Gay-Straight Alliances as Settings for Youth Inclusion and Development: Future Conceptual and Methodological Directions for Research on These and Other Student Groups in Schools

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Abstract

Outside the immediate classroom setting, efforts within other school spaces also can shape school climate, address inequality, and affect student performance. Nevertheless, in this respect there has been little research on school-based extracurricular groups focused on issues of social inclusion and justice. An exception to this lack of focus has been Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), which promote social inclusion and justice for sexual and gender minority youth (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning youth; LGBTQ) through support, socializing, education, and advocacy. As this literature has matured, we detail and provide examples of the following conceptual and methodological recommendations to address emerging research needs for GSAs: (1) Move from a monolithic to contextualized treatment of GSAs, (2) attend to heterogeneity among members, (3) utilize multiple data sources for triangulation, (4) apply

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a range of methodological approaches to capitalize on strengths of different designs, (5) collect longitudinal data over short-term and extended time periods, and (6) consider GSAs within a broader umbrella of youth settings. Further, we note ways in which these recommendations apply to other student groups organized around specific sociocultural identities. These advances could produce more comprehensive empirically supported models to guide GSAs and similar groups on how to promote resilience among their diverse members and address broader social issues within their schools.

Keywords

adolescence; advocacy; descriptive analysis; experimental research; gay/lesbian studies; Gay-Straight Alliance; lesbian; gay; bisexual; transgender; questioning youth; longitudinal studies; mixed methods; peer interaction/friendship; positive youth development; qualitative research; social context; social justice; social support; survey research; youth programs

Social movements in education to promote social inclusion and justice are not limited to issues of curriculum and pedagogy in the classroom. Efforts within other spaces in schools also can shape school climate, address inequality, and affect student performance (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Pollock, in press; Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, & Martin, 2009). In this respect, there is notable potential for school-based extracurricular groups to promote social justice, particularly in student groups organized around sociocultural identities or issues of diversity more broadly (Brown & Evans, 2002; Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999; Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004).

Nevertheless, they have received little attention in the education literature relative to groups focused on academics. In fact, despite a robust literature on school-based extracurricular groups (Farb & Matjasko, 2012), we could locate few studies that have examined established student groups with an explicit focus on diversity or social justice. One exception to this lack of focus has been the study of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), or as some now refer to themselves, Genders and Sexualities Alliances. GSAs stand out as one group with aims to promote social inclusion and justice for sexual and gender minority youth (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning youth; LGBTQ). They are therefore of high interest as part of broader efforts to address social and academic disparities in schools.

GSAs have come to provide a multipurpose setting for LGBTQ and ally youth to receive support, socialize, access LGBTQ-related information or resources, and engage in advocacy to address social inequality in the school and broader community (Griffin et al., 2004). They are typically youth led and supported by an adult advisor. GSAs are now established in over 37% of high schools in the United States, with growing numbers in middle schools (17%) and elementary schools (5%) as well (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). GLSEN has documented similar percentages in their research (Greytak, Kosciw, Villenas, & Giga, 2016). These groups are also found at the collegiate level and in other countries. There has been a corresponding growth in the literature on GSAs, and as this literature has matured, we propose a set of key conceptual and methodological recommendations to address emerging research needs. While we focus on GSAs, we note findings from studies

of other student groups that inform these recommendations, and we note ways in which our recommendations could apply to other such groups.

Overview of Extant GSA Findings and Recommendations

A foundational base of GSA research has highlighted their potential to promote resilience. Nonexperimental comparisons of youth based on GSA presence have been encouraging and indicate that youth in schools with GSAs report fewer physical, psychological, and behavioral health concerns; lower truancy; and greater perceived school safety than youth in schools without GSAs (Davis, Stafford, & Pullig, 2014; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011; Poteat, Sinclair, DiGiovanni, Koenig, & Russell, 2013; Toomey & Russell, 2013; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). Some of this work suggests that GSAs may be beneficial even for youth who are not members. In one study, GSA members and nonmembers did not differ in their reports of safety or truancy, but both fared better than youth in schools without GSAs (Walls et al., 2010). Other studies have highlighted various support and advocacy efforts among GSA members and documented a range of positive experiences related to GSA involvement (Lapointe, 2015; Lee, 2002; Miceli, 2005; Poteat, Calzo, & Yoshikawa, 2016; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). These findings related to multiple psychosocial and educational factors underscore the broader relevance of GSAs for researchers across disciplines and research interests.

