

**Perceptions of a Gay-Straight Alliance Club Ban: School Counselors and  
Advocacy for LGBTQQ Students**

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### **Abstract**

This phenomenological inquiry explored the experiences and reactions of five school counselors who worked in a school that banned a Gay-Straight Alliance club. Specifically, the authors examined how counselors' perceptions of the ban influenced their advocacy for LGBTQQ students. The results of semi-structured interviews revealed one overarching theme: The administration yielded to the status quo and three subthemes (1) the ban prevented students from receiving much needed support (2) proactive advocacy is the best course of action, and (3) change in communities is slow. Future practice and research directions are discussed.

*Keywords:* gay-straight alliance, sexual minority, school counselor, advocacy, LGBTQQ

## **Perceptions of a Gay-Straight Alliance Club Ban: School Counselors and Advocacy for LGBTQQ Students**

On the morning of February 12, 2008, in the cafeteria of E. O. Green Junior High School in Oxnard California, 14-year-old Brandon McInerney shot 15-year-old Lawrence “Larry” King two times in the back of the head. Students, faculty, and staff witnessed the shooting. While there were warning signs that the two students had issues between them, no one was prepared for the violent turn of events that left two young lives shattered, one through death, and the other through the commission of the act. Larry was gay, struggling with issues related to coming out in an environment hostile toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning (LGBTQQ) people. Brandon was straight, struggling with Larry’s open desire of a relationship with him and the subsequent ridicule from his friends. Both students were considered high risk for reasons other than sexuality, including troubled home lives. On December 19, 2011, Brandon was sentenced to 21 years imprisonment. An article in *Newsweek* magazine, as Brandon’s trial neared, reported both Larry’s and Brandon’s supporters believed that the school (i.e., faculty and staff), was primarily culpable for Larry’s death (Setoodeh, 2008). In the end, students, faculty, and staff suggest that both were victims of homophobic harassment that festered within the hallways of the school (Saillant, 2008; Setoodeh, 2008; Wilson, 2008). There are conflicting accounts concerning the response from faculty and staff. One takes the position that an adequate response was made to the harassment, while others believe the response from faculty and staff was inappropriate and insufficient. A lawsuit filed against the school by the King family was settled out of court.

A decade of research into the school experience of LGBTQQ students indicates that physical and verbal harassment and internalized homophobia are significant barriers to emotional, social, and academic development. Nationwide surveys indicate that up to 85% of all students reported frequently hearing homophobic or sexist remarks at school (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). These statistics are alarming given that verbal harassment of LGBTQQ students has often escalated into vicious physical attacks (American Civil Liberties Union, ACLU, 2007). LGBTQQ students report higher levels of substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and dropping out of school (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002). They also report higher levels of trauma symptoms, depression, and low feelings of self-worth (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2007; D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hersberger, 2002; Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). Because of these conditions, the educational performance and aspirations of LGBTQQ students are lower than the national average (Kosciw, et al., 2012).

Intolerance and, at times, blatantly homophobic views of homosexuality in our society perpetuates hostility in our schools toward LGBTQQ students (Macgillivray, 2000; Macgillivray, 2004). Overall, policies are lacking in our educational systems that include protection from verbal and physical harassment based on sexual orientation (Russo, 2006). Further, many school systems with such policies often lack a uniform response to such harassment when it occurs (Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Russo, 2006). As a result, students navigate their orientations and identities fearful of being discovered, fearful of losing friends, and/or fearful of being victimized in a school culture that is silent

regarding their needs or struggling with how to meet them (Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Savin-Williams, 1994).

School counselors must be prepared to address these concerns. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is clear on its position that school counselors are ethically bound to advocate for LGBTQQ students. ASCA unequivocally maintains that the role of the school counselor regarding these students is to “promote affirmation, respect, and equal opportunity for all individuals regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity” and “to promote awareness of issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity among students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community” (ASCA, 2004). Ethically, school counselors are required to confront barriers in the school environment such as verbal and physical harassment that impede the academic, personal/social, and career development of LGBTQQ students. They are also required to provide support that promotes the well-being of these students. Attempts to change their orientation or viewing a non-heterosexual orientation as a disorder or a symptom of an underlying emotional problem are counter to ASCA's standards (ASCA, 2007a).

In order to meet ethical obligations and become competent advocates, school counselors must become aware of personal biases and beliefs about sexual orientation as well as the overall school community's stance toward the issues and needs of LGBTQQ people (ASCA, 2007a; Goodrich & Luke, 2009). Other requisites for ethical action include: acquiring knowledge about the coming out process; the negative impact of homophobia and heterosexism on the social, emotional, and physical development of LGBTQQ people; and the history of the struggle for their civil rights (ASCA 2007a; Nichols, 1999; Jeltova & Fish, 2005). School counselors who are aware of their own

biases and possess sufficient knowledge regarding the needs and issues of LGBTQQ students are poised to create a supportive and affirming school environment for them (Trusty & Brown, 2005).

