

**Transforming Spaces of Learning: The Implementation of a  
Gay-Straight Alliance in a Rural Maritime Community**

BY

**Hannah Alyssa Crouse**

A thesis submitted to the  
Department of Sociology  
Mount Allison University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Bachelor of Arts degree with Honours

April 21, 2022

### **Abstract**

This thesis is an exploration of how gay-straight alliances (GSA) can create community amongst queer youth and present an opportunity for transformative change. I conducted five interviews with GSA advisors at a small, maritime school. Participants' accounts reflected the emancipatory pedagogy that emerged from the GSA, as well as reflections on allyship and communion with the oppressed. The findings of this study point to the clear need to have safe spaces in schools and how these queer youth need to be prioritized in institutional reform. These GSAs act as a small piece of the necessary institutional reform required to disrupt the subject-object relationship between queer youth and their oppressors.

## Acknowledgements

Writing these acknowledgements has been the easiest part of this thesis, as I have so much love for all of the people who have helped me throughout this process. First, I would like to thank my parents who put up with me being cranky while I was “in the zone” over the holidays. Thank you for all of the delicious meals you gave me and for cheering me on everyday, even when you had no idea what a thesis was. Secondly, I would like to thank my sweet cat Alfie, for always staying up with me during late nights and being great company during nights when fomo was real. I would also like to thank all the participants who participated in this study. I have so much love for each of these advisors and I know that they truly believe in the power of having a GSA.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Fabrizio Antonelli. Ever since I had you in Sociological Imagination, I fell in love with Sociology - enough so to switch from the dreadful Biochemistry into Sociology. I could not have done this without your support and I will never be able to thank you enough for the love for Sociology that I have grown to have. You are truly someone that has changed my life and I will forever look back on my time at Mount Allison (and as an honours student) fondly because of you. I know how lucky I am to have had you as a supervisor and I can only hope that my future education has educators that are half the person that you are. Thank you.

**PS.** I'd like to thank my damn self for sticking this process out. An almost 100 page thesis is something to be proud of in itself. I know my younger self would be so proud of the person and research that I am conducting today. This thesis goes out to my younger, closest queer self and for the bravery I had to persevere.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
Note About Language	7
<b>Chapter 2: Methodology</b>	<b>8</b>
Context	8
Participatory Nature	10
Research Ethics Board	10
Interviews	11
Recruitment	11
Risks	12
Timeline	12
Table 1	13
Interview Questions	13
Written Response	14
Data Storage	14
Thematic Analysis	14
Limitations	15
<b>Chapter 3: Literature Review</b>	<b>16</b>
Gay-Straight Alliance's	16
GSA Advisors	18
Harvey Milk - An Alternative?	22
Manifestations of Queerphobia	23
Curriculum	26
Comprehensive Curriculum	28
Online Interventions	30
Cis-Heteronormativity in Schools	31
Disapproval of Queerness	33
Rurality	34
<b>Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>36</b>
Pedagogy of the Oppressed	36
Understanding the World	37
Dialogue	37
Culture of Silence	38
Hidden Curriculum	39
Allyship	40
Performing Gender	43

Regime of Truth	45
Language	46
Docile Bodies	47
<b>Chapter 5: Findings</b>	<b>51</b>
Recognizing the Climate	51
Distinguishing Queerness	55
Hidden Curriculum	56
Culture of Silence	59
Dialogue	60
Advisor Involvement	62
Reborn Leaders	63
Unity	64
Emancipatory Learning	66
Belonging	67
Ripple Effect(s)	68
Raised Consciousness	69
Humanizing	70
Pride	71
<b>Chapter 6: Discussion</b>	<b>74</b>
Palatable Queerness	74
Surveillance	78
Allyship	79
Consciousness	81
Unity	81
Neutrality	82
Need for Safe Spaces	84
Curriculum	85
<b>Chapter 7: Conclusion</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>90</b>

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Schools are notoriously unsafe places for queer youth as anti-queer rhetoric is naturalized and invites violence and harassment towards these youth (Mayberry et al., 2011). Historically, school reform efforts to combat this anti-queer rhetoric are founded upon the idea that these youth are in need of “protection”, and their queerness is equated to being “at-risk”, rather than targeting the root causes of anti-queer hate that places these youth at-risk. Gay Straight Alliance’s (GSA) act as a means of irradicating these root causes of queerphobia and has become increasingly popular in schools.

This thesis examines how the implementation of a gay-straight alliance in a rural Maritime community allows for transformative spaces of learning. I had the honour of being the leader of this GSA and recognize the privilege that I had to be able to spend time with 2SLGBTQIA+ youth who shared their identities and lived experiences with me. As a queer person, a sense of belonging is not certain, as your identity has been delegitimized - the implementation of the GSA creates a space to belong to. Once these youth have a space to belong to, they are able to find community amongst their peers through understanding their shared oppression, whilst sharing lived experiences with allies. As such, when peers engage in true communion with queer students, liberation can become possible.

The following chapters will provide context to this research through both a literature review (chapter one) and a theoretical framework (chapter two). Then, I will describe the methodology in chapter three used for conducting this study. Afterwards, I present findings from interviews in chapter four and discuss them in the context of previously presented research from literature as well as theory in chapter five. To conclude, in chapter six, I provide final thoughts and suggestions for moving forward.

## Note About Language

This thesis utilizes the word “queer” as an umbrella term for all gender and sexual identities that fall within the rainbow community - more commonly understood by the 2SLGBTQIA+ acronym. It is important to note that the order of this acronym matters. For example, “2S” is placed first within this acronym as an initiative to recognize that Two-Spirit people were the first gender and sexual to be oppressed. The letter “L” is to follow to represent the role that lesbians played during the AIDS crisis through blood donation and work as nurses in an attempt to provide help as the abhorrent Reagan government failed to formally do so. I chose to use the word queer in part due to its all-inclusiveness as an umbrella term, but also as a means of reclaiming a slur as I am a part of the queer community. By utilizing this reclaimed slur throughout my thesis, I am able to utilize this word as a means of providing empowerment to myself, as well as the youth who were a part of the GSA by using it on my own terms rather than being a word placed upon me as a label.

As well, the use of the name “Gay-Straight Alliance” (GSA) is flawed within itself as it presents a binary understanding of heterosexuality and “gay”, thus seemingly erasing identities such as bisexuality, pansexuality, asexuality and more. Recently, there has been a shift in understanding the acronym “Gender and Sexuality Alliance” to attempt to create a more progressive name. However, even with this shift, this name is still not perfect as it maintains this element of alienation and the promotion that being queer is something to be “accepted” or “tolerated”. The GSA within this study identified a name amongst themselves (alongside myself) through an anonymous suggestion box that students could place name suggestions in. The name that was selected will not be shared as it is specific to the school and thus can become an identifier.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

This research aims to understand how the implementation of a gay-straight alliance could act as a site of emancipatory pedagogy and transformative change. More specifically, I wanted to understand how the GSA was understood by advisors (and students), how allyship was created and how the GSA acted as a space to assist in queer student liberation.

### Context

I came to this research through prior community volunteer work at the school in which the GSA was implemented. My initial volunteer work was through food security initiatives organized by the principal and his family. One day when delivering food boxes the principal and I prepared, we entered into a conversation about the next delivery being to a queer youth at the school. He then proceeded to tell me about how this student has been struggling and that he wishes he could have a sort of “mentor” for them. After delivering to this student and many others, we got back into the conversation about how he could support these students. I confided in him (as I am openly queer) about my queerness and my desire to help in some manner. The principal was ecstatic and immediately brought the idea of the GSA forward. He noted his hesitancy in starting it given that he has no (openly) queer faculty and did not want to have someone who was cisgender and heterosexual running the GSA. I volunteered myself to be the leader of the GSA and we celebrated with some laughter and his favourite country song as we shared a feeling of finally being able to make the change that he had been longing for.

From here, Principal Louis and I met with Teacher Beth and counsellor Lisa to discuss what this GSA would look like. All three faculty acknowledged their position as cisgender heterosexual people and stated their utmost support for myself and the community. These individuals (alongside the administrative assistant) acted as GSA “advisors”. The term advisor was selected as it was used in literature such as that of Valenti & Campbell (2009).

While these “advisors” did not advise the GSA on anything queer-related, they acted in various supporting roles to the youth. For example, advisor (and counsellor) Lisa was there to debrief students after GSA meetings if any topics had arisen that caused students any emotions they wanted to work through with a counsellor. The other advisors took a less direct role and attended the GSA to learn and to show their support for the youth attendees.

I was given the power of deciding how this GSA would initially run, in hopes that the students would make it their own once the space was created. We brainstormed various activities such as going through the 2SLGBTQIA+ acronym together to learn about various identities, we learned about the gay rights movement through stories and acknowledgment of student’s “queer-o’s” (queer heroes) and we played Queer Jeopardy that I had created with some of the identities, flags and other information we had talked about throughout our time with the GSA. There was an anonymous suggestion box that was placed outside of the library for students to put notes about anything specific they wanted to do during the GSA, names for the GSA and anything they wanted us (myself and the advisors) to know.

The GSA ran bi-weekly on Fridays at lunch in the gymnasium of the school. Students in grades 5-8 were able to join the GSA. While I had hoped that we could open the GSA up to everyone within the school (or could have two separate GSAs with the second being for the younger grades), I was told that the other students were “too young” to participate. While normally I would push back against this, I decided to take what I could get and avoid having the GSA for the older students jeopardized. For the first few meetings, myself and counsellor Lisa would walk from classroom to classroom to remind students that GSA was happening. During this time, I would also introduce myself to students as a queer person from Mount Allison who was looking forward to meeting everyone. After the first few meetings, these reminders were done over the announcements. The GSA had a steady 20-25 students who attended. The majority of these students self-identified as being a part of the queer

community, with a wide variety of identities present (students who were transgender, bisexual, gay, lesbian, asexual, and so on). There were a handful of students who attended regularly who self-identified themselves as allies or as someone who was wanting to learn about the queer community. These students often attended in support of a queer friend/student, but some attended as individuals who were not there to directly support someone.

### **Participatory Nature**

Given that I was the “leader” of the GSA, I played a large role in many conversations with student attendees and advisors. I often would give examples of my lived experiences of coming to understand my own identity, the process of “coming out”, sharing my pronouns and more. While I could not interview myself for this study, my individual experiences are accounted for and presented throughout the findings chapter. I decided to include my own personal perspectives in this thesis as I was the sole queer “advisor” and I was the sole person external to the school involved with the GSA. As such, many students would confide in me directly as they felt more comfortable. As well, I was present in the GSA each week (as was Counsellor Lisa) whereas other advisors did not attend every single time.

### **Research Ethics Board**

This study design was approved by the Mount Allison University Research Ethics Board in May 2021, in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) for the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Participants. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, participants and I were experiencing ever-changing restrictions and concerns surrounding the spread of the virus - especially as these interviewees worked within a school and had a considerably high risk for contracting COVID-19. As a result, all interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams in order to ensure safety.

## **Interviews**

Interviews were selected as a means of collecting primary data from GSA advisors. Interviews were selected as the instrument to collect data as they allow for a comprehensive dive into each individual's ideas and perspectives. As well, it allows for opportunities to clarify questions and correct misunderstandings. As the interviewer, I was able to follow up with probing questions. Given that all the interviewees work at the same school, something such as a focus group may have created power imbalances and censorship of ideas whilst in the presence of their boss and co-workers. As well, given the potentially sensitive nature of these topics (as these interviewees work with these youth every day), interviews allowed for a safe, one-on-one space to share. Interviewees were selected as they were the facilitators of implementing this GSA.

## **Recruitment**

The recruitment process for interviews was done through email, given my ongoing, working relationship with all five of these individuals. All faculty who were involved were sent the same recruitment email. I did not actively seek to include or exclude participants based on specific demographics. However, given the demographic of who I am interviewing, I am only recruiting adult members of the GSA (advisors), thus excluding those individuals who do not fall into this demographic. This resulted in all participants being white, cisgender adults.

Upon emailing these advisors, I attached a consent form to fill out upon agreeing to participate in the study. Once I received this consent form, interviews were scheduled based on individual availability - often taking place after the school day or on weekends. During the mutually agreed upon time, the participant and I would join the Teams meeting where we would briefly catch up. After a few minutes, I would ask the participant if they were willing

to start the interview and re-read my consent form to them. As well, I would ask for their consent to record the Teams meeting.

### **Risks**

The individuals being interviewed are experienced educators who have a pre-established role with the GSA. The risks are minimal as I am not interviewing any youth who are participants in the GSA. All interviews will encompass information that has previously been discussed during GSA debriefs and planning sessions that myself and staff have participated in. There will be nothing discussed that is outside of conversations that I have had with these staff previously. All staff that are interviewed will be directed to external resource support. These supports can be found on the resource sheet in appendix A. Participants may desire or wish to be a part of the study given their commitment to the GSA. However, this does not constitute coercion as I do not occupy a position of power relative to the participants.

All participants are adults and have experience working with the GSA, the school and should in no way be harmed by this study. In order to protect participants (staff) from harm, while meeting the goals of my study, participants were reminded that this is a completely voluntary study. All participants are publicly supportive of the GSA. All members of the administration are openly supportive, and the principal has agreed to participate; whilst actively voicing his support to GSA advisors and GSA members. There was no use of deception or partial disclosure of the research to participants.

### **Timeline**

The interviews for this study were conducted between July and March to accommodate fluctuating schedules and availability. One participant decided that they were not comfortable with being interviewed and opted for a written response. The participants were four women and one male, with ages ranging from 27 to 59. While these participants

were all involved in the GSA, they are also employed in various roles within the school. Please refer to Table 1 below for a guide to participants. All interviews were completed online through Microsoft Teams to ensure we were following all COVID-19 guidelines and to accommodate their busy teaching schedules. The questions asked during these interviews are found in appendix B. The Microsoft Teams meeting was recorded and transcribed for each interview. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect identities.

**Table 1**

***Interview Participants***

Participant	Gender	Age	Position	Interview Duration
Louis	Male	40	principal	25 minutes, 19 seconds
Joanna	Female	47	Vice principal	41 minutes, 46 seconds
Beth	Female	27	Teacher	11 minutes, 18 seconds
Lisa	Female	42	Counsellor	33 minutes, 15 seconds
Mallory	Female	59	Administrative Assistant	Written response

**Note.** This table provides information about each participant interviewed in this study.

**Interview Questions**

Given the open nature of these interview questions, the interviews allowed for a variety of responses be sorted thematically. The interviews began with demographic questions, such as their age, pronouns and position within the school. As well, interviewees were presented with the option of selecting their name alias. This was done to begin the interview with a bit of “fun”, as participants took great pride in selecting their alias. As well,

starting off with this fun activity provided a calmer and more relaxed interview environment, which lends itself well to conducting data on potentially sensitive information.

### **Written Response**

Upon reaching out to one of the participants, they noted that they were uncomfortable completing an interview. I replied to their email to confirm that I had received it and that I value their comfort in this process. She then responded with a long, written response to my email talking about her experiences with the GSA, the values of the GSA, and so on. Upon reading this written response, I asked the participant if it could be included in this thesis in lieu of her interview. When she replied, she noted that she was ecstatic to still be involved and agreed to have her written response included. She then filled out the consent form and this written response was stored in her individual Google folder.

### **Data Storage**

As previously stated, with the consent from participants all interviews were recorded using the recording feature built into Microsoft Teams. In addition, before each interview began I started transcription using the tool on Microsoft Teams. This provided a baseline transcription of interviews, to use while watching the interview recording allowing me to edit any errors in transcription from the software. Interviews were transcribed verbatim during analysis but have been edited for clarity (ex: grammar) when presented in this thesis. All documents such as transcriptions, interview recordings and consent forms were stored in Google Drive folders specific to each respective participant, which both myself and my supervisor had access to.

### **Thematic Analysis**

The thematic analysis for this data was initiated after transcription. Once transcription was complete, I printed each script out and began reading and making small notes of connection between scripts. Themes were identified using these connecting pieces to

interviews and were highly influenced by my theoretical framework. Once themes were identified, quotes were selected that were deemed the most illustrative of the theme (a value-added approach). These quotes were then edited for clarity through small changes in grammar, removal of duplicate words, etc.

### **Limitations**

A limitation to this study is that I was unable to interview youth who were a part of the GSA. Both my supervisor and I recognized that interviewing these youth would not pass through the Research Ethics Board given the nature of this study being for an undergraduate thesis. As such, all data collected that speaks to these student attendees is through the lens of the advisors. Ideally, I would have been able to interview both the advisors as well as the student attendees. Nonetheless, the data collected from interviews with advisors (alongside my individual findings as the leader of the GSA) are comprehensive and paint an accurate representation of the group.

Another limitation to the study is that a GSA will not have all queer youth involved - whether that is because of fear, shame or not being aware of their queerness yet. Interviewees are only able to speak to their experiences within the GSA and by not having these students attend, advisors are unable to speak to them. In addition, these advisors had various roles as a GSA advisor. Some interviewees spent considerably more time with students than others, thus not being able to speak to the same instances as other advisors. Due to this, many instances discussed within the GSA are solely through one perspective which likely results in a lack of depth to examples given. In retrospect, it would have been valuable to bring these advisors together in a focus group to allow folks to speak to their various perspectives on GSA activities, discussions and subtleties that others may have missed.

### **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

In order to situate this thesis within a wider context of research, I conducted a literature review that included a variety of topics: GSA's, advisor involvement in GSA's, health curriculum (both traditional curriculum and, contrastingly inclusive curriculum), manifestations of queerphobia and rurality.

