

## **The Success of Gay–Straight Alliances in Waterloo Region, Ontario: A Confluence of Political and Social Factors**

ALEX ST. JOHN, ROBB TRAVERS, LAUREN MUNRO,  
and RENATO LIBORO

*Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada*

MARGARET SCHNEIDER

*Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

CARRIE L. GREIG

*OK2BME Program, KW Counselling Services, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada*

*This article outlines how gay–straight alliances (GSAs) work to connect youth with community resources, and outlines the political and social context of GSAs in Waterloo Region, Ontario, Canada. Fifteen individuals (youth, teachers, and a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer [LGBTQ] youth service provider) participated in interviews about the role of GSAs in creating supportive school environments for LGBTQ youth and their allies. Analyses of the interview data found that, apart from providing direct support to LGBTQ students, GSAs in Waterloo Region decrease isolation by connecting youth with other LGBTQ community members, events, and resources. This article discusses how the confluence of government and school board policy and community agency support facilitates the implementation, maintenance, and success of GSAs.*

**KEYWORDS** *Canada, educational policy, gay–straight alliances, LGBTQ youth, minority stress, teachers*

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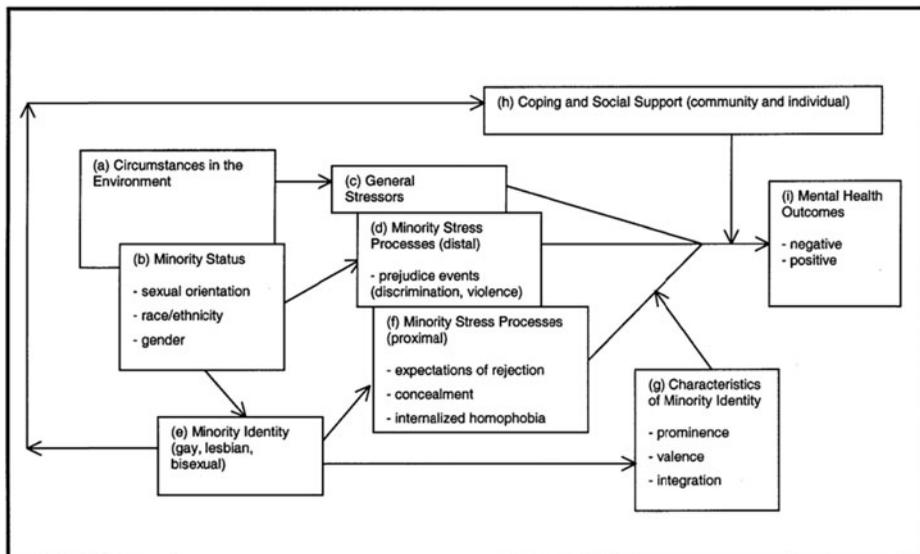
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Address correspondence to Robb Travers, Department of Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3C5, Canada. E-mail: rtravers@wlu.ca

Although openness about and disclosure of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity have been associated with better overall psychological adjustment, openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth face a number of challenges in their lives, including those related to heterosexism and homophobia which take the form of rejection, discrimination, harassment, and violence (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Rivers & D’Augelli, 2001).

The minority stress model, proposed by Meyer (2003; see Figure 1), illustrates how prejudice, stigma, and discrimination (i.e., “minority stress”) explain mental health problems in LGBTQ individuals. LGBTQ youth are more likely than non-LGBTQ youth to experience bullying, to face difficulties accessing support from teachers, and to be involved in fights at school (Ray, 2006; Scott, Pringle, & Lumsdaine, 2004).

The bullying experienced by LGBTQ youth has been linked with a variety of school problems including truancy, declining academic achievement, and dropouts (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Gilliam, 2002; Ray, 2006; Scott et al., 2004). LGBTQ youth are more likely than straight youth to take illegal drugs such as ecstasy, cocaine, and marijuana and to report higher levels of alcohol consumption (Gilliam, 2002; Scott et al., 2004; Ray, 2006). Further, LGBTQ youth are more likely to experience homelessness, with between 20% and 40% of homeless youth identifying as LGBTQ (Ray, 2006). Research also indicates that LGBTQ youth are more likely to be involved in an unplanned pregnancy than non-LGBTQ youth (Saewyc, Bearinger, Blum,



**FIGURE 1** Minority stress processes in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations. Reproduced from Meyer (2003).

& Resnick, 1999; Travers, Newton, & Munro, 2011). Travers, Newton, and Munro (2011) indicate that this finding may be a “response to heterosexism,” where dominant heterosexuality puts pressure on youth to conform to heterosexist norms and to prove one’s heterosexuality through heterosexual sex. Given the range of challenges that LGBTQ youth face, it is no surprise that they experience higher levels of suicidality and are more likely to engage in self-harm compared to their heterosexual counterparts (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Gilliam, 2002; Scott et al., 2004).

Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, an LGBTQ human rights research and education group, in 2011 published the *First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia in Canadian Schools*, which found that, despite Canada’s superior track record supporting LGBTQ rights,<sup>1</sup> youth are still very much immersed in heterosexist and homophobic school environments. In this national survey of 3,700 youth, 70% of both LGBTQ and straight youth reported hearing homophobic remarks such as “That’s so gay” every day, while nearly half heard the word “faggot” every day. Youth recounted significant verbal harassment about their perceived gender identity or sexual orientation, with more than 20% being physically harassed or assaulted due to their sexual orientation, and trans youth reported high levels of sexual harassment in school (Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, 2011).

Whereas heterosexual youth may turn to their homes, schools, peer groups, and communities to receive support, these are often the very sites of victimization for LGBTQ youth (Rivers & D’Augelli, 2001). Given such lack of support and high rates of physical, verbal, and sexual harassment, it is not surprising that two-thirds of Canadian LGBTQ youth feel unsafe in their schools (Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, 2011, p. 8). Nevertheless, many LGBTQ youth demonstrate agency through their visibility as LGBTQ, or LGBTQ-positive allies in their schools.

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) are school-based organizations that provide a safe and supportive place within schools for LGBTQ youth and their allies to meet.<sup>2</sup> According to Griffin, Lee, Waugh, and Beyer (2003), the functions of GSAs fall into one of four main categories: (1) counseling and support groups for LGBTQ youth; (2) “safe” spaces for LGBTQ youth and their friends; (3) primary vehicles for education and awareness about LGBTQ issues in schools; and (4) part of wider school efforts, such as a safe schools

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<sup>1</sup>Same-sex marriage was legalized first in Ontario in 2003 and nationwide in 2005. The Canadian federal government, and all provinces and territories, recognize sexual orientation as a prohibited ground of discrimination in their human rights legislation (Canadian Heritage, 2009).

<sup>2</sup>Allies, a term introduced by Washington and Evans (1991), are youth who do not identify as LGBTQ but work against oppression and advocate for LGBTQ youth. The demographic profile of straight allies tends to be dominated by White females (Goldstein & Davis, 2010).

task force, to educate and increase awareness in schools. GSAs may not fit distinctly into one of these categories and may serve a unique purpose for each member. For example, a single GSA may be an important source of informal counseling and support for some youth, while other youth who may not need the same support may use the GSA for advancing political dialogue and action.

A number of positive influences of GSAs on school environments and on LGBTQ youth's lives have been reported, including enhancing safety and feelings of personal empowerment. For instance, according to Szalacha (2003), the sexual diversity climate, or the "level of safety, tolerance, and atmosphere of respect for sexual minority individuals" (p. 62), is significantly better in schools with GSAs and best in schools which combine GSAs, staff training to combat homophobia, and an explicit antihomophobia policy. Students who attend schools with GSAs are significantly less likely to report being victimized based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Better outcomes related to truancy, dropouts (Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010), alcohol use, depression, and general psychological distress have also been found among LGBTQ youth who attend schools with GSAs (Heck et al., 2011). Egale Canada Human Rights Trust (2011) found that students from schools with GSAs are more open about their sexual orientation and gender identity, more likely to perceive their school climate as becoming less homophobic, and more likely to see their school communities as supportive of LGBTQ youth.

GSAs also play a significant role in participants empowering themselves (Russel, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009), helping them to develop a positive LGBTQ identity (Lee, 2002; Garcia-Alonso, 2004), and providing them with their own rituals, such as dances (Garcia-Alonso, 2004). GSAs increase the visibility of LGBTQ issues, challenge heteronormativity and heterosexism in schools, and work to normalize and legitimize the issues facing LGBTQ youth (Garcia-Alonso, 2004). Finally, GSAs politicize LGBTQ issues, which allows youth to see their personal experiences with isolation, exclusion, and marginalization as public issues stemming from oppression (Mayberry, 2007).

While GSAs are important for fostering environments of safety for LGBTQ youth (Goodenow et al., 2006), a number of systemic factors facilitate or hinder their implementation, maintenance, and success. According to Griffin and Ouellett (2002), these include (1) government policies and programs, backed up by legal, financial, and technical resources; (2) supportive administrators, particularly school principals; (3) community participation; and (4) student leadership. Griffin and Ouellett (2002) further emphasized the importance of understanding the impact of GSAs within the context of these other systemic factors.

