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HANDBOOK OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

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20 Access and Obstacles
Gay–Straight Alliances Attempt to Alter School Communities

Cris Mayo

...if students are to speak to students they must do so where students gather—at school. (Sen. Denton, 1983, during discussion of Equal Access Act)

Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs) highlight the ethical and political work public school students engage in to improve school climate for sexual minority youth and allies, even when traditional sources of authority, such as school leaders, policy, teachers, and curricula fail to do so (Lee, 2003; Mayo, 2004; Perrotti & Westfield, 2001; Walker, 2004). Although there is substantial legal precedent supporting the right of their groups to organize in public schools, GSAs may still find themselves initially without school support and so spend much of their time organizing to change school and district policies in order to ensure that they may continue to meet. GSAs, then, provide sexual minority and ally students with space in the school but also remind them of how much work they have to do to make the entire school community supportive of LGBT-related social justice issues.

While many schools may initially be unsupportive of GSAs, official school programs are partially responsible for why GSAs are organized. As students learn from even minimal curricular lessons about diversity and political responsibility, they are encouraged to find space to engage in their own forms of political and identity-related association. GSAs, then, are born of increasing interest in sexual minority issues and also a long tradition of voluntary association in public schools. There has been some concern by democratic and liberal theorists that, in addition to supporting the development of democratic civic culture, voluntary associations, especially those that organize around minority identities, pose challenges to democracy by turning members away from diverse, public, civic culture and encouraging them instead to focus their energies on building community among like-minded or identified groups. But as Amy Gutmann (2003) notes, voluntary associations organized around identities help provide the support, influence, and opportunity for members to work to improve civic life for all. This concern with the potential divisiveness of identity-based or voluntary associations arises at roughly the same time that writing about identity has moved to looking at how identity categories are constructed. Rather than thinking about identity simplistically, recent theories grapple with how identities come to be formed, how they form communities, and how associations across difference challenge older notions of insider/outsider. Especially given the pervasive effects of homophobia on all students, alliances across sexual orientations are particularly necessary. GSAs are part of that turn toward associational identity and alliance. While all GSAs may not focus on social justice as their intended goal—some organize to socialize—all GSAs do raise the visibility of minority sexualities in public schools and so contribute to working against the presumption that all students are heterosexual.

This chapter begins with an analysis of policies and court cases that have enabled GSAs to meet, and more recent policy and legal challenges they face. It then turns to accounts
of student interactions in GSAs that point to internal challenges GSAs continue to face regarding racial and ethnic diversity, sexism, and the tensions of allying across differences. It will be clear that students in GSAs are working actively for social justice in their schools, but like other social justice groups also create exclusions that replicate the raced and classed context in which they form (McCready, 2004).

While most student-led social justice groups organize without controversy, GSAs are often an exception. Part of the hostility is simple homophobia, but there are also concerns about the schools’ responsibilities for students who have not yet developed a sexual identity and whether schools should be the place where students critically consider their sexuality. In addition, administrators and teachers worry that if students think about their sexuality and decide they are gay, they will organize their lives entirely around that sexuality, ghettoizing themselves and removing themselves from the school community. More troubling, sometimes GSAs do not receive school support because administrators and other school officials may simply presume that there are no sexual minority students and thus they do not need to care about homophobia (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000).

Especially in the case of associational groups of young people, the identity or issue around which they organize may be more of an open question than it is for adults. In part, students join associational organizations because they are curious about their own sexual identities or curious to see what it would be like to be involved in a community with others who are LGBT, questioning, or ally. In other words, GSAs are not only about coming out, but also about forming communities of difference that engage in critical questioning about identity formations and as such, like other challenges to homophobia, they benefit students of all sexual orientations (Schneider & Owens, 2000). Part of what associations across difference may do is to broaden one’s sense of one’s ethical community: if other people are involved in the same kinds of critical questioning, even if they do not come up with the same answer, those questions help form community. While groups do not necessarily require particular identities, they shift the ethical relationship of one’s identity toward that of others. Group members need not share identity, but they do identify with the struggles against homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. Rather than identifying as gay, for instance, group members identify with the work for social justice for sexual minorities.