#### **Gay-Straight Alliance's**

The first GSA was formed in 1989 and they have been increasingly popular ever since (Miceli, 2005, as cited in Mayberry et al., 2011). Gay-straight alliances represent a specific school reform strategy to combat anti-queer harassment and violence that has been naturalized within schools. As Mayberry et al. (2011) note, almost 74% of LGBT students reported being subjected to homophobic remarks (e.g., “fag,” “dyke,” or “that’s so gay”) on a regular basis, with these “anti-gay activities” being a normal, everyday part of the school social organization (p. 308). Having a GSA acts as a means to contradict these seemingly natural anti-queer activities by promoting inclusivity. While initially, a GSA may provide a space specific to queer youth, the benefits extend past those who attend as the GSA has ripple effects that provide student attendees (and non-attendees) with feelings of safety, whilst facilitating the visibility of supportive adult allies (Mayberry et al., 2022, p. 309).

GSAs adopt a critical emancipatory pedagogy that allows for expanding on students' knowledge, while encouraging reflection of lived experiences, positionality and privilege. Giroux (2010) notes that pedagogy is by definition directive, but that does not mean it is merely a form of indoctrination (p. 718). Emancipatory pedagogy is intentional in its instruction, as it aims to give value to individual experiences, interests and asking questions. Youth-led GSAs are inherently transformative as they can create meaningful change within the school. GSA's give personal autonomy and are of critical importance as they allow youth members to learn they can be agents of change (Lee, 2002). In addition, school attendance

improved as participants felt “more inclined” to go to school because they could see friends from the GSA (Lee, 2002). These newfound support systems and social networks are a crucial, positive consequence of GSAs that foster inclusive and safe learning environments. In Lee’s (2002) study, a student reported that while she was failing most of her classes before joining the Alliance, she spoke of “developing expectations” for herself after she became involved (p. 8).

Queer youth often look to online supports, online searches and platforms to find information about their identities and in hopes of finding community. However, many of these queer youth also encounter language from others that serves to alienate and isolate them on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Morris, 2020). In addition, queer individuals are at higher risk of experiencing cyberbullying online than their heterosexual counterparts, whether it be from individuals that they know in person or individuals who they only know in an online setting (Abreau & Kenny, 2017, as cited in Morris, 2020). GSAs may combat the possibility of coming across dangerous online content, as GSAs can provide community and are the most widely accessible as they happen within the school, often during school hours.

The positive correlation of self-actualization is not limited to schools. Students with experiences like the one mentioned are better positioned to make new friends, creating relationships with school admin, teachers, family members, and peers. Further, these students can name their world and disrupt current knowledge on the topic. The ability to create positive relationships and form connections with adult mentors allow youth belonging to GSA’s to have stronger chances of improved relationships at home, as well as the building of “family unity” (Lee, 2002, p. 12). Lee’s (2002) study demonstrates a greater likelihood for acceptance outside of GSA’s. There was unanimous reporting of increased acceptance and support from their social networks, such as their families, communities, and sports teams. In

this way, students can learn more about their identities and are given language to accurately describe and advocate for themselves, thus improving support levels from their families.

Arguably one of the largest benefits the GSA gives students is the “strength to carry on” as one student states in the Lee (2002) study (p. 16). They were able to obtain this strength from the relationships they had formed since joining the alliance.

### **GSA Advisors**

Queer students understand their schools to be unsafe environments as a result of homophobic comments, bullying, and targeted violence. Teachers typically do not intervene when they (the teachers) witness peer-on-peer 2SLGBTQI+ bullying and harassment, “effectively allowing the berating and or violent behaviours to continue” (Watson & Miller, 2012, p. 2). One alarming report indicated further evidence that the formal curriculum is inadequate, as they note that, “...teachers fail to intervene in 97% of incidents involving anti-gay slurs at school” (Carter, 1997, as cited in Watson & Miller, 2012, p. 2). Given the authoritarian position of these teachers, their choice to not intervene in harassments results in the justification of this bullying, harassment, and violence 2SLGBTQIA+, further dehumanizing them. Consequently, homophobic harassment has become an “accepted part of school culture where faculty and staff rarely or never intervene” (Meyer, 2008, p. 555). Queer students succumb to feelings of fatalism, as this oppression and dehumanization are ubiquitous - even outside of the school. GSA advisors act as allies to intervene in these positions and help facilitate meaningful conversations surrounding gender and sexuality.

Fetner et al. (2012) write to teachers being a source of antigay harassment; whether that is through halting the creation of GSA's, shutting down current clubs, running jokes at the expense of queer students or physically separating students they believed to be dating in the classroom (pp. 197-198). Lapointe (2015) furthers this by acknowledging that some teachers have been found ripping down GSA posters from school walls. However, the success

of GSAs relies upon the support of the faculty and staff as they hold power within the schools that these youth are not privy to. Regardless of the root cause, “if gay and lesbian students are being hurt in public schools, then change must begin there” (Anderson, 1993, p. 21). Valenti & Campbell (2009) speak to the (re) productive role of systemic education. They note that “most homophobic slurs come from other students, but as many as 25% of the harassers are faculty, staff, and administrators” (Valenti & Campbell, 2009, p. 239). While faculty, staff and administrators can account for about a quarter of anti-gay harassment, these groups are those in positions of educational leadership and, accordingly, who are able to establish a safe space within the school, alongside youth leaders. GSA’s require a faculty supervisor, to allow for a monitoring of the activities and ensure safety measures are followed.

This advisor position becomes an additional, unpaid, extracurricular activity for teachers and faculty members to undertake. These advisors receive no financial gain by being involved, yet continue to face controversial opinions and hold a safe space for these queer youth to exist. This calls to question their reason for becoming involved. Previous studies have identified two prominent themes that explain advisors' engagement with the GSA; having a protective attitude for these youth and having a personal connection to the queer community.

The protective attitude over queer students requires the acknowledgment of the students' subordinate position. Advisors state to be rooting for the “underdog” when asked why they chose to help with these students (Valenti & Campbell, 2009, p. 234). In addition, some advisors mentioned previous knowledge and research they have encountered influenced their choice to participate. This knowledge was surrounding the rates of isolation, harassment, and suicide for queer youth acknowledges their high risk and need for support. For potential queer GSA advisors, they wanted to protect these young queer youth as they emphasized with their feelings of isolation (Valenti & Campbell, 2009).

Personal connection serves as a humanizing element to queer youth. Valenti & Campbell (2009) write that “by getting to know someone who is a sexual minority person, she or he was perhaps able to look beyond the label of LGBT and realize that LGBT people are people who should be valued” (p. 236). One participant from their study expressed this humanization as, “I think once you start putting a face to people, then they’re people. You can’t, you can’t just group them together anymore” (Valenti & Campbell, 2009, p. 236). In addition, having family members or close friends who are a part of the queer community serves as an additional humanizing element. Through seeing the GSA members as people and humanizing them despite oppositional identities, the advisor may experience a realization that “homosexual people [are] normal” (Valenti & Campbell, 2009, p. 236).

Advisors state their awareness of disciplinary acts against teachers in surrounding school districts; specifically, teachers being fired because of their GSA involvement. The fear of losing one's job is a considerable risk to account for prospective advisors. Given that these advisors often do not have in-group status amongst the queer students, nor do they have professional training, they risk being put in uncomfortable situations and conversations. For instance, some advisors voiced discomfort around topics of safe sex, HIV/AIDS, and STI testing with these GSA members. Given this discomfort, advisors run the risk of creating additional harm if these topics are overlooked due to discomfort. Furthermore, recruitment to the “gay agenda” concern arises amongst potential advisors. The notion of the gay agenda is championed by anti-gay advocates and is often weaponized to oppose inclusive policies and initiatives (Bettinsoli et al., 2021). This labelling of a “gay agenda” is comprised of an indoctrination of people (often youth) into the “gay lifestyle”, with suggestions that this lifestyle is unnatural and rooted in perversion (Bettinsoli et al., 2021). While many advisors are concerned about accusations of this “recruitment”, some advisors expressed a genuine concern that they were encouraging kids to be gay. In a study conducted by Valenti &

Campbell (2009), a queer GSA advisor expressed this very concern, as he has previously been accused of this recruitment to the gay agenda. This fear is pervasive amongst potential advisors who are queer, as they recognize reasons for becoming involved with the GSA can be under public scrutiny.

The *Don't Say Gay Bill* passed this March 2022 is an example of this public scrutiny and ideation of the gay agenda in schools (Jones & Franklin, 2022). This bill will prohibit schools from, using curricula (or discussing topics) related to gender identity and sexual orientation. As Restar (2022) notes, “the institutionalization of these bills is an overt form of structural transphobia and homophobia, and it goes against all public health evidence in creating a safe and supportive environment for [queer] youth and teachers to thrive (as cited in Jones & Franklin, 2022, para 4).

This bill does not exist in isolation and follows the traction of a multitude of others similar to it, such as Bill HB 800 of Tennessee that “bans books and instructional materials "that promote, normalize, support, or address lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, or transgender issues or lifestyle” (Jones & Franklin, 2022, para 11). Such bills are grounded within a manipulated notion of safety. As Irvine (2002) notes, “those who opposed classroom discussion of homosexuality contended that childhood sexuality is infinitely malleable, homosexuality is contagious [and dangerous], and the innocent child—who could and should be heterosexual—was imperiled by lesbians and gay men preying in the public schools” (as cited in Thomas, 2008, p. 171). The culture of silence reinforces notions of queerness as a perversion. Creating a erroneous causal relationship between queerness and perversion that aligns with that of the church and promotes an altruistic paternalistic protection of youth. This fallacious relationship causes significant harm as perversion and queerness are conflated to maintain omission and thus, a culture of silence amongst the queer community.

### **Harvey Milk - An Alternative?**

There have been previous attempts to provide viable alternatives to supporting queer youth in schools. Harvey Milk was the first openly gay elected official in the history of California, who had a famous speech called “The Hope Speech” which was delivered during mass rally to celebrate Gay Freedom Day in California. (Milk, 1998). The New York Harvey Milk School was opened in 1985 to “service lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students who are at high risk for dropping out of the education system” (Bethard, 2004, p. 417). This school was supported by The Hetrick-Martin Institute, specifically their executive director David Mensah who acted as a large “driving force behind the school's creation” (Colapinto, 2005). This institute was the nations largest non-profit organization that was devoted to supporting queer youth, as well as their families.

Initially, the school received significant negative media attention surrounding the crimes committed by its students and the abrupt departure of the school's first principal, former Wall Street executive William Salzman (Colapinto, 2005). Colapinto (2005) writes, “the tabloids had a field day portraying the school as an out-of-control collection of fashion mad, transsexual juvenile delinquents and streetwalkers who channeled their illegal profits into buying sprees at Dolce & Gabbana” (p. 2). Mensah from the Hetrick-Martin Institute attempted to humanize these acts, stating that “all kids get in trouble, but any time these kids [attendees of the Harvey Milk School] got in trouble, it ended up in the paper” (Colapinto, 2005, p. 2). This school was met with unique surveillance as it was home to queer youth. As such, the school was under considerable suspicion and any transgression was immediately reported in hopes of “proving” these queer youth (and the school) wrong. The New York Harvey Milk school was generally promoted as a viable option that would allow queer youth to have a safe space to learn (Bethard, 2004). However, it was targeted and resultantly shut down by anti-queer state senators. These senators argued that the school was illegal as it was

“exclusive” to queer youth, specifically noting that “the Department of Education's own regulations prohibit discrimination in school admissions on the basis of sexual orientation” (Colapinto, 2005, p. 5). While having a queer-specific space to learn, such as the Harvey Milk School, allows for the removal of cis-heterosexual-dominated power dynamics, this option reinforces and reproduces heteronormative notions (Watson & Miller, 2012). By removing queer youth from traditional schools, they become alienated from their peers and society as an entirety. As well, given the significant, targeted negative media surrounding the school, students were further alienated as they were depicted as inherently unruly due to their queerness. GSAs keep this desirable safe space that the Harvey Milk School attempted to provide for queer students, but exists within the school, thus allowing queer youth to engage with their non-queer peers, teacher, and faculty.

### **Manifestations of Queerphobia**

*Hegemonic masculinity* prevails as a critique of masculinity (Donaldson, 1993). A fundamental element of hegemonic masculinity focuses on women being subordinate in their sexuality. More specifically, “women exist as potential sexual objects for men while men are negated as sexual objects for men. Women provide heterosexual men with sexual validation, and men compete with each other for this” (Donaldson, 1993, p. 645). Continuing with this dominance battle of sexuality, hegemonic masculinity is also threatened by the “assertion of a homosexual identity confident that homosexuals are able to give each other sexual pleasure” (Donaldson, 1993, p. 648). Homosexual men were stripped of their masculinity and become effeminate, thus stripped of their power. In addition to female sexual subordination, hegemonic masculinity suggests that femininity is solely produced in the absence of masculinity. Connell (2014) explains that hegemonic masculinity maintains the belief that “only men can truly understand masculinity” (p. 132). Connell’s assertion of this binary understanding in who can have masculinity (and who cannot) has consequences that are

twofold; maintaining a binary understanding of gender, and reifying the perceived requirement to segregate individuals by their gender, specifically to advance men through boys-only programmes and classes. That is, binary understandings of masculinity alienate seemingly “other” gender identities, whilst also (re)producing female subordination through lack of resources and opportunities within the classroom. Resultantly, these advancements for men are naturalized and continue to uphold hetero-patriarchal ideologies. Further, hypermasculinity arises when power resulting from masculinity is threatened, or power is given to those who do not traditionally have power (Connell, 2014). As described, this power shift can be seen when women are working emotionally exhausting, human giver positions that are often unpaid, such as caretaker roles. As a result, hypermasculinity may arise in an attempt to justify the unpaid work/emotionally taxing positions women traditionally hold - upholding ideas surrounding the feminization of care.

An intentional rejection of the notions of hegemonic masculinity by many men has surfaced, referred to as inclusive masculinity (Anderson, 2009). Inclusive masculinity materializes through affectionate men, discussing emotions and adopting these “feminizing” characteristics to model the comfort in their heterosexuality. Anderson & McCormack (2016) argued that “in the absence of homophobia, men’s gender came to be founded upon emotional openness, increased peer tactility, softening gender codes and close friendship based on emotional disclosure” (p. 1). However, these men are able to adopt these behaviours and be rewarded with a social title of being “inclusive” and given social capital as they are ultimately still straight, cisgender men. When women or other gender minorities attempt to adopt contrasting roles than prescribed, they are typically labeled as deviant and confused - often categorized as being too radical and thus dismissed. Inclusive masculinity has been criticized for being dangerous as “it conflates the hard-fought legal rights won by gay rights activists with a mistaken belief that because homophobic speech and violence are less

apparent in public contexts, we are nearing some historical end-point for gender and sexuality discrimination” (de Boise, 2015, p. 334). Resultantly, queer issues are labelled as issues of the past, rather than acknowledging contemporary manifestations and institutions of queerphobia. With this rhetoric of queer issues being something of the past, it becomes seemingly excusable to not actively engage in anti-queerphobia initiatives such as the implementation of a GSA.

As a result of hegemonic masculinity, sexuality emanates through an understanding of binary differences between social functions, and physiological and psychological differences. Carrigan et al. (1993) write to this, by stating “heterosexuality and homophobia are the bedrock of hegemonic masculinity and any understanding of its nature and meaning is predicated on the feminist insight that in general, the relationship of men to women is oppressive (as cited in Donaldson, 1993, p. 645). Thus, the notion of heteronormativity and its homonormative facet is a form of hegemony that is carried out through the education system. If heteronormativity is set at the centre from which all sexuality is understood, you inherently position masculinity and heterosexuality as dominant (Chesir-Teran, 2003). This social institution of education ultimately sustains the premises of heteronormativity and seeks inclusion within such norms. By large, homophobia was created due to a lack of power amongst the queer community, stemming from hegemonic cis-heteronormativity. However, there has been a concerted effort on behalf of many groups to keep the curriculum "safe", which often excludes these voices. Reform requires this power to be shifted, allowing these previously silenced voices to be given power. Compulsory cis-heteronormativity manifests in the variations between schools in the degree to which sexual orientation issues are integrated into curricula (Chesir-Teran, 2003).

## Curriculum

The health curriculum is an essential and necessary facet of education as it develops health literacy while holding space for youth to learn about their bodies and their identities. Begoray et al. (2009) state that health literacy is the “ability to understand and evaluate health information in ways that allow individuals to take control of their own health” (p. 36) and is a key step to having healthy behaviours. Yet, students report negative experiences with their health curriculum, with many stating that there was too much repetition and “glossing over” important topics of identity (Begoray et al., 2019, p. 37). Queer youth are substantially more likely than their heterosexual peers to search online for sexual health information as they are missing it in the classroom, which opens significant doors for poor if not dangerous content, whether that is through online searches or unknowingly placing oneself in dangerous situations (Mustanski et al., 2015). The need for emancipatory pedagogy extends outside of the health curriculum. This same opportunity for danger can arise with restrictive and oppressive classrooms as youth do not feel safe to ask questions or take personal interest in topics (Cohen et al., 2012).