One of the most prevalent and effective ways of providing supportive and affirming services are Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) (Koswic et al., 2012). GSAs are student organizations designed to provide a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQQ students and their heterosexual allies. These organizations are student led and protected under the Equal Access Act (EAA), the law that provides non-curriculum clubs the same rights afforded to other clubs to meet at school and use school facilities (United States Code, 1984).

Research shows that the presence of a GSA is associated with a decrease in verbal and physical harassment, an increased visibility of supportive school staff, and an increased sense of school belonging (Kosciw et al., 2012; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006). A recent study (Saewyc, Konishi, Rose, & Homma, 2014) examined the presence of anti-homophobic bullying policies and GSAs in schools as potential protective factors. Results showed that Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual students reported lower rates of discrimination, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts when GSAs and anti-homophobic bullying policies had been in place in the school for more than 3 years. The most significant factor in reducing these risks in students was the presence of a GSA.

Regardless of the positive impact on LGBTQQ students, there have been incidents in several states where GSAs were banned by school boards because of pressure from citizen groups that opposed them (ACLU, 2007a). The support for these

students that seems so desperately needed in our schools is often denied due to prejudice and discrimination in the larger culture. School counselors are in an ideal position to address such incidents of discrimination. There is limited empirical exploration regarding school counselors' experience of advocating for GSAs. The available literature indicates school counselors generally believe that the level of homophobia in their school environments and larger communities is a serious problem that they are ethically bound to address (Fontaine, 1998). However, they feel neither adequately prepared to do so nor supported by administration and faculty when they try (Fontaine, 1998; Frank & Cannon, 2009). Exploring a GSA ban from the perspective of school counselors provides an opportunity to learn how they perform in their ethically mandated role as advocates for LGBTQQ students who have experienced discrimination.

Trusty and Brown (2005) identified a "dire" need for research studies regarding how school counselors develop advocacy competency in the school environment. Only one study was found that examines how and when school counselors advocate in general on behalf of students (Field & Baker, 2004). The results from Field and Baker (2004) indicated that school counselors were more reactive than proactive in their advocacy behaviors and none of their behaviors were geared toward systemic change, but rather were focused on helping the students help themselves. No studies specifically addressed advocacy for LGBTQQ students; nor were studies regarding how advocacy competency is developed and manifested when needed in the school environment. This exploration added to the empirical knowledge about how school

counselors perceive systemic barriers to educational equity and how their perceptions facilitate or impede advocacy on behalf of these students.

The current explored the following research questions: (a) How did school counselors employed in schools that banned a GSA perceive and describe their experience of the ban? (b) How did the counselors' experience of the ban influence their advocacy for LGBTQQ students? (c) What suggestions did participants have for school counselors facing similar situations?

### **Method**

The purpose of this study was to explore how school counselors perceive and describe a GSA ban and how their perceptions and descriptions influence their advocacy for LGBTQQ students. Phenomenological qualitative methodology was utilized in order to explore behaviors, perspectives, and experiences and gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon as it was experienced by participants (Patton, 2002). Phenomenology is a research tradition that solicits the direct, conscious, and contextual experiences of participants. Its goal is the exploration of the essence and meaning of individuals' lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Research Team**

The research team included two principle researchers (one who identifies as a white, heterosexual female, one who identifies as a white lesbian) and a research assistant (who identifies as a white, heterosexual female). The lead researcher had prolonged engagement with the professional school counselor community particularly focused on child advocacy, which informed an understanding of the environment and

the needs of stakeholders. In order to answer the research questions, an interview guide (Patton, 2002) was created by the researchers, two former school counselors and one former community counselor, and vetted by a qualitative research educator.

Potential researcher biases were made explicit via memoing (Cresswell, 2007) and verbally in meetings with the research team, allowing the researchers to “bracket” or set them aside (Creswell, 1998) throughout data collection and analysis. Some of these biases included viewing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning/queer (LGBTQ) youth through a social justice lens, the belief that all students deserve advocates to face discrimination in school settings, and the assumption that not all school counselors have the courage or willingness to speak out against injustice.

### **Participants**

Participants were five licensed school counselors with membership in ASCA who were working in a school within the contiguous United States that banned a Gay-Straight Alliance club. It was necessary to select school counselors that met this criterion as the purpose of this study sought to explore their unique experience with this phenomenon and its influence on their ethical obligation to advocate for LGBTQ students. The participants in the study all identified as White and ranged in age from 38 to 61 ( $M = 52$ ). Three participants were female and two were male. All participants identified as heterosexual. Four held master’s degrees in school counseling and one held a master’s in education with a graduate certificate in school counseling. Their school counseling experience ranged from 12 years to 36 years ( $M = 18$ ) and their training in multicultural counseling ranged from 6 hours to 100 hours ( $M = 35.8$ ). Regionally, three participants lived and worked in suburban settings in southern states,

one worked in an urban Midwest setting, and one participant worked in a Northwestern state within a school district that included schools in both rural and urban settings.