Alliances are different from identity groups in that they are made up of diverse people who may be particularly concerned about issues relating to a few identities, but are not necessarily members of those identity groups themselves. Unlike other forms of alliance, GSAs may run into difficulties in school districts when parents or administrators feel that any discussion of sexual minorities implies an unacceptable critique of local values. In these cases, adults are objecting to students seeing the possibility of rethinking attitudes about sexual minorities—even to the point of deciding to become a member of sexual minority group. The problem of the alliance is thus not just a problem of associating with sexual minority students, but also challenging dominant ideas about the unacceptability of sexual minority people. The fact that students other than out sexual minority students might be willing to associate with those out students also may indicate a fair degree of “play” in the concept of sexuality. For conservative parents, the fact that their children are willing to engage in any kind of curious reconsideration of local norms is itself a problem and a powerful wedge in disrupting false binaries and oppression.

Access to School Space

The growing popularity of GSAs attest to their relevance for students, especially in a broader cultural climate that is at the very most ambivalent about sexual orientation. GSAs meet
in about 2,500 schools nationwide, according to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), a group that has been critical in providing resources for organizing groups. In a cultural climate where many still believe homosexuality and bisexuality to be unethical, these alliances of gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and heterosexual students are important reminders of the central role of social justice in forming and maintaining communities. GSAs also mark an interesting turn in identity-based political movements because they underscore the degree to which identity is a social process of recognition and negotiation. For instance, people are not simply heterosexual: they must act in particular ways or they will be criticized as being “gay” or “queer”; they must associate with other socially recognized heterosexuals or their own sexual orientation will be called into question; they must also act in “correctly” gendered ways.

Because they are made up of diverse students, GSAs are a curious assortment of groups that do not necessarily have more than the press of normalizing power in common. That is, many students who join GSAs are concerned about the pressures they face to conform, whether or not those pressures are specifically directed at sexuality, gender, or some other issue in their lives. Students who feel themselves to be outcast from “normal” find GSAs to be comfortable spaces in which to converse with others who also feel more comfortable in nonnormative identities. For instance, GSAs are increasingly incorporating analysis and critique of dominant forms of gender as transgender students and their allies work to ensure they are not excluded from school communities. Sexual orientation may be the central concern for some students, though other students may find gender expression more pressing (Boldt, 1996; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; Haynes, 1999). Students who want only to have gay people respected because they are just like heterosexuals are sometimes initially surprised that other students do not want to live their lives within the dominant bounds of gender. In short, for some, alliances provide a context in which to critique normative sexuality. For others, they are a place to critique normative gender, and for others any combination of critique and stability. By centering curiosity in their ethical project, alliance groups understand the positive value of difference and the possibilities that difference and innovation open up for new forms of identity and relations. More than a few young women when they explained how they first came to join one particular GSA, for instance, realized that though they had initially joined because they had a friend who was thinking about coming out, they then realized that they themselves had unacknowledged crushes on other girls. One pointed out that in retrospect she had tried to keep herself from thinking about her own sexuality by telling herself she was in the group to help another young woman through her questioning period. Other students have also remarked, especially after Trans Awareness Day, that they had never really thought about being critical about gender norms and realized they had unexamined biases against trans and gender nonconforming people that they needed to challenge. Understanding their own personal stakes in improving school climate has helped some students to broaden their understandings of the pressures and obstacles other people face. And, understanding the struggles that friends are going through has also helped some students see that they share similar, unacknowledged struggles with sexuality.