Students state that they were never taught that “it was ok to have a different sexuality or gender identity” (Beyond the Action Canada, 2015, p. 5). Queer students subconsciously adopt language that negates the legitimacy of their identity - by stating it is “ok” denotes that permission is required in order to vary from the expected norm of cishetermnormativity. In addition, the pure omission of information surrounding various sexuality and gender identities is detrimental to those who do queer students as they do not have the language to describe themselves or their feelings. Non-queer students also suffer from this omission, as they are unable to support friends, family or have meaningful discussions surrounding gender and sexuality. Additionally, students reported that not only were the topics of their health classes redundant but so were the teaching styles for class material. Students are taking a

passive role in their learning, with students noting the sheer amount of worksheets and copying from textbooks (Begoray et al., 2009). They also noted the number of scare tactics used in the curriculum, specifically in terms of sexually transmitted infections and abstinence. The pure omission of pleasure, desire, and sexuality are deliberate, in an attempt to frame sex as a dangerous and taboo subject. Abstinence is presented as the sole option and those who deviate from abstinence are aberrant.

During interviews in a study by Allen (2008), they spoke to a student who stated that when she did hear the word orgasm it was with reference to 'boyfriends' making this difficult to equate with lesbian experience (p. 579). Positive references to pleasure are scarcer at school for same-sex attracted youth. Same-sex attracted students are already cast as 'deviant' and therefore invisible within schooling cultures, making the possibility of their sexual pleasure even more unfathomable in this context.

One of the largest criticisms of the health curriculum from students was the teachers' competency levels to properly teach the modules. Teachers act in a role to educate students, whilst needing to facilitate a safe and trusting environment for learning about topics that may be deemed taboo. Discomfort from teachers may discredit the importance of the material; many educators report being uncomfortable with teaching sex-ed and in some cases, lessons are skipped, thus leaving students in the dark about essential topics (Beyond the Action Canada, 2015). This is telling, as this highlights how materials are established without attention towards the needs of queer students - instead, educators are simply handing out information that upholds heteronormativity. Further, students state that teachers do not seem to have the background to teach health or sex education (Begoray et al., 2009). Teachers reiterated these same sentiments, as many curricula within Canadian Bachelor of Educations do not include required or elective sexual health education courses (Cohen et al., 2012). Allen (2009) noted that adolescents in a New Zealand study identified that training to teach sexual

health is one of the most important qualities of the best sex educators (as cited in Cohen et al., 2012). Additionally, teachers were perceived as reluctant instructors, with students noting that “our teacher doesn’t necessarily want to be teaching us this moment”, alluding to the discomfort and very reluctance associated with the health curriculum (Begoray et al., 2009, p. 38). This reluctance may take many forms - ranging from discomfort, job security and personal morals that contradict that of the curriculum. Regardless of reasoning, youth are not receiving the necessary education as a result of this reluctance.

### **Comprehensive Curriculum**

It is crucial to note that in order to have truly valuable health education, the curriculum needs to be throughout and inclusive - in addition to having a qualified teacher. A comprehensive health and sex education curriculum needs to encompass more than the traditional core that is anatomy and physiology. This curriculum requires thorough lessons on “contraception, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), traditional and non-traditional sexual values, 2SLGBTQIA+ identities, masturbation, communication skills, sexual health, intimacy, consent and sexual development” (Elia, 1993, p. 181). As well, this class needs to exist on its own, rather than having it delegated into lessons within other courses - such as biology, where anatomy lessons are often delegated to (Elia, 1993).

Through comprehensive sex education, fear mongering tactics such as sexually transmitted infections and teen-pregnancy are replaced with teachings surrounding harm reduction tools to such as condoms and other safe sex practices (Goldfarb & Liberman, 2021). In addition, having a comprehensive and inclusive sex education allows for improved sexual health, specifically in terms of sexual autonomy, pleasure and consent. In the meantime, this formalized curriculum regarding sexuality and gender may be problematic, as it is likely that topics will be hand selected and teachers may not feel comfortable teaching queer-specific topics. However, having an inclusive education encourages an appreciation of

sexual diversity, thus allowing 2SLGBTQIA+ youth to feel valued and legitimized within the classroom and their peers.

A comprehensive sex education curriculum has extensive benefits that extend outside of sexual health. Understanding gender norms and gender equity, rights and social justice are one of the benefits that exist outside of sexual health. A comprehensive sexual health curriculum “allow[s] students to challenge and to cross their own stereo-typical gender boundaries safely” (Goldfarb & Liberman, 2021, p. 19). Further, a comprehensive sex education curriculum can improve knowledge, attitudes about, and reporting of and intimate partner violence. As a result, there is decreased perpetration of the violence and the victimization that may stem from the violence (Goldfarb & Liberman, 2021).

In addition, a comprehensive sex education curriculum allows for lower rates of homophobia, as there is a greater appreciation for sexual diversity. Queer-inclusive sex education curriculum allows for the normalization of 2SLGBTQIA+ identities. This normalization of queer sex and relationships, sex education and health classes that were 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusive “had the greatest impact on school climate” (Snapp et al., 2015, as cited in Goldfarb & Liberman, 2021, p. 16). Subsequently, the reduction in anti-queer bullying from implementing a 2SLGBTQIA+-inclusive sex education is “related to lower reports of adverse mental health (suicidal thoughts and suicide plans) among all youth and of experiences of bullying among sexual minority youth” (Proulx et al., 2019, as cited in Goldfarb & Liberman, 2021, p. 16). Proper sex and health education can save lives, as it addresses and prevents the root causes of negative health outcomes, while also giving youth the knowledge and skills to be themselves, to challenges rigid gender norms and reduces homophobic and transphobic violence, sexual violence, and gender-based discrimination (Beyond the Action Canada, 2015)

Pairing a comprehensive sex education curriculum with a gay-straight alliance can have mutually beneficial effects. By having a comprehensive sex education and thus lower rates of homophobia, the GSA would likely not receive as much resistance from other students, faculty or the community. Further, students may feel comfortable attending a GSA as their understanding of gender and sexuality are likely to be understood in less binary notions, and thus students are more likely to feel comfortable exploring and being an ally to those who are 2SLGBTQIA+ people or others possibly questioning. Within the GSA, students are able to vocalise and share personal stories of what they have learned from a comprehensive sex education.

### **Online Interventions**

Studies with queer youth have experimented with queer-specific online sex-ed interventions - thus, modelling that the delivery of comprehensive, sexual health education online is feasible (Mustanski et al., 2015). The first study to demonstrate the feasibility, acceptability, and initial efficacy of an online comprehensive sexual health promotion program for LGBT youth found that these queer sex education interventions were extremely positive, with participants indicating “they learned more from this program than in school-based sex education” (Mustanski et al., 2015, p. 228). Though some people argue to introduce a queer health curriculum can be unfeasible and inefficient (Mustanski et al., 2015), research suggests otherwise. By introducing similar interventions into the school curriculum, it removes the potential barrier of internet access and electronic devices that are required to participate in these online versions will be minimized, thus reaching a larger audience. As well, it allows for an element of safety to be implemented, as youth will be learning at school and away from potentially queerphobic family/guardians. Furthermore, studies show that the best way to ensure just and equal access to high-quality information on sexual and reproductive health and rights is to include it in a written school-based curriculum that guides

educators, as most young people will go through the education system (Beyond the Action Canada, 2012). Whilst implementation of a queer-inclusive curriculum within schools seems to present a sound option to achieving a comprehensive curriculum, it is built on a large assumption that this high-quality education can be achieved in the current education system.

### **Cis-Heteronormativity in Schools**

Schools act as one of many institutions responsible to enforce and reproduce cis-heteronormativity. Cis-heteronormativity is deeply engrained in schools, through both the curriculum and co-curricular activities such as school dances, and the prom. Given that there is variation between schools inclusion of queer-inclusive education are integrated into curricula represents a programmatic manifestation of heterosexism. That is, by intentionally omitting queer-specific education surrounding gender and sexual identities, the curriculum acts as a means of maintaining cis-heteronormativity. Further, manifestations of homophobia are seen through physical-architectural features of the schools themselves; through displays of media with an underlying climate of heterosexism shown through heterosexual families shown, anti-gay graffiti on bathroom walls, and the absence of identifiable safe spaces (Chesir-Teran, 2003). As a result, not only does cis-heteronormativity become (re)produced, but this ideology becomes naturalized, thus evolving into compulsory cis-heterosexuality. Given that anti-queer rhetoric becomes naturalized within schools, changes to disrupt this naturalization must begin within the school. Administrative and faculty help is required to create a space for a gay-straight alliance, given the limited power of the queer students.

Understanding gender roles begins in elementary school. Youth are socialized with women typically holding elementary school teaching positions, while men hold both high school teaching positions and university professor positions (Hammett & Martino, 2008). This division may be attributed to the feminization of care, as elementary school teaching positions are deemed to have more involvement with students in a caring manner, rather than

being purely instructive (Hammet & Matrino, 2008). Individuals with other gender identities outside of this binary are essentially invisible in these positions. With women holding these elementary school positions, there is an introduction to the lack of a “boy-friendly” curriculum, resulting in emasculation (Hammett & Martino, 2008). It has been suggested that teachers select books, materials, and activities that “suit the feminine gender” (Flynn, 2010, as cited in Osaat & Okenwa, 2018, p. 4). For example, the inclusion of books where women are shown holding traditionally male positions (such as a doctor) act as a means of facilitating this victim discourse for boys in schools. In addition, “activities that boys like” (such as physical aggression) are shut down, thus shutting down their “gregarious and competitive nature” (Osaat & Okenwa, 2018, p. 4). Boys are encouraged to engage in hands-on, tactile learning as action-based learning activities are used to “take into account the ‘special character’ and ‘active personality unique to boys’” (Hammett & Martino, 2008, p. 94). As a result, gender (sex) roles are presented and maintained through these students lived experiences and begin to alienate those who do not fall neatly into these binary categories of gender.

The feminization of schools presents a discourse of boys as victims. There is a moral panic surrounding a masculinity crisis in which boys are presented as the new disadvantaged (Connell, 2008). The consequences are two-part; one being an essentialist view of gender and making it synonymous with sex, which suggests men and women are psychologically different in terms of their attitudes, in addition to being physiologically different (Connell, 2008). Thus, masculinity is the ideal distinct set of interests and personality traits rather than a harmful, socially constructed idea. The second consequence is that only men can truly understand masculinity. This idea maintains and reinforces the need for “boys only” programs, learning styles, and other gendered experiences. Similar to Connell (2008), this boys as victim discourse ignores these efforts to include much needed representation of

women in textbooks that they have traditionally been left out - even more so in male-dominated fields such as being a doctor. Further, this boys as victims discourse ignores how society has continued to favor throughout history and into contemporary society - thus making a mockery of the true oppression faced by non-men, including women and other gender identities.

### **Disapproval of Queerness**

The disapproval of queer people stems from genealogy within the church, as it gave illuminated the obligatory ritual of confession (Dillon, 2014, p. 375). Given this increased emphasis (and the prohibition of sex outside of marriage) any sexual activity to ‘breach’ the previously awarded celibacy became mandatory for confession. If an individual did engage in sexual practices and did not confess, this individual was at the mercy of the church (Dillon, 2014). As a result of this increased emphasis on the obligatory ritual of confession, these religious values have been deeply ingrained into social institutions and thus reproduced through the individuals who attend them (ie. school). This generational understanding of religion becomes instilled in family identity and thus cherished. Resultantly, when initiatives such as a GSA arise (that do not align with a community's religious views), significant community pushback results as religion is taught and understood intergenerationally, thus seemingly acting as truth. religious values are instilled outside of the family structure as well. Sex is rarely included in the curriculum as a result of the weaponization of these religious morals. Sex education puritanical around safety, and is often comprised of enforcing abstinence, using fear tactics such as teen pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infections (Gardner, 2015). Gay sex becomes the epitome of “sin”, as it engages with both sexuality and homosexuality.

Clarke & MacDougall (2012) write to the controversy of religious claims within human rights legislation. They write that the existence of a GSA “infringes the moral

precepts of the person or institution making the claim because it contradicts his or her religion's teachings with respect to sexuality or morality, or both" (MacDougall & Clarke, 2012, p. 211). Furthermore, by stating participation in a GSA is likely two-part with the first being participation is coerced, and the second being that participation in the GSA means involvement in queer "activity" (either through the "gay agenda" or queer sex), which violates some religious claims (Clarke & MacDougall, 2012). As such, Clarke & MacDougall (2012) note that "schools ought not to discriminate against queer or questioning children and in fact ought to be supportive of them" (p. 216). However, they state that "schools ought not to be required to support homosexual behaviour or activity" (Clarke & MacDougall, 2012, p. 216). Resultantly, the GSA is seen as both coerced and involving actionizing queer activity - thus providing grounds for active disapproval and non-support of the GSA and its attendees.

### **Rurality**

Discourse around queer youth is often based on youth suicide and being inherently at-risk. Queer teens are one of the most significant 'at-risk' groups in our high schools today, both in terms of underachieving and wellbeing as they "face a higher risk of harassment, violence, and suicide than other teens" (O'Connor, 1995, p. 13, as cited in Talburt, 2004). However, given this dominant discourse, queer youth are seemingly dehumanized due to the causal relationship formed between being queer and suicide. The reliance on "discourse of risk reinforces harmful associations of "queer" and "problem" alienates these youth from their identities and narrowly defines (and victimizes) ideas of queerness (Talburt, 2004, p. 119). Young people who are exploring their sexual identities may conclude that suicide is the consequence of being LGB" (Harbeck, 1995, p. 127 as cited in Talburt, 2004). This discourse surrounding queer youth being at risk can result in their exclusion in interventions designed for them, as their identities are not comprehensible outside of being understood as victims of their own identity (Talburt, 2004). As well, in terms of the GSA this discourse may result in

having the space as solely a place of refuge, rather than as a space to safely explore gender and sexuality.

While the school where this GSA took place was not a denomination school, there is a significant religious presence within the community and its community members. In addition to this religious presence, the rurality of the town provides a salience to queer identities. Queer identities are salient in rural spaces, as queer spaces and identities are seemingly invisible in comparison to that of urban queers. Marple (2005) writes that there is a “seeming oxymoron in the use of the term rural queer”, as the ubiquitous norm for queer experiences (through media, academia and queer culture) is based upon the urban queer experience (p. 71). As a result, rural queer experiences are undocumented, delegitimized and invisible as they deviate from this urban queer norm. The urban definition of a queer space focuses on an “intentional act or visibility that identifies or ‘outs’ a space as queer”, and is often dominated by the presence of gay men as opposed to queer women (Marple, 2005, p. 71). Given this focus on visible, queer identifiers, the urban queer norm emphasizes being “out” as it is closely related to a sense of pride and liberation.

## Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

In this section I outline critical theoretical frameworks that guide this thesis. The theoretical framework of this study follows that of Freire, specifically through emancipatory pedagogy, a culture of silence, and allyship. As well, queer theory is introduced as a central part of this framework as it provides an analytical lens to pervasive cis-heteronormativity - specifically in terms of schools and the existence of a queer space within this otherwise oppressive institution. Finally, Foucault's theories surrounding docile bodies and surveillance are explored at the intersection of the concatenation of emancipatory pedagogy and queer theory. While these theoretical frameworks are broken up by theorist, there is overlap between sections given the interconnectedness of employing these theories in this thesis.

### **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**

Freire's work through the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* recognizes that the oppressed have had their humanity stolen by their oppressor (Freire, 1970). As a result of this dehumanization from oppression, the oppressed are constrained in their freedom. To prevent the liberation of queer people, oppressors engage in conquest to encourage a fear of freedom sustained in heteronormativity. As a result, the subordinate internalize the effects of their oppression, thus becoming fearful of freedom. Here arises one of many contradictory moments: where the oppressed exist in a duality - they exist as the oppressed themselves, but exist simultaneously as the oppressor whose image they have internalized (Freire, 1970). Consequently, a key part of oppressed identity is submerged in more dominant ideas of sexuality. Freire alludes to this by stating "the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors" and this fear of freedom allows for the adoption of the oppressors' paternalistic understanding of the world (Freire, 1970, p. 62).

### **Understanding the World**

Freire's concept of “the word”, acts as a “means by which people discover themselves and their potential as they give names to things around them” (Freire, 1970, pp. 32-33).

Understanding the social world and the implications of individual occupancies within a subject/object relationship exposes compulsory cis-heterosexuality and social institutions that reify the delegitimization of queer identities. Foucault notes that “the ways in which we categorize things, and talk (and remain silent) about what we do and what we desire, produces truth” (Dillon, 2014, p. 375). This truth becomes the lived experiences, creates cognitive schemas, and understands our social world, similar to “the word”.

Understanding the social world is often carefully crafted through the *banking* concept of education. Banking is understood by Freire (1970) to be the mechanism of teaching where students are “receptacles to be filled by the teacher” (p. 72). Due to this method of banking, education becomes an act of teacher narration and of depositing knowledge where once knowledge is “deposited”, it is to be stored, memorized and regurgitated by students (Freire, 1970). This banking method of education is intentional in the knowledge that is deposited, as it lays the foundation for cognitive schemas for youth to understand the world around them. What is seemingly “banked” into students as empty receptacles is the knowledge that is deemed truth. As a result, anything that is not deposited through this banking method is deemed not truth and delegitimizes its existence - which in relation to this thesis, is the delegitimization of queer identities.

### **Dialogue**

Through dialogue, queer students are able to name their world, thus creating a shared sense of belonging and understanding of the world. Dialogue between queer youth acts to validate and legitimize lived experiences, identities, and feelings of dehumanization as a result of the oppression they face. In GSAs, this dialogue takes shape through discussion

surrounding the process of “coming out”, sharing struggles of identity, and their experiences with experiencing the social world as a member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Dialogue is crucial to breaking the culture of silence that is faced by the oppressed.