### **Procedure**

The questions for the interview protocol were piloted with four school counselors employed in a school where GSAs were banned throughout their county's school system. This resulted in revisions to the interview questions for clarity and identification of constraints to effective data collection. The school counselors in the pilot study would not participate in the larger study because of their fears of reprisal in a work environment that was not supportive of GSAs. It was decided based on these concerns to seek a national sample of school counselors who had experienced GSA bans in the past and not a sample from one particular school that was currently embroiled in a ban controversy. The pilot study afforded an opportunity to experience the sensitive nature of the research topic and in doing so reaffirmed the necessity of exploring it.

Purposeful sampling procedures such as convenience and snowball sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002) were used to identify licensed school counselors who are or were working in a school setting in which a GSA was banned and who are members of ASCA. A variety of recruitment strategies were used including email, ground mail, and distribution of flyers at professional conferences attended by school counselors. Particular efforts were made to target those areas of the country where GSA bans have occurred. In all, over 800 letters, emails, and flyers were distributed nationally. Five school counselors agreed to participate and all met the criteria for inclusion in the study.

## Data Sources

**Demographic survey.** All participants completed a demographic form that included questions about their age, race/ethnicity, educational level, years of experience as a school counselor, geographic region, membership in ASCA, and sexual orientation.

**Semi-structured interviews.** An interview guide was used to conduct 60-90 minute face to face or interviews with each of the participants. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher. Notes were taken by the researcher focusing on key phrases, terms, words of respondents that served to expand on something said or to facilitate data analysis by indicating important quotations to locate during the analysis. Taking notes during the interview also served to bracket the researcher's interpretations, observations, thoughts, feelings, or ideas that surfaced during the course of the interview (Patton, 2002). Notes taken during the interview became a part of the data corpus. Sample questions from the interview protocol included: *What is your understanding of the ASCA standards regarding school counselor's ethical obligations toward LGBTQQ students? Describe the events at your school leading up to the GSA ban. What were your personal reactions to these events? Describe what happened when the GSA was banned, including your role as a school counselor and your personal reactions to the ban. What was the impact of the GSA ban on the school community (student body, staff, administration)?*

## Data Collection and Analysis

An audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002) was maintained that included steps taken throughout the development of the research, data collection and analysis. Process notes, raw data, data reduction methods, field notes, and the reflexive journal

were included in the audit trail. A reviewer with expertise in qualitative research independently reviewed the audit trail and evaluated the dependability of the research process from beginning to end (Patton, 2002). Member checking was used in order to increase trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After each interview, typed transcripts were sent to the participants for verification of accuracy and for clarification as needed. The participants returned their transcripts within the two-week deadline with minor changes made regarding spelling and grammar, and answering in narrative form some follow up questions. One participant called the lead researcher for a follow up interview and to clarify what was stated in the transcript.

Based on the nature of the research questions, we used a modification of phenomenological data analysis called horizontalization using descriptive codes (Moustakas, 1994), pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and axial or analytic coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After setting aside preconceptions and biases, researchers identified key themes (Moustakas, 1994) in each data set. An independent coder trained in qualitative research methods and the lead researcher individually coded each transcript. To begin the process of data analysis, each coder independently examined the first transcribed interview to develop initial descriptive codes. Next, axial or analytic coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to link the descriptive codes relationally. In this process, each identified category was explored to determine the conditions that gave rise to it, the context in which it was embedded, the actions and interactions within the category, strategies by which the actions and interactions were handled, and the consequences of those strategies (Creswell, 1998). The two coders then met for consensus building after the coding the first transcript. The next two

transcripts were then independently coded and the team met once again for consensus building (Creswell, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 2002). An initial coding manual was created to analyze the remaining interview transcripts. To create the coding manual, the codes from the first three interviews were grouped into categories, reducing the initial codes into units of analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To group the codes into categories, we applied a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), asking whether each code was similar or different, until all the codes were grouped thematically. We made decisions about eliminating redundancy in the codes and determined if the codes appropriately represented the data. We independently applied the revised codes to the next two transcripts, adding or modifying codes for additional categories that emerged, and met again to come to a consensus. We continued this process until the data was saturated, the point where categories were fully developed and the remaining transcripts provided no additional codes (Creswell, 2005). Finally, the research team developed individual textural descriptions for each participant. The textural descriptions were then analyzed through the process of *imaginative variation* and a structural description of each participant was created (Moustakas, 1994) in order to understand the context in which the participants experienced the phenomenon. Subsequently, the structural descriptions were analyzed thematically and emergent themes were explicated.