The Equal Access Act (EAA) of 1984 provides legal justification for most GSAs to meet in public schools. Initially crafted as an act to protect religious liberties, debate in Congress and revisions to the act opened its coverage to all political, philosophical, and religious organizations. According to the EAA, if a school provides access for some student extracurricular groups, it must do so for all groups that do not violate the law or substantially disrupt the school community. When GSAs have had to go to court to demand that schools allow them space and the courts have accepted that equal access is the main issue, GSAs have won the right to meet in public schools (Buckel, 2000).
Legal justification alone has not been the only factor in the ability of GSAs to successfully find a place in the school community. Sympathetic administrators (Capper, 1999), faculty, parents, and community members have all been part of efforts to improve the school experiences of sexual minority youth and secure school space for GSAs. In perhaps the most egregious attempt to circumvent the requirements of the EAA, the Salt Lake City school board decided to cancel all extracurricular groups rather than allow GSAs to meet. Mass demonstrations of students from a vast array of extracurricular groups were part of the political and legal pressure brought to bear on the ultimately unsuccessful school board maneuver, showing not only that students were angry that their own groups had been cancelled but that they recognized the injustice done to the GSA in particular.

Obstacles to Alliance: Parental Notification and Obscenity

While GSAs have met with notable success in organizing in many public schools, obstacles remain. Laws protecting sexual orientation and gender identity vary from state to state (Elliott & Bonauto, 2005) and this inconsistency alone makes it difficult for students to know how best to frame their request for a group. Because GSAs are extracurricular groups, they are not tied to official school support. Though they have access to meeting places in schools, they are also subject to regulations that attempt to curtail their membership. Primary among these is a recent trend toward requiring that either the school notify parents of their children's extracurricular activities or parents notify schools about which extracurricular activities they do not want their children to participate in. In Georgia, the legislature has passed a law requiring local boards of education to provide parents with information about their children's club membership or extracurricular activities. An early version of the bill said that, “each local school system shall comply with the written notification from a parent or guardian who has withheld permission for a child to join a club or participate in an activity” (Georgia 148th General Assembly, 2005). Debate over the word permission and opposition from the Georgia State Board of Education (Fields, 2006) led to a change in wording to “notify,” though the means of notification remain unspecified. While the Christian Coalition of Georgia, one of the bills strongest supporters, maintains that GSAs are not the target of the bill, one of the legislators, Representative Len Walker stated, “I don't know about you but when I was in school there was no need for this kind of legislation…because the clubs and organizations…were honorable and were right for kids” (For god’s sake, is this still going on?, 2004). Clearly policies like this are intent on removing all sources of support from sexual minority youth and their allies. Without curricular information in schools, sexual minority and questioning students have no space to learn about themselves from adults. Extracurricular groups are one way that youth have to try to learn and organize in safety—they are already at school, they know members of their school community, and can find support from sponsoring faculty members. But legislation intent on driving GSAs out of school can take away the one place where young people can organize and learn together.

Another strategy to prohibit GSAs has been to argue that any advocacy or discussion of homosexuality is inherently obscene and in violation of community standards, as well as against abstinence-only educational policy. In one of the few cases that rejected the right of a GSA to form in a public school, Caudillo v. Lubbock Independent School District started out seemingly well situated. The Supreme Court had just outlawed anti-sodomy laws in a case that decided that Texas’s antisodomy law was unconstitutional. The Lawrence v. Texas decision came down on June 26th, 2003; the case contending that Lubbock High School’s GSA had the right to meet was filed on July 8 (Lambda Legal, 2005).
While Lambda Legal Defense had already successfully argued two cases whose rulings set the precedent for justifying GSAs under the Equal Access Act, Brian Chase, the lawyer for Lambda filing this case noted the context of *Lawrence*:

> When it struck down Texas’s “Homosexual Conduct” law, the Supreme Court called for gay people to be given full respect, equality and dignity from government institutions. Lubbock High School runs afoul of that by treating this group differently simply because it supports gay students. (Lambda Legal, 2003)

