSA Group

I felt there was also a sense of belonging, like I wasn't an outcast anymore. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

The past quarter century has given rise to a richer body of research and more social support with respect to the LGBTQ communities. Even so, individuals in the education system, particularly in a high school setting, continue to experience homophobic and transphobic bullying (Haskell & Burtch, 2010). The creation and implementation of LGBTQ safe spaces, such as GSA programs, have been included in efforts to counteract these issues. During the interview process, participants were asked to speak about the process of developing a GSA, and factors that contribute to the composition of these groups.

Historically, GSA programs were developed by adult counsellors and teachers who wanted to implement a supportive, in-school group for LGBT students (Russell et al., 2009). Over the past 15 years, however, less adult involvement has led to more students implementing GSAs in their high schools, with an estimated 4000 GSAs currently implemented in the United States (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 2008). Although in recent years there has been a growing acceptance of allowing students to implement LGBTQ-friendly spaces in public high schools, it was necessary to investigate whether participants who implemented GSA groups at their school ran into any preventative hurdles. Unsurprisingly, older participants, when reflecting on their high school experiences, indicated that implementing a GSA in their school was challenging. As Art articulates, GSA groups were not well known at the time, and administration and teachers were very reluctant to get involved.

The area was super right wing conservative in any way you can imagine. So our high school was the only one that had a gay-straight alliance group. And with any extracurricular group you had to get an advisor and that was the hardest part. A friend of mine and me went around and asked a bunch of teachers but we couldn't get any teacher

to agree 'cause they all just felt the concept was unnecessary. (Art, gender variant, age 26)

Art believed that subtle barriers increased the difficulty of sustaining the club for future incoming students.

When I was in high school it was trimesters. So, for *normal* clubs, you'd be ok for the full year. But we had to keep renewing it [GSA] every trimester. Some trimesters the teacher would be like 'no, I don't have time' or 'I don't want to waste my lunch on this' and things like that. (Art, gender variant, age 26)

For Art, it was a constant struggle to ensure that LGBTQ students at their school had a safe, supportive space. Generally, however, current and recently graduated high school participants saw little to no resistance with regard to having a GSA in their school. In fact, many of the younger individuals stated that the administration was happy to implement such a program in the school.

It was actually pretty smooth 'cause all we had to do was talk to the administrator lady and she told us all we had to do – like she was on board with the idea and was ok with us starting it...The teachers were fine with it and they were really supportive. (Alex, gay/transsexual, age 17)

Similarly, when Jordon was asked if she experienced any barriers when implementing a GSA program, she responded:

Not really. The only thing was that [the administration felt] the name wasn't inclusive enough. But our sponsor teacher talked to them and showed them how it is inclusive and we got that space, so nothing really. (Jordon, bisexual, age 16)

Such findings reflect a positive change occurring in Canadian high schools. Seemingly, teachers and administration have become increasingly more open to the development of GSA groups in the high school setting. It is noted, however, that most participants came from urban high schools in the greater Vancouver area. Both the school and surrounding demographics can play a major role in the 'ease' of developing a GSA. Therefore, more research is needed with respect to small-town, rural areas and the challenges of developing LGBTQ safe spaces in these settings. As Art articulated:

The demographic area plays a huge role in how people react to issues around the GSA. (Art, gender variant, age 26)

4.3. Aspects of a Safe Space

It's for people like Leelah Alcorn...this is the reason why we have these clubs. To tell people they are not alone and to support them. (Alex, gay/transsexual, age 17)

Leelah Alcorn was an American 17-year-old male-to-female transgender high school student who, on December 28, 2014, ended her life. Before her death, Alcorn uploaded a suicide letter to a social media website explaining her anguish and mistreatment based on how she identified (Jennings, 2015). An excerpt from her suicide letter reads:

...The only way I will rest in peace is if one day transgender people aren't treated the way I was, they're treated like humans, with valid feelings and human rights. Gender needs to be taught about in schools, the earlier the better. My death needs to mean something. (as cited in Jennings, 2015, p. 343)

In the wake of her death, Alcorn became an international symbol of the continual struggle faced by many transgender youth. For Alex, Alcorn's story was reminiscent of her own ongoing challenges and isolation experienced as a transsexual/gay individual. This became Alex's motivation in developing a GSA. The next major topic discussed with participants was aspects and activities that were unique to the GSA club in hopes of obtaining a more expansive understanding of the beneficial breadth of these programs.

In examining GSA groups, Russell and colleagues (2009) suggest that these organizations can take on several roles and purposes, such as counselling or support-groups, and educational arenas that inspire activist activities. Similarly, when discussing the various dimensions of a GSA group, counselling and activism became two subthemes when discussing the benefits of GSAs.

4.3.1. Counselling and Support

Fetner and colleagues (2012) suggest that “one of the main purposes of gay-straight alliances is to provide support to LGBTQ students in difficult times” (p. 189). Although some researchers suggest that the impact of GSAs on creating LGBTQ friendly school environments is still unclear (see Mayberry et al., 2011), others suggest that GSAs can empower its members, along with a sense of safety, support, community, and acceptance (Toomey et al., 2011). In discussing *counselling and support* with participants, mixed reviews were offered. Some participants suggested that the GSA offered a safe space and gave members a sense of community. As Mary contends:

I felt like that group gave me a sense of purpose in the school...And it gave me something to look forward to. (Mary, cisgender/queer, 19)

For Smalls, his enjoyment came from witnessing the supportive environment that was offered to GSA members.

What I felt was a great thing was when I saw other people opening up and they were able to talk about it and not be judged or anything. It was definitely a safe space. (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

The supportive nature of the GSA was also felt outside the confines of the classroom meeting space. For Charlie, having a GSA in their school permitted them to ‘test the waters’ of the administration and student body as it pertains to queer acceptance. As Charlie explains:

I felt a lot safer within myself and then also within the school because I knew that, well I suspected that, there were allies and other queer folk at my school, but once we started and talking to the school about the QSA [Queer-Straight Alliance] I knew that there was nobody blatantly against it. Like no one is going to come after us with pitchforks because we were really queer. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

Conceivably, in a heteronormative school environment, GSA clubs can help to break down ‘walls,’ even if they are just perceived walls, providing members and students with a foundation of support. Moreover, as Eric articulates, GSA groups can offer its members strength in numbers:

Say I am an individual who is getting bullied based on my sexual/gender identity – however, I decide to stand up to the bully, well I'd stand alone a lot of times. But if you are part of a larger group, which is the purpose of a GSA – which is its strength in unison – you are no longer by yourself. If you are being bullied by Jon at your school, you can go to your GSA and say 'listen, Jon is bullying me' and all of a sudden you not only have all the other gay kids defending you but you also have straight people saying 'what he is doing is not cool.' And eventually, that negative behaviour, I believe, will stop. (Eric, gay, age 30)

As noted, oftentimes these alliance groups are “student-run social clubs akin to other high-school social groups” (Fetner et al., 2012, p. 189). Participants indicated that upon developing a GSA group, student leaders were often left to their own devices to organize, run, and plan group meeting sessions and activities.

I started running it [the GSA] by myself. The first time/day we sat down I had spent the entire night googling lists of all the identities I could possibly find and the definitions. And we spent the entire lunch hour going 'ok, so this is what trans means, this is what the definitions of butch and fem are, this is intersex' and all this stuff. And we just covered everything. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

Using a semi-structured teamwork approach, Jordon recalls organizing and preparing weekly meetings for her GSA:

We usually just prepared everything ourselves. Basically, we would just be like 'oh, I really want to talk about this next week' and then the other person would say 'ok, I have some stuff I want to say on that' or would say 'great, can you figure some stuff out about that cause I'm busy.' (Jordon, bisexual, age 16)

Mary notes that she was often up late, researching topics and acquiring resources that could be used in the GSA. In reflection, Mary wishes the school board had taken a more active role in supporting GSA leaders.

Looking back on it now...like going to university and going out in the world, I wish I had known more to facilitate that conversation. Most of the stuff we talked about in the GSA was based on our own research and our own time. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

With respect to counselling, some participants felt that the GSA group was ineffective at providing adequate services to its members. Understandably, student GSA leaders might not have the appropriate training required to deal with the diverse issues and topics that arise in such programs, impacting the club's ability to be effective as a "potential haven in a hostile world" (Fetner, 2012, p. 189; see also Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Toomey et al., 2011).