GSAs are in a unique position to promote youths' resilience and facilitate social justice efforts in schools. In some schools, GSAs may be the only setting explicitly identified as one that is supportive of LGBTQ students. Also, many students may have difficulty accessing LGBTQ resources outside of school, or such resources may not exist (Gray, 2009). Moreover, GSAs not only aim to support their immediate members, but they also aim to improve the experiences of students within the whole school through advocacy efforts (Griffin et al., 2004). Finally, although a number of prevention and intervention programs are implemented in schools, their effectiveness for LGBTQ youth rarely has been considered (Baskin et al., 2010). Consequently, GSAs are a key setting for education researchers to study.

Although GSAs hold promise for many students, GSAs and GSA research also face sizable challenges. Students in many schools still face barriers when attempting to form or join a GSA (Mayberry, 2013; Mayo, 2008). Also, some GSA advisors report hostility from administrators and barriers to hosting events (Watson, Varjas, Meyers, & Graybill, 2010). These same challenges extend to other student groups also focused on issues of diversity and social justice (Cammarota, 2016). Researchers face similar barriers to conducting LGBTQ-related research within schools. These barriers have made it difficult to conduct largescale school-based studies. Instead, many studies rely on preexisting data sets not originally intended for GSA-focused research, thereby limiting the types of variables available to examine; or they must contend with smaller samples from fewer schools when collecting original data; or instead, they must rely on retrospective reports from young adults. Perhaps due in part to some of these restrictions, in our review of extant GSA research, including our own work on GSAs, we have noted several consistent limitations. These limitations include attempts to identify evidence of GSA effects derived from nonexperimental comparisons

based only on GSA presence, comparing members to nonmembers in a manner that treats them as homogenous in their experiences and sociocultural identities, utilizing only single-informant data, and relying entirely on cross-sectional data.

Research on GSAs is now at an important juncture that requires a more nuanced approach to how they and their members are studied. As we detail in this paper, we propose the following recommendations: (1) Move from a monolithic to contextualized treatment of GSAs, understanding variation among them in their practices as well as their larger school and community contexts; (2) attend to heterogeneity among members and test for person-context interactions related to youth outcomes; (3) utilize multiple data sources for triangulation; (4) apply a range of methodological approaches to capitalize on strengths of different designs; (5) collect longitudinal data over short-term and extended time periods; and (6) consider GSAs within a broader umbrella of youth settings. Table 1 provides a summary of how these recommendations address current limitations and pertinent research questions.

Recommendation 1: Move From a Monolithic to Contextualized Treatment of GSAs

Qualitative research on GSAs (e.g., from ethnographic observations or interviews) has produced a multidimensional framework to describe their various practices and ways in which they are structured (Griffin et al., 2004; Lee, 2002; Mayo, 2013; Miceli, 2005). In contrast, quantitative research has often treated GSAs as uniform and monolithic by comparing youth based on GSA presence in their schools. Although these comparisons have highlighted the importance of basic access to GSAs, they assume a degree of uniformity across GSAs. This approach is conceptually problematic. Although GSAs share a common mission and engage in similar activities, they are not standardized or systematically administered like other school-based programs (e.g., Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Further, analyses that consider GSAs along only one dimension (i.e., their presence or absence in a school) treat GSAs as a singular whole entity rather than as a setting in which structures, practices, and interactions develop over time. Consequently, the results give no direct indication as to what specific GSAs structures or experiences are responsible for promoting positive outcomes and therefore do not provide nuanced guidance to GSAs on best practices.

