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Fostering Youth Self-Efficacy to Address Transgender and Racial Diversity Issues: The Role of Gay–Straight Alliances

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Abstract

Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs) aspire to empower youth to address multiple systems of oppression, including those affecting transgender and racial/ethnic minority youth, yet there is little indication of factors contributing to youths’ self-efficacy to do so. We examined individual and group factors predicting self-efficacy to address transgender and racial issues among 295 youth in 33 high school GSAs. Multilevel results indicated that level of GSA engagement, individual and collective involvement in transgender- and race-specific discussions, and in some cases intergroup friendships were associated with each form of self-efficacy. The association between GSA engagement and transgender self-efficacy was stronger for youth in GSAs with greater collective transgender-specific discussions. Associations with racial self-efficacy differed based on youths’ race/ethnicity. Continued research needs to identify how GSAs and similar youth programs promote self-efficacy to address diversity issues.

Keywords

youth programs; gay–straight alliance; self-efficacy; peer discussions; diversity issues

Youth with marginalized identities (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer [LGBTQ] youth; youth of color) face considerable discrimination in school settings (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016). This discrimination is linked to health and academic concerns, such as depression and anxiety, truancy, and lower grades (Peskin, Tortolero, Markham, Addy, & Baumler, 2007; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, &

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Russell, 2010; Williams & Peguero, 2013). Marginalized youth and their ally peers can share an indispensable role in responding to bias. To this end, school-based extracurricular settings could empower youth by promoting their efficacy to counteract oppression and hostility in schools and the larger community (Larson, Perry, Kang, & Walker, 2011; Russell & Van Campen, 2011). Yet, few studies have examined factors that foster youths' efficacy to address such major social issues in school settings.

Gay–Straight Alliances as a School-Based Youth Setting

Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs) are school-based groups with potential to empower members to address multiple forms of diversity and oppression. With youth program models as a framework (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Shinn & Yoshikawa, 2008), GSAs provide support and opportunities for youth to socialize, take on leadership roles with adult guidance, and engage in advocacy to address issues facing marginalized youth (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). Historically, GSAs focused on sexual orientation-related issues (e.g., victimization of LGBQ students). In recent years, as public awareness of transgender issues has increased, many GSAs extend their effort to respond to the needs of transgender youth (i.e., youth whose gender identity is not aligned with their sex assigned at birth), such as advocating for gender-neutral bathrooms. Many GSAs have even renamed themselves as Gender–Sexuality Alliances, highlighting GSAs' proximal focus on issues of gender identity as well as sexual orientation. GSAs also aspire to address other systems of oppression, including racism, often in a more distal way by forming coalitions with other student groups similar to theirs but with a focus on a different identity dimension (e.g., race) and advocating on issues of shared concerns (e.g., school safety and mental health; Gay–Straight Alliance Network, 2015). At the same time, although racism can be addressed within GSAs, attention to race may be more peripheral relative to gender identity and sexual orientation (Poteat & Scheer, 2016).

Given the GSA aim to empower youth to address multiple systems of oppression within their school communities, we build on empowerment theory to understand members' diversity-related self-efficacy. Psychological empowerment refers to the process where individuals participate in their community, gain control over issues facing their community, and develop understanding of the sociopolitical landscape of their community (Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, & Checkoway, 1992). One important indicator of psychological empowerment is self-efficacy which can be defined as one's perceived capability to address issues of their concern. Within the context of GSAs, we conceptualize self-efficacy to address a specific diversity issue as the extent to which youth believe in their capacity to articulate oppressive experiences facing people with a specific marginalized status and to discuss how this dimension of marginalization diverges and intersects with other systems of oppression (Russell et al., 2009). In this study, we focus on self-efficacy related to two forms of marginalized identities that GSAs may address: transgender identity (a focal identity in the GSA context) and racial minority identity (a relevant, but less focal identity in the GSA context). We consider individual and contextual factors that may account for GSA members' efficacy to address these two forms of diversity.

GSA Involvement: General Engagement and Identity-Specific Discussions

On the basis of empowerment theory, studies have shown a positive association between community participation and perceived control of one's sociopolitical environment (e.g., Zimmerman et al., 1992). Along the same lines, aspects of GSA engagement may encourage members to be more confident about addressing diversity-related issues in their school communities. Indeed, GSAs often create opportunities for members to gain positive experiences of perspective taking and advocacy, receiving supportive feedback from peers and advisors, and learning effective ways to process one's own emotional and physiological reactions that may arise when addressing diversity issues (Russell et al., 2009). These experiences can serve as important sources of diversity-related self-efficacy. Thus, we expect that involvement in GSA will be positively related to members' transgender and racial self-efficacy.

Specifically, there are two ways in which involvement in GSAs may account for youths' transgender and racial self-efficacy: general level of engagement in the GSA and involvement in GSA discussions specific to these two issues. Beyond comparing members to nonmembers, recent studies that have focused on levels of active engagement among GSA members (which can be operationalized as consistency of attending meetings, taking on leadership roles and responsibilities on projects, contributing to discussions) have found that more engaged members also report greater well-being than others (Poteat et al., 2015). The broader youth program literature also indicates that youth more involved in programs derive greater benefits (Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012). A similar pattern could apply to youths' self-efficacy, but with potential differences for the two forms we examine. Greater general engagement in the GSA may be associated with greater transgender self-efficacy because GSAs primarily focus on issues of gender and sexual orientation. However, simply being a more engaged GSA member may not relate to greater racial self-efficacy because race does not tend to be as pronounced a focus.