While all state laws now protect an adult right to privacy, including the right to engage in same-sex sexual activity in private, the Lubbock school district policy prohibits the discussion of sodomy—or any sexual activity—in student groups (*Caudillo v. Lubbock*, 2004). Because the group asked for permission to post flyers in the school and the flyers had their web address that originally linked to a site that itself had links to a site that discussed sex, the case hinged not on their right to associate but on the fact that they were discussing sex. The group removed the link before asking permission a second time, but the fact that they had had such a link stayed a key point in the legal case. The court ruled against the GSA in a decision that, in effect, paralleled the decision in *Lawrence*, albeit for different reasons and to a different end. The Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence* argued that sodomy was not a reprehensible act; it is one among many acts that bring people together and allow them to maintain their intimate ties to one another. In the Lubbock case, the relationship between gay identity and sexual acts are turned on their head. The court ruling argues, essentially, that gay youth are gay because they can engage in sodomy, so just being gay means that sodomy must be part of the discussion and thus their right to associate is essentially a right to have sodomy, which as youth they do not have, so they also do not have a right to associate because the topics they would be discussing are obscene. A Christian athlete group that had discussions about abstinence from sex that did involve some discussion of sex were not similarly prohibited from meeting because the goal of their discussion was abstinence and thus not obscene.

In Arizona, following the precedent set out in the Lubbock-based *Caudillo* case, a bill has been introduced to the State Senate that would reinforce the basic message of the Equal Access Act, but adds the requirement that public postsecondary student organizations not be “obscene” (Arizona 47th Legislature, 2006). In Utah, the “Student Clubs Act” adds clubs to the list of school organizations that must make activity disclosure statements and forbids clubs from “advocating or engaging in sexual activity outside of legally recognized marriage or forbidden by state law, presenting or discussion or information relating to the use of contraceptive devices or substances, regardless of whether the use is for purposes of contraception or personal health” (Utah 56th Legislature, 2006). Further, the bill allows the school to deny any club that does not “protect the physical, emotional, psychological, or moral well-being of students and faculty” or involves “human sexuality” (Utah 56th Legislature, 2006). Referred to widely as the “Gay Club Ban,” Utah S.B. 97, too, is also intent on using *Caudillo* to get around the previous court ruling that cited the EAA to demand the district recognize the GSA. In other words, these bills that purport to be interested in parental rights are very clearly being designed to challenge students’ rights under federal law. Because federal law recognizes that students do need the freedom to meet with other students to discuss diverse social and political issues—especially those not covered by official curricula—laws intent on constraining what little freedom of inquiry students have are especially pernicious. For students who are members of nongenerational minority groups, that is, students whose minority status is not part of their family background, being able to meet with other similarly situated
students is all the more important. Student groups are crucial spaces for learning how to articulate social justice claims with others, learning how to organize and cooperate across differences, and spaces to begin to develop strategies for working toward justice. These are all the goals of the EAA, in fact, goals that underscore the important role that students can play in improving their school and broader community.

Because extracurricular groups are one starting place for young people to build their own versions of community, they are particularly fraught spaces for an older generation more interested in maintaining the heteronormative status quo than addressing homophobia and exclusion. While the advocates of student religious groups pointed to the importance of having such groups in schools because that is where the students are, opponents to GSAs want them out of schools and away from where the students are. Opponents further do not want GSAs drawing in allies, not only because they do not want their children in spaces where they might be recruited into a minority sexuality, but also because they do not want alliance to come close to implying acceptance. Especially for youth who already feel isolated from their families and communities, alliance groups can provide necessary support, even support to help them begin to find strategies for educating their families and communities. In addition, because GSAs are groups that organize across different sexualities, genders, races, and ethnicities, they also provide students with the opportunity to work closely in common cause with others who are different from them. In short, GSAs are a remarkable resource for all members of school communities because they show that justice is an evolving concept—new groups, new issues, and new identities may arise and change the kind of conversations that need to happen. Student groups working toward social justice need to have spaces that encourage them to be open to potential innovations in identities, to critique problematic norms constraining possibilities for gender and sexuality, and to organize to improve their communities. Without space in school and the kind of visibility that school groups provide, those changes will be more difficult to achieve.

Varying Levels of Alliance

Conservative external forces are not the only barriers to GSA attempts to organize for social justice in schools. This next section turns to questions about internal divisions within groups that limit their ability to extend justice to all group members or all members of the school community. GSAs are, to a large extent, notable for their mixed membership, particularly along lines of differences in sexuality. These alliances complicate earlier forms of identity politics, complicating exactly who it is that ought to be concerned about bias against queers and coming up with the answer “all of us.” Emphasizing alliance is also, of course, a way to open a safe space for thinking about queer life without having to publicly identify as queer or even ever have to consider thinking about oneself as possibly queer.