Lending credibility to the overall conclusions and safe guarding against bias, negative case analysis was utilized (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Participant experiences that did not follow the patterns generated during the data analysis were described and included in the results. Peer debriefers (counselor

educators, independent coder, counselors with experience in treating LGBTQQ, and experienced qualitative researchers) were utilized to enhance dependability throughout the data collection, analysis, and interpretive process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Multiple verification methods were utilized throughout the study to enhance credibility including obtaining a rich description of participant's experiences of the phenomenon, multiple sources of data, multiple investigators during analysis (Glesne, 2006), constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 2002), member checking of transcripts, the use of peer debriefers, negative case analysis, and analytic triangulation between researchers (Creswell, 2005) to enhance dependability in that different perspectives about the data were considered (Patton, 2002).

## **Results**

Singular and collective thematic analysis of the participants' textural and structural descriptions revealed common themes. The overarching theme among the participants is that the GSA bans were the result of a direct administrator's or an upper level administrative body yielding to the status quo conservative and non-affirming beliefs about LGBTQQ people. Three subthemes emerged: the ban prevented students from getting much needed support, proactive advocacy for the inclusion of supportive structures is the best course of action, and transformation of communities is slow.

### **Yielding to the Status Quo**

All of the participants described the larger communities in which their schools are located as politically and religiously conservative with non-progressive attitudes and beliefs about LGBTQQ people. The participants consistently described fundamentalist or conservative Christianity as the majority religious values that were represented in

their local, regional, and national political leadership. As such, they perceived the GSA ban as a strategy for an administration that either wanted to avoid controversy or one that was in collusion with the status quo religious beliefs about sexual orientation held by the community. They experienced these ideologies held by the majority populace as more powerful than the perceived need for supportive services for LGBTQQ students.

One participant described the ban the following way:

It was a time when those kids needed us more than ever. They needed us as counselors more than ever. They needed all the adults in that building to support and care for them more than ever. They needed other students to accept them more than ever. It was very destructive. I became a safe haven for these students but I had to be careful about how far I went. At that time, there was a gag order placed by the school board down to the district and school administration to keep LGBT issues under the radar.

Participants experienced a general sense of powerlessness against majority views, described their own views of LGBTQQ people as politically moderate or liberal and affirming, and had all participated in training/education regarding LGBTQQ issues.

Several contextual similarities and differences influenced the participants' experience of the GSA ban. Four participants worked in a public school setting and one worked in a private school setting. Three worked directly with the students that wanted to form the GSA while one worked indirectly with them through consultation with the faculty advisor for the club. Another began working at her school after the GSA ban. The overarching contextual similarity between the participants was that they primarily experienced the GSA ban as a reproduction of their larger communities' status quo beliefs about sexual orientation.

Participants described their administrators' role as primarily to provide them with support and resources needed to perform optimally in their role as student advocates. However, due to the GSA bans, support for their advocacy for LGBTQQ students was experienced as being limited or non-existent. Four participants perceived administrators as acting to avoid controversy with conservative parent or community groups. One participant perceived his administrator as being "in collusion with conservative parents or community groups."

The level of risk school counselors took in responding to a GSA ban was dependent on their perspective of their administrator's position on the ban. However, whether their administrators were perceived as collaborative or adversarial, school counselors perceived the power structures within the community as ultimately deciding what is allowed in schools. The participants believed support for the GSA within the school environment was present. All participants recognized that while some faculty had hesitations about forming a GSA, they believed the faculty understood the students were entitled to the club. The presence of internal support for the GSA from faculty supported the participants' perception that the ban was the administration yielding to the beliefs and attitudes of the larger community regarding sexual orientation.

***Students prevented from receiving much needed support.*** All participants appeared aware of specific issues that LGBTQQ populations face regarding barriers to academic achievement and all were generally empathic and affirming. As one participant stated, "As a school counselor it is my job to address anything that is causing academic failure." She viewed LGBTQQ students as academically at risk due to

“bullying and harassment, being singled out as different and parental beliefs all of which may lead to depression.” Another participant recalled a gay student she worked with:

He taught me a lot. That was the first time I had worked with a student who came out and I was the first person who he had come out to. It was a long time ago and I can still see his face. It was pretty impactful. Far too many LGBT students get hurt over the years and I am sick and tired of it. I have never stood by and tolerated that and the hardest thing for me to swallow in my job day to day when I work in the school or in the office is to watch people treated unfairly. I can't stand it and it's just a passion for me.

Each participant expressed an understanding of his/her ethical obligation to advocate for these academically at risk students. Respect for all students was a common ethical theme for participants. One participant summed up her ethical obligation to students this way, “ASCA mandates that we show them the support and advocacy that we would for any student, that we shouldn't be discriminating in what we offer students and how we support them.” She further stated that “it is unethical to choose not to support them [LGBTQQ students] because one's value system would run contrary to that; we have to check those things at the door.”