Involvement in identity-specific discussions in GSA meetings (i.e., discussing issues concerning gender or race) may offer members a chance to build efficacy regarding transgender and racial issues. Scholars have suggested that peer discussions about issues of inequality can enhance their self-understanding and commitment to social action (Pollock, 2017). These processes have been documented in participatory action work (e.g., Torre & Fine, 2008) and intergroup dialogues (e.g., Nagda, 2006; Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). However, the literature on these conversations strikingly omits attention to established diversity-focused youth groups, such as GSAs. Similarly, the large literature on gender and racial socialization tends to focus on parents (Hughes et al., 2006; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002), omitting attention to how peers engage in identity-specific discussions despite the central role of peers during adolescence (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011).

As an added contextual effect, youth may further benefit from being in a GSA whose members collectively engage in more of these identity-specific discussions. Group psychotherapy research has shown that the group context can contribute to more positive therapy outcomes for individual members (Muller & Miles, 2017). In the case of GSAs, being around other members who collectively participate in more discussions of gender or

race could be associated with youths' self-efficacy regarding each issue, over and above their own direct participation in discussing transgender- and race-related issues.

Person-level conditional effects.—We consider whether youths' gender and racial/ethnic identities may change how GSA involvement (including general GSA engagement and individual participation in identity-specific discussions) may be associated with the two forms of self-efficacy. Although cisgender youth (i.e., youth whose gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth) may not encounter day-to-day gender identity-based discrimination, the focal nature of gender within GSAs may attract youth (cisgender and transgender) who are highly motivated to address transgender-related issues to become members and to further develop efficacy to address such issues. Thus, these indicators of GSA involvement may be related to transgender self-efficacy similarly for cisgender and transgender members. In contrast, this self-selection process may be less applicable for race-related issues given that they are often raised peripherally within GSAs. The associations between GSA involvement and racial self-efficacy may vary between White and racial/ethnic minority (R/EM) youth. White youth typically do not have many opportunities to discuss race-related topics; being able to converse around racial issues could have a large effect on their racial self-efficacy by fostering learning about privilege and issues facing youth of color (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Tatum, 1992). In comparison, R/EM youth may already have a rich understanding of issues related to race from their personal or vicarious experiences of racism (Hughes et al., 2006); thus, engaging in race-related discussions in the GSA may not be as strongly associated with their racial self-efficacy as for White youth. It is less clear whether the relation between general GSA engagement and racial self-efficacy may vary with one's race/ethnicity.

Group-level conditional effects.—The association between general GSA engagement and transgender self-efficacy may be stronger for youth who are members of GSAs where greater transgender-related discussions occur collectively among members. Participatory action and intergroup dialogue research stress the importance of collective learning for individuals to develop critical consciousness (Torre & Fine, 2008; Zúñiga et al., 2007). However, we do not expect a comparable group-level accentuating effect for racial self-efficacy. Initial evidence suggests that GSA advisors feel less equipped to facilitate discussions on race than on gender identity (Poteat & Scheer, 2016). We suspect that GSA members may experience greater collective challenges in generating productive conversations on race-related issues than transgender-related ones, so it may be less likely that collective race-related discussions enhance the benefits of general GSA engagement in relation to racial self-efficacy.

Friendships With Members of a Marginalized Group

Friendships with members of a marginalized group could reduce prejudice and build allyship particularly for individuals without the corresponding marginalized status because they may have less personal experience of marginalization to inform their understanding of that form of oppression (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). For instance, heterosexual youth with sexual minority friends are more likely to show support for sexual minorities than those without (e.g., Heinze & Horn, 2009; Poteat, 2015). Similarly, White youth with R/EM friends are

more likely to advocate for the rights of R/EM than those without (e.g., Crystal, Killen, & Ruck, 2008). Therefore, we expect that having close transgender or R/EM friends will be associated with greater transgender and racial self-efficacy, respectively. Further, we expect that this association will be stronger among cisgender and White youth, respectively.

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection, defined as being open to examining one's own thoughts and emotions as they arise (Sauter, Heyne, Blöte, van Widenfelt, & Westenberg, 2010), can be an important trait for building self-efficacy in multicultural contexts especially because diversity-related interactions often raise complex thoughts and emotions (Tatum, 1992). Such domain-general self-reflection may help one gain insights about the power dynamics at play in different systems of oppression. Empirically, self-reflection was shown to be positively associated with diversity-related competence, such as LGBT-affirming behaviors among heterosexual adolescents (e.g., Poteat, 2015). As such, to provide a more refined examination of the unique contribution of GSA-related variables and friendships, we consider self-reflection as a covariate in our models.

Present Study

Discrimination against transgender and R/EM youth remains prevalent in schools, and GSAs are one setting positioned to instill self-efficacy in youth to address issues faced by members of these groups. We tested the extent to which individual factors (GSA engagement level, involvement in transgender- and race-related discussions, and close friendships with transgender and R/EM peers) and a contextual factor (collective frequency of identity-specific discussions among members) contributed to youths' self-efficacy to address transgender- and race-related issues, controlling for other important factors such as youths' own tendency to engage in self-reflection (Tatum, 1992) and the size of the GSA.

We hypothesized that greater GSA engagement would be associated with greater transgender self-efficacy. Also, we hypothesized that greater involvement in transgender-related discussions and having close transgender friends would be associated with greater transgender self-efficacy. Further, we hypothesized a contextual effect for group-level transgender-related discussions: youth in GSAs whose members collectively participated in more frequent discussions of transgender issues would report greater transgender self-efficacy. Moreover, we hypothesized that group-level transgender discussions would enhance the association between GSA engagement and transgender self-efficacy. Finally, we hypothesized that having close transgender friends would relate to greater transgender self-efficacy more strongly for cisgender youth than for transgender youth.