In addition, dialogue is crucial between the oppressed and their oppressor. However, this dialogue must support the humanization of the oppressed. This humanization of the dialogue allows for a “horizontal (equitable) relationship between oppressed and oppressors—without humanization the dialogue becomes hierarchical” (Watson & Miller, 2012, p. 5). It is important to note that a genuine horizontal relationship will not have an oppressor and the oppressed, given their equitable and symbiotic roles within the relationship. In order to attack anti-dialogical institutional oppression, there is significant cooperation required to create pushback. This cooperation may manifest as engaging in education about queer identities and their oppression. Given that oppression inherently divides (and thus alienates) groups of people from one another, this cooperation results in the organization and unity for liberation that arises from a GSA allows for significant power to push back against oppressive policy and institutions (Watson & Miller, 2012). By engaging in communion with others, humanity is no longer denied by injustice.

### **Culture of Silence**

As Freire (1970) notes, hope is necessary for dialogue. Ensuingly, “hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it” (Freire, 1970, p. 91). In order to break the silence and restore hope, root causes of this hopelessness need to be evaluated - starting with understanding current manifestations of power. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. This net-like organization allows individuals to circulate between its threads, but also allows for these individuals to always be in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power (Gore, 1994, as cited in Levitt, 2008, p. 98). Gore (1994) spoke to this net-like organization within schools. They note that power is

not solely in the hands of teachers, let alone students and teachers. Rather, this power is also spread through governments, administrators, designers of educational materials, and educational tutors who also exercise power in schools (as cited in Levitt, 2008). As such, despite advisor involvement with the GSA to create a transformative space they have limited agency as they are simultaneously at the mercy of others within the educational net of power.

This power works most efficiently when people do not notice it (Thomas, 2008). Within this net organization of education, there is a “private management of this power as opposed to a grandiose public action” (Thomas, 2008, p. 153). However, this private management of power manifests as the omission of a queer-inclusive curriculum. Given the nature of the omission, it is easily gone unnoticed by folks who may not recognize its place in the curriculum. Resultantly, this private management of what is included in the curriculum (and as such, the omission of queer inclusivity) presents this grandiose public action by maintaining a culture of silence amongst the queer community.

### **Hidden Curriculum**

The hidden curriculum is another instrument in this maintenance of silence. Cui (2017), writes that a Teachers’ homophobic habitus not only manifests as a choice of how to teach the formal curriculum but also as a practice of how to manipulate the hidden curriculum (p. 1159). A key element of this hidden curriculum is to duplicitously teach the positioning of the subject/object relationship - who is oppressed and who is their oppressor. The subject frames this oppression through manufactured consent, suggesting that this will allow for the object to have safety, security and responsibility. While the intention is structured to be for the well-being and benefit of both the subject and object to follow these rules, there is a difference between intent and outcome. The outcome is strict obedience, through students’ knowledge (implicit and explicit) of rules and the consequential punitive measures if this absolute obedience is not followed. In reality, the outcome of this strict obedience is the

construction and normalization of dominance and oppression, as well as the maximization of opportunity to regulate student behaviours. The strict obedience required for the object to follow ultimately maintains their submissive positioning. In doing so, students remaining obedient become complicit as a subject within the dialectical relationship.

The school curriculum acts as a tool to create and control knowledge. Giroux (2010) notes that “education cannot be neutral. It is always directive in its attempt to teach students to inhabit a particular mode of agency, enabling them to understand the larger world and one’s role in it” (p. 718). The directive to ensure the maintenance of compulsory heterosexuality permeates through the curriculum, as to minimize disobedience manifesting as the exploration and claiming of a non-cisheterosexual identity. With the omission of a queer inclusive curriculum, these identities are delegitimized and invisible. This disobedience is assumed to also manifest as queer sex, as an extension of having queer identities within schools. By not teaching queer sex education, this acts as a method to “minimize” the possibility of queer sex. Relatedly, this omission of a queer inclusive curriculum is intentional in its directive, as silence itself can be read as caught up in a larger discourse about sexuality (Foucault, 1970).

### **Allyship**

Allyship to the queer community can act as a means of denouncing the culture of silence and, in turn, amplifying queer voices and lived experiences for critical change. Such allyship is a critical, sensitive positionality, as it requires the avoidance and acknowledgement of what Freire (1970) denotes as verbalism and activism. Verbalism sacrifices action and acts in a purely linguistic attempt to provide support and denote support of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. This is harmful as, without action, these words become hollow as their lack of action falls in favour of the oppressor of queer folks, as there is no act of resistance. Freire (1970) notes that “this conversion (becoming a true ally) is so radical as not to allow for

ambiguous behaviour”, thus pointing out that neutrality or verbalism cannot exist when claiming an allyship position (p. 60).

Freire (1970), also notes that “if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into activism” (p. 88). This Freireian activism is often interpreted as allyship genuine allyship as it makes a performative effort towards creating change. However, this activism avoids reflection and becomes “a love of death, not of life” (Freire, 1970, p. 59). Cisgender, heterosexual voices are placed at the forefront of 2SLGBTQIA+ issues, rather than empowering queer people through the amplification of their voices as they are the experts in their lived reality. As a result, queer voices further become silenced amongst those who claim allyship status within this purely Freirean activist role.

Allyship becomes an intricate and delicate position, as it requires genuine sacrifice and leadership rebirth. As a result, any means of *false generosity* under the mask of allyship must be extradited. This “false generosity” manifests as “any attempt to ‘soften’ the power of the oppressor in deference to the to the weakness of the oppressed”; meaning that despite the attempt to create an illusion of being aligned with fighting with the oppressed, those who engage in false generosity maintain (and uphold) oppression (Freire, 1970, p. 44). This illusionment can be understood as *false charity* as it “constrains the fearful and subdued, the ‘rejects of life,’ to extend their trembling hands” rather than striving humanize these hands by allowing them to extend less and “less in supplication” in order to transform the world (Freire, 1970, p. 45). This false generosity under the cloak of allyship uses these extended hands of the oppressed for optics of inclusion and under neoliberalism, likely for profit through means such as corporate pride.

In order to enter into communion with the people whom you desire to be an ally to, the oppressor requires a profound rebirth, as they “can no longer remain as they were. Only

through comradeship with the oppressed can the converts understand their characteristic ways of living and behaving, which in diverse moments reflect the structure of domination.”

(Freire, 1970, p. 61). GSA's act as an introduction to genuine allyship, especially for students who attend on an allyship basis or non-queer GSA advisors. For student allies, the GSA allows for amplification of queer voices and lived experiences, allowing for allies to understand everyday encounters with homophobia, transphobia and difficulties as a queer person. For non-queer GSA advisors, ensuring this space is maintained, even in the face of pushback is an act of allyship to these queer youth, as the GSA allows for these youth to find community and thus become empowered.

As well, the GSA is likely the first opportunities to have a culture of allyship. This culture of allyship actively denounces the culture of silence amongst the queer community, while also acting and both a proactive and reactive measure against violence amongst the oppressed. While the oppressed can never *initiate* violence, as they exist as “class” due to violence perpetrated on them (Freire, 1970, p. 55). As Freire (1970) notes, the duality faced by the oppressed can manifest through self-depreciation where the oppressed internalize the oppressors attitude towards them. Consequently, the oppressed may desire to become the oppressors and engage in “*horizontal violence*”. This “horizontal violence” actionizes through the oppressed perpetrating violence on one another in an attempt to obtain power similar to that of their oppressor. This engagement in horizontal violence may more commonly be understood as *internalized homophobia*. As Newcomb & Mustansku (2010) describe, “internalized homophobia” is “not simply the experience of negative attitudes toward one’s own sexual orientation” but also includes “negative global attitudes toward [queerness], discomfort with disclosure of [queerness], disconnectedness from other [queer folks] and discomfort with ‘same-sex’ sexual activity” (p. 1020). As stated, the proactive (and simultaneous) reactive nature of the GSA allows for this horizontal violence to be addressed

by illuminating manifestations of internalized queerphobia and attempting to disrupt its root causes.

The GSA within itself acts as a manifestation of allyship (between the oppressed and their oppressor). Given that the oppressed are necessary in the process of liberation, the GSA acts as a means to determine the needs of students within the school and to inform them of their options. Prior to the GSA, these options to creating a safe space for queer youth included the GSA and the actionizing of the group was a first step to the process of liberation. It is important to note that by simply enacting a GSA does not mean one is an “ally”, but rather this act of implementation begins what is a continuous and active process of allyship.

### **Performing Gender**

Queer theory exists in two parts; one as recognizing the intricacies and continuums of sexuality and gender, while also critiquing the embeddedness of these binary understandings within institutions and everyday practices (Dillon, 2014). Queer theory is crucial to this research as it rejects the heterosexual/homosexual binary. It shifts attention from the unequal status of gays and lesbians in society to instead focus on the fluidity of all sexuality and gender. Consequently, it allows for the creation of a space of possibility and acceptance, such as a gay-straight alliance. As Freire (1970) suggests, liberation is life affirming, and schools act as a means of reducing queer people to objects which will be categorized and managed. With the GSA, this previously instated “death-affirming climate of oppression” is denounced and these “objects” (queer people) are humanized within the GSA.

Queer theorist, Judith Butler, states that gender is a performance (alluding to its social construction) and specifically notes that the “performance of gender subversion can indicate nothing about sexuality or sexual practice” as gender and sexuality exist exclusively (Butler, 1990, p. 14). Butler’s recognition of gender as a social construct requires a performance to exist in the physical world, indicating there is a correct way to perform and conversely, the

opposite is true: an incorrect way to perform gender. To be precise, one's gender expression/performance must align with conventional ideas of binary gender, or else there is a label of confusion or deviance attached to an individual.

Butler (1990) writes that “the presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it” (p. 10). Accordingly, gender is radically independent of sex, denouncing unity or the causal relationship between gender and sex. Henceforth, understandings of masculinity and femininity are disrupted. Further, she outlines the significance of the body as a medium through which the discursive signs of gender are given corporeal significance” (Nayak & Kehily, 2006, p. 468). For Butler (1990), ““persons” only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (p. 22). Resultantly, the subject (the person) is only made understandable through action. For example, Butler (1990) describes putting on lipstick as a mode of “girling” (as cited in Nayak & Kehily, 2006, p. 460). She notes that the action produces the subject, or a semblance of the subject - “there need not be a “doer behind the deed”, but that the “doer” is variably constructed in and through the deed” (Butler, 1990, p. 142). As such, one's actions are expected to be synonymous with their gender expression in order to be easily understood using cognitive schemas of binary (and dependent) understandings of gender and sex.

Gender identity is constructed and produced through performance, specifically in the engagement with stereotypically masculine and feminine tasks and roles. However, as binary understandings of gender become disrupted, this masculinity and femininity become displaced, as the previously gendered “founding techniques for which identities are realized” are adopted by other gender identities (Nayak & Kehily, 2006, p. 471). 2SLGBTQIA+ youth continue to make up “an invisible minority- invisible because they can't be identified by their

race, skin colour, or ethnicity” (Lee, 2002, p. 1). In order for queer youth to become actualized, they require a similar action that Butler speaks to - “legitimizing practices of identity formation”, which take place within the matrix of gender norms (Butler, 1990, p. 90). However, their action is distinctive in nature, as queer people require performance of their queerness - through romantic gestures, sex and one’s expression through clothes, makeup and hair.

A GSA aims to create a new *semiotic code*, meaning, “the language used not simply to denote a particular reality but as a signifier, an indicator, of a more deeply structured and culturally understood context of meaning” (Dillon, 2014, p. 385). For example, This new semiotic code legitimizes language that is used to describe and explain the lived experiences of the queer community - such as “coming out” or “the closet” (Dillon, 2014). As Freire states, “to speak a true word is to transform the world” and by legitimizing these words queer people are able to transform both their and their oppressors' understandings of the world (1970). Further, it recognizes the prescriptiveness of binary categories such as heterosexual and homosexual. These binary categories erase individual identities that fall outside of these two prescriptive binaries and thus ignore the social differences in lived experience “that invariably characterize” queer people as social actors (Dillon, 2014, p. 385).

### **Regime of Truth**

Foucaults’ regime of truth speaks to how the knowledge of the oppressor is considered truth. This institutional system, “whereby the state and other institutions (government agencies, the military, medical and cultural industries) and knowledge producers (e.g., scientists, professors) affirm certain ideas and practices as true and marginalize or silence alternative practices and interpretations” (Dillon, 2014, p. 389). The truth of the oppressor manifests as their heteronormativity, as their expertise lies within their lived experiences and their shared understandings of the word. Since sexuality was a medical and

medicalizable object, one had to try and detect it-as a lesion, a dysfunction, or a symptom - a seemingly objective artifact to be found (Foucault, 1987, p. 44). Given how social institutions are built on the truth of the oppressor, any experiences and identities deviating from this hegemonic masculine truth relegates them to the fringes of society.

### **Language**

The regime of truth encompasses the culture of silence. As seen in the military, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” rule allowed gays to serve in the military as long as they kept their sexuality secret (Dillon, 2014, p. 379). The policy required the invisibility and inherent silence of queer people and their respective identities. Given this salience of identity (and expression of said identity) due to a culture of silence, the language used to describe queer people’s worlds is compromised. Language holds significant power, as it often emerges from socio-historical moments characterized by unequal power relations. - such as the military policy. However, the reclamation of slurs within the community (such as queer) gives power to the oppressed when using this language, despite years of silence.

Unequal power relations uphold the degradation of queer folks naming of their world, through hate speech. Hate speech is a discourse that falls into four constituents; it is designed to illuminate manipulate social differences, promotes violence through the creation of in-group and out-group discourse, constructs a “collect form of memory for in-group” and lastly, inculcate this hatred as the primary purpose for perpetrators of hate speech (Waltman & Mattheis, 2017, p. 2). However, queer folks have been engaging in acts of reclamation of queer-specific slurs to disrupt these constituents of hate speech. Despite the word being commonly understood to convey hatred or contempt, queer folks are reclaiming these slurs to identify as and to explain their gender and/or sexual identities (St Clare, 2018). An emancipatory moment arises by adopting previously harmful words in a manner to strip the power from the oppressor and confer it on the oppressed. Reclaiming slurs (such as queer)

places power behind years of silence and creates an emancipatory moment by adopting previously harmful words in a manner to remove the power from the oppressor and give it to the oppressed.

Language outside of slurs and hate speech can perpetuate harm to the queer community. For example, the social practice and language surrounding queer folks “coming out” is dehumanizing, despite its embeddedness in contemporary culture. As Hennen (2005) notes, “dismantling the closet does not necessarily signal the end of heterosexual dominance. Even as they enjoy greater social acceptance, gay men and lesbians are confronted with a thoroughly heteronormative social environment” (p. 309). This heteronormative social environment invites the notion of “passing” which alludes to the idea of an owned gender expression based on sex. It is important to note that terminology such as “passing” may not inherently be hateful, but is rooted in harmful understandings of gender and an owed gender expression that allows for a process of intelligibility - often for those who are cisgender and heterosexual.

### **Docile Bodies**

With Foucault's ideas surrounding docile bodies, the body is an object of prescription. In the classroom, this takes place by sitting at a lower level than the teacher to materialize the power dynamic. Further, students must raise their hand, signifying the request to speak. Foucault speaks to disciplinary practices, where “institutional practices evolved so as to take control and regulation of the body, and hence the subjugation of individuals and society, a core preoccupation” (Dillon, 2014, p. 371). As a result, there is surveillance of the body, specifically gestures, body movements, and body positioning. Individuals who express themselves in seemingly deviant ways with their bodies are thus grouped as abnormal and potentially dangerous.

The treatment of youth may vary on their acceptance of the prescription of the body, specifically to avoid the alignment “with the foreign figure of “the criminal,” “the delinquent,” and “the suspect.” (Bauman, 2003, p. 83–105). Further, youth who might not “look,” “talk,” or “act” like the status quo (as designed by prescriptive forces)—are often viewed as suspicious. Thus, suspicion validates the surveillance of youth who present outside of the rigid boundaries of the status quo. Giroux (2009) writes to the deterioration of the image of youth, as a result of the manufactured consent to the prescription of bodies noting that “as the image of youth deteriorates, the retraction of social provisions and application of security practices organized around surveillance, punishment, and disposability has been given further sanction” (as cited in Fisher, 2011, p. 20). A further sanction may manifest as violence or even incarceration, which is ultimately substantiated by the association of danger with alienated, socially conventional bodies, language or expression.

For queer people, deviant body language can be seen when so-called “men” walk in “feminine” ways, or women take up physical space rather than having a scrunched, small positioning. These body movements and gestures act as markers for homosexuality, as the prescribed body gestures are not followed for their assigned gender. The prescription of bodies is seen in how one performs their gender, specifically their gender expression as an extension of their physical body and queerness. When clothing, makeup, and hair that are conventionally assigned to females is seen on a male, there is an assumption that they are homosexual. The same is true for women appearing as masculine in their gender expression, they are assumed to be lesbian. Profoundly, these two presentations are stuck within binary categories - bodies become especially deviant when gender expression appears as androgynous, referring to an inability to directly assign gender and, by extension, sexuality.

Our cognitive schemas further become skewed when attempting to understand what trans “looks like”. That is, many folks are curious about what changes in body image may

signify. As a result, there becomes a reciprocal narrative between transgender people and cis-heterosexual people where the performance of hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity is required in order to “pass.” Problematically, this concept assumes transgender people look inherently different than someone who is cisgender. As well, “passing” acts as another facet of enforcing hegemonic masculinity as one's expected masculinity (or lack of, in terms of femininity) must materialize through a heteronormative manner. For queer folks, this “passing” may manifest as *code-switching*. When engaging in “code-switching”, queer people will change “gestures, body language, clothing and other forms of non-verbal communication” as a means of “passing” as heterosexual to secure their safety in unsafe spaces (Winn, 2021, p. 1). This code-switching and means of passing enforce the idea that queerness has a specific “look” and as a result, promotes the invisibility of stereotypical presentations of queerness as a prerequisite for safety.