The experience of a GSA ban for the school counselors in this study was an emotional one involving feelings of powerlessness, frustration, disappointment and anger. Ultimately, participants in this study experienced a parallel process of oppression and discrimination in that powerful community structures minimized or silenced their views about LGBTQQ people and discriminated against their efforts to practice ethically. One participant underscored her lack of surprise over the denial of the GSA as her and the administrator's desire to avoid confrontation from parents with a description of the larger community:

We live in a conservative area and we are lucky to have a GSA in the high schools, if you want to know the truth about it. I know many parents that would not have wanted a GSA in the middle school. It was difficult enough for them when they found out we had one at the high school. We have a number of evangelical or fundamentalist Christian churches here that are very active in the community. Many of our local politicians and elected officials are members of these type churches. Most people here are just not progressive in their thinking, especially when it comes to sexual orientation.

Participants believed that LGBTQQ students have specific needs that affect academic achievement and that the GSA would benefit these students. Among the perceived benefits, providing these students with a sense of belonging in the school environment was prevalent. For example, participants believed that having a GSA in the school would “promote a sense that other people cared about their needs” and provide a “niche” for them in school. The students would have a place where “they could get together and talk” while at the same time “make being gay less controversial or threatening to other students.”

Banning the GSA prevented all students from experiencing the benefits that the participants believed would emerge from a GSA’s presence in the school environment. As a result, they believed that all students were receiving a message that LGBTQQ students could not be visible, thereby supporting the notion that being a non-heterosexual was something to “be punished for.” The actions of the administrators were perceived as “hurtful,” “painful,” and “disturbing” to the overall sense of well being of the students who wanted the club.

**Proactive advocacy.** Participants emerged from the experience with an understanding that proactive versus reactive advocacy for the inclusion of a GSA and

other services for students is best practice and is not without some professional risk, especially in conservative areas. As one participant stated during a time of chaos over the GSA ban, “I became a safe haven for these students, but I had to be careful about how far I went. At that time, there was a gag order placed by the school board down to the district and school administration to keep LGBT issues under the radar.” Participants believed that proactive advocacy for a GSA or other supportive services for LGBTQ students involved becoming aware and being willing to act. They were also keenly aware that their advocacy for a GSA or for LGBTQ students placed them in politically precarious positions. The power of the community to reproduce status quo beliefs left the participants feeling frustrated, but prepared to offer resistance on some level.

The participants believed that LGBTQ students should experience the same amount of support and affirmation for who they are as do heterosexual students. They believed that starting a GSA would be beneficial to students in order to provide support and to normalize their questioning or coming out experiences. They also believed that having a GSA would help LGBTQ students feel like a part of the school. While feeling frustrated from being told he would have to rename the club something “less threatening,” one participant stated, the “ultimate goal was to let these kids know they have a safe place to go and they have an advocate on the faculty to help them so to me the name wasn’t that important either as long as the services would be there.”

All of the participants except one made efforts to resist the reproduction of oppressive community beliefs about sexual orientation within the school setting. Three of these participants went on to hold administrative positions and to use their positions to weave issues related to advocating for LGBTQ students into their training and

consultation with school counselors, faculty, and staff. Two of these also accepted part-time positions as counselor educators and worked to infuse issues related to sexual minorities in their classrooms. The other remained a school counselor and provided training about the needs of these students to the general student body, faculty, and staff.

Participants recommended preparing administrators by educating them about the needs of LGBTQQ students, articulating the benefits of a GSA, and understanding the “temperature” of the external community around LGBTQQ issues. One participant suggested arranging for the students interested in forming a GSA to meet with other established GSAs and sponsors in other schools to determine what to expect from a GSA and how it has benefitted the overall school environment. Creating a network of allies, regardless of the level of support from the administration, was seen as important by participants so that LGBTQQ students will have visible and safe support.

The participants identified advocacy as their primary role. Acting for the benefit of students permeated their professional identity. As one participant stated “Advocacy is the fabric that we are woven out of and if we are not there for that then we shouldn’t be doing the job.” She believed that school counselors are in the best position to advocate because they have a “global sense of what the school is all about in terms of the heartbeat of the school and the real issues of the kids.” This strong professional identity as an advocate was seen as vital to the school counselor’s role.

Participants expressed that their visibility in the school environment as an ally is crucial to reaching a population that is often, especially in conservative areas, rendered

invisible. Feeling caught between visible advocacy and yielding to the status quo, one participant stated:

I have been cautioned by the people above me that we need to be very, very careful about specifically mentioning LGBT's in our lesson plans. It is a delicate line to walk because I think we need to call it what it is and to me, when you can't come right out and call it what it is that kids won't know what you are talking about.