Moreover, we hypothesized that greater involvement in race-related discussions and having close R/EM friends would be associated with greater racial self-efficacy. Also, we hypothesized that youth in GSAs whose members collectively participated in more frequent discussions of racial issues would report greater racial self-efficacy. Furthermore, because race-related issues are often peripheral in the GSA context and given the different racial experiences of White and R/EM youth, we hypothesized that individual and collective involvement in race-specific discussions would be associated with racial self-efficacy more

strongly for White youth than for R/EM youth. Finally, we hypothesized that having close R/EM friends would be associated with greater racial self-efficacy more strongly for White youth than for R/EM youth.

Method

Data Source and Participants

We conducted secondary data analysis of the 2014 Massachusetts GSA Network survey of youth members, sponsored by the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth and the Massachusetts Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ Students. The survey gathered data to identify youths' GSA experiences. The data were collected at five regional conferences throughout Massachusetts and postings to GSA advisors. Surveys were provided at the start of the conferences. Also, GSA advisors were contacted and requested to make surveys available to youth and to collect them. For both outlets, youth voluntarily completed the anonymous survey if their GSA advisor granted adult consent. Adult consent was used over parent consent to avoid potential risks of outing LGBTQ youth to parents. This practice is common in LGBTQ youth research to protect their safety and confidentiality (Mustanski, 2011). Youth were told that their responses would be anonymous and that data would be used for program evaluation and potentially for research purposes to produce reports or articles. We secured IRB approval for our secondary data analysis. Our sample included 295 youth ($M_{age} = 16.07$, $SD = 1.14$) who were members of 33 GSAs (ranging from 3 to 21 members; $M = 9$ members). Sample characteristics are reported in Table 1.

Measures

Demographics.—Youth reported their sexual orientation, gender, and race/ethnicity. Sexual orientation and race/ethnicity responses were dichotomized (heterosexual or LGBQ, and White or R/EM) because of the limited number of youth in specific minority groups. Similarly, we combined the transgender, gender-queer, and write-in response options (e.g., gender-fluid) into a trans/gender-queer group because of the limited representation of youth within these specific identities. Youth reported their number of close friends who identified as transgender or R/EM. Response options for both questions were 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 or more. We dichotomized responses to both items to indicate whether youth did or did not have any close friends who identified as transgender or R/EM (0 = no close transgender or R/EM friends, respectively; 1 = at least one close transgender or R/EM friend, respectively).

Self-reflection.—Youth completed the 7-item Self-Reflection and Insight Scale for Youth (Sauter et al., 2010; e.g., “I often think about how I feel about things”). Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Higher average scale scores represent greater self-reflection. Coefficient alpha reliability was .93.

GSA engagement level.—Five items asked youth about their engagement in their GSA: (a) I attend GSA meetings or other GSA events, (b) I participate in conversations at GSA meetings, (c) I take leadership roles in activities and events in my GSA, (d) I have discussions with my GSA advisor(s) about and (e) I help with events or projects in my GSA.

Response options ranged from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*all the time*). Higher average scale scores represent greater engagement in the GSA. Coefficient alpha reliability was .89.

Transgender-related and race-related topic discussions.—Youth reported how frequently they personally discussed specific topics during GSA meetings. Response options ranged from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Three items covered transgender-related topics: (a) transgender rights (examples: gender-neutral bathrooms, etc.), (b) discrimination due to gender identity or expression, and (c) transgender awareness (examples: pronouns, terms, etc.). Higher average scale scores represent more frequently discussing transgender-related topics. Coefficient alpha was .88. Two items covered race-related topics: issues of racial discrimination or inequality and experiences of racial or ethnic minority students.

The items were significantly correlated ($r = .87, p < .001$). The items were averaged for a scale score, with higher scores representing more frequently discussing race-related topics. We computed average transgender-related discussions scores and average race-related discussions scores among members in each GSA to represent the group-level collective frequency of discussing these topics.

Transgender and racial self-efficacy.—Youth reported their efficacy to address transgender-related issues (three items) and race-related issues (three items). The items were preceded by the stem, “How equipped do you feel to do the following.” The transgender-related self-efficacy items were as follows: (a) talk about transgender students’ unique experiences, (b) describe differences between sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, and (c) talk about discrimination faced by transgender students. The race-related self-efficacy items were as follows: (a) talk about unique experiences that students of color face, (b) discuss how racial and sexual orientation identities overlap, and (c) talk about racism that students of color face. Response options ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Coefficient alpha for transgender-related self-efficacy and race-related self-efficacy were .87 and .90, respectively.

We conducted factor analyses for scales measuring self-reflection, GSA engagement level, transgender-related discussions, transgender self-efficacy, and racial self-efficacy. Results (available from the authors) indicated that all these scales were unidimensional.

Analytic Strategy

We used multilevel modeling to test our hypotheses for our set of independent variables and their associations with transgender-related self-efficacy. At the individual level we included demographic factors (sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, gender, friendship with transgender peers) and the following standardized group-mean centered variables: GSA engagement level, frequency of participating in transgender-related and race-related discussions, and self-reflection. At the group level we included the collective frequency of discussing transgender-related and race-related topics and group size as predictors of the Level 1 intercept, accounting for average differences across GSAs in transgender-related self-efficacy. To further test whether general GSA engagement, having at least one close transgender friend, and transgender-related discussions were associated with self-efficacy differentially for trans/gender-queer youth and nontrans/gender-queer youth, we created interaction terms

based on the dichotomized trans/gender-queer variable and the standardized score of GSA engagement, the dichotomized variable of transgender friendships, and the standardized score of transgender-related discussions, respectively. We included the interaction terms at the individual level. Finally, we tested the moderating effects of collective transgender-related discussions within the GSA on self-efficacy differences between trans/gender-queer and nontrans/gender-queer members and on the association between individual's GSA engagement and their self-efficacy by including collective frequency of transgender-related discussions at the group level as a predictor of the slopes for trans/gender-queer identity and GSA engagement.

