

A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY OF THE CONTEXT OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE
FORMATION AND MAINTENANCE IN THE DEEP SOUTH

by

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ABSTRACT

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth are a population at risk of many negative health and mental health outcomes due to the stigma and oppression they may face at home, in school, and in the community. There is some evidence to suggest that LGBTQ youths' experiences may vary by region in the United States (U.S.), in part impacted by differing experiences in their social contexts. This variance is evident in the Deep South, where schools are less likely to adopt needed policy protections for this population, and have a lower density of LGBTQ-affirming Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs compared to other regions of the country. In research studies, GSAs have been demonstrated to provide positive impacts for LGBTQ youth (as well as ally youth) in schools, but little is known about their formation and maintenance. This study investigates the perceived contexts surrounding the formation and/or maintenance of GSAs in the Deep South region of the U.S. A grounded theory approach led to the recruitment of 17 participants who were either students, advisors, advocates, or some combination of roles within a GSA. These 17 participants represented the following states, defined as the "Deep South": Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee. The findings and resulting theory indicate that GSAs experience three distinct stages: pre-formation, formation, and maintenance. The findings also indicate that students, advocates, and advisors work to build strength, minimize threats, and negotiate failure and barriers. These findings have implications for social workers and advocates by suggesting ways to enhance GSA functioning in service of protecting LGBTQ youth.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to those who are working for social and economic justice in the Deep South. After living in Mississippi and Alabama for almost a decade, I remain in awe of organizers, educators, youth, parents, grandparents, immigrants, people of color, poor folks, queer folks, and others who continue to push for progressive change in their communities despite immense hardships and personal sacrifice. My participants in this study represent the creativity, passion, and sense of justice that has always inspired me while living in the Deep South. Those who scoff at the region are truly missing out.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my dad, Corky Dykeman, who died in 2014 before I had a chance to complete my PhD journey. I watched him blossom from someone neutral about LGBTQ justice to a staunch advocate for the LGBTQ community. He was the best math tutor I ever had, a kind and loving dad and granddad, and I miss him every day.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ACLU: American Civil Liberties Union.
- EABPs: Enumerated Anti-Bullying Policies.
- ENDA: Employment Non-Discrimination Act
- GLSEN: Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network.
- GSAs: Gay-Straight Alliances. Sometimes, schools call their clubs “Gender and Sexuality Clubs” but these clubs function interchangeably.
- HRC: Human Rights Campaign.
- IRB: Institutional Review Board
- LGBTQ: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. This term is used to refer to the community of LGBTQ people who represent sexual and/or gender minorities.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

This dissertation study will investigate the perceived contexts surrounding the formation and/or maintenance of gay-straight alliance (GSA) clubs in the Deep South region of the United States (U.S.). The intended outcome of this study is to develop a theory of GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South, defined for the purpose of this dissertation as: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee. This chapter presents the background of the issue under examination and a discussion of important terms used in the literature related to this topic. Then, I explore the purpose of the study, the study aims, and the theoretical framework that guides the study. Finally, the significance of the study to the field of social work is discussed and the chapter closes with the central research question.

Background

Increasing political and therapeutic attention is being paid to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) population and, particularly, to youth within this population (Russell, 2005). As such, interventions, campaigns, and community supports are being adopted at the community, school, and individual levels to offer support for LGBTQ youth (Russell, 2005). Little is known about the effectiveness and cultural transferability of these interventions, which appear to be generated largely by non-profit organizations and advocacy groups, such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), who have an organizational goal of raising visibility of this population's needs (Russell, 2005).

These needs and challenges include higher rates of self-reported suicidality (Hatzelbuehler et. al, 2013; Haas et al., 2011). LGBTQ youth are 2.5 times more likely to have a diagnosed mental health history and twice as likely to have a current mental health disorder compared to their heterosexual peers (Meyer, 2013). In particular, LGBTQ youth report higher suicidality both in self reports and in numerous population-based surveys (Meyer, 2013; Mustanski, 2010; Russell, 2003). Kosciw and colleagues have found that 74.1% of LGBTQ youth they surveyed had experienced verbal harassment at school based on their sexual orientation and 55.2% of youth surveyed had experienced verbal harassment based on their gender identity or expression. These needs and challenges also impact educational achievement, feelings of safety in school, and sexual health (Kosciw et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2014).

There is some evidence to suggest that LGBTQ youths' experiences may vary by region, in part impacted by differing experiences in their social contexts (Fishberger, 2011; Fetner & Kush, 2008). As such, research and the interventions developed based upon this knowledge need to be relevant for diverse communities. Little is known about how different communities may vary in terms of their acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ people and, in the absence of full inclusion, social workers have a duty to respond to the needs of this population with the dignity and worth that the Social Work Code of Ethics demands (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008).

One mechanism for addressing the needs of LGBTQ youth is through school-based interventions. Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) are "youth-led, school- or community-based groups that provide a safe, welcoming, and affirming physical and emotional space for [LGBTQ] students, as well as those who are perceived as [LGBTQ], those who are questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, children from [LGBTQ] families, and heterosexual students who want to be allies of their [LGBTQ] peers," (Snively, 2015, p. 1). GSAs provide support to

LGBTQ youth and allies within educational systems by functioning much like any club or after-school group with meetings, officers, and social and educational events (Doppler, 2000; Griffen & Ouellett, 2003).

Research on GSAs is fairly limited, composed largely of either qualitative evaluations of the impact of participating in such groups, or qualitative studies of the process and function of the groups. Fetner and Kush (2008) provide the strongest attempt at developing a theory of GSA location and formation. Focusing on what they describe as “early adopters,” a term from organizational theory that seeks to explain how and why new phenomenon spread through culture, the authors use a national sample to determine the variables associated with GSA presence in public high schools (Rogers, 2010). Drawing upon social movement theory, the authors examined school-level variables such as racial diversity, urban/rural environment, income, and size. According to social movement theory, diverse communities (with diversity including but not limited to race, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity) allow for this exposure to human difference, and urban environments are more likely than rural environments to have elements of diversity.

Fetner and Kush (2008) demonstrated that, nationally, LGBTQ supports are more likely to occur in urban environments compared to rural environments. They also found that GSAs were less likely to occur in the South and Midwest, speculating that this was due to the high fundamental religiosity and associated negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people (Fetner & Kush, 2008). Whether urban environments are associated with LGBTQ protections in the South remains under-explored.

A focus on low density of GSAs obscures the fact that these groups are indeed forming in the Deep South and are being maintained there, although research tells us relatively little as to

where, why, and how this is achieved. An exploratory study of relevant people's perceptions of the conditions within schools, communities, and individuals that foster GSAs could benefit their expansion in this region. For example, if community organizers and the youth and adults they work with better understood the conditions that support the formation and long-term support of GSAs, they could work to bring these conditions about in their communities in order to achieve success. Likewise, this research could be used to inform where efforts could be concentrated in order to have the most impact in forming and supporting GSAs in this region. If the extant literature is correct, GSAs provide support, protection, and community that benefit LGBTQ youth and their allies in school climates that often feel hostile and isolating. A data-driven organizing strategy for GSAs could offer the most successful and consistent support for marginalized LGBTQ youth in this region.

Purpose of the Study

This study will examine how students, advisors, and advocates for GSAs in the Deep South region of the U.S. perceive the school, community, and individual contexts surrounding the successful formation and maintenance of GSA groups. The analysis of these perceptions will be used to develop a theory that describes GSA formation and maintenance in this region. In essence, this study is a contemporary reflection on the GSA movement in the Deep South, which may assist in the expansion of such clubs in the future.

Study Aims

Using a grounded theory approach, this study has three interrelated aims. First, this study will examine the experiences and perceptions of those who have helped form, advise, advocate for, support, or research GSAs in the Deep South. Second, this study aims to generate a theory of how GSAs successfully form and are maintained in the Deep South with the hopes of

understanding strengths and anticipating barriers to expanding GSAs in this region. Finally, this study aims to offer suggestions for social workers and related advocates of GSAs in this region in order to strengthen the formation and maintenance of GSAs. An exploration of this kind would be a contribution to the body of knowledge in this area and could assist youth and their allies in expanding such groups and, therefore, protect a population at risk.

Definitions of Terms

For this study, I will define the *Deep South* as the area including: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and South Carolina. This definition of “Deep South” is a departure from the definition used by Davis, Gardner & Gardner (2009) that included: South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. The addition of Tennessee and the deletion of Florida for the purpose of the proposed study seemed more consistent with the social and cultural contexts I am interested in studying. For example, Memphis and Knoxville reflect the Deep South more so than do Miami or Orlando.

An understanding of GSAs and the LGBTQ population they aim to support requires an understanding of the vocabulary used to discuss and describe this population. *Gender* refers to the “social and psychological characteristics associated with being female or male” (McCammon & Knox, 2007, p. 112). Gender, therefore, is a social construct. *Gender identity* is how people view themselves in relation to the social construction of gender (GLAAD, 2014). For example, does the person identify as male, female, both, or neither? *Gender roles* are those tasks and functions that females and males typically inhabit or are socially pressured to inhabit (Marinucci, 2010). While gender roles may vary by culture, there may be social norms and values associated with child raising, home care, employment, and leadership. *Gender expression* is the outward manifestation of one’s gender, and this includes a range of behaviors (such as fashion choices or

posture) and personality characteristics (such as being aggressive or timid) (GLAAD, 2014; Marinucci, 2010).

Within the LGBTQ acronym, transgender and queer are gender markers. *Transgender* (sometimes shortened to “trans”) is an umbrella term that refers to people who identify with a gender that differs from the sex they were assigned at birth (GLAAD, 2014; Marinucci, 2010). This could refer to someone who was assigned male or female at birth and who identifies with the other marker of gender. It could also refer to a spectrum of other identities that include, but are not limited to, people who are *agender* (don’t identify with one gender) or *gender queer* (someone who complicates notions of gender and doesn’t fit neatly into either the “male” or “female” category) (Marinucci, 2010). The term *cisgender* (sometimes shortened to “cis”) refers to someone who identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth (Marinucci, 2010). The term *queer*, although still considered a pejorative by some within and outside the LGBT population, is being reclaimed as a positive identity (GLAAD, 2014). The term implies both a sexual or gender identity and a political statement, pushing back on a binary system that tries to flatten or simplify identities that may be more complex. Identifying as “queer” is a signifier that traditional labels of “masculine” and “feminine” or “gay” and “straight” are not inclusive of all identities and permutations of gender and sexuality (Butler, 2010; Marinucci, 2010).

Sexual orientation is defined as “sexual and romantic attraction” to the same or different genders (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2015). The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), in their much used media guide, modifies this definition slightly to include “enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex,” (GLAAD, 2014). The term “opposite sex” is a bit misleading, as “male” isn’t the “opposite” of “female” in any concrete way and may lead to false and sexist binary thinking about the role and

function of males and females. The term “different sex” is used in this paper instead. This is sometimes referred to as *sexuality* or *sexual identity*. Within the LGBTQ acronym, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer are all sexual orientation markers. There are a plethora of terms and identities that encompass the queer population, and for the sake of this paper the acronym LGBTQ will be used. When discussion pertains to specific groups within the LGBTQ population, such as just to lesbians or bisexuals, it will clearly state so. It is especially vital not to confuse terms or to inflate terms and assume an accompanying identity. For example, masculine-presenting women (gender expression) may be heterosexual, bisexual, or lesbian (sexual orientation). Transgender people (gender identity) are heterosexual, bisexual, and gay or lesbian (sexual orientation). One term does not always predict the other.

Finally, to understand this study the following terms relate to practices and/or policies that seek to support LGBTQ youth in schools. *Enumerated Anti-Bullying Policies* (EABPs) are policies that specify protection from harassment and/or bullying based upon someone’s sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression, whether actual or perceived (Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2013). *Gay-Straight Alliance clubs* (GSAs), the focus of this study, are school-based clubs that are “designed to support LGBTQ youth and to combat heterosexism” much like diversity clubs do (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009). The purpose and efficacy of these clubs and policies will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Theoretical Framework

A justification for a grounded theory approach in this study is provided in more detail in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. Grounded theory, in essence, generates a cohesive explanation of how a complex phenomenon (such as forming or maintaining a GSA) works (Charmaz, 2012). The grounded theory is developed inductively from the rich data collected, and provides an

explanatory framework for how all components are integrated into the process (Padgett, 2008). Despite grounded theory forming the foundation of this study's methods, four other theories help to contextualize the research methods and form the research question: queer theory, oppression theory, systems theory, and social movement theory. While no cohesive framework was identified in the existing literature that guided how these theories could work together, their influence and explanatory power was important at various stages in this dissertation. These theories will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

The purpose of the current study, however, is to develop a theory grounded in the lived experiences and perceptions of youth and adults who have a direct knowledge of forming, advising, or advocating for GSAs in the Deep South. While an understanding of prior research is essential in order to contribute to the body of knowledge on GSAs generally, and in the Deep South in particular, I will bracket, or mentally set aside, prior research studies and their results so as not to have undue influence on the interviewing, coding, or results of the current study. Grounded theory methods suggest that while it is nearly impossible to be free from the influence of prior studies or biases, I will make sure that the resulting theory is developed from the "ground up" (Charmaz, 2012).

Queer theory. Queer theory asserts that binary systems (for example, male/female or gay/straight) automatically privilege one identity while subjugating another (Butler, 1990). This theory provides a framework for understanding why LGBTQ people are marginalized and may need a GSA in the first place. In addition, queer theory can also help explain why certain groups within the LGBTQ population, such as transgender people, may face more oppression and have disparate health outcomes. Queer theory may have particular explanatory power in understanding the reactions to challenging traditional (and thus limited, according to queer theorists) definitions

of gender presentation, sexual orientation, and gender identity (Butler, 1990; Marinucci, 2010). It has influenced the semi-structured interview questions about challenges and motivations in Appendix E.

Oppression theory. Oppression theory views the marginalization of minority groups as a function of how dominant groups maintain their power and privilege within society (Payne, 2005; Thompson, 2006). This theory helps explain why LGBTQ people of all ages can be marginalized, stigmatized, and denied access to various opportunities within society when compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. This theory can explain why many LGBTQ people have been delayed in achieving marriage equality, risk job loss for being LGBTQ-identified, and experience discrimination in their interaction with service providers. Like queer theory, oppression theory may explain some of the challenges participants have faced when forming or maintaining a GSA in their school or community. Forming or maintaining a GSA may also be seen as one response to the oppression LGBTQ youth face in schools. Oppression theory has influenced the semi-structured interview questions about supports, challenges, and motivations in Appendix E.

Systems theory. General systems theory provides a useful understanding of how multiple moving components impact an organization as a whole (Von Bertalanffy, 1972). Systems theory provides some context for how school, individual, and community factors impact the formation and maintenance of GSAs in the Deep South. It asserts that the challenges or strengths present in one aspect of a participant's system can impact the overall success and function of the GSA. Systems theory influenced the questions about supports, challenges, and school demographics in Appendix E.

