

Exploring Resilience among Queer Youth in Gender Sexuality Alliances

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Abstract

Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) are an important vehicle for engaging queer youth in Canadian high schools. GSAs present a useful entry point for queer pedagogy and can counter heteronormative discourse in schools. The literature shows that GSAs are an important tool for building resilience in queer youth. However, few studies have been undertaken that examine the work and impact of GSAs from the perspective of both queer theory and resilience theory. Drawing on queer theory and resilience theory, this case study examines the experiences of three Manitoba high school students in order to examine how queer theory and resilience theory speak to each other in the context of GSAs in Manitoba secondary schools. This research project addresses the following main research questions: 1) How do student experiences of GSAs align with both queer theory and resilience theory? 2) How do students who participate in GSAs perceive their resilience? Interviews showed that participants experienced their GSAs as spaces where they could safely socialize and explore their identity, but did not engage in broader educative or advocacy activities. These findings point to implications and recommendations for GSA advisors and school administrators in order to help GSAs better serve queer youth in secondary schools.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Current studies surrounding queer youth in Canadian secondary schools paint, often at the same time, both an optimistic and a depressing picture of the state of their sense of safety and their sense of belonging (Baams et al., 2020; Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018; Peter et al., 2021; Taylor & Peter, 2011a). While the past decade has brought a decline in homophobic, biphobic and transphobic language and harassment in Canadian schools, we are a long way from eradicating the presence of these phobic discourses in schools (Peter et al., 2021). Queer issues are finding their way into the curriculum and classroom, but often need to be fought to be included by queer students and allies (Lapointe, 2014, 2015, 2016). And still, queer students are constantly negotiating their way through an environment that defines how they identify as abnormal (Harvey, 2012). Even in the absence of directly experiencing harassment, queer youth are subject to the unique stressors of expecting to experience harassment, and the internalization of the negative views embedded in heteronormative and phobic discourses, often leading to concealment of their true identities for the purpose of safety (Heck, 2015).

One development that has helped to mitigate these risks has been an increase in the number of Gender Sexuality Alliances¹ (GSAs) in middle and high schools across Canada in the last decade (Currie et al., 2012; Fetner & Kush, 2008; Peter et al., 2021) which can have many positive effects in the lives of queer youth (Grace & Wells, 2015; Peter et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2009; Toomey et al., 2011; Toomey & Russell, 2011). GSAs are uniquely positioned to affect the lives of queer youth in the Canadian educational context, both as a space where students can engage in a kind of queer critical praxis, engaging in advocacy and advancing anti-

¹ GSAs were originally (and some still are) titled Gay Straight Alliances, as they originated to combat homophobia and heterosexism. However, as understanding of gender issues has increased, there has been a move to rename the groups Gender Sexuality Alliances to be more inclusive of all queer identities (Sutherland, 2019b).

heteronormative discourses (Grace & Wells, 2015), as spaces for individual support (Russell et al., 2009), as vehicles that can effectively deliver mental health and well-being programming (Heck, 2015; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018), and as builders of resilience in queer youth (Poteat, 2017).

Because GSAs are often the entry point for queer pedagogical practices and counter heteronormative and cisnormative discourses in schools, they are often viewed as the vehicles for correcting the failures of and the damage caused by prevailing heteronormative discourse in the educational system (Lapointe, 2018; Thompson, 2012). As such, there is much focus on how GSAs can engage in these counter discourses and advocacy to improve school climate and the environment for queer youth in particular (Currie et al., 2012; Elliott, 2016; Grace & Wells, 2015; Lapointe, 2014, 2015, 2016; Linville, 2017; C. Mayo, 2004; Poteat, 2017; Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020; Russell, 2005; Russell et al., 2009; Toomey et al., 2011; Toomey & Russell, 2011). And, indeed, it is found that the presence of GSAs in schools does improve school climate, a sense of safety for queer youth, and increases school attachment (Baams et al., 2020; Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Peter et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2016; Taylor & Peter, 2011a; Toomey et al., 2011; Toomey & Russell, 2011).

However, there are concerns with viewing GSAs solely through the lens of counter discourse. Using the presence of GSAs as being indicative of an anti-homophobic school stance can be problematic if it gives a false impression that the school is a safe space for queer students, and that queer students are less victimized. This positioning of GSAs then gets in the way of truly creating queer spaces, and can also put pressure on students to do the activist work to create change that really should be the domain of educators and administration (Hackford-Peer, 2010; Lapointe, 2015).

An argument can also be made that advocacy is often future-oriented instead of dealing with immediate needs, which can lead to a discourse that normalizes queer youth suffering in the present (Schey, 2021a). Schey (2021) argued that most adolescents grow up in “expectant time,” with plans oriented towards the future. From this Schey outlined “a homonormative temporal model that has emerged for queer youth to navigate: that while queer adolescence is a time of homophobic and transphobic bullying, it will eventually give way to happy and productive queer adulthood” (p. 4). This is not to disparage the role that GSAs play in creating a space for queer pedagogy in school or that their role in countering prevailing heteronormative discourses and practices should be sidelined, as those roles are critical for improving the school system, leading to a better experience for queer (and, indeed, all) students. It does point, however, to the need for GSAs to also be explicitly present-oriented, focusing on the immediate needs of queer youth so that they can experience a “here-and-now that is healthier” (Schey, 2021a).

This is where resilience theory can be useful. Resilience theory, broadly, looks at positive outcomes in individuals in response to serious threats to development (Masten, 2001) and the ability to regain mental health after adverse experiences (Herrman et al., 2011). Resilience theory looks at resilience not as an individual trait, but as an ongoing and dynamic attribute located in the relationship between adolescents and their communities (Lerner et al., 2013). Because GSAs are an important community for queer youth, and often serve as a mediator for the relationship between queer youth and their school, they are an important social location for understanding resilience (Russell, 2005).

There have been a number of studies on GSAs and how they impact resilience of queer youth (Heck, 2015; Higa et al., 2014; Russell, 2005; Russell et al., 2009; Toomey et al., 2011; Toomey & Russell, 2011). The limitation of many of the studies on resilience is that many of

them focus on the outcome of “doing well” rather than looking at how resilience is enacted across different dimensions such as sense of purpose, mastery, and self-esteem (Poteat et al., 2015). Additionally, many studies treat GSAs as monolithic, and most studies are too cross-sectional to provide us with factors that would explain why queer youth involved in GSAs do, in fact, report greater well-being (Poteat et al., 2015, 2016; Poteat, Rivers, et al., 2020). An emerging area of research is to investigate specific GSA experiences within the context of Positive Youth Development (Poteat, 2017; Poteat et al., 2015).

A Positive Youth Development, or PYD, lens on resilience focuses on indices of thriving, and the interaction between individual strengths and the presence of resources in the community (Lerner et al., 2013; Masten, 2014). Effective PYD programs focus on the “Big Three” characteristics of developing positive, sustained relationships with caring adults, the development of life skills, and creating opportunities for engagement and empowerment (Masten, 2014; Sanders et al., 2017). Investigating GSAs through this lens can give us lessons in how we can best structure GSAs and the experiences they create in order to best effect change for the individual. As I will explain later, when done alongside viewing GSAs through the lens of queer theory, we can get a unique view of how GSAs work at the individual and the system level to effect positive change.

Personal Background

In the last number of years in my teaching experience, there have been numerous experiences which have opened my eyes to the prevalent heteronormative discourses – in my school particularly, and the educational system at large – and the need to dismantle traditional definitions of normal. These experiences have also convinced me of the need to carefully consider the individual experience of queer youth and how we can support them in their moment

to moment needs.

My educational context is that I teach in a small middle and high school that is also a private Christian school, although one that tends to be on the liberal end of the private, religious institution spectrum. While we had been trying to position ourselves inside an inclusive discourse, what had mostly been an abstract concept that we could imagine we were doing well with became a concrete issue we had to deal with immediately when a student came out, first to the school staff, and then to their class, as transgender, and asked their teachers and classmates to change the pronouns and names that we used for them. To an extent, and possibly naïvely, I do believe that we responded supportively, sometimes proactively, sometimes reactively, sometimes clumsily. We have created a school atmosphere where other students have felt comfortable enough to come out as transgender, though anecdotally, I am also aware of other students who felt the need to remain closeted as to their identity until they left our school. At the same time, it was clear that through their journey, those students were experiencing stressors unique to their experience that put them in fragile spaces – mentally, emotionally, socially, and physically.

Two years ago, this particular student graduated in a class that included one other out transgender student. Despite being out for a number of years in our school, it was clear that they felt discomfort in being included in communal graduation ceremonies, and felt not quite a full part of the community. I've turned these experiences over in my mind for a number of years, considering how we supported those students, but, more importantly, how we failed to support them in their journey through high school, and how we can do better. As I have more students in my classes who find their identity falling outside heteronormative and cisnormative discourses, it becomes more imperative to understand how best to create a safe community experience by challenging those discourses, coupled with strong individual supports in order to serve those

students best.

Queer theory and resilience theory offer different, but complementary, answers to the challenge of tackling community change by changing school discourse while supporting students in their individual needs. Because GSAs are the school social location where those theories intersect and interact most closely with the lived experiences of queer youth in schools, this study will examine how they can inform the answers to those questions.

Context

GSAs are student-initiated and led clubs designed to bring together students of any sexual orientation or identity to a space where it is safe to discuss issues of gender, sexuality, and identity (Fetner & Kush, 2008). GSAs have been a part of high schools in the United States since the 1980s, but have gained traction and proliferated in the last two decades in both the United States and Canada (Fetner & Elafros, 2015). Historically, the purpose GSAs served was to bring gay and straight (i.e., heterosexual) people together to confront bullying and harassment that occurred based on sexuality (Lapointe, 2018; Sutherland, 2019a). GSAs now tend to be a space to discuss issues not only of sexual orientation, but also gender identity (Sutherland, 2019a). The roles of GSAs in schools may differ based on the needs of their member students, but amongst the roles they may provide are to build knowledge about identity, provide a space for socialization, provide opportunities to bond with supportive adults, surface and unlearn internalized negative views, and emerge as proactive agents of change capable of advocacy (Grace & Wells, 2015).

The benefits of GSAs in schools for queer youth are both numerous and clearly documented. Queer youth in schools with GSAs are less likely to hear homophobic statements and experience harassment than their counterparts in schools without GSAs (Lapointe & Crooks,

2018; Taylor & Peter, 2011a). GSAs contribute to more inclusive learning environments in schools, and serve as vehicles for confronting injustice and educating the school community (Lapointe, 2014). GSAs have been shown to have a positive impact on the mental health of queer students (Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). Students who have access to GSAs are more likely to believe that their schools are supportive of queer students (Lapointe & Crooks, 2018; Peter et al., 2021), and queer students who believe their schools support them are more likely to report incidents of harassment (Peter et al., 2021; Taylor & Peter, 2011a). Furthermore, benefits of GSAs extend to all students in a school (Fetner & Kush, 2008; Wells, 2019).

GSAs are political, as the educational system is, itself, political (Grace & Wells, 2015; Thompson, 2012). This view can be taken locally, as we understand the political nature of GSAs as attempting to change the way that the school body interacts with itself, or we can take a larger view, understanding that there are political movements that work to support or to undermine the position of GSAs in schools. When engaging in activities that raise awareness about queer issues, or engaging in advocacy that promotes educational and social change, GSAs are attempting to change the political climate of their schools, but also of their communities (Miceli, 2005; Toomey & Russell, 2011). Therefore, it is appropriate to situate GSAs within the Canadian political context.

The last two decades have seen numerous advancements in rights for the queer community, and queer students in particular. The development of GSAs must be considered against this background, as research has shown that the social context of an educational community affects the success that students may have in forming GSAs (Fetner & Kush, 2008). *Marc Hall vs. Durham Catholic School Board* in 2002, where a student gained the right to take a same-sex partner to his prom; *Chamberlain vs. Surrey school District No. 36* in 2002, which

allowed books picturing same-sex families in elementary classrooms; and *Kempling vs. British Columbia College of Teachers* in 2005, which centered on homophobic speech by a teacher and acknowledged harm that queer students suffer from homophobic statements are prominent cases that advanced queer issues, and the rights of students and educators in the Canadian educational context (Herriot, 2011). These last two cases, in British Columbia, were also set against the backdrop of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation adopting a motion in 2000 that supported the formation of GSAs (Herriot, 2011). These court cases provided context for the increased acceptance of GSAs found in Herriot's study of discourse surrounding GSAs in major Canadian newspapers.

Against that backdrop, many jurisdictions have adopted anti-homophobia policies. Sexual orientation is protected under the Charter of Canadian Rights and Freedoms, and safe-school policies in every province and territory are obligated to uphold these protections (Taylor & Peter, 2011b). However, GSAs have received protection under law in only three provinces. In 2012, Ontario passed Bill 13, which included a section directing schools that required schools to allow students to establish GSAs, and required them to be able to name them as GSAs (Iskander & Shabtay, 2018). Manitoba passed Bill 18 in 2013 (Taylor et al., 2016), and Alberta, in 2015, passed Bill 10; both provided similar protections to the Ontario legislation (Simons, 2015; Taylor et al., 2016).

Progress, however, is not linear. While in 2017, Alberta strengthened GSA privacy protections for students (Wells, 2017), a subsequent change of government resulted in the weakening of those protections – schools are no longer required to start GSAs at the request of students, they are not guaranteed to be able to be called Gay Straight Alliances, and schools are allowed to contact parents when their children join a GSA (Wells, 2019). Bill 64, recently

introduced, and subsequently withdrawn, in the Manitoba legislature, proposed changes to the structure of educational governance in a way that introduces mechanisms that could lead to increased parental control of decision making in individual schools (Stephenson, 2021). In the context of GSAs and Bill 64, the fear was that groups of parents may be able to interfere with a school's ability to run a GSA in the manner that the staff and students see fit. This could have meant restricting communication about GSA activities, or restricting advocacy and education work done for the student body by GSAs. A more recent example is Policy 713, introduced by the government in New Brunswick. This policy makes it no longer mandatory to refer to students under 16 by their preferred pronouns or names (Benson, 2023). Saskatchewan has also implemented a policy where schools must obtain parent's permission to use preferred names and pronouns for children under the age of 16, and has barred involvement of outside organizations in delivering resources for sex education (Reynoldson, 2023). Although Bill 64 has been withdrawn, it's proposal, as well as the recent changes in Alberta, Saskatchewan and New Brunswick policy, highlight that queer youth and GSAs still occupy a somewhat tenuous space in the educational system.

Understanding that protections afforded to GSAs and to queer students continue to be up for debate, any study, such as this one, which shows the benefits of GSAs to queer youth, and which illuminates how those benefits occur, is helpful for advocates. Situating those benefits in the context of both resilience and queer theory allows for arguments in support of GSAs to follow multiple tracks.

Research Problem

As outlined in the background section above, there is a large body of work that has investigated the work of GSAs through the lens of queer theory, another body of work that has

investigated the benefits of GSAs to queer youth and to schools in general, and another body of work that has investigated that benefits of GSAs through the lens of resilience. Studies investigating GSAs through the lens of queer theory, while identifying harmful school-level discourses and how to counter them, may miss how GSAs impact the lives of queer youth in the immediate term. Looking at the activity of GSAs through the constructs of resilience as identified by PYD researchers can give us more insight into how and why GSAs make a difference in the lives of queer youth. Conversely, while studies that look at how GSAs enact resilience in youth through PYD principles acknowledge the positive effects of advocacy and the development of critical consciousness (Harvey, 2012; Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020; Poteat, Rivers, et al., 2020), there are a lack of studies that explicitly consider GSAs and resilience from the perspective of queer theory. Investigating how constructs of PYD and anti-heteronormative discourse can influence each other has the potential to expand our understanding of effective GSAs.

The purpose of this study is to examine how queer theory and resilience theory speak to each other in the context of GSAs in Manitoba high schools. Specifically, this study addresses the following main research questions: *1) How do student experiences of GSAs align with both queer theory and resilience theory? 2) How do students who participate in GSAs perceive their resilience?* Secondary questions that guide this research are: How are constructs of resilience evident in GSA activity? How are constructs of resilience reported by students? How do constructs of resilience reported by students align with GSAs as seen through the lens of queer theory? What can educators learn about building students' resilience through GSAs?

Lugg and Tooms (2010), scholars in educational administration, state that “how educational leaders frame their learning environments determines the kinds of closets in which

queers are forced to reside – or not” (p. 10). School administrators need to better understand how issues of heteronormativity embedded in the school system affect the lives of their students. Doing so means opening up issues of sexuality so inequitable power dynamics can be named and challenged, leading to a school environment where students’ and teachers’ contributions can lead to productive action in changing school climate (Rottmann, 2006). What is valued by administrators ends up being reflected in the values of their schools (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). Understanding how GSAs can effect change on both a school climate level and in the lives of individual students, and valuing that understanding, is important for administrators. Educators need to create theoretically sound approaches that can create both institutional and individual change (Russell, 2005), and these approaches “should be grounded in the lives of very real children” (Lugg & Murphy, 2014). This study, looking at GSAs through the lens of both queer and resilience theory, can guide that process and leadership practices, overall.

Research Design

This research was conducted as an instrumental collective case study. Case studies are used to investigate a phenomenon in its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a the phenomenon itself and its context aren’t clear (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Given that studies of resilience are studies of interactions between an individual and their community, the phenomenon of resilience really cannot be removed from its context, and is best understood contextually (Asakura, 2019; Harvey, 2012; Ungar, 2004). Instrumental case studies focus on the exploration of an issue – in this study, the intersection of GSAs, resilience, and queer theory – understanding and analyzing a case to understand the issue (Stake, 1995). Collective case studies use multiple cases – in this study, queer youth in Manitoba high schools – attempting to understand the cases in order to illuminate the issue to be studied (Stake, 2006).

Case studies are also understood both as a process of inquiry about a case, and the product of that inquiry (Stake, 1995). They allow for in-depth, detailed collection of information that has personal meaning for the participants of a case, and allow for analysis of those viewpoints to produce patterns and themes (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The questions that guide this process will be focussed on how students conceptualize both their resilience and their participation in a GSA, and to determine if we can find queer theory and resilience theory aligning in their construction of those experiences. As such, a case study is an appropriate method to investigate this research topic.

Students who are part of GSAs in Manitoba schools, and who identify as queer, were recruited for this study. An email invitation for participation was first to superintendents of four school divisions. In two cases divisional permission was granted to contact GSA coordinators in those schools for participant recruitment purposes. An effort was made to have the students participating be from different schools to allow for analysis of different experiences resulting from different social contexts and different GSA structures. Rainbow Resource Centre, a Winnipeg organization that provides counselling, education and programming to the queer community in Manitoba, was also contacted to help recruit youth who fit the criteria.

Data collection for this case study came from multiple sources. Students participated in semi-structured interviews, either individually or as part of a focus group interview, with questions focusing on their experiences in their schools and their GSAs, how they view their own resilience, as well as questions that focused on constructs of PYD as outlined in the literature review. Students were also asked to bring in a physical artifact that represents their resilience and to explain the significance/meaning of that artifact. This offered a space for participants to introduce ideas they felt need to be talked about, and created the potential for a more nuanced

view of how they perceive their world (Pauwels & Mannay, 2020). Participants were also asked to share a school assignment that they completed that gave insight into their experience as a queer youth in their school, giving additional insight into their contextual experiences (Gillham, 2000). In addition, I kept a research journal allowing for a continually recursive, reflexive examination of my own positionality and possible biases, an important posture to be adopted by qualitative researchers, especially when examining positions of identity (Innes, 2009; Mao et al., 2016; McGarry, 2016; Sharp, 2009). These different sources of data allowed for the collection and discovery of multiple views, allowing for triangulation of data, richer description, and converging lines of inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014) of how GSAs interact with resilience theory and queer theory, and the impact it has on the lives of queer youth.

Definitions, Limitations and Delimitations

Definitions

Language is a powerful tool, and dominant discourses have often used language as a tool to define reality in their own terms, defining what is normal and abnormal (Foucault, 1978). Language surrounding queer people and queer issues is also constantly evolving, reflecting the evolving understandings of the nature of identity (Peter et al., 2021). As such, the terminology used in this paper may be understood differently by different people, and no claim is made as to being definitive in their meanings. Below are short definitions of several key terms as they are used in this paper, with the understanding that their meanings may evolve over time as conventions and understandings of gender, sexuality and identity also change (Peter et al., 2021).

Allies – refers to people, usually cisgender and heterosexual, who work alongside queer individuals and communities to advance queer issues and work against queer oppression.

Cisnormative – refers to the privileging and normalizing of cisgender (i.e. non-

transgender) identities and expressions of those identities, and the subsequent delegitimization of trans people (Lapointe, 2018).

GSAs –Gender Sexuality Alliances (some schools may name them Gay Straight Alliances, and some groups use the acronym QSA, for Queer Straight Alliances). These are student-initiated and student-led extracurricular clubs that bring together youth across gender and sexual identity spectrums in order to explore issues related to gender, sexuality, and identity, and advocate for related social justice issues (Fetner & Kush, 2008).

Heteronormative – refers to the privileging and normalizing of heterosexual identities and expressions of those identities (Lapointe, 2018).

Identity – In this paper, identity may refer to gender identity or sexual identity. Gender identity refers to an individual's internal experience of gender, and may not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. Sexual identity refers to an individual's emotional/romantic/sexual attraction to other individuals (Peter et al., 2021).

Queer – The term queer can be used to describe non-heteronormative attitudes and practices (Lapointe, 2018), but also can describe a person whose identity challenges prevailing heterosexual norms and binary attitudes towards gender and sexuality (Peter et al., 2021). Other terms and acronyms may be used to describe communities and people who do not fit into heteronormative or cisnormative discourse:

2SLGBTQ – is an acronym denoting Two Spirit (2S – an Indigenous term used to represent various terms in Indigenous culture relating to gender and sexual identities), Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Questioning (Peter et al., 2021).

SGM – is an acronym denoting Sexual and Gender Minorities (Poteat, Calzo, et

al., 2020).

GRSM – is an acronym denoting Gender, Romantic and Sexual Minorities (Lapointe, 2018).

SGM and GRSM acronyms allow for sexual, gendered and romantic ways of being that go beyond identities defined in the 2SLGBTQ acronym, which can be seen as limiting (Lapointe, 2018). As such, the term queer, which can be seen as a critique of identity, rather than as an identity in itself (Jagose, 1996), and which names normalization as problematic (Warner, 1991) will be used in place of other acronyms.

PYD – is an acronym denoting Positive Youth Development. A PYD perspective on resilience has an emphasis on aligning individual strengths of youth with resources present in their social context (Lerner et al., 2013). It can be viewed both as a development process, and as a philosophical approach to programming involving youth (Lerner et al., 2011), but will be used as referring to an approach to resilience that focuses on thriving, rather than a deficit model.

Resilience – The definition of term resilience will be elaborated on in Chapter 2, but generally refers to good outcomes in response to adverse experiences (Masten, 2001), and is theorized as not being an individual attribute, but residing in the relationship between an individual and their environment (Lerner et al., 2013).

Social ecologies – the interactions between individuals and their social environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1976a).

Limitations

Positionality. I enter this research as a cisgender, heterosexual, white, middle-aged man. In essence, the position I occupy can be seen by some as the embodiment of all kinds of problematic privilege. Male educators are often expected to fit into a kind of essentializing

heterosexualized masculinity, which, more often than not, goes unchallenged by male teachers themselves (Martino, 2008). That position might be internalized by the students I intend to interview. On the other hand, in a system where GSAs are often led by straight women (Potvin, 2016), the intersection of my position with my research interests might challenge those discourses. At the very least, I conducted this research project, where I interviewed queer youth about their experiences, as an outsider. An adult will often, possibly always, be perceived as an outsider by adolescents, in this case, possibly more so as a straight educator who can't relate to growing up queer. Understanding these various possible viewpoints, I must also acknowledge that my positionality is not mine alone to decide on and impose, but is instead partially constructed by others in the research process (McGarry, 2016).

There is a long history of debate as to whether or not an outsider or an insider position is more effective at doing research in different communities (Innes, 2009). Understanding one's position with respect to the community one is doing research with is essential to understanding one's own potential biases and impacts on the researched community (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020; Coloma, 2008; Innes, 2009). However one ends up understanding their position, in qualitative research, the researcher's sense of self affects every aspect of the research process, and so critical self-reflection is crucial (Innes, 2009).