We tested an analogous multilevel model with race-related self-efficacy as the dependent variable. However, we replaced the transgender friendship variable with the R/EM friendship variable; we examined how general GSA engagement, R/EM friendships, and frequency of discussing race-related topics were associated with self-efficacy differentially for White youth and R/EM youth; and we tested the moderating effects of collective race-related discussions within the GSA on self-efficacy differences between R/EM and White members, and on the association between individual's GSA engagement and their self-efficacy. As we later note in the results, because there were significant interaction effects with R/EM identity at Level 1, we created cross-level interaction terms with these significant Level 1 interactions in the model: R/EM Identity X Individual's General GSA Engagement X Collective Race-Related Discussions in the GSA and R/EM Identity X Individual Participation in Race-Related Discussions X Collective Race-Related Discussions in the GSA.

Results

Multilevel Model for Transgender-Related Efficacy

In the initial null model, GSAs varied significantly in transgender-related self-efficacy ($\chi^2 = 50.24, p < .05$). Results of the full multilevel model are summarized in Table 2. As hypothesized, variables at the individual level (including LGBTQ identity, trans/gender-queer identity, GSA engagement, and transgender-related discussions) and collective transgender-related discussions at the group level were all positively associated with transgender-related self-efficacy. Moreover, the moderating effects of trans/gender-queer identity were not significant with GSA engagement, transgender friendships, or transgender-related discussions. The nonsignificant interaction with transgender friendships ran counter to our hypothesis. Furthermore, self-efficacy differences between trans/gender-queer youth and nontrans/gender-queer youth did not vary by levels of the GSAs' collective transgender-related discussions. As hypothesized, the cross-level interaction between individual GSA engagement and group frequency of transgender-related discussions was marginally significant. Specifically, the strength with which greater general GSA engagement was positively associated with transgender-related self-efficacy was dependent on the extent to which the GSAs collectively discussed transgender-related issues (see Figure 1), which accounted for 16.7% of the variance in the slope. The overall model with all Level 1 variables accounted for 26.9% of the Level 1 variance and Level 2 variables accounted for 72.4% of the Level 2 variance.

Multilevel Model for Race-Related Efficacy

Notably, in the initial null model, GSAs did not vary significantly in race-related self-efficacy ($\chi^2 = 32.13, p = .46$). Results of the full multilevel model are summarized in Table 2. As hypothesized, variables at the individual level (R/EM identity, R/EM friendships, and race-related discussions) were positively associated with race-related self-efficacy. Also as hypothesized, the moderating effects of R/EM identity were significant with general GSA engagement and race-related discussions. However, its interaction was not significant with R/EM friendships. When testing the model separately for R/EM and White youth, greater GSA engagement was associated with greater race-related self-efficacy for R/EM youth ($b = 0.46, p < .01$) but not White youth ($b = 0.01, p = .91$; Figure 2); in contrast, greater participation in race-related discussions was associated with greater race-related self-efficacy for White youth ($b = 0.51, p < .001$) but not R/EM youth ($b = 0.08, p = .57$). Furthermore, the cross-level interaction of collective race-related discussions with the Level 1 interaction between R/EM identity and individual participation in race-related discussions was significant. Figure 3 graphically shows this interaction effect: the significant association between individual participation in race-related discussions and race-related self-efficacy does not appear dependent on the GSA's collective level of participating in such discussions for White youth, whereas for R/EM youth this association appears partly dependent on the GSA's collective level of participating in such discussions. Collective race-related discussions accounted for 80% of the variance in the Level 1 interaction between R/EM identity and individuals' own participation in race-related discussions predicting race-related self-efficacy. The cross-level interaction between R/EM identity X individual's GSA engagement and collective race-related discussions was not significant. The overall model with all Level 1 variables accounted for 31.7% of the Level 1 variance. There was no variance accounted for in the Level 2 intercept with the inclusion of the Level 2 variables because the amount of variance across GSAs in the null model was nonsignificant.

Discussion

This study provides encouraging and novel results regarding the potential of GSAs to foster the self-efficacy of members to address both transgender and racial issues. The results suggest that both individual and GSA-level characteristics might foster members' self-efficacy to address transgender issues (as a central focus in GSAs) and racial issues (as a more peripheral but critically important issue that can be addressed in GSAs). As hypothesized, general GSA engagement level, individual and collective involvement in race- and transgender-specific discussions, and in some cases friendships with transgender or R/EM peers were associated differentially with each form of self-efficacy. Findings highlight the potential of diversity-focused youth settings such as GSAs to empower youth to address discrimination and major social issues faced by minority populations in schools and society.

Factors Related to Self-Efficacy in Addressing Transgender Issues

As hypothesized, members' involvement in transgender-related discussions contributed to their self-efficacy to address transgender issues. This finding adds to work that indicates the importance of peer discourse in promoting critical consciousness and action countering discrimination (Nagda, 2006; Pollock, 2017). Under-scoring the importance of having direct

discussions on issues faced by specific groups, involvement in transgender-related discussions—but not race-related discussions—was associated with transgender self-efficacy. This distinction may have been evident because some challenges and barriers faced by societally marginalized minority groups are unique to that group. Thus, issue-specific discussions, not simply general discussions of diversity, may be critical to foster youths' self-efficacy to address issues faced by particular minority populations.

The frequency of transgender-related discussions at the group level accounted for members' transgender self-efficacy in two ways. First, youth in GSAs whose members collectively engaged in more transgender-related discussions reported higher self-efficacy. GSA members may benefit vicariously from others engaging in such discussions over and above their own involvement in them. This type of effect has been documented in other areas of research, such as group psychotherapy (e.g., Muller & Miles, 2017). Second, the positive association between general GSA engagement level and transgender self-efficacy was marginally stronger among youth in GSAs whose members collectively had more transgender-related discussions. As one potential explanation, critical discourse on transgender issues through peer socialization and collective learning may have enhanced the benefits of general GSA engagement in relation to youths' transgender self-efficacy (Torre & Fine, 2008; Zúñiga et al., 2007).