Social movement theory. Social movement theory provides a context for how social movements form and under which conditions they thrive or fail (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). Concerned in part with the resources at hand that help gel a social movement, the theory helps explain why previous studies have found that lower-resourced schools are less likely to have LGBTQ protections (Fetner & Kush, 2008). In low-income schools (which are often in low-income communities), the needs across the board such as supplies, infrastructure, crowded classrooms, violent communities may mean that LGBTQ protections (seen as an “extra” amenity) may not be given top priority given competing needs (Archer, 2000). Research has indicated that LGBTQ protections are less likely to be found in lower-income schools with fewer disposable resources, and a variety of social movement scholars can offer insight as to why this may be the case (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001; McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

This theory would also suggest that the students and families who make up the lower-income schools may not have the extra energy, time, or other resources to advocate for changing policies or starting a GSA club (Archer, 2000). Fetner and Kush (2008) demonstrated a significant negative relationship between percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunches (as a measure of poverty within a school district) and the presence of gay-straight alliances. Social movement theory also helps explain why exposure to and tolerance for difference helps us predict which types of communities are more likely to have supports for LGBTQ youth (Fetner & Kush, 2008). This theory informed demographic questions in the semi-structured interview protocol in Appendix E.

Significance of the Study

Research that focuses on LGBTQ youth provides a strong argument that this population is at risk for many adverse physical and mental health related outcomes (Hatzenbuehler &

Keyes, 2013; Mustanski et al., 2010; McDavitt et al., 2008; Rosario et al., 2010). However, data-driven and theory-driven solutions to ameliorating these risks are sparse. While there is some research (see Chapter 2) about the efficacy of GSAs, enumerated anti-bullying policies, and clinical interventions, this research is often conducted in states or regions that are more conducive to LGBTQ people and their well-being, such as the Northeast or Western regions of the U.S. (Gray, 2009). These findings' applicability to the conservative Southern U.S. remains unexplored.

The current study is inspired, in part, by Fetner's and Kush's work (2008) in examining the factors associated with early adopters of GSAs in the U.S. As mentioned above, Fetner and Kush (2008) found that the South had the lowest density of early adopters of GSAs in the U.S. While this research is helpful at assessing the national GSA movement, it does very little to contextualize the process of GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South. In order to narrow this knowledge gap, this study will examine the process of forming and/or maintaining a GSA in the Deep South, a region that is underserved by the larger LGBTQ justice movement (Kan, 2014).

Participants in this study were asked about their experiences forming, supporting, or researching a GSA in the states under investigation. Participants were asked to share the challenges they have faced or observed in their school, in their communities, and individually as members, advisors, advocates, or researchers of GSAs. They were also asked to share the sources of strength that may have contributed to the successful formation or maintenance of GSAs with which they have experience or knowledge. The research aims to uncover the process of forming or maintaining a GSA, contextualized by experiences and perceptions of participants in Deep South communities. If researchers and organizers can better understand this process,

then they can more purposively and strategically expand school and community protections for LGBTQ youth in this region.

Central Research Question

The guiding question “how do GSA members and supporters perceive the individual, school, and community contexts that impact the successful formation and maintenance of GSAs in the Deep South?” formed the basis of this study. The methods employed to answer this question will be discussed extensively in Chapter 3, and literature relevant to this central question will be discussed next in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2 - REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter examines related science that supports the need for this research, including literature that informs the central research question and research design. A variety of previous studies contribute to context or contribute directly to the collective understanding of GSAs in the Southern U.S. First, I explore an overview of the U.S. as it relates to the experiences and social justice issues facing the LGBTQ community. Then, I examine the research that highlights the ways in which LGBTQ youth specifically are a population at risk will follow, thus supporting the need for interventions on behalf of this population. Third, I examine the experiences of LGBTQ people in the Southern region of the U.S., highlighting the need for research that focuses on this region in particular. Fourth, I assess interventions and practices that promote wellness for LGBTQ youth within schools, with a particular focus on the research that explores GSAs and their efficacy as a promising practice. Fifth, I emphasize theories that have assisted in the development of this dissertation, expanding on their introduction in Chapter 1. Finally, I close this chapter by reexamining the gaps in literature and demonstrating how this dissertation addresses these gaps.

A National Perspective

LGBTQ people face discrimination and disproportionate negative health and mental health outcomes across their lifespan (Herek, 2009; IOM, 2011; Lambda Legal, 2010). In the absence of overriding federal protections in some areas such as employment and housing

protections, the state where an LGBTQ person was born or lives appears to impact the types of rights and protections an LGBTQ person enjoys (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Espinoza, 2014;

Hatzenbuehler, 2011). Research in the U.S. tends to focus more on disease prevalence, a medical model of risk, and negative outcomes, and focuses less on strengths, supports, and best practices (Mayer, Garofalo, & Makadon, 2014; Wagaman, 2015). Community change and civil rights efforts for LGBTQ people, while not uniformly funded or prioritized by organizers and/or lawmakers alike, have included a focus on the following areas: violence, employment protections, and the transgender community (Kan, 2014). While the majority of the issues highlighted in this section impact or have been researched in adults, they are highlighted in order to emphasize the macro context that the LGBTQ community, of which LGBTQ youth are a part, face in contemporary American society. Issues that face the wider LGBTQ community may even be a point of organizing and advocacy for youth who are members of a GSA in their schools (Russell et al., 2009).

Violence. LGBTQ people are at risk of violence committed by family members and strangers, as well as within the prison systems (U.S. Department of Justice, 2013). In 2009, President Barack Obama signed into law the Shepard-Byrd Hate Crimes Prevention Act (Samuels, 2013). This Act, according to Attorney General Eric Holder, increases the federal government's "ability to safeguard our civil rights and pursue justice for those who are victimized because of their gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability" (Samuels, 2013). Interestingly, this language was the "the first time 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, and

transgender' appeared in U.S. code" (Samuels, 2013). It should be noted that while the Shepard-Byrd Hate Crime Prevention Act allows the federal government to investigate and subsequently charge those suspected of perpetrating a bias-related crime against an LGBTQ person with a hate crime, the act does little to prevent the violence from occurring (Rimmerman, 2008).

Recent research has demonstrated that as many as one in five LGB adults have experienced personal or property crime based upon their sexual orientation, with gay and bisexual men being significantly more likely than lesbian and bisexual women in some samples to experience such crimes (Herek, 2009). Earlier research by D'Augelli and Grossman (2001) demonstrated that 29% of their sample of LGB adults had experienced being violently threatened, and 16% of their sample had been physically assaulted. Research on violence against transgender people indicates that their experience of assault and hate crimes may be higher than their LGBQ peers (Stolzer, 2009). Research on bullying and violence experienced by LGBTQ youth is explored in subsequent sections. It is unclear how the violence that LGBTQ youth and adults experience may be similar, except to demonstrate that it can be a common lived experience across the lifespan.

Employment protections. In many states and, indeed, many cities and towns, LGBTQ people lack employment protection (Hasenbush, 2014). This means that LGBTQ people (or people who are perceived to be LGBTQ by their employers) can be fired for being out and open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Hasenbush, 2014). Personnel changes at the federal government in 1976 banned discrimination in firing and hiring at public agencies, with the exception being if a lesbian or gay identity interfered with doing the job as required (Hasenbush, 2014). These rules, according to Kirst-Ashman & Hull (2015) do not apply to many

local or state jobs, leaving LGBTQ individuals in these jobs without basic employment protections.

To remedy employment discrimination against the LGBTQ population at the federal level, there has been an ongoing push to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) in almost every Congressional session since 1994 (Rimmerman, 2008). The bill has gained co-sponsors in the legislature every session, but it has failed to pass each time (Human Rights Campaign, 2014). Opponents have framed the issue as “special rights” for the LGBT population, including President George W. Bush who had repeatedly expressed his opposition because he believed ENDA is “special treatment” (Rimmerman, 2008). Proponents argue that freedom from discrimination is not “special treatment” but equal treatment to heterosexual and/or cisgender citizens (Rimmerman, 2008). Controversially, in 2007, efforts from within the LGBTQ and ally communities (notably the Human Rights Campaign and Senator Barney Frank) tried to pass ENDA without protections for the transgender population, thinking that it would be more palatable for many legislators to pass without including protections for gender identity and gender expression (Singh et al., 2011). This issue created a wedge between the Human Rights Campaign and the transgender community, who felt that their concerns were being left behind to achieve mainstream gains for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people (Equality Federation, 2007; Singh et al., 2011).

In the absence of federal employment protection, states and municipalities are passing their own non-discrimination ordinances (Webb, 2014). This leaves a patchwork of protection based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or both depending on the location. Major legal advocacy groups recommend enumerated policies that include sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression to provide the maximum protection for the LGBTQ population (GLSEN,

2015; ACLU, 2012). According to the Movement Advancement Project (2015), eight states do not have any non-discrimination ordinances or protections at the state or local level: Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Wyoming. Some municipalities are passing non-discrimination resolutions, which are less formal and less binding than ordinances (which prescribe a permanent rule for the municipality) (Webb, 2014). Resolutions, although easier to pass, are largely symbolic and offer little legal recourse if violated (Webb, 2014). A lack of employment protections leave youth, the focus of this study, vulnerable to discrimination later in life if these legal loopholes are not rectified. For LGBTQ youth who may already be in the workforce, they may face these issues presently. Adults who advise GSAs, who may be LGBTQ or perceived to be such, may face employment discrimination or fear such retaliation for their efforts to start a GSA (Watson et al., 2010)

Transgender community. Even within the broader LGBTQ population, transgender people are at increased risk of vulnerability. Rates of unemployment for transgender individuals remains almost three times the national average and transgender people were also three times as likely to be living at less than or equal to 100% poverty compared to cisgender peers (Conron et al., 2012). Transgender women, and particularly transgender women of color, remain at increased risk of hate crimes and violence (Lombardi et al., 2008). Though research on the prevalence of violence and discrimination against transgender people remains sparse, one study by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAV) found that though transgender people made up 2% of the total sample they accounted for 16% of all murder victims in their study (NCAV, 2013). Using a questionnaire developed in partnership with an anti-violence coalition in New York City, Lombardi and colleagues (2008) surveyed trans people and found that of the 402 people in their study, 59.5% had experienced violence or harassment in their

lifetime, 14% of their sample had experienced rape in their lifetime, and younger people were more likely to experience violence than older people due to homelessness and associated sex work. While this sample cannot be generalized to the broader population of transgender people, it does demonstrate experiences of stress, violence, and risk in the lives of those transgender people who participated.

The needs of transgender people also include access to health care that can assist in the physical transition process, access to housing policies that affirm their gender, and access to bathrooms, which are a site of much stress and trials (Lombardi et al., 2008, Singh et al., 2011). Transgender people often face issues in coming out that are different from their LGB peers (Gagne et al., 1997; Singh et al., 2011). For example, they may come out first as lesbian or gay, and have to come out again as transgender (Carroll et al., 2002; Singh et al., 2009). There is no guarantee of solidarity and support within the LGB community for transgender issues. The challenges facing the transgender population appear to remain distinct, underfunded, and often misunderstood. While the majority of research on the risks and experience of transgender people is focused on adults, some research has wider implications for transgender youth. Indeed, issues of discrimination, access to bathrooms and health care, and the process of coming out may be addressed in schools with youth, who are the focus of this research project.

LGBTQ Youth: an At-Risk Population

While LGBTQ adults face challenges and experience discrimination, LGBTQ youth are at substantially higher risk of experiencing or developing mental health issues compared to their heterosexual and/or cisgender peers, largely related to the oppression and discrimination they may face (Mustanski et al., 2010; Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Russell, 2003). These risks, which are well-documented, underscore the crucial need for understanding how to protect LGBTQ youth at

every point in their development and to reach them through natural settings like schools, and specifically through GSAs. This information is consistent with population-based studies that have repeatedly found that LGBTQ adults experience higher rates of mental health issues compared to their heterosexual and/or cisgender peers (Mustanski et al., 2010). Meyer (2013) found that LGBTQ youth are two-and-a-half times more likely to have a mental health history, and twice as likely to have a current mental health disorder compared to their heterosexual peers. In particular, LGBTQ youth report higher suicidality both in self reports and in numerous population-based surveys (Mustanski et al., 2010; Russell et al., 2001).

LGB youth have been found to have attempted suicide at five times the rate of their heterosexual peers over a one-year period (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). Rates of suicide attempts for LGB youth are shown to be associated with the level of inclusiveness, support, and visibility that LGBTQ people receive in the greater community (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). The presence of more GSAs and anti-bullying policies in local schools and a larger number of same-sex couples in the community are related to lower rates of suicide attempts for LGB youth (Hatzenbuehler, 2011).

School can be another place where LGBTQ youth face unequal outcomes compared with their heterosexual and cisgender peers. Attending school can be stressful for LGBTQ students, who face physical and verbal bullying and harassment at higher reported rates than their heterosexual and cisgender peers. Such bullying and harassment can be verbal, as when labeling someone “faggot” or “dyke” or using the phrases “that’s so gay” or “no homo” (Basile et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2014). Bullying and harassment can also be physical, including being pushed, hit, tripped, or sexually assaulted (Basile et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2014).

Schools mark a natural point of intervention for adults to protect LGBTQ youth from bullying, but this may not always happen. According to GLSEN’s 2013 National School

Climate Survey, 56.7% of students surveyed did not report incidents of bullying or assault to adults because they did not feel that adults (teachers and school administrators) would respond to the situation or take appropriate action to intervene (Kosciw et al., 2014). Equally as alarming, 61.6% of students reported that after alerting a school staff person, that staff person did nothing to respond to the reported bullying or assault (Kosciw et al., 2014). Students who reported having supportive educators and staff in their schools (at least six adults) were four times more likely to feel safer than their peers who had fewer than six supportive adults within the school system (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Unsafe school environments for LGBTQ youth are associated with a variety of negative educational outcomes. Youth who lack protections in their schools report fewer academic aspirations than their peers with such protections (including, but not limited to GSAs and EABPs) (Kosciw et al., 2014). Youth who experience unsafe school environments report higher rates of absenteeism and higher drop-out rates (Kosciw et al., 2014). Naturally, absenteeism interferes with the learning process for such students.

Bullying-- and, in particular, bullying that is biased in nature (e.g. related to one's individual characteristics such as sexual orientation, gender identity, or race, whether actual or perceived)-- is associated with higher rates of mental health outcomes, poorer self-concept, higher rates of aggressive behavior, and higher rates of suicide (Russell et al., 2012; Sinclair et al., 2012). Russell and colleagues (2010) found that LGBT-related school victimization is strongly associated with increased risk for developing mental health issues and contracting sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV. The same study amongst males found that LGBTQ-related bullying and harassment create high rates of depression and suicidal ideation (Russell et al., 2010).

Southern Regional Perspective

The South is defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) as the following divisions and their subsequent states: 1) the South Atlantic, made up of Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Washington D.C., and West Virginia 2) the East South Central made up of Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee and 3) the West South Central, made up of Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas. The South as a region of the U.S. has a number of cultural markers that may pose a challenge to implementing LGBTQ equality across a variety of issues and settings. For example, many regions in the South are rural and this may impede organizing efforts (Fetner & Kush, 2008; Sandusky, 2007). Sandusky (2007) discusses a number of preexisting stereotypes about the South, such as cultural “backwardness” (having an outdated or old-fashioned mindset) and a lack of education, that impede outsiders from truly understanding and joining with Southern partners, which adds to the marginalization of the region.

