

Barriers to Gay-Straight Alliance Social Activism: An Assessment Model for Education Researchers and Practitioners

Maralee Mayberry¹ & Lane Hanson²

Abstract

Drawing from previous conceptualizations of heterosexism in high schools gendered harassment in high schools, this article presents a school-level assessment model that can be applied to studies of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) and the roles they play (and do not play) in high schools. The proposed assessment model provides both conceptual categories of institutional and social features of schools and methodological assessment tools that education researchers and school-based social work practitioners can use to better understand the challenges GSA members and their advisors face as they attempt to convert their desire to disrupt homophobic and heterosexist school climates into daily schooling practices. Results gathered from the implementation of the proposed ecological assessment model will be of value to those interested in replacing oppressive school structures with socially-just educational climates and to those directly involved in GSA formation and implementation.

Keywords: Gay-Straight Alliances; Queer Students; Safe School Assessment; Heterosexism; LGBT Safe Schools; Social Justice Education

1. Introduction

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are school-based organizations that can play a variety of roles on high school campuses. They are most frequently designed to provide a safe and supportive space on campus within which queer youth¹ and their allies can meet (Griffin, et al., 2004). Whereas heterosexual and cisgender youth frequently rely upon their families, peers, and school personnel for advice, assistance, and affirmation, queer youth often feel unsafe turning to these arenas for support and instead, when present on their school campus, turn to the GSA to receive support. The presence of a GSA on high school campuses has been demonstrated to positively influence the schooling experience of this youth population. For instance, studies indicate that GSA membership is related to an improvement in academic achievement, enhanced social networks, increased sense of school belonging, and psychological empowerment. (Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2010; Mayberry et al., 2013; Russell, 2009; Toomy et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010;). However, an emerging body of literature now argues that if the GSAs primary role is limited to providing a safe space within which queer youth can meet and establish a sense of community, other roles that GSAs could play in transforming exclusive school environments are constrained. For instance, Griffin, Lee, Waugh, and Beyer (2004) studied GSAs in Massachusetts high schools and found that only a very small number functioned as an educational venue designed to raise awareness among the student body and school personnel about the detrimental effects of school and community-based homophobia and heterosexism.

¹ PhD., Department of Sociology CPR107, University of South Florida, 4202 E. Fowler Ave. Tampa, FL. 33620.
Email: mayberry@usf.edu, Phone: 813-928-6836, Fax: 813-974-6455

² M.S.W., School of Social Work, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1350 University Ave. Madison, WI 53706.

This literature suggests that the “safe space” GSA model assumes LGBT students to be “at-risk” and contributes to a common sense understanding of these youth as deficient, in need of help, and “innocent victims” due to the social marginalization of their sexual and/or gender identity. Viewing queer youth as a group of students in need of reparation, it is argued, pathologizes homosexuality and/or gender nonconformity and reinscribes the heterosexual (normal)/homosexual (abnormal) binary which then legitimates and sustains dominant homophobic and heteronormative discourses in schools (Castro & Sujak, 2012; Currie et al., 2013; Hackford-Peer 2010; Mayberry et al., 2013; Quinlivan, 2002; St. John et al., 2014). Thus, GSAs which play this role fail to provide a critique of the schooling practices which necessitates their existence in the first place. In this article, we propose a school-level assessment model from which school cultures can be examined to help us understand the barriers that impede the potential of GSAs to play other social justice oriented roles identified by Griffin and her colleagues (2003), such as: (1) being the primary vehicle for raising awareness, increasing visibility, and providing education about queer issues in schools, and (2) being part of broader school efforts for raising awareness and providing education about queer issues in schools, without being the central vehicle leading these efforts. Results from such assessments will provide not only within-school data but data that can be aggregated to explore variations between schools. Within-school and between-school assessments will produce an enhanced understanding of school-level factors that impede (or facilitate) the positioning of queer youth as “activist educators” (Hackford-Peer, 2010) who desire to work collectively within their GSAs to have an actual impact on anti-queer school environments, but have been constrained in their efforts.