If one engages with Foucault's concept of subjectivity, one must acknowledge that minority identities are not the only ones that need examining, but all forms of identity require critical engagement (C. Mayo, 2004). In order to better inform my research alongside the queer community, as a member of the mainstream culture, I worked to acknowledge and interrogate my own heteronormative and cisnormative tendencies (Sharp, 2009). Given the fact that all knowledge is generated through context-specific power relations (Foucault, 1978), researchers

ought to be reflexive about their role and positionality in the research process (McGarry, 2016). In fact, researchers are called on to be critically reflexive about their own positionality in a process that needs to be constant and dynamic (Mao et al., 2016). In this research project, I strove to be aware that how I relate to queer youth and issues will be, in many ways, a reflection of some kind of the relationship that society, and the educational system, has with queer youth and issues (Sharp, 2009) Throughout the research process, I examined those elements of my identity (maleness, straightness, heteronormativity) that I am liable to be blind to as they afford me privileges in society.

Intersectionality. Heteronormative discourses are one place for oppression of queer youth in the school system. For racialized youth, another layer of oppression is often added (Kumashiro, 2002). Understanding resilience in queer youth will be different for different youth, depending on how their minority stressors of sexual identity, gender identity, racial identity, socioeconomic status or physical disabilities intersect (Higa et al., 2014; Peter et al., 2021; Ungar, 2012). Given the limited sample size of this case study, selecting youth where intersection of these different identities can be explored is not a given, nor is it a focus of this study.

Field Notes of School Observations. Case studies should take place in the real world of the participants (Yin, 2014). Ideally, locating the interviews in the school space would have allowed for collecting additional data by observing the physical environment of the participants' school/GSA space. However, four participants were interviewed in a focus group conducted at Rainbow Resource Centre, which did not allow for observations of the school environment. The other interview took place in the participant's school at the end of the school year when the

school hallways and classrooms had largely been stripped of decorations and posters. As such, an understanding of participants' physical environment was limited to participant reports.

Delimitations

This study confines itself to the study of resilience and how it is enacted in the lives of queer youth. Other studies of the efficacy of GSAs have looked at the impact of GSAs on the lives of allies (Lapointe, 2015). While it would be informative to compare and contrast the impact of GSAs on both queer youth and their straight allies, this study will be limited to queer youth.

This study was conducted by interviewing youth once at the end of one school year. An exploration of the experience of queer youth in a GSA that was more longitudinal in nature would no doubt provide a more insights and a richer description of how resilience is enacted in queer youth as they progress through their school experience, especially from junior high to high school, and may give us more insight into how GSAs can be effective as vehicles for PYD, both overall, and at different stages of development.

This study included participants who attended school of various size, and included a student who attended a school outside of Winnipeg. Although it is important for educators to understand how GSAs operate and how queer youth experience them in the many different contexts of the Manitoba education system, and it would be interesting to compare experiences with those of youth in rural schools, private schools, and schools in the north, this study is not intended to compare GSA experiences between categories of schools.

Significance

This research explores the perspectives of queer youth on their experiences with GSAs in their schools and how they perceive their resilience. Poteat (2015) has called for more research

that studies GSAs from a PYD (i.e. strengths-based) approach to resilience research paying attention to how GSAs promote well-being, specifically paying attention to the variety of ways that they meet the needs of diverse members and to the interplay of GSA members, their advisors and the broader school context, as opposed to assuming a uniformity of experience (Poteat et al., 2015, 2016; Poteat, Rivers, et al., 2020). Ungar (2004) has called on researchers investigating resilience to engage in qualitative research to foreground the experiences and perspectives of youth, which have too often been silenced. This study responds to both of those calls.

This project's use of the case study to examine the individual experiences of queer youth in GSAs in Manitoba high schools allows it to add to the literature by exploring diverse experiences in depth by giving voice to the perspectives of those involved. By analyzing these experiences and perspectives through the lens of resilience theory, we can identify those ways by which GSAs have the most impact on the lives of queer youth. Additionally, by analyzing those experiences and perspectives through the lens of queer theory, we can further understand how GSAs function in a way to challenge heteronormative discourses in schools and how that impacts the lived experiences of queer youth.

In both the literature review and the analysis of the case study, this research found points of connection between resilience theory and queer theory. GSAs have been a source of study for researchers from both perspectives, but rarely combine both theoretical frameworks to inform their study design or analysis. Russell (2005) argued that we need approaches that create change at both the institutional and the individual level that are theoretically sound. This study has the potential to offer guidance at both levels, and help educators gain a more holistic understanding of the potential influence of GSAs in the educational system and their impact on the queer youth who they serve.

In sum, this research in understanding the perspectives of queer youth, and working to understand the relationships between themselves and their social ecologies, especially as mediated through the queer pedagogical capacities of GSAs, can help educators acquire knowledge about what works, what can be done better, and will point to further ways to analyze and understand this important phenomenon.

Outline

This thesis will explore the interplay of queer theory and resilience theory in the lives of queer youth in schools as mediated by GSAs. In the first chapter, background and context to the study have been provided, and the research questions have been outlined. A brief outline of the design of the study has been provided, along with definitions, potential limitations of the study, as well as delimitations. The relevance and potential significance of this research for educators has been laid out.

The second chapter will examine significant literature in the field. It will begin with developing a conceptual lens for examining queer theory and resilience theory. It will follow with an exploration of queer theory and pedagogy, and then examines studies of GSAs that have been conducted through that lens. Resilience theory and the constructs of PYD will be explored, followed by an examination of studies of GSAs that have been conducted through that lens. At the end of this chapter, the lack of studies of GSAs from both perspectives will be highlighted, and the areas of commonality between queer theory and resilience theory will be examined, illuminating how studies can benefit from both perspectives.

The third chapter will outline the methodology chosen for this study, as well as the research design. It will make the case for case study as an appropriate method of study for these research questions, and outline how data will be collected and analysed. It will also outline how

participants will be selected, and what ethical considerations must be made for high-school aged participants of this study.

The fourth chapter of this thesis will present the findings of the case study, and look at how participant experiences align with queer and resilience theory. The fifth chapter will analyze and discuss those findings, discussing their implications, significance, limitations, and the potential for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature in this chapter will be analyzed through the conceptual lens of social constructivism. This framework ties together the two major theoretical frameworks that underpin this study – queer theory and resilience theory. The next section of this chapter will look at the development of queer theory, and then examine the literature that has studied GSAs through the lens of queer theory. The following section will look at the development of resilience theory, and then examine the literature that has studied GSAs through the lens of resilience theory. Finally, this chapter will examine the commonalities between queer theory and resilience theory, pointing to the lack of studies that examine GSAs from both perspectives.

Conceptual Lens

This study examines how queer theory and resilience theory are simultaneously enacted in GSAs. Queer theory and resilience theory are two very different approaches to examining the work of GSAs in schools. However, they have commonalities to draw on to construct a conceptual lens which will guide this study.

Differences

Queer theory draws on traditions of critical discourse analysis and postmodern methods of deconstruction in order to critique heteronormative narratives and power structures embedded in our institutions (Callis, 2009; Dilley, 1999; Marchia & Sommer, 2019). As such, queer theory is largely rooted in qualitative research methods. Resilience theory, on the other hand, draws on an relational developmental systems approach of relying on measurable constructs, qualitatively and quantitatively, of interactions between individuals and their environments (Lerner et al., 2013). Because of the focus on measurable constructs, much resilience research has been done

around creating instruments to measure these constructs (Lerner et al., 2005; Liebenberg et al., 2013; Prince-Embury & Courville, 2008).

Queer theorists, then, see GSAs as a space for queer discourse, affirming queer existence and value, and pointing to ways to counter heteronormative discourse in institutions, and therefore as sites of resistance leading to improvement of institutions and systems (Currie et al., 2012; Elliott, 2016; Griffin et al., 2004; Hackford-Peer, 2010; Lapointe, 2014, 2016, 2018; C. Mayo, 2004; Thompson, 2012). While resilience theorists would affirm that the advocacy that GSAs engage in is an important way for marginalized youth to resist oppression and thrive, they would see developing a critical consciousness of the roots of oppression as a way to develop sociopolitical efficacy, leading to empowerment and improved mental health outcomes for individuals (Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020). The focus of resilience researchers looking at GSAs tends to be on how GSAs can effect change in individuals, by increasing their sense of mastery, their sense of purpose, and their self-esteem (Poteat et al., 2015).

Alignment

What ties these two approaches together, and which is the conceptual lens for this study, is social constructivism. Social constructivism holds that creation of knowledge cannot be separated from the social environment (Adams, 2006; Burr, 2015). Burr (2015) saw Foucauldian discourse at the heart of social constructivism, where the social world we live in “constructs [us] as recognizable persons who are capable of meaningful conduct” (p. 224).

Queer theory focuses on the constructedness of identities (Callis, 2009), and poses the definition of normalcy as being produced by cultural discourses (Britzman, 1995). Sexuality and gender take their meaning from processes of social construction (Lapointe, 2018). In a similar manner, resilience theory uses an ecological model that locates resilience not in the individual,

but in the interactions between the individual and their social ecology (Lerner et al., 2011, 2013; Masten, 2014; Ungar, 2012; Ungar et al., 2019). As such, resilience is seen as culturally and contextually specific and can be seen as a negotiation by the individual with their environment for the resources necessary to define oneself as healthy (Ungar, 2004; Ungar et al., 2008). Resilience, therefore, is also constructed in negotiation with one's social world.

This understanding of the social constructedness of both identities and resilience is important for understanding how resilience can be defined by queer youth in the context of GSAs in schools. If knowledge is intra-personally created and contextually driven (Adams, 2006), and if the organizational reality of the school environment is socially constructed through meanings shared by other actors (Riveros, 2015), then that has implications at both the individual and institutional levels. Individually, this affects how we understand how queer youth construct knowledge about themselves and their identities. Institutionally, there are implications for how schools construct knowledge about the heteronormativity embedded in their systems. Understanding these implications shows a way forward for understanding and driving both resilience for students, and systemic change for the school institution.

Queer Theory and Queer Pedagogy

Queer theory draws on a number of sources, but the groundwork for queer theory comes out of Foucault's work on analyzing the discourse of power within the context of sexuality. Foucault's (1978) position is that the individual is created through discourses, which are themselves creations of knowledge-power systems. It is not that sex and sexuality have been repressed through discourse, but rather that they have been created by discourse, and the power of those discourses have defined what is normative, and what is not. The power these discourses hold on the definition of the proper nature of sex "is maintained through language, or rather

through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law” (Foucault, 1978), p. 83). Our bodies and our desires do not give rise to the discourse around them but rather, the discourse gives rise to our bodies and desires, and how we are allowed to name them (Rodemeyer, 2018).

Foucault (1978) saw sexuality as produced in society through a number of discourses. Foucault saw the discourse of confession as a way that society created truths, first through the church, but then through psychology, which gave to scientific authorities another way to give truths to those who confessed, although these truths were really just ways to categorize their particular deviancy. Through the medicalization of sex, sexuality was positioned in a scientific system, which allowed for discourses of pathology to emerge, creating as deviant those sexual relations which fell outside of heterosexuality. The power of these discourses allowed construction of the Other, and allowed policing of those defined as Other, as morals were created by discourses of power and repression. Later, Warner (1991) described these normative discourses that create Otherness as the site of violence against queer people.

Foucault (1978) saw the power these discourses exerted was not as a centralized idea or force, but as a network of relations that polices and disciplines bodies. Understanding the powers of discourse not as centralized and coordinated, but as decentralized and pervasive is an important idea for those looking to improve the situation of queer youth in the education system. The pervasive discourses enacted through normative practices in schools police queer bodies, and deny them full participation in the public spaces of schools (Linville, 2017). Being aware of the nature of these discourses allows us to more properly confront and counter them and reimagine the public spaces and practices in our schools.

Because of the decentralization of the power of discourse, when we undertake analysis, we must pay attention to “who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak” (Foucault, 1978). Additionally, Foucault asked us to consider what are “the most local power relations at work? How did they make possible these discourses, and conversely, how were these discourses used to support power relations?” (p. 97). These are important questions to keep in mind for those who study and work with GSAs, which can be one of the few groups in a school institution who are concerned with the discourses of norms, as they serve queer youth, who have often been described by these discourses as outside the norm (Harvey, 2012). Understanding how administrators, teachers, students, and even curricula and textbooks speak normative discourses can help us locate where and how these damaging definitions of norms and deviancy are enacted on queer youth.

Foucault (1978) further described how these definitions of norms and deviancy are enacted. He saw that, since categories of sexuality are socially constructed, homosexuality can only be defined as in opposition to heterosexuality. It is not just that they are defined in opposition to each other, but that the consequence of making heterosexuality definable is to define homosexuality as a deviant category (Luhmann, 1998). Because heterosexuality can only be defined in opposition to a deviant Other, this makes heterosexuality and its various discourses inherently damaging to those who fall outside its norms (Marchia & Sommer, 2019).

Foucault’s analysis of the discourses that create heterosexuality as a norm are important for the educator working with queer youth to understand, especially in the context of GSAs, because it allows them to understand how sexuality is produced in systems and institutions, how it is damaging to those outside defined norms, and helps to make visible what was invisible. Power as a policing network of relations can be seen in the heteronormative rituals, modes of

communications and curriculum in our schools (Lapointe, 2018; Linville, 2017). As Foucault highlighted that the discourse of sexuality is ever present (Callis, 2009), so it is in schools as well, and understanding that queer identities have been erased and hidden by prevailing heteronormative discourses (Tooms, 2007), heterosexuality is then understood as not only constructed as normal, but as appropriate (Lapointe, 2018). The idea of ‘appropriate’ is important here, as discourse surrounding queer identities are often framed through and dominated by questions of morality (Warner, 1991). It is important for educators to understand how the discourses of normality, appropriateness and morality have been perpetuated in schools, so that they can be addressed and resisted.

Foucault’s work also saw a way for these powerful discourses to create resistance. “Discourse transmits and produces power, it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (Foucault, 1978). For example, after homosexuality was constructed through the discourse of medicalization:

it also made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (p. 101)

Once enough people accept a label, even if the label is one that casts them as Other, they can seek out those similarly labelled. This allows them to create a community, which can create alternative, or reverse discourses – for example, the confessional discourse can be subverted to become a powerful coming out discourse (Callis, 2009). In the same way, GSAs, as gathering points for queer-identifying youth, create a framework for destabilizing power relations in schools. GSAs affirmation of queer existence and countering heteronormative narratives upend

power relations and become sites of institutional resistance (Lapointe, 2018). They become a springboard for challenging stereotypes and engaging in queer discussion and political action (Lapointe, 2014) and point to queer pedagogical approaches (Lapointe, 2016).

While Foucault's analysis focused on the discourse of sex and sexuality, his ideas were extended into analyses of gender as well, especially by Judith Butler (Rodemeyer, 2018). Butler held that gender is not biological, but is a reinforced repetition of socially produced norms (Lapointe, 2018). This performativity, by its nature, produces a normative idea of gender, necessarily excluding other ideas by inscribing limits on the idea of nature. These limits render performances of gender outside those limits unthinkable, and therefore erased (Rodemeyer, 2018). In these performative discourses, much like Foucault described, normalcy is defined by that which is deviant. Heterosexuality is defined as having value, and queerness is named as immoral (Lapointe, 2018). By considering gender as performativity, and not biologically essential, Butler asserted that gender conformity should not be assumed, and suggests that gender categories are fluid, not fixed (Rodemeyer, 2018). Again, as queer youth have often been defined as outside the norm, understanding how gender is produced through social discourses, and enacted through performativity in the school context is important for educators and researchers who are working to understand GSAs.

Though Foucault and Butler are seen in some circles as foundational to queer theory, it is important to note that Foucault wrote before queer theory was articulated (Callis, 2009), and both he and Butler have been critiqued by trans theorists (Hausman et al., 2001; Prosser, 1998; Rodemeyer, 2018). Transgender individuals, seen through Butler's discourse of rejecting binary gender norms, face:

...a problematic dilemma when faced this position in queer theory: either she is condemned for reinscribing an oppressive sexual norm (man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual) by insisting upon material alteration of her body in order to live the ‘opposite’ sex fully, or her existence as a transsexual is held up as a prime example of performativity which brushes aside or ignores her insistence upon the importance of her own body. (Rodemeyer, 2018)

Similarly, the concept of bisexuality, while mapping on to Foucault and Butler’s ideas well, has often been excluded from those analyses of queer theory (Callis, 2009). As we produce discourse that seeks to normalize queer existence, we must recognize that any normalizing discourse requires the production of otherness (Britzman, 1995). As researchers working with queer youth, we must ensure that the B and T in LGBTQ are affirmed and given space for their identities to be recognized as legitimate.

Helpfully, other scholars explore the idea of queer in different ways. Warner (1991) suggested that using the term “queer” names the widespread normalization of heterosexual identities as the site of violence against queer individuals, rather than intolerance. For Warner, then, institutions are the problem, and systemic heteronormativity is the key construct that must be fought against. In this sense, the label “queer” is a way of organizing people in response to power. Warner also suggests that using the term “queer” ends up being more inclusive of a wide range of identities, as the term points to the difficulty of specifically naming the people who have a stake in queer theory, allowing us to consider questions of both gender and sexuality.

While Warner defined queer as being more inclusive of a wide range of identities, Jagose (1996) defined queer not as defining an identity, but as a critique of identity itself. Viewing queer as “an unfixed site of engagement and contestation” (Jagose, 1996), the main task of queer

theory then is problematizing norms, not making normative statements. While Warner, (1991) framed queer theory as mainly focussed on fighting heteronormativity, Jagose (1996) described queer theory as locating and exploiting inconsistencies in *any* normative statement about sex, gender, or desire. This is an important point for schools and GSAs. Educators deal with curricula which, while they can be approached from constructivist standpoints, inevitably point to prescribed and defined outcomes. An effective GSA, on the other hand, must be continually in flux, growing and changing with the needs of its students.

Though Foucault's work highlighted the power of heteronormative discourse, the term heteronormativity became popularized in Michael Warner's (1991) *Fear of a Queer Planet*, (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Heteronormativity here is investigated as the ability of heterosexual culture to interpret society as itself, and is presented as privileging, inherent in institutions, and totalizing in nature (Warner, 1991). Warner focused, as did Foucault, on the systems of discourse surrounding heterosexuality (Lapointe, 2018). The "queer" in queer theory names normalization as the site of violence towards queer identities, not intolerance (Warner, 1991). Understanding this concept is important, as often the approach to supporting queer students in classrooms is framed solely as fighting intolerance or correcting under-representation, which Kumashiro (2012) would categorize as "education about the Other." The problem is that these solutions look to merely expand the definition of normal, rather than to critique the process of normalization itself (Luhmann, 1998). Kumashiro (2012) would agree that empathy is not enough. Relatedly, Warner (1991) importantly defines being queer as engaging with normalizing and stigmatizing discourses all the time, and names institutions as an important site of this resistance. As mentioned above, GSAs often form this point of resistance in schools in many different ways.

While Warner would not have been considered a queer *pedagogue*, his ideas on heteronormativity illuminate and lead us into key tenets of queer pedagogy:

Being queer means fighting about issues all the time, locally and piecemeal, but always with consequences. It means being able, more or less articulately, to challenge the common understanding of what gender difference means, or what the state is for, or what a good relation to the planet's environment would be.

(Warner, 1991)

Put another way, Warner is highlighting that being queer means being intimately attuned to the fact that coming to understand one's self as queer is to understand that one's identity is questioned on many different levels (in the family, in the education system, in health care, in cultural norms). To be queer, then, is to constantly engage in reflection on and challenging of one's place in the social order (Warner, 1991)

Similarly, Britzman (1995) asked queer pedagogues to challenge this common understanding, thinking about what the discourses of difference mean, and how the discourse of normalcy require the production of otherness, often defined as deviancy. While the silencing of queer content in curricula privileges heterosexuality (Lapointe, 2015), countering this with pedagogies of inclusion may produce more forms of exclusion (Britzman, 1995). If schools merely engage in education that is anti-homophobic, but not anti-heteronormative, the teaching of empathy for the Other merely reinforces the normative/non-normative binary (Kumashiro, 2002). Discourses that produce non-normative sexuality can often preclude non-binary understandings, and queer theorists such as Eve Sedgwick would have us understand that this ignorance is purposeful – queer knowledge is purposefully resisted and refused, creating ignorance claims that are the source of heteronormative power (Lapointe, 2016, 2018).

As Warner (1991) defined being queer as fighting normalizing tendencies, queer pedagogy, then, should not seek just to expand the definition of normal, but should critique normalization itself (Luhmann, 1998). A pedagogy that aims merely for empathy for the Other is still Othering, and critiques of privileging and normalizing discourses must be included (Kumashiro, 2002). Luhmann (1998) poses undermining normalcy as a good entry point for queer theory into queer pedagogy, interrupting binary modes of discourse, and understanding that there are no right answers, seeing knowledge making as a never-ending pursuit. Here, we can understand queer pedagogy as the praxis of queer theory, and understand education as emancipatory (Dilley, 1999).

GSAs and Queer Theory and Pedagogy

Gender sexuality alliances (GSAs) are student-led, student-created extra-curricular groups that support and advocate for queer youth, and offer space for engaging with straight allies (Fetner & Kush, 2008). GSAs can be seen as filling numerous roles, including counselling and support for queer youth, providing safe spaces, engaging in educational awareness and broader advocacy efforts (Griffin et al., 2004). These roles correspond with Kumashiro's (2002) notions of anti-oppressive education – education for the Other, education about the Other, and education that is critical of privileging and Othering.

The benefits of GSAs in schools for queer youth are both numerous and clearly documented. Although queer youth are generally subject to harassment, hear queerphobic statements, and feel unsafe in schools (Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Peter et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2016; Taylor & Peter, 2011a; Wells, 2009), queer youth in schools with GSAs are less likely to hear homophobic statements and experience harassment than their counterparts in schools without GSAs (Baams et al., 2020; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018; Taylor & Peter, 2011a). GSAs

contribute to more inclusive learning environments in schools, and serve as vehicles for confronting injustice and educating the school community (Lapointe, 2014). GSAs have been shown to have a positive impact on the mental health of queer students (Lapointe & Crooks, 2018; Poteat, 2017). Students who have access to GSAs are more likely to believe that their schools are supportive of queer students (Lapointe & Crooks, 2018), and queer students who believe their schools support them are more likely to report incidents of harassment (Taylor & Peter, 2011b). Furthermore, benefits of GSAs extend to all students in a school, through the transformation of school climate (Baams et al., 2020; Fetner & Kush, 2008; Russell & McGuire, 2008).

GSAs occupy an important space in the challenging of norms, and the entry of queer theory into school discourses. GSAs, their members and advisors, may not be explicit about queer theory, but they do engage in it, and can create functional queer pedagogical spaces (Lapointe, 2015; C. Mayo, 2004). GSAs can consider the relationship between identity categories, seeing them as points of conflict and possibility, and incorporate critiques of dominant discourse surrounding gender and sexuality (Elliott, 2016; C. Mayo, 2004).

GSAs enable youth to explore and articulate anti-heteronormative discourses (Lapointe, 2018). They model queer pedagogical practices by questioning norms, interrogating privileges and stereotypes, providing a queer pedagogical space separate from the classroom to explore queer issues through student-led dialogue, and to develop knowledge for interrupting heteronormative thinking (Lapointe, 2014, 2016). GSAs provide social support, and enable students to become agents of change and engage in social justice, bringing queer issues into the classroom and the wider school, countering heteronormative narratives and practices (Lapointe, 2014, 2016; Thompson, 2012). GSAs also provide a space for allies to engage with queer issues.

Engaging with queer youth in GSAs challenges allies to consider their privilege, changing ideas about themselves, but also provides an opportunity to leverage their privilege to engage in advocacy (Lapointe, 2014; Thompson, 2012).

While GSAs create a space for queer theory to enter the educational system and challenge heteronormative discourses, at the same time discourses have been created surrounding GSAs. The discourse surrounding GSAs can sometimes be problematic from the perspective of queer theory. The creation of GSAs, and naming of their roles in the education system, simultaneously position queer youth in two separate, and somewhat conflicting, discourses. One discourse positions queer youth as innocent victims (in terms of not deserving negative outcomes, not in terms of sexual innocence) in need of protection from the very society that marginalizes them. At the same time, another discourse positions them as activist educators who must assume the burden of confronting heteronormativity and educating and leading others (Hackford-Peer, 2010).

Positioning GSAs in terms of safe space havens positions queer youth in the discourse of protection and safety. This allows for the creation of GSAs as safe spaces while also permitting the sidestepping of addressing the heteronormative climate that requires a safe space to be created in the first place (Currie et al., 2012). The creation of safe spaces may hinder the creation of open queer spaces, while creating the narrative that a school is less homophobic and that queer students are less victimized without allowing queer bodies to actually be more visible in the school (Hackford-Peer, 2010).