Herriot (2011) placed the development of GSAs in Canada over the past ten years within Canada's shifting political, legal, and social context. Herriot's analysis of Canadian newspaper coverage of GSAs outlined a number of key successful human rights cases for LGBTQ people and argued that "[i]t is against the backdrop of these legal, political, and social contexts of both schooling and Canadian culture that GSAs emerged" (p. 220).

Despite numerous successful human rights cases for LGBTQ people there is a historical absence of specific language addressing LGBTQ bullying in Canadian safe schools policies (Walton, 2004). Further, while memoranda and policies are important symbolic efforts, these may not lead to real systemic or institutional change as often there is no action plan to combat homophobia (Meyer, 2008). Teachers' awareness of such policies also seems to vary greatly (Meyer, 2008).

There are multiple challenges related to GSAs. For instance, in the context of the emergence of a GSA in Salt Lake City, Mayberry (2007) documented two prominent discursive strategies employed when discussing school-based programs for LGBTQ youth: the identity formation discourse, focusing on resolving developmental problems associated with having a stigmatized identity; and the public health discourse, examining the role of the school environment in contributing to or preventing risky behaviors, such as alcohol and substance abuse. Mayberry argued that these discourses are problematic because they individualize and depoliticize the experiences of LGBTQ youth as well as overlook the underlying heterosexism that exists beyond the school environment.

Much of the rhetoric surrounding school safety is the product of a "moral panic" regarding the incidence of extreme physical violence in schools, such as the December 2012 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut (Short, 2009; Walton, 2004, 2005). Often this leads to antibullying policies that tend to focus on bullying as an individual behavior (i.e., addressing physical violence through zero-tolerance policies), ignoring the systemic forces at work, namely, homophobia and heterosexism (Walton, 2004). GSAs may provide an opportunity for LGBTQ youth and their allies to challenge these systemic forces in schools.

While the research presented in this article incorporates some of the problematic discursive strategies criticized by Mayberry (2007), we attempt to move beyond the identity formation and public health discourses by considering the social and political context of GSAs in Waterloo Region, Ontario, Canada. In particular, the introduction by the Ministry of Education in the province of Ontario of the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009), which ensures every school has an equity officer and focuses on making schools welcoming for all youth, will be considered in terms of its impact on the social and political context of Waterloo Region GSAs. Our research hopes to enrich the limited findings

about the positive impact of GSAs in Ontario's unique human rights policy context (Egale Canada Human Rights Trust, 2011).

## METHODOLOGY

This article draws on qualitative data collected and analyzed from a pilot study of GSAs in Waterloo Region that aims to further understand the impacts of GSAs on local youth and high schools. Our purpose is twofold: to outline how GSAs in Waterloo Region work to connect youth with broader community structures and resources; and to outline how the political and social context of GSAs in Waterloo Region has an impact upon their functioning.

### Research Site and Partner

This research focuses on GSAs in the Waterloo Region of Ontario, Canada, a municipality of approximately 500,000 people, consisting of three smaller cities (Cambridge, Waterloo, and Kitchener) and their environs, approximately an hour's drive west of Toronto. It has a median income of \$29,449, one of the highest in southern Ontario (Region of Waterloo, 2006), and is home to two universities and one college. The Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) contains 17 high schools, all of which have GSAs. There is also a publicly funded, religiously affiliated (Roman Catholic) school board in Waterloo Region. However, because the sample was collected through a network which, at the time of data collection, included public school GSAs only, data from Catholic school GSAs are excluded.

Data used in this article were drawn from a larger study that emerged as a result of an ongoing research partnership between Wilfrid Laurier University and the OK2BME Program of KW Counselling Services, an organization based in Kitchener, Ontario, that offers a variety of therapeutic counseling programs to the community. OK2BME offers counseling and support groups for LGBTQ youth, as well as education and training to service providers, school-based stakeholders, and the broader community. The OK2BME Program partners with WRDSB GSAs to provide education, resources, and one-on-one support to LGBTQ students in high schools. As partners on this project, a service provider from OK2BME provided invaluable input into the development of the objectives, design, recruitment strategy, and interview guides for the current study.

### Sample

Youth, teachers, and a key informant LGBTQ youth service provider directly involved in GSAs in Waterloo Region were recruited through a variety of

strategies. Youth were recruited through the Waterloo Region GSA conference, an event cosponsored by the WRDSB and OK2BME, which brought together youth from across the region to network and discuss issues relevant to GSAs and participate in workshops facilitated by LGBTQ community members. Youth who attended the conference were selected because of their past or current membership in local GSAs. An additional notice was circulated through OK2BME's e-mail network and an advertisement placed on their website. Teachers and key informants were also recruited at the GSA conference and by invitation through the personal and professional networks of the research team. At the time of this analysis, nine youth from six high schools, five teacher GSA sponsors from five high schools, and one key informant service provider who provides LGBTQ counseling, education, and outreach had participated in semistructured, open-ended interviews.

