GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS: AGENTS OF EARLY ADOLESCENT ALIENATION

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Abstract

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) are heralded for their role in providing safe spaces and social outlets for queer students in public schools in the United States. While this is true to an extent, GSAs fail to accomplish their mission of creating a culture of diversity and tolerance within their schools. Due in large part to macro-level heteronormative expectations, mezzo-level GSAs emphasize the ostensible difference between heterosexual teenagers and their non-normative peers, in preference to dismissing this falsehood. As influential sites of socialization, this paper offers an alternative strategy that schools might employ to foster an environment of inclusivity and mutual respect.

The intentional targeting, stigmatization, and marginalization of queer[1] youth in secondary educational settings recently garnered a great deal of media attention, albeit temporary, in the wake of a string of queer adolescent suicides. As with many high-profile events, the issue quickly faded from public consciousness and, consequently, never became the target of policymakers. Yet, for the past 20 years, many high schools across 27 states have created and established Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) whose primary missions are "to empower youth activists to fight homophobia and transphobia in

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[1] "Queer" in the context of this paper includes those who identify as LGBTQIN: lesbian, gay, bisexual, bigendered, transsexual, transgendered, questioning, intersexed, or none of the above. Scholars and members of the LGBTQIN community use "queer" as a way of addressing all individuals whose behaviors do not conform to heteronormativity (e.g., Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1984; Miceli, 2005; Turner, 2000).

schools" (GSA Network, 2010). Since GSAs represent one of the only attempts to address homophobia in public schools, they provide the only micro-level model that might be used to inform future policy. Consequently, it is imperative to examine their effectiveness.

Accordingly, this paper challenges the efficacy and relevance of GSAs in secondary educational settings, especially as they relate to the early adolescent psychosocial crisis. It argues that while having benign intentions, these mezzo-level interventions may actually be exacerbating the notion that queer teens are somehow separate from their peers. If GSAs provide a mezzo-level education of heterosexuals and a micro-level empowerment of non-heterosexuals (Miceli 2005), these organizations can be shown to isolate and distance a particular group of adolescents from the larger, normative population. I will explore how this is problematic vis-à-vis the psychosocial theory of human development.

VIEWING HOMOSEXUALITY THROUGH A HETERONORMATIVE LENS

Five states and the District of Columbia now perform and recognize same-sex marriages and ten other states have adopted the separate-but-equal policy of same-sex civil unions. Those outside of the queer community, then, most likely situate queer individuals in a class that now enjoys equal rights and, consequently, equal participation and recognition in society. Although logically counterintuitive, *de jure* "equality" of a marginalized class does not ensure *de facto* integration of its members into society. For a simple example, one need only look to the popular media, where a very specific stereotype of the "gay man" (Caucasian, tall, slender, well-educated) and "lesbian woman" (generally, a militantly feminist woman) are reified and perpetuated.

In contrast, television shows that depict a no-holds-barred version of the queer lifestyle are often unsuccessful. For example, *Queer as Folk*, a series that ran on the premium HBO network from 2000 to 2005, was largely unsuccessful because its characters were unabashedly accurate portrayals of different personalities within queer society (specifically, within the homosexual male subculture). Consequently, the program did not conform to American culture's heteronormative values, ratings plummeted, and the show was canceled. In contrast, seemingly "queer friendly" shows that now appear on primetime television (ABC's *Brothers & Sisters* and NBC's *The Office* immediately come to mind) suggest a queer lifestyle that is both recognizably middle-class and heterosocietal. Queerness in the popular conscious has thus been boxed into a white, male, heteronormative

frame that excludes the LGBTQIN (i.e., the invisible) portions of the community.

Therefore, even in an era of superficial trends toward equality, queer adolescents' self-esteems do not seem to be improving; rather, a heterosocial expectation continues, purporting to define each young person's unique, individual sexuality. The discovery of one's non-normative sexual orientation is, in itself, an isolating experience (Westrate and McLean 2010). This, paired both with adolescents' psychosocial crisis of identity versus role confusion (Erikson 1963) and their compulsory attendance in a normative, institutionalized social setting, instigates a strong sense of unwanted solitariness and confusion. Compulsorily immersed within a normative environment, the psychosocial crisis with which these young people must grapple can be extremely overwhelming. Accordingly, just as schools have the obligation to recognize and to serve children from varying socioeconomic, racial, political, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, so too do they have the obligation to do so with regard to sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