Unexpectedly, transgender self-efficacy was not associated with having close transgender friends for either cisgender or transgender youth. It is possible that friendship quality is more important when it comes to promoting transgender self-efficacy among youths who are already motivated to address transgender issues (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011).

Factors Related to Self-Efficacy in Addressing Racial Issues

Racial self-efficacy was associated with having close R/EM friends, and this association did not differ in size across White and R/EM youth. As expected, for White youth, having at least one R/EM friend may increase their awareness of issues such as discrimination that their R/EM friends may experience (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). However, inconsistent with our hypothesis, R/EM youth may also benefit from having at least one other R/EM friend when it comes to their self-efficacy in addressing racial issues potentially due to a sense of solidarity.

Whereas there was a simple main effect for the association between general GSA engagement and transgender self-efficacy as hypothesized, general GSA engagement was positively associated with racial self-efficacy for R/EM youth but not White youth. Greater GSA engagement may be important for R/EM youth to build confidence to address racism, perhaps through an increased sense of community through their engagement in the GSA. This association was not observed for White youth potentially because they may require more explicit and focused attention to race/ ethnicity (e.g., through race-related topic discussions).

Individual involvement in race-related discussions contributed to youths' racial self-efficacy, but in a more nuanced manner than we first hypothesized. Originally, we hypothesized that

individual involvement in race-related discussions would have a stronger association with race-related self-efficacy for White members than R/EM members. Although this interaction was significant, it was further moderated by the extent to which members collectively discussed race-related issues within the GSA. Specifically, White GSA members' own involvement in these discussions was associated with their racial self-efficacy, which appeared regardless of how frequently members in their respective GSAs collectively participate in race-related discussions (see Figure 3). We expected this pattern for White youth because these discussions may have built White GSA members' critical consciousness about racial privilege and about the importance of promoting racial justice (e.g., Nagda, 2006; Pollock, 2017). Given the dominant racial status of White youth and their potential unawareness of racial privileges, they may have benefitted from opportunities to discuss and gain insight on racial issues (Gurin et al., 2004; Tatum, 1992).

This association was more nuanced for R/EM GSA members: their own participation in race-related discussions appeared to be positively associated with racial self-efficacy only when they were in GSAs whose members collectively discussed race-related issues frequently (see Figure 3). Because R/EM youth face racial stigmatization and marginalization and may feel less supported in their GSAs relative to White members (Poteat et al., 2015), it may have been important for them (but not for White members) to have other members reciprocate and show interest in discussing these issues with them. R/EM youth in this GSA context may have felt more supported and validated, which could explain why their more frequent participation in race-related discussions predicted a greater sense of self-efficacy to address race-related issues. In contrast, if other members were relatively silent and did not have much to say on race-related issues (i.e., for R/EM members who reported discussing racial issues frequently but were in GSAs whose members collectively discussed race-related issues infrequently), R/EM youth in this GSA context may have felt isolated or pressured to speak on behalf of other R/EM people (Tatum, 1992). This could explain why, in this context, more frequently discussing race-related issues may not have predicted R/EM members' efficacy to address race-related issues. Although GSA advisors may have lower efficacy to direct conversations on race than on gender identity (Poteat & Scheer, 2016), more research is needed to identify factors that facilitate discussions on race in youth settings where other social identities are a primary focus. It would also be important to examine this cross-level interaction in future research with larger samples of individuals and GSAs and in combination with qualitative data that could help to describe and understand the likely nuance inherent to this finding. We would consider this significant cross-level interaction to be important but exploratory and tentative with the current data.

Limitations, Strengths, and Future Directions

We note several limitations to our study. First, given its cross-sectional nature, we could not draw conclusions about causal or directional relationships. For instance, self-efficacy to address these two systems of oppression might be a predictor and outcome of individuals' involvement in identity-specific discussions. Future longitudinal studies could enrich our understanding of the directionality of such associations over time. For example, studies could investigate mechanisms that may explain the connection between GSA engagement

and self-efficacy in diversity issues. Studies could also consider examining collective efficacy (e.g., the belief that GSA members as a group can achieve change) going beyond individual efficacy (Russell et al., 2009; Zimmerman et al., 1992). Second, we had to dichotomize race/ethnicity due to the limited sample of specific R/EM groups. This limits our understanding of how the associations between various factors and race-related self-efficacy may differ across specific R/EM groups. Furthermore, due to the limited number of GSAs in our study, results for our cross-level interaction effects should be interpreted with caution and future research should consider these nuances with larger samples. Finally, although this study included data from a number of GSAs across Massachusetts, future studies should include more nationally representative samples of youth in GSAs across multiple states.

Despite the limitations of the study, it makes several significant contributions to the literature on GSAs and youth empowerment. First, we went beyond studying general self-efficacy as an indicator of youth empowerment and instead we focused on youth self-efficacy to address two specific social issues (i.e., issues faced by R/EM and transgender individuals). As the racial demographics in the United States continue to become more diverse, and as transgender-related issues become more salient in social discourse, it has become increasingly important to understand how to empower youth—both from majority and minority groups—to address such social issues. Second, most GSA studies have compared members to nonmembers without attention to variability among GSA members. Our study addressed this gap by identifying and accounting for such variability. Third, from a multicultural education perspective, our study is one of the first to examine both transgender-specific discussions and race-specific discussions in the school context. Fourth, our data were from participants in multiple GSAs across geographically diverse regions of Massachusetts. We believe that these strengths, altogether, provide a more rigorous and nuanced way of understanding GSAs as a school-based setting with potential to empower youth to counter multiple forms of inequality. Finally, this study addresses a major gap in the youth program literature, namely the need to examine how youth programs address issues of diversity and prepare youth to engage in an increasingly diverse society (Larson et al., 2011; Russell & Van Campen, 2011).