### Data Collection

Participants were interviewed at either Wilfrid Laurier University or at a community location of their choice. Interviews were between one and two hours in length and were conducted by either the principal investigator or research coordinators working in the Equity, Sexual Health, and HIV Research Group. All participants provided informed consent prior to their interview, and youth received a \$25 honorarium following their participation. A secondary incentive of \$10 was provided to youth participants who recruited additional youth. One of nine youth was recruited through the secondary incentive. Participants also completed a demographics questionnaire detailing age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and high school (see Table 1). Teachers were asked about their school and the age of the GSAs in their schools (see Table 2).

**TABLE 1** Youth Demographics ( $N = 9$ )

Participant pseudonym	Age	Trans	Gender	Sexual orientation	Membership	City	Ethno-racial background
Casey	17	No	Female	Lesbian	3 years	Kitchener	White-Canadian
Jessie	14	Yes	Male	Bisexual	1 year	Cambridge	White-Canadian
Haiden	17	No	Male	Gay	1 year	Cambridge	White-Canadian
Sydney	16	No	Female	Straight	1 year	Kitchener	White-European
Dakota	16	No	Male	Straight	0	Cambridge	White-European
Jordan	17	No	Male	Gay	0	Kitchener	White-Canadian
Quinn	17	No	Female	Straight	2 years	Cambridge	White-European
Jamie	17	No	Female	Bisexual	1 week	Kitchener	White-Canadian
Avery	18	Yes	Female	Straight	4 years	Cambridge	White-European

*Note.* Trans = does the participant identify as trans; membership = length of membership in gay-straight alliance; City = the city where their high school is located.

**TABLE 2** Teacher Demographics ( $N = 5$ )

Participant number	Age of GSA	Grade level in school
1	3.5 years	9–12
2	2–3 years	9–12
3	3 years	7–8
4	4 years	9–12
5	2 years	9–12

*Note.* GSA = gay–straight alliance. To protect their anonymity and confidentiality, teacher participants in the study provided limited demographic information.

Semistructured interviews with youth focused on two main areas. First, we asked youth about function and form of GSAs and contextual factors in their schools, including questions such as, “What role does your GSA currently play in your school?” and “What role do you see the LGBTQ service providers playing in your school?” Second, interviews asked youth about their personal experiences with homophobia and GSAs, including questions such as, “What is it like to be an LGBTQ student at your school?” and “How does being involved in your school’s GSA impact your experiences as a student in your school?” In addition to being asked similar questions, teachers discussed the impact that school board and government actions and policies have had on the development of their GSAs and GSAs throughout Waterloo Region. The service provider was asked similar questions but with more of a focus about the connection between Waterloo Region LGBTQ service providers and GSAs.

### Data Analyses

We used a modified version of the grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The grounded theory method allows theory (themes) to emerge inductively from the data rather than starting from hypotheses and deductively establishing findings. Rather than applying a theoretical framework to data, theory emerges from the data. We modified this approach by establishing a categorical coding framework prior to inductive coding, which allowed analysis to focus on our areas of interest.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo 9 software. After reviewing the transcripts, the research team developed a categorical coding framework based on the research objectives, interview guide questions, experiences of interviewers, and transcript data. The categories included (a) general experiences of LGBTQ youth, (b) perceived impact of GSAs, (c) description of GSAs, (d) experiences of LGBT teachers, (e) contextual factors, and (f) response to GSAs. For this article we focused on categories (a), (b), (c), and (e).

In the second stage of coding, interviews from one youth, one teacher, and one service provider were coded separately by two members of the research team to ensure intercoder reliability. Codes were developed inductively, through the use of “open” coding—using the coding framework as a guide for sorting the data. In open coding, research analysts name and describe textual data by asking “What is happening here?” While many of the codes fit in the existing categorical coding framework, many others do not, which requires the establishment of new categories, including such categories as “marginalized youth and GSAs.”

Next, the coders gathered to reach consensus regarding any codes where disagreement existed. At the same time, research team members began to make connections among codes and discuss potential theories. Once consensus on the open codes was achieved from the first three interviews, a single research team member coded the remaining transcripts using the established coding framework while making appropriate changes as new information emerged from the data.

During the final stage of coding, emerging themes, patterns, and relationships within and between participants’ responses were identified. A process of triangulation between service provider, teacher, and youth responses was used to enhance the credibility of the data. Themes were also appraised and altered by the research team as a whole, so that alternate explanations could be explored and discussed.

## RESULTS

Our analyses of the data indicate that GSAs play a crucial role in connecting youth with others, both inside and outside their respective schools, and provide opportunities for youth to engage with the broader LGBTQ community and community supports. Further, Waterloo Region GSAs experience a high level of support through the OK2BME Program, the Equity and Inclusion Office (a branch of the Waterloo Region District School Board), and Ontario’s Ministry of Education policies.