Foucault argues the body is subject to a historical and discursive genealogy, being part of what Butler (1990, p. 141) describes as a ‘social temporality’. The body is, in Foucauldian terminology, the product of a unique ‘bio-power’ (1978, p. 143, as cited in Nayak & Kehily, 2006). Through *bio-power*, the prescription of bodies and the benefits abiding by this control are marketed back to youth through media. Bio-power is the “linking of biological processes to economic and political power, coincided with industrialization and capitalist growth” (Dillon, 2014, p. 372). Ultimately, anything that is gendered has an impact on sexuality as gender is the foundation of sexuality bio-politics, through its various technologies (its methods, categories, and procedures), invented sexuality (Dillon, 2014, p. 373). However, for queer people, abiding by the techniques of bio-power allows an element of safety, often through “passing” as someone who is cisgender and/or heterosexual.

Given that Foucault deems power as relational, this power is omnipresent and presents itself through discourse. Despite the liberating elements of creating discourse

surrounding sex (given its taboo nature stemming from Christianity), it is not yet a truly emancipatory moment. This 'progressive' strategy that schools may use when beginning conversations surrounding sex is a tool to demarcate what is sinful, normal, weird, etc. (Dillon, 2014). This masking of power reinforces queer sex being placed within these deviant categories of unnatural and thus sinful and weird. In order for these discourses surrounding sex to be truly liberating, these categories of what normal sex is and what is not (as a result of an essentialist view of sexuality) need to be destroyed. By doing so, queer sex (especially as an expression of their queer identities rather than the act of sex itself) can become normalized and thus brought into the curriculum.

## Chapter 5: Findings

### Recognizing the Climate

Recognizing the climate for queer issues is crucial before implementing an initiative such as a GSA. principal Louis notes that “our community definitely [is] lacking a lot of education in this area (queerness)”. Further, he speaks to community members not always being supportive of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. He notes that “people are very backwards in their thinking and it hurts me”. Despite a clear unacceptance of queer youth amongst community members, this sentiment is not held by everyone within the community. Teacher Beth states that acceptance of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community is antagonistic. She notes that there are both sides of the “spectrum”. She states “there are very negative connotations and very accepted connotations”, pointing to these adversarial views on the queer community. She (and fellow faculty) recognized this climate and wanted to help implement the GSA to drive social change. Teacher Beth notes “the whole purpose behind it was to create a safe space and hopefully try to transition some of that negative view to create a more inclusive environment and community.”

Vice principal Joanna notes that when speaking to a previous queer student of the school, “he said it (the community) wasn't an inviting environment.” Further, she notes that “[in] the community, there are lots of great people that are accepting in the community, but usually the loudest ones and the ones that make the most noise or the ones that aren't accepting.” Counsellor Lisa affirms this statement about the community climate. She notes that:

I naively hope that most people are welcoming, but I think, knowing a little bit of the history with that community and then seeing a little bit of the reactions from the launch of the GSA, maybe it's [the town] not as welcoming as we hoped.

Prior to becoming the facilitator of the GSA, I was heavily brief surrounding potential pushback that may conspire if I was to move forward in the facilitator role. Staff at the school

noted that there may be an individual safety concern. They noted that if community members (specifically parents) knew that I was a queer person coming into the school, there would likely be concerns that I was “spreading the gay agenda” and that I would be “brainwashing” these students. However, this was not enough for counsellor Lisa and fellow staff to back away from the GSA. Lisa notes that this community non-support “makes you want to stick to it even more, right? That to me, is the reason that we're doing it.” She furthers this by alluding to the potential source of this non-support: discomfort. Lisa states “the discomfort is where growth comes from, and so we're just going to ride out the discomfort, you know.” This discomfort arises from an acknowledgement of polarizing acceptance of 2SLGTQIA+ issues and thus the GSA. This discomfort presents as a barrier to creating a GSA as advisors (and students) must acknowledge this discomfort from the community, whilst simultaneously recognizing the significant need for a GSA - thus counteracting the values of many within the community.

Despite a seemingly unwelcoming climate for queer issues, some community members have made a conscious effort to create visible signs of queer pride among the community. One example of this effort is painting rainbow crosswalks in the downtown area. The effort was not welcomed by everyone within the community. principal Louis states that there was “a gentleman fired from the town because they [community members] wanted to paint the crosswalk in multi-colours, and he got so enraged that he punched the wall - he got dismissed because of that.” Vice principal Joanna was one of the community members who wanted to paint these crosswalks. She notes that “I actually went and helped and painted the downtown sidewalks and I think somebody drove by and gave some obscene gesture..... there's bitterness and anger that way for sure”.

When asked whether or not queer community members are well known amongst the community, Counsellor Lisa stated that “I think if they do know [that someone is queer

within the community] there's a really strong chance that it's not in a celebratory way". In a recent election in the town, the newly elected mayor is gay. Tellingly, interviewees deemed that the majority of the town was likely not knowledgeable of their sexuality. Counsellor Lisa notes that this newly elected mayor relinquished their queer identity, making this a "secondary piece" to who they were. She hypothesized that this was not general knowledge as the elected mayor likely understood the climate of the town and was worried about their chances of becoming elected. Counsellor Lisa states that

I think if they do know there's a really strong chance that it's not in a celebratory way, right? And it's not in a like wow this person, this leader, this wonderful advocate is an amazing presence within our community, who happens to also fall within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, right?.

Counsellor Lisa alludes to a potential source of anti-queer rhetoric. She states "people don't even maybe realize how offensive they're being. So maybe the intention isn't a negative one, but the impact is super negative". As well, she speaks to confusion being a source of this same anti-queer rhetoric. She states that

providing people with you know, education and language.. like I feel like a lot of fear stems from confusion, perhaps. So then you know to help minimize that confusion and give people the tools and the language, like it's not so scary anymore, and it's not, you know, so alien to them.

However, counsellor Lisa is hopeful that the GSA can help inform these unaware biases and prejudice to build awareness. She notes that "I think that by purposefully and intentionally having the GSA we can slowly, one by one, kind of build that awareness and welcome making change that really needs to happen".

Teacher Beth points to a large religious presence within the town and thus the students, as being a part of this anti-queer rhetoric. She notes that within the classroom, these religious beliefs and values are used in a manner to oppose conversations surrounding 2SLGBTQIA+ identities and relationships. She states "sometimes there are certain religious statures that are brought up ... sometimes there's a resistance exhibited there". Despite this

pushback, Jenna did not abandon these conversations. She states that whilst she recognizes these religious values, she continues to encourage queer-inclusive dialogue within her classroom.

Within the school, Teacher Beth speaks to a unique relationship amongst students. She notes that most of the students fall within the same lower economic class. She states that:

it's different than urban schools here. Obviously, money still plays a factor in that, but most of the kids are related in one way or another, and I don't feel as big of a divide amongst the children as you would see in an urban school where you have a very dominant, rich to poor ratio.

However, despite this closeness, there has not been a finalized effort to create support for queer youth. Counsellor Lisa states that “every school within our district at the middle school level at the high school level, should have a GSA, so we're way behind the times.” Despite seemingly being behind the times in not having a GSA, this is not an anomaly within the school district as the majority of schools within the district do not have a formalized GSA. Despite this, Lisa notes that “if I walk into school there isn't a GSA that is a bit of a red flag for me” as she recognizes the value of the space. Despite a clear, anti-queer climate, principal Louis is hopeful for change. He notes that “we've come a long way”. Teacher Beth notes that with the GSA, this change can happen. She states “I just want kids to be comfortable, have a safe place, inform themselves and be able to walk out with their head held high and not feel like they're not a member of [the community]”

The community's school acted as a sole, social outlet for the youth. Vice principal Joanna speaks to this lack of opportunity to connect. She notes that “there's no youth center or anything like that, so most of the time the school is the heart of the community”. Having the school as the sole space for connection presents a unique issue for rural schools. Given the sheer numbers in rural schools, students are often in the same class as their peers until high school Vice principal Joanna states “it's always these same kids, we don't usually have more than one class [per grade level]”.

As the facilitator, this lack of anonymity proved difficult for students who wanted to attend the GSA. During the first few GSA meetings, we noticed that individuals would come in and out of the gymnasium where the GSA was located. I asked students about their reasoning for this, as I was hesitant that students were coming in and out of the GSA to survey who was attending. However, students stated that they could only come in for the first bit of the GSA or would brief come in and out as they didn't want their friends to catch them in the GSA - whether that was by watching them walk into the gym or by peering into the gym through the windows on the doors. After discussing with students, we decided to set up coverings for the gymnasium doors that would be put up during the GSA to allow students peace of mind that their peers would not be peeking inside.

### **Distinguishing Queerness**

As Butler (1990) writes, “assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that “women” will interpret only female bodies” (p. 10). This perceived requirement of having one's gender match their external presentation creates confusion for those who are stuck in categorizing the binary of male and female. For those whose expression matches the ‘opposite’ gender, the gender binary further alienates them as their queerness becomes visible to the public. Vice principal Joanna speaks to hiding one’s queerness. She notes that if someone’s queerness is hidden (and not easily identifiable by external expression) then individuals will be more accepting. Notably, the aforementioned example of the Mayor exemplifies the intersection of public image and the perceived ability to express gender and sexuality.

However, Joanna states that community members may shift from this acceptance if individuals are expressing their queerness in an externally flamboyant manner. She notes that “if you saw maybe someone dressing in drag or something like that, it wouldn't be as

accepted for sure”. Joann furthered this idea of queerness having a specific “look.” She notes that queer students within the school were often identifiable by their dress. When speaking about one student within the GSA, she claims that “I know at one point you could maybe tell, or guess (that this student was gay) by the way she dressed.”

As the facilitator, conversations surrounding expression and “looking gay” were frequent. Students often noted that they wanted to be perceived as gay in order to be quickly identifiable by other queer people - whether this was in a romantic way or to seek out other queer friends. As well, by “looking gay” students felt as though they did not have the same pressure to come out, as their expressions alluded to their queerness. However, this expression may not have been as well known to their parents (ex: thinking that their daughter is a tomboy, not dressing to look “gay”). This form of expression as a means of coming out allowed students to be out to groups of people whilst maintaining safety from homophobic families.

### **Hidden Curriculum**

The hidden curriculum manifests through enforcing cis-heteronormativity. As Butler (1990) notes, “the “unity” of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality.” Teacher Beth spoke to her frustration with the curriculum being non-inclusive to 2SLGBTQIA+ people, thus reifying this ‘unity of gender’. She states that the healthy relationships portion of the curriculum is the “last outcome that I get too, so it's kind of the last week, second last week of school.” While queer identities are not explicitly talked about, she takes this as an opportunity to teach about non-traditional relationships, such as those within the queer community. She notes that when this happens, “there's a resistance exhibited” within the classroom. Vice principal Joanna affirms this notion of a hidden curriculum. She notes that within the curriculum, “they're

teaching almost as if it's always going to be somebody else... So when your *friend* feels this way. . . so it kind of subtly saying it shouldn't be you.”

Outside of the curriculum, cisheteronormativity manifests in school policy. This school policy rests on the idea that “gender is an assignment” (Butler, 1988), meaning that one’s gender is permanent and allocated based on one’s external sex characteristics. In prior years, a transgender male student wanted to play on the boys’ soccer team but it caused a significant disruption within the school and the greater community. In this case, the transgender student’s gender was deemed questionable, wrongly perceiving gender as if it could be debated. Vice principal Joanna states that conversations surrounding the student's eligibility for the boys’ soccer team focused on whether or not their transition creates “an advantage or a disadvantage”. As well, confusion about eligibility struck conversations surrounding this student's ability to go to the team’s bathroom. Joanna notes that “they're still trying to work through those types of things”.

Vice principal Joanna has spent considerable time speaking with this student after they graduated from middle school, as she seeks to understand what the school could have done to better support them. She notes:

I know, he's been into some art competitions and things, and one of them was about a sense of community, and how he feels being queer and in his community. It was . . . you know . . . it's sad and heartbreaking because like he said, I don't feel connection anywhere, right? And it's true.

Because of this lack of belonging to their community, this previous student spends limited time within their community. As Joanna notes, “he doesn't feel a part of, or comfortable in this community and that's why he kind of migrated, he still lives here, but goes to (a neighbouring town) a lot cause there's more openness”. Joanna notes that as a result of this non-belonging, the student has created a “queer specific group” in the neighbouring town that allows queer youth to attend on a weekly basis - similar to a GSA.

In addition, microaggressions based on cisheteronormativity arise within the school. Vice principal Joanna notes student's inappropriate use of phrases such as "that's so gay" and "you're gay." Likewise, counsellor Lisa speaks to these microaggressions, noting that "the pride crosswalks have been, you know, violated." In terms of macroaggressions, she notes that upon the implementation of the GSA, there was "really offensive. . . kind of . . . degrading hate crime graffiti at the school." principal Louis notes that this graffiti included explicitly queerphobic statements such as "trans faggots" and "trans die". Teacher Beth echoes this pushback. She hypothesized that these overt acts of queerphobia were directly correlated with the increase in Facebook posts surrounding the GSA. She notes that this pushback was likely provoked by the presence the GSA was beginning to create - both online and within the school. Beth states "we publicly took a stance and then now they're (individuals vandalizing the school) publicly taking a stance"

Specific to this project, the hidden curriculum has manifested into how one comes to understand gender and sexuality. Vice principal Joanna speaks to her husband's confusion surrounding their son being bisexual. After their son came out as bisexual, he began to openly date men. Despite their support, Joanna's husband was confused about their son's newly out identity. Her husband began conflating bisexuality with being gay, as his understandings of sexuality were grounded in a binary notion of sexuality, where an individual is either straight or gay - thus reducing bisexuality to solely homosexuality. Joanna states "even [he] struggles with it, our sons bisexual and he's like 'no OK he's gay and I'm like 'no, not gay'...it's hard for him to wrap around. Similarly, Joanna speaks to her husband's assumption that gender and sexuality are relational. She notes "if you saw somebody that may be transgender from a woman to a man, but then was gay, and he's like, 'well I don't understand' or 'do they like women still'.

## **Culture of Silence**

As a facilitator, I noticed a significant culture of silence amongst student attendees. To begin with, students were hesitant to attend the GSA as they recognize that attending the GSA as a queer person, it was affirming their identity to their peers and to themselves - thus breaking the silence that they were able to maintain by not attending the GSA. As well, when we had the final GSA meeting before the end of the year, I brought various pride themes stickers, flags and pins as students had requested them. While some students jumped at the idea of having this new pride-themed memorabilia, many students were not able to take home any of these items as it could raise suspicion (and even risk safety) from family members/guardians. By having a symbol of queer pride, the culture of silence was shattered as this symbol acts as an outward recognition of queerness or support of queer folks.

As previously mentioned, queer people engage in the act of code-switching to maintain a culture of silence when in spaces of oppression to ensure safety. As a facilitator, I also noticed students would wear different clothes to the GSA than they wear during school. Upon speaking with one student during a GSA meeting, they claimed that they saved up their lunch money to buy a pride flag from their local store to avoid breaking the culture of silence that maintained their safety with their family.

Students also engaged in the act of code-switching outside of their clothing. When at the GSA, some students would ask to have different pronouns or names used for them. However, when outside of the GSA, these students were explicitly asked to be called by their assigned pronouns and name. As well, queer students who were in a same-sex relationship may openly hold hands or hug whilst at the GSA. Similarly, this was specific to the GSA and once these students were outside the walls of the GSA they did not engage in any activities that would allow students to recognize them as a queer couple.

During the first few meetings of the GSA, when the principal would walk in, students often fell silent - despite the principal's outward support of the GSA. This silence may have manifested in true silence or would manifest as muted queerness. Students may move away from their queer partners, may use their assigned name or would avoid using queer slang. However, after a few meetings of the GSA these students gained confidence and would invite the principal to engage in their conversations, where the students would teach Louis about their queer slang, they would introduce him to their partner (acknowledging that they were a couple) and would confide in him about their new, chosen name.

### **Dialogue**

In order for the GSA to emerge there needed to be significant dialogue around the need and desire to have this space. While students initiated this dialogue by bringing forward their desires to have a GSA to students and staff, there was a considerable dialogue between myself as facilitator and school staff. The oppressed primarily initiate the conversation in the sense that their lived experience presents a contradiction, therefore, others (GSA advisors) enter the relationship to remedy the contradiction. Lisa noted that “when I stepped into the role of a Counsellor, I'm hearing all these voices saying ‘I want to help the GSA happen. It hasn't happened for years.’” She decided it was time to action these requests from queer students. She noted that she “c[ould] hear I could hear the students directly saying to me, you know I'm struggling with identity. I'm struggling with my gender, I'm struggling with sexuality. I'm struggling. I'm struggling”.

Dialogue is a crucial part of the GSA, as this environment provides the two crucial elements to meaningful, genuine dialogue: trust and love. They emerge as a result of a queer leader of the GSA, while also having advisors who aim to be allies to those in the community. However, this emerging trust and love are not guaranteed as genuine dialogue cannot be ensured. Designating a space within the school allows for trust to be built and is recognized

as a safe space. Further, the GSA allows for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community to shape their world on their terms. Having many of the same students return each week builds significant trust, as these students recognize the shared experiences they have and find community through dialogue.