Before turning to some of the complications to identity and association observed in GSAs, it is important to point out that even attempting to do research on GSA members raises important social justice issues. Institutional Review Boards generally prefer that parents give active consent for their children to participate in research projects. There are many compelling reasons to demand that parents have a say in the kind of research involving their children, but like parental notification laws directed at limiting GSA membership, more than a few students have said they do not want their parents to know that they are questioning their sexuality or that they support members of minority sexualities, and this may mean that research on LGBTQ youth cannot be done (Donelson & Rogers, 2004). Even straight-identified youth have said that as much as they want to
be able to challenge homophobia in schools, they would not feel comfortable with their parents’ knowing that they are GSA members. Students who are questioning have said that the GSA is the only safe space for them to be with other questioning, queer, and ally students and that any hint to their parents that they are gay would put them at risk. Even out gay students have said that as much as they are out at school, their sexuality is still an un discussed issue at home and sending home a note requesting parental consent for research would likely turn into an occasion for full-scale confrontation with their parents. Students who are members of minority racial, ethnic, or immigrant communities may find the potential loss of support of their home community an impossible resource to lose. Granted all youth depend on families, but for youth of color, wanting to maintain strong ties to home and community in order to help confront racism may also provide additional reason not to risk rejection (Duncan, 2005; Leck, 2000). Some research suggests that communities of color are less homophobic than White communities, but that “coming out,” especially when one’s sexuality is already an open secret, is taken as an affront to community solidarity (Ross, 2005). So while parental consent is meant to help parents protect their children from unethical research practices, many GSA members perceive parental notification as potentially dangerous because it would out them to parents. With high rates of homelessness among sexual minority youth, it is not surprising that they have these concerns. A few students I’ve approached about getting parental consent for research on GSAs have said they could not risk it: they were afraid parents would withdraw financial support for college or kick them out of the house.

It is important to remember that fear of homophobic reaction from parents and peers is experienced by straight, gay, and questioning youth alike. In other words, the pressures of homophobia affect youth of all sexualities. Because GSAs may have very few (or even no) out queer members, they can be groups that advocate for other people’s rights, not their own. But it is also often the case that students initially join GSAs thinking that they do not know someone gay and then find out a close friend who never felt comfortable coming out to them is actually gay. Or they may join thinking they themselves are not gay and then find themselves questioning their sexual identity. Still, there are plenty of GSA members who are straight and simply find homophobia intolerable and identify with the struggles of sexual minority students, even if they themselves do not experience the limitations imposed by homophobia in the same way.

In part, GSAs are a space to think critically about gender and sexuality, replacing feminist groups that had often also been places to discuss the problems of gender norms and the need to critically evaluate concepts like sexual identity and gender relations. This use of GSAs has its own complications. In one GSA, whenever the female president would try to lead a conversation, two young out gay men would turn up a DVD player and drown her out. The gay young men interrupted other young women when they tried to speak and generally evinced attitudes of disrespect for women. Partially this was motivated by a belief that the women were not gay. From talking to the young women it became clear that while they were not out, neither would they label themselves as heterosexual. The young women expressed frustration at the gender dynamics in the group but when I asked young women why they did not organize feminist groups to discuss sexual harassment and gender inequality, more than a few responded that people would think they were lesbians if they belonged to a feminist group. Does this seeming contradiction point to a dislike of the term feminist? Or is the implication that there are different forms of being gay? Perhaps the old stereotype of the angry lesbian feminist is more negative than the new stereotype that all members of GSAs are gay? Further, the gender antagonism in the group has to be put in a context of antagonism over sexuality as well. Even though the young women self-described themselves as not straight, publicly they passed as heterosexual.
The young men were clearly quite irritated by this, but rather than expressing their critique by reference to sexuality, they chose instead to direct their hostility toward women. Clearly this example points to the overlapping complications involved in any alliance group. Gender bias and sexuality bias overlap, and without explicit conversations among the members about the different forms of privilege that attach to normative sexuality and dominant gender, the antagonisms will remain unaddressed.