### GSAs Connect Youth With One Another

GSAs have an important role in the lives of LGBTQ youth and their allies. In particular, the ways in which GSAs connect students with other LGBTQ community members and resources was cited as one of the most significant outcomes of being involved in a GSA. These connections decreased feelings of isolation and helped build a sense of community, allowing youth

to see beyond their high school experiences. As described by Blake,<sup>3</sup> a teacher:

I think one of the big pieces that we've put together, that the kids have responded the most to, is networking outside their school. . . . [W]e try to tell them all the time that this is just a little pond and the world's a big place . . . get them together with other people; that seems to be helpful.

In describing how one school dealt with the suicide of a GSA member, our key informant service provider, Robin, recounted how the connection between the GSA and OK2BME enabled her to connect youth with local resources and supports. She also helped youth understand that they could draw on the broader network of GSAs as a source of support, something that both teachers and students may overlook:

I talk about "what are some positive social supports in our community that you can use and do," including OK2BME, but other things, and talk about the relevance of GSAs. That's a network right there, and sometimes we don't see that or the teachers don't realize that and the youth don't see that.

This sentiment was shared by youth who enjoyed new relationships with friends and their community because of their GSA. The GSAs raised awareness among youth of the LGBTQ community in Waterloo Region and connected them with LGBTQ-friendly businesses, organizations, and events. As a youth named Haiden indicated,

Well, I've gotten more friends from [GSA]. Um, I've gotten more aware of the LGBTQ community in [Waterloo Region]. . . . I know about places I can go, I know about events I can go to, because of the GSA . . . and I know about support groups . . . other than GSA.

Youth described relationships they formed within their GSAs and through GSA networking opportunities, expressing the importance of these connections for reducing their isolation. For instance, Casey came to understand that she was not alone and was not the only youth experiencing challenges related to homophobia and coming out: "I could connect with them and I was like, wow, I don't feel so alone, I'm not the only person . . . that feels this way. It really made a big difference."

Youth also highlighted the importance of the local GSA conference, in particular, for connecting them with people who are accepting of LGBTQ individuals, which helped them develop a stronger group identity and a sense

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<sup>3</sup>Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the anonymity of participants.

of community. Seeing other youth that were “like them” worked to validate and normalize their identities, thereby reducing isolation. For instance, Casey observed:

Everyone [at the GSA conference] being in the same room and being accepting, and realizing, “Hey, look, they’re not different; they’re not some weird freak. They’re just like me,” and like, I think those are the big things that we found with GSA that when we did the conference. We’re like, wow, you never feel like everyone’s like you; you’re not by yourself.

GSAs also connected youth with leadership opportunities and helped strengthen and build the local LGBTQ community. A service provider highlighted the important role that GSAs play in linking youth with leadership opportunities that could help continue to build momentum within the LGBTQ community in Waterloo Region. These leadership opportunities also facilitated positive identity development and fostered self-esteem among youth, like Robin:

The GSAs promote this camp so that youth can go and become youth leaders. . . . That’s the piece that for me is so important—that these youth figure out how they can carry this momentum—because I’m going to retire someday, and they need to get that empowerment, that piece that says, “Yes, I’m gay; yes, it’s ok; yes, I have a good self-concept; yes, my self-esteem is okay; yes, I’m a part of the GSA; yes, I believe in what I’m doing.”

### The Political and Social Context of Waterloo Region GSAs

The success of GSAs was mediated by their connections with other important institutions, including the WRDSB and the OK2BME Program, which were important for building GSA capacity and connecting youth with services. In addition, teachers and our key informant service provider discussed broad shifts that were making schools a safer place for LGBTQ youth in the province of Ontario and their influence on Waterloo Region GSAs. While they mentioned the importance of GSAs to school safety, they also maintained that GSA capacity was impacted by broader policies that support LGBTQ youth.

*Connections with community agencies.* GSAs in Waterloo Region moved beyond the provision of direct support for youth. For example, GSAs not only focused their energies within individual school settings but also built broader capacity in Waterloo Region to support LGBTQ youth through annual GSA conferences and quarterly GSA teacher sponsor meetings. In these forums, awareness of LGBTQ youth issues were

raised, skills-building opportunities provided, and teachers and students established lasting and meaningful connections with each other and their communities.

Further, GSAs often performed an important referral role for the OK2BME Program by connecting students with its services. Robin, a service provider, highlighted the role that she played supporting GSAs and connecting youth with services and resources in the region:

They [youth in GSAs] didn't know how to bring [bullying and suicide] up and talk about it, and so it was my job to come in that day and just kind of put it on the table and say, "It happens sometimes. It happens. When it happens, we need to talk about it, and again, here's your group of supports."

