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Discussing transgender topics within gay-straight alliances: Factors that could promote more frequent conversations

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ABSTRACT

Background: Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) have potential to facilitate conversations on transgender and gender-diversity issues among members. We examined how frequently GSA members discussed transgender and gender-diversity topics within GSAs, whether GSAs varied from one another in the extent to which these conversations occurred, and identified factors that distinguished which members and GSAs discussed such topics more often than others.

Methods: Participants were 295 members of 33 high school GSAs in the state of Massachusetts who completed surveys that assessed their experiences within their GSA.

Results: On average, youth discussed transgender and gender-diversity issues with some regularity, but this varied significantly across GSAs and among youth within each GSA. Youth who had transgender friends, perceived a more respectful GSA climate, and accessed more information/resources and engaged in more advocacy within the GSA reported more frequently discussing transgender and gender-diversity issues. Also, GSAs with transgender members, whose members collectively perceived a more respectful climate, accessed more information/resources and did more advocacy, and who reported lower socializing or support discussed transgender and gender-diversity issues more frequently than other GSAs.

Conclusions: This information could inform GSA programming to facilitate more transgender and gender-diversity topic discussions and ensure that members feel encouraged to participate in them.

KEYWORDS

Gay-straight alliance; transgender youth; lesbian, gay, bisexual youth; youth programs; high school

Many transgender youth face discrimination, hostile climates, and barriers to accessing care within schools as well as academic and mental health risks (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Miller, 2016). Their experiences of stressors can include but are not limited to peer victimization based on gender identity or expression, adults refusing to use and confirm their preferred gender pronouns, being prevented from using bathrooms of their gender identity, lack of representation in the curriculum and in enumerated antibullying policies, and facing hostility throughout their transitioning process (e.g., in how they dress or as they undergo hormonal therapy and medical procedures; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Sausa, 2005; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Russell, 2010). Transgender youth

who experience these various forms of discrimination report significantly greater health and academic concerns, such as depressive symptoms, suicidality, truancy, and risk of school dropout (Clark, Lucassen, Bullen, Denny, & Fleming, 2014; Miller, 2016; Toomey et al., 2010; Veale, Watson, Peter, & Saewyc, 2017). These findings underscore the need for approaches that could raise awareness of discrimination faced by transgender students and their knowledge around gender diversity in general. Such knowledge, in combination with other efforts, could promote safer schools for transgender students.

Participating in conversations focused on transgender issues is one such approach that we consider in this study. Indeed, research on intergroup dialogues in general has pointed to the importance of having conversations around issues of diversity in order to

promote attitudes and behaviors in support of members of marginalized groups (Dessel & Rogge, 2008). Moreover, given the salience of peers as sources of support during adolescence (Brechtwald & Prinstein, 2011), it could be particularly important for youth—and not simply adults—to have these conversations.

GSA as settings to discuss transgender issues

One key school-based setting in which youth are likely to have conversations around transgender issues are gay-straight alliances (or as some now refer to themselves, gender-sexuality alliances; GSAs). GSAs are extracurricular groups based in many schools that aim to provide opportunities for youth to receive support, socialize, access information or resources, and engage in advocacy around sexual orientation and gender-diversity issues (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Poteat et al., 2015). Notably, they aim to be inclusive of sexual and gender minority youth (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning youth or transgender youth; LGBTQ) as well as heterosexual and cisgender youth. Historically, GSAs have focused primarily on sexual orientation-related issues; however, issues of gender identity and expression have become more integrated into many of these groups (Miceli, 2005). GSAs are grounded within youth program models that highlight the importance of providing a safe space for peer interaction with opportunities for leadership roles and with adult guidance and role modeling (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Indeed, students in schools with GSAs report greater wellbeing and lower victimization than students in schools without GSAs (Davis, Stafford, & Pullig, 2014; Heck et al., 2014; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). Likewise, GSA members have reported a number of benefits tied to varying ways of being involved in the GSA such as a sense of empowerment and wellbeing (Poteat et al., 2015; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009).

Given their focus on sexual and gender-diversity issues, GSAs have strong potential to facilitate conversations around transgender issues among members. Still, we know little about the conversations that take place in GSAs regarding transgender topics. The purpose of this study is to investigate how frequently GSA members discuss transgender topics within GSAs, whether GSAs vary from one another in the extent to which these conversations occur, and factors that might distinguish which members and GSAs discuss such

topics more often than other members or GSAs. These research questions address important foundational issues because these conversations could go on to have a major role in promoting youths' knowledge and skills around advocating for transgender youth at school.