The other major issue is the fact that it [the GSA] was not run by the school, it was run by students. To me, that is great that students want to be a part of it but it seems kind of silly that schools are allowing students to setup these groups without the proper professional support needed for places like that. It ends up having a lot of varying emotional problems. I have friends that were in that group [GSA] in high school and the fact that it was student run meant that when they felt really emotional at times, they ended up having to go to other students for emotional support which can vary because some people aren't able to give that type of emotional support like other people can. So I feel that if these groups are being created in high schools they also need professional help on hand so when these emotional events occur, especially these more suicidal ones and greater issues like that, they are able to have the professionalism able to help people walk through these issues. (Lain, transsexual woman/gender fluid/gender nonconforming, age 19)

Similarly, Smalls states:

It was kind of nice at first because you meet all these other people and you know that there are other people out there with you. But I found it wasn't very well organized and it was run by students. There wasn't really a teacher figure that was dominant. It was housed in a teacher's room who was very pro LGBTQ. But it was run by the students so it was kind of boring and kind of unorganized at times. So I only went about 3 or 4 times and then dropped out after that. (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

The lack of resources and training left some GSA leaders at a disadvantage with regard to providing adequate support for their members. As Mary demonstrates:

A lot was focused on how to deal with bullying. I felt it was difficult because it was almost like a therapy session and I felt like our teacher sponsor and I didn't help in the way we wanted to help just because we didn't know what to do. So that was a challenge with it. Lots of kids came in because they were getting bullied and yeah, I wish that there had been more resources that we knew about to help people. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

Participants also noted that school administration, along with school counselling services, seemed to be absent in their involvement with these programs.

I have never had my high school counsellors be that supportive. They are just kind of there. They are there to change your courses and say 'oh hey, we are here if you want to come talk to us.' But they never have gone into classrooms or anything and been like 'we are here to talk.' (Alex, gay/transsexual, age 17)

For many high schools, providing resources and funding to GSAs is simply not a priority. In turn, the survival of the club rests on the leadership and the degree of membership involvement.

It was only students helping students. I know we had counsellors, but our school didn't have a huge budget. Most of the money in the school district went to a school that funded a lot more sports...So I think that all the counsellors in our school doubled as academic counsellors and psychological counsellors and they just didn't have the time or the capacity. (Art, gender variant, age 26)

Without the necessary funding and support from the school board and administration, GSA youth leaders are faced with the challenge of educating and supporting other youth members. Furthermore, the possibility of a having a teacher, or even a trained counsellor, attend these groups is often left to chance. In turn, the extent to which these groups can prevent LGBTQ teen suicide, eliminate bullying, and improve LGBTQ dropout rates is heavily weighted on student leadership. As Eric articulates:

I think a weakness in the GSAs is the [lack of] support the school boards or certain schools give them. GSAs are only as supportive as the funding they get and the willingness of the teachers. The administration needs to stand behind them fully instead of presenting it as a poster program - 'we are very supportive of LGBTQ students, look we have a GSA.' That is not enough. (Eric, gay, age 30)

4.3.2. Education and Activism

The second aspect Russell and colleagues (2009) articulate when examining GSAs functionality is its ability to be an arena for *education and activism*. By developing and attending these programs, "GSA leaders have the potential for individual and collective empowerment as agents of social change at school" (Russell et al., 2009, p.

891). Moreover, sociologists have credited safe spaces with developing counterhegemonic ideologies, producing radical identities, and serving as a springboard in training movement leaders (Fetner et al., 2012, p. 189). In this sense, GSAs are unique “not only because they challenge cultural and institutional heterosexism and sexism, but also because as organizations they typically are led by youth rather than by adults” (Russell et al., 2009, p. 892). Advocating for student GSA leaders, Charlie states:

I definitely think that the youth themselves can be underestimated... honestly, if the kids make a shit then the teachers will have to listen to them. And I find youth to be the best at building communities with other youth and the best at fostering good relationships surrounding this type of stuff [LGBTQ Issues]. People underestimate how much youth can have empathy for each other. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

In discussing GSA effects on student mobilization and activism, individuals who were involved in implementing GSA programs in their schools suggested that they found a sense of confidence not only in their LGBTQ status, but also as an activist and leader.

Yeah, I definitely grew up a lot going through it. In grade 9 I was very, very shy. But like tackling this and having to present yourself and go out there and talk to other people, I learned that if I was going to help other people I had to be confident in myself. If I come across as nervous that won't be good because as a role model you need to appear confident, so through that I felt that I grew. I don't think I would have been able to do that if I didn't take part in starting that club. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

Like Mary, Michael felt that his leadership role gave him a newfound confidence and a platform to voice LGBTQ issues and promote equality.

I think being a part of the queer-straight alliance, which is the safe space committee here, it allowed me to own who I was and stand up for issues that I saw. (Michael, gay, age 27)

Although the long-term effects of GSA membership are still uncertain (Mayberry et al., 2011), Jordon felt that as a GSA leader she was learning valuable skills that would benefit her when entering the workplace or continuing in LGBTQ activism.

There is definitely a lot of leadership skills involved in running a GSA as well as activist skills such as knowing what to say, how far to push

it, knowing what not to say and when to really stand your ground and knowing when to fluctuate and pass on things...You gain an understanding of different issues and you're able to branch off and deal with other issues as you get older because you have these skills. (Jordon, bisexual, age 16)

With regard to counteracting homophobia and transphobia in the high school setting, the degree of activism and the approaches used to combat homophobia and transphobia was very dependent on the individual's student leadership style. As Smalls indicates:

...they [the GSA] would put up posters once and a while, like "gay is ok" or other posters that would discourage using homophobic words. They were never pushy about it. They were actually pretty passive, like 'we are here and we are queer.' Which I thought was a good way to handle it. Sometimes pushy isn't the way to go. There was never a direct response to homophobia, it was more of a 'please don't.' (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

Taking a similar approach in her GSA, Jordon states:

Even when LGBTQ students aren't part of the GSA, the GSA takes it upon themselves to ensure the little rainbow flags are up and we have signs saying 'here we are here, it is a safe space.' And I think it helps with bullying, because even if an LGBTQ student isn't part of it, they see that there is a safe space and that people are trying to make a safe space and deal with the issues that are there. And I think that makes a difference. (Jordon, bisexual, age 16)

Mary took a more active approach in her GSA group by engaging not only students who attended her high school but also connected with surrounding high schools to build a sense of community.

The group started off very small, but by the time I graduated there was like 30 kids in it. And it became a lot more activist which I was really happy with. We reached out to other high schools with GSAs and connected with them, which was interesting. So the community building was awesome. So yeah, I think we did combat homophobia and what people thought. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

The difference in leadership style can have a profound impact on the degree of activism produced by a GSA. Because of this, activism itself is not an inevitable reaction

as it pertains to these safe spaces (see Fetner et al., 2012). Some participants who were eager to become involved in LGBTQ activism felt let down by the leadership in their GSA. For example, William described his GSA as being shallow, failing to address any issues surrounding LGBTQ inequalities.

There wasn't a lot of discussion on how to make things better. It was more like 'ok, we are going to raise some money by selling cupcakes.' So I went once and never went back. (William, transgender male, age 19)

For leaders and members who took more of an active approach, guest speakers, "pride proms," and the "day of silence," were methods used by GSA clubs to raise awareness and help counteract the heteronormative high school climate. Participants noted that opposition towards these initiatives was dependent on the school climate at the time. As Jordon states:

GSAs are great for the school environment; however, it depends on the school and its students. (Jordon, bisexual, age 16)

Although most participants indicated that GSA awareness initiatives were met with little to no resistance, others were not so fortunate. One participant reflected on the challenges they faced during the "day of silence," a day in which individuals "refuse to speak...to draw attention to the cultural silence around LGBTQ issues" (Fetner, 2012, p. 202).

We would all try to wear our pink and blue shirts and walk around. But other students would come up to you and try to talk to you and try to engage you in conversation [during the day of silence] and they would start using really awful words like 'faggot' or stuff like that, trying to incite you to speak. And it was just such an unfortunate way for other people to react. (Art, gender variant, age 26)

GSA members are on the frontline of discriminatory harassment in all its forms – "overt and covert, obvious and subtle, individually prompted and institutionally embedded" (Stengel, 2010, p. 524). However, as Stengel (2010) claims, "the discomfort in fact presents an educational possibility, an opportunity to reconceptualize the world" (p. 536). For some participants, the GSA became a tool for learning and educating themselves on various LGBTQ topics, which in turn aided in their empowerment.

As I look back on who I was before I got involved to whom I am today, I was two separate people. I was kind of like 'go with the flow,' but when I joined and I knew I had something to go against and fight against...I found my voice and I learned how to speak and advocate and stuff like that. (Michael, gay, age 27)

With a general lack of resources and training offered to GSA leaders and their members, the full potential of these programs and their ability to inspire activism cannot be comprehensively understood. Following the logic that education aids in the empowerment of individuals, it is imperative that Canadian School Boards provide the adequate funding necessary to ensure the quality of these programs as it pertains to being a safe space.