Future studies need to adopt a more contextualized treatment of GSAs. Specifically, studies should consider how GSAs vary along multiple dimensions and link their variability along these dimensions to youth outcomes. This approach will allow researchers to identify the "active ingredients" of GSAs and mechanisms by which they promote resilience.

Recent studies suggest several GSA dimensions to consider in relation to youth outcomes. For instance, members who perceive greater support and engage in more advocacy in their GSA report greater well-being and empowerment (Poteat, Yoshikawa, et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2009). Also, GSAs vary from one another along such dimensions as their decision-making processes and the ways advisors are involved in them (Poteat, Yoshikawa, et al., 2015; Valenti & Campbell, 2009). Building on these points, are some leadership and decision-making styles in the GSA more likely than others to promote youths' well-being? Further, GSAs can be contextualized based on the settings in which they operate. The

broader school climate, cultural makeup of a school, or available resources (e.g., funds to travel to events) could shape the ways in which GSAs are able to operate (Herdt, Russell, Sweat, & Marzullo, 2007; Poteat, Scheer, Marx, Calzo, & Yoshikawa, 2015); in turn, this could inhibit or enhance the effects of GSAs.

The general youth program literature also points to characteristics of these settings that could account for how GSAs foster positive youth outcomes. This literature indicates that effective youth programs provide safe environments, adequate structure, and opportunities to foster peer connection; cultivate youths' strengths and place them in positions of responsibility; and provide adult support and role modeling (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Variability along each of these factors could distinguish GSAs that are more successful than others at promoting resilience among their members.

A contextualized approach also can be used to study why some schools have GSAs in the first place. School characteristics may influence which schools have GSAs as well as what GSAs may be able to do within them. One study showed, for example, that urban and suburban schools, schools in more liberal areas of the country, larger schools, and schools with more financial resources were more likely to have a GSA (Fetner & Kush, 2008). Additional studies could identify factors that enable GSAs to form and be successful and how certain factors may shape the roles that GSAs have in their schools.

Whereas we have pointed to how multiple factors could account for how GSAs promote positive outcomes among their members, these same factors could be relevant for studying other similar school-based groups. There is remarkably little research on, for example, student clubs based on race or ethnicity (e.g., Black Student Alliances; La Raza) or gender (e.g., feminist clubs). Like GSAs, these groups could have a vital role in promoting social inclusion and justice within schools. Nevertheless, systematic in-depth analyses have not been conducted in these other student groups. This is a major area for research that has been overlooked in the extant literature. Similar to the recommendations we have proposed for GSAs, studies should test for associations between specific structures and experiences in these groups and youth outcomes rather than only considering basic membership status in them; at the group level, they should consider interpersonal dynamics and structural characteristics linked to such outcomes, especially because these groups address issues that may raise differing views and feelings that may need to be processed with the facilitation of a skilled advisor; and they should consider the characteristics of schools in which student groups addressing diversity and social justice issues are more likely to be present.

Recommendation 2: Attend to Member Heterogeneity and Person-Context Interactions

Members of GSAs often have been treated as a relatively homogenous group. With few exceptions (see Herdt et al., 2007; McCready, 2004), comparisons based on GSA membership have risked leaving the impression that members have similar experiences within their GSA and benefit equally from their involvement. Most studies comparing members to nonmembers do not further consider the sexual orientation, gender, race/ethnicity, or other sociodemographic characteristics of these individuals. For instance, scholars have called for greater attention to the experiences of youth of color in youth programs in general (Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012) and GSAs specifically (McCready,

2004). Additionally, GSAs aim to be inclusive of youth across sexual orientation and gender identities. Still, few studies have investigated whether LGBQ and heterosexual youth or transgender and cisgender youth derive equal benefits from their involvement.