The South has a number of cultural markers that may be related to why it is slower as a region to adopt LGBTQ equality protections and practices such as Gay-Straight Alliances. According to a 2013 Gallup Poll, the most religious state in the country (as measured by the percentage of citizens who say they attend church weekly and feel their faith is important to them) is Mississippi with 61% of its citizens identifying as “very religious.” Of the top ten most religious states in the nation, nine of them are in the South (Gallup Poll, 2013). As I explored briefly in Chapter 1, while being “very religious” does not exclude also being pro-LGBTQ equality, Gallup (2015) has found that those who identify as “very religious” or who identify as Republican are less likely to be satisfied with the political gains of LGBT Americans. Incidentally, every state in the South (as defined by the U.S. Census) had the majority of its votes

cast for the Republican Presidential candidate in 2012 except for the District of Columbia, Florida, Maryland, and Virginia (Newman, 2012).

In addition to distinct political markers, the South is responsible for the highest number of calls to The Trevor Project National Hotline, a suicide prevention hotline for LGBTQ youth (Fishberger, 2011). Despite having a great need for support for LGBTQ youth and adults, all these challenges are coupled with a lack of outside funding from national foundations that could contribute to bringing about social change and equality for LGBTQ people. According to Kan (2013), the South as a region receives only three to four percent of total foundation funding given to LGBTQ issues. Funding for LGBTQ issues nationally has been directed toward the numerous marriage equality fights (Kan, 2013). In the South, 44% of all dollars spent on LGBTQ issues are on health care and health-related campaigns (Kan, 2013). Only 20% of funding in the South is for civil rights issues, including marriage equality, safe schools work, and employment non-discrimination policies. Social movement theory would suggest that regions with less access to resources (such as funding or technical or organizing expertise) would have less capacity to organize a response to LGBTQ injustice (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). Indeed, this theory could help explain the difference between the South and other regions of the country.

This disconnect between a region in the country that is very resistant to LGBTQ equality the lack of national investment in infrastructure and organizational development for social change is puzzling. To break down funding along different lines, only 22% of total dollars spent in the South are for advocacy work, while 40% of total dollars spent are on direct service (Kan, 2013). This report states that “LGBTQ leaders in the South have done much with little, developing innovative advocacy strategies, cost-effective service organizations, and deep intersectional coalitions” (Kan, 2013, p. 1). While more research is needed that contributes to an

overall national assessment of LGBTQ people and youth in particular, a regional analysis could contribute to the development of strategies and interventions that are particularly effective in the South.

It is clear that the Southern region of the U.S. can be considered politically conservative, and thus it embraces more conservative social norms (Newman, 2012). What is less clear is an understanding of the strategies, effectiveness, and challenges of community organizing in conservative contexts (Richards-Schuster et al., 2013). According to Richards-Schuster and colleagues (2013), *conservative contexts* – as they may relate to LGBTQ youth-- are defined as: “environments that may marginalize youth voices, that create settings in which powerful interests are allied against particular issues that groups of young people may wish to voice, and that may pose actual physical threats and dangers to young people who attempt to provide voice that challenges the mainstream perspectives” (Richards-Schuster et al., 2013, p. 1291). Richards-Schuster and colleagues (2013) explore whether social context and place matter when defining the "essence of youth organizing" and they suggest that we know relatively little about youth organizing and social change efforts in conservative contexts (p. 1291-2). In particular, we lack research that explores whether place influences what is considered youth organizing, and if place does influence organizing, how it does so. This information could be crucial to developing strategies for expanding GSAs in the conservative Southern region of the U.S. The research that does exist highlights innovation, departures in language use from mainstream national LGBTQ organizations, and the importance of cultural context in framing the strategies and next steps in organizing (Richards-Schuster et al., 2013; Young et al., 2013).

Despite the gaps in research, existing studies do highlight promising trends. First, in examining LGBTQ youth organizing work in Mississippi, Richards-Schuster et al. (2013) and

Young et al. (2013) found Southern departures from national organizations in the use of the word “queer.” Despite national educational and organizing materials containing the use of the word “queer” readily, this term is still not completely free from the bias and stigma that signals the discrimination of the LGBTQ population. Youth organizers use the term “judiciously” to fit the cultural needs and variety of contexts that the organizers might face (Young et al., 2013, p. 47).

Second, both authors documented instances of adopting national materials for specific use in organizing efforts (Richards-Schuster et al., 2013; Young et al., 2013). For example, youth who are trying to start a GSA have a plethora of free handbooks from organizations such as GLSEN and the ACLU. These handbooks may direct the youth to rally adult support for starting a club, and to focus on building the club after adult support is secured. In the conservative context of Mississippi, there may be obvious barriers to building adult support that include lack of employment protections for teachers, who could be fired for being LGBTQ themselves or for supporting the efforts to start a GSA (Young et al., 2013). Thus, youth organizers may instead opt to build support from fellow students or community members before approaching the principal or other adults within the school (Richards-Schuster et al., 2013; Young et al., 2013). The lack of recognition of cultural realities of LGBTQ youth and allies in conservative contexts is a gap in national movement building.

Finally, when defining who qualifies as a “youth” in terms of building LGBTQ youth and ally support for social change efforts, organizers in conservative contexts may be more likely to choose an age range that fits the social context and realities of the region (Young et al., 2013). For example, even though youth are coming out at a younger age (average age of 15 in 2008 compared to 21 in 1970), youth in conservative social contexts may not have the ability to come out safely (Espelage et al., 2008). In observing LGBTQ youth organizing in Mississippi,

Richards-Schuster and colleagues (2013) found that the definition being adopted by one state-wide youth organization was that “youth” applied to individuals up to and including age 30. The justification was that youth are coming out later than their peers around the country because it is not safe or welcomed in schools, families, and places of worship to be LGBTQ in Mississippi. Thus, despite having a non-profit network that forwards the definition of youth as being up to age 18, or up to age 22, the context within conservative spaces lends itself to adapting this definition (Richards-Schuster et al., 2013).

A major contribution to scholarship regarding Southern LGBT youth comes from Gray (2009). Gray interviewed 34 LGBTQ youth across the state of Kentucky using ethnographic methods and, in her book “Out in the country: Youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America,” she suggests that rural and Southern LGBTQ identities among youth are complex. On one hand, Gray (2009) states that “gay people are everywhere--on TV!” and that LGBTQ youth in rural spaces are connecting to and benefiting from “unprecedented” visibility in television and other forms of media (p. 30). On the other hand, she suggests that there is a disconnect between such visibility and a lack of resources in Southern rural communities for LGBTQ youth. Gray (2009) suggests that this lack of resources is fueled by national non-profit models (such as GLSEN) that stress a dues-paying membership model that many poor, unemployed people cannot afford. Based on her research, she also suggests that Southern LGBTQ youth are not being reflected in media portrayals; that only urban, North East or West Coast gay culture is shown, and this leaves many of the youth she interviewed feeling like they had to choose between being LGBTQ-identified and being Southern-identified. In this way, Gray (2009) builds upon earlier works of Sears (1991), Howard (1999), and McWhorter (1999) in raising the issue that some LGBTQ Southerners feel as if they have to choose between different identities.

Gray (2009) suggests that such forced choices leave the youths she interviewed feeling alone and invisible.

While the qualitative research and personal narratives highlighted speak to the experiences of LGBTQ Southerners, taken together they are emblematic of issues present in the literature focusing on the experiences of LGBTQ youth at the national and even international levels: the research is nascent, and narrow in focus. Certainly, there is a need for further exploration to build a richer understanding of themes and patterns of behaviors, needs, and strategies. These behaviors, needs, and strategies, if better understood, could lead to a more focused and successful GSA movement in the South.

Promising Policies and Practices for Supporting LGBTQ Youth at School and in Community

As has been explored in other portions of this paper, LGBTQ youth face challenges and demonstrate resilience at a variety of levels, including the individual, family, school, and policy levels. As such, this section will explore promising practices and potential interventions that assist LGBTQ youth in increasing their health, wellness, and safety at these levels. The term “promising practices” refers to a variety of supports, programs, or interventions (demonstrated in the research) that have the goal of increasing positive outcomes for this population. “Practices” is used as an umbrella term, as some issues explored are truly interventions and practices, and some issues explored are guiding principles or policies that guide practice. This section will explore two related school-level protections (enumerated anti-bullying policies and safe spaces) before focusing on what the literature illustrates about GSA effectiveness and prevalence.

Enumerated anti-bullying policies. State-level anti-bullying and anti-harassment laws are similar to anti-bullying efforts that exist in local school districts. Often these laws enumerate

protections based on categories such as race, class, nationality, disability, and, to protect LGBTQ youth and those perceived to be LGBTQ, protections based on gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation (Johnson, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2009). It appears that such policies may act in part as an intervention that has positive impacts on mental health and well-being of LGBTQ populations.

Current federal policy does not protect youth based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, leaving states to fill this gap with legislation that is a mix of both pro- and anti-LGBT policy (Kosciw et al., 2009; Short, 2008). O’Shaughnessy et al. (2004) found that the simple presence of an enumerated state policy is not enough to translate into positive outcomes for LGBTQ youth. For example, in their survey of California students, despite a state law that mandates an enumerated anti-bullying policy for all public schools, some students did not know there was such a policy (O’Shaughnessy et al., 2004). Many students in their sample reported feeling unsafe in their schools based on LGBTQ-based harassment, thus suggesting that the implementation of such policies is at least as vital to the creation of safe space as the presence of such a policy (O’Shaughnessy et al., 2004). Hansen (2007) expanded this assumption by exploring the importance of disseminating information about the policy directly to students so they are aware of the policy and how it impacts them.

Compelling but limited evidence suggests that additional state-level protections that enumerate sexual orientation can have benefits to lesbian, gay, and bisexual students’ mental health. Although not limited to LGBTQ youth, Hatzenbuehler (2011) found that states that offered protections against hate crimes and secure employment practices to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people also had lower rates of psychiatric disorders within the LGB populations. Most notably, these state-level protections predicted a strong association between being lesbian, gay,

or bisexual and having a psychiatric disorder (particularly generalized anxiety disorder) (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). This research did note that there were disparities between LGB participants and heterosexual participants, but proposed that the expansion of state-level policy protections appears to be acting as a public health intervention in lessening the discrimination and threat that LGB people face (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). It should be noted that this research did not examine the impact of the inclusion of gender identity and gender expression on transgender and gender non-conforming people.

Safe zone or safe space programs. Schools and colleges are a natural setting to promote safety and inclusion of LGBTQ people, and safe zone or safe space programs were developed with such an aim. Broadly speaking, these programs are defined as education and awareness trainings for teachers, staff, or faculty to increase their sensitivity to the needs of LGBTQ students (Finkel et al., 2003). While the content of such trainings may vary, the basic premise largely appears to be similar. Educators may participate (either voluntarily or mandated by their place of employment) and learn practical ways to intervene against bullying and harassment (Evans, 2002). Curriculum agendas may include: education about mandated reporting or anti-bullying protocol; information about oppression, sexism, and heterosexism; and statistics about the needs and risks specific to LGBTQ youth. Often-times such participating educators receive a sticker or emblem to display on their office door or other visible place (Finkel et al., 2003). The idea behind a visible display of support is that it sends a message to LGBTQ students that they have an adult ally, and it may send a message that harassment and bullying based on LGBTQ identity will not be tolerated (Evans, 2002; Finkel et al., 2003). Students who report that teachers “sometimes” or “often” intervene experience 13% less harassment compared to their peers who report that their teachers “rarely” or “never” intervene (O’Shaunessy et al., 2004).

These programs have a host of benefits that protect LGBTQ youth in schools and colleges or otherwise contribute to their overall well-being. Goodenow, Szalach, & Westheimer (2002) assessed 202 students who participated in the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey, and the researchers found that the perception of staff support for LGBTQ youth, which can be bolstered through Safe Zone programs, was associated with lower rates of suicide attempts and victimization. The presence of an anti-bullying policy, discussed in the previous section, was significantly negatively associated with suicide attempts in this sample.

Safe zone or safe space trainings appear to have an impact on the teachers and staff who participate, and these impacts translate to the students with whom they interact. For example, when teachers, faculty, and/or staff display a sticker to show their participation in such trainings (as is commonly encouraged in such programs) students were more likely to disclose their LGBTQ identity to these teachers and were thus expanding their social support within the school system (Ballard, Bartle, & Masequesmay, 2008). The display of stickers or other visible signs of participation in these trainings also appears to increase the LGBTQ students' sense of being treated fairly in classrooms (Ballard et al., 2008; Elze, 2003). Participants in such programs reported an increased confidence in being able to help LGBTQ students (Finkel et al., 2003). Finkel and colleagues (2003) sampled 68 psychology graduate students attending the same university and found that, by implementing pre-test/post-test surveys and other self-reporting questions, the Safe Zone program increased participants' knowledge about the LGBT population. Most notably, they found that nearly 71% of participants indicated that they were interested in learning more about the LGBT population due to the trainings, although the researchers acknowledge that nearly 30% of participants reported that they were "tolerant" or "accepting" of LGBT people at the outset of the training and study (Finkel et al., 2003). The desire for follow-

up trainings is reflected in further qualitative work that followed up on participants after their Safe Zone trainings. In these qualitative assessments of participants of safe zone programs, the impact of such trainings was described as being short-lived, and participants expressed wanting a refresher course after the initial training was experienced (Payne & Smith, 2010). This desire suggests that further research is necessary to determine the longevity of any benefits reported in an immediate post-test evaluation.

Gay-straight alliances: Effectiveness. GSAs are one strategy for promoting LGBTQ inclusiveness and safety within secondary schools and colleges. Russell and colleagues (2009) cite Griffin et al. (2004) in defining GSAs as “school-based clubs that are partnerships between [gender and] sexual minority [LGBTQ] and heterosexual students with the purposes of promoting sexual justice, supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students and their allies, and promoting positive change in the school climate” (p. 892). The Equal Access Act, ironically passed to protect conservative students’ interests such as prayer clubs and religious clubs, is the legal basis for GSAs having the right to exist in a public school (Riener, 2006). Despite a well-established legal precedent, formation of GSAs may be still met with resistance from school administrations, community members, parents, and other students (Riener, 2006; Russell et al., 2009). Essentially, if one extra-curricular club is allowed to form at a public school, the school must allow the GSA to form. GSAs are often attacked for being “sexually themed” and “inappropriate” in secondary schools, despite the curriculum being about diversity and inclusion, and being age-appropriate (O’Shaughnessy et al., 2004).

GSAs are one very visible tool of the National Safe Schools Movement. Most notably promoted by the education policy non-profit Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) which also generates the bulk of research on GSAs and their effectiveness, the

developmental and organizational, and legal support of GSAs is also provided by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), and Lambda Legal, among other organizations. It appears, based upon the resources invested in the support and expansion of GSAs that these organizations believe GSAs are an effective tool to make schools safer and more inclusive for LGBTQ youth. Much of the research on the impact and effectiveness of GSAs is produced by advocacy groups, thus limiting what we know and its objectivity (Miceli, 2013; Toomey et al., 2011).

A limited body of research attempts to measure the function and effectiveness of GSAs; these articles have focused almost exclusively on GSAs in the Northeast, West, and Midwest regions, again begging for exploration of how these findings hold up in conservative spaces, rural spaces, and in other regions with varying social contexts (Henning-Stout et al., 2000; Doppler, 2000). Science had documented that GSAs can provide peer-to-peer support during the coming out process (Russell et al., 2009). GSAs can also encourage youth leadership and social justice advocacy (Griffin et al., 2004). In recent research, Poteat and colleagues (2013) found that the presence of a GSA was correlated with lower rates of truancy, smoking, suicide attempts, and risky sexual behavior in a sample of Wisconsin high schools.