Individual factors related to discussing transgender issues

At a basic level, identifying the general frequency with which youth discuss transgender issues in their GSAs is important for several reasons. First, it could give a sense of the overall salience of gender-diversity issues among youth in this setting. Documenting the frequency of conversation could help to determine if there is a degree of silence around transgender issues in the group, which could perpetuate invisibility of transgender youth and issues in the group. More frequent conversations could signal that the space is affirming and members are dedicated to addressing these issues. Second, more frequent conversations offer more opportunities for both cisgender and transgender youth to reflect on and develop their understanding of these issues in an ongoing manner. Indeed, scholars have emphasized the need for multicultural dialogues and education to include multiple and ongoing conversations as opposed to single isolated events in order for them to be most effective (Murray-García, Harrell, García, Gizzi, & Simms-Mackey, 2014; Shipherd, 2015). Third, knowledge of how frequently transgender issues are discussed could also inform the kinds of programming that might be delivered. For instance, if transgender issues are rarely discussed, then programming may be needed to help initiate these discussions and to provide adequate guidance and structure for sustaining them. In contrast, if transgender issues are already discussed with regularity, programming may instead aim to deepen these discussions or to harness and translate them into advocacy efforts.

At the individual level, members can have different experiences from one another within a given GSA (e.g., some members may receive more support than others in a GSA; Poteat, Calzo, & Yoshikawa, 2016). Further, at the group level, GSAs collectively can vary from one another in how they are structured and what activities they may do (Poteat, Scheer, Marx, Calzo, & Yoshikawa, 2015). Building on this, individual GSA members and GSAs as a whole could vary from one another in how frequently they discuss transgender

issues. If so, it would be important to identify members who are more likely than others to participate in these discussions so that advisors might know which students might benefit from more tailored outreach to invite them into such conversations occurring within the GSA and which students might be natural facilitators of these conversations. Likewise, it would be important to identify characteristics of GSAs that collectively engage in more discussions around transgender issues than others. This knowledge could help some GSAs in which these discussions rarely occur among members by highlighting certain qualities that they might need in order to facilitate more of these conversations or suggest how these discussions could be tied into their existing practices.

First, we consider potential demographic differences based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and race/ethnicity. Most research has treated GSA members as a singular group (e.g., in comparing members to nonmembers; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010), and thus there is little data on whether youth from different backgrounds vary in how they participate in their GSA. Transgender and other gender minority members (e.g., genderqueer or those who identify outside the binary) may more frequently discuss transgender issues than cisgender members, given that these issues directly affect and are personally relevant to them. Sexual minority youth might also discuss these issues more frequently than heterosexual youth, given the overlap in how discrimination is often directed toward both sexual and gender minorities and in how members of these communities have at times formed coalitions in advocacy efforts (Toomey et al., 2010). We consider racial/ethnic differences as well. These are important from a perspective of intersectionality—transgender youth of color, for example, report elevated levels of stressful life events and show higher rates of HIV/AIDS prevalence than White transgender youth (Garofalo, Deleon, Osmer, Doll, & Harper, 2006; Operario & Nemoto, 2010). We investigate racial/ethnic differences in discussions in an exploratory fashion, with no a priori hypotheses.

Second, we consider whether discussing transgender issues is tied to members' involvement in specific GSA functions of support, socializing, education, and advocacy (Griffin et al., 2004). Members who access more support or socializing opportunities in their GSA may more frequently discuss transgender issues. Given the high frequency with which gender identity-based

discrimination is experienced in schools (Kosciw et al., 2016; McGuire et al., 2010; Miller, 2016), discussing transgender issues could be tied to conversations around receiving support due to gender-based discrimination that a member has experienced. In addition, discussing transgender issues could be tied to the education function of GSAs. As part of accessing more information and resources in their GSA, members may ask their advisors or peers questions about gender diversity or participate in structured discussions intended to provide basic information about gender identity and expression (e.g., learning the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation). Finally, many GSAs participate in a variety of advocacy and awareness-raising efforts, with some directly focused on transgender individuals and issues (e.g., Transgender Day of Remembrance, advocating for gender-neutral graduation gowns, the Day of Silence, GLSEN, n.d.). As such, members who participate more in advocacy through their GSA may also discuss transgender issues more frequently as part of the process of planning and implementing these efforts.

Interpersonal and setting factors related to discussing transgender issues

Interpersonal relationships and group dynamics could have an important role in promoting more frequent conversations of transgender issues within GSAs. First, members with more transgender friends may participate more in conversations around transgender issues. For cisgender youth, those who have close connections with their transgender peers could feel more driven to speak up about these issues due to their personal connections with transgender peers who are experiencing discrimination. Such a pattern would align with elements of Allport's contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) and with more specific findings in relation to this that show heterosexual youth with sexual minority friends report greater support for sexual minorities (Forsberg, Thornberg, & Samuelsson, 2014; Heinze & Horn, 2009). For transgender youth, those with more transgender friends may feel an even stronger connection to their community and feel empowered to speak up about their own and others' collective experiences of discrimination.

Positive social norms are a major feature of successful youth programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Similarly, within classrooms,

students' perceptions of respectful climates (i.e., those in which students feel able to express diverging ideas respectfully with one another and the teacher) are associated with positive outcomes such as greater civic engagement and social competence (Brock, Nishida, Chiong, Grimm, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Campbell, 2008). Given the diversity of backgrounds and perspectives represented within GSAs, having a more respectful climate could be significantly associated with the extent to which members discuss transgender issues. Issues faced by transgender individuals have only recently come into greater focus relative to those for sexual minorities, and even many adult GSA advisors report limited efficacy to address issues faced by transgender youth (Poteat & Scheer, 2016). As such, youth members may need to feel safe and free from judgement in voicing their questions and perspectives in order to participate in conversations around transgender issues with greater frequency.