The perspectives of GSA members and their advisors regarding the role *they* would like their GSA to play and the obstacles they face in their attempts to enact these roles has been explored in several studies. For instance, Russell and his colleagues (2009) employ the concept of “empowerment” in their study of high school GSA student leaders to assess the degree to which these leaders engage in “activities that often directly challenge or resist hegemonic structures that characterize adolescents’ lives—the gender and sexual order of their schools” (893). These GSA leaders clearly expressed a strong desire for the GSA to play a proactive role in transforming the anti-gay environments in their schools. However, the leaders’ energies focused primarily on empowering GSA current and potential members and little attention was paid to promoting sexual justice initiatives. The question of why activist initiatives did not emerge from the GSA was left unanswered. The desire to have GSAs play a role in school transformation is echoed in Mayberry and her colleagues (2013) interviews of GSA members and their faculty advisors from four high schools. A salient feature of their study was the willingness among members and their faculty advisors to take both individual and collective action to educate their school’s student body about the challenges queer youth face as they navigate the wider school environment. Members and their advisors shared the desire to move the GSA beyond being a school club that acts primarily in isolation to provide their members with a safe space within which to meet to being a club that is fully integrated and visible in the school community. The GSA members in this study envisioned the ways in which their GSA could play a more instructive role in developing a new set of school norms and rules that inhibit antigay expressions, illuminating the detrimental effects of homophobic remarks, and encouraging educators to challenge unacceptable student behaviors. Enacting their visions of introducing queer issues into the wider school environment appeared to be restricted by a perceived fear of potential negative repercussions to the GSA that might transpire should activist initiatives be implemented, but limited information about this finding was presented.

Why is it then that GSA members’ aspire to have their club play a transformative school environment role but appear to be unable to fulfill that mission? In his study conceptualization of studying heterosexism in high schools, Chesir-Teran (2003) argues that taking a school-level approach would enable researchers to move beyond focusing on individual-level expressions of heterosexism and to assess heterosexism as an attribute of schools, rather than an attribute of individuals (e.g., individual attitudes about homosexuality). The shift from individual-level to school-level assessment, he argues, is essential if we are to develop effective policies and interventions designed to target institutional heterosexism. Similarly, in her study of gendered harassment in high schools and teachers’ responses to such harassment, Meyer (2008) provides an understanding of the complex institutional and social factors of schools which shape teachers interventions and (non) interventions. These school-level variables presented barriers that restricted a teacher’s ability and willingness to confront gendered harassment. Drawing from this literature, we propose a school-level approach to conceptualize and assess the barriers GSA members and their advisors face as they attempt to convert their desire to be a transformative force on high school campuses into daily practices.