In addition to the benefits documented in other research about LGBTQ youth in the school systems, there is a growing body of evidence that being a leader within a GSA has benefits in addition to a general level of protection. Russell and colleagues (2009) found in their qualitative interviewing of GSA leaders in California that the youth expressed feeling empowered individually, relationally, and through teaching others what they knew about leadership and the rights of LGBTQ youth in schools.

Like most student groups at the high school and college level, GSAs require the support of an advisor. Research has documented the experiences of advisors as existing along a barriers and rewards continuum (Russell et al., 2009). Some advisors report that the strongest barriers to their advisorship exist in the broader community surrounding the school. This can be in terms of lack of political support, lack of resources, or their own sexual orientation. Heterosexual GSA advisors have expressed feeling greater freedom to advocate on behalf of the GSA they advise when compared to advisors that identify as lesbian or gay (Valentini & Campbell, 2009). Having GSAs present in schools allows LGBTQ youth to seek out and connect with adult advisors who serve as advocates and sources of support (Toomey et al., 2011; Valentini & Campbell, 2009).

Gay-straight alliances: Location and school characteristics. While the benefits of participating in a GSA for both students and advisors are well-documented, we know relatively little about where GSAs are likely to occur and what factors influence their development. Research by Fetner and Kush (2008) provides the best test of the factors that facilitate early GSA development. Their research tries to predict which schools will be “early adopters” of GSA clubs (Fetner & Kush, 2008; Rogers, 2010). What they found was that “the social context in which young people live has a major impact on their ability to form GSA groups” (Fetner & Kush, 2008, p. 125). As such, suburban schools were much more likely to be early adopters, as were larger schools and schools in more progressive or liberal areas of the country, such as the West Coast and the Northeast (Fetner & Kush, 2008). Fetner and Kush also found that schools in the South as a region had the least chance of having a GSA. The South was ranked last, behind the Midwest, East and West. This suggests that there is a difference between regions of

the country in terms of the early adoption of GSA groups. However, it explains very little about why this disparity exists across regions.

Research from GLSEN's School Climate Survey, which comes out every two years, suggests similar findings (Kosciw et al., 2014). Relying on a nationally representative sample of LGBTQ youth ages 13-19 (N=7,898), the survey found that students in the South were the least likely to have access to LGBTQ resources and supports (such as GSAs) (Kosciw et al., 2014). Even more concerning, the South (compared to all other regions) had the highest reported levels in all six categories (verbal and physical harassment and physical assault) for "experience of harassment and assault" based on sexual orientation or gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2014). Youth in the South were also less likely than their peers in every other region of the U.S. to report the following: that administration were supportive of them as LGBT youth, that they had "many" (defined as 22 or more) supportive staff, that they had access to LGBT websites while at school, that LGBT issues were discussed in curriculum, and that there was a comprehensive (EABP) policy established at their school. In essence, the South is finishing last. While these studies, taken together, support this notion, we do not understand why exactly this is happening or what can be done to change this pattern.

Theoretical Framework

Expanding the theoretical framework first explored in Chapter 1, the following theories are influential in the forming of this dissertation: queer theory, oppression theory, systems theory, and social movement theory. While Charmaz (2014) identifies tension between the influence of prior theory generation and the goal of this project is to generate its own theory of GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South, these four theories did influence the development of interview questions and also helped to frame initial thinking about the topic.

Queer theory. Queer theory emerged in one way as a fusion between and in other ways as a departure from women's studies and gay and lesbian studies. Heavily influenced by Foucault, queer theory challenges the constructions of normative and privileged sexualities and gender identities. It suggests, as Marinucci (2010) writes, that "an attempt to define something is ultimately an attempt to exert control," (p 97). As mentioned in Chapter 1, queer theory views binary systems (for example, male/female or gay/straight) as a way of making multiple groups of people who don't "fit" the binary automatically "less than."

Instead, queer theory offers that sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression are much more complicated than one of two choices within a binary system. This means that people can identify as butch, femme, androgynous, or genderqueer. In addition, people can identify as gay, straight, bisexual/pansexual, lesbian, asexual, or prefer not to have a label for their sexual orientation. Queer theory also recognizes that those who stray from what society considers "normal" can be severely punished vis-a-vis oppression, stigma, and exclusion (Butler, 2010). Queer theory is difficult to define, since it seeks to challenge the very systems it operates within. It has also been compared to a postmodern theory of sexuality and gender identity (Marinucci, 2010).

Oppression theory. Oppression theory seeks to explain why and how dominant groups maintain and subjugate oppressed groups. Thompson (2006) suggests that three levels of interaction impact and maintain oppression. The social order level maintains the status quo of , privileged groups who have often held power in society (such as straight people and cisgender people). The social order level influences the cultural level, which regulates the way groups treat and relate to each other, as well as ideas groups have about each other. The cultural level most

intimately impacts the personal level. The personal level is where people enact their thoughts, feelings, and ideas about other individuals (Payne, 2005; Thompson, 2006).

Knowing what we do about the experiences of LGBTQ youth, oppression theory helps explain everything from employment and housing discrimination to violence and bullying at schools. Oppression theory also suggests that clinical practitioners educate their oppressed clients about the overarching structures of heterosexism and cissexism (discrimination against transgender people), which is suggested as a promising practice when working with LGBTQ clients (Payne, 2005). Oppression theory particularly influenced the interview protocol questions about challenges that participants have faced or perceived. Subsequently, participants were probed about specific experiences of oppression, which has been informed by my understanding of this theory.

Systems theory. Social systems theory, whose origin is largely credited to Von Bertalanffy (1950; 1972), provides a useful explanation for how different aspects of a social system (such as the different roles people play within a school) impact the system as a whole. Von Bertalanffy developed this theory by using the human body and its subsequent systems (such as the endocrine, nervous, and immune systems) as a metaphor for how organizations and systems function (Hasenfeld, 1992; Von Bertalanffy, 1972). A reflection of the state of science at the time, which was attempting to unify biological and social phenomenon under a set of common principles, Von Bertalanffy (1972) found that “[t]here are principles which apply to systems in general, whatever the nature of their component elements or the relations or ‘forces’ between them,” (p. 139). Although it can be difficult to determine causation between one variable and the next within a social system, this theory can highlight how a change in one variable can impact another part of the system (Gortner, Nichols, & Ball, 2007).

Systems theory has influenced this project by providing an understanding (which, subsequently is supported in previous research) of how different individuals within a school system may influence the development of a GSA. Prior research has indicated, for example, that administrators (whether pro- or anti-LGBTQ equality) can play an important role in the perceived safety of the school (GLSEN and Harris Interactive, 2008).

Social movement theory. Social movement theory helps scholars understand why social movements form, how they grow, and under what conditions they succeed and fail. As mentioned in Chapter 1, research on social movement theory indicates that in schools with fewer resources (as measured, often, by the percentage of students who are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch) are often less likely to have a GSA. Social movement theory also helps explain why communities that have a more visible LGBTQ community are more likely to have supports for LGBTQ youth in schools. Various studies suggests that positive exposure to people who are different from oneself is key to building support for diverse human needs (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). Diverse communities (with diversity including but not limited to race, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity) allow for this exposure to difference, and urban environments are more likely than rural environments to have elements of diversity (Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000).

One would expect, then, that LGBTQ supports are more likely to occur in urban environments compared to rural environments, and Fetner and Kush (2008) demonstrated this nationally. At the same time, Fetner and Kush (2008) demonstrated that GSAs were less likely to occur in the South and Midwest, likely due to the high fundamental religiosity and associated negative attitudes toward LGBTQ people. Whether urban environments are associated with LGBTQ protections in the South remains under-explored. The purpose of this dissertation is not

to “test” any one theory, but social movement theory certainly has influenced the probes about the demographics on the school and community levels.

Gaps in Knowledge

Research has established that the LGBTQ community is one at risk of a variety of negative social and health disparities, and that LGBTQ youth are a population at particular risk (Mustanski et al., 2010; Hatzenbuehler, 2001; Russell et al., 2001). Researchers have also noted that schools are a natural point of intervention and support for these youth, and that, subsequently, a GSA is one way of offering demonstrable protections for LGBTQ youth in schools (Kosciw et al., 2014). While research has documented the benefits of participating in or advising a GSA, or even the residual benefits of attending a school with a GSA, we know relatively little about how these groups form and what maintains these groups over time.

Richards-Schuster and colleagues (2013) have suggested that youth organizing in conservative places such as the South are employing innovative tactics for adapting national movements to their community change efforts. The science that has examined GSA location, density, and experiences of LGBTQ youth by region suggest a worrying trend: that the South (whether unintentionally or purposively) is being left behind (Fetner & Kush, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2014). LGBTQ youth are reporting more school victimization and are less likely to attend a school that has LGBTQ protections (Fetner & Kush, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2014).

If we know more about the circumstances that facilitate the GSAs in getting established at individual schools in the Deep South, and if we understand the benefits that they may provide to LGBTQ youth, those who work to support the health and well-being of LGBTQ youth may be more efficient in starting GSAs. As such, after reviewing the extant literature this dissertation attempts to answer the following question: how do GSA members and supporters perceive the

individual, school, and community contexts that impact the successful formation and maintenance of GSAs in the Deep South? The aim of this dissertation project is to address this gap in the literature in hopes to inform future organizing strategies for the expansion of GSAs in this region, which research suggests are at risk much like the LGBTQ population that lives within its borders.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODS

This chapter describes the research methods for this dissertation, organized as follows. The first section provides a rationale for qualitative inquiry in general and a grounded theory approach in particular. The second section provides an epistemological framework and explains my role as researcher in this study. Finally, this section provides a discussion of data collection and data analysis procedures for this study.

Rationale for Qualitative Inquiry

As I explored the literature on GSAs and other school-based protections and organizations for LGBTQ youth, including GSA development and efficacy, it became clear that there were substantial gaps. It was also clear that a study that explored how GSAs are formed and maintained over time would be a contribution to the field. For example, the science described the South as having low GSA density, but did little to highlight the pathways and processes of how existing groups developed. In addition, the state of science provided little information about the larger school, community, and individual contexts that facilitated and/or challenged the formation and maintenance of such groups. As indicated in the previous chapter, no studies were identified that helped to explain the factors that contributed to GSA longevity within schools.

As I continued to immerse myself in the literature about GSAs and their development, I continued to gravitate toward questions of how and why these groups, despite the numerous

social and political challenges they face in the region, formed and thrived. In particular, I wanted to document the formation and maintenance experiences of these groups. If thoroughly and rigorously documented, these experiences may contribute to a stronger organizing strategy and an increased protection of a vulnerable group within an undeserved region of the Deep South. My intention was not to determine how many GSAs exist in the Deep South, nor was my interest in replicating the Fetner and Kush (2008) study that tested the types of school and community variables associated with GSA location. These types of questions (which operationalize their variables in ways that allow them to be counted and analyzed) are better suited for a quantitative or mixed methods inquiry. Instead, my interest in conducting this dissertation lies in understanding the contexts of GSA development and maintenance. This study also focused on understanding the strengths and challenges that individuals who are knowledgeable about such groups in this region have experienced. To reiterate from the first chapter, the current research question was: how do GSA members and supporters perceive the individual, school, and community contexts that impact the successful formation and maintenance of GSAs in the Deep South? The following section explains why this question is particularly well-suited for a grounded theory approach.

Rationale for Grounded Theory Approach

Qualitative inquiry encompasses a number of methods, many of which I considered when developing this dissertation. The decision to select grounded theory as the method for this study was twofold. First, a review of the science on this topic revealed no existing theories that explained how GSAs were formed or maintained. A lack of theory about the formation and maintenance process essentially means that researchers and advocates do not yet know how to support the development of GSAs in the South and Midwest, two low-density GSA regions

(Fetner & Kush, 2008). A strengths-based theory focused on successful GSAs, developed within the context of a region with low-GSA density, is especially suited to social work inquiry. I selected a grounded theory method because it can best be used to analyze and integrate experiences of participants into a cohesive and explanatory theory of how GSAs are formed and maintained in this region.

Second, I aimed to address the gaps in the literature while contributing an explanation of how GSAs form and successfully exist over a period of time in the Deep South. This explanation explored, in particular, the way that the group's formation or maintenance interacted with or was impacted by school, community, and individual factors. As a former community organizer in this area, my previous work could have benefitted from a strategy or theory that explained why and how GSAs were successfully formed and supported. This, ideally, would have led to a more efficient use of resources and community strengths.

Grounded theory is particularly well-suited to address the two aforementioned goals. First, with very little science to guide the line of questions that participants are asked, grounded theory provides the flexibility and reflexivity to capture a burgeoning area of research from the ground up (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This method centers theory development on the experiences of those closest to the phenomenon under question (Charmaz, 2012). Prior research suggests this is especially important to Deep South organizers of GSAs and LGBTQ youth protections, who indicate that-- in some cases --national materials and organizing strategies are out of touch with the realities they face in their own communities (Richards-Schuster et al., 2013; Young et al., 2013).

Second, relatively little is known about the formation and maintenance of GSAs in the Deep South. Grounded theory allows for the data not only to be captured but also to suggest a

relationship between the contexts and experiences that are examined. Given that the existing science does not capture the processes of *how* or *why* GSAs are successfully formed or maintained, a theory offering one explanation and built from the data, or experiences, of those who are experts in their own culture and experiences, holds importance for this field of social work practice.

Epistemological Framework

There is a debate among those who conduct qualitative research as to whether knowledge and meaning is uncovered through an objective research process or if knowledge is socially constructed in a reflexive and, therefore, subjective process between the researcher and the research participants (Padgett, 2008). As such, I adopted a constructivist viewpoint in the current study. This viewpoint asserts that knowledge construction is a joint enterprise between the researcher, the participants, and the meaning they make together (Charmaz, 2012).

For this study, my purpose was to thoroughly and rigorously document both the experiences of participants and the research process. As the process deepened, through coding, memoing, and an iterative interview process, I allowed meaning to emerge from the data. Believing that no knowledge is created without an underlying viewpoint (Charmaz, 2012), I acknowledge the influence of both prior experience and prior exposure to literature.

Role of Researcher

I entered the doctoral program in social work, and ultimately this line of scientific inquiry, after working for seven years in a role similar to that of eight of the participants in this study: an advocate for LGBTQ protections in schools in the Deep South. My work focused on Mississippi, and later Alabama, where one goal of the work was to expand the number of GSAs in this region. I trained youth, some of whom were LGBTQ identified, to advocate for GSAs in

their schools. I also helped youth identify potential GSA advisors, coached youth on pitching the idea of GSA formation to often hostile administrators, and offered educational and strategic materials to youth and adult allies to support their work.

Very few efforts to expand GSAs in Mississippi and Alabama were successful. After many such failed attempts, the organizing team paid little attention to evaluate the successes and challenges of the campaign. Often, we organizers found ourselves moving on quickly to the next targeted school. I personally found myself growing more frustrated with the limited resources coupled with the lack of success that left many of us feeling empty handed. I had wondered many times over the years about what successful and failed GSA start-up efforts had in common. I also have wondered about any common factors that assisted those GSAs that have stood the test of time in this region.