Student trust manifested through experimentation with identity. principal Louis noted that “we had all these kids change their names and change them back and I'm like great, explore!”. Through experimentation with names, pronouns, and identities, there may be a significant risk to queer students’ safety and confidence as there is often a sense of an owed explanation to those who are expected to use these new names, pronouns, or identity labels. However, within the GSA the built trust allowed for a risk-free area for students to experiment with their expression and identity. Teacher, Beth, stated that “they're just owning it, you see confidence in these and kids that didn't necessarily have confidence [before]”.

When the students engaged in experimentation outside of the GSA, they were sometimes met with a lack of acceptance, primarily from those who were religious. principal Louis stated that “there [are] very religious children in our school who don't believe in . . . [being gay] And because it's a sin in the Bible, right?” Even in the face of religious claims against not respecting or believing in these identities, these youth felt comfortable as a result of the love and trust built within the GSA. Beth stated that despite being met with adversity, “they're just owning it, you see confidence in them and in kids that didn't necessarily have confidence”.

Through dialogue, there was a raising of consciousness; conscientização. This raising of consciousness diminished queer students' fear of freedom and consequently brought conversations surrounding gender, sexuality, and the lived experiences of queer students who attend the GSA into the classroom. Beth, stated, “I feel like the conversations are richer and classrooms and the kids are more aware.” She noted that students who were hearing

homophobic comments and graffiti at school would ask “do you think in class we could explore this part of the LGBTQ community?” She alludes to a piece of the process of raising consciousness within the GSA and brought into the classroom. Beth states “they're thinking critically about what they want to learn, which is cool, like, that's another elevated level to it as opposed to not just within the GSA”. While consciousness involves a greater understanding of both the oppressor and oppressed to come to a truer understanding, this understanding of the oppressed becomes a step in the direction of raising consciousness. Given that the GSA exists partially outside of the school (as a social haven space), bringing dialogue outside of this space and integrating it into the current oppressive curriculum allows for their peers to raise their consciousness as well, despite not attending the GSA. While the most radical/emancipatory potential of the GSA happens within the margins of the gymnasium, these ripple effects (despite being muted) are still crucial.

### **Advisor Involvement**

Prior to the GSA, there were previous attempts to bring queer people into the school to help educate students. One prominent queer community member has a foster home where they have multiple kids enrolled at the community's school. principal Louis acknowledged their community advocacy (through their foster home and queer-specific activism) and invited them into the school. He notes “this lady from [the community] would come into our school and do sessions. She would come into classrooms and talk about her journey and how she felt going through high school, and how she had to hide being gay”. However, these sessions were not a sustainable solution, as this person would visit annually.

Advisors spoke to the internal support amongst faculty and staff at the school when the GSA was first introduced as a more sustainable option to annual visits from the seemingly token queer. Due to initial limitations to support, Counsellor Lisa mentioned that the GSA was not quickly implemented. She states that “it hasn't happened for years”. However, when

approached by a queer university student who sought to kickstart this GSA, it was quickly actualized in a matter of months. Counsellor Lisa notes that the administration said “yeah, we're overdue, let's do it”. Teacher Beth affirmed this sentiment, as she notes “it’s time stuff starts changing”. She notes that she has “no stipulations” about being involved. Given this internal support within the school, the GSA was able to come to fruition. principal Louis was one of the initial supporters of this GSA. He notes that “my schedule didn't allow me to be there for the whole time [during the GSA] and I knew it was in capable hands, so my role was just to let the children know that I'm in full support of the program”.

Administration assistant Mallory was overjoyed with the actualization of the GSA.

In a letter, she says:

let me express how grateful I am that you started up such a group for our students and school. To give these souls the opportunity to be proud of themselves and relax their fears of belonging or being different is exactly what they need at this time in their lives.

Further, Mallory notes that she had a personal connection to the implementation of the GSA. She states:

my son was in grade 8 when I first had wayward thoughts that he was maybe... [gay]. He only revealed himself to us (parents) when he went away for schooling in the states. What a shame that he only then, with the distance between us, he felt sure enough to tell us.

This personal, familiar connection to the GSA was reciprocated by Teacher Beth. She notes that “both of my siblings are members of the LGBTQ community, as well as a grandmother and a cousin.” Beth states that this connection gave her further motivation to participate in implementing a GSA. As well, she recognizes the climate of queer issues within the rural town. She notes “it's just one of those things where it needs to be done, especially in a rural community”.

### **Reborn Leaders**

While faculty members may not be the direct oppressors of queer people, they certainly engage with oppression through teaching the curriculum and working at an

institution of oppression. A unique situation arises by having cis-heterosexual advisors, as they require humility to recognize their role as the subject/object relationship, without blaming the victim of the oppression or allowing personal emotions to take over. As Freire (1970) noted, this working partnership between oppressed and oppressor is only successful when initiated by the oppressed and their allies, and as the oppressed fight "...for the restoration of their humanity they will be attempting the restoration of true generosity" (p. 27). Leadership rebirth is a result of praxis - acknowledging that queer people are the experts in their own identities and lived experiences.

This leadership rebirth requires that paternalistic ideologies must be exiled. Vice-Principal Joanna notes that rather than continuing to impose support for queer youth, they are shifting to work with the oppressed to determine their needs. She notes "I found in the last couple of years since we've talked to [previous queer student] and trying to purposely make it better. counsellor Lisa alludes to leaving these paternalistic ideas behind by noting "I can't be the one who does it on my own, that's for sure. I'm a hetero, cis, super boring 41-year-old woman. I can't be the leader of your GSA." Teacher Beth also speaks to lived experiences needing to be considered as truth. She states:

It's not my story to tell, it's not my place to govern. It's my place to stand up and help and support, but it's not my place to determine what these people want to need in their lives as a GSA. I just want kids to be comfortable, have a safe place, inform themselves and be able to walk out with their head held high.

Beth recognizes the expertise these youth have in their lived experiences, thus relying on the students to state their needs within the GSA. Once this need is brought forward, Beth (and fellow advisors) can act in a manner to actionize a plan to meet this need.

### **Unity**

Through dialogue and reborn leaders comes unity, allowing for the oppressed and their allies to work together as a cohesive group with a common goal to fight for the liberation of the oppressed. Through the GSA, students and advisors were able to build close

bonds, held together by love and trust. These bonds ignored the “abnormality” of their gender and/or sexual identity and allowed for personal connection on a meaningful level. As principal Louis said, “it then makes you know who you're fighting for”.

In order to have unity, advisors needed to acknowledge the privilege and power they have to reach out to teachers and faculty members who were not involved with the GSA or may not be allies of queer people, as they share a common ground of being cisgender and/or heterosexual. Using these collective interests and identities allow for advisors to speak to non-allies in a manner that acknowledges their shared power and allows for a horizontal exchange of knowledge, where the advisor seeks to recruit other faculty as allies.

consellor Lisa saw this firsthand, as faculty members who had no relationship with the GSA were actionizing their newfound allyship. She notes:

Teachers were reaching out to me and saying this student is struggling with issues brought about by the GSA. Can you connect with them? Can you check in with him, like, even just colleagues checking in with each other or checking in with GSA members. You know, just regularly checking in on each other, building community, through talking.

As a facilitator, acts of allyship and unity were riddled through the GSA. GSA students expressed to me there were no visible signs of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community within the school. I encouraged students to bring this forward to Joanna and Louis to determine a solution. While we had anticipated we would create posters as a GSA and place them around the school, but we were pleasantly surprised. Joanna and Louis ordered an abundance of 2SLGBTQIA+ flags, pins and decorations - all gifted to the GSA, with some for individuals to keep, and the rest to be used as decorations for around the school. Students were ecstatic with this generous gift and took significant pride in decorating their hallways, classrooms, and lockers. Staff took note of new decorations and took it upon themselves to bring some visibility into their classrooms. Teachers and staff bought queer-specific books, adorned positive space stickers on their doors, and invited students to share their pride artwork.

The cooperation and unity required to build and maintain this GSA are of significant importance. principal Louis noted his worry about having to take on community backlash as an individual. He states “I thought I was going to take the community on as an individual. And when you and these teachers took this on, and we as a team approached it, it made it so much easier”. With unity, there is greater strength, resources, and ability to fight against this pushback.

### **Emancipatory Learning**

GSA provide opportunities for emancipatory learning. Counsellor Lisa notes that by “we can slowly, one by one, kind of build that awareness and welcome making change that really needs to happen”. Given the salience of youth identities, queer youth are met with an additional barriers in being experts in their own identity. Vice principal Joanna speaks to common notions surrounding queer youth, such as their identity being simply a phase. She notes “maybe we don't trust kids with enough...we maybe make all the decisions for them”. Having a GSA allows for youth to have power shifted onto them, allowing queer youth the opportunity to relish in their expertise of their own identity. Vice-Principal Joanna speaks to this by saying as an advisor “I'm not the one that's going to be the teacher”. Further, she notes “that's probably another benefit of the GSA. Is that empowering kids to say you tell me, right, we're not here to teach.” shifts in power allows for youth to become empowered to share their stories, lived experiences, and identity with those around them. As Vice principal Joanna states, “[it's] kind of . . . empowering, for them to have a voice.”

With empowerment, youth may feel comfortable beginning the lifelong process of “coming out”. Administrative assistant Mallory notes the coming out process is often delayed until at least high school, as youth are not given an opportunity to become empowered in their identity. She states, “they would hide that for a long time until they're older, and that's what I've seen with the younger generation..I mean, it wasn't until they were out of high

school". She also speaks to the idea that familiar relations may be holding these youth back from coming out, noting "they knew their parents wouldn't accept it and it would be very hard. So, if they had a good support group afterwards (after high school) then they felt like they could come out... the younger generation definitely came out later in life."

### **Belonging**

In addition, the GSA provided a space for students to belong to. Administrative assistant Mallory expressed her gratitude by stating "groups such as the ones you established here last year will help those less strong or those not grounded in a loving, caring home to turn to. Having that outlet here (your group and school) to feel included and valued makes a difference." Principal Louis affirms the importance of belonging. He notes that as a result of the GSA, "kids now have the confidence" to be visibly queer. He states "I see the, the rainbow stockings. I see the flags in my hall and that would have never happened before." This GSA has highlighted the need for belonging amongst GSA advisors. Principal Louis notes that once he saw the increase in confidence, it has cemented the importance of belonging. He states "it's been a really good learning curve for me and makes me more aware of everybody's kind of sense of needing to belong and accepted in our community." Principal Louis is pleased with the shift in confidence amongst the students. He notes "I saw smiles on their faces more and that, for me, is all I needed to see. That's huge. So we're definitely elevating the social, emotional and well being of our children by this, by this club"

Newfound confidence allows for GSA members to experiment with their identity. Through exploration, youth are able to realize their true selves. Vice principal Joanna noted that students started approaching her after the GSA asking for them to be called by different names or pronouns. She states "[student] was just testing the water so she was trying, and so that's good. That shows that they're not too afraid, and they know that [we] would accept them". principal Louis encouraged experimentation. He notes that "we had all these kids

change their names and change them back and I'm like great, explore". Further, he was excited that youth felt comfortable to explore their identities. He notes "they feel that freedom to do that (changing their name). I thought that's cool, and that they're starting to say, hey, we feel free enough to do that."

### **Ripple Effect(s)**

Through lessons in the GSA surrounding language and identity, youth are able to create this emancipatory space of learning for others. Vice principal Joanna notes that there have been instances of microaggressions from students who say "that's so gay" as a result of being presented with something that displeases them. However, instead of calling these students out for their microaggression, students and staff use these opportunities for learning. Vice principal Joanna states that she may ask "what does gay mean?" By inviting others into this conversation it allows students to give insight into how these microaggressions impact members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Here, the emancipatory capacity of the GSA spills into the larger community.

In addition, GSAs provide students with the confidence to defend their fellow GSA members. Teacher Beth speaks to experiences with seeing GSA members correcting their peers, in the case of deadnaming and the usage of incorrect pronouns. She notes that GSA members are forward in their approach, telling their peers "you can't say that, that's not OK". Corrections like this help students are made aware that this deadnaming will not be tolerated. As well, Beth notes that "this information spreads unknowingly, and unofficially" which can be extremely helpful, especially in terms of students who have decided they wish to be called a name in place of their birth name as it allows for students to learn and thus correct other students. This unofficial spreading of information happens outside of the school and into the community, as many of the community members are employees of the school. Administrative assistant Mallory speaks to this, as her husband has benefitted from their friends sharing

information (and acceptance) for the queer community. She notes that she wishes there was an avenue for hesitant family and community members to attend an initiative similar to a GSA. She recognizes the ripple effect of the GSA, as the educative nature informally circulates amongst participants, friends, family and community through dialogue. She states “the hard part would be getting the negative parent to attend. I have found that the best inroads made with my husband have come from all our friends (male and female) being so accepting and vocalizing it, in a roundabout way, in my husband’s presence.”

### **Raised Consciousness**

With the influx of COVID-19, schools had to create unique solutions to minimize the spread of the virus. For example, washrooms had to be changed in order to minimize contact with students from other classes. Vice principal Joanna notes that “we designated bathrooms for a classroom. So this is my classroom. This is your classroom and it's not like, male/female”. Whilst this change was implemented as a result of COVID, the GSA allowed for these classroom-specific bathrooms to be viewed in a new light - an opportunity to have all-gender washrooms. Joanna states that “we were doing 'cause it COVID, but we like, hey, this is gonna be good practice for down the road”.

As a result of the GSA, there has been a consciousness-raising among the faculty, staff and students. This consciousness-raising begins with recognizing the weight of words, specifically when they have queerphobic undertones. Vice principal Joanna speaks to new awareness being present in recognizing microaggressions students may have previously perpetrated - such as saying ‘that’s so gay’. She notes that they are “realizing our words” and that:

we have to be careful with her words because people are always listening and hearing you know. So if you're sending the wrong message all the time, as much as we know we're not trying to offend anybody, we have to think of those things and we have to adjust [our] language.

In addition to changing harmful language, the GSA has allowed for this new consciousness-raising to be applied to tangible change. Vice principal Joanna spoke to how lessons learned within the GSA have allowed her to view her everyday life from a new perspective. Specifically, she notes the example of the male mascot for the school. She states that “whoa, wait a minute... that's not inclusive”. She speaks to the idea of running a competition for students to submit ideas for a new, gender-neutral/inanimate mascot. She states “ can we just switch to the lighthouse or the wheel? Or something that's less identifying”.

### **Humanizing**

The GSA allowed for youth to be humanized by their peers. As a facilitator, I noticed that there was a considerable amount of internalized homophobia amongst GSA members. This internalized homophobia manifested as queer students not “liking” or “not getting” identified bisexual or pansexual students - claiming that they were just confused or looking for attention. This act of horizontal violence provides the “gay” student with a means of stealing humanity from another queer student who in the eyes of the gay student, had characteristics of their oppressor given as they still had “opposite-sex attraction”.

principal Louis states that the GSA encourages difficult conversations that promote empathy. He states, “I think [students] are open now and we're having better conversations and they're realizing that there is a group of people that are struggling. Staff members note the success of conversations lies within an advisor the youth could relate to and be accessible. Counsellor Lisa notes that by having queer youth run the GSA, they are “not this alien super older figure. For them you're, you know, are close enough in age that they can really relate and connect to you”. Similarly, Joanna notes the value of having someone within the queer community, as well as the geographic community to be the leader of this GSA. She states “they actually need to see somebody too, and somebody from our area”.

The benefits of the GSA extend past time students spent at the school. Administrative assistant Mallory notes that “the benefits (of belonging to) even extend past the teens that became members of [the GSA], to all of the other older students being exposed to the normalcy of it all.” As well, she speaks to the benefit of having this GSA available at a young age. She notes that “if we start now, at this age, there is a real opportunity for growth and acceptance as they move forward in the world around us.”

### **Pride**

A sense of pride emerged as the GSA ran throughout the school year. Counsellor Lisa Notes that “I think maybe there was, by the end of it, a little bit of social celebration tied to belonging to the GSA.” Students embraced the pride from the GSA and began integrating it into their everyday life. Teacher Beth noted that these students were no longer afraid to be seen as a part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. She notes “they want to be a part of it. They just I see a lot of their doodling has the pride flags on it and they're using those colours and those terms (queer specific terms) in their everyday life”. This pride influenced a new sense of confidence, especially for queer-specific issues. Vice principal Joanna states she has “heard some of those kids in the GSA correcting somebody when they made a mistake [when using someone's pronouns]”.

In addition, there was a pride created from being an ally to the GSA. Counsellor Lisa affirms this by stating “I think there was a lot of pride in being an ally, which definitely was not my high school experience”. This pride manifested itself in school projects. For example, Teacher Beth reflects “for a social action project in ELA last year, the kids redid the [rainbow] crosswalks” as they had been deteriorated from environmental damage. As well, Beth noted that another group decided to create an information guide to “inform our parents and community members about what it meant to be pansexual or different members of the LGBTQ community.”

Projects like this allow for queer youth to merge their learning from the GSA with their formal education. principal Louis spoke to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) taught within social studies by GSA advisor/Teacher Beth. He notes that “I've seen projects come out now because they had to do a project on the SDG and some of them came out in support of gay and lesbian community, which was awesome”. As well, Teacher Beth speaks to this desire to integrate their knowledge of the GSA into their classroom. She states: “I've had kids over summer message “hey, do you think in class we could explore this part of the LGBTQ community” and they really want to integrate that into their lives, 'cause they feel it's important? So they're thinking critically about what they want to learn”. A connection to the material like Beth describes allows for students to deepen their learning. As Beth states, bringing connection into the classroom provides “another elevated level to it (their learning) as opposed to not just within the GSA.”