Implications

The results of this study carry several implications for practice. School psychologists have been called on to promote the well-being of LGBTQ youth (National Association of School Psychologists, 2011). In relation to this call, school psychologists could be a valuable resource to GSAs. They could serve as GSA advisors or consult with advisors and students as they aim to address multiple issues of diversity in this setting. For instance, given our significant findings for transgender-related and race-related discussions, school psychologists could help facilitate these conversations based on their training and expertise. These conversations can be challenging and carry intense emotion; school psychologists could work with students through these experiences and to establish and uphold ground rules to ensure a supportive climate for such conversations. Similarly, although we treated self-reflection as a covariate in our models, general self-reflection was significantly associated with both forms of self-efficacy. School psychologists could also use their expertise to work

with GSA advisors and youth members to develop and strengthen self-reflection skills (e.g., through training or workshops), which could go on to have benefits in strengthening youths' self-efficacy to discuss and address these social issues. Ongoing work in this area by school psychologists and other school-based professionals—not only with GSAs but also with other programs—will further our understanding of how youth programs in schools can directly address these major social issues and promote equality.

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Impact and Implications

This study highlights the potential of diversity-focused youth settings such as Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs) to empower youth to address discrimination and issues faced by minority populations. It advances GSA research by considering individual and group differences; and suggests that active involvement in peer discussions and being socialized around other members who collectively discuss such issues may benefit youth depending on the issue at stake.

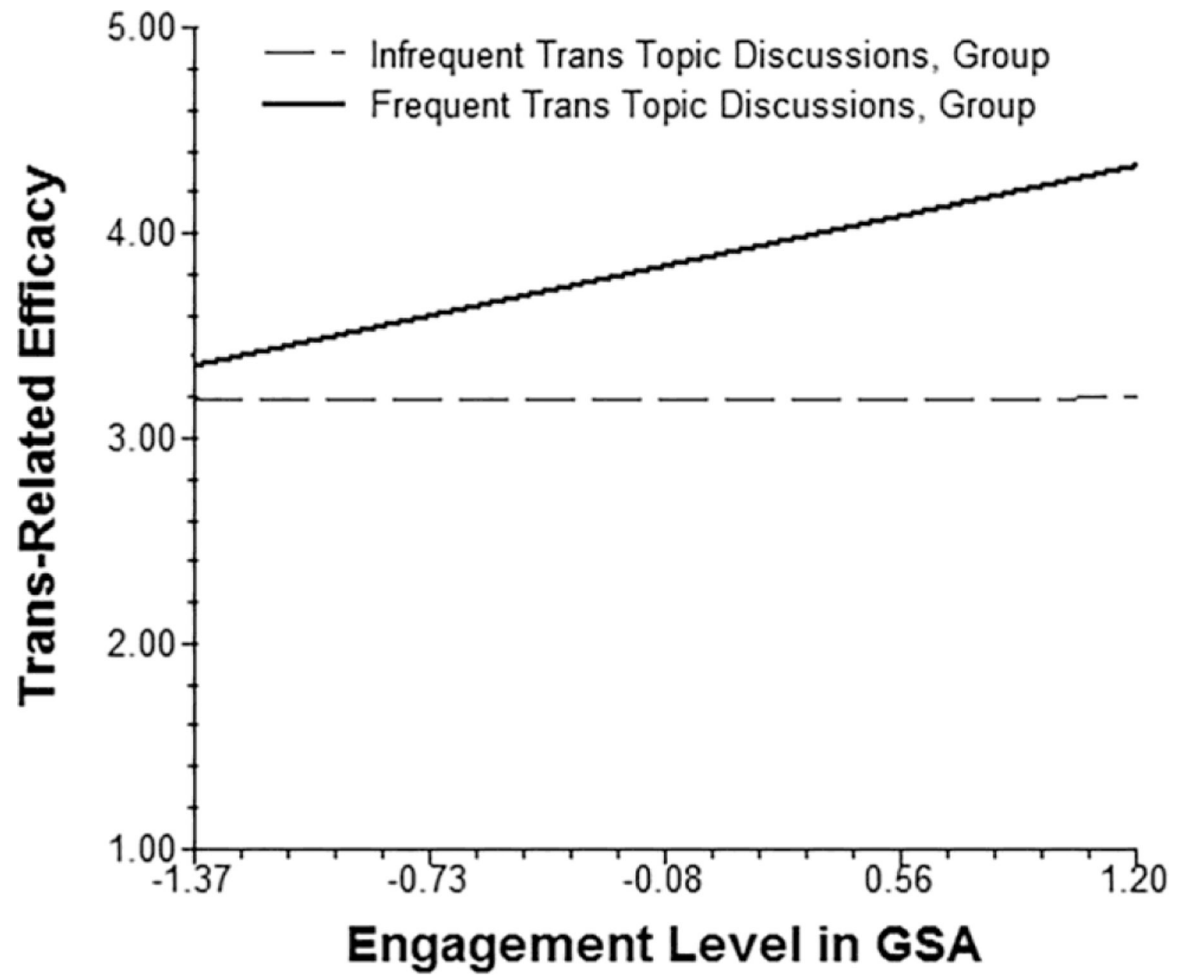


Figure 1. Association between individuals' Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) engagement level (group-mean centered) and their transgender-related efficacy, moderated by their GSA's collective frequency of discussing transgender topics. Infrequent and frequent group-level discussions are displayed based on lower and upper quartile estimates ($M_{infrequent} = -1.44$; $M_{frequent} = 1.14$).