My role as the researcher in this study is to design and tailor the methods, collect and analyze the data, and suggest implications from the findings. As Creswell (2013) and Padgett (2008) note, the researcher is the vehicle through which the study is implemented. While notions of bias are of great concern in quantitative research, these concerns exist but are acknowledged as part of the context of qualitative inquiry (Padgett, 2008). As discussed in the previous section on epistemology, constructivism recognizes that theory or meaning from data, grounded in the experiences of those close to the phenomenon under investigation, is always subject to the world view and experiences of the researcher and her participants. That being said, my own biases were explored through memo writing, challenged informally through member checking of my results, and I welcomed critique from members of the academic community (including my dissertation committee and research colleagues).

In addition, it would be disingenuous, and nearly impossible, to say that my prior experiences as a community organizer did not influence the development or execution of this research project. That being said, the role of this researcher was to systematically document the experiences of participants and not that of the researcher herself. Although the notion of “bracketing”, or setting aside one’s own views and prior knowledge of a subject, is debated within the field of qualitative inquiry, I found it to be a valuable concept that assisted in separating the experiences and ideas of my participants from my own theories and assumptions (Schwandt, 2007; Padgett, 2008). Additional methods to encourage trustworthiness in the data and analysis are discussed in a subsequent section.

Data Collection Procedures

This study seeks to understand the process of forming and/or maintaining a GSA in the Deep South. For the purpose of this study, the following states were designated as “Deep South”: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee. In order to gather rich data, recruitment focused on participants with first-hand experience in forming, participating in, and advising GSAs. Participants also included experts in the research on GSAs in this region and who had organizing or advocacy experience with such groups. This section discusses the sampling strategy, the process of gathering data, and the interview protocol.

Sampling strategy. In order to gain diverse perspectives from different states in the region, I contacted various non-profit organizations and GSA-serving groups in the various states. I identified 13 organizations that directly served the needs of LGBTQ youth in schools in the six states mentioned above (such as Safe Schools Coalitions, GLSEN chapters, and GSA Network chapters). I identified these organizations through my own personal awareness of their work, through asking for suggestions of organizations to contact from my personal and

professional networks, and through an internet search for LGBTQ youth organizations in the states included in my sample. After I identified the organizations, I contacted leaders who had publicly listed email addresses or with whom I had a professional contact. I contacted a total of 26 people through these means, and this yielded only three participants for the study. Several people responded that they supported the project but did not have the time to participate. Other contacts did not respond, I suspect, because they were either too busy, did not fit the protocol, or were not interested. In addition to contacting those associated with GSA-serving organizations, an additional 19 people were contacted through my professional network. This yielded 10 participants for the study. Using a script that was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at The University of Alabama, all contacts were made via email or Facebook using only the pre-approved script.

GSA leaders, advisors, and advocates over the age of 18 (the age of consent for an adult in Alabama) were contacted through LGBTQ-serving organizations. I requested that these organizations distribute IRB-approved recruitment flyers via emails or post the flyer on their organizational Facebook site. This yielded four participants for the study.

Sampling was purposive, meaning I intentionally recruited participants with specific experiences and who could elaborate on themes emerging from the data analysis (Charmaz, 2012; Creswell, 2013). The first six participants were purposively sampled to achieve diversity in both their location (state) and role within a GSA (be they a student, advisor, or advocate). As data analysis deepened and the grounded theory of GSA formation and maintenance emerged, participants were purposively sampled in order to speak to emerging themes and to clarify questions about such themes. Whenever possible, participants continued to be purposively included based on the diversity of their expertise, by state, and according to the role they played

in relation to a GSA. When this was not possible, I recruited participants who fit the inclusion criteria and purposively sampled the next participant to try to balance the sample in key ways (such as role or state).

I used a variety of coding methods (such as open, thematic, and axial) and this process is further described in the following analysis section. I continued to recruit participants to the study until I felt that saturation was achieved, or no new concepts or themes emerged in the data (Charmaz, 2012). A total of 17 participants were interviewed for this study, and their demographic data is summarized in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Data

Participant #	Role	State	Started/Maintained	Years GSA Existed
P1*	Advocate	AL	Maintained	N/A
P2	Advisor	GA	Started	N/A
P3	Student/ Advocate	SC, TN	Both	Unknown
P4	Student/ Advocate	MS	Maintained	Unknown
P5	Advocate	MS, AL, GA	Started	N/A
P6	Advocate	AL	N/A	N/A
P7	Advocate	AL, GA, LA, MS, SC, TN	Both	N/A
P8	Advocate	TN	Both	N/A
P9	Advisor	AL	Both	4
P10*	Student/ Advocate	AL, LA	Maintained	Unknown
P11	Advisor	TN	Both	9
P12	Student	SC	Maintained	3
P13	Advisor	MS	Started	1
P14	Student	SC	Both	3
P15	Student	AL, MS	Both	Unknown
P16	Advisor	AL	Both	5
P17	Advisor	GA	Both	10

*P1 and P10 use gender-neutral pronouns (they/theirs) and so when these two participants are quoted in the dissertation, the pronouns “they” or “theirs” is used.

As indicated by the above table, three participants played multiple roles (student and later advocate) within a GSA over time. Responses of “unknown” indicate that the participant did not know how long their GSA had existed. Responses of “N/A” indicate that participants felt the demographic questions asked did not apply to their role or experience. Participant 6 felt that she could not take credit for helping start or maintain GSAs, since she provided support and advice and not direct action. Many advocates responded “not applicable” about years a GSA was in existence, since they had assisted many GSAs over time and it would be difficult to list all GSAs for the sake of the interview.

Overall, the sample was well-balanced between roles. Eight people identified as advocates, six people identified as advisors, and six people identified as students. States were fairly balanced as well, including: Alabama (eight), Georgia (four), Louisiana, (two), Mississippi (five), South Carolina (four) and Tennessee (four). Likewise there was a nice balance of experiences starting and/or maintaining a GSA, as Table 1 shows. In retrospect, it would have been excellent to recruit administrators to the sample. Participants spoke about administrators, and speculated on their motivations, but no one was an administrator that could clarify the information. Since grounded theory dictated that I recruit participants until I reached saturation, I do not believe that the sample size of 17 limits the data in ways that compromise the rigor of the analysis.

Inclusion Criteria. Sampling involved purposively recruiting students, advisors, advocates, researchers who also had direct experience of the topic, and organizers with expertise in starting, supporting, and/or working with GSAs in the Deep South. In order to be included in this study, the person must have either self-identified as 1) having experience forming or participating in a GSA in the states mentioned 2) an advisor of such a group in the states

mentioned, 3) an advocate for GSAs in the states mentioned and/or 4) a researcher with a direct knowledge of GSAs in the states mentioned.

For potential participants who expressed interest in the study, I made an initial email or phone contact to determine if the potential participant met the inclusion criteria. In the email, I asked for the person to review the selection criteria and to respond only if the criteria applied to them. On the phone, I asked if the criteria applied to the person. An IRB-approved screening script was used, and is located in Appendix B. The terms “advocate” and “researcher” represent broad categories, and they include individuals who played a variety of roles such as: Safe School Coalition members, employees or volunteers of GSA-supporting organizations, and/or academics with the requisite expertise who had engaged in GSA support. Prior to the start of each interview, I reviewed the selection criteria with the participant for a second time and asked for the participant to confirm which of the criteria applied to them.

Exclusion Criteria. Individuals were excluded from this study if 1) they did not self-identify as having the requisite expertise stated above, or 2) if their research or advocacy did not allow them to elaborate on the various community contexts that support or challenge GSAs in the Deep South (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and/or Tennessee).

Gathering data. I conducted a screening interview and a full interview with each participant, who were allowed to select the location of the meeting in order to allow them to feel most comfortable responding to my questions. In 15 of the 17 cases, the screening interview preceded the full interview in one session. In the other two cases, a screening interview determined that the participants were eligible for the study, and I scheduled a time to conduct the full interview at a later date. The average length of the interviews was 54 minutes, with the shortest interview taking approximately 33 minutes and the longest taking 114 minutes.

Although I initially preferred to conduct an in-person interview, because I thought it would minimize distractions and capture a clear audio recording, most participants could not participate face-to-face given their schedules and locations. I was able to interview two participants face-to-face, and interviewed 15 participants remotely. Seven participants elected to be interviewed via video conferencing, and eight participants elected to be interviewed over the telephone. In retrospect, I felt that the remote interviews were full, clear, and did not interfere with my ability to probe for more detail. Thankfully, any technological issues (such as inconsistent internet access for video conferencing) were rectified quickly if they occurred at all. I used a good quality set of external computer speakers when conducting video interviews, which allowed me to record a high quality audio recording. I used the speaker phone function on my cell phone, which also achieved a high quality audio recording. Participants provided verbal consent to have their interview audio recorded. For all interviews, regardless if they were in person or not, I made only an audio recording of the interview, which was later transcribed. The IRB at The University of Alabama approved the interview formats used for data collection in this study.

Interview protocol. Unlike other types of qualitative inquiry, Bryant and Charmaz (2007) suggest that a semi-structured interview protocol may limit the flexibility and depth that a grounded theory project requires. As such, the interview protocol included in Appendix E should be viewed as a starting point or a “loose guide.” I used the technique of scaffolding, or building upon, the information I learned through each interview (Seidman, 2013). This essentially meant that while remaining focused on the primary research question, the exact questions I asked each participant depended upon their prior responses, their unique experiences, and the emerging questions and themes developed from prior interviews. One technique I used to keep the

interview on track as much as possible was to print a personal copy of the research question and have it visible to me as I interviewed participants. This served as a subtle reminder of the purpose in interviewing the participants, since I realized that researchers can sometimes veer off their intended course (Seidman, 2013). This was especially helpful to me if I felt that the interviews started to drift way off topic to areas that in no way were related to the research study. The research question and semi-structured protocol served as only a guide. Other questions were generated that helped clarify and explain emerging concepts and relationships. To clarify meaning and explore unanticipated topics, I did choose to “veer” into these areas when applicable.

After screening and recruiting each study participant, I built rapport with the participant by asking them to describe their experiences with GSAs in their community (Seidman, 2013). I probed for depth in any resulting answers, as appropriate, by drawing from the list of possible probes on the interview guide. I did interview participants with whom I was already acquainted. Under such circumstances, Seidman (2013) suggests that the researcher essentially over-sharing their own experiences or developing “too much familiarity” may inadvertently skew the information received and the trajectory of the interview. Keeping this in mind, I prefaced the interview by explaining that despite our prior relationship my purpose was to ask about their lived experiences with GSAs and the meaning and context they could uniquely share. I empowered the participant as an expert, letting them know that I was not looking for a “right answer” but was instead looking for the meaning they made from their own experiences.

Establishing trustworthiness. The purpose of a qualitative study is not to arrive at one “objective” truth, as in quantitative study, but instead is to uncover meaning from the experiences and perspectives of those impacted by the phenomenon under investigation

(Charmaz, 2012; Creswell, 2013). Instead of bias and reliability or validity concerns, qualitative inquiry concerns itself with establishing what many scholars call “trustworthiness”. Padgett (2008) defines trustworthiness as a process by which a researcher attends to “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (p. 181). The term “credibility” refers to the way the researcher accurately captures the meaning of the participant’s views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability addresses the ability to extend the findings from one study to another context (Padgett, 2008). The term “dependability” refers to the rigor of the study procedures, such as the documents and transcripts created from the data (e.g. an audit trail) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, researchers achieve confirmability when they link the findings from the study closely to the data (Padgett, 2008).

I attended to the concerns raised by Padgett (2008) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) by ensuring that I spent requisite time in the analysis, that documents were clear, and that I could defend my findings by grounding them in the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Member checking, or bringing the findings back to the participants so they can confirm or challenge the analysis, helped attend to trustworthiness (Charmaz, 2012). I offered all of the participants an opportunity to read the findings from this study and explained to them that their opinions and feedback helped make the research stronger. Each participant was sent a copy of their transcript and encouraged to make comments and corrections. In addition, three participants were presented with a detailed description of the resulting theory of GSA formation and maintenance, and I discussed their impressions, questions, and comments. This process is detailed in Chapter 4.

Potential Ethical Issues

I did not identify any major ethical issues with this study. Participants were adult experts who offered their informed opinions about GSAs with which they were familiar. Given that I used to be a GSA organizer in the South, some of the participants were former colleagues or, in some cases, friends. To off-set any personal dynamics, I stuck to IRB-approved scripts and I prefaced the interview with an assertion of professionalism. To enhance this professional boundary with former colleagues and friends, I limited the line of inquiry in the interview to those questions or probes that enhanced my understanding of the research question. All participants were de-identified in the interview transcripts and will continue to be de-identified in any manuscripts or publications that resulting from this dissertation.

Researcher's Resources and Skills

I identified several resources and skills that assisted in the execution of this study. First, as previously mentioned, I has worked for seven years in the GSA movement in the Deep South. This allowed me to have a deep professional knowledge of the issues involved in the movement and enabled me to build and maintain connections with experts in this area. Although I was careful not to let my prior experiences overshadow my data collection and analysis, through the use of bracketing and memoing, this deep professional connection to the issues was extremely useful in that it allowed me to efficiently recruit participants into this study. This expediency may not have been possible if I did not have personal connections to relevant people and organizations in the region.

The second skill set that I identified as critical to this study was the completion of both a mixed methods research seminar and a qualitative research seminar. The skills I learned in these courses, as well as the textbooks used, provided valuable assets to consult as the study moved

forward. Finally, I have had participated in extensive training in data analysis using NVivo and also had access to the software for data analysis. I currently serve as a qualitative data manager for a physician researcher, which has afforded me an opportunity to organize data, code, and write memos. I have also served as a data manager and consultant, and these experiences have prepared me to work with an ambitious project and meet a tight timeline.

Data Analysis

I used QSR International's NVivo 10 software for data analysis. In conjunction with field notes that captured my impressions and initial questions following each interview with a participant, I used the software program to organize data to better-facilitate deep thinking about the meaning and context provided by participants. The data analysis plan consisted of formatting and organizing the data, coding, reflection and memo writing, and validating the theory. These steps are detailed below.

Formatting and organizing the data. Prior to any formal data analysis, I employed the services of a professional transcription company to transcribe all audio data. The transcripts were often ready within 48 hours of conducting the interview. Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest that this immediacy between time of interview and transcription facilitates a smoother segue into data analysis. The quick turn-around time did ensure that coding and initial analysis took place while the interview was "fresh" in my mind. After the company created the transcript, I uploaded into NVivo software.

Once the transcript was created, I sent the document to the participant, asking that they review the transcript for accuracy. Seven participants indicated that they had reviewed the document. Of those seven, three provided me with corrections and clarifications to their transcript. These corrected transcripts then replaced the original in the NVivo project file. All

participant transcripts were referred to by their participant number (for example, “P1” or “P2”) and any identifying information (such as the name of a school or a town) were removed from the transcript. The file was encrypted using AxCrypt software, and all files were password protected to ensure the security of all study data.

Coding. As Bryant and Charmaz (2007) note, “[t]o remain truly open to the emergence of theory is among the most challenging issues confronting those new to grounded theory,” (p. 269). In order to remain open to the “emergence of theory” I coded data in various stages. These stages include first cycle coding, also known as open coding, second cycle coding, referred to here as focused coding, and thematic analysis.