4.4. Membership and Transgenderism in GSA Groups

The last major theme to emerge during the interview process was *membership*, defined as students who are included and excluded from the GSA. In discussing safe spaces, Fetner and associates (2012) indicate that membership is an essential component in order to “(a) provide shelter from dominant ideologies, (b) create physical (or virtual) spaces for like-minded people to meet and engage in dialogue, and (c) for building skills for leadership or other activist roles” (p. 193). For GSAs specifically, researchers have indicated that these clubs “may be safe for some students while unsafe for others” (Fetner, 2012, p. 200). To date, very few research studies have specifically assessed transgender students’ experiences in these clubs (Nagoshi et al., 2008). Therefore, with hopes of addressing this research deficiency, participants were asked to speak directly to transgender membership in the GSA. In doing so, two subthemes emerged: (1) lack of voice, and (2) marginalization.

4.4.1. Transgender Experiences in GSAs

For a GSA to be a safe space it needs to have the ability to fracture the heteronormative school environment; however, these programs must also foster an “inclusive learning community that values diversity” (Fetner et al., 2012). When assessing research on GSAs, often transgender students are not distinguished from

gays, lesbians, and bisexual individuals in the LGBTQ literature (Nagoshi et al., 2008). In turn, there is limited knowledge regarding the GSAs' ability to ensure equal representation of its LGBTQ members, with specific emphasis on trans* students. Reflecting on GSA membership, many trans* participants stated that upon joining these clubs feelings of exclusion and a general lack of concern regarding transgender issues emerged.

I found the trans discussion was really missing...I think if the conversation is missing then there is definitely exclusion happening in general...for the people that are questioning their gender, it's like 'ugh, this isn't giving me many options.' (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

For Normandy, they found that members of the club were uncertain on where Normandy actually 'fit in' with the already present group dynamics, consisting of a homosexual/heterosexual binary.

It was like 'oh, you are something other than gay or straight? Ok, well, pick one.' 'Umm, no.' 'Well you have to!' 'Umm, no.' There is more than just gay and straight...There was no talk of other sexuality other than gay and straight. And you can only be cisgendered. (Normandy, agender, age 19)

Smalls had a similar reaction when disclosing his trans* identity in the GSA.

There was really no focus on it [transgender issues]. It was like 'oh, you are trans? That is great, but we are going to focus on the gay shit.' (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

Similarly, this notion of trans* exclusion is highlighted by Fetner and colleagues (2012) in their research on LGBT students' experiences in high school GSAs across Canada and the United States. In terms of membership, the researchers found that "students of colour and trans*-students were the most likely to be marginalized in these groups" (p.201).

We never said 'hi, my name is [removed] and I am gay.' Our conversations were very shallow and more just general chit-chat. But there was never a big focus on transgender issues. (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

For transgender members, lack of representation left some participants feeling excluded and voiceless. Gaetz (2004) stipulates that a lack of voice can amplify feelings of social exclusion and marginalization. Outside the GSA, the lack of voice from the transgender community is still evident when examining the lack of policy in both Canada and the United States that seeks to address transgender discrimination with regard to employment, housing, and the justice system. As Fletcher (2013) states, “the erasure of trans* bodies in official statistics not only means that they are ignored, but, more importantly, that trans* people are unlikely to be considered in policy decisions” (p. 67), further marginalizing this community.

People think that gender doesn't matter so trans people shouldn't care as much. But it does. It tells me that I exist, so don't invalidate me.
(Normandy, agender, age 19)

Generally speaking, most people outside the LGBTQ communities believe that there is a common acceptance and little difference between gays and lesbians, and trans* people (Vitulli, 2010, p. 158). However, transgender exclusion by the LGB communities is not a new phenomenon; rather, it has historical roots that date back to the late 1950s and 1960s during the homophile movement and gay liberation (Stryker, 2008). During this period, the transgender political movement and the gay rights movement ran alongside each other with hopes of securing basic civil rights. Nonetheless, the early 1970s led to a “watershed moment...when the transgender political movement lost its alliances with the gay and feminist communities” (Stryker, 2008, p. 94), negatively impacting the transgender community's politically progressive developments and leaving a divide between these communities that has “yet to be fully overcome” (p. 94).

I feel like people think that the LGBTQ community is just one big accepting happy place, but it is not like that all the time. I read something online the other day and someone was deconstructing the LGBTQ+ and they were saying that bisexuality doesn't count and transgender doesn't matter. And I thought that was really interesting because I feel that that is true on so many levels that people get left out and they shouldn't be left out. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

Stone (2009) highlights this divide by exploring American lesbian and gay activists' attitudes towards transgender inclusion in the LGBT movement. Stone indicates that gay

men had the most difficulties regarding transgender inclusion, expressing struggles around (1) cultivating approximating experiences, (2) movement connections, and (3) space for transgender individuals. Lesbians, on the other hand, were more ambivalent towards transgender inclusion, recognizing and relating their own experiences with social exclusion. However, Stone states that “feminist consciousness and personal experience also made many lesbians wary of transgender inclusion, particularly what they perceived to be the invasion of women’s space” (p. 349).

One of the things I have always remembered under the queer umbrella is that bi kids are always discriminated against by gays and lesbians, and trans folks are discriminated against by everyone else. Partly because [for] trans folks, it is not an issue around sexuality, it is an issue around gender. So it sort of falls into a different realm. So yeah, I see that. I see how that discrimination sticks out. (Michael, gay, age 27)

Specific to GSA groups, Jordon notes,

I think the one thing there is, in general, is that transgender students don’t feel included enough in the LGBTQ community, so they don’t tend to come to the GSAs. So, if there was a way to advertise and say ‘hey, we do want transgender students to come in and bring their opinion and say what to do.’ Because we can think as far as we want but if we don’t have transgender students we can’t approach certain issues because we are not in the same mindset. Maybe put posters up saying ‘transgender students, please come to our GSA’ something like that. (Jordon, bisexual, age 16)

In 2010, Pride Education Network released their third edition of the ‘*Creating and Supporting a Gay/Straight Alliance*’ (2010) manual for youth interested in implementing or running a GSA program. The authors suggest that the GSA title is meant to be inclusive of all LGBTQ students; however, they go on to state that although some GSAs “try to include transgender students; many others don’t because of the relative invisibility of transgender individuals” (p. 3). This, in turn, isolates those trans* individuals who are not publicly ‘out’ with their transgender status.

To start off, it was run by two cis white girls, one was a lesbian and one was an ally, which is cool. And we definitely talked about bisexuality and stuff, but the trans discussion was definitely something I found was missing. I don’t think there was any out trans people in the alliance at the time, which I don’t blame. High school is a weird

place that can be dangerous. So that is totally valid...It was all rainbow flags, but no talk about diversity from the binary or the effects of intersectionality...and absolutely no trans discussion...You are supposed to have a safe zone that is representative of everybody and your voice is missing...whether or not it is intentional in the club, it is really harmful and exclusionary. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

Due to the lack of voice, the exclusion experienced living in a heteronormative culture is seemingly being reinforced within the confines of these safe spaces. Rather than promoting authenticity, social exclusion in GSAs can force transgender individuals into hiding their identity, depriving this community of a wider range of positive role models. Extensive research pertaining to the gay community has demonstrated the positive impact of role models in combating individual feelings of isolation and depression (Loiacano, 2011). Charlie found that the lack of voice, coupled with the lack of trans* discussion in the GSA, led to confusion and a sense of being an outsider:

Dysphoria and just being trans, it's constantly on your mind. Your gender is a constant thing, especially in a space that isn't fairly trans specific. That can raise a huge amount of anxiety and depression... I just didn't know non-binary identity existed...we never talked about non-binary identities...the whole time I was like 'well maybe I am a tomboy. I don't know'... if you don't have any resources to go further on and figure it out more then you feel stuck...having a stifled identity of any sort is so suffocating. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

GSA groups are at risk of failing to capture the complexities of gender and sexual subjectivities and practices, limiting this program's ability to be an effective queer resource and safe space. Such findings are also illustrated by Fenter and colleagues (2012), who express that the marginalization of trans* students within the GSA suggests a lack of diversity in educating its members on gender identity challenges. Additionally, the failure to provide adequate support in these programs can prevent its members from assuming other affirming social identities.

There is, however, a "variation in the quality of these groups" (Fenter et al., 2012, p. 204). In discussing membership, participants articulated that the degree of inclusivity often depended on the quality of leadership and their access to resources and training. Inclusivity of transgender students in the GSA was most notable when club leaders were

either transgender themselves or had a strong educational foundation with respect to LGBTQ issues.