Finally, GSAs with members who identify as transgender may participate in more frequent conversations around transgender issues than GSAs that do not have any members who identify as transgender. GSAs with transgender members may have such discussions more frequently than other GSAs because transgender members may help to ensure that these topics are more consistently raised as part of the various collective discussions held among members within the GSA (e.g., when discussing a situation that is personally affecting them or when bringing up these topics in the group for educational purposes).

Research questions and hypotheses

In this study, we focus on several research questions related to the discussion of transgender issues within GSAs. First, on average, how frequently do GSA members discuss topics related to transgender issues? Second, to what extent do GSAs as a whole vary from one another in how frequently these discussions occur within their groups and to what extent do individual members within GSAs vary from one another in how frequently they engage in these discussions? Third, what individual characteristics and group characteristics account for variability in the frequency with which individual members and GSAs as a group discuss transgender issues? We have several hypotheses for this research question. At the individual level, we hypothesize that transgender members and sexual

minority members will report discussing these topics more frequently than cisgender and heterosexual members, respectively. Also, we hypothesize that members who access more support/socializing and information/resources, and who do more advocacy in their GSA will report greater participation in discussing transgender issues. Further, we hypothesize that members who have more transgender friends and who perceive a more respectful climate within the GSA will participate more frequently in these discussions. At the group level, we hypothesize that GSAs whose members report receiving overall more support/socializing, information/resources, and advocacy, who report overall more respectful climates, and who have members who identify as transgender will discuss transgender topics more frequently than other GSAs. We included additional variables—participants' race/ethnicity and the urbanicity of the location in which the GSA was located—for exploratory purposes without a priori hypotheses.

Method

Participants and procedures

We analyzed data from the 2014 Massachusetts GSA Network survey. The Network is run collaboratively by the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth and the Massachusetts Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ students. Surveys were distributed at conferences hosted by the Network throughout five regions of Massachusetts and through their GSA advisor listserv. At the conferences, students were asked to complete the surveys at the start of the meeting. Through the listserv, GSA advisors requested surveys, which they distributed to and collected from members of their GSA (the surveys were sent to GSAs that had not attended regional conferences). In both situations, youth voluntarily completed the anonymous survey if their GSA advisor granted adult consent. The Network uses adult consent over parent consent to avoid potential risks of outing sexual and gender minority youth to parents. This method is common in research among these youth to protect their safety and confidentiality (Mustanski, 2011). The youth were told that their responses would be anonymous and that data would be used for program evaluation and potentially for research purposes to produce reports or articles. Youth were free to do other activities at the conferences or to not request a copy of the survey from their

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Demographic factor	N (%)
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	87 (29.5)
Lesbian or gay	73 (24.8)
Bisexual	59 (20.0)
Questioning	18 (6.1)
Other self-reported sexual orientations	55 (18.6)
Not reported	3 (1.0)
Gender identity	
Cisgender female	200 (67.8)
Cisgender male	66 (22.4)
Genderqueer	9 (3.0)
Transgender	11 (3.7)
Other self-reported gender identities	7 (2.4)
Not reported	2 (.7)
Race/Ethnicity	
White	201 (68.1)
Biracial/multiracial	32 (10.9)
Latino/a	18 (6.1)
Asian/Asian American	16 (5.4)
Black or African American	16 (5.4)
Native American	4 (1.4)
Other self-reported racial/ethnic identities	5 (1.7)
Not reported	3 (1.0)

Note. Total sample size: $n = 295$.

advisor if they did not want to participate. We secured IRB approval for our secondary data analysis.

The full participant sample included 308 youth in 42 GSAs. However, because youth were nested within their GSAs and we needed to account for this interdependence through multilevel modeling, we only included youth who were in GSAs with three or more members in order to avoid complications with limited or no variability in scores within GSAs. The final sample size was 295 youth in 33 GSAs ($M_{\text{age}} = 16.07$, $SD = 1.14$). Group sizes ranged from 3 to 21 members ($M = 8.94$, $SD = 5.45$), and the average membership duration was 1.56 years ($SD = 1.22$ years). Approximately 45% of these GSAs ($n = 15$) had at least one participant who identified as transgender or genderqueer, and 24% of the GSAs ($n = 8$) were located in urbanized areas (i.e., populations of over 50,000 people; United States Census Bureau, 2017). Demographic data are presented in Table 1.

Measures

Demographic information

Youth reported their sexual orientation, gender identity, and their race/ethnicity. We dichotomized the race/ethnicity responses as White or racial/ethnic minority because of the limited number of youth represented in each specific racial/ethnic minority group. Similarly, we dichotomized the sexual orientation

responses as heterosexual or sexual minority because of the limited number of youth represented in each specific sexual minority group. Other write-in responses represented nonheterosexual identities such as pansexual or queer. Also, for gender identity, because of the limited number of youth represented in the specific transgender, genderqueer, and other write-in responses, we considered them together in a trans/genderqueer group for our analyses when making comparisons with cisgender male and cisgender female youth. The write-in responses included genderqueer identities such as gender-fluid or nonbinary/pangender. In addition, we used the youths' self-report data from this item to determine whether each GSA had a participant who identified as transgender/genderqueer and we included this variable at the GSA level in our multilevel model. Finally, using the 2016 US Census estimates of the population for the city in which each GSA was located, we classified each GSA as being located in either an urbanized area or non-urbanized area (based on the cut-off of either under or over 50,000 people; United States Census Bureau, 2017).