Another participant stated that if students are "so passionate about it [forming a GSA] and you've given them all the caution and fore warning out of a nature to protect them, and they still want to go ahead, then you be there for them and you catch them when they fall. You be there to listen." Proactive advocacy requires networking with other allies, researching how other schools in conservative communities have successfully implemented GSAs, and advocating from a legal rather than a moral perspective. Collaborative relations yielded strategies within the school environment; adversarial relations yielded strategies away from the school environment or resignation to the status quo.

Participants believed awareness was not simply confined to the school environment but applied to the community context as well. Among the suggestions were to be aware of the level of interest and support for a GSA in the school and the motivating factors of the students that want to start a GSA. Others included knowing the laws specific to GSAs and other supportive services for students, knowing what services are available in the community for LGBTQQ students, and knowing who in the community and school is supportive. For example, one participant believed that school counselors have an "arsenal to engage in battle" for the inclusion of a GSA in the school environment. He recommended engaging "the opposition from a legal rather than a

moral stance utilizing the *Equal Access Act*, networking with allies in the community, and partnering with local, regional, and national civil rights organizations.”

Participants suggested that, if armed with sufficient awareness, school counselors are better prepared to address hesitant administrators if they are able to show how a GSA will benefit all students and show that there is support from faculty, staff, and students. Additionally, they believed that school counselors who are able to articulate the legal ramifications of failing to approve the club and cite legal precedents related to school clubs may persuade a reluctant administrator to view the issue in a legal context rather than a moral one. Finally, the participants believed that school counselors who can speak to the day-to-day experiences of LGBTQQ students may be able to appeal to their administrators’ sense of duty to promote and support ethical school counseling practice.

**Transformation of communities is slow.** There was consensus among participants that their community, while remaining primarily politically conservative and religiously fundamental, the visibility of LGBTQQ people and awareness of their issues, particularly the issues of students, has increased. There was also consensus that discrimination continues and will until there is greater acceptance in the larger community. The participants were optimistic that the direction of change will continue to be positive, but that the advent of these changes will be slow. The experience of a GSA ban also confirmed for participants that until the larger community becomes more accepting, supportive services in the school environment would remain highly controversial. The evidence of positive but slow changes in the communities of school counselors who have experienced a GSA ban gave them hope that their students, loved

ones, and acquaintances would one day be able to live full lives without hesitating to be open about their identity.

Participants reflected on changes in their school and larger communities since their experience of the GSA ban. From their reflections, the participants revealed themes of continued discrimination and the slow pace of change. One participant reported “the school board reinstated clubs, but there are still no GSAs in any of the district schools.” The policy on student clubs was re-written so that one can only exist if justified by a connection to school curriculum. Another participant revealed his sense of pride that “the student club is still up and running.” Conversely, he experienced his community “slowly changing” in terms of “awareness and respect for diversity.” Another participant believed that LGBTQQ communities need to be “normalized” in the larger culture. This thought led him to hope “that one day supportive services for these students are just one of the many services we provide for students with issues that are getting in the way of being emotionally healthy and being successful students.” For him, the battle lines were clear and the side he is on, professionally and personally, is “slowly” gaining strength and momentum. He was at the same time discouraged and lamented that while there has been progress, the power of both lower and upper level education administrators to reproduce community non-affirming attitudes and beliefs about LGBTQQ people remained. To illustrate, he reported that “despite the fact that GSA’s are now present in that district’s high schools, that district’s superintendent recently prohibited one of the local high school’s plans to present *The Laramie Project* as a school play.”

While the participants perceived some positive changes in their communities such as increased awareness and visibility of LGBTQQ people, there remains few at best or none at worst, GSAs throughout their school districts. The characteristics of their communities' power structures have remained more or less the same. However, the participants have noticed some slight changes toward progressive attitudes.

### **Discussion**

The authors of this study explored the experiences of school counselors navigating their professional identities as ethical advocates for LGBTQQ students in the aftermath of a GSA ban. Regarding the first research question "How did school counselors employed in schools that have banned a GSA perceive and describe their experience of the ban?" the participants in this study believed: (a) the administration banned the GSA in order to avoid controversy or collude with conservative parents or groups in the larger community that held moral or religious objections toward LGBTQQ people; (b) the ban prevented LGBTQQ students from getting much needed support in the school environment, which ran counter to their ethical codes; (c) the community's power and influence over administrative decisions regarding supportive services for LGBTQQ students impeded their ability to advocate for these students in the school environment.