I am a huge champion of intersectionality. Because there is no one oppression...people who are affected by one oppression are often affected by multiple oppressions because of intersectionality. And so, also being mixed raced, I found it also really important to talk about racial issues...We spent one day comparing the measure of the average white woman to a transwoman of colour. I think the average heterosexual murder rate is 1 in 100,000¹¹ you have a chance of getting murdered. For trans people, it's 1 in 12¹². And for trans women of colour it is 1 in 8¹³. So that is intersectionality at play right there in a very serious way. So, we talked about that. We also talked about differences in abilities. So people with different disabilities, queer folk, the fact that trans people have difficulties getting jobs. If they have a disability it adds to the complexity which often they can't work or whether the job will be trans friendly or not. So intersectionality is a huge thing at play and I wanted to make sure it was addressed. They are not all this serious. We did have a drag tea party at one point [laughs]. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

Similarly, Jordon, whose family is very active and well-versed within the LGBTQ communities, indicated that in addition to playing transgender documentaries and having discussions that focused on trans* issues, Jordon's GSA club worked hard to get a gender-neutral bathroom setup in her high school despite not having an openly trans* student member.

One thing that has been our goal in the GSA is to get a gender-neutral washroom opened. First, we got it so people could walk to the teacher's office and ask the teacher for a bathroom key, which was the disabled washroom, which was basically the only gender-neutral

¹¹ The World Bank Group (2016). Intentional homicides (per 100,000 people) Retrieved April 19, 2016, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5>

¹² Although no empirical evidence was found to support this statistic, the Human Rights Campaign and the Trans People of Color Coalition (TPOCC) (2016) stipulate the following: "For transgender women, we used the Williams Institute estimate that there are 700,000 transgender people in the United States. This data is not broken down by gender and there aren't any great sources for that proportion, so we estimated half of that population is female. Dividing year-to-date homicides (21) by 350,000, there is an estimated homicide rate of 6.00 per 100,000 U.S. trans women, which means that trans women have 4.3 times the risk of dying by homicide relative to all women" (p. 28).

¹³ Again, no empirical evidence was found to support this statistic. However, among the 53 known transgender victims in the United States from 2013-2015, 46, or 87 percent, of those were transgender people of colour. "Among those, at least 39 were African American and 6 were Latino" (Human Rights Campaign & TPOCC, 2016).

washroom we had there. Then the next year after that, in grade 10, we were able to leave it unlocked, but the only problem was the teachers and support workers were not used to having it unlocked so oftentimes we couldn't get in. However, that doesn't happen anymore. (Jordon, bisexual, age 16)

With respect to limited access to resources and training, participants suggested that this was a major setback regarding transgender inclusivity. As mentioned, often student GSA leaders were in charge of not only developing and implementing the GSA in their high school, but also ensuring that the club had weekly lessons and activities. Coupled with the busyness of high school, most participants relied on their own research or background knowledge of various LGBTQ topics and issues. In discussing whether transgender issues were discussed in her GSA, Mary stated:

No, there wasn't; and looking back on it now that was definitely something that was missing. But yeah, that discussion didn't come up and I feel that it was something that really should have. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

Researchers have indicated that GSAs have the potential to create visibility and a sense of pride in LGB(T) youth and their allies (Haskell & Burtch, 2010; Little, 2001; Toomey et al., 2011). Evidently, however, as Lain, notes, "the GSA is being an unintentionally exclusionary club," which may negatively impact members' experiences in these safe spaces. Consequently, this group's ability to be a safe and beneficial environment for transgender students relies heavily on the leadership and the inclusivity offered. Echoing the recommendation of Fetner and colleagues (2012), it is important to consider "not only whether high schools have GSA programs, but also the variation in the qualities of these groups and the safe spaces they create for LGBTQ students and their straight allies" (p. 204).

In discussing how GSAs can be more inclusive of both potential and current members, I felt it important to turn to a theoretical perspective that promotes the values of peace, cooperation, integration, and caring. Such sentiments are the basis of peacemaking criminology, which focuses on an individual and collective cognitive shift in understanding human suffering and developing peaceful resolutions. In the concluding chapter, a peacemaking criminological (PC) approach is reviewed and discussed as a

means of informing policy recommendations. Furthermore, in hopes of expanding the theoretical breadth of peacemaking criminology, facets of transgender theory are integrated and used to explore the complexities of social hierarchies and generate discussion on inclusionary safe spaces.

Chapter 5.

A Peacemaking Approach

Looking directly at suffering, both the suffering in the world and the suffering in one's own heart and mind, we love others [as ourselves] and act in compassion to end suffering – to heal separation...We begin our practice, then, by being aware of the ways in which suffering is manifested in each of us... Our responsibility is to do what we can to alleviate the conditions of human suffering...[such as providing] shelter for the homeless, health care for the sick and feeble, *protection for the threatened and vulnerable*...(Quinney, 1991, p. 9, as cited in Wozniak, 2008, p. 230, emphasis added)

Transgender awareness and the push for acceptance of transgender individuals continue to be a road flanked by ridicule, exclusion, and hostility brought on by primarily heterosexual ideals. Fleming (2015) suggests that “all changes of attitudes and laws find their basis in changes in conception, which typically come first as a single person offers a vocabulary that mirrors that change” (p. 114). However, Fleming adds that in order to change laws and attitudes, collectivity is needed. In a sense, GSAs are becoming that single voice within the public high school arena seeking to combat homophobia and transphobia. Yet if collectivity is needed, then GSAs must work on unifying their voices and ensuring equal representation of its members, with specific emphasis on transgender students.

In concluding each interview, I asked participants to share their personal conceptualization of a *safe space* with hopes of guiding policy recommendations. From a peacemaking criminology perspective, Quinney (2011) articulates that “the path to the ending of suffering is through compassion” (p. 316), a notion that seemingly characterized participants' reflections on *what a safe space is*.

I think a safe school environment at the core is a place where youth can go and absorb knowledge and learn how to socialize in a healthy

environment, essentially. Unfortunately, there are no high schools yet that have appealed to that. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

The high school experience can be challenging, especially for youth struggling with their sexual orientation or gender identity. Participants noted the importance of school boards not overlooking the marginalization, peer rejection, and personal struggles that encompass the lives of many queer youth. In discussing aspects of a safe school environment, Jordon and Normandy emphasize the importance of being able to be yourself, a notion that becomes increasingly difficult when one's identity or sexual orientation does not fit within the heteronormative high school environment:

It is an environment, regardless of their orientation or whatever...where people feel able to express themselves if they are LGBTQ or even just different in their own way. (Jordon, bisexual, age 16)

A place you can just walk around and be yourself. Nobody is really judging you. (Normandy, agender, age 19)

Echoing this perspective, Michael states:

I think safe spaces are really defined by the person. But I think it also follows this general guideline that you are free to express yourself without discrimination. You are also free to learn without discrimination. Outside of the class, I think it is important to be able to express yourself in a way that isn't detrimental to others, but also it isn't detrimental to yourself. So it is striking a balance. A place where you feel free to do what you feel you need to do. (Michael, gay, age 27)

For Sanzen (1991), a peacemaking criminologist, the ability to create a safe and accepting school environment lies in the implementation of 'peace.' Sanzen argues that:

Peace means reducing the power that is based on control, domination, exploitation, hostility, all of which produce segregation. Peace means increasing people's power to do things with others rather than to others by building trust, acceptance, respect, love, nurture and caring – all of which integrate rather than separate people. (pp. 239-340)

Despite peacemaking criminology's ability to be applied to diverse phenomena (see Barak, 1991; Gaskew, 2009; Jesilow & Parsons, 2010; Wozniak, 2009), researchers have yet to examine the applicability of the peacemaking theoretical

orientation in the context of informing policy with respect to GSA groups. As Haskell and Burtch (2010) stipulate, “participants’ recommendations are valuable as policy recommendations in their own right, but grounded in theory they are invaluable” (p. 89). Therefore, with hopes of reinvigorating peacemaking criminology, I seek to examine the breadth and various dimensions of this philosophical approach as it pertains to guiding policy recommendations for GSA clubs.

5.1. Policy Recommendations

The need for policy implications in both the GSA program as well as the high school setting at large is evident in this research. As indicated, from a peacemaking criminology perspective, it is suggested that through compassion and understanding, inclusivity becomes forthcoming (Quinney, 2011). Seemingly, the notion of compassion and understanding became two overarching themes when examining participant perceptions on how GSAs can be more inclusive for trans* students. Based on this, four recommendations are offered: (1) widening the scope of the GSA title; (2) incorporating informed and inclusionary discussion within the GSA; (3) enhancing resources and training of GSA leaders; and (4) continuing to break the silence in high schools.