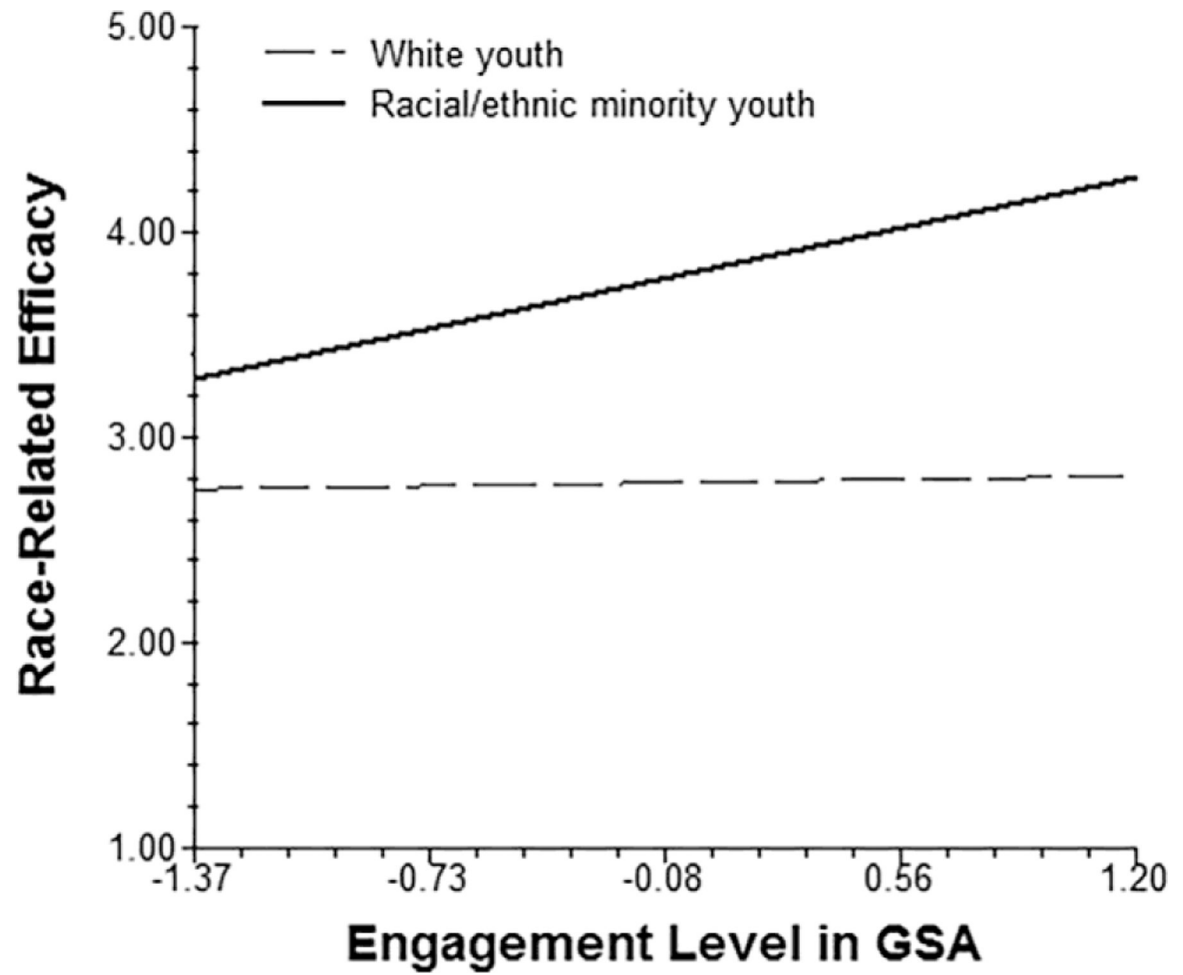


Figure 2. Association between individuals' Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) engagement level (group-mean centered) and their race-related efficacy, moderated by race/ethnicity.

