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School engagement among LGBTQ high school students: The roles of safe adults and gay–straight alliance characteristics

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ABSTRACT

Student school engagement, or the person–environment fit between a student and the student's school, is a construct that has received increasing attention in the school psychology literature in recent years. However, little research has examined this construct among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) students or analyzed whether factors such as access to safe adults, the presence of a Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA), characteristics of a GSA, or personal involvement in a GSA may connect to engagement. The current study used sequential multiple regression to examine data from a sample of LGBTQ high school students ($N = 152$) from Colorado and found that the greater the number of types of safe adults that a student has access to at school, the higher the student's school engagement. GSA presence was not significantly associated with student school engagement. However, among those students whose school had a GSA ($N = 91$), the larger, more active, more visible, and more supported a GSA was perceived to be, the more these students were engaged at school. Personal involvement in a GSA did not predict student school engagement. This article discusses implications for school-based practitioners and future research.

1. Introduction

Student school engagement, or the person–environment fit between a student and the student's school, is a construct that has received increasing attention in the school psychology literature in recent years (Hazel, Vazirabadi, Albanes, & Gallagher, 2014; Hazel, Vazirabadi, & Gallagher, 2013). Student school engagement is a modifiable factor that can predict student academic outcomes such as grades, truancy, and dropping out, as well as non-academic outcomes such as depression, substance abuse, and delinquency (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Hazel et al., 2013; Lam et al., 2014; Li et al., 2011; Wang & Fredricks, 2014; Wang & Peck, 2013). Engagement is theorized to act as a link between school contextual factors and school performance for youth and young adults (Lam et al., 2014). However, little research has examined this construct among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) students, a subpopulation that faces increased risk factors (such as harassment, bullying, and a hostile school climate) that may affect academic performance and behaviors at school as well as mental health outcomes. Additionally, while researchers have previously examined school contextual factors—such as the presence of safe adults or a Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA)—in relation to academic and psychosocial outcomes for LGBTQ students, there is a dearth of research examining how such contextual factors may connect to student school engagement for this population. Further, most studies looking at outcomes for LGBTQ youth have measured GSAs in terms of simple presence, ignoring contextual details such as the GSA's size, level of activity, visibility, or degree of support within the school.

Using a sample of LGBTQ high school students from Colorado, the present study addresses these gaps in the literature, examining whether access to safe adults at school, presence of a GSA, characteristics of GSAs, and one's personal involvement in a GSA predict student school engagement. This paper will first provide an overview of the evidence base related to high school settings for LGBTQ youth, the roles of safe adults and GSAs, and student school engagement. This will be followed by a description of the present study's methods and results. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings, limitations, and implications for practitioners working within school settings.

1.1. High school settings for LGBTQ youth

Adolescence is a key period of development for LGBTQ youth, as many individuals in the U.S. begin to develop a sense of their sexuality and/or gender identity during this time of their lives. As reported by the Institute of Medicine (IOM, 2011), early research on LGBTQ young people has indicated that "coming out" during this time period can present many challenges due to the prevalence of societal homophobia and transphobia and their negative effects on adolescents. Since many youth

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go through adolescence and the associated developmental tasks while in high school, such settings are a key place of socialization and exposure to ecological factors that may affect the development of LGBTQ youth (Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007).

Building from Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, Kosciw, Greytak, and Diaz (2009) assert that LGBTQ youths' feelings of safety or risks for victimization at school not only connect to the individual identities that they hold, but are also affected by factors within the larger social environment, including their school. These environmental factors can create differential experiences for sexual and gender minority students compared with heterosexual, cisgender[1] students (Kosciw et al., 2009). The IOM (2011) points to how the research base about LGBTQ youth has focused on schools as a key setting of conflict and victimization for this population. A growing body of literature has indicated that middle school and high school climates are often hostile and unsafe for LGBTQ youth, with frequent occurrences of harassment, discrimination, and violence (see IOM, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2009 for a review of related research). Some evidence suggests that the school climate may be particularly difficult for transgender and gender nonconforming youth, with a greater likelihood of experiencing assault, harassment, feeling unsafe, and missing days of school due to fear compared with LGB youth (Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2014). Such risks within the school climate can deeply impact the interaction between individual students and the school setting, producing difficulties for LGBTQ youth that extend into adulthood (Pearson et al., 2007). LGBTQ students who experience victimization in school are more likely to have lower self-esteem, weaker grades, and a greater number of missed days of school, and they are at increased risk for suicide (Birkett, Russell, & Corliss, 2014; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2014).