Prior to any formal data analysis, I read each interview several times during the first cycle coding, where I assigned words and phrases to first-cycle coding units (Saldaña, 2013). Codes were labeled in the software program (NVivo refers to “codes” as “nodes”). I then defined each code in the “node properties”, which created a codebook of initial codes (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Saldaña, 2013). The initial codes represented first impressions and description of the data. Some of the meanings and relationships of these “open” codes did change in later coding cycles. Latent, implied meaning was also captured in the data. For example, I would code for the implied meaning of a participant in addition to coding in vivo, which uses the actual words of the participant in the code.

In order to establish a deep understanding of the data, the coding process was iterative (Charmaz, 2012; Saldaña, 2013). This meant that I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning and context of the data through the process of coding, reading, and recoding. As such, I engaged in second cycle coding and recoding as necessary, until I had clearly-defined codes that assisted in helping answer the research questions for this study. These categories and codes

were clarified with participants in the study to ensure trustworthiness in the codes and subsequent emergent theory.

Detailed description of coding process. This section details how I moved from codes to themes to core concepts in the development of a theory to describe how GSAs form and maintain over time in the Deep South region of the U.S. The first section describes the initial phase of coding, including the types of codes used, the number of transcripts used to inform the initial codes, and a summary of this first stage of coding. Immediately following is a description of how I refined the coding system, moving from open codes to solidified themes, which assisted in the purposeful and theoretical sampling of future participants. Finally, I describe the final coding system, which lists the core concepts and describes reaching a saturation of themes.

Initial categories and codes. Initial, first round coding commenced after four participants were interviewed and their interviews had been transcribed and uploaded into NVivo. The first four participants were an advocate with experience in Alabama, an advisor with experience in Georgia, and two participants who had multiple roles first as students and later as advocates, from Tennessee/South Carolina and Mississippi respectively. I used in vivo, process, and initial coding to organize the data (Saldaña, 2013). In vivo coding refers to naming the code directly from the participant's own words (Saldaña, 2013). I found this useful so I did not introduce bias to the initial coding scheme (Saldaña, 2013). Process coding is a way to initially describe an action or pattern in the data (Saldaña, 2013). A key example of process coding from this round was the category of "LGBT Network" with codes of "provide training" and "provide advocacy" which began to describe the role that the network plays in relationship to GSAs. Finally, initial or open coding was used to capture first impressions of data and meaning (Saldaña, 2013). These initial impressions or codes commonly evolved as I spent more

time memoing, thinking about the data, and asking participants to help clarify her thoughts and impressions. Examples of initial codes were “sex education” and “supports for GSAs” which both evolved out of the developing theory. Data did not initially provide substantial support for these initial ideas. The coding scheme from the initial round led to the following list of codes, shared in Table 2 below.

Table 2: List of Initial Categories and Codes

Categories	Codes
Challenges GSAs face	Accessing information Administration Being outed Faculty and staff Fear Hostility, general Keep a low profile No major challenges Parents Safety Stigma Teacher concerns
Demographics that challenge GSAs	Challenges, general
Demographics that help GSAs	Low-income school
Facing Anti-LGBT forces in community	Community not supportive
GSAs evolve over time	Suburban schools
LGBT Network	LGBT network
Responding to challenges in starting a GSA	Boarding school
School climate	Provide training
Sex education	Provide advocacy
South under-resourced	Covert GSA
Starting a GSA	Community GSA
	Positive school climate
	Negative school climate
	Need an advisor
	Legal support
	Laying groundwork

Supporting a GSA	Paperwork Fate or serendipity Administration Agenda and goals Allies Club culture Connecting youth to each other Faculty and staff Curriculum Programming Inclusive Networking Policy advocacy Regular meetings
Supports for GSAs Surviving Types of GSAs	Activist GSA Support group GSA Social GSA
Youth leadership and activism, generally	

As evidenced in Table 2, first round coding yielded 16 categories and 44 codes. Categories were identified first, and codes (sub-categories) were added if they logically fit under an existing category. Some categories had no codes, since no codes emerged that naturally fit. An emerging theme of the LGBT network was described generally in the first four interviews. To develop this further in the data, I made the decision to deliberately, or theoretically according to Charmaz (2012), sample from advocates who could describe the role of the network in more detail. I also felt that advocates could speak to the challenges GSAs face, the supports for GSAs, and the notion of “responding to challenges” which was developing from the first round of coding.

Refined coding system. The next four participants were all advocates who had collective experiences in all of the states included in the sample (AL, GA, LA, MS, SC, and TN). A number of categories and codes evolved, forming the basis of core concepts, merging with other

categories or codes, or dropping altogether from the emerging theory. Categories or codes were dropped if they did not rise to the level of importance in the emerging theory (Creswell, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 2012). I continued to memo after each interview was conducted. I also wrote memos about coding, relationships between the categories and codes, and the process described in the emerging theory.

After eight participants were interviewed, three distinct stages of GSA development became: pre-formation, formation, and maintenance. Subsequent participants were asked to clarify, challenge, or expand these core concepts. These stages captured the process that the emerging theory sought to explain: the process of GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South. As a result of the developing coding process, four additional core concepts emerged: negotiating barriers, overcoming threats, building strength, and failure. The detail of these core concepts, as well as the logic behind their development, are detailed in Chapter 4. That chapter also includes a table that details the final coding structure of core concepts, categories, and codes.

Nine additional participants were recruited after the initial eight interviews for a total of 17 participants. Although the analysis process was iterative, I arrived at a point when no new themes emerged from the data. This process, or goal, is referred to as saturation (Saldaña, 2013). Participant 15's data fit within the existing coding scheme of the prior 14 participants, signaling that perhaps saturation was reached. An additional two participants were recruited, and when their data also fit within the coding scheme, recruitment ended.

Reflection and memo writing. Reflection about content and impressions of the data, as well as memo writing to further expand such thinking, served as key to the inductive and iterative nature of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2009; Creswell, 2013). To bridge the processes of

reflection and analysis, the previously-written field note from each interview was included alongside the transcript from the participant in what the NVivo software calls a “linked memo” that allowed for easy access to the field note while viewing the transcript (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). This field note, describing overall impressions of the interview, reflection on the efficacy of the questions asked, and other initial impressions, was written no more than 48 hours after each of the 17 interviews occurred. This memo also highlighted any adjustments I considered making for future interviews. This field note captured important details about the interview, allowed new questions to emerge, and served as a baseline for how my thinking evolved during the data analysis process.

In addition to the field note memo, I relied on several different types of memos to capture her thinking and to develop the emerging theory. Code memos, which pertained to the evolving codes, categories, and core concepts, helped to capture evolving definitions and the relationship between codes, categories, and core concepts (Mihas, 2016). These memos were titled “What do I know so far?” which was an evolving thought process of the developing relationships, “Code evolution” which logged each new code definition and lingering questions about the code’s usefulness in the developing theory, and later evolved to have a memo for each of the core concepts in the theory. I also employed process memos, which detail the methods, decision making about methods, and general comments about the evolving process (Mihas, 2016). These three process memos were titled “general notes”, “methods” (which detailed the methods choices and conversations with committee members about methods choices), and a “positionality memo” (that allowed me to explore my biases and bracket my assumptions).

Validating Theory

I validated the theory by inviting participants to review the analysis at multiple points throughout the study. “Member checking” refers to the process of asking participants to review and critique the findings. It provides one useful tool for validating theory (Charmaz, 2014). I reiterated to participants that I valued their opinions, that their time was precious, and that this step of theory validation helped ensure that the end result of this product is useful to communities like theirs. A further exploration of theory validation is offered in Chapter 4.

Timeline for Completing the Study

I conducted this study over the course of a six month period of time from start to finish. Details of the timeline are provided in Appendix F.

CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS

In this chapter I report the findings from interview data gathered from 17 study participants who were students, advisors, advocates, or a combination of these roles with GSAs in high schools in the Deep South. The data show how the participants perceive the individual, school, and community contexts that support the formation and maintenance of GSAs in this region. The findings, as a reflection of the data, detail the myriad challenges that GSAs face at three distinct phases: the pre-formation, formation, and maintenance phases. I will also discuss additional findings as organized by these three phases. Each phase will include strengths and challenges, as perceived by participants. The chapter will close with a rationale for the core concepts that emerged in the theory. These findings are the basis of constructing one theory of GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South, the relationships within and significance of which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Three Distinct Stages of GSA Development

Participants were asked if they were involved in starting a GSA and if they had experience in keeping one running after the group had been started. Two participants had experience only in starting a GSA. Five participants had experience only in maintaining a GSA. Six participants had experience in both starting and maintaining a GSA. Four participants had experiences that could not be classified, and these four participants were largely in advocacy roles. These advocates saw themselves as providing what one participant called “general support” to GSAs and did not want to take credit for starting or maintaining a GSA. These

support tasks included things such as making referrals to legal support, offering program ideas, or consulting with GSA members and advisors. These tasks will be further explored below.

Through analyzing how GSAs start and stay running, it emerged that there was a preceding stage that I designated “pre-formation” since it had distinct tasks, people, strengths, and challenges. Initial codes of “starting a GSA” and “maintaining a GSA” were renamed “formation” and “maintenance” to reflect their importance as core concepts in the emerging theory. The stages are defined immediately below.

Pre-formation stage. I defined the pre-formation stage as any tasks or people that seemed necessary in order to form the GSA successfully at the school. This stage also included key threats, barriers, and strengths that seemed to apply to experiences in the pre-formation stages of the GSA. Without the pre-formation tasks being accomplished, the group could not advance to the formation stage. Before renaming this phase “pre-formation” I thought of it broadly as “early formation” or “initial organizing efforts”. These early codes describe what makes this phase distinct: there is recognition by students or faculty that a GSA is necessary or desired in the school, but the “raw materials” to form one have not been assembled quite yet. These “raw materials” specifically include: a student willing to take a risk, a faculty member willing to take a risk, and on occasion the law and the LGBT network which can assist in overcoming barriers to starting a GSA.

Formation stage. I defined the formation stage as the direct efforts to start a GSA within a school where one had not existed in the past. When participants discussed specific efforts to start the GSA, including threats to this process, it was coded under this core concept, as were aspects of the process that made the GSA formation efforts stronger. This phase also encompasses the option of failure, and some creative responses to the failure to start a GSA

within a school, which is detailed below in the section titled “Formation Stage of a GSA”. GSAs that do not make it past the formation stage, or groups that fail before their first year in existence, do not make it to the maintenance stage.

Maintenance stage. I defined the maintenance stage as the efforts to maintain a GSA within a school where one already existed. Participants discussed “maintenance” tasks soon after the GSA was formed, and these tasks were often (although not always) distinct from the tasks faced at the formation stage. Like the formation stage, this stage also includes overcoming threats to the GSA’s continued existence and also included aspects of the process that strengthened the GSA. This phase also includes failure, although in a different relationship at this stage that again will be detailed below.

Overview of Categories and Codes

This chapter details the findings of each stage of GSA development, and closes with a closer examination of the emerging theory of GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South. To help guide readers, the table below (Table 3) illustrates the final list of categories and specific codes that emerged during each stage of GSA development. The reader should note that some of these categories and codes merge into core concepts of the theory later in the chapter, and the rationale for this will be detailed at the end of this chapter. Categories, or broad meaning units, are in regular type. Codes, or specific sub-units of categories, are listed in *italics* and correspond to the categories just above them.

Table 3: Final Coding Scheme

Phase	Supports/Strengths	Challenges
Pre-Formation	LGBTQ network The law	Fear & stigma Safety Faith or religious opposition Being outed as LGBTQ... Invisibility of LGBTQ youth Family acceptance Job security Perception that advisors are coercing students
Formation	Supportive administration Legal support Student-led initiative Managing expectations Gathering information Keeping a “low profile” Hurdling organizational tasks Paperwork	Finding an advisor Multi-level opposition Rejecting or hostile administration Student opposition Parents Community members Policy
Maintenance	Organizational practices Agenda and goals Curriculum and programming Regular meetings Swag Commitment to a student-led group Allowing the group to be student-directed Meeting students where they are at Allowing the group to evolve over time Tenure for faculty LGBT Network	Harmful organizational practices The advisor Interpersonal issues Recruiting and maintaining members Student organizational skills Turnover of students Logistics Programming Multi-level opposition Parents Students Faculty and staff Community Fear, safety, and stigma

Pre-Formation Stage of a GSA

The pre-formation stage, as described above, relates to the tasks accomplished and challenges that must be overcome in order for direct efforts to proceed that form the GSA. This

stage also includes key strengths that help move students and faculty members from the exploration of starting a GSA (in the pre-formation stage) to actively trying to start the group (in the formation stage). Macro-level challenges that impact the pre-formation stage are: fear, stigma, lack of safety, faith or religious opposition, and being outed as LGBTQ. Strengths that impact the preformation stage are: The LGBTQ Network (which includes organizations, youth networks, and online networks), and the law or legal support.

The strengths in the pre-formation stage. Despite enormous challenges in the social environment, discussed in the subsequent section, GSAs and their champions continue to press for the needs of LGBTQ youth. In the face of enormous pressure and oppression, the main strengths in the social environment that work to support GSAs in the pre-formation stage are an LGBTQ network and the law, which overwhelmingly supports LGBTQ youth and their right to start a GSA in a public school.

The LGBTQ network. A network of LGBTQ-identified people (usually adults in the community) or LGBTQ-related organizations was mentioned as helpful for GSAs in the pre-formation stage. The category of “LGBTQ Network” emerged in the formation and maintenance stages discussed later in this chapter, but was categorized as a strength of the pre-formation stage if the support helped individuals explore the idea of starting a GSA, helped them understand what the process of formation would later entail, or provided a general level of support in the stage before a GSA officially was formed. The role that LGBTQ organizations and key people play in this stage, as well as the role of youth and online networks, is explored in the pre-formation stage. The LGBTQ network helped to buffer the initial organizers from challenges they faced, as is explored below.

Organizations and key people. The LGBTQ network's various non-profit organizations within a community seemed to provide support to LGBTQ people generally and to those working to form GSAs in particular. One advocate, when asked if they found any pattern that could describe where GSAs existed in their state, said:

I would say that primarily, those communities, most of the time either have some sort of LGBTQ support structure in place, or either are connected to one. For example, there's a lot of organizations in NAME OF CITY specifically that do LGBTQ work, so these suburban communities that are surrounding the city of NAME OF CITY have access to those things. (P1, Advocate)

This advocate, and others, mentioned that the mere presence of LGBTQ organizations and visible LGBTQ people within the community served as what they described as a "buffer" from more severe negative reactions (such as fear, stigma, and religious opposition) to the GSA in the pre-formation stage. While this process was not fully explored, as the participants who perceived this effect could not explain it with much depth, the network may serve to inoculate student members of the GSA from negativity since other organizations are known to fight for the rights and dignity of LGBTQ people.

National organizations that were outside of the community were also mentioned as having an influence, but these supports came primarily in the formation and maintenance phases of the GSA. One advisor (P11) did mention that GLSEN, a national organization, was an important support in this phase because its resources were shared with the broader community as to why a GSA was necessary: "definitely use the resources of GLSEN, you know, their research. Because it's really quality and speaks to exactly why to do it." This advisor closed this thought with the following advice: "just be very aware of all of the organizations that can help you."