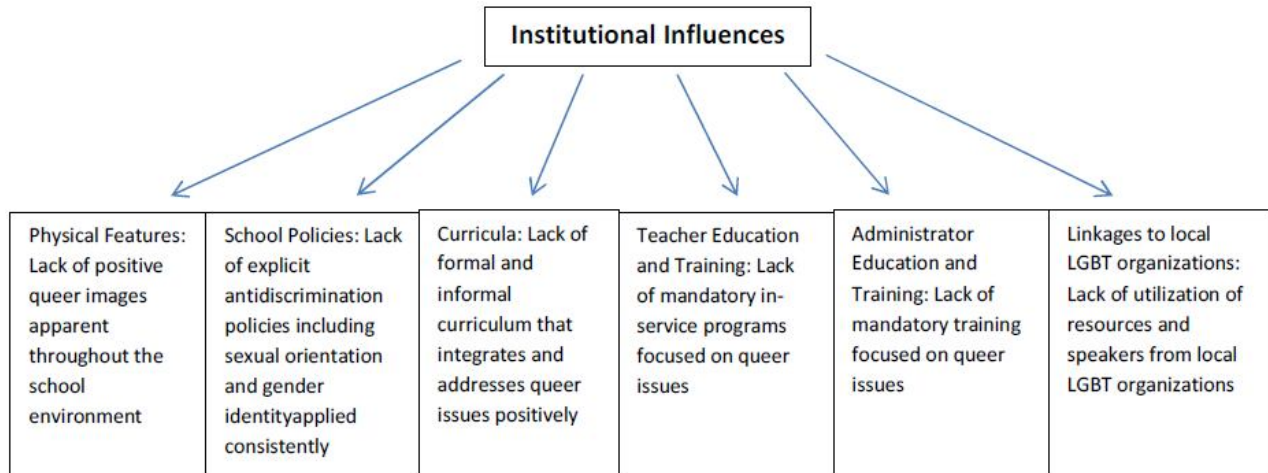
In developing this understanding, two elements of what is described as “school culture” (Maehr & Buck, 1993; Moos & Lemke, 1983) will be discussed to demonstrate a range of school-level attributes capable of either supporting or suppressing GSA activism: institutional influences and social influences. The first section of the article describes a variety of institutional and social features of high schools that could be assessed to help our understanding of the barriers to GSA activism. This is followed by a discussion of multiple assessment strategies that would produce school-level measures of a school’s ecological system. This approach would allow comparisons between the roles GSAs play in various schools and demonstrate school features that facilitate or impede GSA activism. Results from comprehensive setting-level assessments have the potential to transform GSAs from school organizations that are limited to providing queer students with a “safe” space within heteronormative school environments to organizations designed to educate others about queer issues and disrupt anti-queer school environments.

2. Barriers to GSA Activism: Ecological Dimensions

Researchers have focused primarily on individual-level assessments of GSAs and rarely examine the impact of more than one ecological category. For example, studies of GSAs have explored the impact of club membership on (a) individual perceptions such as sense of safety and school belonging (Mayberry et al., 2013; Walls et al., 2008), (b) youth empowerment (Mayberry, 2013; Russell, 2009), and (c) young adult psychosocial well-being and educational attainment (Toomey et al., 2011). One exception to individual-level assessments is Watson and her colleagues’ qualitative study of the ecological systems that interacted to create barriers or facilitators as GSA advisors attempted to advocate for queer youth (2010). Similar studies are needed to understand how these systems interact to create barriers and facilitators to GSA activism. Such studies have the added value of allowing researchers to make school-level comparisons and answer questions such as: do the roles GSAs play vary by the institutional and social influences present or absent in that school? Do some institutional or social influences appear to play a larger role in impeding or facilitating GSA activist attempts than other influences and, if so, what influences appear to be most salient? Answers to these questions necessitate a comprehensive approach to assessing GSA activism through the use of multiple methods to collect data about each dimension of a school’s ecology. Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate institutional and social features of schools that may present barriers to GSA activist efforts. The model suggests that the ecological systems within a school (e.g., institutional and social) interact and impede GSAs attempts to move beyond being a “safe space” for queer youth to instituting school-wide initiatives designed to provide education about queer issues.² Conversely, our model also suggests potential institutional and social features of a school that could serve as *facilitators* rather than barriers to GSA activist efforts. The *presence* rather than absence of the noted institutional features combined with the *absence* rather than presence of the noted social features illustrates an ecological system more likely to assist and promote GSAs as they design and implement their school-wide activist initiatives.