Involvement in GSA functions

Youth completed a 17-item assessment of the extent to which they personally received support/engaged in socializing in their GSA (seven items; e.g., "emotional support"; $\alpha = .90$), received information/resources in their GSA (three items; e.g., "learn ways to deal with stress"; $\alpha = .84$), and did advocacy in their GSA (seven items; e.g., "Organize school events to raise awareness of LGBT issues"; $\alpha = .87$). Response options ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a lot*). This measure has been developed and refined over several iterations of surveys delivered by the Massachusetts GSA Network and the evaluation of its factor structure has been previously reported (Poteat et al., 2016). Higher average scores indicate receiving more support/socializing, information/resources, or doing more advocacy. Also, we computed average scores for each GSA to represent overall levels for each function among members of the GSA.

Number of transgender friends

Youth reported their number of close friends who identified as transgender. Response options were *zero*, *one*, *two*, *three*, *four*, or *five or more* (scored 0–5).

Respectful GSA climate

Youth completed the four-item Open Classroom Climate Scale (Flanagan, Syversten, & Stout, 2007) of their perceptions of a respectful climate in their GSA. The items were preceded by the stem, “In my GSA, students...”: (a) Have a voice in what happens; (b) Can disagree with the advisor, if they are respectful; (c) Can disagree with each other, if they are respectful; and (d) Are encouraged to express opinions. Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher average scores represent a more respectful GSA climate. The coefficient alpha reliability from the current data was $\alpha = .91$. Also we computed average scores for each GSA to represent the overall perception among members of their GSA’s respectful climate.

Transgender topic discussions

Youth reported the frequency with which they personally talked about transgender topics during their GSA meetings. Response options were *never*, *rarely*, *sometimes*, *often*, and *very often* (scaled 0–4). The items were preceded by the stem, “How often do you talk about these topics in your GSA meetings”: (a) Transgender rights (examples: gender-neutral bathrooms, etc.), (b) Discrimination due to gender identity or expression, and (c) Transgender awareness (examples: pronouns, terms, etc.). Higher average scale scores represent more frequently discussing transgender topics in the GSA. Coefficient alpha reliability was $\alpha = .88$.

Analytic strategy

We calculated basic descriptive statistics among all of our variables and conducted Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) to test for demographic differences based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and race/ethnicity. We also examined bivariate associations among the variables.

Using multilevel modeling to account for the interdependence of respondents, where youth were nested within GSAs, we tested a model of how our set of variables accounted for variability in members’ frequency of discussing transgender topics in their GSA. Individual youth data were included at Level 1 and GSA-level data were included at Level 2. We first tested an unconditional null model to determine the extent to which GSAs varied from one another in how

frequently these discussions occurred in their group as a whole (Level 2) and the extent to which individual members varied from one another in how frequently they personally participated in these discussions (Level 1). Our full multilevel model included our independent variables at Level 1 of demographic group factors (sexual orientation, gender identity, race/ethnicity) and the following variables that were group-mean centered: individuals’ reported number of transgender friends, support/socializing received, information/resources received, and advocacy done in the GSA, and individuals’ perceptions of their GSA’s climate as respectful. We included the following variables at Level 2 as predictors of the Level 1 intercept (i.e., to account for differences across GSAs in the frequency with which they discussed transgender issues): number of participants in the GSA (as a basic control variable, which was formed based on a count of the number of participants in the dataset from the same GSA), whether the GSA included a participant who identified as transgender/genderqueer, the composite average scores of members’ support/socializing received, information/resources received, advocacy done, perceptions of their GSA’s climate as respectful, and whether the GSA was located in an urbanized area.

Results

Descriptive data, group differences, and bivariate correlations

GSA members’ responses spanned the entire possible range of how frequently they discussed transgender issues. At the item level, whereas some individuals reported “never” discussing any of the topics or issues listed, others reported discussing all of them “very often.” On the topic of transgender rights, scores ranged from 0 (never) to 4 (very often), with an average of 2.60 ($SD = 1.10$). Similarly, on the topic of discrimination due to gender identity or expression, scores ranged from 0 (never) to 4 (very often), with an average of 2.75 ($SD = 1.05$). Also comparable to the other two items, on the topic of transgender awareness, scores ranged from 0 (never) to 4 (very often), with an average of 2.63 ($SD = 1.13$). Across all three items the responses were generally normally distributed (skewness = $-.55$ to $-.64$; kurtosis = $-.05$ to $-.32$). For the scale, the average frequency of discussing transgender topics was moderate ($M = 2.66$,

Table 2. Descriptive data for demographic comparisons: Sexual orientation and race/ethnicity.