Attention to intersectionality (e.g., attention to LGBTQ youth of color or LGBTQ youth with disabilities) will be important in advancing GSA research. This focus will help ensure that GSAs are inclusive of youth who may be among the most marginalized in schools. Doing so is an especially pressing issue given the ongoing major changes in national and school demographic diversity (Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011) and would be consistent with broader efforts to promote health equity in general (Hankivsky, 2012). Although the focus of GSAs centers around sexual orientation and gender identity, it is important to remember that members come with experiences shaped by their many other intersecting sociocultural identities. This point is also critical for other student groups organized around specific—and often singular—sociocultural identities. GSAs, as well as similar groups, should therefore use an intersectional framework when examining the extent to which youth perceive that the group is welcoming and supportive. Ultimately, how do GSAs and similar groups attend to the unique needs and strengths of youth who are marginalized and privileged in multiply different ways, and what impact does this have on their engagement in these groups and their well-being?

Other individual attributes also could relate to variability in youths' experiences in their GSAs and the level of benefit they derive from GSAs. For example, youth have reported joining their GSA for myriad different reasons (Heck, Lindquist, Stewart, Brennan, & Cochran, 2013); future studies should build on this to consider whether youths' reasons for joining their GSA align with their experiences in them or particular outcomes. Person-environment fit theories (e.g., Moos & Lemke, 1983) also indicate the need to consider the match or mismatch between youths' goals and motivations and the opportunities afforded within GSAs as this could impact the extent to which youth benefit from their involvement in them.

For the reasons noted previously, future research should attend to within-group variability among GSA members in terms of how their individual backgrounds, needs, strengths, and experiences coincide with the benefit they derive from their GSA involvement. Significant variability among GSA members may account for why extant comparison studies have only documented small or inconsistent differences between members and nonmembers in schools with GSAs (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011; Walls et al., 2010). Moreover, studies that consider heterogeneity among members and test person-context interactions will begin to address a formidable challenge faced by GSAs and similar groups: How can GSAs and similar groups flexibly meet a range of needs of youth from diverse backgrounds to promote their health, identity and social development, and overall well-being?

Recommendation 3: Utilize Multiple Data Sources for Triangulation

Whether quantitative or qualitative in nature, most GSA studies have relied on single-source data (e.g., either from youth or adults) to document the potential effects of GSAs or describe individuals' experiences within them. Youth and adult data have rarely been directly linked in studies to predict outcomes of interest (Poteat, Yoshikawa, et al., 2015). Other sources of

data—such as publicly accessible data on schools, districts, or their broader communities—are virtually absent in GSA research (Fetner & Kush, 2008). Although GSA studies based on single-source data are rigorous in other ways, single-source data pose methodological limitations and threats to validity (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). For instance, shared method variance can artificially inflate associations, there could be self-presentation bias, and certain sources may provide more reliable data than others for certain research questions. Thus, another major advancement to be made in future GSA research is to combine multiple data sources.

We suggest several additional ways to use youth- and advisor-reported data. Studies might consider collective perceptions of youth within a GSA, which could provide more robust indices of climate, norms, or interpersonal exchanges among members than data relying on a single youth's perception to predict that youth's experiences. Advisor attributes (e.g., educational background) also could influence the experiences of youth in their GSAs. Additionally, due to their position in the school, advisors may be attuned to certain challenges to the GSA (e.g., administrator pushback). At the same time, advisors and youth might perceive certain situations differently or even disagree. As such, advisor-reported data would be a valuable supplement to youth-reported data, but neither should replace the other or be considered "more valid."