5.1.1. Widening the Scope of the GSA Title

In examining how to unravel the complexities of isolation experienced in certain GSAs, participants indicated that the GSA title can be exclusionary, unrepresentative, and reinforces the binary of gender and sexuality. Alex states:

I think the most important thing in groups [referring to GSA] like that is inclusivity. Gay-straight alliance kind of implies that only gay and straight people are welcome. (Alex, gay/transsexual, age 17)

This notion was also supported by Charlie who indicates:

The GSA title enforces the binary really hard for sexuality. There is already so much erasure of bisexuals, asexual, and pansexual both in the queer community and outside of it...GSAs just doesn't seem inclusive enough. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

Weinberg (2009) articulates that “classrooms, like the culture at large, often inadvertently marginalize or exclude a sizable, and frequently invisible, minority” (p.50). In addressing this issue, Weinberg raises the importance of using inclusive language to create a sense of community and belonging among and within students. He points out that “language plays a central role in the way human beings behave and think” (p. 50). Based on this, Weinberg stipulates that inclusive, or LGBTQ-fair language, such as avoiding heteronormative assumptive statements, can help promote self-acceptance among queer students while teaching other students respect, tolerance, and fairness.

This notion of LGBTQ-fair language was evident in participant narratives on the GSA title. Participants suggested titles that encompassed a wider spectrum of GSA membership, such as Gender-Sexuality Alliance. Changing the GSA title would be a first step in acknowledging the diversities and variations in sexual and gender identities/expressions. From a peacemaking perspective, the acknowledgement of a more inclusive GSA title would demonstrate an understanding and acceptance towards potential and current members, encouraging feelings of inclusion and representation within the confines of this safe space.

I think [university name] has currently the most effective strategy, calling it Out on Campus. Even if it isn't perfect for every gender identity on the spectrum, it ends up at least acknowledging that they are interconnected issues with political representation in America and also Canada. (Lain, transsexual woman/gender fluid/gender nonconforming, age 19)

5.1.2. Informed & Inclusionary Discussion

I feel like you can't achieve a safe space without awareness being established...Just like people who talk about homophobia we need to talk about transphobia so there isn't these anxieties that people have. Really try to conquer the fear of the unknown. Even with people in the LGB circles who don't know a ton need to be educated. If we start educating people early on, even in elementary schools, then maybe it won't happen [referring to transphobia]. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

As illustrated in this research project, many trans* youth felt that transgender issues and topics were not being represented in GSA clubs. This left trans* students feeling voiceless and excluded. Lack of voice can amplify issues of social exclusion and

marginalization (Gaetz, 2004). From a peacemaking criminology standpoint, oppression is caused by fear and the craving for power over others (Quinney, 2011). Therefore, Quinney challenges individuals to confront their prejudices and obtain a sense of understanding of human suffering in order to break down segregation.

Evidence of this theoretical notion is noted in Stone's (2009) research on lesbian and gay attitudes towards transgender individuals. Arguably, in the queer community there is a socially constructed LGBTQ hierarchical system with gay men at the top and transgender individuals nearing the bottom. As Charlie recollects:

Cisgender, so non-trans, and gay men are those that are most represented and most privileged out of the queer people and they are the ones that get the most representation and the ones that most straight people and cisgender people get to interact with on a daily basis. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

Art stresses the importance of educating individuals on transgenderism, suggesting that gay and lesbian issues have oftentimes taken priority:

Nowadays you get a lot of understanding of what gay or lesbian is. But we still don't have a lot of understanding of the different colours of trans. And this is the unfortunate part because you have this acronym that fits in trans very nicely and neatly but it does not lead itself to explaining all of the different emotions that people feel when it is not just who you like, but also biologically how you feel about your self-expression. (Art, gender variant, age 26)

Notably, being of lesbian or gay status has become increasingly more visible and accepted, with a wider array of political reform and legitimacy when compared to transgender individuals (Vitulli, 2010). Therefore, the extant notion of gender and sexuality normativity may be more beneficial to the gay community. As Vitulli explains, "homonormative gay and lesbian identity assumes a stable, essentialized sexual object choice that is attached to normative 'male' and 'female' genitals corresponding to specific normative gender expressions" (p. 157). The term homonormativity is thus not a standalone concept but one that is defined "in terms of whiteness, traditional and essentialized gender roles, property and wealth, monogamy and the nuclear family structure, and able-bloodedness" (p. 157). This mimicry of heteronormativity by the

homonormative gay community became a defining factor in achieving fundamental rights and freedoms during the 1970s' Gay Rights Movement.

Vitulli (2010) further notes, however, that “queer or unstable sexual object choice and trans*, gender non-conforming, and surgically altered bodies denaturalize and expose the performativity of these normative constructions of gender and sexuality and therefore remain outside homonormativity” (p. 157). In turn, this creates a hierarchical system that places trans* folk near the bottom.

In highlighting the disconnect of inclusion between the gay community and transgender community, Stone (2009) illustrates that individuals who are able to empathize with transgender discrimination and make connections to their own oppression are significantly more likely to become transgender allies. Such findings can be equated with the peacemaking perspective. Like A. J. Muste (1942) and Mahatma Gandhi (1957), Quinney (2000) argues that social action and peace comes out of:

...the informed heart, out of the clear and enlightened mind. We act with an understanding of our own suffering and the suffering of others. If human actions are not rooted in compassion, these actions will not contribute to a compassionate and peaceful world. ‘If we cannot move beyond inner discord, how can we help find a way to social harmony? If we ourselves cannot know peace, be peaceful, how will our acts disarm hatred and violence?’ The means cannot be different from the ends; peace can come only out of peace. (p. 26-27, as cited in Barak, 2005, p. 135)

In this sense, GSA leaders must focus on “identifying common forms of injustice [because it] is a key element in the process of creating an oppositional consciousness or collective identity of a group” (Stone, 2009, p. 338). Through this process GSA leaders will be able to expand the discussion on gender and sexuality, which will aid in fostering an understanding, give voice to its participants, and provide compassion to its members.

5.1.3. Resources & Training of GSA Leaders

In addition to collaborative ways of thinking, access to resources and training for GSA leaders and their group members is an essential element to ensuring inclusivity. As indicated, more often than not, student GSA leaders are left to organize, plan, and run

the GSA club. Understandably, student leaders might not have the adequate training required to deal with the diverse issues and topics needed in such programs. Reflecting on this, Eric articulates:

I think a weakness in the GSA is the support the school boards or certain schools give them. GSAs are only as supportive as the funding they get and the willingness of the teachers. The administration needs to stand behind them fully instead of presenting it as a poster program – ‘we are very supportive of LGBTQ students, look we have a GSA.’ That is not enough. You need the administration to say that ‘we support the GSA and we are going to become involved in what the GSA is doing. We are going to become informed about the GSA. We are going to make sure the GSA knows how to directly communicate with us, the administration, and how we can communicate directly with the GSA.’

If I have a problem and I am in the GSA, I should be able to directly go to my principal and say ‘we at the GSA have this issue and you as the administration need to address this issue’ and the administration needs to be like ‘yeah, we will do that’ – and then actually do it. And vice-versa, if the administration sees that there is an issue around the school regarding gay rights, then they should go to their GSA and ask them ‘how can we address this issue? What can we do to make this better?’ It is a two way street – and if this doesn’t happen, then the GSA almost becomes a figurehead and they are there symbolically and not there functionally. They have to be functional in order to survive. (Eric, gay, age 30)

It is paramount that LGBTQ youth have a safe space free of verbal, physical, and emotional harassment; a place where they feel represented and their needs are being accounted for. However, for these programs to be effective as potential havens in a hostile world, school boards must ensure adequate resources and training for its GSA leaders, including the teacher sponsors. Additionally, as McGuire and colleagues (2011) suggest, “leadership development among GSA advisors and peer leaders [needs to] focus on ways to specifically support transgender students as a means to improve participation and school experiences for transgender students” (p. 1186). This can be fulfilled through various LGBTQ community resource centres or through in-school training seminars.

5.1.4. Continuing to Break the Silence

Acceptance needs to be talked about. Acceptance is a good thing. So promote that. Advocate for that. Because if we can get students talking about these things [referring to issues of homophobia and transphobia] outside the GSA it will become a normalized thing. (Mary, cisgender/queer, age 19)

Most teachers were prepared to handle a gay student. But most times people didn't know what transgender was or how to approach it. So a big thing is getting the right information out there. (Smalls, transgender male, age 21)

From a transgender theoretical perspective, the social environment can enforce conformist gender expectations, limiting and oppressing one's ability to construct an identity outside the given social norms (Harper, Jernewall, & Zea, 2004; Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Increasingly, teachers are becoming more aware of the detrimental effects of homophobia and, to a lesser extent, transphobia. Nevertheless, the high levels of truancy, suicidality, and dropout rates among LGBTQ youth (Haskell & Burtch, 2010; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Toomey et al., 2011) suggest the importance of continuing and supporting efforts and initiatives that address LGBTQ bullying and harassment.