Youth networks. LGBTQ youth networks, situated in the broader community, appear to be one form of social support to the LGBTQ youth who start, attempt to start, and participate in

GSA. These youth networks, which were both formal (i.e. intentionally created and structured) and informal (as in, came together organically with loose structure) offered young people the ability to connect with others and find support that they may not have found in other areas of their lives. Three participants mentioned the advent of some sort of LGBTQ-inclusive prom event in their community. While these types of events offered support and socializing for youth involved in the starting and maintenance of GSAs, they also offered support for youth who were not connected to such clubs and were considering starting one at their school. As one advisor (P11) explained:

That's really how diversity prom started in this area. There was like a big Halloween party that they were hosting for a while. It was a way to say, okay it's not just students at this school. Students from all the schools and all the outlining areas including, a Catholic schools who couldn't really have an above board GSA because private school stuff. Who they could connect with public school students and they could connect with community organizations where their parents felt like there was legitimacy, there was safety, there was organization. So they were inclined to let their kids participate as well.

At another diversity prom event, an advocate (P5) explained:

One of the benefits of connecting outside of school is that students who don't have a GSA can talk with the students who do. I think they can inspire each other in these situations. I've known GSAs to start this way.

LGBTQ youth connecting with each other outside of school allowed the seeds of a GSA to germinate.

These connections also appeared to troubleshoot failed efforts to start a GSA, as one advisor described:

Our students had family or friend connections to NAME OF COUNTY and invited the girl who tried a GSA there down to speak to our students. She was like a guest in one of our GSA meetings. She was able to talk about her situation and what was going on there. (P17, Advisor)

This informal support network amongst youth was able to provide support for a student whose effort had failed.

Online networks. LGBTQ youth are finding what one student called “safe and supportive” community online. This online community can provide the safety and support that these youth do not find in their homes, schools, and communities. As one advocate mentioned:

What I found particularly interesting is in the study of youth media practices there's a beautiful online space that's created. A lot of online students, particularly I see it everywhere today, especially in my site business with the GSA, and a lot in the discussions I had as a high school student that's the safe spaces at the time when I was there was people having online forums or using Facebook or stuff like that. Right now it has entirely moved to Tumblr. Tumblr is this enormous safe space for students enabled to have threads that talk about specific topics or even following blogs with content that you like. (P3, Advocate/Student)

These online communities of support and of activist education can actual be the antecedent for forming a GSA, as this advocate/student (P3) mentioned: “online spaces were the ones that actually raised these young activists that made them feel comfortable and confident enough to make a club. “ The fact that youth are connecting to each other online may be an important social factor that eventually influences GSAs forming or maintaining over time.

The law. The law is considered settled, meaning there is relatively little contest, when it comes to the right of students to start a GSA in a public school (Riener, 2006). There are several caveats to this, including that the school has to be a public school in receipt of federal funding and there must be other students groups that already are allowed at the school (Riener, 2006). The Equal Access Act, as was explored, in Chapter 2, paves the way for public school students to start a club when other such clubs exist in their school. One advocate (P7) used the following summation when educating people about their legal right to start a GSA:

Within public schools in the U.S., schools that get money from the Federal Government under the Equal Access Act are required to have a GSA club that's comparable in its requirements to any of the other student clubs that they have on campus.

The law being settled in favor of GSAs is a source of strength for students and teachers who want to organize such a club. This legal knowledge can come, as described above, from the network of LGBTQ serving organizations in a community. This knowledge can also come from other youth or from high-profile lawsuits about which students or teachers happen to know. Regardless of its source, knowing that the law is in favor of starting a GSA can allow organizing efforts to proceed with more confidence. One advisor (P11) said "Or whether it's GSAs, or you know, who gets to wear what to prom or bring who to prom. That always the law is on your side. At least in public school." This advisor expanded, "Ultimately, I just feel like the law will prevail."

Knowing that the law is settled in favor of GSAs, once a student asks for the group and an advisor is identified this seems to pressure administrators to allow the group to exist. Seven participants mentioned that an administrator continued to cite the law. It also appears that the law can function as an excuse for administrators to remain neutral in the face of pressure from parents and community members that might not be supportive of such efforts.

At the beginning there were parents who called and said, "Why is this happening?" Not to me but to the principal. They [the principal] can site their legal obligations. This group has to exist. If we let first priority exist, we have to let this group exist. They can skirt the issue of do I personally support it or not and they choose to because they can just cite their legal obligations. I'm very grateful for that. That's how they handle it. (P16, Advisor)

Citing the law when community members raise opposition both neutralizes some concern and also allows the administrator to save face and not have to declare whether they support or oppose the GSA.

Challenges in the pre-formation stage. Participants mentioned community-level, regional-level, or macro-level social forces that impacted GSA pre-formation, formation and maintenance. Several of these forces specifically impacted the pre-formation stage. Although interview questions focused on the perceived strengths and challenges related to GSAs, most participants spoke at length and unprompted about the myriad challenges that exist in the broader social environment that create barriers for the GSAs in this pre-formation stage. These barriers or challenges include: fear and stigma, lack of safety, faith-based opposition, being outed as LGBTQ, and invisibility of LGBTQ youth in the school community.

It should be noted that some of these challenges reemerged at multiple times as participants described both the formation and maintenance of a GSA in their school or community. Eight participants indicated that specific challenges did not dissolve after the GSA was established, or did not simply appear once the group had started and had been in existence for months or years. If challenges were perceived in multiple stages, they will be discussed in those phases. These re-emerging challenges will be discussed in multiple phases in the emerging theory and the model of the process that the theory describes.

Fear and stigma. Fear is described as a macro force that emerged in the data at numerous points and with a variety of origins. Fear can impact key people at all levels related to a GSA, from students to faculty and staff to administrators. Fear of a lawsuit from hostile parents, fear of community backlash, and teacher fears of being fired for supporting the GSA were all common experiences described in the pre-formation stage. These fears impacted the people who were considering starting a GSA. Students were not immune to feeling fear from the broader community. One advocate (P8) described the fear that youth face at the possibility of starting a GSA in their school:

Their climate is so hostile. That's the reason why [it's hard to start a GSA]. There are so many young people that are scared to do anything about it. The only thing they can think about is getting out of their hometown.

An advisor (P9) mentioned fear impacting multiple levels of people involved in starting the GSA:

There was fear going all the way up the chain. Fear that there would be protests, complaints, harassment, mostly complaints, people unhappy and not liking that we're having a GSA. Uncertainty about how students would respond, it was all uncertainties.

When pressed for the specific origins of the fear, this advisor (P9) said it was “just vaguely threatening and people were afraid of what could happen.” Other participants, later in this chapter, discuss fear coming from the actions of specific constituency groups such as parents and faculty.

The notion of leaving one's hometown or leaving the Deep South altogether came up repeatedly in the data. One advisor (P16), speaking of her former students and her own personal friendships with LGBTQ people, said:

Unfortunately, many of them flee the South. They go to college somewhere else, and they flee and don't come back. That breaks my heart. I thought about it over the years. "Why am I doing this?" One of my best friends in high school that happened to [be gay], and I'm never going to see him again. He'll never come back home because he didn't feel like he could be himself here. I have lost him as a friend because he didn't have a community.

The fear that LGBTQ people and their allies experience of being attacked or ostracized, along with a lack of community and family support, can be a driving force in the decision to leave the region. While this example doesn't solely describe the pre-formation stage of a GSA, the advisor was speaking to reasons why it is difficult for students and faculty to explore starting one in the first place.

Stigma is a macro force, related to fear, that many participants perceived in their social environment that impacted the pre-formation phase. In one sense, participants perceived a

stigma surrounding LGBTQ issues in the region of the Deep South. Participants perceived that being LGBTQ in this region carried stigma that prevented people from wanting to associate with efforts to explore or start a GSA. Participant 12, a student, explained:

Yeah, well there's this huge stigma in the South over gay rights. My school is relatively progressive, but we as the students don't really feel comfortable going on the announcements a whole lot, or just telling people that much.

The reference to “going on the announcements” was an effort to notify students to attend an information meeting. This meeting would have helped interested students explore the possibility of starting a GSA in the pre-formation stage.

In another sense, the stigma that LGBTQ students faced served as a justification for why a GSA is necessary. Another student/advocate participant (P3) explained:

Also being out at my school wasn't really a thing. There was maybe 2 kids who were out. They were considered weird and they ended up being really socially outcasted. I know that a lot of students who weren't out came to philosophy club because of the stigma attached within the school and outside of the school [related to LGBTQ issues].

So, while stigma can be a challenge it can also be a mobilizing force that students and faculty can organize around.

Lack of safety. The personal physical safety of GSA members, although not a theme that came up frequently, was present and on the minds of some participants. Four participants spoke about safety and physical risk in general terms. This was related to the risk associated generally with those who are outspoken allies of or members of the LGBTQ community particularly in the pre-formation stage. Three additional participants described the safety concerns they had experienced specifically as GSA members, as is captured by this statement from a GSA advisor (P11): “[t]he whole point of GSA is you want to protect them. I think the hindrance is I don't want to get my students all this media attention because I worry about their safety.” There was a

noticeable tension between the safety a GSA could provide for youth in schools and the safety threats that came up in deciding about whether to start one.

Similar to the category of stigma, lack of safety was also a motivation to explore starting a GSA. Participants discussed how lack of physical and emotional safety was a driver for students to organize around starting a GSA in the pre-formation stage. One advocate (P1) described a group of students they are helping to support in the pre-formation stage:

I could tell that the students that I spoke to recognized that [starting a GSA] is something that would be important for them. Also, some of them in particular were really struggling in school because of this hostile climate. It was an important matter to them that this happened, not just so that they could have people to talk to, but because they thought that it would drastically improve conditions for them at their school.

This advocate went on to give an example of a transgender student who has experienced a threat to his safety:

For example, there was one student who's transgender who had been followed into the restroom that corresponded with his gender identity multiple times by the principal, yanked out physically, like removed from the restroom, which sounds to me like assault.

These safety challenges in the pre-formation stage were discussed as both examples to justify forming a GSA as well as targets to change in the school climate after a GSA had been formed. Finally, in the pre-formation stage the safety of the students involved in exploring the GSA was paramount. Two advocates (P7 and P8) mentioned that although they may want to push for a GSA to start at a high school, ultimately students had to lead the process. As one advocate (P8) explained:

...[A]s much as it's exciting to have a GSA Club started in a school, particular in a conservative or rural area, that putting the student at risk or their safety at risk is not worth that obviously.

If the students did not feel safe, the efforts in the pre-formation stage would not continue.

Faith or religious opposition. Examples of faith or religious opposition to LGBTQ people and, by extension, the idea of starting a GSA were ever-present in the data. Religious opposition to exploring the idea of starting a GSA motivated and influenced students, administration, faculty, parents, and community members alike. Participant 6, a community advocate, described faith-based opposition to LGBTQ people and issues as something pervasive across all levels of the community she lives and works in:

I think the lack of adequate training plus that many of the school personnel, teachers, counselors, administrators reflect the pervasive values that still exist out there that are condemning of same-sex attraction and transgender issues --religious, moral perspectives that relate to all of those issues. The schools are microcosms for what we have here.

This participant described faith-based opposition to LGBTQ people and issues as something “pervasive” across the community, which naturally means that the “schools are microcosms” for these ideas and how they impact wider society. If schools are microcosms for their communities, it is no surprise that religious opposition to LGBTQ people and services (such as a GSA) extend from the region to the community and into the schools. Participants mentioned that negotiating faith-based opposition was a challenge that they faced personally in the pre-formation stage.

In some instances, the religious objection to LGBTQ people and their needs was mentioned in the context of region, such as what one student (P12), stated:

Yeah, well there's this huge stigma in the South over gay rights... [W]e don't have a whole ton of support from the principal. A lot of the teachers are very religious and things like that. I've found it's a bit harder to find people who are open, who you can spread news about the GSA to.

This participant, and others, mentioned the South or Deep South as synonymous with the “Bible Belt” and Christianity. One participant described a student literally throwing a Bible in someone’s face because they were so upset that a GSA was being started in the school: “I think

that the one kid with the Bible coming ... He actually threw the Bible in somebody's face at lunch” (P13, Advisor).

To emphasize the deep influence of religion on opposition to a GSA forming, five participants mentioned that there was a “lack of separation between church and state” as one advisor (P2) described it. This seemed to mean that specific Christian objection to LGBT people and a GSA was used in what should be the secular context of a public school. One teacher, whose former school had a GSA but whose current school does not, stated:

I think in our community there is a poor line between the separation of church and state and the school. We have 3 Christian organizations on campus but nothing is remotely liberal. There's no GSA, there's no diversity group, there's ... Everything is farming and Jesus. (P2)

This teacher found that there was very little protection for secular ideas or for exploring secular clubs, but found an overwhelming support for Southern Baptist and other Christian ideas. These ideas were discussed openly and used against a GSA forming from students, faculty, staff, and administration in this particular public high school.

It is worth mentioning that faith or religion was not mentioned at all in the data as having a positive impact on starting GSAs, maintaining them, or supporting LGBTQ people. While this does not mean that faith or faith leaders cannot be LGBTQ affirming, the absence of faith in this context and across multiple phases is notable. For these participants faith communities, their leaders, and its influence are perceived as a challenge to starting and maintaining GSAs and are also a source of pain and rejection for LGBTQ people and their allies.

Being outed as LGBTQ or being perceived as being LGBTQ. Fear, faith, and stigma were all related to a very real and distinct theme of fear expressed by participants about being “outed” as LGBTQ. This concern, and the consequences of being “out” as either an LGBTQ

person or an ally of the community, had to be negotiated by individual students prior to a GSA being started in the pre-formation stage. One advocate (P8) speaking about the students who helped start the GSA at a local school, said:

We know that it takes a lot of strength to ... In a way, they're coming out, whether it's coming out as LGBTQ or whether it's coming out as an ally, which is also, in certain parts of the South, not good.

This concern about being “outed” was not limited to students. It was shared by one faculty advisor (P17) who personally identifies as a member of the LGBTQ community but who was not out at work at the time:

I can't remember if it was that they asked her to or if I asked her so that I would have a straight ally on the staff, so that my participation in this group didn't out me. I honestly was very uncomfortable with my sexual orientation while I was teaching... I'm not uncomfortable with it, but in that environment, I was always uncomfortable. It grew less so as time wore on. I left in 2015, which is just last year. By the time I left, I was much less concerned with outing myself but back then, I was.

This fear of being outed gave this advisor pause for thought before finally agreeing to serve as an advisor.

Invisibility of LGBTQ youth in schools. One major challenge in the social environment is that the existence of LGBTQ youth are rendered what multiple participants referred to as “invisible” at school. Participants mentioned that fear, stigma, and other aforementioned challenges caused LGBTQ youth and allies to be in the closet about their identities. Participants also mentioned that even if LGBTQ youth were out at school, administrators, faculty, and staff would often ignore them and their needs. This invisibility had made it difficult for administration to believe that there is a need for a GSA to exist in the school, as evidenced by one advocate’s comment:

We've had people, administration, say "Well we don't have any kids like that at our school, so we don't need it [the GSA]. We don't need to be making special clubs for people, so you can just join one of the other clubs." (P5)

Since many youth who do identify as a part of this community fear coming out and openly identifying as a member of this community, they are not seen as existing and their needs are not recognized as valid for a school system to recognize and support.