While queer adolescents face a distinct facet of self-discovery (i.e., a non-normative sexuality), it is important to understand that adolescence, in itself, is one of the most pivotal stages of human development. Consequently, both heterosexual and queer children share many similar experiences during this unique period of life. For example, the developing adolescent grasps fully, and for the first time, the concept of being an autonomous individual with a unique purpose and goals (Newman and Newman 2009). Since this is a period of great physical, emotional, social, and cognitive growth and change, many scholars (e.g., Newman and Newman 2009) posit that this period of life can be divided into two stages: (1) early adolescence, ages 12 to 18, and (2) late adolescence, ages 18 to 24. During both early and late adolescence, humans grapple with the psychosocial conflict of identity versus role confusion (Erikson 1963). Whereas early adolescents resolve the conflict through group identification, late adolescents do so through forging an individual identity (Newman and Newman 2009). The formation of these identities is the resolution and self-affirmation of one's prior developmental roles, many of which were explored during childhood, in which humans begin to experiment with various gender roles as early as late toddlerhood (Erikson 1963; Money and Ehrhardt 1972). The end of early adolescence results either in affirmation or rejection of the self by one's peers—and this is a fragile moment. With adequate support from parents, teachers, coaches, and close friends, the queer teenager can positively affirm and accept this identity.

When examining gay-straight alliances, then, one of the major concerns is that "gay-straight alliances will broadcast the difference between

gay students and straight students" (Schwartz et al. 2009). Thus, while the motive of these school clubs is to eliminate homophobia and to empower marginalized youth (GSA Network 2010; Miceli 2005), psychosocial theory and recent events show that early adolescents are not able to make this connection. The result is dangerous.

THE GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE: A SITE OF SIMULTANEOUS AFFIRMATION AND ALIENATION

While the social science literature abounds with information about GSAs within the theoretical, sociopolitical context (see, e.g., Adams and Carson 2006; Blumenfeld 1995; Holmes and Cahill 2004; Miceli 2005), there is much to be desired in the realm of examining the effectiveness of gay-straight alliances in practice. According to the Gay-Straight Alliance Network (2010), these student groups are

> powerful tools that can transform schools—making them safer and more welcoming for LGBTQ youth, youth with LGBTQ parents, and straight allies. … GSA clubs become activist clubs that can educate teachers and students to improve the school climate.

McCready (2005) and Miceli (2005) liken student participants in GSAs to youth activists whose goal is to "challenge and destroy the heteronormative American culture" (Miceli 2005, 228). If one combines this idea with the fact that a queer teen seeks affirmation from her/his peers and mentors (McLaren 1995; O'Conor 1995), then it is plausible that GSAs are, in fact, sites of political power, asserting the agency of an oppressed group (Rofes 1995; Uribe 1995).

However, recent research suggests that early adolescents do not join GSAs to engage in discussions of systemic change; rather, they seek a group of like-minded peers who accept them for who they are. For example, Griffin and others (2005) explain that

> for LGBT youth, being part of such a group can help them overcome persistent isolation and victimization in school. However, when the GSA is the sole agent for such activism, it is questionable how much systemic or even personal change can occur or continue. Without participation and leadership of other adults and students, addressing LGBT issues can become marginalized (180).

Furthermore, Holmes and Cahill (2004) note that well-organized groups of queer students who are interested in spearheading real change

go beyond formulating GSAs at their high schools. These students seek intervention at a higher level and often demand that administrators draft "nondiscrimination and anti-harassment policies and anti-homophobia initiatives" (54). In many cases, however, these administrators are reluctant to mind such requests, especially in geographic areas that are not sociopolitically diverse (McLaren 1995). Linking this to the early adolescent's psychosocial crisis leads to a sense of role confusion and, ultimately, isolation. Whereas adults have the complete sense of self to fend against these adverse reactions, early adolescents have yet to develop such skills (Newman and Newman 2009). For many queer adolescents, the discovery of their sexual orientation and/or non-normative gender identity marks the first time that they have fallen beyond the purview of societal expectations (Sadowski 2010); it is the first time that s/he is deviant. Consequently, even the most outspoken adolescent, already feeling awkward and misplaced in the normative school setting, is likely to resign his/her efforts after facing this dismissal from school officials.

In fact, Adams and Carson (2006) find that queer students are more likely to face resistance from leadership figures within schools (i.e., teachers, counselors, coaches, and administrators) than from their peers. Moreover, Schwartz et al. (2009) explain that most resistance to the establishment of gay-straight alliances stems from parents, community leaders, and teachers, not from students themselves. Accordingly, the real issue lies not within the adolescents themselves, but rather within the intersection between the semi-hostile school environment and the potentially toxic home environment. Even if schools were to teach all of their students that an egalitarian society should embrace diversity, there is no guarantee that students' peer groups and parents would promulgate or support these concepts in the home environment.

Therefore, it is plausible that gay-straight alliances may allow students to build a solid group identity (Erikson 1963) and an affirming sense of self (Newman and Newman 2009). However, while queer students might feel protected from heteronormative marginalization during their weekly GSA meetings, queer adolescents nonetheless remain vulnerable to experiencing violence in schools solely as a result of their sexual orientations or gender identities (Adams and Carson 2006; Weststrate and McLean 2009). The number of state-recognized gay-straight alliances is on the rise (GSA Network 2010), but so too are suicides among the very group that these organizations purport to aid (LGBTQ Nation 2010). This trend is curious and bothersome.