Data gathered from sources other than youth or advisors could provide an even more comprehensive understanding of how GSAs and similar groups operate within and are affected by their larger social context. Information on specific schools or districts is often within the public domain and could contain data that are relevant to GSA research (e.g., information on other resources, school performance, or district policies). Finally, characteristics of the broader community (e.g., level of political conservatism, other safe spaces for sexual and gender minority youth) could account for variability across GSAs in the activities they are able to pursue and the types of experiences youth have in GSAs. Because GSAs and other student groups that challenge oppressive systems may face hostility within their larger context—in contrast to other extracurricular groups that may be actively supported—this attention to the larger context is critical. In sum, researchers should utilize multiple types of data from multiple sources to identify a more comprehensive set of factors that influence how GSAs function and for more rigorous tests of GSA-related effects, with this same approach used for similar student groups. In doing so, researchers should consider the strengths and limitations of various sources in providing reliable and valid data and when feasible, utilize multiple sources of data for triangulation.

Recommendation 4: Apply a Range of Methodological Approaches

Continued research on GSAs should reflect methodological pluralism using rigorous approaches that are appropriate to the context of GSAs. Given the ways in which GSAs operate, their multiple functions, and diverse membership, utilizing multiple qualitative and quantitative methodologies will be necessary to address diverse research aims and provide data that capitalize on the strengths of different designs. In this section, we consider qualitative and quantitative methodologies that could be used within the context of GSAs

and other student groups aimed at promoting social justice and supporting youth who are marginalized in schools.

Qualitative research has produced important findings on youths' experiences in GSAs and how GSAs may promote positive development (Griffin et al., 2004; Miceli, 2005; Russell et al., 2009). For example, interviews with GSA youth leaders showed that GSAs promoted several forms of empowerment for activism and social justice (Russell et al., 2009). The leaders reported not only empowerment to produce change within school and community settings but also personal and relational empowerment stemming from interactions with other members. In another study, GSA meeting observations showed the importance of advisor flexibility in responding to a large range of youth concerns or interests, from personal family issues to agenda-based activities of organizing and activism (Poteat, Yoshikawa, et al., 2015).

Research on GSAs would benefit from further use of a variety of qualitative methods, such as participatory action research (PAR) and comparative case studies, among others (Horn, Peter, Tasker, & Sullivan, 2013). Other social justice–related work within schools has used PAR approaches to describe experiences of youth marginalization in schools, highlight instances of discrimination, and advocate for changes in the school through youth narratives, photography, and presentations (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). These types of data from youth or advisors in GSAs would be particularly rich and could contextualize other types of quantitative and qualitative data that have more typically been gathered. PAR approaches may give new perspectives into the types of challenges and issues faced by GSAs, identify questions that are urgent to this youth population, and shed light on assets, strengths, and novel strategies that GSAs can use to address these issues.

In the area of quantitative methodologies, we draw attention to the absence of causal, experimental, and quasi-experimental designs in GSA research. Such designs are positioned to address causal questions concerning whether and for whom and under what conditions GSAs may be effective. At the same time, researchers should give careful consideration to how experimental designs are used within the context of GSAs and other youth-led programs for social justice promotion. For instance, it would not be in keeping with the spirit of GSAs to use a cluster randomized trial wherein GSAs are randomly established in a set of schools while other schools serve as controls because GSAs are often established organically through student-driven initiatives and are not standardized. Also, this approach could raise ethical challenges. At the same time, quasi-experimental or experimental approaches could be ideal for testing the effectiveness of specific support or advocacy efforts implemented by existing GSAs (Heck, 2015) or trainings for advisors and youth (i.e., with comparison and experimental groups both consisting of GSAs but testing variation in implementation and practices; for an example of such an approach using PAR, see Ozer & Douglas, 2013).

Other nonexperimental quantitative designs could be used to provide increasingly refined tests of GSA effects. Similarly, they may be ideal in cases where experimental designs are not feasible or ethical. As one example, most quantitative studies have not accounted for many relevant covariates (e.g., family support, involvement in other youth programs)

when comparing youth based on their access to or membership in GSAs. Consequently, it is difficult to rule out alternative explanations for these GSA-based patterns or provide a rigorous test of the distinct contribution of GSAs to youth resilience. As another example, multilevel longitudinal models would allow researchers to consider the combination and interaction of individual attributes, GSA dimensions, and broader contextual factors in relation to youth outcomes over time. Finally, mixed methods studies can provide more comprehensive data on implementation, experiences of diverse youth in GSAs, and mechanisms of impact than one method alone (Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008). Diversifying methodological and analytical approaches will help build a totality of evidence that will be fundamental to assess causality and the robustness of associations in GSA research.