### **GSA Challenges**

Even still, the model of a GSA is not without flaws. Despite having a designated space for topics surrounding queerness, it can be difficult to ask questions. Vice principal Joanna states that “people want to communicate because they don't want to offend, so they wanna ask questions and think oh, can I ask this question, but I don't know if he will be mad at me or will it be offensive”. Another flaw of the GSA is the physical meeting of the GSA is visible to the school population, as it happens within the school itself. As Vice principal Joanna notes, students were hesitant to attend as it was located in the gym where students could see them entering and exiting on their way to lunch, reflecting that “they (the students) might have been nervous to go.. like I'm going to the gym and everybody knows that that's (the GSA) happening now”. This hesitancy (and visibility) may discourage students from attending as they are afraid of their peers' perceptions of their role in the GSA.

Having the GSA in this specific location invites surveillance of the gymnasium and the attendees. Once the location of the GSA became common knowledge amongst the students, some youth would spend less time at the GSA. Aforementioned, students would come in for the first or latter part of the GSA meeting in hopes of avoiding peer surveillance. An additional layer of surveillance occurs as various faculty advisors attend each week. Students would often run inside the gymnasium and take their seat within the circle arranged for the GSA. Once seated, students would peer at the door to monitor which faculty would come in. This surveillance amongst students acted as a means of determining palatable queerness and thus their expression.

There was a noticeable change in dynamic when principal Louis entered. I often considered the reasoning for this - whether it was due to his authoritative position, maleness or perhaps a combination of both. Nonetheless, students would refrain from sharing personal anecdotes and would minimize queer slang and body expressions. Some students faced unique surveillance because their parents were also faculty at the school. Having their parent exist within the school redacted safety that the GSA could provide from homophobic parents.

A critical finding of this thesis is that interviewees were not always able to recognize their critical consciousness. As such, when interview questions were asked they would subconsciously hint at much larger ideas of emancipatory pedagogy or oppression. Consequently, it was unable to bring these subconscious ideas into the critical consciousness.

## Chapter 6: Discussion

The present study seeks to understand how the implementation of a gay-straight alliance can create emancipatory and transformative spaces for learning and liberation. The findings are congruent with past studies highlighting how GSA's provide a sense of belonging and validation about their identity, and possibly resulted in hardships accordingly.. As well, these results point to how GSA's provide a sense of community amongst queer youth that ultimately empowers them to take a more active role in their education and expressing themselves in a genuine manner. These findings support ideas of palatable queerness, the educative capacity of the GSA, allyship and practical implications for the GSA. The present study adds to existing literature by creating current data with advisors and their experience with queer youth, whilst engaging in participatory research in a rural area.

### **Palatable Queerness**

Findings are consistent with Marple (2005), as these interviewees speak to these queer youths experiences being grounded within their rurality. Marple (2005) notes how “queerness is de-emphasized as a centralized form of identity in comparison to other elements of the individual such as familial, work and regional alliances” (p. 73). Likewise, many interviewees noted how within the school, there is a significant lack of anonymity as most students are either related or have been in the same class since they entered into schooling. Given this interconnectedness, queer students are met with a significant safety concern as it can be assumed that when one student knows about their peers queerness, it will spread throughout the school and the greater community. Further, queer students must de-emphasize their identity in order maintain safety - thus presenting an idea of palatable queerness within rural areas. This became increasingly difficult as youth who adopted “dressing gay” in lieu of coming out may risk their safety if peers identified their attempt at displaying their queerness.

As the findings noted, this may force youth to change their clothes before and after GSA, to avoid being perceived as queer.

The findings also point to these characteristics of palatable queerness. Queer people in rural areas (also known as rural queers) “find themselves integrated into a system of local interdependence and may label their queerness differently as a strategy” (Marple, 2005, p. 72). This sentiment of “outness” that is desired and normalized within urban queer culture is often unattainable for rural queers. As noted in the findings, if individuals do not express their queerness externally (typically in stereotypically “out” ways) then their queerness becomes more palatable to those within the community. This muted queerness can be considered a new method to “passing” in rural spaces. This “passing” instrumentalizes the techniques of bio-power that favour cishetermnormativity and utilize them against their oppressors. While the idea of passing is typically understood in relation to transgender individuals and an owed gender expression (typically one which is hyperfeminine or hypermasculine), this rural passing includes muted queerness whereas queer folks are to keep their queerness internal and private.

Palatable queerness points to a culture of silence that envelopes the queer community. This silence does not have to be solely in the form of verbal silence, but also a physical/expressive silence. These invisible identities become the “object of communication, never a subject in communication” as their expression is prescribed by ideas of palatable queerness (Foucault, 1977, as cited in Manning & Stern, 2018, p. 210). Enforcing an invisibility to queerness becomes dangerous, as those who deviate from this invisibility are subject to harm as they become easily identifiable. As Butler (1990) notes, “the naturalized knowledge of gender operates as a preemptive and violent circumscription of reality” (p. 24). The naturalized (and thus, reductionist) knowledge of binary gender is used to surveil youth.

This public consumption of bodies and expression allows for ease of surveillance, especially in rural schools that serve as the primary social outlet for youth. Surveillance promotes an idea of “true” performance that aligns with notions of cisheteronormativity. In order to identify those who fall outside of cisheteronormativity, they must exemplify contrasting characteristics. The first component of this surveillance is a “truth” of sex. As Foucault ironically describes it “is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms” (Butler, 1990, p. 58). The gender norms, combined with the heterosexualization of desire, create a critical lens for queer youth to be surveilled. The heterosexualization of desire “requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine,’ where these are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’ (Butler, 1990, p. 58). A lens of surveillance creates significant parallels to Foucault’s notion of the panopticon, whereas this cisheteronormative lens acts as “centralized disciplinary mechanisms create and maintain power through the possibility of discipline” (Manning & Stern, 2018, p. 10). Resultantly, there is an illusion of surveillance without the need for transparency - ultimately positioning expressions of queerness as powerless.

In terms of the findings, these lenses are used to identify non-palatable queerness. As Joanna noted, those who express their queerness externally (using the example of drag) are not accepted within the community and are subject to criticism. This invitation to criticize is an attempt to categorize queer people. As Butler (1990) notes, drag alludes to a “legitimacy to bodies that have been regarded as false, unreal, and unintelligible. Drag is an example that is meant to establish that ‘reality’ is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be” (pp. 24-25). As a result, drag acts as a direct contrast to palatable queerness, thus justifying any criticism and harm.

Despite the GSA being a designated safe space away from cisheteronormative surveillance, it still exists within the school that actively promotes such layers of surveillance. As such, students engaged in the act of code-switching when taking part in the GSA. The findings speak to this act of code-switching, as students seemingly had two different identities within their school: one for when they were *within* the GSA and one for *outside* of the GSA. In the case of the former, students alter their external expression by changing their clothes, wearing rainbow and/or transgender flags and wearing pride-themed accessories such as pins, bracelets and hats. This is congruent with Mayberry et al. (2011)'s findings, whereas the GSA allowed for students to be more "flamboyant" and comfortable with themselves (p. 321). As well, this newfound comfort with themselves and their identity reduces internalized homophobia and thus reduces horizontal violence amongst queer students.

As well, within the GSA some students asked to be called by a different name than their birth name. In other instances, students would use different pronouns than they typically would outside of the GSA. These changes point to a larger, internal struggle of individuals feeling uncomfortable/insecure in their identity - potentially struggling with gender and the desire to transition. Additionally, some students would attend with their same-sex partners and display physical acts of affection such as holding hands that otherwise would not be shown within the school. Congruent with Mayberry et al., (2011), the GSAs as "an emotional safe haven for [queer] students", which allows them to come as their true and genuine selves (p. 322).

Code-switching is indicative of the required invisibility for queer youth, as they are socialized to understand silence as synonymous with their safety. Understanding drag through Butler's (1990) notion of impugning reality, this code-switching can be understood as engaging in a unique idea of drag, whereas queer students perform drag to disguise themselves as aligned with cis-heteronormativity. This manufactured agreement to abide by

cisheteronormativity delegitimizes these identities and thus enforces the culture of silence amongst the queer community. As well, in the Foucauldian sense, how we talk (or remain silent) about who we are, what we do, and our desires produce truth (Dillon, 2014).

Resultantly, this culture of silence becomes known as truth and becomes how youth understand their world. This silence ironically becomes “the word,” in the Freireian sense, as it acts as a means of giving names to the things around them - *including* themselves (Freire, 1970). This truth is replicated through curriculum, media and institutions which provide a ubiquitous envelopment into cis-heteronormativity. As such, navigating queerness ostracizes folks and youth often take refuge by masking their queerness. These findings are supported by Quinlivan & Town (1999) who note that “pervasive silence concerning their experience, feelings, and perceptions of their sexuality contributed to their feelings of isolation and invisibility within their school” (p. 514). However, given that queerness is an invisible identity this physical expression of queerness can allow queer people to take up physical space.

### **Surveillance**

The GSA acts as a place for queer youth to express themselves in a genuine manner - *without* the surveillance from cisheteronormativity. Within the GSA, queer youth may find it empowering to embody queer stereotypes (specifically in terms of physical expression through clothes, hair, makeup) as it allows for them to be considered visibly queer. As Lee (2002) noted, queerness is an invisible identity. That is, unless acted upon through external expression, queerness is unidentifiable by others. However, by expressing oneself in a stereotypically “gay” way, it invites other queer people to recognize queer people around them - whether this is in a platonic or romantic way. As such, it reduces the salience of these queer identities as these youth are using stereotypes to be visibly queer - thus using these stereotypes to their advantage. There was surveillance of bisexual and pansexual students,

who (in the of some of the gay and lesbian students) were invalid. These bisexual and pansexual students seemingly had to prove their queerness to their peers in order to rid the surveillance. This “proof” often manifested through the adoption of bisexual and pansexual stereotypes, as these stereotypes were founded on the legitimization of their identity. Withal, by using these stereotypes it is maintaining Foucault's regime of the truth of how queerness “looks”. As a result, youth who do not present their queerness in stereotypical manners are denied the same truth about their identity.

The GSA acts as a systematic intervention that employs anti-oppressive education. Anti-oppressive education approaches “raise important questions about the impact of heteronormativity and privileging and ‘Othering’ as they apply to sexual minorities” (Lapointe, 2014, p. 708). An anti-oppressive focus on education is of crucial importance on account of the findings noting the manifestations of the hidden curriculum (and, thus, cisheteronormativity). This educative capacity of the GSA allows for the integration of queer-inclusive learning without the constraints of the curriculum. As well, given that the principal is extremely outwardly supportive of the GSA, it emphasizes the importance of the GSA and the learning within it to the larger school community. As Meyer (2008) noted, having someone in an authoritative position exemplifying this support sets the expectations for the other staff and faculty - thus disrupting acceptance of previously naturalized queerphobic harassment and surveillance.

### **Allyship**

These findings suggest that straight allies of the GSA have significant pride in their allyship. The allyship extends to the GSA and manifests in physical spaces around the school, such as repainting the sidewalks or creating information pamphlets for the community. The research findings coincide with those of Valenti & Campbell (2009) since both exemplify the same attitudes toward protection and personal connection to the queer community. Beth

spoke to the connection to the community as her brother and Mallory spoke to her experiences with her own son. As well, Joanna, Louis and Lisa all not all noted attitudes of protection as they recognize the climate of the town and how it has traditionally been unwelcoming of queer people.

GSA's are not only important in offering support to queer students but also in providing education for their heterosexual peers. "Discrimination and prejudice not only harm the receiver, they stunt the growth of the giver as well" (Epstein, 1994, as cited in Lee, 2002, p. 5). The ripple effect of the GSA becomes pervasive throughout the school and greater community. Advisors can act as the beginning of that ripple effect that allows for a wrap-around approach to unofficially educating the community. In Mallory's experience, she noted that her husband receives a direct benefit from this ripple effect, as their friends have been actively vocalizing their support for the queer community. Rather than failing to respond to antigay comments such as those that Watson & Miller (2012), advisors in this study's findings allow for learning experiences to emerge as an emancipatory pedagogy. By creating teachable moments, anti-queer comments are challenged in a proactive manner to create sustainable shifts in the school climate.

However, being an ally to the GSA comes with an imposed job to actively denounce anti-queer behaviours. The participants in the Mayberry (2011) study affirm how non-queer members of the GSA (or its supporters) are expected to stand up for things more than their counterparts in order to be in communion with the oppressed. The participants note that students "feel it is my job" as an ally within the GSA (Mayberry, 2011, p. 325). While this self-imposed "duty" can be good (as it allows for an unofficial spreading of knowledge and governance) it becomes laborious and inappropriate. Such matters should be left to their queer counterparts who can speak to their identities, feelings, and/or lived experience.

## **Consciousness**

Allies to the GSA may experience a submerged consciousness as a result of a lack of education and lived experience. Despite the intention of helping liberate queer youth, advisors and student allies can create significant harm by having a submerged conscious, even if unintentional. There is considerable opportunity for a raising of consciousness, as noted by my findings. Joanna noted that the GSA provided her and her fellow faculty with a new perspective on everyday life, one that *included* the viewpoint of queer students. As such, when implementing a new bathroom system to reduce the spread of covid, she recognized the opportunity to keep the classroom-specific bathrooms as a means of imposing gender-neutral bathrooms. As Elliot (2016) notes, gender-neutral bathrooms provide a glimpse into queer theory, specifically in the “understandings of sexuality and gender to destabilize institutionalized binaries” (p. 56). While these gender-neutral bathrooms were initially implemented under the notion of health and safety measures for COVID-19, the educative capacity of the GSA allowed for the Vice principal to regard this policy change in a new light. With this implementation of gender-neutral bathrooms, there is an introduction to having transgender folks at the forefront of school policy.

## **Unity**

The findings suggest allyship invites unity to be fostered between GSA attendees, advisors, and the greater school community. This unity is essential, as “[queer] students often perceive they lack the authority to challenge normative school climates that foster anti-LGBT comments and practices (Adelman & Woods, 2006, as cited in Mayberry et al., 2011, p. 324). However, this unity requires that the oppressed and their oppressors to engage in meaningful dialogue that recognizes larger systems of oppression and their ability to work within them. As Butler (1990) notes, “the effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a

different set of terms" (p. 19). The identification of the enemy as similar happens through the engagement of staff in their advisory role. Rather than identifying the entirety of the school as the oppressor, advisors (and fellow staff allies) became humanized in the eyes of GSA attendees. Students were able to create a new set of terms in which they understood their oppression.

Students were able to confide in and share space with advisors in order to bring lived experiences and concerns forward, which could be actionized through newfound unity. The current experience from students is invaluable to the GSA, as it allows for acts of allyship to be grounded in the present, whilst recognizing greater systems of oppression that Butler (1990) identifies. As Freire (1970) argues, "looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so that they can more wisely build the future" (p. 84). As such, students and their allies were able to disrupt the strategy of the oppressor by revealing "the enemy" as a multiple. While this revelation may be overwhelming as the oppressors are viewed as manifold, these composite oppressors are siloed into more manageable understandings of students' oppression.

### **Neutrality**

With the new terms for understanding queer students' oppression, the implementation of the GSA illuminates a deceptive position of neutrality. In order to become an ally (and thus, a reborn leader), one must make an active, continuous effort to exile their paternalism and support these students with a unified front. There is no neutral ground within this leadership rebirth. Indeed, claiming neutrality is siding with the oppressor. As Freire states, "washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral" (1985, p. 122). This is a tool of the oppressors to present a seemingly neutral option, but in reality, it acts in favour of the oppressor. Those who are "neutral" are not creating action to liberate the oppressed. To reiterate: no action is still an

action. That is, inaction represents a positionality that holds merit in different social groups. The findings suggest that advisors avoid neutral ground by ensuring action through the implementation and maintenance of the GSA.

By implementing the GSA, the potential for this seemingly neutral position becomes limited. The GSA places pressure on students, faculty and the greater community, as it exposes their positions of support or non-support of the GSA. For instance, in the findings, those who hid behind the veil of neutrality and have since been revealed in a position of nonsupport showed significant pushback through methods such as graffiti. However, those who previously may have appeared within this neutral position, but have since shown support, are creating opportunities to bring queer-inclusive topics into the classroom through contrasting methods. Thus allyship included placing positive space stickers on their classroom doors, inviting students to share pride-themed artwork and purchasing queer-inclusive books.

Another manifestation of neutrality was seen with the recent election in the town. Many interviewees spoke to the newly elected gay mayor who kept his queerness masked under the veil of cisheteronormativity. While it may be unintentional (and thus seemingly neutral), cisgender heterosexual folks may not recognize the need to vote for someone who advocates for queer folks. As Freire (1970) notes, “oppressors do not favour promoting the community as a whole, but rather selected leaders” (p. 143). Resultantly, queer issues continue to be ignored and queer folks become delegitimized and further oppressed. Preserving a state of alienation, hinders the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in a total reality. And without this critical intervention, it is always difficult to achieve the unity of the oppressed as a class.

## **Need for Safe Spaces**

The GSA opposes this alienation, as the selected leaders within the GSA are the youth themselves. While advisors are engaged in an institutional leadership role, their leadership is guided by that of the GSA attendees. As such, the oppressed are promoting their community as a whole to their peers, teachers and the school. The state of alienation is disrupted and allows for the emergence of consciousness, as attendees are the experts in their own experiences and are able to engage in horizontal knowledge translation with fellow GSA attendees and advisors. This emergence of consciousness allows for a critical intervention that disrupts the dehumanization of queer students, as their lived experiences allow for a first-hand look into everyday life as the oppressed.