GSAs also act as liberal alliance groups, where members can mark their progressive-ness to one another by addressing a bias issue that may not seem to implicate them. While race remains a difficult issue for White students to situate themselves in relation to, gayness is sometimes less difficult. Because Whiteness and White privilege operate by removing a sense of responsibility from White students, beginning to think critically about race means that they have to confront their own participation in structures that maintain racial hierarchy. At least in my observations, heterosexual privilege does not seem to elicit “heterosexual guilt” to the same extent that “White guilt” seems to be elicited by serious conversations about race. More troublingly, White students seem adept at avoiding conversations about race, likely to dodge around the responsibility they may know they ought to feel. In one GSA meeting, students decided they wanted to have group t-shirts and began discussing designs, all of them agreeing that the public representation of the group’s mission had to be a central part of the design. One young Black woman suggested that the club use a kaleidoscope-like design that another group she had been involved with had used. In this case, she suggested that the design would represent both the rainbow colors and the idea that the group was multiracial. She explained that she had joined the group because she wanted to support LGBTQ people because as an African American, she had seen the importance of having cultural groups. She explained that she had heard that when the school’s African-American cultural group started, it was very small and that other people besides African-American students had supported it and helped it to grow. A young White woman responded that she thought that design would make the group seem like a “diversity club” and she did not want to represent the group that way.

This discussion happened only one week after the group had been told by the principal that they could be an official school group if they backed off from being called a “gay–straight alliance” and instead agreed to call themselves the “diversity club.” The group had decided instead to stick with its original name “gay–straight alliance” and to forego status as an official school club. While they were still disappointed at becoming a group “neither endorsed nor supported” by the district, they felt it was important to be clear about being a gay–straight alliance. But the discussion about the t-shirt design showed a willingness to remove race from consideration in defining the group’s identity. On the one hand, one could argue this was a tactical decision to centralize sexuality, but on the other hand, it also meant that the group decided not to simultaneously recognize that the racial diversity of their members was an important issue, neglecting the interlocking ways oppressions based on race, class, gender, and sexuality work (Collins, 2004; Kumashiro, 2003). They decided on a design where a series of bathroom-sign figures, lined up in couples: boy-boy, boy-girl, girl-girl with the words underneath “It’s all the same to me.” The group’s decision, then, was to maximize their similarity to one another rather than point to internal diversity, but by so doing they also chose to silence a group discussion on race. Especially in a group dedicated to examining sexual and gender diversity, this lack of attention to race is all the more troubling and points to the possibility that gender and sexual associations may find some forms of diversity relatively easy to discuss and others still too much of a challenge for many members.

The next year, at another gay–straight alliance, the same young Black woman who had just transferred schools ran into a similar obstacle to raising race as an issue for
the gay–straight alliance she had just joined. She had been attending for a few weeks when, a conversation started between two group members, an Asian-American young woman and a South-Asian young woman about the different versions of Asian culture they were familiar with. They both agreed that they shared the experience of being part of communities that were extremely interested in their academic achievements and their social interactions. When the young Black woman tried to join the conversation to invite them to the African-American literature club, that line of conversation stopped, and the South Asian woman, who was also the group leader, shifted the topic to a discussion of the misuses of the word gay. Shared experience of “cultural” difference was a topic the group apparently could manage but the introduction of racial difference jolted them into silence.