2.1 Institutional Influences

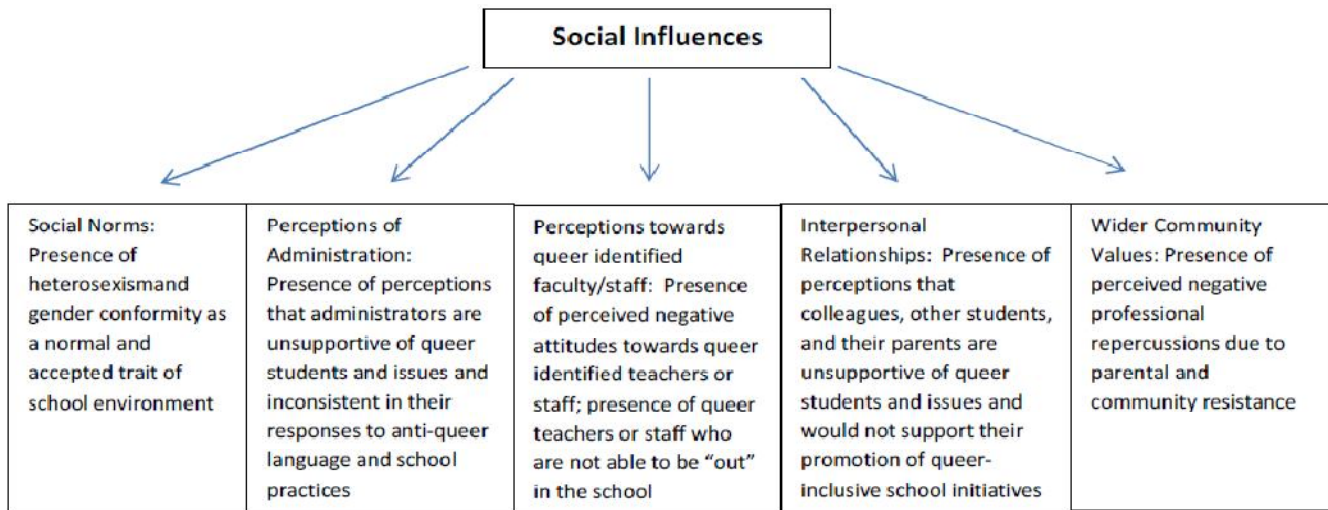
Institutional features of schools have been shown to exert influences over teachers’ and students’ perceptions and behavioral characteristics and include six main aspects of the schools organizational environment: physical features, official school policies, curricula, teacher education and training, administrator training, and linkages to community resources (Chesir-Teran, 2003; Meyer, 2008). Research on queer youth in educational settings suggests that these institutional features are related to the extent to which a school’s environment is supportive of queer students and responsive to the challenges they face. In this sense, discernable barriers to GSAs interests in being an activist organization on campus may vary between schools by the presence or absence of (a) school signs, posters, and announcements that reflect positive queer images (Chesir-Teran, 2003); (b) explicit antidiscrimination and harassment policies that include sexual orientation and are enforced consistently throughout the school’s culture (Chesir-Teran and Hughes, 2009; Rienzo et al., 2006; Watson et al., 2010); (c) formal and informal curricula that integrates sexual orientation and addresses queer issues in positive ways (Castro & Sujak, 2012; Friend, 1998; Mayo, 2013); (d) mandatory teacher education and training in-service programs focusing on increasing teachers’ perceived relevance of queer issues for their professional practice (Clark, 2010; Gorski et al., 2013; McGillivray & Jennings, 2008; Payne & Smith, 2011; Sherwin & Jennings, 2006); (e) administrator preparation programs that integrate throughout the curriculum a focus on social justice issues in general and, more specifically, on queer youth and the challenges they face (Capper, 1999; Lugg, 2003a,b; O’Malley & Capper, 2014; and (f) access to and utilization of community speakers and educational resources from local queer organizations (Macgillivray, 2004; St John et al., 2014; Watson et al., 2010). Figure 1 illuminates the institutional school features that, when absent, may “push” against GSA activist efforts.