Regarding the second research question "How did their perceptions influence their advocacy for LGBTQQ students?" participants seemed compelled to address the ban through the utilization of a variety of strategies that matched the level of their primary administrator's involvement in the ban. For example, one participant perceived his principal as being in collusion with the status quo; therefore, he created a way to

form a GSA outside of the school premises for his students which by-passed administrative directives all together. Another participant perceived her principal as being unapproachable and unwavering on the issue. Coupled with her already diminished capacity to perform optimally as a school counselor, she resigned herself to the principal's decision. A third participant perceived his principal as being primarily neutral regarding the GSA, but approachable. The strategy he utilized through continued dialogue with his principal and the school council was to compromise and change the name of the GSA to something "less controversial." Yet another participant perceived her principal as angry and concerned that a GSA in the school would decrease enrollment from a predominantly conservative constituency. She was empowered enough to openly disagree with him and confront his decision and continues to be a vocal advocate for LGBTQQ students. A fifth participant perceived her principal to be affirming and supportive of the GSA, but was powerless over an upper administrative decision to ban all non-curricular clubs to keep the GSA from forming. Her strategy involved remaining a visible ally but being extremely cautious in her actions.

Participants' experiences illustrated that the broader social context of a school's environment has a significant impact on whether or not students are allowed to form a GSA. Likewise, Fetner and Kush (2008) explored social predictors of the GSAs that were formed prior to 2003 and determined that students in rural areas, small towns, and conservative regions were less likely to have the support needed from the community to form a GSA. This trend is evidenced in the current study in that sufficient support to form the GSA was found within the school environment among faculty, staff, and

students, support in the larger religiously and politically conservative community was lacking.

Participants were frustrated over having to yield to conservative parents or groups that held religious objections toward LGBTQQ people. They perceived these parents or groups to be unmoved by the needs of students and primarily concerned with preserving their particular religious views about sexual orientation. Their perceptions of the opposition are consistent with Miceli's (2005) results of a content analysis of several hundred letters to the editor in newspapers across the country in conservative areas where the attempted formation of a GSA created considerable controversy. She found that the primary argument against GSAs put forth by conservative groups is based in their belief that GSAs are a part of a "gay agenda" that seeks to corrupt the morals and values of minors by encouraging them to engage in what they perceive as deviant sexual behavior. As a result, she asserted that "all those involved with the GSA movement are forced, time and time again, to contend with the morality frame of the opposition and the power it has over public opinion" (p.18).

While national opinion polls consistently show that public opinion regarding LGBTQQ people generally continues to move toward greater acceptance, a gap between the opinions about LGBTQQ populations held by religiously and politically conservative populations persists and continues to widen (Linneman, 2004; Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006; Herek, 2006; Ball, 2014). Thus, school counselors in conservative areas who attempt to provide supportive services for LGBTQQ students may find themselves embroiled in what many religiously and politically conservative parents and groups believe is a culture war that they must win at all costs (Linneman,

2004). Sometimes the cost is the loss of progressive administrators, faculty and staff, but the largest cost is the emotional, physical, and academic well-being of students.

The findings of this study further elucidate the interconnectedness of a school counselor's role with her/his administration and how this can be problematic. In general, participants reported they depend on their administrators for the supervision and tools they need to fulfill their obligations. However, support was denied or withdrawn with respect to a GSA. The participants continued to advocate, providing evidence that school counselors who identify strongly as advocates and hold affirming beliefs and attitudes about LGBTQQ people are willing to take professional risks to fulfill their ethical obligations to this student population. This is consistent with another qualitative study of 13 teachers and one school social worker who decided to be the advisor to GSAs in their schools in spite of controversy from conservative parents or groups (Valenti & Campbell, 2009). Participants were motivated to be the club's advisor out of protective attitudes toward students and personal connections with loved ones who identify as LGBTQQ, but they believed there were several risks with fear of job loss among the most prominent of their worries.

Other studies support advocacy for LGBTQQ students without administrative support. For example, DeMauro (2009) found that 100% of 93 middle school counselors surveyed about their intervention strategies in support of LGBTQQ students have encountered situations wherein they observed other students bullying or harassing these students. All of them indicated they addressed this behavior directly with the perpetrators and/or their targets. However, 34% did not believe their administration would want them to discuss this topic with the general student body, 26% did not

believe their administration would want them to discuss it with parents, and 33% would not want them to discuss it in staff development workshops. Choosing to remain silent on such issues, while reducing the threat of controversy within the community, increases the risk for LGBTQQ students. Administrators that insist on silence and other behaviors to appease the status quo may be creating hostile work environments for school counselors who are attempting ethical practice.

The religiously and politically conservative communities represented in this study objected to supportive services for LGBTQQ students. They were able to influence administrative level decisions that reproduced and reinforced their beliefs. The opposition groups utilized systematic inclusion (Friend, 1993) by framing their opposition to the GSA as something that would be harmful to students. The school counselors in this study attempted to resist the status quo beliefs through a variety of strategies. This resistance was rooted in altruism, their autonomy as a student advocate, and their willingness to take risks to meet the needs of students. All of these attributes are characteristic of an advocacy disposition, the most crucial component of advocacy competency (Trusty & Brown, 2005).