Recommendation 5: Collect Longitudinal Data

We are unaware of much GSA research at this point that has extended beyond the use of single-timepoint data. There are several limitations with this approach as it pertains to documenting GSA-related effects. First, it prevents researchers from disentangling self-selection and influence effects (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). This distinction is important because GSAs, as with other diversity-focused groups, are typically established from student-led efforts and membership is voluntary. Single-timepoint data do not allow researchers to compare students' well-being prior to and after joining these groups. Second, single-timepoint data make it impossible to determine the relative directionality of effects, despite the likelihood of reciprocal effects. For example, higher levels of GSA involvement may lead to greater well-being; it may also be the case that greater well-being enables members to become more involved.

At a broader level, GSAs as groups are not static entities; their level of activity can fluctuate, possibly due to a number of factors (e.g., member turnover, changing priorities, or advisor availability). Nevertheless, this type of setting-level fluidity and its effects on youth cannot be adequately captured from single-timepoint data. Studies should follow GSAs over time to track these types of fluctuations in GSA membership, how this may correspond with fluctuations in the ongoing activities of GSAs, factors that characterize GSAs that are relatively stable versus perpetually in flux, and how this may coincide with the benefits that members may derive. Given the limited research on other student diversity groups, attention to the formation and evolution of these groups over time as well as how this may relate to a range of student and context factors would be important as part of forming a clearer understanding of how these groups are best established and sustained within schools where they may not be supported.

Longitudinal data could be collected over short-term or extended time periods. Both approaches would allow researchers to consider and test important questions such as whether GSA involvement produces immediate benefits, the extent to which gains are sustained between meetings or over the school year, whether trajectories differ across students, and whether short-term gains predict longer term outcomes (e.g., the likelihood of graduating high school). Longitudinal data also would allow researchers to capture more dynamic interpersonal processes that occur within the GSA as well as identify how

GSAs adapt to the changing needs or interests of members and how they respond to broader circumstances or events that occur within their schools or communities. Again, these questions are equally relevant to other student groups aimed at promoting youth resilience and social inclusion and justice in schools.

Adding to the aforementioned issues, longitudinal data would be useful for charting how youth move into and out of GSAs and how this may coincide with their movement into and out of other groups in schools (e.g., other diversity-based groups, academic groups, or activity-specific groups) or relate to other competing academic or family responsibilities. This larger schoolwide social network–based approach could yield a dynamic portrayal of how GSAs constantly adapt to changes within the larger school context, how schools themselves respond to or change based on the actions of GSAs, and how these processes may differentially affect certain members of GSAs.

Recommendation 6: Consider GSAs Within a Broader Umbrella of Youth Settings

As a final recommendation, we highlight the need to consider GSAs within a broader umbrella of youth settings and programs (both within and outside of schools) that are accessed by youth and that promote their resilience and development. Doing so would allow researchers to situate GSAs within youths' broader social system and understand how youths' experiences in GSAs might interact with or remain separate from their experiences within other settings. This approach acknowledges that GSAs are one of potentially several settings accessible to youth.

The study of GSAs in conjunction with other programs could enrich our understanding of the logic behind youths' involvement in different programs. Some youth in GSAs likely participate in other similar groups that may exist within the school. For example, how might youth selectively access GSAs as one of multiple extracurricular settings to meet their varied needs and interests? How do GSAs partner with other groups within schools to engage in larger scale socializing events or advocacy efforts? This attention to coalitions across student groups is an important issue to address not only for research on GSAs but also for research more expansively on school-based youth programs that seek to promote social inclusion and justice across multiple interlocking systems of oppression.