She was also instrumental in assisting GSAs with getting started, building structure, and ensuring they have the resources required to support students. One youth, Jordan, recalled:

Um, she [a service provider] actually came in today to talk to our vice-principal because, you know, we're having our first meeting on the twenty-fourth of this month, so we kind of want to have that structure, and we talk with her, and she's actually planning on possibly getting us . . . resources and stuff like that.

*Supportive government and school board policies.* Teachers and our key informant service provider reported that a number of policies developed and implemented by the province of Ontario's Ministry of Education (2009), highlighted in its Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, updated in 2009, helped support the efforts of the WRDSB Equity and Inclusion Office, specifically related to the Ministry's Equity and Inclusion Policy (WRDSB, 2007) to "provide a safe, inclusive environment free from inequity, discrimination and harassment," and delineating "sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression," as protected grounds from discrimination. This policy has become an important symbolic and substantive support for GSAs. Robin put it this way:

Yeah, that's fairly new in terms of having actual equity and inclusion officers hired at the [school] board . . . the Ministry implemented those changes and said this is what's needed . . . we luckily get to be a part of that because it helps us and we help them.

Staff from the WRDSB Equity and Inclusion Office attend quarterly meetings with GSA teacher sponsors to discuss successes and challenges within the GSAs in the region and support events such as the GSA semiformal dance and GSA conference. Teachers highlighted the important role of the Equity

and Inclusion Office in garnering support for GSAs at the school board level that, in turn, supports teacher sponsors in starting and maintaining successful GSAs. McKenna, a teacher, said, for instance, that

[the Equity and Inclusion Officer] performed an equity audit here at the [school] board and through that came a number of recommendations . . . and helping support GSAs was one of those. That's when things started to open up a little more, to be safer for those of us who teach, to be able to more fundamentally say we're behind GSAs. Now that the board has a policy, it's a little more visible, it's starting to get some more air time at the board, and there's some more acceptance at the board, so it was easier for us to come out and initiate more GSAs.

Another teacher, Kelly, described the role of the Equity and Inclusion Office in connecting GSAs with one another, with the school board, and with the OK2BME Program, discussing both concerns and successes:

I don't know if they've done anything recently on that, programming for staff. Certainly they do that—they offer GSAs, at least an opportunity to get together and talk about GSA concerns, which is where I usually come across them, and that's been great, really supportive of things like the conference or the prom, or you know those kinds of things that are being done in the schools.

Beyond providing behind-the-scenes support for GSAs, a service provider pointed out the importance of the physical presence of the equity and inclusion officer at GSA-related events. This was illustrated by a comment by one teacher: “Our equity and inclusion officer was there [at pride prom]. Actually, so was a school board trustee . . . which was really cool and cool for the kids, I think. As long as they knew who she was; I think they did.”

## DISCUSSION

Our work on high school GSAs builds upon the findings of other studies by including the perspectives of youth, teachers, and a service provider centrally involved in supporting the implementation and maintenance of GSAs in Waterloo Region. The inclusion of multiple perspectives, particularly service provider and teacher perspectives, results in a more holistic picture of the social and political context of GSAs. Whereas youth experience the influences of policies firsthand, teachers have a more complete understanding of how government policy interacts with and impacts individual school boards and classrooms. Thus, our research moves beyond positive individual psychological and emotional impacts that GSAs have on LGBTQ youth and builds

upon the earlier work of Griffin and Ouellet (2002) to detail two essential supports that facilitate the success of GSAs in Waterloo Region: community agency support and government and school board policy.

### The Effectiveness of GSAs in Waterloo Region: A Confluence of Supporting Factors

In Canada, education falls under the purview of the various provincial and territorial governments. As such, Ontario's Ministry of Education has significant influence on individual school board policy and practice. In 2009, the Ministry of Education introduced its Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, which provided a number of guidelines that schools were asked to use to foster a safe and supportive school climate for all youth. This document includes references to the Ontario Human Rights Code (1990) and specifically highlights discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The Ministry of Education (2009) website communicates its equity commitment this way: "Students in our publicly funded education system—regardless of background or personal circumstances—must be given every opportunity to reach their full potential." Whereas, historically, language and policies on homophobia and LGBTQ identities were absent in this kind of legislation (Walton, 2004), the 2009 Ontario government policy explicitly highlights homophobia as an unacceptable form of discrimination.