The findings demonstrate how the school acts as the youth's sole social outlet within their rural community. Thus, the importance of this school being a safe space is imperative. Yet, schools continue to be unsafe places for queer youth. While the GSA acts as a place of belonging and safety, it is housed within this school (and community) climate. In the case of the trans student that Joanna spoke about, they inevitably left their community because they did not feel a connection to the queer community (nor did they feel supported by community members). As Marple (2005) notes, "rural is the site of torture from which queers flee, and it is home to the less fortunate or disadvantaged queer" (p. 72). The experiences of these trans youth exemplify the disadvantaged queer and as a result of their non-supportive environment, they fled to a neighbouring, more urban community.

These findings point to the need for safe spaces within one's home community. As Treadway & Yoakham (1992) note GSA's can be "life-saving" for youth by providing them with a safe place to meet other youth like themselves (as cited in Lee, 2002, p. 20). As noted in the findings, the youth felt safe to be themselves within the GSA and found community amongst those who were alike. In the Frierian sense, this means of liberation from the GSA is

life-affirming. By having a space where youth feel comfort in their expression, having openly queer relationships and wearing symbols of queer pride, this safe space affirms queer students' identity and belonging within the school.

Whilst the GSA may be providing a safe space, it also acts as a compromise to student attendees' safety. These results echo that of Mayberry et al. (2011), as they note that GSAs have the "potential to isolate its members from the wider school community and to become the sole space where LGBT visibility is located" (p. 327). In these instances, unique surveillance emerges as youth begin surveilling themselves. They do so to give permission themselves in order to attend the GSA. As well, as noted by the findings, this surveillance intersects with that of their peers, who are surveilling attendees of the GSA. GSA's as the sole safe space within a school is not sustainable. especially so, if their existence may not be maintained without systematic oppression and anti-queer notions to begin with - maintaining this inhospitable school climate. By not being "on the radar," "the existing culture of heterosexism is not challenged; "nonissues" are not addressed, formally or informally. Failing to recognize, or denying, the issue eliminates the pressure to respond" (Mayberry, 2011, p. 319).

## **Curriculum**

The GSA is situated in a unique manner given it can provide critical opportunities for queer-inclusive learning currently not possible in the curriculum. It has a limited capacity to teach such topics due to its very design. Currently, queer-inclusive education is almost entirely omitted from the curriculum. A school's "code of silence concerning any form of sexuality other than heterosexuality is comprised of educational acts of omission" (Fontaine, 1997, as cited in Mayberry et al., 2011, p. 317). The queer-inclusive curriculum exists in a contradictory position as it is unable to truly be liberating as it promotes carefully selected material - typically through scare tactics as Gardner (2015) notes.

As Foucault claimed, “humanist efforts to liberate the criminalized subject, the subject that is freed is even more deeply shackled than originally thought” (as cited in Butler, 1988). Intentionally including queer identities in the curriculum acts as a box to check to state that these identities are not intentionally being omitted from the curriculum. As a result, these queer youth are further oppressed as they are objects within the banking of information. These students are recipients of carefully curated and “safe” knowledge about queer identities as a “gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). In these scenarios, queer students are to feel lucky these identities are included at all and are expected to be thankful for the “gift” bestowed upon them, even though this “gift” does not challenge the conditions of their oppression

As Beth stated, any acknowledgment of queerness is often taught within the last weeks of the year. This glimpse of a queer-inclusive curriculum is far from adequate. For example, they carefully select the most palatable of topics - such as briefly introducing the idea that there can be same-sex relationships. The prioritization and unfolding of topics is telling. Curricular reform may not be enough to ensure queer-inclusive learning, as simply having queer content in the curriculum does not suffice. Teachers need to be able to deliver this material in a comprehensive manner to ensure it is taught thoroughly and correctly. As noted by Begoray et al., (2009), teachers are often reluctant or inadequately trained to teach topics surrounding queer identities and sex.

If curriculum reform were to happen, this thesis suggests that it should not be done in a manner of attempting to educate on gender and sexual identities, for the reasonings outlined above. Instead, this curricular reform should include the causes of queer oppression to denounce the idea that their oppression is fate, resulting from their queerness. As Freire (1970) states, “fatalism in the guise of docility is the fruit of an historical and sociological

situation, not an essential characteristic of a people's behavior.” Curriculum could include lessons on the gay rights movement, stonewall and queer activists such as Marsha P. Johnson. As a result, this education will point to how to overcome the duality of oppression, whilst illuminating its roots.

As previously mentioned, GSA's act in a reactive manner to systematic queerphobia. While these GSA's are of significant benefit, as noted by its educative capacity, humanization and nature of being life-affirming, their existence may not be as crucial if this queerphobia was not so deeply embedded within society. From this study and studies similar (such as Lee (2002)), these elements of the GSA can be implemented in a manner that provides a proactive approach, to combat existing queerphobia that is ultimately responsible for the need to have a GSA.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis argues that GSAs provide a unique emancipatory space within an otherwise oppressive institution where youth have the opportunity for youth (and advisors) to learn and explore gender and sexuality outside of cis-heteronormative guidelines.

Aforementioned, GSAs provide youth with a sense of belonging, self-actualization and the “strength to carry on” as they navigate their understandings of their own identity and the world around them (Lee, 2002). As a result, queer youth are able to become *re-humanized*, as they are able to regain their humanity that had been stolen by their oppressor(s).

The GSA advisors interviewed within this study recognize the importance of these safe spaces, as they provide an opportunity for transformative learning, whilst simultaneously creating a safe haven for attendees. As well, these advisors begin navigating allyship in the Freirian sense, as they have moved past simple verbalism and into actionizing tangible change - with the first being the implementation of the GSA.

The success of the GSA lies within the realm of possibility that curriculum does not have access to as a result of its very design. Despite being housed within the physical space of a school, the GSA works independently from the curriculum and invites lived experience that directly opposes the banking model of education. However, the GSA is not a permanent solution as it presents a contradiction. Given that the GSA is implemented to solve the lack of visibility and space within schools, once implemented it seemingly solves this contradiction. While the GSA acts as a practical, structural change that has an immediate effect on the oppressed, it does not engage in creating deep structural changes to society. Lessons (in allyship, emancipatory pedagogy and liberation) must be brought outside of the GSA to catalyze the “expulsion of myths created and developed in the old [oppressive] order” (Freire, 1970, p. 55).

To conclude, this thesis acts as a call to action to implement GSAs in each junior, middle and high school. As well, it invites educational “leaders” to take a step back and acknowledge their ignorance and the harm done by not having this safe space. To reiterate a quote from Louis, having a GSA “makes you know who you’re fighting for”. It is crucial to recognize ones role to play in the oppression of the queer community and being queer does not absolve someone of this responsibility. It is apparent that GSAs are lifesaving and by continuing to not take action, you are complicit in the lives lost due to not having a space to belong to.

## References

- Allen, L. (2008). “‘They think you shouldn’t be having sex anyway’: Young people’s suggestions for improving sexuality education content” in *Sexualities* 11(1), 573—594.
- Anderson, D. A. (1993). Lesbian and Gay Adolescents: Social and Developmental Considerations. *The High School Journal*, 77(1/2), 13–19.
- Anderson, E. (2009). Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities. Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities. 1-190. 10.4324/9780203871485.
- Anderson, E., & McCormack, M. (2018). Inclusive masculinity theory: Overview, reflection and refinement. *Journal of gender studies*, 27(5), 547-561.
- Bauman, R., Briggs, C. L., & Briggs, C. S. (2003). *Voices of modernity: Language ideologies and the politics of inequality* (No. 21). Cambridge
- Begoray, D. L., Wharf-Higgins, J., & MacDonald, M. (2009). High school health curriculum and health literacy: Canadian student voices. *Global Health Promotion*, 16(4), 35-42.
- Bethard, R. (2004). New York's Harvey Milk School: A viable alternative. *JL & Educ.*, 33, 417.
- Bettinsoli, M. L., Napier, J. L., & Carnaghi, A. (2021). The “gay agenda:” How the myth of gay affluence impedes the progress toward equality. *European Journal of Social Psychology*.
- Beyond the Action Canada. (2015). The State of Sex-Ed in Canada. Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights.  
[https://www.actioncanadashr.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/Action%20Canada\\_StateofSexEd\\_F%20-%20web%20version%20EN.pdf](https://www.actioncanadashr.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/Action%20Canada_StateofSexEd_F%20-%20web%20version%20EN.pdf)
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre journal*, 40(4), 519-531.

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble - Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Chesir-Teran, D. (2003). Conceptualizing and assessing heterosexism in high schools: A Setting-Level Approach. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 31(3–4), 267–279. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023910820994>
- Clarke, P., & MacDougall, B. (2012). The case for gay-straight alliances (GSAs) in Canada’s public schools: An educational perspective. *Education & Law Journal*, 21(2), 143–165.
- Cohen, J. N., Byers, E. S., & Sears, H. A. (2012). Factors affecting Canadian teachers' willingness to teach sexual health education. *Sex Education*, 12(3), 299-316.
- Colapinto, J. (2005). The Harvey Milk School has no right to exist. Discuss. *New York Magazine*, 1-6.
- Connell, R. (2008). Masculinity construction and sports in boys’ education: A framework for thinking about the issue. *Sport, education and society*, 13(2), 131-145.
- Connell, R. (2014) “Masculinity construction and sports in boys’ education: A framework for thinking about the issue” in *Sport, Education and Society*, 13(2), 131—145.
- Cui, D. (2017). Teachers’ racialised habitus in school knowledge construction: A Bourdieusian analysis of social inequality beyond class. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38:8, 1152-1164
- de Boise, S. (2015). I’m Not Homophobic, “I’ve Got Gay Friends”: Evaluating the Validity of Inclusive Masculinity. *Men and Masculinities*, 18(3), 318–339. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X14554951>
- Dillon, M. (2014). *Introduction to sociological theory: Theorists, concepts, and their applicability to the twenty-first century*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.
- Donaldson, M. (1993). What is hegemonic masculinity? *Theory and Society*, 22(5), 643–657. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00993540>

- Elia, J. P. (1993). Homophobia in the high school: A problem in need of a resolution. *The High School Journal*, 77(1/2), 177-185.
- Elliott, K. O. (2016). Queering student perspectives: Gender, sexuality and activism in school. *Sex Education*, 16(1), 49-62.
- Fetner, T., Elafros, A., Bortolin, S., & Drechsler, C. (2012). Safe spaces: Gay-straight alliances in high schools. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie*, 49(2), 188-207.
- Fisher, J. (2011). "The Walking Wounded": Youth, Public Education, and the Turn to Precarious Pedagogy. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 33(5), 379-432.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (Vol. 1). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Freire, P. (1970) Pedagogy of the oppressed. New York: The Seabury Press.
- Freire, P. (1985). The politics of education. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey
- Gardner, E. A. (2015). Abstinence-only sex education: College students' evaluations and responses. *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 10(2), 125-139.
- Giroux, H. A. (2009). Youth in a suspect society: Democracy or disposability?.
- Giroux, H. A. (2010). Rethinking Education as the Practice of Freedom: Paulo Freire and the Promise of Critical Pedagogy. *Policy Futures in Education*, 8(6), 715–721.  
<https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2010.8.6.715>
- Goldfarb, E. S., & Lieberman, L. D. (2021). Three decades of research: The case for comprehensive sex education. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68(1), 13-27.
- Hammett, R. F., & Martino, W. (2008). 5. In *Boys, girls, and the myths of literacies and learning*. essay, Canadian Scholars' Press.

- Hennen, P. (2005). Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life. *Contemporary Sociology*, 34(3), 308-310.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/009430610503400351>
- Jones, D., & Franklin, J. (2022, April 10). *Not just Florida. More than a dozen states propose so-called 'don't say gay' bills*. NPR. Retrieved April 16, 2022, from  
<https://www.npr.org/2022/04/10/1091543359/15-states-dont-say-gay-anti-transgender-bills>
- Lapointe, A. A. (2015). Standing “straight” up to homophobia: Straight allies’ involvement in GSAs. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 12(2), 144-169.
- Lee, C. (2002). The impact of belonging to a high school gay/straight alliance. *The high school journal*, 85(3), 13-26.
- Levitt, R. (2008). Freedom and empowerment: A transformative pedagogy of educational reform. *Educational Studies*, 44(1), 47-61.
- MacDougall, B., & Clarke, P. (2012). The case for gay-Straight alliances (GSAs) in Canada’s public schools: A legal perspective. *Education & Law Journal*, 21(3), 197–227.
- Manning, J., & Stern, D. M. (2018). Heteronormative bodies, queer futures: Toward a theory of interpersonal panopticism. *Information, communication & society*, 21(2), 208-223.
- Marple, L. (2005). Rural Queers? The Loss of the Rural in Queer. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 24(2), 71-74.  
<http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.mta.ca/scholarly-journals/rural-queers-loss-queer/docview/217467437/se-2?accountid=12599>
- Mayberry, M., Chenneville, T., & Currie, S. (2011). Challenging the sounds of silence: a qualitative study of gay–straight alliances and school reform efforts. *Education and Urban Society*, 45(3), 307-339.

- Meyer, Elizabeth. (2008). Gendered harassment in secondary schools: Understanding teachers' (non) interventions. *Gender and Education*, 20, 555-570.  
10.1080/09540250802213115.
- Milk, H. (1998). The hope speech. *We are everywhere: A historical sourcebook of gay and lesbian politics*, 51-53.
- Lee, C. (2002). The impact of belonging to a high school gay/straight alliance. *The high school journal*, 85(3), 13-26.
- Morris, M. (2020). The Internet and LGBTQ+ Identity Formation in Adolescents and Young Adults.
- Mustanski, B., Greene, G. J., Ryan, D., & Whitton, S. W. (2015). Feasibility, acceptability, and initial efficacy of an online sexual health promotion program for LGBT youth: the Queer Sex Ed intervention. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 52(2), 220-230.
- Nayak, A., & Kehily, M. J. (2006). Gender undone: subversion, regulation and embodiment in the work of Judith Butler. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27(4), 459-472.
- Newcomb, M. E., & Mustanski, B. (2010). Internalized homophobia and internalizing mental health problems: A meta-analytic review. *Clinical psychology review*, 30(8), 1019-1029.
- Osaat, S. D., & Okenwa, U. (2018). Feminization of primary school teaching: A societal and cultural limitation to boy-child education. Retrieved on April, 9, 2018.
- Quinlivan, K., & Town, S. (1999). Queer pedagogy, educational practice and lesbian and gay youth. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 12(5), 509-524.
- St Clare, K. J. (2018). Linguistic Disarmament: On How Hate Speech Functions, the Way Hate Words Can Be Reclaimed, and Why We Must Pursue Their Reclamation. *Linguistic and Philosophical Investigations*, (17), 79-109.
- Talburt, S. (2004). Constructions of LGBT youth: Opening up subject positions. *Theory into practice*, 43(2), 116-121.

- Thomas, N. (2008). Pedagogy and the work of Michel Foucault. *JAC*, 151-180.
- Valenti, M., & Campbell, R. (2009). Working with youth on LGBT issues: Why Gay–Straight Alliance advisors become involved. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 37(2), 228–248. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20290>
- Waltman, M. S., & Mattheis, A. A. (2017). Understanding hate speech. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*.
- Watson, S., & Miller, T. (2012). LGBT oppression. *Multicultural Education*, 19(4), 2+. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A411196883/AONE?u=anon~da204f06&sid=googleScholar&xid=c28fc15f>
- Winn, B. (2021). PASS/CODES: CODE SWITCHING FOR SURVIVAL.

## Appendix A

## External Resources for Participants

**LOOKING FOR SUPPORT?****EXTERNAL  
RESOURCES**

**SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES TO  
USE OR SHARE IF YOU NEED  
SOMEONE TO TALK TO**

**CHIMO HELPLINE**

**CHIMO IS A  
PROVINCIAL CRISIS  
PHONE LINE,  
ACCESSIBLE 24 HOURS  
A DAY, 365 DAYS A YEAR**

**1-800-667-5005**

**GLBT**

**GAY, LESBIAN,  
BISEXUAL,  
TRANSGENDER  
NATIONAL HOTLINE**

**888-843-4564**

**MENTAL HEALTH  
MOBILE TEAM**

**1-866-771-7760  
SUNDAY TO SUNDAY**

**12PM TO 10PM**

**CRISIS SERVICES  
CANADA**

**833-456-4566  
BY PHONE  
OR  
TEXT 45645**

## **Appendix B**

### Interview Questions

#### **Demographics Questions**

1. Name & Alias
2. Age
3. Gender
4. Pronouns

#### **Interview Questions**

1. Describe your involvement with the GSA
2. Describe the climate of queer issues in your town
  - a. How would queer folks be described by members of this community?
3. Do you know of any openly queer members in your community? Do the students know these individuals?
4. Explain the social environment of the school
  - a. Is social status given to youth who protect or shame queer folks?
5. Have you witnessed any acts of homophobia within the community?
  - a. School?
  - b. Other?
6. Why did you choose to become involved in the GSA?
  - a. What did this process look like?
  - b. Did you have any stipulations about becoming involved?
7. What types of discussion have arisen as a result of the GSA?
  - a. Has the narrative of queer issues and identities changed?
8. What kind of change has the GSA brought?
  - a. Is it positive?
9. Describe acts of allyship in your school you have encountered or witnessed (between students, staff, etc.)
  - a. Where do they occur? (on the playground, in the classroom, in private)
  - b. Are they responded to positively by other students?
10. What are your goals for the GSA?