Simultaneously, another discourse creates students as the primary agent of change in the school system (Hackford-Peer, 2010). Clarke and Matthews (2020) have described the burden that often is placed on minorities in the workplace to undertake efforts to promote diversity and

equity. In essence, minorities are made responsible for creating the environment for their own inclusion, which has been termed the “minority tax” (Clarke & Matthews, 2020). The discourse that Hackford-Peer (2010) describes fits with this description, but positions it within the school system. Another problem with a discourse that creates students as the primary agents of change is that it also positions change and acceptance as something to achieve in the future, rather than to create now (Schey, 2021a). Schey (2021) argued that while most adolescents grow up in “expectant time,” oriented toward the future, placing change within an “it gets better” discourse² reinforces that future orientation, resulting in a normalization of the suffering of queer youth in the present tense. The queer-youth-as-agents-of-change discourse also puts a large burden on a marginalized group to push for their own acceptance. Schools have never led the way for change in heteronormative discourse – GSAs began as a resistance to discourse in schools (Thompson, 2012). However, now that queer discourses have entered schools, it is incumbent on administrators and teachers to do their part to counter heteronormativity (Lapointe, 2016; Taylor et al., 2016). This will allow queer youth to reposition themselves in a discourse of activism with community support, co-creating whole-school improvements in culture and practices in the present, rather than defining an activism that envisions creating safe school climates in the future (Hackford-Peer, 2010).

Being aware of how heteronormative discourse is enacted in schools, how counter-discourses can be enacted through bodies such as the GSA, the potential pitfalls of those discourses, and how this all is informed by queer theory is crucial for educators and researchers attempting to understand the functioning of GSAs. As this study attempts to understand how

² “It Gets Better” is a campaign started by Dan Savage and Terry Miller, and started as a series of YouTube videos where adults describe how their queer experience in adulthood was better than as adolescents. The goal of the campaign was the prevention of queer youth suicide by sending the message that their lives would improve (Schey, 2021).

GSAs positively impact the lives of queer youth, seeing those impacts through the lens of queer theory will help appropriately position and interpret our findings.

Resilience Theory and Positive Youth Development

Resilience theory arises out of relational developmental systems theory focusing on adolescents (Lerner et al., 2013). Specifically, it finds its foundations in a bioecological systems theory that sees human development as guided by interconnected environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1976a). Bronfenbrenner (1976) described microsystems, the immediate setting an individual finds themselves in, such as the home or the classrooms; mesosystems, which are made up of the interrelations between microsystems, such as the home, school, and peer groups, emphasizing multi-directional influences between these settings; exosystems, which describes major social structures that influence mesosystems, such as the parents' workplace, government agencies, or transportation systems; and macrosystems, or overarching institutions of culture such as economic, educational or political systems. Much of resilience research focuses on interactions at the mesosystem level (Lerner et al., 2011; Ungar, 2012). This model stresses the bidirectionality and dynamic nature of influence – an individual influences their context as well as being influenced by it, and so is represented as individual↔context relations (Lerner et al., 2011).

Resilience studies began by focussing on a deficit model, where resilience was seen as the ability of an individual to bounce back from adversity, but has shifted to focus on resilience as the presence of positive traits, and as a characteristic of normal human development (Lerner et al., 2005; Masten, 2001; Prince-Embury, 2013; Ungar, 2012). Resilience is better seen as a dynamic, adaptive attribute representing mutually influential relations between adolescents and their environment (Lerner et al., 2013), implying that resilience does not exist in the individual or

the context, but is situated in their interactions with each other. This perspective on resilience is often framed in terms of Positive Youth Development, or PYD (Lerner et al., 2013; Masten, 2014). Locating resilience in interactions allows for a shift from a more positivist variable-focused research to a constructivist person and context-focused research (Lerner et al., 2013; Masten, 2001). It posits that changing ecologies, as opposed to merely focusing on changing attributes of individuals, can have an effect on resilience (Lerner et al., 2013; Masten, 2001; Sanders et al., 2017; Ungar, 2004), and asserts that interventions that effect changes in ecologies account for more changes in positive outcomes than the motivation of an individual (Ungar, 2012). This view aligns with how queer pedagogists focus on challenging heteronormative discourses in schools as a major route for improving the lives of queer youth as they navigate the educational system.

Positive Youth Development can be seen both as a focus on the developmental process of resilience, and as the enactment of those processes through youth focused programs (Lerner et al., 2011). Understanding the focus of the programs can help shed light on the constructs of a PYD understanding of resilience. PYD programs focus on what are known as “The Big Three” characteristics of (1) building positive, sustained relationships with caring adults; (2) building life skills; and (3) providing opportunities for leadership, engagement and empowerment (Masten, 2014; Sanders et al., 2017). In general, PYD programs look to align the strengths of youth with assets in their social ecologies, encouraging youth to exercise personal agency, building coping strategies and responses, and calling for interventions that honour the uniqueness of the situation of each individual (Sanders et al., 2017). The vocabulary and discourses of PYD are developing, as researchers look at indicators of mental, emotional, behavioural, and social relational markers that could comprise PYD (Lerner et al., 2005). This point suggests that

different researchers in the field of resilience and PYD have developed different constructs and language to operationalize the ideas behind PYD.

Lerner (2005) identified five constructs in adolescents that define PYD – the Five C’s. These constructs are: (1) competence, or self-efficacy in social, cognitive, and academic domains; (2) confidence, or a sense of self-worth; (3) connection, or bonds with people and institutions; (4) character, a sense of right and wrong, or integrity; and (5) compassion, sympathy and empathy for others. These Five C’s are a means to operationalize the characteristics that youth need to enact resilience (Lerner et al., 2011), and it is suggested that youth enact these Five C’s through a sixth C – contribution, contributing positively to themselves and their community (Lerner et al., 2005). While Lerner et al. (2011) acknowledged the empirical usefulness of these constructs to studying the PYD process, they admit that there are uncertainties in how to translate them to create specific youth development programs.

Prince-Embury (2013) focused on three main constructs. The first, mastery, is measured by youth’s positive expectations of themselves, self-efficacy, and adaptability. Prince-Embury found that mastery can be driven by curiosity and building problem-solving skills, and self-efficacy experiences can be structured. The second construct, sense of relatedness, is measured by trust and the availability of relationships for support. Here, strong, supportive relationships are key. Prince-Embury found that cumulative experiences of support build trust and help shield youth from the negative psychological impacts of adversity. Relationships are also tied to the mastery sub-construct of adaptability, in terms of both a youth’s ability to be receptive to feedback, and their ability to seek out that feedback and advice (Prince-Embury & Courville, 2008). Interestingly, Prince-Embury (2013) found that perceived support (built through long-lasting relationships) is more important than actual support in terms of psychological well-being.

Prince-Embury's third construct is that of emotional reactivity, which, unlike the first two constructs of mastery and sense of relatedness, is presented as measuring a deficit rather than assets, and is measured by sensitivity, or speed of negative emotional response; recovery from the negative response; and by how much the response impairs normal functioning. Unlike Lerner, Prince-Embury (2008) developed a measurement instrument for these constructs, and uses it to build resiliency profiles of individuals that can be used to tailor interventions for them (Prince-Embury, 2013). A study on resilience in transgender youth, while not using Prince-Embury's model, also showed that increased sense of mastery, self-esteem and social support predicted positive mental health outcomes, while self-oriented rather than task-oriented emotional responses predicted negative mental health outcomes (Grossman et al., 2011).

Ungar (2004) argued that the ecological models and the tools used to measure them focus too much on predetermined assets and behavioural goals. He argued that resilience is much more culturally and contextually specific (Ungar, 2004, 2012; Ungar et al., 2008, 2019). Specifically, he argues that resilience is in the capacity of individuals to navigate to resources, the capacity of ecologies to provide them, and the capacity of individuals and ecologies to negotiate culturally meaningful ways to share those resources (Ungar, 2012; Ungar et al., 2008). Ungar argued that other views of resilience silence youth's own perspective on resilience, and posits that in certain contexts resilience can be achieved through pathways that may look dysfunctional to an outside observer (Ungar, 2004; Ungar et al., 2008). Queer youth do experience unique minority stressors including experiencing prejudice events, expecting to experience prejudice events, concealment of identities, and internalization of negative discourses surrounding themselves (Harvey, 2012; Heck, 2015; Russell, 2005; Wells, 2009). Groups and individuals that have experienced cumulative trauma may find different pathways to resilience (Matheson et al., 2020). Because

queer youth experience more adversity, ideas of resilience may not be universally transferable from more general studies, and need to consider their context (Asakura, 2019; Harvey, 2012). Ungar's argument that resilience may show up in different ways in various contexts is important to note as we examine how resilience is enacted for queer youth. In addition, Ungar's (2012) conception of a co-construction of what a meaningful expression of resilience might be lends power to youth, and critiques an imposed discourse of resilience, echoing Foucault's (1978) critique of dominant discourses of sexuality. Ungar's (2004) view that qualitative research is an important tool to consider and help explore contextually embedded paths to resilience informs the methods of this study.

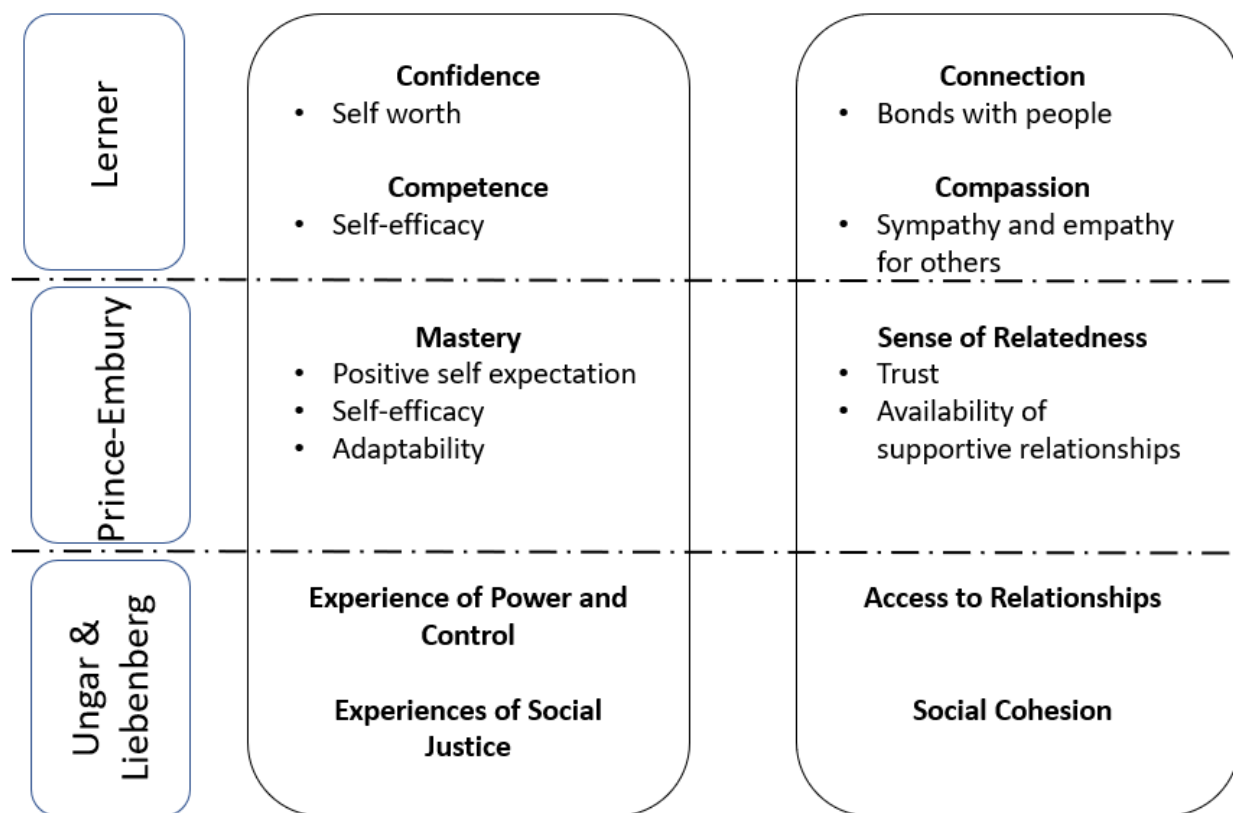
Ungar, along with Liebenberg, operationalized resilience as seven tensions – (1) access to material resources; (2) access to supportive relationships; (3) development of desirable personal identity; (4) experiences of power and control; (5) adherence to cultural traditions; (6) experiences of social justice; and (7) experiences of social cohesion (Ungar et al., 2008, 2019) and have also developed a tool to measure these tensions (Liebenberg et al., 2013). They argue that youth have to make choices about how to negotiate each tension, and changes in how they deal with one tension affects the others (Ungar et al., 2008).

There are several overlaps between the tensions of Ungar and Liebenberg, the constructs of Prince-Embury, and the constructs of Lerner, effectively creating two "strands." In the first "Confidence Strand," experiences of power and control and of social justice map on to mastery as well as the two C's of confidence and competence. In the second "Connection Strand," experiences of social cohesion and access to supportive relationships map on to sense of relatedness as well as the two C's of connection and compassion. Here, Ungar and Liebenberg (2019) made special note of relationships with teachers, and how important they are. What

distinguishes Ungar and Liebenberg’s seven tensions from the constructs of Prince-Embury and the 5 C’s of Lerner is the inclusion of the development of a desirable personal identity. This tension deals with whether or not youth see themselves as successful students, and speaks to personal sense of purpose (Ungar et al., 2019), which does speak to mastery, competence and confidence, but also goes beyond that to speak to queer theory’s insistence that non-straight identities be made central in interrupting binary modes of understanding that exclude queer identities (Luhmann, 1998).

Figure 1

Alignment of Resiliency Constructs



The constructs of resilience and PYD as described by Lerner, Prince-Embury, and Ungar will guide the construction of questions asked of participants and inform the analysis of collected

data as we look to see how resilience is enacted for queer youth in the context of their experiences with GSAs.

GSAs and Resilience Theory and PYD

Given that GSAs challenge the institutional homophobia of schools, they are an important social ecology for understanding resilience in queer youth (Russell, 2005). GSAs are already known to improve school climate for queer youth and make them feel more safe (Baams et al., 2020; Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Taylor et al., 2016; Taylor & Peter, 2011a). Other studies have looked more specifically at GSAs using the lens of resilience.

GSAs have been shown to empower youth through having and using knowledge to move towards social and sexual justice (Russell et al., 2009). Social justice work done by GSAs has been shown to increase school belonging, and increases academic achievement on the part of queer youth (Toomey & Russell, 2011). GSAs have been reported as contributing to mental health of queer youth by giving them a sense of agency in their school and creating supportive peer networks (Higa et al., 2014). GSAs have also been shown to be effective at delivering mental health programs that can promote resilience (Heck, 2015; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). A critique of these studies is that they treat GSAs as uniform across schools, and should shift to examining specific dimensions of individual GSA programs, and to exploring individual members' various experiences with GSAs in order to understand how constructs of resilience are enacted (Calzo et al., 2020; Porta et al., 2017; Poteat et al., 2016; Poteat, Rivers, et al., 2020). In addition, it is useful to consider variation not only *between* members' experiences in their GSAs, but also to expect to find variation *within* an individual's experience in their GSA (Poteat et al., 2023).

Poteat and his colleagues have looked at GSAs through the lens of PYD in order to determine specific experiences and mechanisms that predict aspects of resilience. They found that GSAs provide social support, which builds bonds and enables advocacy, resulting in greater self-esteem, sense of mastery and agency (Poteat, 2017). They also found that access to information and resources had more of a predictive effect on developing a belief in one's ability to achieve future goals and had more of a moderating effect on the effects of victimization than advocacy did (Poteat, Rivers, et al., 2020). This is interesting because access to resources often receives less attention in the literature than support and advocacy do. Access to information and resources, however, was found to address students' immediate needs and provided them with coping strategies and a clearer sense on an immediate path forward (Poteat, Rivers, et al., 2020). This echoes Schey's (2021) critique of future-oriented advocacy efforts that ignore or normalize the present tense of queer youth.

Support from a GSA, actual and perceived, correlated with increased sense of purpose and connection, a sense of mastery, and self-esteem (Poteat et al., 2015). Increased involvement in GSAs led to greater relational empowerment through peer validation; greater emotional empowerment through increased efficacy to promote social justice; and greater cognitive empowerment through the provision of tools to pursue and achieve goals (Poteat, Calzo, et al., 2020). Different kinds of involvement lead to different effects in participating youth. Having more time to socialize led to a more immediate positive affect, whereas discussing personal concerns led to a more immediate negative affect, and meeting time related to advocacy issues had no immediate effect on affect (Poteat et al., 2023). However, while discussing personal issues may be distressing in the immediate term, advocacy work may result in positive affect changes in the long term (Poteat et al., 2023), as involvement in dialogue and group discussion in

GSAs helped queer youth and allies gain the cognitive capacity to understand the systems of oppression, raising their critical consciousness (Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020). Developing sociopolitical efficacy is important to promote advocacy, which has immediate positive effects of giving students a sense of agency, but which also counteracts other sources of stress, such as school policies and climate (Poteat, 2017).

Poteat et al.'s studies also illuminate certain aspects of GSAs related to the development of relationships that predicted greater resilience outcomes. The position of the GSA advisor is highlighted. They are an important part of the GSA given that they may be one of the few supportive adults for queer youth (Poteat, 2017), and when queer youth feel that their advisor is responsive to their concerns, it alleviates negative feelings (Poteat et al., 2023). Even though GSAs are student-led, having a long-serving GSA advisor predicted increased sense of purpose and increased self-esteem for queer youth attending GSAs (Poteat et al., 2015). This could be because having a longer serving GSA advisor leads to greater organizational structure. More structure in a GSA is associated with greater engagement by students in GSAs (Poteat, 2017), and is also predictive of greater agency (Poteat et al., 2016), as well as greater engagement in advocacy work (Poteat et al., 2022). In addition, the GSA advisor's perception of control predicted resilience outcomes. If the GSA advisor had a greater sense of control of the GSA, it was linked to greater sense of purpose, sense of mastery and sense of self-esteem in students. At the same time, these outcomes were also linked to students sensing they had more control over the GSA (Poteat et al., 2015). This relationship between structure, sense of control and resilience outcomes tied together through the relationship of GSA members with their GSA advisor is one good illustration of how resilience resides in individual↔context relations.

Gaps in the Literature, and Potential Alignment of Queer and Resilience Theory

There is clearly a body of research examining how queer theory can be enacted in schools through queer pedagogy, and how GSAs are the primary site for the entry of queer pedagogical practices in schools. There is a body of work showing how GSAs positively impact the lives of queer youth by engaging in queer theory, whether they are explicitly aware they are doing so or not, countering heteronormative discourses and providing spaces for engaging with other ways of knowing identity, and spreading these ideas to the school community.

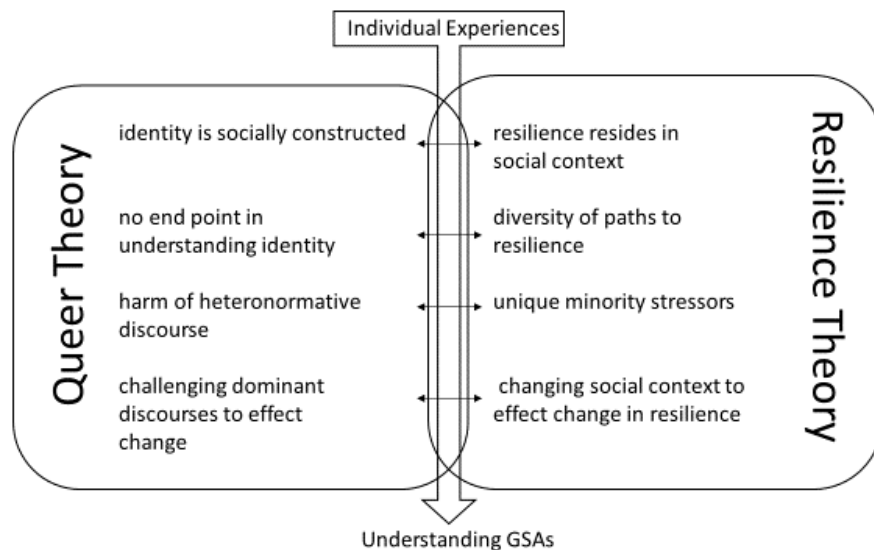
There is also a body of research examining how the interactions of queer youth with GSAs impact resilience generally, and how GSAs promote positive mental and social health outcomes, leading to greater well-being and a sense of safety. Lately there has also been a growing body of work examining how GSAs positively impact students live specifically through the lens of resilience theory, by enacting elements of PYD.

However, there is little overlap between the two areas of study. When GSAs are studied from the standpoint of queer theory, the emphasis is on changing school culture by changing school discourse, but either there is little emphasis on how GSA activity effects change in individual students, or it is taken as a given that that change in discourse will change school climate, which will effect positive change in individual students' lives. Conversely, when GSAs are examined from a standpoint of resilience, and specific mechanisms are looked at to see how they are effecting positive change for individuals, broader discourses are rarely used as a lens for this analysis. While advocacy is seen as an important part of GSAs, it is seen from the standpoint of how it enables an increases sense of purpose, agency, and mastery (Poteat, 2017; Poteat et al., 2015; Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020). Even when GSAs effects on critical consciousness and

sociopolitical efficacy are specifically examined (Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020), they do not position their studies within the context of queer theory’s examination of discourse in schools. This is a missed opportunity, because there are common threads between queer theory and resilience theory. Below is Figure 2, which seeks to visualize those common threads – the relationships between queer theory and resilience theory. Understanding the places where queer theory and resilience theory speak to each other, we can then use those relationships to analyze experiences of individual students in order to better understand how GSAs facilitate the enactment of resilience.

Figure 2

Queer Theory and Resilience Theory Inform Understanding of GSAs



Queer theory sees identities of self as constructed through socially constructed discourses (Callis, 2009). Resilience theory locates resilience not as an aspect of an individual, but in the interactions between an individual and their environment (Lerner et al., 2013). This emphasis on

interactions rather than individuals echoes Britzman's (1995) assertion that "queer" signifies "actions not actors" (p.214).

Queer theory can also be seen as a critique of identity rather than identity itself, and therefore a constantly evolving project (Jagose, 1996), where there are no final answers, and knowledge is "an interminable question" (Luhmann, 1998). While coming at it from a different position, resilience theory comes to a similar conclusion:

Estimates are that the odds of two genetically identical genotypes arising in the human population is about 1 in 6.3 billion, and each of these potential human genotypes may be coupled across life with an even larger number of life course trajectories of social experiences. Thus, the number of human phenotypes that can exist is fundamentally equivalent to infinity, and the diversity of development becomes a prime, substantive focus for developmental science. This diversity may be approached with the expectation that positive changes can be promoted across all instances of variation, as a consequence of health-supportive alignments between youth and settings. With this stance, diversity becomes the necessary subject of inquiry in developmental science, and in the study of resilience. (Lerner et al., 2013)

Resilience theory can also be seen as positioning itself not as having final answers, but an exploration that, in the context of the infinite pathways of human development, must be continually open to diversity.

Studies of GSAs from a queer theoretical perspective name the harm that heteronormative discourses in the educational system have done to queer youth (Hackford-Peer, 2010; Lapointe, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018; Thompson, 2012). General studies on resilience, some

of which also look at GSAs, have pointed out that queer youth suffer from stressors particular to their situations (Asakura, 2019; Harvey, 2012; Heck, 2015; Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). Ungar et al.'s (2014, 2008, 2012, 2019) conception of resilience argued that it must be considered contextually sensitive to individual's circumstances. These three views, though starting from different theoretical frameworks, come to similar conclusions, and inform this study.

Finally, queer theory and queer pedagogy name the goal of changing the school environment by challenging concepts of normalization, with the end goal of fundamentally changing how queer youth are able to interact with their school community by changing societal perceptions of identities (Kumashiro, 2002; Linville, 2017; Warner, 1991). Resilience theory similarly posits that changing an individual's social ecology and their interactions with it will have more of an impact on their resilience than a focus on changing characteristics on an individual level (Lerner et al., 2013; Masten, 2001; Sanders et al., 2017; Ungar, 2004). Both lenses point to system level changes as an important factor in positively changing the ability of queer youth to interact with the educational system.

GSAs challenge institutional discourses of heteronormativity and homophobia, and they are an important relational context for understanding resilience in queer youth (Russell, 2005). Investigations of how GSAs work to benefit queer youth will be better informed if they take into account both queer theory and resilience theory. Therefore, this study aims to examine students' experiences in GSAs through both lenses in order to better understand how those theories can inform each other and how they align in practice, ultimately informing educators so that they, and the school system, can better serve queer youth.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study uses qualitative methods to explore the interplay between queer theory and resilience theory as they are enacted in how queer youth experience GSAs in their school settings. Qualitative methods are an appropriate way of approaching this study, as it is used when an issue needs to be explored in such a way as to provide a complex, detailed understanding of an issue (Creswell, 2007). Experiences of queer youth in GSAs from a perspective of queer theory have been examined using qualitative methods to explore and understand in depth how heteronormative discourses are resisted in schools (Lapointe, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018). On the other hand, many resilience studies rely instead on surveys and questionnaires as instruments of measurement of resilience (Lerner et al., 2005; Liebenberg et al., 2013; Prince-Embury & Courville, 2008). Though these instruments are designed to measure individual↔context relations, they do not use qualitative methods to understand the experiences of youth themselves.