Prior to the introduction of the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, the WRDSB was already well on its way to addressing issues of equity and inclusion in Waterloo Region schools. The WRDSB *Equity and Inclusion Policy*, first approved in 2006, explicitly included protections on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. This policy led to the commissioning of an Equity Audit Report in 2007, which recommended that an Equity and Inclusion Office be created along with two equity and inclusion officer positions. In 2008, an assistant superintendent position was added to the Equity and Inclusion Office structure (D. Ahluwalia, personal communication, August 15, 2012). The focus of the WRDSB Equity and Inclusion Office is to ensure equitable school experiences for all youth in the Waterloo Region—work which is supported by both the WRDSB Equity and Inclusion Policy and Ontario's more recent Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009).

In addition to government and school board policies, GSAs in Waterloo Region are supported by their connection with the OK2BME Program of KW Counselling Services. The OK2BME Program has been an integral partner with individual schools and the WRDSB Equity and Inclusion Office in supporting and facilitating the implementation, maintenance, and success of GSAs in Waterloo Region. The LGBTQ youth service provider of the OK2BME Program attends the quarterly GSA advisor meetings and hosts

the annual GSA conference, which brings together diverse GSA stakeholders from across Waterloo Region to network, discuss issues relevant to GSAs, and build knowledge and skills. The unique combination of school board policies and structures, government policy, and the role of the OK2BME Program form the basis for a supportive environment in which Waterloo Region GSAs are able to flourish.

The Ontario government's explicit support and recognition of LGBTQ youth is a key factor influencing GSAs in Waterloo Region. Government policies, such as the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, mandate the creation of school board policies to combat homophobia and heterosexism in schools, as well as the connections between community organizations and GSAs; these were identified as essential supports for GSAs by teachers, service providers, and youth in our study. Ensuring that GSA teacher sponsors feel their jobs are secure if they support GSAs is an essential step to ensuring the successful implementation of GSAs. Furthermore, teacher sponsors working for school boards with explicit equity and inclusion policies may feel more supported in encouraging their GSAs to engage in activism, education, and awareness activities. Engaging in activism has the potential to elevate the function of GSAs from local support groups and safe spaces for LGBTQ youth into primary vehicles for change regarding LGBTQ issues in schools or as part of broader school efforts to educate and increase awareness in schools (Griffin et al., 2003).

### Group-Level Resources: Why Is This a Good Thing for LGBTQ Youth?

Meyer (2003) discusses a number of stress-ameliorating factors that intervene in the relationship between minority stress and health, distinguishing between individual- and group-level resources, with the latter being available to all LGBTQ people. Group-level resources available to LGBTQ people include (a) the establishment of their own structures and values, and (b) the experience of environments in which they are not stigmatized by others.

Access to these group-level resources may be facilitated by GSAs, according to Meyer (2003). While much research has considered the direct impacts (e.g., psychological impacts and school performance) of GSAs, this article more closely analyzes the ways in which GSAs are able to connect youth with resources, supports, and the local LGBTQ community. In particular, we highlight the importance of GSAs in connecting LGBTQ youth to their peers outside of their schools through a local community agency, through GSA events such as conferences and dances, and through other networking opportunities. In the case of Waterloo Region, we believe that the provision of such group-level resources is facilitated by the convergence of Ontario government-specific policies, school board policies, and community agency support.

This speaks to how GSAs in Waterloo Region provide group-level resources, specifically LGBTQ community structures and values, and environments in which LGBTQ youth are not stigmatized by others (Meyer, 2003). By connecting youth with the broader LGBTQ community, and with such alternative structures as the annual GSA conference, GSAs in Waterloo Region may increase the sense of community experienced by youth. Youth may begin to compare themselves to other GSA or LGBTQ community members, rather than to the dominant majority, which may enhance self-esteem. While Meyer argues that individual personality characteristics are important determinants of LGBTQ people's access to these group-level resources, GSAs may also facilitate access. The provision of support and access to these group-level resources may help buffer the relationship between minority stress and adverse health outcomes for LGBTQ youth.

Garcia-Alonso (2004) discusses the important legitimizing and normalizing effect that GSAs can have. This, too, is echoed in our findings where participants reported decreased feelings of isolation due to community connections garnered through GSAs. Opportunities for LGBTQ youth leadership and mentorship provide social roles that allow youth to feel both legitimate and valued in their community. These connections and opportunities may further legitimize and normalize LGBTQ identities for youth.

## Implications

We hope we have avoided the narrow individualizing and depoliticizing discursive traps described by Mayberry (2007). While both identity formation and public health lenses are evident in our findings, this research study considers the political and social context of GSAs. Similar to the work of Herriot (2011) and Griffin and Ouellett (2002), our research emerges from a need to understand the development and success of GSAs within their respective political and social contexts. The success of GSAs in Waterloo Region can be better understood within a framework of change that includes the consideration of shifting political landscapes and key connections with community organizations.