Figure 1: Institutional Barriers to GSA Activism

2.2 Social Influences

In addition to the institutional features of schools, five categories of significant social influences, or social norms and values embedded in schools and community settings, also impact teachers' and students' understanding of the school's culture and thereby influence the attitudes and behaviors of school personnel and the student body (Capper, 1999; Chesir-Teran, 2003; Meyer, 2008; Moos & Lemke, 1983). Social influences embedded in the school environment include manifest and latent social norms of schools, teachers' and students' 'perceptions of administrators' level of support, perceptions of attitudes towards queer identified staff, interpersonal relationships among teachers, administrators, students, and parents, and perceptions of wider community values (Capper, 1999; Chesir-Teran, 2003; Meyer, 2008; Moos & Lemke, 1983). For example, research demonstrates how heterosexism becomes a normal and accepted trait of school environments through school practices that regulate sexuality by affirming opposite gender displays of affection and censoring other forms of sexual expression, silencing formal and informal discussions about forms of sexuality other than heterosexuality, regulating dating relationships, stigmatizing nonheterosexual identities through antigay speech, and endorsing normative gendered constructions of "popularity" (Castro & Sujak, 2014; Fredman et al., 2013; Friend, 1998; Koschoreck, 2003; Payne, 2007). Further, teachers who perceive their administrators as unsupportive and uninterested in queer students and inconsistent in their responses to antigay language and school practices are less likely to confront incidents of gendered harassment. Similarly, teachers who feel their decisions and actions would not be supported by their colleagues and heterosexual students were less likely to confront displays of gender harassment (Meyer, 2008). The possibility of negative professional repercussions due to community and parental resistance impacts what does or does not happen in the school and is a salient theme throughout the literature examining the challenges of addressing queer issues in public schools (Fredman et al., 2013; Macgillivray, 2004; Mayberry et al., 2013; Payne & Smith, 2011; Watson et al., 2010). Finally, while visibility of queer-identified adult role models in schools has been demonstrated to benefit queer-identified students (Anderson, 2010; Evans, 2001; Renn & Bilou, 2005), the decision of adults to "come out" in a school setting is significantly affected by perceptions of how administrators might respond (DeJean, 2008). A recent study by Watson and her colleagues found that, despite acknowledging the importance of role models, queer adults who are not "out" in their schools make this choice for fear of professional consequences. Figure 2 illustrates the social influences in schools that, when present, may "push" GSA members and their advisors from pursuing activist initiatives.

Figure 2: Social Barriers to GSA Activism



3. Assessment Strategies

Robust assessment models commonly employ a variety of data generation techniques to provide a multi-faceted picture of the phenomena under study. Figure 3 portrays a range of techniques that can be appropriately used to collect data about the *institutional* influences embedded in a school’s ecological system from various angles. For example, the school’s physical environment could be assessed through documentation of observed posters and notices displayed in classrooms and hallways, graffiti in bathrooms and locker-rooms, and photos and other materials displayed in teacher and administrative offices, and then analyzed for the quantity of queer images portrayed and the nature of the portrayals. Document analysis could be used to interrogate the quantity and quality of positive and negative references to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in formal classroom and library materials as well as the school’s formal policies and procedures regarding discriminatory actions. Documents related to teacher and school administrator in-service training programs could also assess the degree to which, and the ways in which, in-service training programs address issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression or include appropriate representations of queer persons. Interviews with teachers could also discern how queer topics were integrated into in-service training and the impact of the training on their daily practices. The specific curriculum of the programs school administrators were trained in could be evaluated for level of inclusion of queer issues.

Observations in classrooms could provide insights into the nature of the formal and informal curricula—for instance, are anti-gay epithets tolerated? Do classroom discussions allow for dialogues about sexual orientation and gender expression or are such topics avoided and silenced? Do teachers exhibit a willingness (or lack of) to integrate information about these topics into their formal and informal curricula and what factors are related to their decisions? Survey data can also be used to assess the features of the school environment that facilitate or impede school personnel’s ability to be “out” in their school, the types of support queer-identified faculty and staff have received or repercussions they have faced, and the perceptions of queer-identified faculty and staff throughout the wider school environment. Survey questions could also focus on the school personnel’s perceptions of “outness” on the overall school climate. Assessment data can also be gathered from interviews and surveys of administrators, faculty, and students to explore the consistency to which antidiscrimination policies are applied—for instance, does the school have a comprehensive antidiscrimination policy that covers sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression? Can you recall instances and situations in which these policies were applied? Ignored? Surveys and interviews could also question these constituents and community stakeholders about the types of school-community organization linkages that exist and the degree to which these linkages utilize resources from queer organizations.