Attention to youths' involvement in multiple settings in which they are involved (e.g., GSAs or other diversity groups) could begin to address nuances in how their intersecting sociocultural identities are supported and explored in different ways across these settings to promote their resilience. Similarly, it would be beneficial to consider various ways in which groups focused on different sociocultural identities are either similar or distinct in how they are structured or function to provide similar opportunities for members (e.g., for support or advocacy). Also, this more expansive approach of considering youths' involvement in multiple settings could address complex questions related to successful youth outcomes. For example, member retention within the GSA may be deemed an important and successful outcome. Yet, if a particular member's social support or identity needs were met by the GSA and this person went on to devote more time with a different student group (e.g., one focused on economic justice), this too could be considered a favorable outcome. However, only considering this youth's level of involvement within the GSA would fail to capture

this process. GSAs might serve as a launching pad for involvement in other in-school or out-of-school activities by providing initial supports that serve to build youths' confidence, engagement in school, social support networks, or interest in advocacy.

In addition to the multiple settings and student groups within schools, there is limited understanding about the extent to which youth utilize GSAs rather than out-of-school services, or vice versa, and why different patterns of use may exist for some youth. Which youth prefer GSAs, which youth prefer other out-of-school settings, and which youth utilize multiple settings? Such questions as these apply to groups within and outside of schools and could be beneficial not only for GSAs but also for these other settings in understanding their unique roles, important areas of overlap, as well as other opportunities or resources that are still missing or inadequately provided. Studies might also consider the potential benefits and drawbacks for youth who participate in single or multiple settings.

Conclusions

In sum, we contend that GSAs and similar student groups in schools are uniquely positioned to promote well-being among many youth across sexual orientation and gender identities. Yet, there is a dearth of systematic research on the roles and effects of other established student groups that aim to promote resilience among youth marginalized in schools and address issues of diversity and social justice. As the number of GSAs and similar groups continue to grow across schools that are geographically, socioeconomically, and culturally diverse, there is a pressing need for rigorous descriptive and evaluative research on how they function to promote positive development. Ultimately, these approaches will provide a rich source of data to inform the development of more comprehensive models and empirically supported practices for how GSAs and similar groups can promote youth development and resilience. These approaches will increasingly require larger scale efforts, complex designs, as well as collaborations and shared resources across research groups. GSA-related research should be considered a funding priority to ensure the feasibility and success of such work given the relevance and strong potential for GSAs to galvanize within-school approaches to facilitate student well-being, social inclusion, and justice. Education researchers across multiple disciplines stand to have a central role in these expanding efforts. Our hope is that the set of recommendations we have proposed will serve as a platform to stimulate new ideas for the next phase of research on GSAs and similar youth programs. Ongoing advances in GSA research will be essential to develop empirically supported recommendations that could maximize the benefits of GSAs for the youth who are involved in them and the schools in which they are established. Ultimately, GSAs and other student groups focused on issues of diversity can play integral roles as part of social movements to promote social justice and inclusion within schools.

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Table 1

Recommendations to Advance Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) Research, Limitations Addressed, and Sample Questions Adaptable for Other Student Groups