GSAs alone are not enough to significantly alter the social context of youth's lives. However, our analyses of the data indicate that GSAs, in combination and connection with other policies, activities, and organizations, work to reduce youth's feelings of isolation by creating group-level resources. In December 2011, after data were collected for this paper, Ontario premier Dalton McGuinty released the Ontario government's next action plan on bullying: enforcing government policy supporting GSAs in all Ontario publicly funded schools, including those that fall under the jurisdiction of Catholic district school boards (Office of the Premier, 2011). The action plan included the Accepting Schools Act (2012), which requires school boards to "support pupils who want to establish and lead activities and organizations that

promote a safe and inclusive learning environment.” The Accepting Schools Act, which became law on June 5, 2012, is an example of explicit legislative policy support for GSAs and other student groups, and may be a further crucial and important step in ensuring the ongoing success of GSAs. International advocates working to improve the lives of LGBTQ youth should consider the important role that policies, beyond the immediate classroom context, can have on the success of GSAs and effective implementation of other LGBTQ-affirming initiatives.

Policymakers outside of Waterloo Region (and outside of Canada) should note the importance of these findings when attempting to improve LGBTQ youth’s experiences in schools. Schools do not exist in a vacuum; human rights and education policies have important implications for youth in schools. In Waterloo Region supportive policies at the school board and provincial level, as well as community-level supports, have been essential for GSAs and LGBTQ youth to thrive in schools. Action toward improving LGBTQ youth’s lives should advocate for comprehensive policies and interventions that target multiple contexts (i.e., classroom, school, school board, and provincial and federal government) and consider each policy from an interactive and holistic perspective.

### Limitations and Future Research

Longitudinal analysis is needed to understand the long-term impacts of GSAs on LGBTQ youth and schools (Garcia-Alonso, 2004; Goodenow et al., 2006; Heck et al., 2011). Understanding the contextual distinctions among GSAs is also of vital importance. Most youth in this study came from schools in urban, rather than rural, settings. Due to geographic restrictions, rural youth in GSAs may not have access to the same resources as the youth described in this article, making geographic context an important consideration for future research. To attend to the diversity of contexts within which GSAs are situated, focused case studies of individual schools may produce a more holistic understanding of the contextual factors that affect the impact potential of GSAs.

While GSAs are often lauded by teachers as safe spaces for all LGBTQ youth, not everyone is equally represented in the composition of individual GSAs. Youth who identify as transgender, for instance, are one such group whose experiences require more intensive and focused research. Because only two trans-identified youth were included in our study, we were not able to adequately discuss their experiences in local GSAs. Many researchers have noted a lack of ethnic and racial diversity within GSAs (Adams & Carson, 2006; Griffin et al., 2003; McCready, 2003). Our sample was comprised entirely of White youth, further highlighting the need for research endeavors that explore the experiences of racialized youth and the need to “de-normalize the perceived Whiteness of queer youth identity” (McCready,

2003, p. 48). Focusing on the experiences of youth with multiple marginalized identities should be a consideration for future research in this area. While we attempted to highlight themes that emerged from the data, individual GSAs throughout Waterloo Region varied significantly; some had been operating for three or four years, whereas others were in their first year of existence. Individual GSAs may vary in connectedness based on their longevity, and research that explores individual determinants of connectedness may be needed. Furthermore, three of the youth participants were in the beginning stages of starting GSAs and therefore could not speak significantly about past experiences with their GSAs. Our findings show the important role that policy plays in supporting GSAs, and the Accepting Schools Act may add an additional layer of explicit support, helping to further develop GSAs. This is a question that future studies should examine.

## CONCLUSION

GSAs may be a starting point for school boards looking to improve the lives of LGBTQ youth. They may help to expand group-level resources by connecting youth with resources and the larger community. However, schools looking to implement successful equity, inclusion, and safety interventions may find that creating GSAs in partnership with other initiatives at the community, school board, and government levels is more effective than either intervention alone. Other communities looking to support GSAs should foster networks of GSAs, support connections with community agencies, and ensure that GSAs are connected with supportive administrators at their respective school boards. These partnerships are important for supporting the success of GSAs and ensuring that GSAs continue to connect youth with their communities.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

**Alex St. John**, BA (Hons), is a former undergraduate student and research coordinator at Wilfrid Laurier University.

**Robb Travers**, PhD, is an Associate Professor in Psychology and Health Sciences at Wilfrid Laurier University.

**Lauren Munro**, BA (Hons), is a PhD student in the Community Psychology program at Wilfrid Laurier University.

**Renato Liboro**, MD, is a PhD student in the Community Psychology program at Wilfrid Laurier University.

**Margaret Schneider**, PhD, teaches within the Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

**Carrie L. Greig**, MA, at the time of this submission of this article, worked in counselling services with the OK2BME Program.