Quinney (1991) contends that "many of our concepts are so deeply ingrained in our minds, in our education, and in our culture, that we forget that they completely condition our perceptions of reality" (p. 5). The peacemaking approach encourages educators to place a strong emphasis on the importance of educating individuals on social inequalities and injustices. Greytak and colleagues (2007) support this notion, finding that teachers who acquire an understanding that LGBT youth often do not feel safe at their school are more likely to address homophobic language when heard.

It is Pepinsky's (2006) belief that by "talking to others, listening to others, and listening to oneself (that is, reflecting on one's experience and considering whether to talk or listen next, to whom, to discover what)" (p. 434) individuals encourage mindfulness and a deeper sense of awareness and connectedness of oneself as well as others around them. In other words, *understanding* can be an impetus to *peace*, which, according to Sanzen (1991), "means reducing the power that is based on control, domination, exploitation, hostility, all of which produce segregation" (p. 239).

Based on this, GSA groups are not a panacea. They are not – and cannot be – the only means of fostering a safe school climate. School board policies must focus on “addressing social differences [in a] meaningful way” (Walton, 2015, p. 32), with an emphasis on vulnerable populations. As Walton recommends, in addressing bullying, scholars and educators must take a step back and examine it in a broader context, taking note of the “dynamics of privilege, stigma, prejudice, and hate – and how they shift in accordance with wider social and political contexts” (p. 32). Arguably, emphasis must be placed on normalizing social differences through a more holistic approach including educational institutions and a host of pathways to understanding aimed at combating stigma. Moreover, as participants indicated, forms of harassment have become seemingly more subtle in areas such as the change rooms and hallways. Due to this, a greater emphasis on subtle forms of homophobia and transphobia is needed by teachers and administrators. Additionally, school boards must emphasize to teachers the importance of resisting the bystander effect, which leaves LGBTQ youth vulnerable.

To reiterate, “what schools fail to realize [is] that by not confronting homophobia [and/or transphobia], they are likely condoning it” (Loutzenheiser, 1996, p. 59). In keeping with this, school-wide education through various activities, such as assemblies, awareness days, or during LGBT History Month, is imperative in creating understanding and compassion for marginalized students. As Lee (2002) concludes, “once the dialogue starts, change can begin” (p. 25).

5.2. Conclusion and Future Research

Described as being poised as the next civil rights movement (Steinmetz, 2014, June 4), the transgender community has gained considerable progression both politically and socially since I began this thesis project in early 2014. Evidence of this is the growing number of provinces – including Saskatchewan, Prince Edward Island, Ontario and Manitoba – and a territory (Yukon), that have expanded their human rights legislation to explicitly include “gender identity.”

Globally, transgender awareness and visibility are increasing thanks to the efforts of transgender and ally organizations, community leaders, scholars, as well as social

media groups (e.g. Facebook, Twitter), and television broadcasts (e.g. MTV, Logo TV, Netflix). Moreover, the International Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) initiative, which is in remembrance of Rita Hester, a Black transgender woman who was murdered in Allston, MA on November 28, 1998, as a result of transphobic violence, is steadily becoming a recognized day in November throughout North America and other countries, including England, Scotland, Italy, India, and Australia.

More locally, the positive effects of the transgender rights movement (TRM) have been felt on many Canadian university campuses regarding secure safe public facilities for trans* individuals, with a specific emphasis on washroom facilities.

I think with trans specific stuff, things that are definitely moving in the right direction is the gender-neutral bathrooms. That is a huge thing because at the bigger schools there are people who are assaulted in the bathrooms just for needing to pee. (Charlie, gender nonconforming, age 19)

Researchers suggest that many transgender students carry a lot of anxiety when accessing the washroom. Rightfully so, as public bathroom facilities are often the grounds for transphobic assault and harassment (Veale et al., 2015). Bringing awareness to this prevalent issue, Simon Fraser University transgender students, along with their allies, held a rally on February 18, 2014, to advocate for the implementation of gender-neutral washrooms on campus, with hopes of creating a safer and more trans*-inclusive campus environment. At the time, Simon Fraser had only 50 single-stall washrooms on the university's main campus in Burnaby (Kane, 2015a). However, this event led to various departments, including the School of Criminology and the SFU Burnaby Library, changing signage to allow single gender bathrooms to become gender-neutral.

In 2007, McGill University, in Québec, introduced a policy that requires gender-neutral washrooms to be built in every newly constructed campus building, with hopes of providing one on every floor. Moreover, similar to the University of Alberta and Carleton University in Ottawa, McGill is committed to displaying gender-neutral signs in single-stall washrooms across its campuses (Kane, 2015a). Taking a slightly different approach, the University of British Columbia, like the University of Toronto, is developing

a comprehensive list that identifies single-stall or gender-neutral washrooms to help students locate safe and inclusive spaces around campus.

Despite these positive steps forward, and the growing recognition of the marginalization faced by the trans* community, trans* individuals continue to face discrimination and stigmatization with regard to employment, housing, access to resources, and the criminal justice system. Regardless of the continued efforts to address the systematic and social inequalities in Vancouver, such as the Trans* Equality Now campaign, the transgender community continues to hit barriers in their pursuit for equality. For example, in 2015, the British Columbia Liberals refused to sign a pledge that calls for new legislation to protect transgender and gender-variant people, making B.C. among a select few provinces unwilling to amend their human rights legislation (Kane, 2015b).

Currently, under the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and the *British Columbia Human Rights Code*, there is no explicit reference to “gender identity,” nor is violence based on gender identity and expression classified as a hate crime under the Canadian criminal code (Trans Equality Now [TEN], 2016). Such laws are particularly salient for transgender individuals who contend with multiple layers of stigma, transphobia, and marginalization. Admirably, in 2012, Ontario became the first North American jurisdiction to pass the Toby’s Act¹⁴ protecting transgender individuals from discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression (Fletcher, 2013). Although the effect and reach of this law is still to be determined, expanding the foundational principles of this Act across Canada would give the transgender community a platform in which to gain a stronger voice in order to combat stigma, exclusion, and transphobia.

In closing, the current study was an attempt to provide a platform for transgender youth, and LGB allies, to voice their experiences within a GSA group. Similar to past

¹⁴ Toby’s Act is named after Toby Dancer, an Edmonton born, transgender (male-to-female) musician. Toby was influential in convincing Rev Dr. Cheri DiNovo, the New Democrat Member of the Provincial Parliament, to take a stand for transgendered individuals. Tragically, in 2004, Toby died from a drug overdose at the age of 51. Shortly after, in 2007, DiNovo introduced a bill entitled Toby’s Bill that would add Gender Identity to the Ontario Human Rights Code. It became law in 2012 (Marchand-Pegg, 2013).

research (Bradford et al., 2013; Fenter et al., 2012; Haskell & Burtch, 2010; McGuire et al., 2010), findings here support the notion of needing a LGBTQ friendly space in the high school setting. Building on this, I argue that leadership and access to resources can dramatically affect the degree and quality in which GSA groups foster an inclusive environment for transgender students. From a peacemaking criminology standpoint, with compassion and understanding, equality and inclusivity become forthcoming (Quinney, 2011). Thus, an emphasis must be placed on GSA advisors and peer leaders to develop effective strategies that specifically support trans* youth.

Additionally, echoing the words of Toomey and colleagues (2011), “GSAs cannot be accepted by schools as the only solution for creating safer school climates for LGBT youth” (p. 183). Teachers and administrators must take an active role in creating LGBTQ+ friendly school environments that seek to fracture the heteronormative school climate by adequately addressing and educating students and fellow co-workers on the impact of homophobia and transphobia. Burtch and Haskell (2014) contend that the actual gay agenda often involves “establishing a queer-positive culture in schools” (p. 239).

Future researchers should continue to explore transgender youth and their experiences in GSA programs. In-depth qualitative studies – and mixed-methodological approaches – would be appropriate for addressing and disentangling unique challenges being faced by transgender youth and the trans* community at large. Through this, researchers might gain a more substantive and comprehensive understanding, allowing policy frameworks to have a more direct impact with regard to helping and supporting this community as well as furthering our perspectives beyond evaluations of the worth of GSAs or other initiatives tied with LGBTQ protections and appreciations.

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Appendix A.