Some studies on the experiences of schools, GSAs, and queer youth use quantitative methods to understand their experiences (Baams et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2016; Toomey et al., 2011), others use mixed methods (Grossman et al., 2011; Poteat et al., 2015), while some studies on resilience of queer youth do focus on qualitative methods to understand their experiences (Asakura, 2019; Higa et al., 2014). These last two studies, however, do not focus on resilience of queer youth in the context of GSAs. Those studies that do look at resilience in the context of GSAs rely on mixed methods but include observations rather than interviews (Poteat et al., 2015), or rely strictly on questionnaires (Poteat, Calzo, et al., 2020; Poteat et al., 2016; Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020; Poteat, Rivers, et al., 2020). Given that a criticism of resilience and PYD studies is that they have not done the work to understand children's perspective on resilience, more studies that undertake a qualitative approach are needed (Ungar, 2004).

Qualitative methods, at a fundamental level, are about “understanding the meaning that people have constructed” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative methodologies assume a socially constructed reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and as such rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of their situations to develop a pattern of meaning of a social issue (Creswell, 2007). Studies that focus on questions that call for how individuals construct their worlds, and interpret their experiences, and what meaning they attach to those experiences, call for qualitative methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Besides focusing on creating themes of meaning, qualitative methods also view researchers as key instruments of collection of data, which should be varied, and mined for rich descriptions of individuals in their contexts (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Following this view, this study explored how queer youth experience and enact queer theory and resilience theory primarily through their voices, by talking with them rather than administering questionnaires, and allowing them to use their words and other pieces of data that they generate to describe their experiences.

Case Study

There are many different approaches that fall under the umbrella term of qualitative methods (Creswell, 2007). Case studies allow researchers to explore multi-layered social phenomena from a real-world and holistic point of view (Yin, 2014). It especially allows researchers to look at issues where the boundary between a phenomenon and its context aren’t clear, or where it is difficult to separate a phenomenon from its context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). Given that this study examined the experiences of queer youth in a specific context, and that resilience in particular is understood to be embedded in the relationship between an individual and their context (Lerner et al., 2013), case study was an appropriate methodology for this project.

Stake (1995) categorizes case studies as either intrinsic, where the case itself is of interest, or instrumental, where there is a need for general understanding of a phenomenon. Further, case studies can involve a single case, or be collective, involving multiple cases. With multiple, or collective, case studies, even when the focus is on a phenomena, the cases we choose to study should still be individuals, because understanding a phenomenon requires experiencing the activity of the case, or individual, in their particular context (Stake, 2006). In that case, Stake (2006) termed the phenomenon to be studied the “quintain,” defining it as the collective target of the study, which we can understand by studying individual cases. In this instrumental collective case study, the quintain is how queer youth experience queer and resilience theory in a GSA, and the cases will be the individuals to be studied – queer youth participating in GSAs in different Manitoba high schools.

Case studies should strive to be holistic, understanding the context; empirical, based on observations; interpretive, according to a constructivist lens; empathic, striving to articulate the insiders’ perspectives; and descriptive, illuminating our understanding of an issue (Yazan, 2015). A case study is a process of inquiry that should fit the description above, but yet is not necessarily defined by a prescribed methodological approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995). Instead, the quintain provides the conceptual structure for the case (Stake, 2006; Yazan, 2015), and the development of a theoretical framework around that conceptual structure prior to engaging in research will help guide the approach of data collection and analysis (Yin, 2014).

Stake (1995) views researchers in the context of the case study as gatherers and interpreters of others’ interpretations of their reality. As such, we can only report the constructions that we have gathered (Yazan, 2015). Gathering these different constructions will help build a rich description of how different individuals attach meanings to those experiences,

and build an emic perspective of the issue (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Gathering multiple sources of data within each site will aid this rich description, and allow for an inductive analytical process, discovering themes that are informed by, but also build on, the theoretical framework of queer and resilience theory that has been explored in Chapter 2 (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). This process will be informed by the theoretical framework, but will also allow for the foregrounding of the lived experiences of queer youth, aligning with the idea that every individual will be charting their own path to resilience, depending on their context (Ungar, 2004; Ungar et al., 2008).

Research Design

Case and Recruitment

The individual cases studied were five queer youth from Manitoba high schools that participated in GSAs. In selecting cases, Stake (1995) suggests that a number of factors come in to play. Researchers want to select cases, not necessarily to represent the typical case, but rather we want to select cases that we can learn from. Additionally, we want to select cases that are “hospitable to our inquiry” (p.4). This was key to this study, as my cases were high school students, and numerous levels had to demonstrate this hospitality to research. In the end, the GSA advisors in schools where permission was granted, and the Rainbow Resource Centre, were of aid in helping us purposively sample students in their GSAs.

To recruit individual students to participate in this study, a number of levels of permission had to be granted. First, ethics approval was granted from Research Ethics Board 2 on June 3, 2022. After this was granted, I emailed superintendents of school divisions in Winnipeg to ask permission to undertake research in their school division. The email outlined the parameters and purpose of the study, and asked for recommendations of schools in their division

that have an active GSA. Following this, a recruitment email was sent to the principals and GSA advisors at those schools, again outlining the parameters and purpose of the study, and asking both for permission to undertake research in their school with their students and asking for their help in recruiting students who are active in their GSA to participate.

Division approval was obtained for two school divisions. However, responses on the emails to principals and GSA advisors was low, and recruitment of participants was difficult to obtain. One school was contacted on the advice of a faculty member. Some follow-up phone calls to the principal, after some email communication, resulted in the recruitment of one student from that school.

Because recruitment was otherwise so paltry, an ethics amendment was sought to recruit participants through the Rainbow Resource Centre. The amendment was granted by Research Ethics Board 2 on May 16, 2023. Rainbow Resource Centre was contacted to attempt to recruit participants for a focus group interview. Through their efforts, four students agreed to participate. While this was above the desired number of three, it was felt that it would be wrong to turn willing participants away, that more data would be beneficial to the study, and that there might be a chance that some potential participants might not show up for the interview, so all were accepted. Happily, all four students were able to participate in the focus group interview and share their experiences.

Once the students were recruited, an email was sent to them explaining the purpose and parameter of the study, and asking for their consent to participate. Consent procedures will be outlined in the Ethics portion of this chapter.

Data Collection

Case studies benefit from the collection of data from multiple sources, as this allows for triangulation of data and converging lines of inquiry (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). When data is obtained from multiple sources, multiple constructions of realities are identified (Stake, 1995), and this allows for a richer description of an issue, giving the researcher more data to identify themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Collecting multiple sources of data is referred to as methodological triangulation, and helps to ensure that researchers that the interpretations they generate ‘make sense’ and are defensible, rather than simply generating the conclusions they want (Stake, 1995). In this study, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with students; physical artifacts; school assignments; and my own researcher journal.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used to understand student experiences of their GSA and obtain data about how they have experienced queer theory through the GSA, and how involvement in the GSA has helped enact resilience, with questions that allowed for interrogation of constructs of resilience as seen through the lens of PYD. Qualitative interviews are essential for this type of understanding, as they allow researchers to access those aspects of social life that they are unable to observe (Stake, 1995). Hearing the stories of participants also helps to minimize the power relationship that can occur between the researcher and the research participants (Creswell, 2007). Attention was paid to experience and behavior questions and opinion and feeling questions, as these help to illuminate how participants’ construct a reality from their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews in a case study ought to be semi-structured rather than a rigid, structured series of questions (Yin, 2014). This format provides an outline for questions, but allows researchers to respond to issues that arise, ask probing questions, allow for openness to new ideas, and allow for the construction of worldviews by the

participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interview transcripts were also offered for member checking. This is an additional source of triangulation (Stake, 1995, 2006), and additional feedback can constitute additional data points.

For the one-on-one interview, the student was able to be interviewed in their school space, at the end of the school year. The focus group interview took place at the Rainbow Resource Centre, where all of the youth also participated in other programming. Interviews are attempts to cross social boundaries, and the physical location of an interview is a very concrete expression of this boundary crossing by the interviewer (Herzog, 2005). Interviewing participants on their “home turf” can allow for a comfort level for participants that will allow them to occupy a position of being an expert about a place. Understanding the importance of where interviews take place is important for qualitative researchers, who must understand that social locations are part of the construction and production of knowledge, and are also spaces where power relationships are produced (Herzog, 2005).

Artifacts. Physical artifacts selected by participants offer a window into their lives, and can act as a tool that allows participants to introduce ideas that they feel are worth talking about that might not come up with in the structure of an interview (Pauwels & Mannay, 2020). Participants were asked to bring a physical artifact that represents the GSA to them, and to explain the significance/meaning of this artifact. Including artifact-centred discussions in the interview opened up a space for a more nuanced understanding of how participants perceive their world (Pauwels & Mannay, 2020).

Assignments. School assignments can serve the same purpose as physical artifacts in terms of giving researchers additional insight into the lived experiences of participants.(Gillham, 2000). Participants were asked to share a school assignment that they completed that gave insight

into their experience as a queer youth in their school. Having an assignment that gave insight into how students bring their queer experience into the classroom, which relates to challenging prevailing discourses, helped to understand the school climate. For example, it helped reveal whether teachers are working to make their assignments more queer-inclusive, or if the student had to subvert an assignment to include queer content. If the GSA is having an impact in the classroom, either through empowering students individually, or by affecting how teachers structure their work, then this assignment could help bridge that understanding.

Journal. Using a research journal was a tool I used during the research process. Researchers are called on to be critically reflexive about their positionality in any research project (Innes, 2009; Mao et al., 2016), and this is especially important when examining positions of identity (Sharp, 2009). Using research journals before and after interviews, and while analyzing data helped me identify the positions and biases that I bring to this research. Stake (1995) holds that “qualitative research champions the interaction of researcher and phenomenon” (p.95). And so, undertaking this reflection was important, as I adopted a similar view of Stake (1995) in that researchers are gatherers of interpretations, and any construction of these interpretations is inevitably a construction filtered through the researcher.

In addition, the use of the journal allowed me to collect notes of any pre- and post-interview conversations with participants. It allowed me to reflect on the participants body language, and note areas of hesitancy or enthusiasm in engaging with certain interview topics, offering an opportunity to reflect on those experiences after the interviews. This follows Stake’s (1995) and Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) view that analysis can and should happen at the same time as data collection, and Yin’s (2014) advice that a researcher write memos to themselves that provide hints, clues, or suggestions as to what the data is saying.

Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research should be inductive, drawing out themes from interviews and other empirical data that are responsive to the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Analysis of those themes should be grounded in the theoretical frameworks drawn up prior to the research being undertaken (Yin, 2014). Queer theory was used to identify heteronormative experiences of queer youth, and examine practices they undertook to counter heteronormative discourses. Resilience theory was used to identify themes in their experiences in their GSA that align with constructs of resilience. Themes generated through this analysis were compared with each other to find possible areas of alignment that have been pointed to as possibilities in Chapter 2.

Coding of the data in order to generate themes was informed by the inductive and comparative open coding analysis process outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Marilyn Lichtman (2017). By doing so, what the participants have said, and what the researcher has seen and read was consolidated, reduced, and interpreted (Yazan, 2015). Analysis happened at the same time as collection, as researchers should be giving meaning even to their first impressions (Stake, 1995). But initial analysis of data, such as interviews, also happened shortly after it was collected, in the form of reflective journal entries after the interview, and during the transcription process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995). This was the first iteration of the analysis process. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe a three-part process. The process started with category construction by assigning codes to information in interview transcripts and other data, highlighting data that relates to the original research questions. This was followed by the sorting of these initial coded categories into larger themes, which allowed the data to be revisited and sorted. The first two parts of this process were iterative, inductive and emergent, repeating

themselves as more sources of data came in and were coded, and compared to categories that had already been generated. The third part of this process built theory-based explanations of the themes generated.

Analysis should be accompanied by interpretation, asking how one part of the data relates to another (Stake, 1995). In following the process outlined above, attention was paid to the analytic techniques outlined by Stake (1995, 2006). Stake (1995) highlighted the technique of categorical aggregation, finding themes that repeat themselves from different data sources and across cases, From these patterns we can make assertions about what our data is telling us but he also makes the case for direct interpretation, the idea that important features may only be captured once, but still have importance. Stake (2006) also drew attention to the importance of letting cases speak to each other during the interpretive process.

Ethics

The core principle of “Respect for Persons” means that research participants should participate voluntarily, understand the purpose of the research, and be made aware of potential risks and benefits (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2019). For participants under the age of 18, one would normally seek parental permission for participation. However, it is possible that parental permission for queer youth to participate in a study may not be a reasonable requirement. If a parent is unaware of a participant’s identity, disclosure through requiring parental permission could increase the risk of parental rejection, neglect, or abuse (Mustanski, 2011). The Tri-Council Policy Statement (2019), or TCPS 2, does not provide an age-based approach for consent, but instead recommends a decision-making capacity approach to consent. As such, in this study, students under 18 years of age were required to have a signed statement of assent from their guardian authorizing participation in the study, unless they had not

disclosed their identity to their guardian, and feared repercussions for doing so. In that case, they were able to sign their own form consenting to their participation in the study, along with the attestation of their GSA advisor or principal that they were capable of understanding that consent.

This process has been used by Lapointe (2018) in her study of GSAs in Ontario, and was approved by the Western University Ethics Board. Other studies have held that a queer youth's understanding and awareness of their sexuality and gender identity represents an awareness that positions them as mature minors (Peter et al., 2021). Other research ethics boards also recognize the doctrine of the mature minor, holding that minors as young as 14 may consent to participate in research (Saint Mary's University, 2005; University of Alberta, 2021). In these cases, it is incumbent on the researcher to provide evidence that participants are mature minors (Saint Mary's University, 2005) – one way to do this is by attestation of a teacher who works with the research participant (University of Alberta, 2021).

The TCPS 2 is rightly concerned with protecting the dignity of participants in research, taking special note of populations that could be considered vulnerable. Queer youth are often a population defined as vulnerable. However, that definition of vulnerable refers to their elevated risk as a group to negative health outcomes, not to their reduced capacity for decision-making (Mustanski, 2011). The process of waiving parental permission is not to circumvent the authority of parents and their ability to look after the welfare of their children, but to allow research to be conducted in circumstances where parental permission is not a reasonable protection for those youth (Mustanski, 2011).

Recognizing potential participants under the age of 18 as mature minors, with involvement of their GSA advisor to attest to their capacity to consent freely and acting as a

safeguard for their welfare, is in accordance with the core principles of Respect for Persons, respecting their autonomy and ability to freely consent while committing to accountability and transparency; Concern for Welfare, promoting the wellbeing of participants in view of foreseeable risks; and Justice, where queer youth have often been excluded from expressing their perspectives directly in research about them (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the case study approach for this thesis, and provided justification for it. The research design portion outlined case selection and recruitment procedures; data collection choices and procedures; analysis techniques; and ethical considerations for this study. This research design helped me to answer the research questions as outlined in Chapter 1, and interpret my findings through the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2.

Chapter 4: Data Review

In this chapter, I share and discuss the data resulting from interviews with students from various high schools, including reflections from my research journals, which encompass a discussion of the similarities and differences between the responses.

I began to analyze the data during collection, marking the beginning of data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995). As described in Chapter 3, coding began by assigning codes to information in interview transcripts and other data, highlighting data that related to the original research questions (Lichtman, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process was iterative, beginning with the first interview. Having a second interview allowed for a comparative coding process, generating coded categories. This was followed by the sorting of these initial coded categories into larger themes, which allowed the data to be revisited and sorted. Themes that were generated were intended to be responsive to the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I was also guided in my coding principles by Lichtman's (2017) guide to drawing meaning from the data, particularly the section on conventional content analysis, where coding categories are generated from the text.

I also kept a researcher journal to record my reflections after interviews, during and after data transcription, and during the coding process. This was helpful to examine the positions and biases I brought to the research (Stake, 1995). As a cisgender, heterosexual male in the education system, I am aware that I occupy a position of privilege. Some of that privilege was laid bare as participants explained their experiences in school, and journaling helped me to come to terms with the inequities that have been all too easy for me to leave in the theoretical realm. I recorded five formal journal entries, one after each interview, one after each transcription and one during the coding process. Another form of journaling came in the form of memos and notes I wrote to

myself in the margins of the transcripts, and in the chapter outlines I sketched out. Yin (2014) suggests writing these memos to alert ourselves to clues that the data are providing. In particular, these memos helped alert me to how the participants' experiences aligned with previous research.

The data collected as responses to the interview questions (see Appendix D) are grouped by themes responding to the secondary research questions. The first section of this chapter provides an overview of each participant, offering some biographical information for context for their responses. The second section presents insights into how the participants reported their own resilience, directly and indirectly, by discussing both their responses about resilience, and the physical artifacts that they brought into the interview.

The third section examines participant responses about their experiences with GSAs and the roles their GSAs both do and do not play, how those responses reported constructs of resilience evident in their GSA activity, and how they aligned with principles of queer theory and pedagogy. Griffin (2004) highlighted four roles that GSAs play in schools: offering counselling and support for queer youth; offering a safe space for discussion and socializing; serving as a vehicle for educating the school; and engaging in broader advocacy efforts, and this study was used to help frame the roles participants reported their GSAs played. Studies that have examined GSAs from a resilience perspective (Calzo et al., 2020; Poteat, 2017; Poteat et al., 2015, 2023; Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020; Poteat, Rivers, et al., 2020) have looked more closely at how these roles were tied to constructs of resilience, offering a framework to examine how principles of resilience theory and queer theory align in participant responses.

The fourth section looks at the role of GSA advisors in the experiences of the participants. The final section explores the participants experience in their broader school

community. While this theme is not directly related to the research questions, it informs the analysis of the participants' experience in GSAs.

Review of Participants

Two interviews were conducted: one a focus group interview with four participants, taking place at the Rainbow Resource Centre, while the other interview was a one-on-one interview at the participant's school. The interviews took place in May and June of 2023. All participants were enrolled in Manitoba schools in grade 9-12 for the 2022-23 school year, and attended their school's GSA in that school year. To protect the privacy of the participants, pseudonyms have been used, and other identifying information, such as names of schools or teachers, has been also changed. To protect the privacy of focus group participants, participants were asked not to share names or responses of other participants, and identifying information for other participants was removed from transcripts when they were sent for member checks. Some schools used different names for their GSAs, but since some of those names are unique to those schools, the term GSA will be used for all schools' clubs, so as not to provide identifying information. When participants are quoted, their original language, with associated grammatical quirks, will be used as much as possible, in order for this project to tell their story in their voice (Lichtman, 2017).

Focus Group Participants

Eliot. Eliot is a grade nine student attending Forest High in Winnipeg, a school of over 1,000 students. Eliot uses they/she pronouns. Eliot has used many labels to describe themselves over the years, but currently uses the term lesbian to describe their sexuality. In terms of their gender identity, Eliot says "sometimes I feel more like a girl, and sometimes I just feel like kind of, like, nothing. And it kind of fluctuates between those two." They enjoy reading, writing, and

listening to music, and feel that, as a student, writing is one of their strengths. Eliot describes themselves as “an overthinker,” which then leads to social anxiety. This can then lead to missing school, which can stress them out further. Eliot was very open in their responses, but seemed to process their feelings about their experiences as others offered responses on their experiences. After listening to others’ reflections, Eliot would often come back to their previous responses and share new insights or reflections.

Eliot has attended their school’s GSA this past year, and described it as “a really good place” where “the staff is super supportive.” Eliot’s GSA meets once a week during lunch, and also has an after-school meeting once a month. Eliot reports that interest, and therefore attendance, varies throughout the year. They described that it felt like the group lost momentum towards the end of this school year. This echoes Lapointe’s (2018) findings about variable attendance in their research. This change in interest and perceived momentum affected how Eliot felt about their GSA, being less enthusiastic about it now in May than they were at the beginning of the school year. Eliot’s varying enthusiasm towards their GSA also reminds us that we ought to expect variability within youth in their GSA experiences (Poteat et al., 2023).

Simon. Simon also attends Forest High in Winnipeg, is a student in grade 10, and uses he/him pronouns. Simon is a trans male and identifies as bisexual and demiromantic. He enjoys learning about science, but generally describes himself as having low academic expectations. Outside of the classroom, art is one of his strengths. He especially enjoys drawing, and creative projects, and this is one of the ways he contributes to his GSA and other clubs he is involved in. Sometimes he feels like he takes on too much in that area, which can affect his schoolwork, but he still feels that it is an important way that he can contribute to his GSA. Simon tended to start his responses with smaller pieces of information, but would get more expansive as we dug into a

topic. He had a tendency to use sarcasm as he described experiences that had exasperated and frustrated him at school. Because he and Eliot attended the same school, they often had a back and forth, confirming information, or comparing their different perceptions of experiences in their school and GSA.

Simon attended his school's GSA this year, as well as last year, when he was in grade 9. Simon echoes Eliot's experience that their school's GSA seemed to lose momentum over the course of the year. Simon was also able to compare it to his experience in his previous year at Forest High, where attendance was as high as 20 to 30 people, to the end of this year, where it has been fewer than 10. Simon also has a conflict in attending his school's GSA as the school's Indigenous club also meets at the same time, which forces him to choose between attending one group or the other.

Jade. Jade is a grade 9 student who attends Riverbend School in Winnipeg, a school that goes to grade 9, and has about 700 students. Jade uses she/her pronouns, and identifies as female and lesbian. Her hobbies outside of school are music, dancing and swimming. Jade describes herself as having anxiety in class, and finds her mind tends to wander, making it difficult to learn new material. Jade was a quieter participant, and seemed to be choosing her words so she could provide the best response to topics we were discussing, sometimes checking in to make sure we were clear on what she was explaining.

Jade's GSA meets at lunch on the same day of each school day cycle. Jade reports that a lot of people attend her GSA. Jade reports that while she feels like she can express herself in her GSA, at the same time she reports that there are some students who attend who she feels do not respect her that much. Like at Forest High, at Riverbend, there is an Indigenous club that meets at the same time as the GSA, and Jade often finds herself there instead of the GSA.

Skye. Skye is a grade 11 student who attends Prairie View High, a high school of about 1,000 students in a community outside Winnipeg. Skye uses they/them pronouns, and uses the word queer to define both their sexuality and gender. Skye enjoys going to the gym, and takes pride in their role as a manager at a fast-food restaurant. While they do not see themselves as a very successful student, finding it hard to focus in school, they point to their role as manager at their workplace as evidence of their ability to work hard and do well. Skye was most direct of the participants, and clearly expressed their feelings about things that frustrated them, or about what needed to change in their school.

Skye's GSA meets once a week after school. Skye did not report feeling terribly enthusiastic about attending their GSA, reporting that one of the reasons they went is because one of their parents was encouraging them to do more social things.

One-on-One Interview Participant

Maddox. Maddox is a grade 9 student at Grasslands High in Winnipeg, a smaller high school of about 150 students. Maddox uses they/them pronouns, and identifies as non-binary and omnisexual/asexual. This past year, Maddox was a lead in a musical this year, and took pride in being a part of that experience. Maddox's school operates on a homeroom model, meaning that they have stayed with the same teacher and same 20 classmates all year. Maddox will continue to have the same teacher all the way through their journey to grade 12, and much of their schoolwork is project-based. Maddox enjoys the community that the homeroom model, coupled with the smaller size of the school, creates. Maddox sees themselves as someone who is outgoing, able to adjust to things well, and as having leadership qualities, having won a leadership award in their previous school and helping to lead their GSA this year. Maddox was very enthusiastic

about participating, and had an optimistic, forward-looking approach to their school, their GSA, and the people they interacted with, always choosing to focus on the positive.

Though a GSA at Grasslands High had existed in previous years, there was no incarnation of it this school year until a peer of Maddox's started it up again in March. Maddox joined when that happened, and soon became part of the leadership of the GSA, helping to manage its social media account, and making sure that meetings got announced by going class to class to let students know about them. While attendance at Maddox GSA was small (aside from an early meeting where there was food offered, it was often only the two leaders and the teacher advisors), Maddox looks forward to growing the GSA as they move through Grasslands from grade 9 to grade 12, expressing eagerness to offer a safe space to incoming students next year who might need it.