Sometimes, though, racial/ethnic identity is discussed in order to diffuse tension over sexual identity. In the midst of a discussion of the heterosexual questionnaire (Rochlin, 1995, p. 407), for instance, the group began their discussion pointing out that the questionnaire could be reversed and it would look like the sort of thing people ask gay people. Clearly, of course, that was the point, and the fact that the group spent several conversational volleys describing the task of the questionnaire rather than answering the questions, as the group leader had asked them to, was striking. Even as they discuss how heterosexual is presumed to be a “default” identity, their discussions sometimes showed that they did not feel particularly implicated in its dominance. The discussion about the heterosexual questionnaire was essentially 45 minutes of self-identified straight students being actively unwilling to discuss how their affectional lives were framed by heterosexual privilege. Each time the group leader asked another question from the questionnaire: How long have you known you were straight? Do you ever think that you just need to have a good experience with a member of the same sex? and so on, the group members replied that the questions were too personal. The group leader tried to explain that the point of the exercise was to examine how heterosexuality is presumed and how gay people need to be constantly justifying themselves, but no one was willing to engage in a critical discussion, despite the fact that they could see that the questionnaire was meant as a reversal.

They further dodged the issue when a young White woman asked one of the Asian-American woman, in reference to that woman’s having brought noodles from home for lunch, “Why do Asians get all the really good food?” The Asian-American woman replied, “Because Asia’s really big.” The group spent the next five minutes discussing whether the probability of good food versus bad food depended on the size of the continent and then moved to a discussion of probability in general. The faculty advisor, quite used to the tendency of the group to wander, pulled them back to the questionnaire and though the conversation continued for the rest of the group’s meeting time, no one in the group answered any of the questions designed to have them confront heterosexual privilege. This incident may also point to challenges that remain for GSAs as they try to get members to think more critically about their own lives, in addition to giving them conceptual tools to challenge homophobia in general. It is easier, of course, to advocate for someone else without fully taking responsibility for one’s own racial, sexual, or gendered privileges, but GSAs do need to also work on those important internal issues in order to successfully address the biases they find in their school communities.

While many GSA members may be curious about what it means to be gay and how processes of gay life proceed (coming out, trying to figure out whom to date, negotiating one’s sexual identity across a variety of contexts, and so on), organizing as an alliance sets up a task for the group that often involves, not the creation of a considered alliance across difference, but an attempt to alter the environment of the school. The fact that the group
is already an alliance means that it begins its work as if the group itself already agreed on the issues and then moves the site of struggle to the space outside the group. GSAs, in other words, think of themselves as definitionally safe spaces because they are in opposition to schools that are not. So the identity of someone in such an alliance is not based on sexual orientation but rather orientation toward a political goal that supports freedom of sexual orientation. The point of the group, then, is not necessarily to explore the issues around sexual identities, but to develop group cohesion against homophobic bias. They emphasize working against homophobia, rather than working toward sexual identity in part because they are often told very explicitly that they may not discuss sexuality.