Ethics Application

More Than Just 'Either Or': Transgender Students' Experiences with Gay-Straight Alliances in British Columbia

SCHOOL OF CRIMINOLOGY, SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6

Principal Investigator: D. Kyle Sutherland

Supervisor: Dr. Brian Burtch

Co-Supervisor: Dr. Sheri Fabian

Director of School of Criminology: Neil Boyd

General Description of Study

Current research on gay-straight alliance (GSA) groups has focused on the development, implementation, and impact of these “safe spaces” within a high school setting. GSAs are defined as “student-led, school-based clubs that aim to provide a safe environment in the school context for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students, as well as their straight allies” (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz & Russell, 2011, p. 175). Since the emergence of GSAs in the late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers have credited these programs with (1) empowering LGBTQ members, (2) addressing prejudices and breaking down segregation, (3) educating students and the community on LGBTQ issues, (4) providing a safer school environment, and (5) helping LGBTQ youth develop effective coping strategies which aid in diminishing feelings of hopelessness, despair, and suicidality. Lee (2002) contends that there is a “dramatic need for school-based support groups, such as GSAs, in all high schools” (p. 25).

Nagoshi, Adams, Terrell, Hill, Brzuzy, and Nagoshi (2008) state, however, that transgender students are often not distinguished from gays, lesbians, and bisexual individuals in the LGBT literature. Consequently, little academic attention has been given to how these GSA programs actually support transgender students and address issues surrounding gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation.

Therefore, in an attempt to bridge a gap in the literature, the proposed study will use a qualitative methodology to examine how GSA programs can offer social support and provide a safe space for transgendered high school students in greater Vancouver, B.C. The purpose of this study is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dimensions of a safe space, specifically GSAs, and ways in which expressions of homophobia and transphobia can be addressed within the high school setting. Through the exploration of this topic area, this research will seek to provide useful school-based implications with regard to providing adequate support programs for youth struggling with invisible challenges, such as sexual and gender orientation.

Study Participants

Participants will be youths, 16 years of age and older.

Participants in this research project will self-identify as transgender and will have had experiences with GSA groups.

Potential participants will be recruited by contacting various LGBTQ youth community programs, such as the Queer Resource Centre and Surrey Youth Alliance. Many of the potential participants in this study are openly transgendered and are members of a large queer youth support group that does motivational talks about LGBTQ issues in high schools throughout Vancouver and surrounding areas.

Posters advertising the study will be made available to program directors and displayed at their discretion.

Informed Consent

Simon Fraser University's ethics policy R 20.01, section 5.18, stipulates that the age of majority in British Columbia is 19 and individuals who fall below the age of majority require parental consent to participate in a research study. However, exceptions can be made to these requirements by the REB upon adequate justifications by the principal investigator (PI). Therefore, in hopes of diminishing risk to the participants, the PI strongly recommends allowing adolescent participants to act as mature minors and to provide their own, informed consent for participation. Justifications for this recommendation are provided below.

LGBTQ youth are likely to experience unique stressors in coming to terms with their personal sexual and/or gender orientation. Among these unique stresses is the process of finding acceptance in a heterosexual society. Past research on LGBTQ communities has established the potential emotional, physical, and familial risks of the reactions of parents to disclosure of LGBTQ identity (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Downs, 2012; Stengel, 2010; Stryker, 2008; Sullivan, 2012; Taylor & Peter, 2011). As highlighted by Griffin, Lee, Waugh, and Beyer (2004), required parental permission can place participants at risk based on the "blind" assumption that the parents or guardians know of and approve of their children's participation in the GSA. Therefore, to avoid placing participants at greater risk than what they would likely experience in their everyday life, this PI will allow its adolescent participants to act as mature minors and provide their own consent for participation.

Participant consent will be obtained orally before each interview. Individuals will be presented with an information sheet that will outline the process and purpose of the study. The researcher will read through the information sheet with each prospective participant to ensure understanding of the information being provided and allow the participant to ask any questions. The participant will be informed that personal disclosure of immediate self-harm and/or suicidal ideation will be addressed through the Protocol for Participant Disclosure of Self-Harm and/or Suicidal Ideation. Moreover, the researcher will contact a mental health resource, specifically Liz Robbins from the BC

Crisis Centre, in the presence of the participant to provide counselling services and/or sound information for individuals dealing with these types of situations.

Additionally, participants will be informed that the data from this research project will be used in a Master's thesis and course related papers. Participants will be reminded that the information they provide will be kept confidential and that names and locations will be anonymized using pseudonyms during the transcription process of the research to protect their identity. It will be reiterated that participation in this study is strictly voluntary allowing them to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without fear of any negative impact from the researcher.

If a participant chooses to withdraw from the study, they have the right to request that the recorded data be deleted. In accordance with SFU REB's policy on data retention and destruction, if the participant confirms the destruction of the data, the PI will offer to delete the audio file in front of the individual in order to maintain participant confidentiality. If the individual is not present, the data will be deleted upon request and the participant will receive a confirmation email stating the destruction of the data (also refer to the Confidentiality and Storage of Data section). Participants will be informed that they can exercise the option of removing any information given in the interview or may refuse to answer any questions they do not want answered. Upon completion of the interview, participants will be debriefed and an opportunity to bring forth any questions or concerns will be provided. Follow up interviews may be needed. As such, at the end of each interview participants will be asked if they would be willing to partake in a follow up interview if need be. The PI will inform them they have the right to refuse without reason or negative impact from the researcher.

Method of Data Collection

Based on the exploratory nature of this study, coupled with the lack of previous research pertaining to transgender student experiences within GSA programs, the PI will utilize a qualitative methodological approach to obtaining and analyzing the data.

The interview process will involve a face-to-face semi-structured interview approach. This will allow the PI to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth assessment of the current research topic.

Interviews will range from 30 – 45 minutes in length and will explore individual experiences with GSAs in high schools. Interviews will not, however, be restricted to this time frame and will depend on how talkative each participant is.

Questions presented in this research study will be developed from past research on LGB experiences with GSAs. Consent of each participant will be obtained orally before each interview. Individuals will be presented with an oral consent information sheet that will outline the process and purpose of the study. The PI will read through the consent information sheet with each prospective participant to ensure understanding of the information being provided and allow the participant to ask any questions (see Informed Consent).

Interviews will be conducted by the author in private rooms or another secure setting of the participants choosing to ensure confidentiality. For example, locations will include

Simon Fraser University campuses across metro Vancouver and LGBTQ community centers. With the participants consent, interviews will be recorded for quality purposes. If the participant does not consent to being digitally recorded, hand written notes will be taken. Data obtained through the interview process will be transcribed into a Microsoft Word document and imported into NVivo 10, a qualitative research software program. Here, the data will be coded and categorized using an inductive content analysis approach.

Confidentiality and Storage of Data

Confidentiality is a central focus of this research study. As Taylor and Peter (2011) articulate, “LGBTQ youth generally need to be careful about revealing their LGBTQ identity in order to avoid discrimination, harassment, and violence” (p. 280). Therefore, all interviews will be conducted by the PI and will take place in a private location of the participant’s choosing. Personal information obtained throughout this research project will only be accessible to the PI to ensure participant’s confidentiality. Moreover, during the transcription process, data will be stripped of any identifying information (i.e. names and locations) to ensure confidentiality upon publication. Pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant to ensure anonymity. A master list with the identifying information and the participant’s pseudonym will be stored separately by the PI in a password-protected encrypted USB key stored in a locked filing cabinet. Additionally, data (audio files and transcripts) obtained during this research study will be stored on a password-protected encrypted USB key stored in a locked filing cabinet and will remain there post publication for a maximum of two years. On the two year expiry date, the data will be destroyed.

Risk/Benefit Analysis

Potential Risks

The risk to the participants is minimal. Many of the potential participants in this study are part of a large queer youth support group that does motivational talks about LGBTQ issues in high schools throughout Vancouver and surrounding areas. Therefore, these youth are publicly open regarding their transgender status. It is noted, however, that although this study has a strong focus on positive encounters and experiences with GSA programs which can offer support, friendships, and empowerment for these youths, there is a possibility that some participants may encounter painful memories when discussing reasons for joining a GSA. In this case, the PI will be vigilant and mindful of the participants’ needs with respect to not answering certain questions and taking necessary breaks. Participants will also be instructed to seek their usual source of supports (e.g., outreach staff from BC’S Queer Resource Centre) if required. Additionally, information for the local distress hotline will be provided should the participant feel the need to seek alternative support.

Anonymity is a primary concern regarding this study. Therefore, the PI will adhere to the confidentiality procedures outlined above. Moreover, specific third party references (i.e. names and locations) will be removed during the transcription process.

There is no known risk to the researcher.

In accordance with R 20.01, this study can be classified as minimal-risk because any risks that will be encountered in this study are at the same level that one would expect the participants to encounter in their everyday life.