Figure 3: Institutional Assessment Strategies

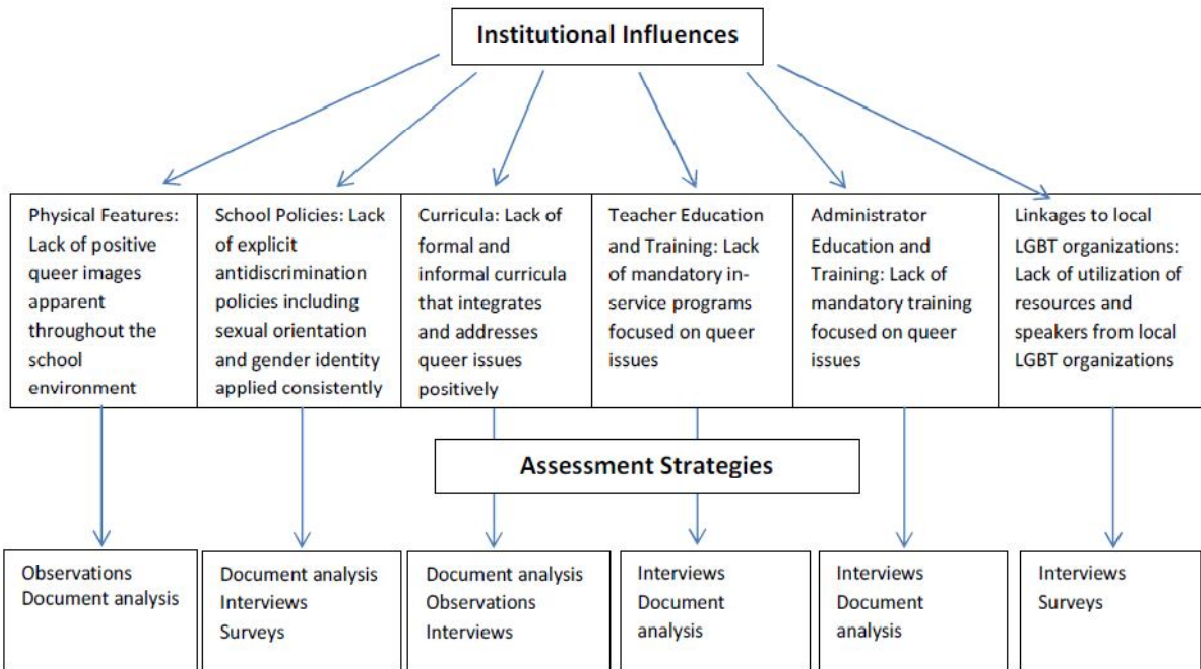
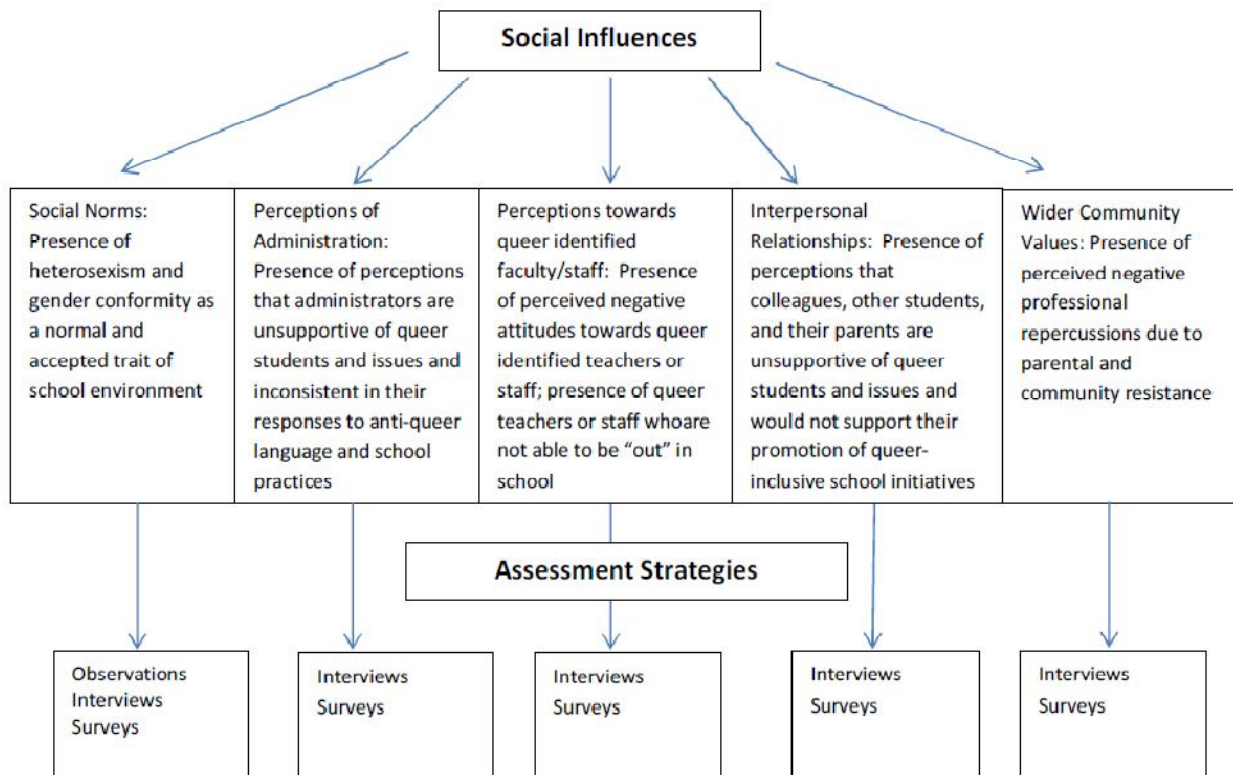