	Sexual orientation				Race/Ethnicity			
	Sexual min. (n = 172)	Heterosexual(n = 79)	F	η_p^2	Racial min. (n = 74)	White (n = 177)	F	η_p^2
Trans discussion	2.73 (.96)	2.57 (.97)	1.58	—	2.41 (1.07)	2.79 (.91)	8.22**	.03
Trans friends	1.00 (1.22)	.39 (.71)	17.26***	.07	.58 (.94)	.92 (1.18)	4.72*	.02
Member duration	1.76 (1.22)	1.14 (1.08)	14.81***	.06	1.39 (1.21)	1.65 (1.20)	2.62	—
Support/social	4.53 (.58)	4.30 (.86)	6.56*	.03	4.38 (.83)	4.49 (.62)	1.52	—
Info/resources	3.68 (1.08)	3.63 (1.01)	.12	—	3.78 (1.16)	3.59 (1.02)	1.67	—
Advocacy	3.22 (.96)	2.84 (.86)	9.08***	.04	2.90 (1.02)	3.19 (.91)	4.68*	.02
Respect climate	4.73 (.52)	4.39 (.89)	14.61***	.06	4.52 (.87)	4.66 (.57)	2.38	—

Note. Values represent the means and standard deviations (in parentheses) of scores for each demographic group. Trans discussion = frequency of participating in discussions on transgender-related issues; Trans friends = number of transgender friends; Member duration = membership duration in number of years; Support/social = amount of support/socializing received from the GSA; Info/resources = amount of information/resources received from the GSA; Advocacy = amount of advocacy done through GSA; Respect climate = perceived respectful climate of the GSA; Sexual min. = sexual minority youth; Racial min. = racial/ethnic minority youth. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

$SD = .98$), and showed little skew or kurtosis (skew = $-.61$; kurtosis = $-.01$).

The MANOVA for sexual orientation was significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .85$, $F(7, 243) = 5.98$, $p < .001$, and $\eta_p^2 = .15$. Follow-up ANOVAs indicated that sexual minority youth reported having more transgender friends, longer membership duration, receiving more support/socializing, doing more advocacy, and perceived a more respectful GSA climate than heterosexual youth (Table 2). Counter to hypotheses, sexual minority and heterosexual youth did not differ significantly in their frequency of discussing transgender issues.

The MANOVA for gender identity was significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .84$, $F(14, 488) = 3.17$, $p < .001$, and $\eta_p^2 = .08$. Follow-up ANOVAs indicated gender identity differences for number of transgender friends, membership duration, information/resources received, and advocacy done (Table 3). Bonferroni post hoc comparisons indicated that transgender/genderqueer members reported having more transgender friends than cisgender male members ($p < .001$, $d = .67$) and

cisgender female members ($p < .001$, $d = .83$); cisgender male members reported shorter membership duration than cisgender female members ($p < .05$, $d = .37$) and transgender/genderqueer members ($p < .05$, $d = .71$); cisgender male members reported receiving more information/resources than cisgender female members ($p < .05$, $d = .42$); and transgender/genderqueer members reported doing more advocacy than cisgender female members ($p < .01$, $d = .68$). Thus, also counter to hypotheses, transgender/genderqueer and cisgender members did not differ significantly in their frequency of discussing transgender topics.

The MANOVA for race/ethnicity was significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = .91$, $F(7, 243) = 3.55$, $p < .01$, and $\eta_p^2 = .09$. Follow-up ANOVAs indicated that White youth reported more frequently discussing transgender issues, having more transgender friends, and doing more advocacy than racial/ethnic minority youth (Table 2).

With the exception of membership duration, all of the variables were associated with frequency of

Table 3. Descriptive data for demographic comparisons: Gender identity.

	Male (n = 56)	Female (n = 170)	Trans/GQueer (n = 27)	F	η_p^2	Bonferroni post hoc comparisons
Trans discussion	2.64 (.98)	2.63 (.98)	2.99 (.91)	1.58	—	—
Trans friends	.80 (1.17)	.66 (.90)	1.78 (1.69)	12.76***	.09	T/G > M, F
Member duration	1.19 (1.08)	1.62 (1.22)	2.00 (1.21)	4.88**	.04	M < F, T/G
Support/social	4.60 (.47)	4.40 (.75)	4.58 (.57)	2.16	—	—
Info/resources	3.96 (1.01)	3.53 (1.05)	3.85 (1.12)	4.02*	.03	M > F, T/G
Advocacy	3.13 (1.07)	3.00 (.88)	3.63 (.98)	5.42**	.04	T/G > F
Respect climate	4.67 (.66)	4.59 (.71)	4.77 (.33)	1.10	—	—

Note. Values represent the means and standard deviations (in parentheses) of scores for each demographic group. Trans discussion = frequency of participating in discussions on transgender-related issues; Trans friends = number of transgender friends; Member duration = membership duration in number of years; Support/social = amount of support/socializing received from the GSA; Info/resources = amount of information/resources received from the GSA; Advocacy = amount of advocacy done through GSA; Respect climate = perceived respectful climate of the GSA; Trans/GQueer = transgender/genderqueer youth. For Bonferroni post hoc comparisons, T/G = transgender/genderqueer youth, M = cisgender male youth, and F = cisgender female youth. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Table 4. Bivariate correlations among the variables.