Potential Benefit

The available literature confirms that transgendered and LGBQ students regularly encounter victimization, harassment, isolation, and institutional discrimination within the school setting. Although homophobia and transphobia still occurs in schools, there have been efforts to counteract these forms of discrimination, including the development and implementation of high school gay-straight alliances (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). Currently, to this author's knowledge, no research study has undertaken the task of specifically examining GSAs and how they cater to transgender students and their struggles surrounding gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation. Therefore, to gain a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of GSAs, I will explore the dimensions of these safe spaces within the high school setting by assessing how GSA groups actually support transgendered and questioning students. By enhancing the limited knowledge encompassing this area, this research will hopefully provide useful school-based implications with regard to providing adequate support programs for youth struggling with the process of coming to terms with their sexual and/or gender orientation.

Remuneration and Dissemination of Results

Each individual who participates will receive a \$10 monetary payment as a token of appreciation for contributing to this research study. Based on the right to withdraw from this study without penalty, remuneration will be given to all participants regardless of whether they choose not to answer certain questions and/or withdraw from the study.

Participants will be informed that if they wish to receive the results of this study upon its completion they can contact the PI by email.

Appendix B.

Informed Consent

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF CRIMINOLOGY

8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6

ORAL CONSENT

This study is being conducted under the permission of the Simon Fraser University Research Ethics Board. The chief concern of the Board is for the health, safety and psychological well-being of research participants. If you have any questions regarding this study please contact the primary researcher, Kyle Sutherland, by email or the research supervisor, Dr. Brian Burtch, by email. Should you wish to obtain information about your rights as a participant in research, or about the responsibilities of researchers, concerns, or complaints about the manner in which you were treated in this study, please contact Dr. Jeff Toward, Director of the Office of Research Ethics by email or phone. You may also contact Neil Boyd, Director, School of Criminology, by email or phone.

TITLE: More Than Just 'Either Or': Transgender Students' Experiences with Gay-Straight Alliances in British Columbia

INVESTIGATOR: D. Kyle Sutherland, B.A., School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how high school gay-straight alliance (GSA) groups support transgender students and cater to issues surrounding gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation. Through the exploration of this topic area, this research will provide useful school-based implications with regard to providing adequate support programs for youth struggling with invisible and visible challenges, such as sexual and/or gender orientation.

TASK REQUIREMENTS. You will be asked to complete a face-to-face interview with the primary researcher. Interviews will range from 30 – 45 minutes in length and will explore your individual experiences with GSAs in a high school setting. Additionally, with your consent, the interview will be recorded for quality purposes. (Note: if the participant does not consent to being digitally recorded, hand written notes will be taken). Data from this research project will be used in a Master's thesis project and course related papers.

RISKS. The risk to the participants is minimal. It is noted, however, that although this study has a strong focus on positive encounters and experiences with GSA programs which can offer support, friendships, and empowerment, there is a possibility that you may encounter painful memories when discussing reasons for joining a GSA. You are reminded that you are under no obligation to answer any questions and may withdraw from the study at any point. If you require further assistance I recommend you seek out

your usual source of support (e.g., outreach staff from BC's Queer Resource Centre – (604) 684-5307) or call this distress hotline: 1-800-668-6868.

Disclosure of immediate self-harm and/or suicidal ideation will be addressed through the Protocol for Participant Disclosure of Self-Harm and/or Suicidal Ideation. Moreover, the researcher will contact a mental health resource, specifically Liz Robbins from the BC Crisis Centre, in the presence of the participant to provide counselling services and/or sound information for individuals dealing with these types of situations.

BENEFITS. Transgender students are often not distinguished from gays, lesbians, and bisexual individuals in the LGBT literature. Consequently, little academic attention has been given to how these GSA programs actually support transgender students and address issues surrounding gender identity, gender roles, and sexual orientation. Through the exploration of this topic area, this research will hopefully provide useful school-based implications with regard to providing adequate support programs for youth struggling with the process of coming to terms with their sexual and/or gender orientation.

CONFIDENTIALITY. The data collected in this study are strictly confidential. Your personal name will be replaced by a pseudonym (a fake name) so that your name is not associated with the responses you provide. Moreover, during the transcription process, data will be stripped of any identifying information (i.e. names and locations) to ensure confidentiality upon publication. Data (audio files and transcripts) obtained during this research study will be stored on a password-protected encrypted USB key stored in a locked filing cabinet and will remain there post publication for a maximum of two years. On the two year expiry date the data will be destroyed.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW AND REMUNERATION. This study is entirely voluntary. This means that you have the right to not complete certain questions and/or withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without fear of any negative impact from the researcher. If you withdraw, you also have the right to request that your recorded data be deleted.

Individuals who participate will receive a \$10 monetary payment as a token of appreciation for partaking in this research study. Based on the right to withdraw from this study without penalty, remuneration will be given to all participants regardless of whether you choose not to answer certain questions and/or withdraw from the study. Payment will be given out once the interview has been completed or the participant has withdrawn from the researcher study.

If you wish to receive the results of this study upon its completion, please contact the principal investigator Kyle Sutherland.

By verbally consenting, you acknowledge that you have read the above form and understand the conditions of your participation. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you understand that if at any time you may withdraw from the interview, you may do so without giving an explanation and with no penalty. You consent to being digitally recorded for quality purposes and you are also aware that the data gathered in this study are confidential with respect to your personal identity. Lastly, you understand that finding from this research study will be used in a Master's thesis project and course

related papers. Stating YES indicates that YOU agree to participate in this study. If I do not wish to partake in this study, please state NO.

Appendix C.

Protocol for Participant Disclosure of Self-Harm and Suicide Ideation

In the matter of a participant revealing current suicidal thoughts or intentions of immediate self-harm, the following steps will be taken:

Step One:

1. The researcher will ask the participant if there is someone they regularly speak with about this issue and if they can be contacted at this time.
 - a. If yes, with the participant's permission, the researcher will contact the requested personal support contact and will wait with the participant until support arrives. In addition, the researcher will provide the participant with the necessary crisis and support helpline information. Here, the participant will be able to speak with support workers trained in suicide and self-harm prevention.
 - b. If no, or if the participant's personal contact is unavailable, the researcher will implement step two.

Step Two:

2. If the participant does not have a personal support contact, or if the personal support contact is unavailable, the researcher will provide the participant with the necessary crisis and support helpline information. The researcher will request to call the support helpline with the participant to ensure the participant receives the necessary help. In addition, the researcher will offer the participant the option of being taken to the hospital (refer to step three).

Step Three:

3. In addition to providing the participant with helpline contacts, the researcher will also offer the participant the option of being taken to the nearest hospital to receive psychiatric assessment, if needed.

Crisis and Support Contacts

Crisis Centre (Anywhere in BC)

- Thoughts of suicide?
 - 1-800 (SUICIDE) or 1-800-784-2433

Mental Health Support Line

- 1-800-310-6789

Chimo Crisis Services Crisis Line

- 604-279-7070
 - Areas serves: Richmond/South Delta/Ladner/Tsawwassen

Youth and Crisis Response Team – Fraser Health

- Surrey: 604-585-5561
- Port Moody: 604-469-3232
- Abbotsford: 604-557-2095

TRACC (Team Response to Children & Adolescents in Crisis)

- Richmond: 604-207-2524

VictimLink BC

- 1-800-563-0808

Youth Against Violence Line

- 1-800-680-4264

Online Chat Service for Youth/Adults

- Online Service for Youth • www.YouthinBC.com
- Online Service for Adults • www.CrisisCentreChat.ca

Appendix D.

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Introduction

- How do you identify yourself?
 - o What does it mean to you
- Personal pronouns?
- Personal pseudonym?

Background Information

- How old are you?
- Family background
 - o Parents
 - Occupation?
 - Education?
 - o Siblings?
- Where did you grow up?
- Jobs you have had/currently have?

High School Experiences

- Could you please describe what your high school experience like?
 - o Challenges
 - o Positive experiences
 - o Negative experiences
 - o Friendships

Involvement in GSAs

- How long have you been involved and/or a member of a Gay-Straight Alliance?
 - o Please describe some daily activities of GSAs?
- Reasons for joining the gay-straight alliance?
- Please describe your interactions with other members of the GSA?
 - o Issues of exclusion:
 - Did you find LGB members inclusive?

Impact of GSAs

- Please share some strategies you have learned with regard to handling society's assumptions of heterosexuality?
 - o What role did GSAs play in developing these strategies, if any?
 - o Coping mechanisms?
- Has the involvement in the alliance affected the way you identify with your school or feelings of belongings?
 - o Why/why not

- Stigma?
- Academic performance?
- Please discuss school safety and what that means to you?
 - How does this relate to school involvement?
 - Are students more comfortable with being known as transgender through their involvement in the alliance?
 - Do students feel safer attending school due to their involvement in the alliance?
 - Empowerment?
- Please comment on how/if GSA programs actually support transgender students?
 - Why or why not?
- What does a safe space mean to you?

Social Media as a Safe Space

- Websites? Chat rooms?