Recommendation	Limitations Addressed	Sample Questions
1. Move from a monolithic to contextualized treatment of GSAs	Treatment of GSAs as a singular entity Failure to capture variability among GSAs	What specific GSA functions, interpersonal dynamics, and advisor characteristics and roles are associated with desired outcomes among youth members? How does the broader social context of the school contribute to how GSAs function and their effectiveness in promoting resilience among members?
	Inability to identify "active ingredients" of GSAs related to positive outcomes	What conditions are necessary for GSAs to form and to be effective within a school?
2. Attend to heterogeneity among members	Members treated as a homogenous group without attention to intersecting identities or variability in GSA-based experiences	Why do students join GSAs? Do reasons for joining vary according to students' sociocultural identities? How do students' reasons for joining relate to how they become involved in specific functions of their GSA? Are GSAs as effective in promoting desired outcomes for youth from different backgrounds? How do GSAs attend to the unique needs and strengths of youth who are marginalized and privileged in multiply different ways, and what impact does this have on their engagement in GSAs and their well-being?
3. Utilize multiple data sources for triangulation	Reliance on single-source data for any given GSA study	What are the strengths and limitations of various data sources in providing reliable data? How can data gathered from multiple sources be combined to provide a comprehensive model of how multiple factors at multiple levels contribute to positive outcomes?
	Inability to identify differences in perceptions	In what ways do student members and adult advisors tend to agree on their perceptions of the GSA? In what ways do they tend to disagree? How does convergence or divergence on such perceptions relate to how GSAs operate effectively and their ability to promote desired outcomes?
	Missing attention to larger group norms, interpersonal processes	What are various social norms and interpersonal dynamics among GSA members—based on the collective reports of members and advisors—and how do these contribute to how GSAs operate and the extent to which they promote desired outcomes?
	Omission of other data sources beyond student or advisor self-report data	Do school or district policies or other characteristics of the school or larger community—gathered from publicly available data sources—impact the ability of GSAs to operate in certain ways or inhibit/enhance the extent to which they promote desire outcomes?
4. Apply a range of methodological approaches	Reliance on any single approach cannot fully capture nuanced ways in which GSAs operate, interpersonal processes among members and advisors, different ways that youth access and interface with GSAs, or factors external to the GSA at multiple levels and how these all connect to youth outcomes	What kinds of data will help address the particular research question of interest, and what designs will provide that kind of data? How could experimental or quasi-experimental approaches be used to test causal research questions related to student experiences in their GSA or test the effectiveness of programming or training delivered within the context of the GSA? How might qualitative or participatory action approaches help build richer theories or new conceptual models, identify new challenges faced by GSAs, or highlight novel strategies used by GSAs to counter discrimination or promote resilience among members? How could a mixed methods approach be applied to a given study to provide more comprehensive data to address the research question of interest?
5. Collect longitudinal data over short-term and extended time periods	Cross-sectional data cannot disentangle self-selection effects from actual influence effects of GSA involvement	In what ways are youth who join GSAs distinct from youth who do not join GSAs?
	Cross-sectional data cannot determine relative directionality of effects	What patterns of change over time are evident in students' level of involvement in GSAs or for various outcomes that GSAs seek to promote? What individual and contextual factors predict distinct patterns of change for different students? What are immediate gains connected to GSA involvement, and to what extent are they sustained between meetings or over the school year? Do immediate gains lead to longer-term outcomes? Do trajectories differ based on individual and contextual factors?

Recommendation	Limitations Addressed	Sample Questions
	Cross-sectional data cannot capture fluctuations in membership or activity levels of GSAs or how GSAs adapt to emerging needs of members or broader school conditions	What patterns of fluctuation are evident for GSAs as groups in terms of membership turnover or their level of activity? What patterns can be captured in how GSAs respond to broader circumstances or actions within the school or community, and reciprocally, how do schools or communities respond to actions of the GSA? How does movement into or out of the GSA coincide with movement into or out of other student groups or relate to other competing demands or responsibilities?
6. Consider GSAs within a broader umbrella of youth settings	GSAs have not been situated within youths' broader social system to understand how experiences within GSAs interact with or remain separate from experiences in other settings	How do youth selectively access GSAs as one of multiple settings to meet their varied needs and interests? Which youth access multiple settings, and which youth primarily access their GSA? Which youth prefer GSAs, which youth prefer other out-of-school youth settings, and which youth utilize settings across contexts? What factors contribute to such decisions? How do GSAs partner with other groups within schools or the broader community to engage in larger-scale socializing events or advocacy efforts? What are the potential benefits and drawbacks for youth who participate in single or multiple settings?