“In Case I Need a Tech Deck”: Participants’ Perspectives on Their Resilience

Participants were asked to share an object that represented their GSA or their resilience, and I asked them follow-up questions about how they defined resilience for themselves. Some participants included the school assignment that they had brought in the discussion about resilience. This allowed for both direct and indirect answers to the questions of how participants viewed their resilience.

While resilience from the viewpoint of PYD describes the interactions between youth and their environment (Masten, 2014), when participants were asked about how they would define resilience, most gave an answer that echoed the deficit model of resilience – inner strength that allowed them to bounce back from adversity. Skye shared that resilience, to them, “means being able to stand back up when things get really hard, and, you know, some things are really hard, you know?” Simon explained that “resilience is like getting through tough times and, like, being

okay.” When discussing resilience, Maddox gave the context of their GSA not being as big and successful as they had hoped for, and not getting as much done as they had hoped for. They then explained that they felt that resilience in this context was that, “I feel like its good to just kind of push through it,” indicating, along the same lines as Skye and Simon, that pushing through adversity is key to what they consider resilience is. Eliot explained, “resilience for me is just like making little changes and, like, getting through stuff.” These responses implied to me that the deficit model is the dominant mode of discourse concerning resilience, especially in schools. The focus seems to be on the individual’s ability to push through, rather than understanding resilience as interactions between individuals and their ecology.

When the discussion shifted to the objects and assignments that the participants brought with them, a more nuanced view emerged of how their views on resilience align with some of the constructs of PYD. Simon brought with him a Tech Deck (a miniature skateboard) and a small tape measure (see Figure 3). Simon shared that growing up, he didn’t feel like he had stability, and often worried about household problems and how they might affect family finances, and about how he had uncertainty and anxiety around that. Simon shared an example:

There's the basement's flooding because the fridge is leaking and ice and stuff. So I'd be like, worried and stuff about that because, you know, I'm a kid, I can't really do anything. I tried to help and like, I put, like, a small bowl where the leak was. Didn't do much. It was just like a metal bowl. Right? Like, this is like, why? So I had to, like, carry it upstairs and, like, pour it out.

Given that context, Simon explained that the tape measure represented his need to be prepared.

I carry stuff on me a lot of the time. I have my bag. Why do I bring it? Just in case.

I have a flashlight, an umbrella. I have a ton of stuff. Need an eraser for some reason? You know, just like, stuff, because, you know, I might need it.

With the Tech Deck, Simon joked that it was “in case I, you know, need a Tech Deck,” but went on to explain how it had come in handy when doing an activity in a class when he could use the Tech Deck instead of the, in his opinion, inferior material that the teacher had provided. “It just makes me feel like I’m more prepared and resilient for like, what’s to come,” he explained.

Figure 3

Simon’s Tech Deck and Tape Measure



At the end of this discussion, Simon offered another meaning of resilience for him: “Probably feeling safe, you know...if you’re in a situation where you’re unsafe and you can get safe, I guess.” Simon is accessing experiences of power and control, where a sense of control, and feeling an ability to effect change on one’s own and care for oneself is important (Ungar et al., 2019). When we take into account that resilience involves the capacity of an individual to navigate to resources, and that the definition of resilience is contextually unique (Ungar et al., 2008), Simon’s choice of objects, given his recounting of early childhood stressors, makes sense.

Simon's story of worry over a leaking fridge, and attempting to solve the problem with what limited resources he had at hand, provide context for choosing a tape measure (and describing how he has objects like flashlights, umbrellas and erasers close at hand). By attempting to be ready for any circumstance, Simon is building his sense of competence by building his self-efficacy and adaptiveness (Lerner et al., 2005), as well as embodying the construct of mastery, building his sense that "one can master one's environment" (Prince-Embury & Courville, 2008).

Eliot referenced both an object and the assignment they brought. Eliot showed a rainbow bracelet (see Figure 4), and referenced a rainbow necklace (not shown), which they felt allowed them to represent their queer identity without feeling like they are being too overt about it. "I've got a lot of compliments, especially about the necklace. People are like, 'Hey, I really like your necklace.' And I know that they don't know why I'm wearing it. Like, they don't know the true meaning and personal meaning behind it, but it just like, makes me feel good." Eliot also explained that they alter the way they dress so as to avoid negative comments.

I used to represent myself pretty masculine. Where, like, I would wear only baggy clothes, which I still do. I had, like, a short pixie cut. I got misgendered a lot. That was the big thing. And just people would tell me that just because I look a certain way, I'm not a girl. And it was kind of, like, weird for me because it's just a way of expressing myself. And I also started dressing more femininely and stuff. And then when that happened, it kind of stopped.

While having to alter the way they express their identity to avoid negative interactions is not a desirable outcome, it is one way for Eliot to exercise control over their situation (Higa et al., 2014). In this case, Eliot is choosing their unique path to resilience (Ungar et al., 2008), as this is

a safe way for them to negotiate the tension of a desirable personal identity in their school environment (Ungar et al., 2019).

Figure 4

Eliot's Bracelet



Further to negotiating this tension, Eliot referred to the school assignment they wanted to discuss, an essay they wrote called “Who Am I?” This essay was written as a classroom assignment, and writing it contributed to feeling more comfortable to be in that class. Eliot felt that they were able to explain about themselves in a private way to the teacher, and that it made them feel “understood and respected.” The essay gave another way for Eliot to negotiate the tension of developing a desirable personal identity in the context of the school system, by having a private communication with a teacher, and it also gave them the feeling of trust and support, sub-constructs of sense of relatedness (Prince-Embury & Courville, 2008), and connection (Lerner et al., 2005). Although Eliot never discussed this assignment with the teacher, the opportunity to communicate about themselves nonetheless contributed to their sense of well-being, echoing the importance not just of actual support, but the *perception* of support by adults as important to developing resilience in youth (Poteat et al., 2015; Prince-Embury & Courville,

2008). Here we find an example of how school assignments can be structured to align with constructs of PYD, especially how they can consider the “Big Three” characteristics, in particular allowing for developing positive relationships with caring adults and providing opportunities for engagement for queer youth in assignments (Masten, 2014; Sanders et al., 2017).

Jade brought, as her objects, a bracelet with a cross on it, and a necklace that has a pendant with her childhood dog’s ashes in it. The bracelet “reminds me that God is always with me, and, like, I am safe, and I shouldn’t be afraid to show who I am.” Likewise, the necklace “makes me feel more safe. And when I have it on, I’m more calm.” In a one-on-one interview, we might have had the time to delve deeper into those thoughts, especially the role faith and religion play in her path to resilience, but Jade’s choice of objects reminded me that the path to resilience will be unique for each individual (Lerner et al., 2013; Ungar et al., 2008). Jade is navigating the tensions of adherence to cultural traditions and the development of a desirable personal identity (Ungar et al., 2019), which, in this case, will be related to Jade’s interaction with her faith community.

Skye described their trouble deciding on an object to bring, and asked the advice of a teacher. Instead of a personal object, Skye settled on two documents, *My New Gender Workbook* and a Career and Resilience workbook that helped them work through gender identity, and also talked about coping skills. Ungar et al. (2019) point to access to material resources as one of the tensions of resilience that needs to be navigated which can predict resilience at school. These resources include educational resources – in this case the workbooks that Skye discusses – which predict greater resilience in the school context. One explanation for this may be that access to these resources addresses immediate needs by providing coping strategies, and promoting the

cognitive hope attributes of belief , efficacy, and knowledge (Poteat, Rivers, et al., 2020). It is also a reminder that GSAs can, and *should*, structure experiences (such as working through resources like these workbooks) that lead to self-efficacy (Prince-Embury, 2013).

Figure 5

Maddox's Pronoun Pin Project



Maddox brought in an object that was both representative of their resilience and doubled as a school assignment to discuss (see Figure 5). It was a box of different pronoun pins that they had designed and manufactured themselves. It was the result of a project where students had to recognize an injustice and find a way of addressing it that lined up with what their strengths. Maddox took on the project thinking about trans youth and mental health. As part of the project, students went to a local mall and displayed their projects, giving them the opportunity to interact with members of the public. While Maddox had been worried about that aspect of the project,

they recounted largely positive interactions with people. This project is a great example of PYD principles, offering a chance to do advocacy work in an area of social justice (Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020), developing self-efficacy (Prince-Embury & Courville, 2008), and building the constructs of confidence, competence, and connection, leading to the enactment of those constructs through contribution (Lerner et al., 2005). PYD encourages youth to exercise personal agency, emphasize their strengths and draw on their capacities to face challenges, and honour the unique situations of youth (Sanders et al., 2017), all of which this project explored.

Roles that GSAs Play

Griffin et al. (2004) described one of the roles of the GSA as being a safe space for discussion and socializing. While Griffin uses the language of “safe space,” there have been critiques of that language. It is rare that any space is truly “safe” (Collective, 2014). In light of those critiques, there has been a movement to reconceptualize these efforts as creating “brave spaces,” which are co-constructed by students and teachers, offering support as they grapple with discomfort in engaging in difficult dialogues (Brazill & Ruff, 2022). Another way of understanding safe spaces is accepting that a state of “safeness” is never really achieved, but rather that they should be understood through the relational work that goes into cultivating them (Collective, 2014). Given the different perspectives on what a safe space can be, and the limitations of such language, I will use the term “safer space” going forward, which, besides making no claim on an absolute, static state of safety, also points to how my participants described their experiences within their GSAs.

The participant responses related to this role were expansive enough that in my analysis two distinct themes clearly emerged in this category. For the purposes of presenting the data, and following Griffin et al., I have divided the role of GSA into two themes – the GSA as a safer

space to explore their identity (but distinct from counselling and support contexts), and the GSA as a safer space for socialization.

“Bam! I was so Comfortable”: GSAs as a Safer Space to Explore Identity

Most participants described their GSA as a safer space to discuss and explore their identity. One of the main reasons that participants described their GSAs as a safer space was that it was a space where they could encounter other queer-identifying schoolmates, and realize that they are not alone, both in their identities and in their school experiences. As Simon described, “For me, the club, it seems to be like a place where you can go and feel less alone. There *is* other gay people at our school! It isn't just homophobic boys writing mean graffiti in the men's washrooms,” further explaining, “it was like really nice because it was like, you know, you're not that alone. So yeah, I would say it did have a positive effect on me.” Jade echoed that the “biggest change for me was like, knowing that there's other gay people in the school.”

Simon and Jade are describing their GSAs enacting a fundamental purpose of countering heteronormative narratives by becoming a gathering point that affirms queer existence (Lapointe, 2018). In the affirming social space, Simon and Jade encounter a counter-discourse to heteronormative narratives. Where heteronormative discourse posits that “the idea that the emergence of more queers might be a desirable outcome remains unthinkable” (Warner, 1991), their experience in their GSAs offered a different narrative. While Simon and Jade did not use Warner's terminology, their narrative of their GSA experience was that it described their bodies and identities in ways that were desirable and “thinkable.” The very act of gathering and socializing as queer youth is a political act (Thompson, 2012), providing a gathering point that allows them to question what is normative (Callis, 2009; Foucault, 1978). The queer pedagogical goal of questioning what is normative aligns with the goals of PYD, in that being able to develop

counter-narratives ends up being an important step in negotiating the tension of developing a desirable personal identity. Being able to identify as part of a group allowed participants the experience of social cohesion, feeling that their presence is not only noticed but that it matters (Ungar et al., 2019). In addition, it allowed them to see that they are (or have the opportunity to be) part of a larger community (Poteat et al., 2015).

Eliot described this precisely in their description of their GSA as “a community because like, everybody kind of knows each other. Everybody's feelings are like, accounted for.” The type of peer validation that Eliot describes builds relational empowerment, especially since many queer youth lack the opportunity to receive that peer validation in the broader school community. (Poteat, Calzo, et al., 2020; Poteat et al., 2016). While Eliot’s perception of their GSA has changed over the course of the school year, at the beginning of the school year “it was like, bam! I was so comfortable. And, I don't know, I was just very happy to find that place.” Social comfort is an aspect of developing a sense of relatedness that enhances resiliency (Prince-Embury & Courville, 2008).

Skye was not as effusive about their GSA, but echoed that “it's nice to know that there are other gay people, like gay people I didn't expect to be gay...but like, I would function just fine if I didn't go.” At the same time, Skye later reported that one of the main functions of their GSA was that participants are there for each other, and described an important relationship with a fellow student who came out in high school and attends their GSA, and whom they work with, as someone that they can talk to. Access to supportive relationships is an important factor in building resilience (Ungar et al., 2019), and “being able to relate to others in a meaningful and long-lasting way...constitutes resiliency” (Prince-Embury, 2013). Here, it is the facilitating of meaningful interactions with other queer youth that is important, as “the peers of adolescents

represent important instances of the individuals that may serve as resources for PYD” (Lerner et al., 2013), and is an important way that Skye’s GSA is a locus for the development of their resiliency.

Maddox was much more effusive about their experiences in their GSA, both presently and historically, explaining that being able to attend a GSA was instrumental in helping them understand and explore their identity:

We go way back into like when I was in grade four. It was back in that GSA, it was more like, “Hey, let's learn about this sexuality and hey, let's learn about this gender identity.” And so that's what got my head thinking, like, okay, maybe I'm not this, maybe I'm not necessarily this anymore. And then in grade six, everything, I kind of was just like, “Oh, oh, right!” So I would say that that definitely impacted me pretty well. And I'm glad that I decided to join that GSA, because if I didn't, I don't think I would have been able to figure myself out that quickly or like that early on. I feel like maybe it would have taken a few more years.

Maddox’s perception of their GSA was that it fostered the idea that the emergence of more queers and the development of their identities is a desirable thing (Warner, 1991). Their description also showed that their GSA engaged in queer pedagogical practices, which allowed GSA members to explore queer issues and identities (Lapointe, 2014, 2016).

Kumashiro (2002) describes the “Other” as groups who are traditionally marginalized, as queer youth often are in schools. In exploring education for the Other, Kumashiro describes a space “where Otherness is embraced, where normalcy...is not presumed, where students will have an audience for their Othered voices” (p. 34). From Maddox’s perspective, their GSA delivered in the role of providing education for the Other, providing a space that was separate,

supportive, and empowering. Overall, Maddox reported that their long-standing involvement in GSAs has been a meaningful part of how they were able to develop their identity, and how they came to understand that they had a welcoming community in which to do so. Their cumulative experiences of support (Prince-Embury, 2013) and allowed them to develop both self-confidence and connection with others (Lerner et al., 2005):

in reality I've never really had that feeling [of being alone] because I was always very accepted, and I was always in a bunch of GSAs and I knew a lot of queer people. Like in my school. So I never felt alone. I knew that there was other people out there.

“Come Here and Chill”: GSAs as Safer Social Spaces

Another reason that participants described their GSA a safer space was that it was a place where they could engage in socializing. All of the focus group participants described their GSAs as functioning mainly as a social space. Simon described Forest High’s GSA as “our club, it’s kind of like a hangout, you know?” with Eliot echoing “Yeah, it’s just kind of like, come here and chill.” Jade described “some of the activities that we do is like making bracelets or just like talking.” One of the benefits of this socialization, according to Skye, is peer support, while Eliot saw the benefit as being able to sound out new ideas, saying, “It’s like kind of just like expressing your own thoughts and seeing what other people contribute.” Maddox reported that although in their current GSA the focus (since the group had only started in March) was largely focused on Pride Week activities, their past experiences in GSAs had also largely been social in nature.

Many studies on peer interactions in GSAs tend to focus on the value of socialization in terms of peer support, while little attention has been paid to the value of simply hanging out. A recent study has found that when GSAs provide time for unstructured socializing, youth report

more positive affect (Poteat et al., 2023). In another study, the prevalent theme reported by GSA members, as in these interviews, was that the GSA built community by providing a space for social support and engagement (Porta et al., 2017). While it is true that socializing generally has positive benefits for all adolescents, since peers are often a primary source of social support, socializing in the safer confines of their GSA is especially important for queer youth given that they often experience rejection and discomfort in other settings (Poteat et al., 2016). Through these positive peer interactions, participants are able to negotiate the tensions of accessing supportive relationships while also building a desirable personal identity (Ungar et al., 2019).

However, because participants described their GSAs as being primarily a social space, and one where they could feel comfortable with their queer identity, when they felt the GSAs didn't fulfill those roles, it was a significant disappointment. While Skye reported that they had a meaningful relationship with a peer in their GSA, at the same time they reported that their GSA can be quite a lonely place: "if you aren't friends with someone there, you're sitting alone in the back of the classroom. But like, even the teacher won't talk to you if you go in and, like, you aren't friends with someone there." Jade, too, reported that the social dynamics of her GSA made it difficult to attend, saying that "some of the people that are in there don't really like, respect me that much. So I try and stay away from those people." Instead, she ended up attending the Indigenous club at their school more, explaining that "I choose that more because of people in there actually, like, treat me how they would be treated." Similarly, Simon has often opted for the Indigenous club in his school over GSA attendance, indicating that this choice is made because of friendship group affinities. Later on in the interview, he also talked about having the opportunity to go to the Indigenous club room to smudge in response to stressful incidents,

implying that the Indigenous club offers different ways of negotiating the tensions that contribute to resilience.

This reporting was a reminder that GSAs are not a panacea for queer youth, nor are they going to meet every need of every student all the time. Noticing who participates and who does not, and how they do or do not participate is important so that GSAs can find creative ways to provide tailored safety and support (Griffin et al., 2004). It is also a reminder that while different youth will report different experiences in their GSA, we should also expect that there will be variability within how individuals report their own experiences over the course of their time in a GSA (Poteat et al., 2023). Jade and Simon both reporting that they felt more supported in their Indigenous club reminds us that the path of individual youth to resilience will not be uniform, and that they will seek out culturally meaningful paths to resilience (Ungar et al., 2008). This is a reminder that GSAs might not (and should not) be the only locus of resilience for queer youth in a school. However, as will be discussed later in this chapter in the section on School Climate, those other paths to resilience for queer youth are often made more difficult to negotiate because of the dominant heteronormative discourses that play out in the larger, everyday spaces of schools.

“You Can Only Do So Much”: GSAs as Counselling and Support

Griffin (2004) showed that offering counselling and support to queer students is one of the purposes that GSAs can serve. However, in that study only two of 22 GSAs studied played this role, and both of those GSAs operated in an underground manner due to a hostile school environment, and were run by the school’s guidance counsellor. It was not surprising then, that participants in this study did not report their GSAs were places for counselling, but that they felt that they could go to their guidance counsellor for that type of support. Skye offered that they felt

that they could talk to their GSA adviser about issues, but felt that they were limited in what that advisor could offer. “You can only do so much. She can give you advice. That’s more of a guidance counsellor issue.” Jade and Eliot agreed that they would be more likely to go to their guidance counsellor to discuss larger issues. Maddox also reported using their guidance counsellor rather than the GSA to address how issues such as deadnaming and homophobia affected them personally.

The involvement of guidance counsellors in larger issues makes sense for queer youth. Guidance counsellors interact with queer youth on many levels of their ecology (Beck et al., 2018). While they can offer advice on an individual level, they can also work with students who bully queer youth, in order to change their behaviour (Mahan et al., 2007). In addition, effective counsellors can be advocates for systemic change with administration within a school (Beck, 2020).

“Showing We Are Here”: GSAs as A Vehicle for Education

Another important role that GSAs play is that of education; both for participants, and for the larger school. Kumashiro (2002) describes this as education about the Other, where the goal is to raise awareness in the wider school about the Othered. Participants reported their GSAs attempting this in a variety of ways.

Possibly because the interviews took place on either side of Pride Week, and so it was the most recent event their GSA had worked on or been involved in, all participants named a Pride March as the primary education piece that their GSA engaged in. Skye’s school was engaging in a Pride Walk during the school day, and that other students were invited to join. Skye reported that it was “the only big event that was, like, broadcasted to the school.” At Forest High, Simon and Eliot explained that their school would also be engaging in a neighborhood Pride Walk, and

that they had invited a nearby middle school to join as well. Neither Jade nor Maddox had an in-school Pride Walk, but their schools were inviting students to take part in the Pride Walk that took place in Winnipeg on June 4th. Maddox completed the assignment of advertising this opportunity to their school through their GSAs' Instagram account.

Events like school Pride Walks, and taking part as a school in the larger Pride March can be important parts of the resilience pathway for queer youth. Queer youth get a sense of connection to community, both by inviting others to join them, thus connecting to the wider school community, and by joining the larger queer community in a celebratory event. In doing so, they are accessing experiences of social cohesion (Ungar et al., 2019), as well as getting a sense of outside support, which is linked to developing a greater sense of purpose in their individual lives (Poteat, 2017). This was particularly evident in talking with Maddox, who was energized by their involvement with their GSA since it started in March, and had done a lot of work promoting Pride Week at their school. Maddox's work in their GSA inspired them to continue their leadership next year:

I feel like I'll have more of a motivation next year because I'll be like, okay, there's going to be new grade nines who are absolutely terrified to like coming to high school. They need that little space, and if it's not there like once a week, then what are they going to do that week? Like, that could be their only saving grace...

Maddox has an optimistic outlook on the future of their GSA and is excited by how the ideas they have generated about how to engage in more educational activities next year, such as presentations on queer history, and a larger Pride Week event, especially as they plan to have their GSA running from the beginning of the school year. Maddox sees their GSA as a viable

vehicle for such activities, and their positive experience this year makes them more determined to make similar events happen in the future.

While organizing and participating in these events has been good for these participants, Kumashiro (2002) notes the weakness of leaning entirely on this approach. He argues that education about the Other needs to be more integrated, working against the idea that it can be achieved in one-off events like Pride Walks. One-off events are also, by definition, not the norm, and so further the discourse of heteronormativity, revealing the problem of normalcy as a problem of culture (Britzman, 1995).

Simon and Eliot discussed visiting surrounding middle schools whose students would attend Forest High, in order to advertise the fact that a GSA did exist at Forest High, and making it known to the students that everyone is welcome. As Eliot described, “we visited them and said like, ‘Hey, if you're coming to Forest High, here's what to expect. You should join our club.’ Like, it wasn't like preaching “join,” right? But it was like very much like, ‘Oh, just this. This is our club. This is what we do.’” Here we find Forest High's GSA engaging in practices of effective PYD, namely providing opportunities for leadership and engagement (Masten, 2014; Sanders et al., 2017). This promotes self-confidence (Lerner et al., 2013; Poteat, 2017) and builds mastery (Prince-Embury, 2013) among youth.

On the other hand, it appears that in their explanation of the school visit, Eliot has internalized a degree of censorship, making clear that they weren't preaching “join,” but merely advertising the GSA's existence. Here, Eliot seems to anticipate the fear of some that GSAs are dangerous and would like to indoctrinate students into a queer ‘lifestyle’ (Herriot, 2011). This fear has been the subject in the recent Manitoba elections where “parental rights” have become an issue regarding queer content in public education, and where discourse surrounding this

matter has included a fear that children are being indoctrinated into becoming queer (Pindera, 2023). However, returning to the context of Eliot and Simon's middle school visits, research shows that when *all* students are invited to join GSAs, including straight cisgender allies, they can produce safe, positive peer relationships that counter Othering, heteronormative discourses (Lapointe, 2015), and could eventually lead to being able to leverage the privileged status of allies to push for advocacy in a number of directions (Lapointe, 2014).

Simon and Eliot also reported that their GSA did try to engage in education activities to their student body at Forest High about the fact that their GSA existed, but they felt that they were unsuccessful. Eliot reported that the GSA was going to put a "Queer Fact of the Week" in the announcements, but that it stopped after a couple of weeks. Neither Simon nor Eliot were clear on why the "Queer Fact of the Week" stopped being included – possible causes include a lack of follow-through on the part of the GSA, or lack of support from the administration. Simon also reported that in the previous year, the GSA made posters and put them around the school, but that a lot of them got torn down.

Eliot Yeah. Miss Smith wanted to do that again. But then they were talking and they're like, it's hard to say if they're going to get wrecked again.

Simon I think you should do it, though, because like, even if they do get wrecked, still, it's like just put them back up.

Eliot Yeah, yeah.

Simon It's like showing like, we are here, you know, instead of just being like, we're not here.

Likewise, Skye reported that their GSA was not widely advertised, saying “it's like no one knows about it and unless you're talking to them the first two weeks school is and there's posters up.” On the other hand, Jade's perception is that “Everyone knows what [GSA] is because, like, it's announced quite a lot. And like, we do have, like, some posters up.” Maddox was an enthusiastic promoter of their GSA, running their Instagram account, which advertised upcoming events, such as the Pride Parade, as well as ensuring that announcements about GSA meetings showed up on the school TVs that post announcements, and going from class to class on the days of GSA meetings reminding students that they were happening. However, they also admitted that they would sometimes forget, or give up on going to classes for announcements because “it was just simply, we were just – we knew that we weren't going to get a lot of people anyways, right? So we were just like, you know what? Forget it.”