	Trans discussion	Trans friends	M. duration	Support/social	Info/resources	Advocacy
Trans discussion	—					
Trans friends	.23***	—				
M. duration	.08	.22***	—			
Support/social	.24***	.19**	.05	—		
Info/resources	.32***	.11	-.12	.58***	—	
Advocacy	.38***	.26***	.21**	.44***	.47***	—
Respect climate	.17**	.16**	.09	.56***	.29***	.22***

Note. Trans discussion = frequency of participating in discussions on transgender-related issues; Trans friends = number of transgender friends; M. duration = membership duration in number of years; Support/social = amount of support/socializing received from the GSA; Info/resources = amount of information/resources received from the GSA; Advocacy = amount of advocacy done through GSA; Respect climate = perceived respectful climate of the GSA. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$. Table 5.

discussing transgender topics. Members who more frequently discussed transgender topics reported having more transgender friends ($r = .23$, $p < .001$), receiving more support/socializing ($r = .24$, $p < .001$), receiving more information/resources ($r = .32$, $p < .001$), doing more advocacy ($r = .38$, $p < .001$), and perceived a more respectful climate in their GSA ($r = .17$, $p < .01$). Bivariate correlations among all of the variables are reported in Table 4.

Multilevel model results

There was significant variance across GSAs in the frequency with which members discussed transgender issues (i.e., on average, some GSAs had members who collectively discussed transgender topics more than members of other GSAs; $\chi^2 = 132.57$, $p < .001$, deviance = 742.61; Level 1 variance component = .71; Level 2 variance component = .28). The intraclass correlation coefficient indicated that 28% of the total variance in the frequency of discussing transgender issues was across GSAs. Indeed, descriptive data indicated that some GSAs almost never discussed any of the transgender topics (the lowest average score at the group level was .80, indicating that at least one GSA almost never discussed any of the three topics) whereas some GSAs discussed these transgender topics very often (the highest average score at the group level was 3.58).

Next, we tested our multilevel model, with full results reported in Table 5. At the individual level, members with more transgender friends ($b = .10$, $p < .05$), who perceived a more respectful GSA climate ($b = .15$, $p < .05$), engaged in more advocacy ($b = .19$, $p < .01$), and received more information/resources ($b = .12$, $p < .05$) more frequently discussed transgender topics than other GSA members. At the group level, GSAs with transgender members who

participated in the survey ($\gamma = .35$, $p < .05$), GSAs whose members received more information/resources ($\gamma = .62$, $p < .05$), engaged in more advocacy ($\gamma = .56$, $p < .05$), and less support/socializing ($\gamma = -.97$, $p < .05$), and whose members collectively perceived a more respectful GSA climate ($\gamma = .64$, $p < .05$) more frequently discussed transgender topics than other GSAs. The model accounted for 15% of Level 1 variance and 57% of Level 2 variance.

Discussion

The current study is the first to our knowledge to consider how frequently youth discuss topics specifically related to gender identity and transgender individuals

Table 5. Individual and GSA factors associated with discussing transgender topics.

	Multilevel model	
	Coefficient	SE
Level 1: Individual level		
Sexual orientation	-.008	.13
Cisgender male	.07	.15
Cisgender female	.12	.14
Race/ethnicity	-.10	.11
Number of transgender friends	.10*	.04
Support/socializing received	.00	.10
Information/resources received	.12*	.06
Advocacy done	.19**	.06
Perception of respectful climate	.15*	.07
Level 2: GSA Level		
Group size	.00	.02
Group average support/socializing	-.97*	.42
Group average information/resources	.62*	.24
Group average advocacy	.56**	.23
Collective perception of respectful climate	.64*	.28
Transgender members	.35*	.15
Urbanicity	-.34	.29

Note. Values are unstandardized coefficient estimates and their standard errors (SE). Sexual orientation is dichotomized as 0 = heterosexual, 1 = sexual minority; race/ethnicity is dichotomized as 0 = White, 1 = racial/ethnic minority; transgender members = indication as to whether the GSA had transgender members participate (0 = no, 1 = yes); urbanicity = whether the GSA was located in an urbanized area (population of over 50,000 people) or not in an urbanized area (0 = nonurbanized area, 1 = urbanized area). ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

within one key setting in schools, GSAs. Our results indicated, on average, that youth discussed such issues in their GSA somewhat regularly. At the same time, there was significant variability among youth in how frequently they participated in these discussions. In general, we found that social and interpersonal factors mattered and significantly accounted for which youth engaged in these discussions more frequently than others. Specifically, having transgender friends, perceiving a respectful climate, having transgender members in the GSA, and accessing resources and engaging in advocacy each were connected to more frequently discussing transgender issues. This foundational information could inform GSA programming to facilitate more transgender topic discussions and ensure that members feel encouraged to participate in them.