Figure 4 suggests that interviews and surveys of administrators, teachers, students, and community stakeholders could also focus on the *social* influences embedded in the school environment. For example, observations of daily school activities could be used to assess the quantity and nature of school practices that stigmatize non-heterosexual displays of sexuality and non-normative gender behaviors—for instance, what are typical hallway responses to same sex couples holding hands? Are normative-gender displays of femininity and masculinity rewarded or punished, and if so, how? Survey and interview data could reveal teachers and students perceptions of administrator’s dispositions toward queer students and GSA activities and assess how these dispositions may influence their own willingness to propose activist initiatives—for instance, what type of administrative response do you perceive receiving if the GSA proposed an assembly focused on queer issues? Do you perceive administrative barriers on the types of activities the GSA might sponsor and, if so, what might be the reason for these constraints? Survey and interview data could also uncover teacher’s perceptions of how they believe their colleagues, students, their student’s parents, and members of the community would respond and the professional repercussions they may face should they support queer students against discrimination and anti-gay behaviors, encourage GSA activist activities, or should they integrate issues of sexual and gender diversity into their formal and informal curricula. These data could assess the degree to which these perceptions influence teacher’s willingness or reluctance to promote GSA school-wide initiatives.

Figure 4: Social Influences Assessment Strategies



4. Implications for Practice

The assessment model discussed in this article relies heavily on Chesir-Teran’s (2003) conceptualization of assessing heterosexism in schools. His work encourages future researchers to extend his conceptualization to other contexts. We have responded to his appeal by developing an assessment conceptualization that can examine the impediments and facilitators of GSAs to make actual change in heterosexist and homophobic school environments. When considering the various roles a GSA can perform within schools, it is when the GSA functions as “part of broader school efforts for raising awareness, increasing visibility, and educating about LGBT issues in school” (Griffin et al., 2004, p. 16), that it engages GSA members and their allies in work dedicated to holistically transforming anti-gay school cultures. When supportive adults in schools and GSA members are collectively able to play the role of “activist educators” and participate in the realm of school and community wide efforts, the dominant, and often, damaging discourse of queer youth as “innocent victims” in need of a safe space within which to meet is challenged (Hackford-Peer, 2010). Three assumptions of the safe space GSA model are important to consider:

1. Queer and gender nonconforming students only need a safe space within which to meet during a small part of the school day or week. Hackford-Peer (2010) demonstrates the shortcoming of this assumption clearly: “The doors to these ‘spaces’ symbolize a portal between two different worlds; on the inside the queer student can exist without judgment or the fear of violence. But on the other side of the door, the side where the rest of the school is, the homophobia is still there, the slurs are still yelled, the threats are still made” (p. 550). Safe space initiatives are not designed to make visible homophobic school practices throughout the school environment.
2. The school has made an effort to provide for the safety of this segment of the school population by sanctioning a GSA and further efforts are not really necessary. This assumption, Mayo (2004) and Hackford-Peer (2010) warn us, can lead to complacency among school personnel to further interrogate their school environment and to a perception that “our work is done; we have provided safety for these students.” The assumption inhibits the energy school personnel may have to take steps to holistically examine the institutional and social features of the school ecology that negatively impact the educational experiences of queer youth.

3. Providing a safe space for queer students in the form of a school-sanctioned GSA will serve the needs of this student population by providing them with the opportunity to develop supportive peer networks. This assumption, however, diverts our attention away from attending to the heterosexist and homophobic school environments upon which the need for supportive peer networks is predicated (Mayberry, et al., 2013).

More than 4,000 GSAs exist within the United States and their positive effects on queer student health, academic performance, and safety have been well documented in individual-level assessment studies (Kosciew et al., 2010). In order to better understand the effects GSAs may (or may not) have on a school's culture and to enhance the ability of GSAs to move beyond their dominant role of providing a safe space for LGBT youth and toward holistically transforming anti-gay school cultures, ecological school-level assessments need to be developed. Given the idea that various institutional and social features of schools may either facilitate or impede GSA members and their advisors' pursuits of school-wide initiatives aimed at cultivating inclusive school cultures, such assessments are warranted and will provide insight into how school artifacts, norms, organizational features, and interpersonal relationships shape the roles GSAs are encouraged to play or constrained from playing within their school setting. Developing a multiple method school-level approach, as suggested in this article, and including multiple schools in a single study will enable researchers, educational practitioners and policymakers, as well as students and advisors involved in GSA formation and implementation, to aggregate data within schools and to make comparisons between schools to answer questions such as: How do the roles GSAs play in schools vary by the presence or absence of various institutional and social influences? What are the institutional and social features of schools that primarily function to provide a "safe" space for queer youth as compared to schools with more activist-oriented GSAs? Do some institutional or social influences appear to play a larger role in impeding or facilitating GSA activist attempts than other influences and, if so, what influences appear to be most salient? In summary, extending Chesir-Teran's (2003) conceptualization to an examination of the institutional and social features of schools and their impact on GSA activism is an essential step toward dismantling oppressive school structures and replacing them with socially-just educational climates. It is our hope that the assessment approach described in this paper will inspire educational stakeholders to move us in that direction.

5. Notes

1. We use the term "queer" to be inclusive of the wide range of identities that people claim within the LGBTQ community.
2. Much of the existing research on LGBT youth populations does not distinguish between the experiences of LGB and T youth. However, we acknowledge that the specific issues for transgender and gender nonconforming youth are often different from and more extensive than for LGB youth. Our current assessment model is oriented toward the institutional and social features of schools that are problematic for all queer youth, but may overlook some features of the school environment that are most problematic for transgender and gender nonconforming youth, such as names, pronouns, access to gender neutral facilities, etc. (Beemyn, et al., 2005). We encourage future research to expand the model to consider additional issues pertaining to gender identity and gender.

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