In these narratives, the weariness of the participants became clear. The disappointment of not following through on “Queer Fact of the Week,” the debate about whether or not it would be worth it to keep putting up posters that might get torn down, the disappointment in not getting new members to the GSA in spite of persistent cheerful promotion. They are experiencing that “being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences” (Warner, 1991). While students are being given opportunities for leadership and engagement it appears, through their narrative, that momentum for their projects is up to them. Because of this, when they fail to follow through that failure appears to them as more of a personal failure than a systemic failure. In this way, the heteronormative school system “bears down in the heaviest...way on those with the least resources to combat it: queer children and teens” (Warner, 1991). Students need the adults in their lives to support them in their projects (Lerner et al., 2013; Poteat, 2017), but schools have never been institutions who “lead the way to

queer liberation” (Thompson, 2012). The stories of these participants suggest that their schools have also not supported them in their attempts to amplify their voices and claim their space in their school – even in the mundane places such as school announcements and hallway posters.

This abandonment points to a larger structural issue for the participants and their GSAs. In order to perform all roles, but particularly the role of being a vehicle for education – for both queer youth and for the wider school – GSAs need to be supported by school leaders. Students need to see their lives reflected in the “seemingly mundane, but critical, every day interactions that human beings have” (Lugg & Tooms, 2010), such as announcements and hallway posters, and that needs to be encouraged and promoted by administration: “What is honoured and valued by the administration tends to be honoured and valued by the school or school system” (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). While Maddox felt that their GSA could ask their principal for financial support for activities and expect support, Eliot perceived a less enthusiastic support from their school’s administration. Students’ perception of outside support, such as that of administration, for their GSA is tied to a greater sense of purpose, which ties to the resiliency construct of self-efficacy (Poteat et al., 2015). Students clearly notice whether or not that outside support is present. While Maddox’s perceived sense of support resulted in optimism for future endeavours, Simon and Eliot had a more pessimistic view of what was possible for their GSA and what would be supported.

Another component of GSAs as a vehicle for education is that they can be places that offer GSA members resources for their own lives. A PYD perspective on resilience requires “focus on the social and physical environment as the locus of resources for personal growth” (Ungar, 2012). While it is clear that participants’ GSAs offered support in the form of safer spaces, relationships with teachers, and a space for socialization, support in the form of resources

was harder to identify. When asked about resources that their GSA had to offer, Simon explained “There isn't much. Like, then they don't really have many resources. Like, they've said on occasion, like, ‘Rainbow Resource’, like the namedrop, but, like, not much else.” He went on to explain that the GSA participants wanted to provide other kinds of resources: “We planned on like, getting binders for, like, if people who needed them needed like a binder. That's one thing I remember is wanting to do, like, you know, hygiene products and stuff like that.” Eliot added that “I feel like our school, sadly, does not have the funding to do that.” We discussed how the GSA might get funding for initiatives. Simon and Eliot explained how their GSA held a bake sale to raise funds, but otherwise would have to apply to administration for funds, but needed, according to Eliot, “good reasoning.” Here, as above, Eliot felt that their principal offered nominal support: “the one time we did [apply for funds], he kind of, he was like okay” but Eliot felt that it “just kind of got like forgotten about.” Simon was more critical, saying that it felt like “hygiene isn’t a good enough reason.” Simon and Eliot are voicing that they feel only nominal administration support for their GSA.

Skye pointed to a Teen Clinic that operates out of their school, which offers support such as birth control and hygiene products for students. While Skye recognized that this wasn’t a GSA support, it was clear that they saw it as a place where they could receive gender-related counselling and medical advice, and felt that it was a good resource at their school.

It is clear that our participants are attempting to navigate the tension of access to material resources (Ungar et al., 2019). But while it seems that they have shown the capacity to navigate to resources, by holding bake sales to get funds and requesting support from administration, an equally important part of resilience is the capacity of their ecologies to provide those resources. “It is this dual process of navigation toward available resources and negotiation for resources to

be provided in ways valued by young people that implicates both individuals *and their environments* [emphasis added] in a dynamic process leading to well-being” (Ungar et al., 2008). Here again, we point to Lugg and Tooms (2010) assertion that what is honoured by administration is valued by the school system.

One way that GSAs could offer resources is by being a ‘queer pipeline’ to the larger queer community and to queer-affirming organizations (Porta et al., 2017). Here, a glimpse into Maddox’s educational experience, though not provided by their GSA, is helpful. Maddox has the opportunity to engage in internships each year at their school. In the previous year, they interned at a children’s museum, where they were given the opportunity to organize a pride event. Maddox reported:

I got to do a pride event there and I made the craft, I picked out the books. I, whenever I was there, I was able to do the activity as well, which was just walking around the museum, like with our little crafts that we made and little like noisemakers. And it was very lovely and I loved it.

In the upcoming year, Maddox hopes to do an internship with a theatre had been involved at Rainbow Camp, and looks forward to working with a group they know to be queer-affirming.

The access to experiences with queer-affirming organizations outside of the aligns with recommendations in literature on career development education and school-to-work transitions. School-to-work experiences increase self-efficacy and help students build their identity outside of traditional high school constraints (Masdonati et al., 2021). However, career development programs have not consistently prepared youth to deal with potential discrimination in their pathway to work (Kenny et al., 2019). Allowing queer youth access to queer professionals, and queer-affirming work experiences allows them to explore identity and career concerns at the

same time, and may challenge queer youth to explore career options that they might have closed off for themselves (Chen & Keats, 2016).

GSAs as Vehicles for Broader Advocacy

While Maddox's project involving making pronoun pins was not GSA-initiated per se, given that their homeroom teacher was also one of the staff advising the GSA, it makes sense to mention it again in this space in terms of advocacy-related projects that GSAs can inspire. When GSAs model queer pedagogy – questioning norms, interrogating privilege, engaging in dialogue and exploring queer issues, they can empower students to bring those practices into their classroom assignments (Lapointe, 2016). As discussed earlier, this project was an excellent example of PYD principles. It also highlights an area of alignment between queer theory and resilience theory. Warner (1991) defined being queer as engaging with normalizing discourses, and named institutions as important sites of resistance. This project allowed Maddox to engage with those discourses in the context of their school experience. By doing so, Maddox was also engaged in changing their social ecology, and interventions that effect changes in ecologies are an important part of building resilience (Lerner et al., 2013; Ungar, 2012).

The focus group participants did not report broader advocacy related activities that their GSAs participated in. Advocacy improves feelings of hope, by improving their school environment and by counteracting sources of stress, such as their school policies (Poteat, Rivers, et al., 2020), and represents a chance to effect a change in the ecologies of queer youth. As I reflected on the focus group interview, I was frustrated by the lack of advocacy efforts on the part of participants' GSAs, hoping for bold, transformative action on their part to change the system. However, that desire on my part is reflective of a systemic tendency to offload responsibility for reform onto GSAs (Lapointe, 2018), and is part of the discourse that positions

queer students as activist educators, which is damaging when it leads to a complacency on the part of the school system (Hackford-Peer, 2010). In spite of my desire for a narrative of activist GSAs bravely changing the system, the reality is that “when the GSA is the sole agent for such activism, it is questionable how much systemic or even personal change can occur or continue” (Griffin et al., 2004). My frustration was rooted in my desire to have the GSAs take on the responsibility for creating the environment for their own inclusion, similar to a minority tax (Clarke & Matthews, 2020), and is representative of the privilege of non-action that the larger heteronormative school system has. Lapointe (2018), in a study of GSAs in Ontario schools, also argues that “GSAs should not be obliged to tackle and alleviate hetero/cisnormative school regimes; schooling and the system itself must take on much of the responsibility” (p. 114).

While Lapointe’s argument that the system must take on the responsibility of change may be true, nonetheless, GSAs are often the only vehicle that challenges heteronormativity in schools (Hackford-Peer, 2010; Lapointe, 2015, 2016). However, there may be both internal and external disincentives that prevent GSA advisors from leading their groups to engage in advocacy efforts. Lack of perceived support from administration, as discussed above, would be one external disincentive. A subtler disincentive, however, is that unstructured “hanging out” time leads to more immediate positive affect in GSA participants than does time devoted to advocacy work, which has no impact on positive affect in the immediate term (Poteat et al., 2023). This could be because discussing and addressing issues of oppression leads to a more immediate negative affect – while it may ultimately be empowering in the long term, in the immediate term it is distressing (Poteat et al., 2023). It could be that GSA advisors see that differential, and opt, consciously or not, for activities such as socialization that provide more immediate positive affect. In addition, some GSA advisors, especially new ones, lack knowledge

and training, and may lack self-efficacy in discussing systemic queer issues (Poteat et al., 2022), which would be an internal disincentive to engage in advocacy work.

Although not demonstrated in the data, I suggest there are other disincentives to consider. As mentioned above, lack of administrative support would be one external disincentive, but so would lack of collegial support. If GSA advisors feel alone and unsupported in change efforts by their colleagues, either through indifference or resistance, that could be a disincentive to keep working on advocacy projects. In addition, advocacy work takes time. There is a strong association between the time GSA advisors devote to their GSA and how much advocacy work occurs (Poteat et al., 2022). Lack of time for GSA advisors, or the lack of value given to that time (reflected in evaluations, for instance) would also be a disincentive for GSA advisors to engage in advocacy work with their GSA.

“It’s Not Noticeable for Straight People”: Desire for a Queered Education – The Need for Advocacy

While participants did not name broader advocacy efforts that would help counter heteronormative discourse present in schools, they were able to name their desire for a more queered educational experience when discussing school assignments. First, they shared examples of how they had been able to include queer content in their own assignments. Eliot discussed their essay allowing them to describe who they were to their teacher in a meaningful and private way. Simon reported on a project that he did the previous year about an important Canadian, when he received permission to do the project on Marsha P. Johnson, a prominent American queer rights activist, instead. Jade explained a project done through her GSA where they were to talk about someone they were proud of, and she selected a friend who had helped her understand

her sexuality. Here, our participants have been able to highlight the absence of queer content in their classrooms by bringing in their own (Lapointe, 2016).

From there, the discussion went from how they were able to queer these assignments for themselves to examples of school assignments where queerness is erased. A powerful exchange occurred:

Douglas Are there any would there be examples of school assignments that make you feel not seen or just even uncomfortable?

Skye Not seen, yeah, because we never learn about it. Like we should be learning about queer sex ed. I've never learned about it.

Douglas Okay.

Skye We should be learning about queer history. I've never learned about it. Like, we should be learning those things. Yeah, but it never happens. And it's never going to happen. Like, not while I'm in school, at least.

Simon Like, we have to look out for that ourselves, you know? Like, I guess we can, like, find people who can, like, teach us these things. But still, it should be like general knowledge and everyone should be like, learning about, you know, it shouldn't like, you know, let other people know if queer people exist, you know, it's like, not that hard. But then it's like, you know, like most classes, I hear the word like gay or anything like said in a classroom without like a negative connotation or something like, or like even by a teacher.

Skye And if it is said, it is said with rude remarks made afterwards or something like that and at the end of the day it is unsafe that we aren't learning. Like this is definitely very like sex ed talk about like, I'm so pro sex ed, right. But it is so unsafe that we aren't learning any like queer sex ed or anything because that's how people die, that's how kids die from not learning those things.

Douglas So that assignment is noticeable in the fact that it's not there.

Skye Yeah.

Simon Yeah...It's like, noticeable for, like, queer people, but like, I just want to point out how like, it's not noticeable for like, you know, straight people and stuff because like, you know, it doesn't really involve them, you know?

Here we have an insightful example of how queer students are desiring the queering of the curriculum, and expressing feelings of erasure. In this discussion, we see the capacity for students to engage in the queer pedagogical practices of questioning norms and interrogating privilege (Lapointe, 2016). Simon powerfully points out that it is easy for straight teachers to be purposefully ignorant about the need to queer the curriculum, naming the ignorance that “willfully ignore[es] perspectives that threaten to dismantle heteronormative regimes” (Lapointe, 2016), and also highlights that because of this ignorance, teachers often don’t have the capacity to include queer content (Lapointe, 2014).

The participants desire queer content not only so that they can be seen, but also so that they can be safe. As Simon points out, they could find people to teach them queer content on their own, but they should not have to. By not including queer content, “it is assumed that all of

the students in the school do not need the things that queer students need, so they can have what they need in their space, as long as it does not impinge upon what the rest of the students need” (Hackford-Peer, 2010). In reality, including queer content is good for both queer students and the school community as a whole (Kumashiro, 2002).

Focus group participants went on to discuss times that queer issues did come up in class. Eliot described a time in Family Studies class where they watched episodes of *Modern Family*, a television show which includes a married gay couple. In the context of watching those episodes, a class discussion “did touch on like, ‘oh, um, do you think gay people should be allowed to get married?’ Like, that was a question!” In that context, Eliot could see the good intentions of the teacher, but felt that those intentions had unintended consequences:

I kind of felt that that was like her - in a way, like she's a very supportive person - but it's giving the option for people to like, express how they don't support it. And that to me, kind of made me feel unsafe just knowing that my peers could be writing ‘I hate gay marriage,’ and stuff.

Eliot is in the familiar position of anticipating a prejudice event. For queer students, the expectation that “these experiences will occur... produces hypervigilance that taxes executive functioning and compromises their mental health” (Heck, 2015). These stories of non-inclusion and unsafe inclusion make clear that their teachers need to engage in more professional development in how to introduce queer content into their classrooms, at all or safely.

What is striking about these conversations is that, as passionate as these students are about queering education, and as much as they were able to articulate critiques from a queer pedagogical perspective, they still find that their GSA is not a place where discussion about these issues and the broader heteronormative discourse happens. After a further discussion about being

misgendered in class, I asked if the participants would talk about issues such as this in their GSA. Simon replied, “Not in the club, no. ‘Cause it’s like a hangout thing.” Simon expressed that it felt like students at his GSA were “just constantly we’re just hanging out.” Eliot concurred that there needs to be “more activities...I feel like it’s just so boring after a while, you know?” Simon chimed in, “it doesn’t have to be much. Just like, discussing *something*, right?” GSA participants tend to be more interested in advocacy efforts after their socializing needs are met (Calzo et al., 2020). Given the reports that our participants on their GSA as serving their social needs, it seems like they are ready to move forward. This desire for group discussion and dialogue is important because those activities are necessary to develop critical consciousness and sociopolitical efficacy (Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020). In doing so, queer theory and resilience theory can align as the GSA becomes a queer pedagogical space exploring issues (Lapointe, 2014) while convincing students of their ability to effect change in their ecologies by giving them experiences of power, control, and social justice (Ungar et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of the GSA advisors, who must be attentive to structuring GSA activities and recognizing when the socializing needs have been satisfied to a point where students are ready to move on to advocacy efforts.

“I Feel Like That Kind of Formed the Bond”: The Role of GSA Advisors

GSA advisors are important figures in the lives of queer youth, and may be one of the few supportive adults for queer youth in the school system (Poteat, 2017). The availability of supportive relationships is a key construct of resilience, and an important part of PYD (Lerner et al., 2005; Prince-Embury & Courville, 2008; Ungar et al., 2019). The perception of support from a GSA advisor, and having a GSA advisor with training are linked to increased sense of purpose and self-esteem in GSA members (Poteat et al., 2015). All participants reported their GSA

advisor to be a supportive person in their lives. As Maddox put it in their interview, “all the teachers that are...part of the GSA, I think are pretty supportive because why wouldn't they be?” Beyond that, participants reported benefits to the relationships that they formed with their GSA advisors outside the GSA as well.

For Eliot, in their first year at Forest High, their GSA advisor became someone that they could talk to outside of class and the GSA:

whenever I'm feeling like sad or something I'll just, like, stop by the main teacher's room, I'll be like, “Hey, Miss Williams, how's it going?” And she's like, "It's going great, El, how are you?" And it's just like, very, very supportive.

Eliot mentioned how they were able to talk to Miss Williams about issues in their life such as family conflicts:

I walked by her office because my locker is there, and she was just kind of, she was like, "Hey, how's it going?" And like...wanted to talk to me? And I just got over a fight with my dad and it was just like I was like, really upset. And I kind of talked to her about it. I feel like that kind of formed the bond.

Strong supportive relationships with adults are key mediators of resilience as these relationships in times of adversity buffer youth from negative psychological impacts (Prince-Embury, 2013). As well, youth perception of their advisor's responsiveness was associated with youth reporting less negative affect in the days following those interactions (Poteat et al., 2023).

For Simon, it was important that he had classes this year with teachers who were involved in the GSA, mentioning that he felt more comfortable in their classes, having developed trust and connection with them because of his interactions with them in the GSA. Simon mentioned that the previous year's main GSA advisor had moved on to another school, and so

this year Forest High has a new GSA advisor. However, he felt the loss of last year's advisor, and, as discussed previously, preferred the structure of last year's GSA. Part of the loss was that last year's advisor identified as queer: "it was kind of like, nice to know, like, there was, like, someone teaching at the school that was LGBT. I don't know it brings, like, a sense of hope for the future for me, you know, like being adult and queer." Simon is experiencing the important (but sometimes problematic) it-gets-better discourse that "while queer adolescence is a time of homophobic and transphobic bullying, it will eventually give way to happy and productive queer adulthood" (Schey, 2021a). Another part of the loss may have been due to the loss of structure and group discussions that Simon enjoyed the previous year. New advisors often lack knowledge and training, both in terms of structuring PYD programs successfully, and in terms of discussing queer issues, leading to low self-efficacy in that regard (Poteat et al., 2022).

For Skye, the fact that their advisor was not queer felt like a barrier: "both these teachers are both straight and, like, they're straight. They're married, they have kids. They're not part of the LGBTQ community at all, but they try to relate to us. And I'm like, 'You do not understand. You're never a queer person in high school. You've never been bullied. You've never been harassed for being queer.'" Some studies have highlighted that the majority of GSA advisors are cisgender, heterosexual females (Poteat & Scheer, 2016). While these individuals may be queer-affirming, it is clear from Skye and Simon's narratives that having access to a queer adult in the school system is something they long for. This highlights the need to hire a more gender-diverse staff, but also to cultivate an environment where the queer identities of those teachers would be affirmed (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). The danger for administrators in this case, would be to automatically assume that those teachers would want to lead a GSA, or create a situation where once again, the queer minority is responsible for creating the conditions for its acceptance in the

school system, analogous to the minority tax described by Clarke and Matthews (2020) where mentorship of minority members in the workforce often falls to other minority members.

For Maddox, it was clear that they had a connection with their current GSA advisor, who was also their homeroom advisor. Maddox also mentioned their experience in their previous school, where they had attended the GSA from grade 4 to grade 8, and that it was meaningful to them that they had the same GSA advisor every year. Having a long-serving advisor is correlated with an increased sense of purpose in GSA-attending youth (Poteat et al., 2015), and offers a chance for cumulative experiences of support, which are important components of resilience. Additionally, having a long-serving advisor means that there is an institutional memory for the GSA, meaning that they can build on past accomplishments (J. B. Mayo, 2013). Given that seeing the payoff for advocacy-related activities in terms of seeing positive affect is not immediate (Poteat et al., 2023), having a long-serving GSA advisor may also be more able to identify when GSA members are ready to take the step of moving to advocacy work, and be willing to work with those efforts to see the less immediate positive results in their students' lives. On the other hand, turnover in the role of GSA advisors can mean that the positive momentum made in one year may be lost (Griffin et al., 2004), as was perceived by Simon.

Given that participants reported GSA advisors being important figures in their lives, but also expressed that sometimes they contributed to a feeling of alienation from their GSA, it is important to reflect on what we are asking of teachers who take on the role of GSA advisor and how they can be supported. The important PYD goal of having supportive relationships with competent caring adults is a task that most queer-affirming adults can competently engage in. However, GSAs engage in queer pedagogy, whether or not they are explicit about it (C. Mayo, 2004), and are often the entry point for engaging in critical discussions (Lapointe, 2016). It may

be difficult to find queer-affirming adults who have self-efficacy in discussing queer issues (Poteat et al., 2022). Space must be made for teachers to learn and engage in professional development about queer pedagogical issues in order to increase their self-efficacy (Brant & Willox, 2021; Lapointe, 2016; Poteat & Scheer, 2016).

School Climate

“Time and Time Again”: Dealing with Queerphobia and Bullying

In Maddox’s previous school they described an incident where there was a bully in their class who was targeting not only them but other students who were openly queer. Maddox was assertive in how they dealt with situation.

But I would be time and time again, like in and out of the classroom, talking to the teacher outside being like, “Hey, this guy is making me feel really uncomfortable for the certain things that he’s saying and certain things that he’s doing, like specifically against me.” And then I would also get sometimes I have to go to the principal’s office because I would have to talk to our principal being like, “Hey, this person is like, really, like on my nerves and I can’t really want to deal with this right now because I’m graduating this year and I don’t want to deal with this.” And like they would always try to reassure me being like, “Hey, this person came from a different school. Maybe it was a little bit different then.” So I was always just like, “I don’t care. This is not good.” So, I mean, I think I dealt with it in a pretty like, well way. And if I had to change anyway, I don’t think I could because I did all I could. I talked to the teacher. I was too scared to talk to the person directly. So I talked to the teacher. I got the principal involved.

Although this could have been an experience where Maddox was able to have an experience of power and control, as they had come up with a plan of who to communicate to and when, instead the process left them feeling unsupported and minimized:

My teacher would just keep on being like, ‘No, they could be like, just talking to somebody else’ or ‘No, they’re probably not looking at you’ or whatever, like, directly and whatnot. And I was just like. Really? You’re trying to get this guy out of trouble.

Jade also reported her experience where “in my classroom, it’s like a lot of people, like, teased me and stuff for, like, who I am and like, how I look or how I talk or just like, how I answer a question.” Like Maddox, Jade reported that often teachers minimized her concerns: “I’ve talked to the teachers quite a lot, but they, like, they say, like, just ignore or just walk away or just like, get through it.”

These experiences are reflective of the perpetual resistance that queer students must engage in (Warner, 1991), and reminds us of the necessity of administrators and teachers to hear the experiences of their queer students and not dismiss them (Lugg & Tooms, 2010). Happily, this year Maddox reported feeling safe at their current school “I’ve been able to like luckily be in a good environment where I can just walk in the halls and be like, ‘Yeah, I’m nonbinary, I’m confident about this.’ Like, I don’t need to hide it from anybody.”

“Anybody Can Say Anything”: Physical Spaces

Linville (2017) found that queer students often reported that classrooms, especially those with supportive teachers, were safer spaces, in that they have rules and monitored behaviour. Likewise, focus group participants generally reported feeling safe in classrooms where teachers were present.

However, while Maddox feels safe in their current school, focus group participants described a different experience outside of their classrooms. They experience that “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” (Hackford-Peer, 2010). All participants reported hearing queerphobic comments in their schools, either directly, or reported hearing of them directed at other people they knew. Their experiences align with the findings in Peter et al.’s (2021) school climate survey, where 64% of respondents reported hearing queerphobic language daily or weekly at school. Students have very real mental maps of where and how their schools are safe (Linville, 2017), and for all focus group participants, the hallways were definitely an unsafe environment. As Eliot explained,

It's just I feel like when there's when you're just in your classroom, it's like you kind of have people that you know, and like, if something happens, they can, like, protect you. But when you're out in the halls, anybody can say anything to you. And like, if a teacher's not around normally, then no one will really care.

Jade echoed that,

the hallways are usually very loud and teachers can't really, like, keep track of everything everyone says. So like someone can easily just walk by you and, like, whisper something in your ear.

Once again, as per Heck (2015), focus group participants were forced to enact the draining hypervigilance that comes with expecting to experience harassment as they “negotiate with environments that almost universally define their queer identity as pathological” (Harvey, 2012).

Navigating the hallways between classes was not the only time that spaces outside of the classroom felt unsafe. Using the bathroom at school, even when gender neutral bathrooms were

provided, was often a fraught, high-stress experience, as bathrooms “represent the convergence of public and private in spaces designed around a dichotomous conceptualisation of gendered and sexualised bodies” (Elliott, 2016). As Skye explained,

Even the gender neutral bathrooms aren't safe, like people at my school, like will follow you down the hallway because we have this giant fucking key that you have to carry down to the gender neutral bathroom...So you have this giant key and people like, make fun of you and be like, “oh, you're using a [queerphobic slur] bathroom, you [queerphobic slur],” right? So that's like, we can't use those without being harassed.