Given that GSAs aim to address a wide range of issues (Griffin et al., 2004; Poteat et al., 2015), it is encouraging that a number of youth discussed transgender issues with some regularity. The average scores fell between “sometimes” and “often” discussing these issues. This suggests that many youth might be receptive to and welcome additional or more formalized programming around transgender issues (e.g., to facilitate deeper dialogues or advocacy efforts related to gender diversity). At the same time, the significant variability across students and GSAs could signal the need for different levels of programming. At least one study has shown the benefits of GSAs specifically for transgender youth (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013). The development and refinement of GSA content to be more inclusive of transgender youth could possibly enhance these benefits.

Based on the findings noted above, some youth and GSAs may first benefit from materials that provide basic information around gender diversity and guidance on how they can discuss these issues (e.g., covering basic terminology). These types of materials are available through a number of organizations such as GLSEN and PBS (GLSEN, n.d.; PBS, n.d.). However, whereas materials are readily available to guide basic educational discussions on terminology and history, few resources are available that go beyond this focus. Given that our findings show some individuals and GSAs frequently discuss transgender issues, this further emphasizes the need for researchers and practitioners to develop and test the effectiveness of such resources. More advanced material might guide youth and GSAs on how to build on these initial information-focused discussions in order to have deeper dialogues around

these issues and to translate their knowledge of gender-diversity issues into specific advocacy efforts. For instance, it may be helpful to develop trainings for GSA advisors and student leaders on how to facilitate dialogues that may bring up powerful emotional reactions from members as they share more personal experiences, cover issues of privilege and marginalization, and that challenge stereotypes, misconceptions, or bias. It would also be beneficial to develop materials that GSA members could use to sponsor transgender awareness-raising activities or events in their school (e.g., for giving presentations in various classes) or that provide instruction on how to advocate for school or district policies that affirm and protect transgender students (e.g., materials that guide youth on how to propose antibullying or antidiscrimination policies that are inclusive of gender identity and expression, or for having gender-neutral graduation gowns).

Counter to our hypotheses, youth did not differ in their frequency of discussing transgender issues based on their own gender identity or sexual orientation. Individual demographic differences may have been nonsignificant because GSAs often decide collectively on the focus of their meetings (Poteat et al., 2015) and their activities are meant to include and engage all youth members across sociocultural backgrounds. Consequently, as we review in the following section, variability among youth in discussing transgender issues was better captured by their level of involvement in specific GSA functions rather than their individual sociocultural identity. Still, it would be important to consider whether there are differences in the degree to which youth want to discuss such topics in order to ensure that youth are not silenced or marginalized.

Finally, whereas we identified an initial difference based on race/ethnicity, this became nonsignificant when accounting for other contributing factors. This could reflect the case that racial/ethnic diversity varied across GSAs, and that these GSAs could vary in their focus, available resources, or issues that are salient within their schools. As an exploratory piece to the current study, future research should consider underlying contributors to this pattern with greater nuance.

Factors accounting for variability in discussing transgender issues

Our findings suggest that programming around transgender issues could be delivered within GSAs in a way

that ties into their existing functions. As hypothesized, youth who discussed transgender topics more frequently were those who received more information/resources and engaged in a greater amount of advocacy through their GSA. Although support/socializing was significant at the bivariate level, it was nonsignificant at the individual level in the full multilevel model.

Transgender topic discussions may have been tied to the GSA's educational function because transgender individuals and issues are rarely represented in standard course curricula (Kosciw et al., 2016; Snapp, Burdge, Licon, Moody, & Russell, 2015). Therefore, some youth may have seen their GSA as a setting in which they could access and discuss basic information on gender diversity. As scholars have pointed to inclusive curricula as important for fostering more welcoming school climates (Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010), it might be helpful for schools to consult with their GSAs around the information material that they have used or generated around transgender issues and how this might be infused into classes where it could be accessible to the broader student population. GSAs might also consider sharing the materials they have used or generated with other GSAs to further refine these materials in effort to guide discussions among their members.

Similarly, discussions of transgender issues may have been related to the GSA's advocacy function because GSAs are beginning to incorporate transgender issues into their advocacy efforts. For instance, some GSAs in this study may have hosted awareness-raising events such as Transgender Day of Remembrance or Day of Silence (GLSEN, n.d.). Members participating more in such advocacy efforts may have engaged in a number of discussions around transgender issues as part of planning these efforts. Although some organizations have posted information on hosting these types of advocacy and awareness-raising events (e.g., GLSEN, n.d.), the materials could benefit from more detailed descriptions for how to host such events and it would be helpful if these materials also more explicitly detailed how these events could foster dialogue and a deeper understanding of transgender issues for participants.

We identified similar patterns of associations between GSA functions and discussing transgender topics at the group level. Youth in GSAs whose members collectively accessed more information/resources and did more advocacy discussed transgender issues

more frequently, even while accounting for a youth's own level of involvement in these functions. As such, there appears to be an added benefit from being in a GSA with peers who are more active along these lines. For instance, in the case of advocacy, some members may not themselves have contributed directly to certain advocacy efforts in the GSA, but they may still have participated in discussions when their peers brought up transgender issues as part of a related, real-time, advocacy effort they were doing (e.g., when petitioning their school for greater protection of transgender students). In contrast to findings at the individual level, youth in GSAs whose members collectively engaged in more support/socializing discussed transgender issues less frequently than other GSAs. It may be that this was partly reflecting GSAs that collectively focused more on socializing (e.g., playing games, offering time for members to hang out with friends) than support, during which there may have been fewer deliberate or direct efforts to bring up transgender issues. It would be beneficial for future research to differentiate between casual socializing and explicit efforts for social-emotional support to clarify this finding.