To the extent that it is possible to work against homophobia without examining the particularities of sexualities and their experiences in the world, GSAs do show us that work against bias can be done without centralizing sexual identity. Avoidance of sexuality as a topic for discussion has fairly major pitfalls, but responses from members of school communities not in GSAs show that the very presence of the group stands as a marker of the importance of addressing homophobia and acknowledging queer presence. For instance, queer kids who do not belong to GSAs still report how important it was for them to know there was someone in school who might “have their back” if something went wrong. As one student put it, “I was the gum on the bottom of everyone’s shoe” before a group of other students started to work on a GSA. While their experience was not without conflict—their principal objected that there were no gay students in the school, their posters were torn down, and their members harassed—the fact that there was even a small group of students interested was enough to give her hope. Another student in a college gay group remarked that the sight of the GSA poster in high school, though she was never brave enough to actually show up to the meetings, gave her a sense of future and the feeling that there were other people like her that she could meet if she ever really felt she had to. Other research shows LGBT students say they would feel better just knowing about a group, especially when they are faced with family crisis or harassment (Ginsberg, 1998). Though many teachers believe either that homophobia is not an important issue in their school or that other forms of bias, like racism and sexism, are more pressing (Ferfolja & Robinson, 2004; McConaghy, 2004), some teachers report that their attitudes about public displays of queer affection have changed just since seeing posters about GSAs (personal communication, 2005). In that case, the teacher said that seeing a poster advertising a GSA jolted her out of her visceral dislike of same gender demonstrations of affection and reminded her that there were colleagues and students who thought about homophobia. That thought, in turn, led her to challenge what she began to see was the uninterrogated homophobia that was structuring her visceral response. School leaders have reported that the presence of the GSA reminds them that kids that they care about are affected by homophobia; a particularized understanding of the issue helps them to counter conservative attempts to disband GSAs. During a difficult conversation with a local minister, who wanted to pray over the GSA group, one principal was able to remain committed to protecting the GSA by being able to visualize the members of the group. She explained that as she thought about what the kids’ reaction to such a prayer would be, it was easier to explain to the minister patiently and carefully that she thought he could understand that the kids would not take his intervention as a gesture of kindness but rather one of affront. (Interestingly enough, quite a number of school leaders have reported the same situation.) In a certain sense, then, for some in the community, GSA members, regardless of their particular sexual orientations, are all in traitorous relationship to heterosexuality and normalcy. Situations such as these also act as important reminders of the kind of support GSA members and sexual minority students need.
from school community members as they try to negotiate their way through potentially hostile relationships with others inside and outside the school community (Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002). Even in schools where homophobia is not the central issue, GSAs provide students with important skills to help them address homophobia in the broader community and help students to become educated on sexual and gender minority issues. In one GSA with a very supportive principal and liberal school climate, students remarked that local homophobia was not really their focus. Instead they kept up with national politics and worked with students in GSAs at less liberal schools to alter policies and educate one another. GSAs, in other words, are laboratories for democracy, places where young people can learn how to be critically aware of social justice issues and learn strategies for confronting bias from one another. In some states, GSA members actively lobby state legislatures to challenge bills intent on restricting extracurricular clubs. In other areas, GSA members join with adult LGBT community members to demonstrate on local antidiscrimination efforts. Many GSAs also educate themselves on issues missing from the curricula, a reminder that schools themselves remain sadly lacking in academic content on sexuality and gender.

Gay–straight alliances also work to strategically forestall objections to a group that would only focus on queer life. Here we get into some of the difficulties of alliance groups that often must justify themselves on the basis of their address to dominant group members and not on the needs of minority group members. It is much easier for GSA advocates to talk to people who object to gay–straight alliances and point out to them that they are objecting as much to straight people as they are to gay people. It is strategically easier to talk about the necessity of countering homophobic bias and not bring up the particularities of queer life. In short, it is easier to talk about the problem of homophobic harassment and violence and considerably less easy to talk about the actual presence of queer students. Now that queer studies has shifted the focus from recovery of gay and lesbian lives to an examination of the process of queering sexuality, thinking about who matters becomes more complicated. But the tendency to dodge around sexual minority youth continues, no matter the disciplinary shift. On the one hand, GSA members are queer to the extent that they are all deeply concerned with the damaging effects of homophobia. They are also possibly queer because their studied lack of attention to identity seems to suggest that as long as all members are potentially victims of homophobia and definitely advocates for queer people, they share some sort of queer identity. On the other hand, kids who are GSA members and not out as gay tend more to say they are not queer, rather they identify as progressive or radical. But they do have something of a “queer eye” as most of the members of GSAs demonstrate their ability to analyze the problematic dominance of heterosexuality in daily experience, curricula, media, and the news. In other words, they are adept at reading for overt homophobic responses and more normalized forms of heterosexism.

But just because they engage in projects of critical reading and intervention does not mean that they can easily imagine the full range of what queer lives are like—of course, this is a problem that extends to out queer youth as well who may have no or little contact with adult queers and thus no strong sense of how to negotiate their sexuality in adulthood. So while the groups may be able to sustain an alliance on the basis of concern about bias, the fact that they do not sufficiently engage with the identity experiencing the bias means that a crucial piece of their understanding is missing. When legislation intent on providing students with critical forums in which to discuss philosophical, political, and religious differences are challenged by laws intent on keeping those differences out of schools, students lose freedom of association and with it, the chance to imagine their futures differently.
References

For god’s sake, is this still going on? (2006, February 18th). Retrieved February 19th, 2006, from majikthi.se.typepad.com/majikthi.se_/2006/02/for_gods_sake_i.html