Eliot also explained that using gender neutral bathrooms can be an invitation to being noticed: “I prefer using gender neutral bathrooms and I feel like walking there is like, ‘Oh, God, who's going to see me go into here?’” Simply put, bathrooms, even gender neutral ones, “are a location of significant anxiety” (Peter et al., 2021), and a space where our participants expect to encounter stressors. Simon, for example, encountered homophobic graffiti in the bathroom asking students to count themselves as straight or gay. He explained, “there's like, this like tally mark thing that says, ‘Are you gay?’ And it's like, ‘straight’ and then ‘gay’ and everyone puts, like, tally marks for, like, ‘straight.’” As in this example of “score-keeping” of who is straight and not straight, time and again, our participants describe coming up against “hegemonic discourses [that] remain uncontested by denying certain bodies and voices access to public spaces” (Linville, 2017).

“No Teachers Asked Me”: Pronouns

Another key issue that participants brought up was that of pronouns, and the normalization of them, or the lack of it. “We make gender real through referring to it repeatedly in specific ways” (Rodemeyer, 2018). Skye reported that

I really had [only] one teacher my whole school time ask me my pronouns. And it wasn't even to my face, it was in like one of those school things you fill out at the beginning of the year, like ‘Get To Know Me’? And I don't even think she read it because she didn't call me the right pronouns for the entire school year.

Eliot concurred: “I felt pretty like almost underwhelming, that no teachers asked me my pronouns at the start of the year.” Simon had a teacher ask him about his pronouns, but pointed out that “at the beginning of the year they had, like, sheets given out to people and where you can, like, write your pronouns, too.” Resources are created for students to communicate their pronouns to teachers, but our participants report that the teachers aren’t using them. For the most part, participants report that teachers are also not sharing their pronouns with students. “Only like the teachers that are like participating in [GSA] club from like my experience...they share their pronouns because like, they know it's important to share that,” Simon explained.

Simon also pointed out that was not being normalized in other parts of the school. While Indigenous club was important to Simon, and helped him connect with his Indigenous heritage, when sharing about themselves, participants are not asked about their pronouns:

Like, I know, like non-binary people in like, you know, the Indigenous club. So, like, they don't really get a chance to say their pronouns. If they say their pronouns, then it's, it kind of it's alienating in a way, because it's like, you know, you're not... you're the only one saying your pronouns amongst all these other people.

Our participants experience daily that heteronormativity is inherent, pervasive and oppressive in our school system, and experience this normalization of heteronormativity as the site of violence against queer youth (Warner, 1991), even in otherwise affirming places like Indigenous clubs.

On reflection, I am part of the problem of normalization, reflective of the larger system. While I offer my pronouns at the beginning of the year, I have only recently included them on school emails to parents. We have pronoun pins available, but it has been too easy not to wear one, hiding behind purposeful ignorance. However, if “by performing certain genders repeatedly (and here Butler points usually to the performativity of heterosexual orientation), the possibility of other genders is made ‘unthinkable’” (Rodemeyer, 2018), then conversely, by repeatedly performing gender differently – by offering our pronouns, by wearing pronoun pins, by asking all of our students what their pronouns are, by determinedly getting our students’ pronouns correct – we can instead make the possibility of other genders thinkable.

Summary

This chapter presented responses from five queer youth who attend GSAs in their Manitoba high schools. They gave direct responses as to what resilience meant to them, and discussions of assignments and physical artifacts that they brought in to represent their GSA or their resilience helped inform a more nuanced view of how they viewed the concept. Their individual experiences in their GSAs were grouped by the roles described by Griffin et al. (2004), namely as safe spaces, as social spaces, as counselling and support, as vehicles for education, and as vehicles for broader advocacy. These responses illuminated constructs of resilience that were evident in those activities, and were analyzed for how they aligned with queer theory and queer pedagogical practices to help understand the role of the GSA. The role of

the GSA advisor as experienced by the participants was also examined. Finally, the participants' reports of their experience of their overall school climate was examined, helping to give a broader context to their involvement in their GSA, looking at instances of bullying, unsafe spaces in the school, and the (mis)use of pronouns.

The following chapter will provide a short summary of the data and analysis presented in this chapter, highlighting how principles of queer theory and resilience theory have aligned in the individual experiences of the participants, and exploring how that can help us better understand the roles of GSAs. This analysis will inform a section on implications and recommendations about what educators can learn about building resilience in students through GSAs. The chapter will include a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the study, and offer some conclusions.

Chapter 5

The research conducted as part of this thesis was concerned with providing insight into the individual experiences and perceptions of queer youth in Manitoba high schools who attend GSAs in their schools. Their experiences were examined to see how they aligned with both resilience theory and queer theory, to explore how queer theory and resilience align with each other, and to examine what we could learn about resilience being built through GSAs. Using case study as a method of inquiry allowed me to compare the similarities and differences in the experiences of different participants. The semi-structured interview format allowed me to foreground student voice, to explore areas of interest more fully, and having participants bring in objects that represented their resilience or GSA allowed a more nuanced exploration of how they navigate their path to resilience.

The previous chapter presented the data from the interviews with the participants, and analyzed the experiences they reported in terms of how those aligned with both queer and resilience theory. This chapter will begin with a summary and synthesis of that analysis and a discussion of the broader themes illuminated by that analysis. The second section will discuss implications of these findings and include recommendations. The third section will discuss strengths and weaknesses of this study, as well as recommendations for future research.

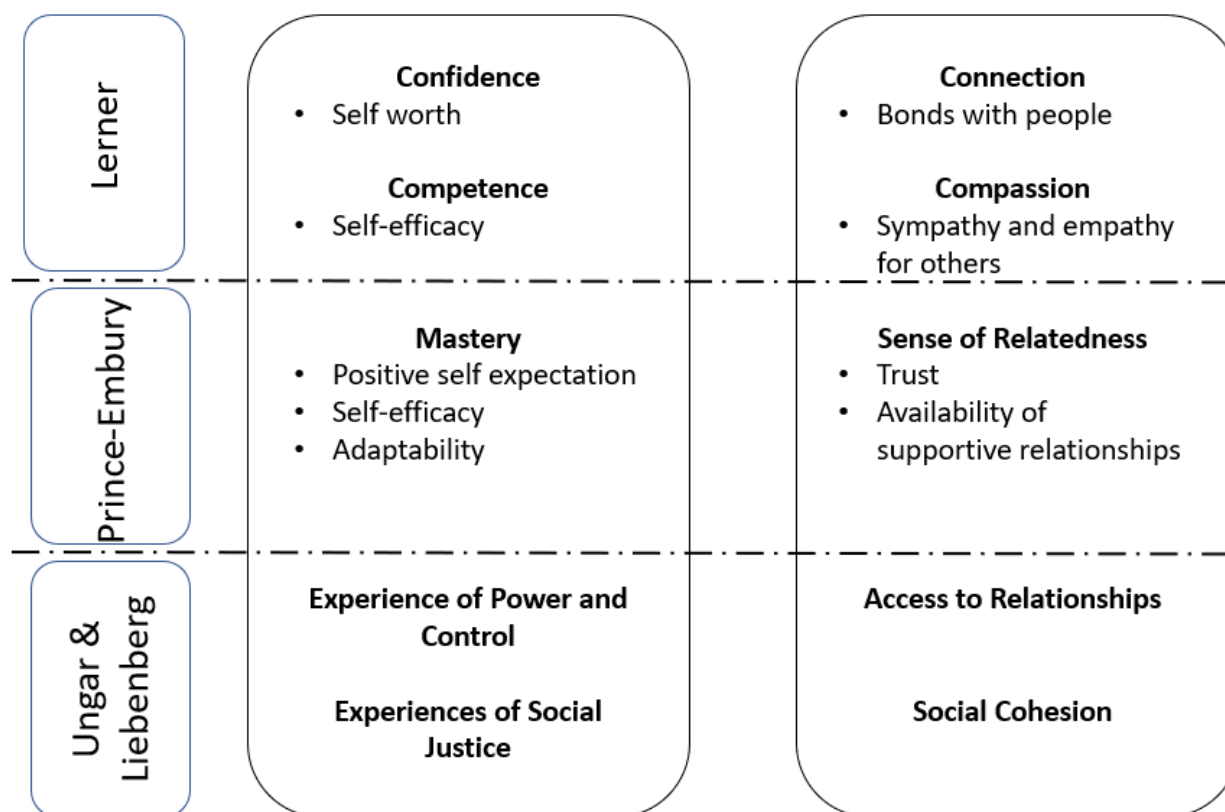
Summary/Synthesis of Data and Analysis

In discussing their experiences in their schools' GSAs, participants reported that their GSA filled the roles of providing a safer space in school – both to explore their queer identity and to socialize with a peer group. They reported that their GSAs played a limited role in education, both for the GSA members, and for the school at large, although all reported Pride

Week-associated activities. They did not report that their GSAs were involved in broader advocacy work.

Figure 1

Alignment of Resiliency Constructs



When considering how constructs of resilience are evident in participants' reporting of their GSA activities, it is helpful to refer to Figure 1 (reprinted above). The participants reported constructs of resilience in their GSA activity that largely aligned with the constructs in the Connection Strand. Maddox highlighted the importance of their long-standing advisor in their previous school's GSA, which helped them develop an understanding of their identity. Eliot discussed the important relationship that they had developed with their GSA advisor, and how they felt they could talk to them about important things in their life. Skye discussed an important relationship with a peer in their GSA. Jade discussed how it was important to have a space where

she could connect with other queer youth and feel less alone. Simon explained how having GSA advisors as teachers of his classes was important in developing connections in those classes.

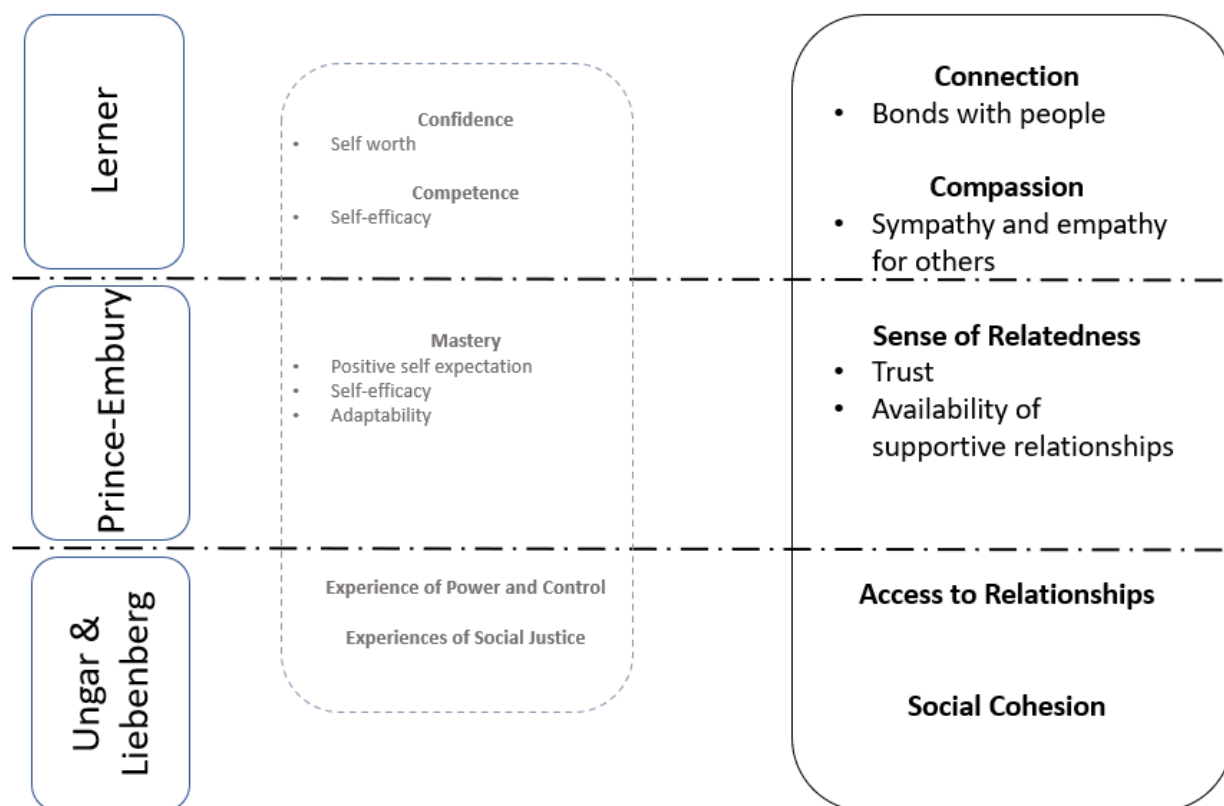
My analysis of the data in Chapter 4 demonstrated the development of the resilience constructs of trust, availability of supportive relationships (especially cumulative experiences of support) (Prince-Embury, 2013), connection and compassion (Lerner et al., 2013), access to relationships and social cohesion (Ungar et al., 2019). These resilience constructs align with queer theory in that the GSAs provided a space that affirmed the participants queer existence and gave them a space to encounter other queer youth. The discovery of a place that was for, and filled with, other queer youth was an important part of their experience, and also provided them with a way to negotiate the tension of developing a desirable personal identity (Ungar et al., 2019). Thomson (2012), describes how the queer community defined themselves “*outside* of the normalising pull of educational institutions” (p. 995), and only after that “did queerness enter back into the academy to protect and support queer students” (p. 995). In a sense, although it is happening inside of the school, the GSA offers a space outside that “normalising pull” for queer youth to find a community and define their identities in a positive way in a space set apart from the heteronormative discourses and expectations that dominate their larger school experience. It is possible that, as described by Thompson above, this would then set our participants up to re-enter the larger school space equipped to engage in queer pedagogical practices – questioning norms, interrogating privilege and exploring queer issues through student-led dialogue (Lapointe, 2016).

However, engagement in these queer pedagogical practices is not being reported by these participants. Despite showing a willingness and an ability in our conversations to engage in critiques of dominant discourse in the education system, and of the marginalization and erasure

of queer identities from the curriculum, none of our participants reported those kinds of conversations happening in their GSAs. From a resilience perspective, this is a failure to engage in the Confidence Strand of constructs outlined in Figure 1, developing self-efficacy, adaptability, accessing experiences of power and control and social justice. A more accurate representation of the reporting of resilience constructs in GSAs would look like Figure 6, showing that the constructs from the Connection Strand are reported much more than constructs from the Confidence Strand.

Figure 6

Enactment of Resilience Constructs

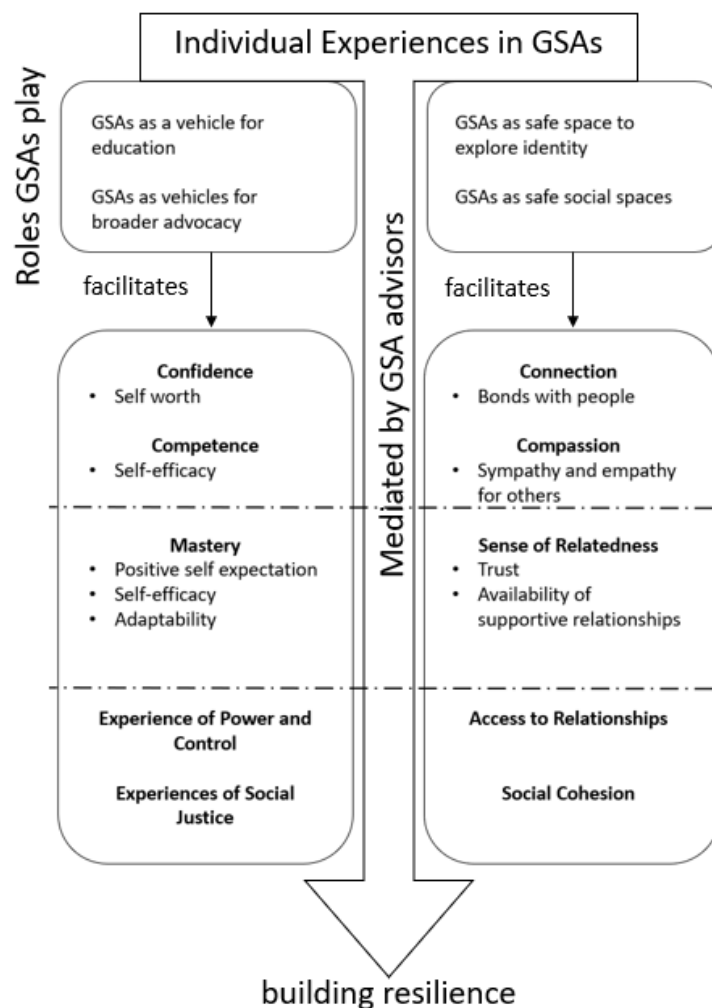


Youth need to negotiate a balance between the tensions of resilience, but an important factor is “the capacity of individuals’ physical and social ecologies to *provide* these resources” (Ungar et al., 2008). For these participants, opportunities to change their ecology, and to engage in group

discussions that work to develop the critical consciousness necessary to do that work (Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020), are conspicuous by their absence in their reports of their GSAs. This implies that their ecology has not developed the capacity to provide access to those experiences necessary for the development of resilience. This critique from a resilience perspective aligns with a critique from the perspective of queer theory, which would expect GSAs to be queer pedagogical spaces to explore issues and develop knowledge for interrupting heteronormative thinking, which can then be brought into their larger school experience (Lapointe, 2014, 2016).

Figure 7

How Individual Experiences in GSAs Build Resilience



The answer to getting GSAs to enact the Confidence Strand of constructs is not as simple as “do more advocacy and education.” Rather the critiques above point to the importance of the position of the GSA advisor, as highlighted in Figure 7. They are often the supportive adults that queer youth need, and are access points to relationships that are key to developing resilience, and creating safer spaces for queer identity to be explored and defined as desirable. Our participants’ reports affirm that their GSA advisors fill these roles. However, GSA advisors are also the individuals who give structure to the GSA, and who can therefore model and engage in queer pedagogical practice, developing the competency of queer youth to address heteronormativity in the school system. From participants’ reports, this appears to be an area for growth in their GSAs.

Successful PYD programs, which focus on the developmental process of resilience, and as the enactment of those processes (Lerner et al., 2011), have sufficient structure to allow the group to operate, to provide a safer space and to allow youth to take on leadership roles (Poteat et al., 2022). This structure increases student level of involvement and the ability to do advocacy work. Students might, in fact, be turned off by a lack of structure for such experiences (Poteat et al., 2022). Eliot and Simon described just this as they discussed wishing for more structured discussion opportunities. However, while structure is important, so is youth autonomy in setting the direction of the GSA (Poteat et al., 2022). While an advisor’s perception of control over the GSA was related to an increased sense of purpose and self-esteem for GSA members, a sense of mastery was linked to both the advisor’s sense of control *and* the students’ perception of control (Poteat et al., 2015). There is complexity in how the process of making decisions is negotiated that points to the importance of individual↔context relations. Being able to balance that

perception of control falls to the GSA advisor. Except for Maddox, who reported being very driven in their goals for their GSA, our participants did not report having a stake in setting the direction for their GSA.

While they attempt to balance a perception of control, GSA advisors must at the same time balance the need for a safer space for unstructured social time with the need to engage in group discussions necessary to raise critical consciousness. GSA advisors need to balance the long-term needs of queer youth – changing their ecology by developing tools to empower them to counter heteronormativity – with the shorter-term needs of queer youth – gaining emotional strength through positive social interactions. Complicating achieving that balance is the reality that socializing results in more immediate positive affect for queer youth, while discussing the harms that dominant heteronormative discourses bring to bear on queer youth and engaging in advocacy does not bring about immediate positive affect changes (Poteat et al., 2023). This will be a delicate balance when the longer-term development of critical consciousness doesn't have immediate pay off in terms of seeing positive benefits in the lives of their GSA members.

Additionally, many queer-affirming teachers, who may find themselves in the role of GSA advisor for that reason, lack self-efficacy when it comes to discussing queer issues (Poteat et al., 2022). However, without “without strong adult leadership, students’ ability to realise their vision of a more equitable school [will be], if not lost, certainly compromised” (Elliott, 2016).

Reflecting on the Data

The synthesis above focuses largely on what GSAs can do, and how that can be supported by GSA advisors. This has been guided by the original research questions. However, this is not to say that GSAs should be solely responsible for engaging in queer pedagogical practices, or to say that it is the only aspect of their ecology that should be changed.

When beginning this research, I was intrigued by descriptions of GSA activity that was engaged in disrupting norms and challenging oppressive practices. I was attracted to descriptions of GSAs as queer pedagogical spaces to explore and articulate anti-heteronormative discourses (Lapointe, 2018), by examples of how they can introduce those ideas to the wider school (Lapointe, 2014, 2016), and by the idea that they can allow students to engage in an array of activities that impact their school experience (Hackford-Peer, 2010). At the same time, I was impressed by research that found that when GSAs engage in these types of activities, they have a remarkable impact in building their resilience (Porta et al., 2017; Poteat, 2017; Poteat, Calzo, et al., 2020; Poteat et al., 2015, 2023; Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020; Poteat, Rivers, et al., 2020; Toomey & Russell, 2011). Because I was so immersed in those descriptions, I had an expectation that I would hear the same kinds of narratives from my participants. As described in Chapter 4, and the above summary/synthesis, I did not.

The narratives of their experiences, and my analysis of those narratives, have led to my claims about what GSAs of the participants are already doing well and what they can do better, but those narratives have also highlighted the system in which their experiences, and their GSAs, are embedded. My analysis has highlighted that GSAs need to engage in queer pedagogical practices, but also that they cannot be an island of resistance in an inactive system, constantly paying the minority tax of creating the conditions for their own acceptance (Clarke & Matthews, 2020). Through my interviews with the participants, my perspective broadened to see the necessary work that schools and the school system need engage in to make changes. So, while the analysis has focused inward on GSAs, the following implications and recommendations are more focused on changes that administrators can implement on a school/system level.

Similarly, the analysis has also focused on what we might expect of GSA advisors. The importance of GSA advisors in mediating student experiences in their GSAs and in building resilience through those experiences has been made clear both by the literature (Calzo et al., 2020; Poteat, 2017; Poteat, Calzo, et al., 2020; Poteat et al., 2015, 2022; Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020; Poteat & Scheer, 2016) and by the narratives of the participants in this research. As with their GSAs, the narratives of the participants also shifted my perspective to highlight the system that GSA advisors are working within. And so, again, while the analysis and the following implications focus on how GSA advisors might work to make GSAs more effective, both from a queer theory and a resilience theory perspective, the recommendations below focus more on the supports that the system, especially administrators, must give to GSA advisors.

Implications and Recommendations

When resilience is measured as an outcome, individual traits, behaviors and cognitions are always outcomes that result from positive developmental processes that have been made possible by an individual's wider ecology (Ungar, 2012).

GSAs should not be obliged to tackle and alleviate hetero/cisnormative school regimes; schooling and the system itself must take on much of the responsibility of promoting sexual and gender democratization in the education system (Lapointe, 2018).

This study intended to address two main research questions: *1) How do student experiences of GSAs align with both queer theory and resilience theory?* *2) How do students who participate in GSAs perceive their resilience?* In addition, a secondary research question asked what educators could learn about building students' resilience through GSAs. As such, any implications that can be drawn from the data presented by study participants, and any

recommendations that come from such a study need to be focused, from a resilience perspective, on changes in the wider ecology, and from a queer theory perspective, on broader changes in discourse in the school and school system. The implications and recommendations that follow are meant to be starting points for improving resilience of queer students by changing their ecologies and by queering the education system.

Implications

One implication of this study is that professional development for GSA advisors is important. Participants described their GSA advisors as empathetic adults working to create connection with the queer youth in their GSAs. They reported their GSA advisors doing good work in creating queer-affirming spaces and creating supportive relationships from a resilience perspective. However, according to participant narratives, GSA advisors could be doing more to empower youth to discuss and address heteronormative discourses, and to engage in educational and advocacy work in their schools, and, from a resilience perspective, to give students experiences of social justice, power and control, and to structure opportunities for leadership and engagement. An important part of successful PYD programs is strong adult guidance (Sanders et al., 2017), because they can provide structure and scaffold experiences for youth (Poteat et al., 2015; Prince-Embury, 2013). Likewise, queer pedagogy points to the importance of support from adults. Hackford (2010) argues that the discourse of expecting queer youth to be activist educators needs to be reframed within the context of community support. We cannot expect queer youth to engage in ecology-changing challenges to cis-heteronormative discourses without support, and this support is most likely to start with GSA advisors who themselves have access to professional development and administrative support.

A further implication regarding professional development for GSA advisors relates to their self-efficacy. Skye's critique of their GSA advisor was that she could not directly relate to the struggles of Skye as a queer youth. Many GSA advisors, though queer-affirming, if they are not queer, "must address challenges faced by youth with identities and experiences different from their own" (Poteat & Scheer, 2016). While professional development cannot directly address Skye's critique, GSA advisors need more professional development in order to boost their efficacy in addressing these issues (Poteat et al., 2022). Self-efficacy is an important driver for change in teacher practices (Brant & Willox, 2021), and therefore we would assume that it holds true for GSA advisor practices as well. Many GSA advisors report not having received adequate professional development to engage in advocacy efforts (Poteat et al., 2022). More professional development for GSA advisors to increase their self-efficacy in engaging in queer pedagogy represents an important change in individual↔context relations.