It is true that gay-straight alliances do, to some extent, create a space in which the queer student can form a strong fidelity to others with the same status. The most profound issue with these alliances is that they are only relevant for the hour-long, weekly session during which they meet.

Once students leave the safe confines of their meetings, they must face the hostility of and isolation from their peers with whom they will never fully identify. Since GSAs are the most overt and discussed assemblies of queer youth, the successful execution of their mission, "to fight homophobia and transphobia in schools" (GSA Network 2010), is imperative. Unfortunately, GSAs in the United States currently do not hold enough of a presence to support, affirm, or protect queer students. In fact, Miceli (2005) and Uribe (1995) find that these organizations are so stigmatized that many queer students do not participate in them. As social workers, social administrators, teachers, counselors, coaches, parents, and community members, we must do more.

A MORE EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION

Since the majority of opposition to GSAs and the queer student body comes from the adult role models of young people, the primary focus of public schools' efforts to ameliorate the detrimental effects that a heteronormative society has upon queer students should begin with parental education and dialogue (Sadowski 2010). Public middle schools and high schools have ample opportunities to engage such a dialogue with students' parents and guardians. This intervention could include, among other things, hosting guest speakers, having community open houses, discussing the importance of diversity at parent-teacher conferences or curriculum nights, and mailing educational materials to parents.

I add that public school faculty and staff should be required to attend annual training conferences that affirm their responsibility to be sensitive to the needs of queer students. Such training need not focus only on queer students, but rather its scope could include the entire gamut of the diversity and difference within the student body. I therefore advocate a multifaceted approach to deescalating the hostile environment that queer teens face on a daily basis: educating their adult superiors and role models in both the home environment as well as the school environment.

This intervention is most useful in middle schools and high schools (thus, at the early adolescent level) for two primary reasons. First, young people between the ages of 12 and 18 look to their elders for cues; as they near adulthood, they begin to emulate and exhibit many of the behaviors of their caregivers (Newman and Newman 2009). Accordingly, a student whose caregiver is hostile toward the queer community is likely to hold an antagonistic view of this group as well. Second, because early adolescents are struggling to form allegiance to a group (Erikson 1963; Newman and Newman 2009), they are less interested in changing the overall system of

oppression and more interested in finding people with whom they can identify and in whom they can confide.

Before any intervention of this kind is implemented, however, it is essential that the academy conduct more extensive research on the biopsychosocial needs of queer adolescents, owing to the current dearth of literature on the subject.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that a teenager's perspective of gay-straight alliances is one of forming a bond with like-minded peers. According to Erikson (1963), this identification with and fidelity to a group indicates a successful resolution of the early adolescent psychosocial crisis. However, the modern literature indicates that the costs of such an intervention far outweigh the benefits. Research has shown that GSAs are, in large part, ineffective at helping early adolescents avoid the "pathologies" of dissociation and alienation from their heteronormative peers and their parents (Newman and Newman 2009). By identifying a group of teenagers and thus making them "stand out" (Miceli 2005) from the rest of their peers, these interventions exacerbate the stigmatization of queer teenagers. Public schools, as the crucial institutions of socialization for the majority of our nation's young people, have two obligations to reduce this conundrum: educating teachers and reaching out to parents. The former stems from the notion that public schools must be sensitive to the needs of its constituents, of whom students form an integral part. The latter works in tandem with this first intervention and with the idea that change must happen both "inside" and "outside" of the classroom. That is, for change to occur, it cannot be limited to the school. Environments in which early adolescents spend the majority of their time need to shift from the heteronormativity and heterosexism that are so rooted in our society and instead nurture new messages and value systems. Through informative parent-teacher conferences, curriculum nights, and newsletters, parents and guardians would be encouraged to establish a respectful dialogue within students' home environments. Through sensitivity workshops, teachers, coaches, counselors, and other school staff would be trained in cultural competence and fostering a respectful atmosphere within the classroom. The aim of this intervention is to create two parallel environments in which both heterosexual and queer adolescents receive complementary messages. This is imperative, as research shows that adolescents who receive conflicting messages from both environments (i.e., the private and public)

are more likely to develop an oppositional pathology and worldview based in the rejection of "other-ness" (Newman and Newman 2009).

Before schools can attempt to change years of ignorance and misinformation, it is imperative that parents, guardians, and teachers reach a consensus vis-à-vis the importance of a heterogeneous, open society in the twenty-first century. To acquire this community consensus, it will be essential for schools to hold community meetings, to encourage parent participation, and to solicit feedback. Working from both within and outside of the classroom in this manner will provide the most effective avenue for moving toward progress.

This paper is a call not only to educators and parents, but also to policymakers, academics, and the general citizenry to reevaluate its attitudes toward these young people with distinct needs. If we are to move forward and advance a democratic society, we must begin to pay closer attention to this pressing, ever-relevant issue. After all, a teenager's life and experiences do not exist to create "breaking news" or "tragedy" for merely one day.

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