As Kosciw et al. (2013) have stated, "A central challenge for educators and safe school advocates is how to identify and design supportive school climates that promote the positive development of LGBT and all students" (pp. 46–47). Research has begun to indicate a number of school-level factors that can counteract heterosexism and cisgenderism[2] within schools and support the psychological and physical well-being and academic success of LGBTQ students. Examples include non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity, LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, changes to the physical environment of the school (e.g., gender-inclusive bathroom and locker room options), having a GSA at school, and having safe staff at school who students can talk to about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Chesir-Teran, 2003; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Diaz, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2013; Sausa, 2005; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). This paper will be taking a closer look at what the literature has to say about two of these factors relevant to the present study: access to safe adults at school, and the presence of GSAs.

1.2. The role of safe adults at school for LGBTQ students

As previously detailed, school harassment and violence are commonplace for LGBTQ students in the U.S. A national survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that while three quarters of LGBT students had been verbally harassed in their school, over half (57%) had failed to report the incident to school staff, mostly due to their not believing that any action would be taken (Kosciw et al., 2014). If harassment and victimization are not directly addressed, they can escalate into physical and sexual violence (Holmes & Cahill, 2004). Yet, school staff do not necessarily respond to reports of harassment and violence. In their study, GLSEN found that 62% of LGBT students who had reported such experiences were met with no response or action taken on their behalf by school staff (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Having access to a safe adult—whether a teacher, nurse, counselor, or principal—serves as an important component in the creation of a safe school for LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2014). Schools with supportive adults and staff help create an environment where students feel more connected to their education, have a greater sense of school belonging, are more likely to attend activities of a GSA, and are less likely to experience victimization or miss school due to feeling unsafe (Diaz et al., 2010; Kosciw et al., 2013, 2014; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Seelman, Walls, Hazel, & Wisneski, 2012). Such adults can have a role in providing safety by preventing harassment and violence. One study found that LGB students who could identify an adult in school they could talk to were about one third more likely to report being threatened or victimized at school compared with those without such an adult (Goodenow et al., 2006). For transgender students, having a connection to an adult in school is positively correlated with feeling safe in school, and supportive adults play an important role when navigating the school environment if the student is transitioning (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010).

Research suggests ways that particular types of adults at schools—such as teachers (Murdock & Bolch, 2005) or school psychologists (Murphy, 2012)—can provide critical support to LGBTQ students. In their national study, Kosciw et al. (2014) examined students' experiences approaching different types of adults at school, with teachers and school-based mental health professionals (counselors, social workers, etc.) being among the adults approached most frequently and with the greatest level of comfort. Over half of this sample said they would be comfortable talking with a teacher or school-based mental health professional about LGBT issues, while only about one out of four would be comfortable approaching a principal or a librarian (Kosciw et al., 2014). While we did not find other studies that specifically looked at the relationship between number of *types* of safe adults and outcomes, the knowledge base suggests that knowing safe adults across multiple spheres of the school environment would provide the greatest level of support for LGBTQ students.

1.3. Gay–straight alliances and LGBTQ students

The emerging body of scholarship on the relationship between GSAs and psychosocial outcomes for LGBTQ youth and young adults is mixed depending upon the type of outcome examined and whether one is studying the presence of GSAs, membership in them, or school contextual factors that may influence the impact of GSAs. The presence of a GSA in a school or college tends to be associated with more positive outcomes for LGBTQ youth than actual membership or involvement in a GSA, although some mixed results do exist. Recent scholarship has started to examine contextual factors about the GSAs themselves and has added to a more nuanced understanding of these relationships.

Research indicates that having a GSA at school positively correlates with LGBTQ students' comfort with gender expression (Walls, Wisneski, & Kane, 2013), greater levels of being "out" (Heck, Lindquist, Stewart, Brennan, & Cochran, 2013), and greater self-esteem (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011). Findings are, however, mixed on other mental health outcomes, with some associations with lower levels of depression (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2013; Toomey et al., 2011) and lower levels of general psychological distress (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2013), but at least one study finds no differences in mental health outcomes (Heck, 2014). Relatedly, most studies have found a positive relationship with lower levels of suicidality (Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013; Walls, Freedenthal, & Wisneski, 2008), but at least one study found no significant relationship with lifetime suicide attempts (Toomey et al., 2011).

Examining the relationship of GSA presence and victimization in schools, some studies have found no relationship (Poteat et al., 2013;

[1] *Cisgender* is an identity term for those whose gender identity matches cultural expectations for their sex assigned at birth (i.e., they are neither transgender nor gender nonconforming).

[2] Building from the conceptual work of Chesir-Teran (2003), *cisgenderism* is the systematic process of privileging cisgender (non-transgender) identities relative to transgender and gender-non-conforming identities, based on the assumption that being cisgender is normal and ideal (Seelman, 2013).