We only have access to the participants' perceptions of their GSA advisors, and not the perceptions of the GSA advisors themselves. However, the lack of addressing the Confidence Strand of resilience constructs through queer pedagogical practices such as group discussions, education and advocacy efforts implies a possible role malalignment on the part of GSA advisors. Here, role theory may point to some answers. Cognitive role theory points to the relationship between role expectations and behaviour (Biddle, 1986). It may be the case that they find the expectations of themselves as GSA advisors to be in conflict with other roles that they take on as teachers. Expectations generate behaviour, and normative consensus is often the result of hegemonic domination of discourses (Biddle, 1986). If administrators expect teachers not to create conflict, then GSA advisors may implicitly feel that advocacy roles, and questioning cis-heteronormative discourses in the school is being discouraged. Besides this potential role

conflict, role ambiguity may come into play if the expectations of being a GSA advisor have not been clearly defined by administration. Role conflict and role ambiguity have been shown to have a negative impact on teacher leadership, with role ambiguity having a larger negative impact than role conflict (Murillo, 2013).

This study also produces implications for school and division administrators. If resilience theory posits that changes in the environment have implications for the resilience of individual youth, it also follows that changes in the ecology of the GSA and the GSA advisor has implications for the resilience, efficacy and effectiveness of the GSA and the GSA advisor. Griffin (2004) argues that advocacy efforts by GSAs are most likely to be effective when “they are part of a broad, on-going, organization-level plan to affect institutional policies, programming, and practices” (p.10). Administrators need to value what GSA advisors do enough to give them the training, and therefore the time, that they need to do it well.

Besides administrative support in the form of offering professional development, the data collected from the participants has other implications for school administrators. One implication is that the relationship between the school administration and the GSA needs to be attended to. The perception of outside support – from the broader school community and therefore from administrators – is important for the success of GSAs (Poteat et al., 2015). Participants reported that they perceived little support from their principals. To counter that perception, administrators need to take the time to be invested in their schools GSAs. Interactions between GSA members and administration shouldn’t come only when funds need to be requested for activities.

Administrators are also responsible for the larger educational environment that students operate in. Participants named many experiences in their school experience where they did not feel supported, whether that be non-inclusion in the curriculum, having teachers use their wrong

pronouns, or feeling minimized when harassed. Both Eliot and Skye discussed changing how they present at school in order to minimize harassment, but a desirable personal identity should be achievable not only within the context of the GSA, but within the broader school community, and so a supportive administration goes beyond a relationship with the GSA. All participants were in a school division with a policy affirming the use of preferred pronouns, and some also have tools to record students preferred pronouns. Participants nonetheless reported inconsistent use of their preferred pronouns, and little modelling of preferred pronouns by teachers. Teachers model for their students what discourses are acceptable by how they speak, and how they respond to speech by others. Administrators do the same for teachers. Administrators need to do more to model, encourage, and monitor the use of queer-affirming language in teacher-student interactions. Some of this monitoring could be done by attaining feedback from GSA members, but that is dependant on administrators taking the time to develop a relationship of trust with GSAs and their members, as discussed above.

Recommendations

Just as mastery experiences can be scaffolded for students to increase self-efficacy (Prince-Embury, 2013), so too can experiences be scaffolded to increase self-efficacy for GSA advisors. School divisions should provide access to division-wide and ongoing professional learning communities (PLC's) to GSA advisors. Providing PLC's would allow GSA advisors to share knowledge, resources and best practices, and help each other through reflective discussions. Just as dialogue can increase the capacity for critical consciousness in youth (Poteat, Godfrey, et al., 2020), we should expect that dialogue can increase sociopolitical efficacy for GSA advisors. To support division-wide PLC's, a SAGE group for GSA advisors should be initiated to allow for province-wide sharing and more formal professional development,

including workshops that discuss resilience and PYD best practices. Having access to these opportunities will boost the self-efficacy of GSA advisors and give resources that will help them provide needed structure to enable their GSAs to better engage in advocacy efforts, but also in other domains from the Confidence Strand of Figure 1, such as helping them negotiate decision-making structures in their GSA to allow for more experiences of power and control for students. Creating these structures as resources for GSA advisors will help them navigate towards and create “innovations that employ theoretically sound approaches for creating institutional and individual change” (Russell, 2005).

Administrators need to be more visible in their support of GSAs in their schools. The simple act of visiting a GSA meeting from time to time in a listening capacity would go a long way changing the perception of support, and create important connections between GSA members and administrators. Additionally, administrators should establish a fixed budget, even a small one, for GSAs. This would ensure that GSA members have access to a known amount of funds for projects, which would enable them to engage in more concrete planning of activities.

Skye and Simon noted the lack of queer teachers in the school system. Hiring more queer teaching staff would address the need for access to queer adults. As noted earlier, administrators should use caution in automatically assuming that queer teachers would want to be GSA advisors. This pressure could be alleviated by making efforts to hire multiple queer teachers, and by making efforts to hire queer teachers with a history of activism. This alone is not a solution, but must be accompanied by supports for those teachers, such as the PLC’s mentioned above.

Maddox’s experience with internships points to an opportunity for GSAs to offer a queer approach to the school-to-work pipeline. Though facilitating work experience falls beyond the purview of GSAs, GSAs could play two roles. One role is by promoting a queer pedagogical

stance for current career development programs. Queer youth often reject possible career choices because of fear of discrimination, and so inviting in queer role models in non-stereotypical occupations can both provide inspiration and frank discussions about obstacles they have faced in their career paths (Chen & Keats, 2016). A second role GSAs can play is to create a school-to-queer community pipeline for queer youth by inviting resources such as speakers from Rainbow Resource Centre into the GSA meetings, exposing GSA members to resources outside their school building.

As stated at the beginning of this section, these recommendations are starting points. It could be argued (and should be argued), that the above recommendations do not go far enough in queering the education system or making large enough changes in the ecologies of queer youth. However, increasing GSA advisor efficacy and capacity, and having administrators align their priorities with those recommendations, and establish relationships with GSAs in their schools, will lay important foundations in the school ecology that will make it more receptive to further advocacy efforts.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Strengths

This study fills a theoretical gap in exploring how queer theory and the constructs of resilience theory align and contribute to one another. This allows for new perspectives on student experiences in GSAs. This study then fills an empirical gap in exploring individual student experiences of GSAs from the perspective of both resilience theory and queer theory. By allowing them to express their experiences in their own words, this study allowed the student experience to be foregrounded. By foregrounding the student experience, one of the contributions to the literature this research provided was the exploration of the GSA members'

ambivalence towards GSAs. The use of in-person interviews, and the design of this study as a collective case study allowed for an in-depth, detailed collection of information. Knowing a case well implies knowledge of other cases, and is useful for making assertions that can be extended beyond the case (Stake, 1995). Including physical artifacts allowed me to collect data that had personal meaning for the participants, and allowed for a more nuanced analysis of how they negotiated their own resilience.

By analyzing these experiences and perspectives through the lens of resilience theory and queer theory, this study was able to look at the interplay of GSA members, GSA advisors, and the broader school context, and helped identify those ways in which GSAs have had the most impact on the lives of these five queer youth. The experiences of these participants also pointed to recommendations that would have an impact on their school ecology. Using the lenses of both queer theory and resilience theory, this study found areas where they align, both in theory, and in the everyday experiences of the participants, allowing for recommendations that are also grounded in theory and practice.

Limitations

This study also has limitations. The first limitation is my positionality as a researcher. As this study was designed, as data was analyzed, and conclusions were drawn, I was aided immeasurably by my advisor and my committee, who pointed out perspectives I missed, and drew my attention to usage of words and phrases that could be seen as problematic, especially from a queer perspective. This points to the inevitable conclusion that there will also be nuances I will have missed in interviews with participants, or that there were follow-up questions that might have been obvious to ask to a researcher with a different positionality.

As for limitations regarding study design, data gathering was limited to only one interview, at the end of the school year. Lapointe (2018) described the “winding down” of enthusiasm and participation in GSAs towards the end of the school year, and Poteat (2023) makes the point that one-time data collection, while retrospective in nature, is a mismatch with the frequency of meetings, because there can be variability in GSA members’ experiences of their GSA over the course of a year, and therefore in their reporting of those experiences.

Data gathering was also limited to the participants’ perspectives. While it is important to foreground the experiences of youth as we explore their resilience (Ungar, 2004), Kumashiro (2002) discusses the “unknowability” involved in teaching, the “‘space between’ the teacher/teaching and learner/learning” (p. 39). The perceptions of queer youth are paramount in understanding their experience in the school system and in GSAs, but a more complete picture would include perspectives from GSA advisors.

Future Directions

In order to address the limitations described above, future studies might include more interviews over the course of the school year to provide a richer understanding of the experiences of participants. Future studies might also include observations of GSA meetings and school visits would allow for field observations, increasing the richness of the data available. Additionally, future studies might bridge the gap between the teaching and the learning done in GSAs by including interviews with GSA advisors, comparing what their perceptions of how GSA activities are delivered with member perspectives of how they are received.

Given that this study included two students who had to choose between attending their school’s Indigenous Club or their GSA, future studies might also look at intersectionality of GSA participant identities. Simon and Jade’s narratives point us to Audre Lorde’s assertions that

“there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (Lorde, 1984). Studying narratives that explore intersectionality of identities will acknowledge this, and will be better able to look at how this shapes participant experiences, and how it affects their path to resilience.

Future studies should also look at what professional development GSA advisors have received in the Manitoba educational system. Listening to the experiences of GSA advisors as to what they feel has been effective professional development, and how they share, or are hindered from sharing, knowledge with other GSA advisors would be useful information for administrators.

Future studies could also examine the relationship between teachers and administrators through the lens of role theory. Studying role conflict and role ambiguity that might arise between defined and assumed expectations that administrators have of GSA advisors would provide insight into how administrators might provide more support for GSA advisors that goes beyond access to training.

Future studies might also examine how GSAs already do function as school-to-queer community pipeline, examining what outside resources are being accessed by GSAs. As in this study, the impact outside resources have on GSA members could be looked at through both a queer theory and resilience theory lens.

Conclusion

At the start of this study, I wanted to produce research that found GSAs that are producing strong, resilient students who were creating important changes and transforming their schools. Had this been the result, it would have absolved me of my responsibility as a part of the system, because the change-makers had been enabled and were on the move. What I found were

youth who still experience harassment, who see their schools as questionable spaces for queer-inclusion, and who could speak both positively and ambivalently about their GSAs. Listening to their stories and analyzing their experiences makes it clear that the responsibility for change is on the system, and therefore on me, and on every teacher and administrator in the education system.

An important piece to highlight from that last idea is the importance of “listening to their stories.” The implications and recommendations that this research has arrived at would have been impossible without listening to five queer youth in the Manitoba school system, and taking time to hear their stories and make sense of their experiences. As I have drawn attention to throughout this research, my own preconceptions and biases have been exposed, and my perspectives have shifted. That has happened because I have taken the time to listen to and seriously consider the experiences of these students. Foregrounding those experiences will remain key to future research, and also to changing system and individual practices.

Changing the ecologies of queer youth depends on how we frame their educational experiences in our classrooms, and how we equip ourselves to do so. This study suggests that supports for GSA advisors are important, and it is incumbent upon administrators at the school and school division level to support them in ways recommended above. In addition, teachers not directly involved in GSAs must also recognize the need to queer their classrooms. Provision of professional development to help teachers do this is the responsibility of administrators and school divisions, who must show they value and support systemic change. But the individual teacher has responsibility to do this as well, making changes such as valuing pronouns, giving space for students to express themselves in assignments. As we would expect teachers to pursue excellence in pedagogical practices in their subject matter, we should also expect them to pursue excellence in how they frame their teaching practices for queer youth.

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Appendix A – Letter to Superintendents



ATTENTION: Superintendent

Re: Seeking permission to conduct research in your division

Research Project: Exploring Resilience among Queer Youth in Gender Sexuality Alliances

Principal Investigator: Douglas Durksen (umdurkse@myumanitoba.ca)

Research Supervisor: Dr. Robert Mizzi (robert.mizzi@umanitoba.ca)

Hello,

My name is Douglas Durksen, and I am a Master's student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. I am interested in studying how resilience theory and queer theory are enacted in queer youth through their experiences in their high school's GSA.

I am requesting your permission to conduct this research with youth in your division who are willing to participate. I am interested in identifying how queer youth who attend GSAs understand and define their resilience, and I am interested in gaining insight into their experiences in their GSA to understand how queer theory and resilience theory align, and am hopeful that this research will lead to a better understanding of how GSAs can better serve queer youth in the educational system.

If granted your permission, I am asking your help in identifying high schools with a GSA, and permission to contact the principals and GSA advisors in those schools to identify youth who are willing to participate in this case study. I am looking to work with a total of three students in Winnipeg high schools. On agreeing to participate, students will be given a consent form to read, consider, and sign. If the participant is under 18, parental/guardian consent will also be asked for prior to participation. However, if a student is willing to participate, but has not disclosed their sexuality or gender identity to their parent/guardian, they can identify as a mature minor, acting as the primary person who decides on their participation, with the approval of their GSA advisor. These procedures have been vetted and approved by the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board. Please refer to the attached Information Sheet for more information about the consent process.

One form of data collection will be a one hour, audio-recorded, face to face, semi-structured interview. Prior to the interview, each participant will be given the interview questions I intend to ask. At the beginning of the interview, consent forms will be collected, and participants will be reminded that they can withdraw from being part of the study at any time. Interviews will take place at the student's school, during or shortly after school hours. Please refer to the attached Information Sheet for more information about data collection.

In conducting research, I have an obligation to the participants of my study to ensure their dignity, privacy and wellbeing. During the data collection, I will assure participants that they can

withdraw at any time. Immediately before beginning an interview, the study will be explained along with any potential risks and benefits. Following this, participants will be asked if they understand the information and are still willing to be part of the study. Only after a response of acceptance will the interview proceed. Participants, schools, and school divisions will be given privacy and anonymity, with pseudonyms used for all participants and institutions in all transcripts and subsequent manuscripts. Additionally, all data and consent forms will be stored in secure fashion, as approved by the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board.

Please be aware that I am required by law to report any abuse against children that may be revealed during the interview process. As well, at the conclusion of my thesis, I may include parts of this research, in the form of direct and indirect quotations of interviews and assignments, as well as photos, in presentations or publications I give as a researcher or educational leader.

This research has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry campus. If you have questions or concerns about this project, please contact the Human Ethics Coordinator at humanethics@umanitoba.ca.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Douglas Durksen

Appendix B – Letter to Rainbow Resource Centre



ATTENTION: Noreen Mian, Executive Director, Rainbow Resource Centre
Re: Seeking permission to conduct research through the Rainbow Resource Centre
Research Project: Exploring Resilience among Queer Youth in Gender Sexuality Alliances
Principal Investigator: Douglas Durksen (umdurkse@myumanitoba.ca)
Research Supervisor: Dr. Robert Mizzi (robert.mizzi@umanitoba.ca)

Hi Noreen,

My name is Douglas Durksen, and I am a Master's student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. I am interested in studying how resilience theory and queer theory are enacted in queer youth through their experiences in their high school's GSA. My goal is to interview 3 such students for a case study, in either one-one-one interviews, or in a group interview as a focus group.

I am requesting your permission to recruit participants for this study through the Rainbow Resource Centre. If granted your permission, I hope to be in contact with Rainbow Resource Centre staff who run youth programming. I understand that there might be a youth group that meets at Rainbow Resource Centre to which I could present the study, with the hope that some members might be willing to sign up. I would be more than happy to come in and discuss this - with a Rainbow Resource staff member first, if that makes sense.

On agreeing to participate, participants will be given a consent form to read, consider, and sign. If the participant is under 18, parental/guardian consent will also be asked for prior to participation. However, if a participant is willing to participate, but has not disclosed their sexuality or gender identity to their parent/guardian, they can identify as a mature minor, acting as the primary person who decides on their participation. These procedures have been vetted and approved by the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board. Please refer to the attached Information Sheet for more information about the consent process.

One form of data collection will be a one hour, audio-recorded, face to face, semi-structured interview, either one-on-one, or as a focus group. Prior to the interview, each participant will be given the interview questions I intend to ask. At the beginning of the interview, consent forms will be collected, and participants will be reminded that they can withdraw from being part of the study at any time. If the Rainbow Resource Centre is willing to offer space, interviews for recruits could take place at the Rainbow Resource Centre. Please refer to the attached Information Sheet for more information about data collection.

In conducting research, I have an obligation to the participants of my study to ensure their dignity, privacy and wellbeing. During the data collection, I will assure participants that they can

withdraw at any time. Immediately before beginning an interview, the study will be explained along with any potential risks and benefits. Following this, participants will be asked if they understand the information and are still willing to be part of the study. Only after a response of acceptance will the interview proceed. Participants will be given privacy and anonymity, with pseudonyms used for all participants in all transcripts and subsequent manuscripts. Additionally, all data and consent forms will be stored in secure fashion, as approved by the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board.

Please be aware that I am required by law to report any abuse against children that may be revealed during the interview process. As well, at the conclusion of my thesis, I may include parts of this research, in the form of direct and indirect quotations of interviews and assignments, as well as photos, in presentations or publications I give as a researcher or educational leader.

This research has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry campus. If you have questions or concerns about this project, please contact the Human Ethics Coordinator at humanethics@umanitoba.ca.

Thanks in advance for being willing to consider this. I would appreciate the opportunity to pursue this study and would appreciate any help Rainbow Resource Centre could offer.

Douglas Durksen

Appendix C – Recruitment Letter to Participants



ATTENTION: Interested Participants

Research Project: Exploring Resilience among Queer Youth in Gender Sexuality Alliances

Principal Investigator: Douglas Durksen (umdurkse@myumanitoba.ca)

Research Supervisor: Dr. Robert Mizzi (robert.mizzi@umanitoba.ca)

Hello,

My name is Douglas Durksen, and I am a Master's student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. I am interested in studying how resilience theory and queer theory are enacted in queer youth through their experiences in their high school's GSA.

I am interested in identifying how queer youth who attend GSAs understand and define their resilience, and I am interested in gaining insight into their experiences in their GSA to understand how queer theory and resilience theory align, and am hopeful that this research will lead to a better understanding of how GSAs can better serve queer youth in the educational system. Potential participants are high school students who identify as queer and who attend their high school's GSA.

You have been identified as a potential participant in this study. After reading this letter that outlines the study, if you would still like to participate, I would ask you to contact me at umdurkse@myumanitoba.ca, and we would begin the process of contact and consent.

This research involves the participation in and approximately one-hour, audio-recorded, face to face, semi-structured interview. Prior to the interview, you will be given the interview questions I intend to ask. At the beginning of the interview, consent forms will be collected, and you will be reminded that you can withdraw from being part of the study at any time. Interviews are intended to take place at your school, during or shortly after school hours. **You will be asked to give an example of a school assignment that provides insight into your experiences as a queer youth in your school, and will also be asked to bring an object (perhaps a drawing, a photo, or a physical object) that represents your resilience.**

Before we begin the interview, I will check in with you to ensure you understand the points in the consent and reaffirm your consent to participate. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time. All information will be held private and confidential.

Please be aware that I am required by law to report any abuse against children that may be revealed during the interview process. As well, at the conclusion of my thesis, I may include parts of this research in presentations I give as a researcher or educational leader.

On agreeing to participate, you will be given a consent form to read, consider, and sign. If you are over 18, you may sign the consent form yourself. If you are under 18, parental/guardian consent will also be asked for prior to participation. However, if you are willing to participate, but have not disclosed your sexuality or gender identity to your parent/guardian, you can identify as a mature minor, acting as the primary person who decides on your participation, with the approval of your GSA advisor.

This research has been approved by the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board. If you have questions or concerns about this project, please contact the Human Ethics Coordinator at humanethics@umanitoba.ca.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Douglas Durksen

Appendix D – Semi Structured Interview Questions

Consent Preamble: We would like to remind you of the time commitment of about 90 minutes for this portion of the research study, as per the informed consent form. Your participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without any consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. With your consent, there is a Rainbow Resource staff member sitting in on this session.

Introduction: Welcome to this focus group interview. One of the important parts about this study is the idea that your privacy and confidentiality will be respected. With that in mind, before we begin, I would like to ask that you not share the names of other participants or information or responses that they have given in their responses to questions and the following conversation that occurs with anyone outside of this study. Thank you.

1. Tell me about yourself.
 - Can you describe your sexuality?
 - Can you describe your gender?
2. Can you describe what it is like being a queer youth in your school?
 - Classroom experiences
 - Public space experiences
 - “being yourself”
3. How do you view yourself as a student? Can you explain why that is?
 - Engaged?
 - Successful?
4. What personal qualities do you have that you view as a strength?
5. Can you describe your GSA and what it is like? What sorts of activities does your GSA engage in?
 - Peer support
 - School-wide education
 - Advocacy
 - Is it a safe space? What does that mean to you?
6. *How did your GSA operate during the times when school was shut down because of COVID? Did it operate differently when school was open but restricted?*
 - *How did you stay connected?*
 - *Was it a help for you to be connected?*
 - *Does last year’s experience change the way you view your GSA this year?*

7. Can you describe the object you brought, and explain why you chose it to represent your resilience/GSA?
 - What does resilience mean to you?
8. How does your GSA fit in to your school culture?
 - Is your GSA known about in your school? Do you feel it is supported?
9. How does your GSA support you?
10. How do you contribute to your GSA?
11. Do you feel you've changed since attending your GSA? In what way?
12. Can you describe an important relationship with someone in your GSA?
 - GSA Advisor?
13. What motivates you to keep attending your GSA?
14. Can you describe a stressful/problematic incident at school and how you dealt with it?
 - Have you encountered a challenge at school where you felt you grew? What did you learn from the experience?
 - Have you encountered a challenge at school and it didn't work out? Looking back, what would you have done differently?
15. If you are having a difficult time at school, who do you seek out for help?
 - What steps do you take to manage adversity at school?
 - When you encounter a setback, how do you manage it?
16. What plans do you have after high school?
17. Can you tell me about the school assignment you chose?
18. Is there anything else you would like to add? Is there a question I should have asked you but didn't?

Appendix E – Research Ethics Board Approval



University
of Manitoba

Research Ethics and Compliance

Human Ethics - Fort Garry
208-194 Dafoe Road
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2
T: 204 474 8872
humanethics@umanitoba.ca

PROTOCOL APPROVAL

Effective: June 3, 2022
2, 2023

Expiry: June

Principal Investigator:	Douglas Durksen
Advisor:	Robert Mizzi
Protocol Number:	HE2022-0001
Protocol Title:	<i>Exploring Resilience among Queer Youth in Gender Sexuality Alliances</i>

Andrea L Szwajcer, Chair, REB2

Research Ethics Board 2 has reviewed and approved the above research. The Human Ethics Office (HEO) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans- TCPS 2* (2018).

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

- i. Approval is granted for the research and purposes described in the protocol only.
- ii. Any changes to the protocol or research materials must be approved by the HEO before implementation.
- iii. Any deviations to the research or adverse events must be reported to the HEO immediately through an REB Event.
- iv. This approval is valid for one year only. A Renewal Request must be submitted and approved prior to the above expiry date.
- v. A Protocol Closure must be submitted to the HEO when the research is complete or if the research is terminated.
- vi. The University of Manitoba may request to audit your research documentation to confirm compliance with this approved protocol, and with the UM *Ethics of Research Involving Humans* policies and procedures.

Appendix F – Research Ethics Amendment Approval



University
of Manitoba

Research Ethics and Compliance

Human Ethics - Fort Garry
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T: 204 474 8872
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AMENDMENT APPROVAL

May 16, 2023

Principal Investigator:	Douglas Durksen
Advisor:	Robert Mizzi
Protocol Number:	HE2022-0001
Protocol Title:	<i>Exploring Resilience among Queer Youth in Gender Sexuality Alliances</i>

Andrea L Szwajcer, Chair, REB2

Research Ethics Board 2 has reviewed and approved your Amendment Request submitted on April 26, 2023 to the above-noted protocol. The Human Ethics Office (HEO) is constituted and operates in accordance with the current *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans- TCPS 2* (2022).

This approval is subject to the following conditions:

- i. Approval is granted for this amendment only.
- ii. Any further changes to the protocol require subsequent amendment approvals from the HEO before implementation.
- iii. Any deviations to the research or adverse events must be reported to the HEO immediately through an REB Event.
- iv. Amendment Approvals do not change the protocol expiry date. Please refer to the original Protocol Approval or subsequent Renewal Approvals for the protocol expiry date.