### **Limitations and Strengths of the Study**

Perhaps the most telling and significant part of the current study are the lengths at which the researchers had to go to identify 5 school counselors who work or worked in a school where a GSA was banned. Over 800 requests for participants were sent out and only 5 school counselors came forward to tell their stories. This concerning fact is coupled with a pilot project where 4 school counselors with a GSA in progress had consented to be interviewed and then suddenly withdrew from the larger study when the

ban was being debated by the school board due to fear of losing their jobs. While a limited number of participants is generic to qualitative research (Creswell, 1998), transferability of the results of this study should be tempered with caution. Considering the amount of concern and fear of reprisal for participants in the pilot study and the reassurances participants in this study needed that their identities would be kept confidential, it is reasonable to suggest that similar concerns prevented some school counselors from agreeing to participate in the study. As such, oppressive structures within the communities that banned GSAs in and of themselves are a limitation to this study.

Further, the participants were homogeneous with regard to a heterosexual orientation, affirming attitudes and beliefs about LGBTQQ people, professional identification as advocates, non-conservative political affiliations, and the politically and religiously conservative climate of their school community. The lack of diversity among these variables must be considered a limitation. Despite such limitations, the data analysis revealed consistency within and between the participants' experience. Researcher subjectivity should be considered a limitation in that the researchers shared many of the same attitudes, and beliefs as the participants. However, these similarities may have contributed positively to the research process by helping build rapport with a reticent population and to encourage more risk taking facilitating in-depth understanding of experiences. Other strengths of the study included using a phenomenological approach to examine school counselors' perceptions of an often silencing lived experience of advocacy for an oppressed group.

## Implications and Summary

Because the participants in this study believed their administrators yielded to status quo community discrimination, a qualitative exploration into how school administrators make decisions about supportive services for LGBTQQ students is warranted. Since administrators wield a lot of power in the school environment, knowing what motivates them to yield to or resist community beliefs could aid in preparing school counselors to successfully partner with administrators to negotiate with community leaders on issues related to sexual orientation. Even in a non-supportive environment, school counselors can empower themselves to take action.

School counselors should anticipate that they will encounter LGBTQQ students. Especially those working in religiously and politically conservative areas, should anticipate that students may not be forthcoming about their struggles unless they are given some indication that the school counselor is affirming, will provide a safe environment for them to process their struggles, and that their efforts to be included in school activities will be supported. School counselors should also maintain a proactive stance and work steadily within the school system and larger community to inform, educate, and/or promote a dialogue about the needs of LGBTQQ students. This stance should focus on how affirmation, safety, and inclusion is directly related to the physical, emotional, and academic well-being of students.

The first step a school counselor must take toward ethical practice for LGBTQQ students is to examine personal beliefs and attitudes about sexuality in general and sexual orientation in particular. School counselors with religious beliefs that are not LGBTQQ affirming should evaluate their practice in the same manner as if they were

counseling an individual that had other religious or cultural differences from themselves. The next critical step is to become a visible ally within the school environment by displaying affirming literature and symbols of the LGBTQ community in their offices, addressing homophobic remarks made by students, faculty, and other staff (McFarland & Dupuis, 2001), organizing or attending Safe Zone trainings (Goodrich & Luke, 2009), and initiating a dialogue about the needs of LGBTQ students in the school environment. They should include sexual orientation in classroom guidance programs about diversity and organizing student participation in events such as National Coming Out Day and A Day of Silence, both of which are featured on Parents, Friends, and Families of Lesbians and Gays' (PFLAG) national website and through the Gay-Lesbian-Straight Education Network (GLSEN) website at [GLSEN.org](http://GLSEN.org). School counselors can also ensure that historical and contemporary figures with LGBTQ orientations are represented in the curriculum (Jeltova & Fish, 2005). For example, James Baldwin, Willa Cather, and Tennessee Williams are historical literary figures whose sexual orientation could be included in their biographies and other learning materials. Additionally, school counselors are referred to Singh & Burnes (2009) to find recommendations for creating safe schools and affirmative environments for transgender youth across elementary, middle, and high school settings.

Regarding GSAs, school counselors should become familiar with the *Equal Access Law*. GSAs are protected under this law and organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and LAMBDA Legal have successfully argued in court and prevailed in instances where school officials have banned or prohibited GSAs from forming. Many national organizations such as PFLAG, the ACLU, the Southern

Poverty Law Center have resources to assist school counselors in their endeavors to act ethically on behalf of all students.

Finally, school counselors should be mindful that there are likely others working within the school environment who are affirming, but perhaps unsure how to become visible. They may be willing to form a network of allies in the community. School counselors working in religiously or politically conservative areas should also bear in mind that proactive advocacy for LGBTQQ students may cause considerable anxiety due to the professional and personal risk. Coming out as an advocate in these environments may cause threats to job security, alienation by peers, and fears of reprisal. Advocacy that aims to transform takes courage. It is never without risk, but the willingness to stand up for LGBTQQ youth in our schools in order to create a more affirming environment, may not only be personally transforming, but might save lives.

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