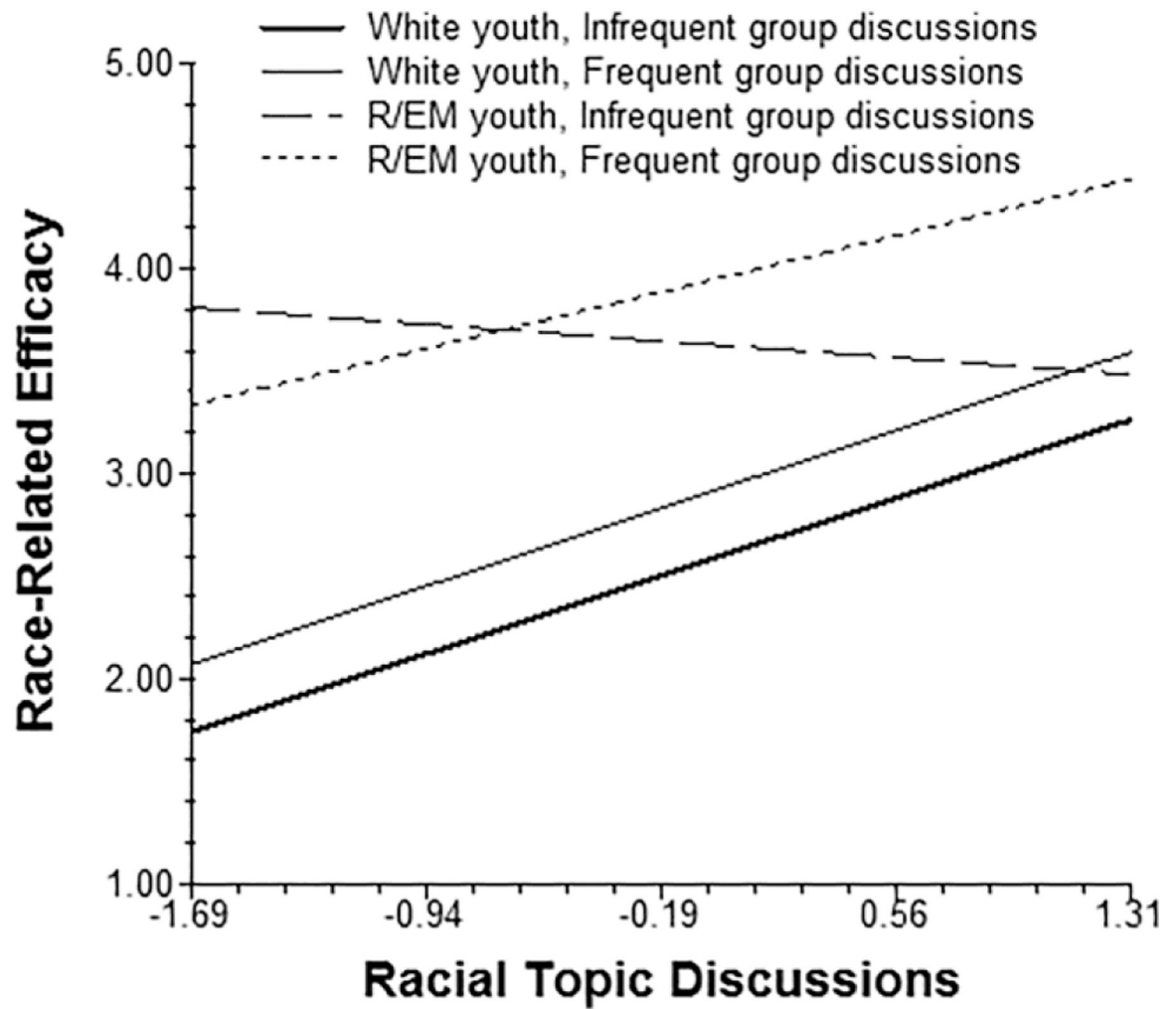


Figure 3. Association between individuals' frequency of discussing race-related topics (group-mean centered) and their race-related efficacy, moderated by race/ethnicity and the collective frequency with which the Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) as a whole discusses racial topics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Measures Descriptive Information

| Variable | <i>N</i> (%) |
|--|------------------------|
| Sexual orientation | |
| Heterosexual | 87 (29.5) |
| Lesbian or gay | 73 (24.8) |
| Bisexual | 59 (20.0) |
| Questioning | 18 (6.1) |
| Other self-reported sexual orientations | 55 (18.6) |
| Not reported | 3 (1.0) |
| Gender | |
| Cisgender female | 200 (67.8) |
| Cisgender male | 66 (22.4) |
| Gender-queer | 9 (3.0) |
| Transgender | 11 (3.7) |
| Other self-reported gender identities | 7 (2.4) |
| Not reported | 2 (.7) |
| Race/ethnicity | |
| White | 201 (68.1) |
| Biracial/multiracial | 32 (10.9) |
| Latino/a | 18 (6.1) |
| Asian/Asian American | 16 (5.4) |
| Black or African American | 16 (5.4) |
| Native American | 4 (1.4) |
| Other self-reported racial/ethnic identities | 5 (1.7) |
| Not reported | 3 (1.0) |
| Grade Level | |
| Grade 8 | 4 (1.4) |
| Grade 9 | 47 (15.9) |
| Grade 10 | 90 (30.5) |
| Grade 11 | 95 (32.2) |
| Grade 12 | 55 (18.6) |
| Not reported | 4 (1.4) |
| | <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) |
| Self-reflection | 4.44 (1.27) |
| GSA engagement level | 2.77 (1.00) |
| Transgender-related topic discussions | 2.66 (.98) |
| Race-related topic discussions | 1.95 (1.15) |
| Transgender-related self-efficacy | 3.56 (1.05) |
| Race-related self-efficacy | 3.13 (1.16) |

Note. *N* = 295.

Table 2

Models for Transgender-Related Self-Efficacy and Race-Related Self-Efficacy

| Model | Transgender-related self-efficacy | Race-related self-efficacy |
|---|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Level 1 | | |
| LGBQ (vs. heterosexual) | .26 (.14) | .10 (.12) |
| Trans/gender-queer (vs. cisgender) | .53 (.33) | -.07 (.21) |
| R/EM (vs. White) | .05 (.10) | 1.03 (.40)* |
| Self-reflection | .19 (.06)** | .13 (.05)** |
| Have T/G friends | .19 (.13) | |
| Have R/EM friends | | .40 (.16)* |
| GSA engagement | .21 (.06)** | .02 (.09) |
| Trans-related discussions | .23 (.09)* | .04 (.10) |
| Race-related discussions | .09 (.08) | .51 (.09)*** |
| T/G X GSA engagement | .03 (.19) | |
| T/G X Have trans friends | -.28 (.37) | |
| T/G X Trans-related discussions | -.05 (.16) | |
| R/EM X GSA engagement | | .36 (.11)** |
| R/EM X Have R/EM friends | | -.62 (.37) |
| R/EM X Race-related discussions | | -.37 (.11)** |
| Level 2 | | |
| Group size | -.01 (.08) | .04 (.07) |
| Collective trans-related discussions | .25 (.08)** | .03 (.08) |
| Collective race-related discussions | -.03 (.07) | .19 (.07)* |
| Cross-level moderators | | |
| T/G X Collective trans-related discussions | .17 (.29) | |
| GSA engagement X Collective trans-related discussions | .15 (.08) [†] | |
| R/EM X GSA engagement X Collective race-related discussions | | -.11 (.09) |
| R/EM X Race-related discussions X Collective race-related discussions | | .30 (.11)** |

Note. Values in parentheses are standard errors. LGBQ = Lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer; R/EM = Racial/ethnic minority; T/G = Transgender/gender-queer; GSA = Gay-Straight Alliance.

$p < .001$

$p < .01$
**

$p < .05$
*

$p = .06$
†

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