GSA members who had more transgender friends more frequently discussed transgender topics in their GSA. We expected this finding for cisgender youth based on related findings that heterosexual youth with sexual minority friends report greater support for sexual minorities (Forsberg et al., 2014; Heinze & Horn, 2009). Cisgender youth in the GSA with transgender friends may have felt more driven to speak out about transgender issues because their close connections may have raised their awareness of the stressors faced by their transgender friends. For transgender youth with more transgender friends, we expected this association because these same connections could have empowered them to raise these issues during GSA meetings. Adding to this individual-level finding, at the group level we found that GSAs with participants who identified as transgender more frequently discussed transgender topics. Transgender youth in GSAs may play a central role in ensuring that transgender issues are discussed more consistently among members of the group. Also, cisgender members of these GSAs also may be more likely to bring up these topics in the group because of their connection with transgender peers in the GSA. Our findings suggest that it may be important for GSA advisors and

cisgender student leaders to take on a more proactive role in raising transgender topics during GSA meetings. Doing so may help to ensure that having these discussions is not dependent on having out transgender members in the GSA and that the responsibility for raising these topics is not placed entirely on transgender members of the GSA.

The current findings suggest the importance of establishing a respectful climate as a way to foster more frequent conversations around transgender issues. As hypothesized, GSA members who perceived their GSA's climate as more respectful more frequently participated in these discussions. This finding was significant at the individual and group level. These members and GSAs may have felt safer to ask questions or express their perspectives without fear of judgment from their peers or advisors. Youth program models have identified positive social norms as a distinguishing factor of successful programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). From our findings this appears to apply to GSAs in relation to transgender topic discussions. Advisors and student leaders therefore might aim to check in and ask members about how they perceive the GSA climate and to identify ways in which to foster respect among members. Given the significant lack of safety that transgender youth report in schools (Clark et al., 2014; McGuire et al., 2010), it would also be important to consider the GSA climate specifically in relation to how welcoming and inclusive it is of transgender youth. Moreover, it could be beneficial to assess these perceptions among transgender youth who are not members of the GSA.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

There were several strengths to the current study. Participants were recruited across a number of GSAs and these GSAs were located in diverse settings (e.g., they were based in socioeconomically diverse schools and diverse geographic locations). Also, not only did we document the degree of variability among GSA members in discussing transgender issues, but also we identified several factors at the individual and group level that accounted for why members differed in how frequently they discussed these issues. Finally, our focus on transgender issues is an important aspect of the study, given the continued marginalization and invisibility of transgender students and issues within schools.

We note several limitations to the current study. First, although multiple GSAs were represented, they were all

located in Massachusetts. There could be even greater variability in the frequency with which GSAs and youth members discuss transgender issues when considering GSAs located across different states and areas of the country (e.g., based on factors at the setting-level such as political climate or local events occurring around transgender issues). In relation to this, GSAs that were able to attend the conferences or whose advisors volunteered to distribute surveys to their GSA could be distinct from those who could not attend the conferences or whose advisors did not request surveys to give to their GSA. For example, GSAs attending the conferences may have had more resources or administration support that enabled them to attend. In addition, GSAs attending the conference or whose advisors asked for surveys to distribute may have been among the more active GSAs. Consequently, this could place some limitations on the generalizability of our findings. Second, our data were cross-sectional and therefore we cannot speak to issues of causality or directionality of effects. Future research should collect longitudinal data in order to better capture potential bidirectional associations among variables and to test for changes in how frequently transgender issues are discussed within GSAs and identify factors that might predict any changes over time. Third, although we documented the relative frequency of transgender topic discussions, the data do not provide information on the depth or quality of such discussions. This information would be important to assess with future qualitative or mixed methods research. For instance, it would be helpful to understand youths' comfort level in discussing these topics, what they may personally disclose in these conversations, the tone of the conversations, who tends to initiate them, the amount of time spent on any given conversation, and the aftermath of having these conversations. Finally, future research might consider members' active engagement in these conversations (as we did in this study) as well as more passive listening to other members discuss these issues in order to determine the extent to which doing either or both predicts any increases in youths' knowledge or action around transgender issues.

Conversations and dialogues around diversity issues can serve as a powerful means of increasing individuals' knowledge and supportive actions around such issues (Dessel & Rogge, 2008). There is a pressing need for these conversations around issues of gender diversity and the experiences of transgender youth in schools. Our findings point to GSAs as a key setting in

which these conversations could occur and they provide a foundation for future work in this setting that could aim to promote and sustain these conversations. These efforts, in combination with other approaches, could contribute to improving school climates and promoting positive experiences for transgender youth in schools.

Declaration of interest

The authors have no further conflict of interests to declare.

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