Stigma and fear seem to maintain youth being closeted, and the consequences of starting a GSA can be so severe that many do not come out or engage in these efforts. Therefore, the mantra that "we don't have any kids like that at our school" seems to be a self-fulfilling prophecy whereas youth are rendered invisible by the social environment that maintains their closet and thus fails to see them as worthy of attention and safety. In fact, it appears that many school faculty, staff, and administration fail to see LGBTQ youth at all. This is a shame, because as one advocate noted, diversity can be a strength:

These young people bring a lot to the school climate that enriches the diversity and the school culture overall. But they don't see that. Especially for the LGBs in the school, that can become a hidden identity. It can be easily overlooked. It can be easily disregarded and easily dismissed. (P8)

Other key components in the pre-formation stage. Several other categories and codes rose to the level of importance in the Pre-Formation Stage that simply did not fit under "strengths" or "challenges". These key components describe common elements in this stage that are either necessary (such as a student and advisor willing to take a risk) or influential (such as serendipity or assessing the need for a GSA) and all help move students and advisors from simply exploring the idea of starting a GSA to actively forming the group in the formation stage. Discussions of the student and advisor willing to take a risk include codes that could also be described as "strengths" or "challenges". However, because they are strengths or challenges

specific to the role of student or advisor, they are discussed as such in the subsequent sections below.

“It was just serendipity”. Participants were asked if they had experiences in starting a GSA at their school, and if so to describe the process. They were probed on what may have supported the GSA in getting started in the first place. Interestingly, two participants mentioned that it felt like “fate” or “serendipity” that the GSA was able to start when it did. When Participant 13, an advisor, was asked to describe how her GSA started, she said: “You know, it was just fate. It was just serendipity. Like, I can't explain it any better. It just was, it was the time.” Similarly, a different advisor (P11) described a number of factors all coming together at once, including an article in the Southern Poverty Law Center’s education journal “Teaching Tolerance” about GSAs, an unrelated news article on the topic in the local newspaper, and her students reading a fiction book on students starting a GSA. On these factors gelling at once, she stated: “Forming the GSA was, I feel like, really serendipitous. It was...the universe just sort of came together.” Participants may perceive such factors as “fate” or even as the “universe” helping them with their goals. When probed further, even participants who held firm to it being “fate” were able to identify additional factors that they perceived to support the starting of the GSA in their school or community.

The need was apparent (or not). Assessing the school climate for LGBTQ youth, including but not limited to incidents of bullying, levels of support from fellow students and faculty, and physical and emotional safety, may seem like an obvious first step to and impetus for starting a GSA. Ten participants mentioned that the school climate for LGBTQ youth was so “brutal” as one student (P14) described it, that the need for a GSA seemed obvious. The harsh school climate operated as an organizing target, building both passion for the goal and resilience

amongst the people pushing for the start of the club, as evidenced by the quote from this advocate:

They were very enthusiastic about it, so I could tell that the students that I spoke to recognized that this is something that would be important for them. Also, some of them in particular were really struggling in school because of this hostile climate. It was an important matter to them that this happened, not just so that they could have people to talk to, but because they thought that it would drastically improve conditions for them at their school. (P1, Advocate)

Although the need for a GSA may be apparent to students, who may have a better sense of the school climate for LGBTQ students, it is not always apparent to teachers or potential advisors. Three advisors indicated that they had only a limited assessment of “how bad” things are in their schools for LGBTQ (or LGBTQ-perceived) students. One advisor (P16), speaking of how students approached her to be an advisor, stated:

I said, "Whatever you need me to do we'll figure out how to do this if you want to do this." I asked, "Do we need this at this school? Is there a need for this?" I didn't really know that we had much of an LGBT community. I certainly wasn't aware of any bullying or any need for a safe space or protection or even just awareness. He said, "Yes. Yes, we need this." I had to trust him.

This teacher, who later became an advisor, was supportive of her students and trusted that there was indeed a need for a GSA even though she could not see the need for herself.

Three teachers, who became advisors, mentioned that they were only aware of the climate they created in their own classroom or area of the school. Since these spaces were safe and inclusive for LGBTQ youth, teachers mentioned that they were unaware of the harsh climate within the school. However, as the quote above exemplifies, they believed their students who reported that the climate was harsh for them or their LGBTQ peers. Regardless of whether teachers accurately assessed the school climate or not, an overall assessment of the need for a GSA was perceived as an important component of the pre-formation stage.

A Student Willing to Take a Risk. Once momentum builds within a school system toward starting a GSA, what is required to proceed are two obvious components: students willing to start the GSA, and a faculty or staff person to advise the club. This section outlines the common characteristics of student leaders who helped start GSAs in their schools in the Deep South. The section will also discuss family acceptance (or lack thereof), a key factor that impacts student leaders who engage in starting a GSA.

Common characteristics of student leaders. First and foremost, students had to be prepared to take a risk and accept the challenges and negativity that accompanied many of the reported efforts to start a GSA. According to one advocate (P5), she said “I think really the key ingredient is the student leader or that one student that’s willing to stand up and say, ‘I want to do this and this is my right to do it.’” Being willing to take a risk naturally meant that student leaders were described as “brave” and “courageous” as one advisor (P9) noted about the student who took initiative to start their school’s GSA:

She's the one that had the courage to have the first conversation in a community that no one had had this conversation out loud and she knew that. She knew she was taking a risk. She's a very courageous student and continued to be bold and pull people together.

Many of these students who helped start their GSAs were also described as “natural leaders”. One of the advocates, in describing a trend amongst students who start GSAs, stated:

Then when the students were ready to form the GSA there was this existing support already identified. That's one I know more about. The other one, the young people that took the leadership there, as I said, they went on to college and they were leaders at their colleges. They were just leadership types. They were very committed and able to do what needed to be done. (P6)

Many of these student leaders were also described as “smart” or “bright”. Others were described as “passionate” and “committed to a cause they believed in deeply.” Finally, two participants (P5 and P8) commented that the youth who started GSAs in their community were

both willing and able to serve as spokespeople for any media attention that was the result of the GSA starting. It should be noted that two participants indicated that there was no pattern that the students fit in terms of the above characteristics, apart from having a general desire to start the club.

Family acceptance. Family acceptance, as has been explored in Chapter 2, refers to the spectrum of family reactions toward a child being LGBTQ-identified that ranges from total rejection to full support (Ryan et al., 2010). Participants mentioned that students involved in a GSA at all levels had a range of experiences with family and family support. Unsurprisingly, students who come from families that are largely accepting may show resilience in the face of the challenges that accompany starting a GSA in their school. One advocate (P6), who has supported numerous efforts to start a GSA, explained:

If their families are members of such a community, if they have experienced acceptance and support there and their family supports them then they can step up at school, and they'll be able to withstand any criticism or rejection even from their peers if they have family acceptance and their community of faith provides acceptance. Even when they hear those negative, condemning views expressed on television or in the social media they'll be able to withstand. They'll have the resilience to withstand any difficulty they might encounter in their school informing the GSA. That's how I see the layers to all of this.

This advocate saw a natural connection between a student's family system and their ability to be out and in front of a GSA effort within their school system.

Students who lack family acceptance may be prevented from taking part in such efforts to create the GSA. What is key from the data is that the level of family acceptance (or rejection) appears to dictate who is willing and able to take on a leadership position when the GSA is starting. As another advocate (P5) noted,

Sometimes we would come against that, and it would be like this young person would say, "Hey I can't be this lead person," even though they were the ones that were leading

it, they started it, they said, "I can't be that person, because I'm going to get kicked out of my house," or "I can't be that person because my family doesn't even know that I'm queer," so we would then have a struggle of, not necessarily a struggle, but a challenge of finding who could be the spokesperson, or who could be the leader, who could go on camera or something of that nature to really push what they needed to happen.

Family acceptance becomes a personal barrier when the student doesn't have it. As such, family rejection is a personal barrier that the student needs to work through in order to be an active member of the pre-formation stages. The level of family acceptance that a student has continues to impact them even after the GSA is started, making it a part of the pervasive context that is key to understanding GSA formation and maintenance in this region.

An Advisor Willing to Take a Risk. The second crucial part of a successful equation for starting a GSA is finding an advisor who is willing to support the group and weather the challenges that may arise. This section outlines the common characteristics of faculty advisors who helped start GSAs in their schools in the Deep South. The section will also discuss specific challenges and concerns that faculty advisors encounter when deciding whether to serve in this capacity. The difference between a voluntary advisor and one that is assigned to the group is explored. Finally, the importance of the GSA starting as a student-led effort is explored within the context of the role of a successful faculty advisor.

Common characteristics of faculty advisors. Similar to student leaders who start GSAs, the data suggests that faculty advisors appear to have many characteristics in common. First and foremost, the advisor was someone that the students trusted. Most participants who had experience starting a GSA indicated that students approached a trusted teacher or staff person.

When describing how and why she was approached to serve as an advisor, Participant 17 stated:

There were a couple of girls in the school who wanted to begin a GSA and they approached me and another teacher. I think that I was ... Although I was never out at the school until a little bit later, and then I sort of selectively came out to some students. I

was never out then, but I think they just figured it out. People just figure out who you are and how you live based on what you talk, especially kids who are interested in looking for allies...They knew they had an ally in me, I guess.

Four of the six advisors included in the sample indicated that they were known for being an ally to the LGBTQ community prior to being approached to serve as an advisor, and student participants who had experience starting a GSA described a similar process of determining who should service in this crucial capacity.

One notable departure from this process was described by Participant 9, an advisor who helped start the GSA at her high school. This advisor and her co-advisor were approached by her principal to assist in the start-up efforts:

The principal reached out to me and then one other teacher and asked us if we would cosponsor the organization. I was asked by the principal and not approached all the students and then I certainly [approached the] students right after that to see how I can be supportive.

In this situation, the administrator was actively involved in helping the students start their GSA. It should be noted that similar to other advisor selection experiences, this advisor was chosen by the principal because she was an outspoken ally to the LGBTQ community.

Job security. Before agreeing to serve as a faculty advisor to a GSA, three of the six advisors indicated that they had to consider whether their job was secure enough. One advisor (P16) stated that she had numerous conversations with her husband, an attorney, before agreeing to serve. Of that conversation, she stated:

I'm so grateful that my husband and I were able to talk about it and ... He's a lawyer and he's very rational. He's applying his logic and I'm very emotional and, "Ha, this is all going to happen." No it's not. Here's the law, they can't do this to you.

Another advisor (P13) mentioned that her mentors tried to dissuade her from taking what they perceived to be a risky career move:

I had asked some teacher mentors and some of them, like one of them told me, "Woa, that is such a political issue I wouldn't touch that with a 40 foot pole. You have a good heart, but that's a hot button topic."

Advisors appear to have to convince themselves and their support networks that serving as an advisor will not cost them their job.

The lack of perceived job security, or the direct threats made to a faculty member's job, prevented potential advisors from stepping forward. An advocate (P1) described one effort to start a GSA that has stalled for several years:

They were told this time, I think, that a lot of teachers had been telling them that they didn't know if they could be the faculty sponsor because they were really concerned about their jobs...They were really struggling to find people to even ask to be faculty advisors, and the ones that they did come up with were not people who were tenured, so were very nervous about the potential of being let go as the teacher had been the year before who tried to help them get this group off the ground.

Tenure, or lack of it, can be a deciding factor for faculty members who are considering being the starting sponsor for a GSA. One advocate (P3) described a school that was unable to start a GSA because the only teacher who agreed to sponsor the group was fired:

There's one school system that I've worked with that does not have a GSA currently, but students have attempted to start a GSA, and their principal was very, very opposed. There was actually a faculty member who wanted to be the sponsor who was let go at the end of that year, and she has suspicions that that was why, because she had tried to be the sponsor of this group.

Interestingly, two other participants (both students, P12 and P 14) in the same state at different school districts mentioned this example. This could suggest that news about failed efforts to start a GSA may reach students and faculty members across the state or region and serve as a warning or perceived threat.

For those participants who did not fear for their jobs by serving as a GSA advisor, they reported being able to agree to serve with confidence. One participant felt that having tenure, in addition to a number of other privileges, worked to protect her from any serious job threats:

It was my 3rd year at NAME OF HIGH SCHOOL. I had Tenure. So I felt like I was protected, I was in a role that would be really convenient for me to be an advocate, you know, married to a dude, white female, educator with tenure and said, you know here is kind of what is happening and I want to start this group and here are a bunch of students who are already interested. I kind of communicated with them and willing to sponsor so what do I have to do? (P11, Advisor)

Two advisors hinted that they were not worried at the time that they would lose their jobs, but in retrospect they thought maybe they should have been concerned. One advisor (P16) explained: “I didn't feel like my job was in danger because I don't know, I guess I'm just oblivious to reality sometimes. It wasn't actually in danger, but some parents tried to get me fired.” This raises the question that if she had felt her job was in danger would she have still agreed to serve as advisor? This question was not explored in depth with the participant.

One participant (P17) remarked that her position of feeling secure in her employment was “unique in the South” she imagined, something that the literature on employment protection in this capacity seems to support (Wade, 2011). Advisors who do not have experience starting a GSA indicated that they experienced similar concerns before agreeing to serve as a co-sponsor, meaning that job security is a contextual factor that advisors need to mediate at all stages of the GSA lifecycle.

Perception that advisors are coercing students. A concern that is unique to faculty advisors is that they are sometimes perceived as coercing students. This charge, which seems to function as a threat to a faculty member's job and reputation, can be levied by parents, students, or administrators. When probed further with participants, it appears to take on several forms.

First, advisors, regardless of their own sexual orientation or gender identity, are labeled as part of the LGBTQ community. This labeling creates stigma. As one advisor (P13) mentioned:

Any teacher that's going to try and provide that opportunity [to start a GSA] is at risk of being accused of instigating. In our situation, I'll be accused of flaunting my gayness if I do anything that's remotely gay. Which... actually been used at one point.

Advisors have also been falsely accused of, or are cautious not to be accused of, having inappropriate relationships with students. Opponents of the GSA being started have accused advisors of spreading a “gay agenda” (a phrase mentioned four times by participants). Another advisor (P11) was accused by a parent of turning her son gay: “[s]he [the mother] was convinced that GSA turned him that way. And I was somehow responsible. So, she really wanted to keep her impressionable son very far away from me.” Three advisors mentioned that these challenges were not surprising, but all mentioned that they created some level of stress or anxiety for them personally.

LGBTQ-identified teachers. The experiences of LGBTQ-identifying teachers who helped get GSAs started, or who wanted to, came up twice in the data. In one example, a straight-identifying teacher mentioned that an LGBTQ-identifying colleague wanted to be an advisor but dropped out because she was afraid:

The only protection I had against what the other teacher was afraid of was the existence of my husband and my two children. That didn't completely protect me, but for the most part most people didn't peg me as some sexual deviant because of this. However, that was the fear from the single [LGBTQ-identifying] teacher. (P16)

The second experience came from an LGBTQ-identifying advisor who helped her GSA get started. While this advisor did not feel that her job was in jeopardy, she was concerned about getting a reputation for coercing students.

There had been a gay drama teacher at my school who started a long-term relationship with an older female student and who completely changed the reputation of the school,

district-wide. It was like pre-GSA but not very long before I got a job there. I was always like, "Well, that's the legacy of the last openly gay teacher. I'm going to be the biggest prude who ever walked the face of the earth. No PDAs in my GSA. We're an advocacy organization. (P17)

This particular advisor mentioned that she modified her demeanor at school for fear of persecution, and would act overly “prudish” and would stick to “cold, hard pedagogy” and not cross boundaries in any way. While determining if the lived experiences of LGBTQ-identifying and straight-identifying advisors are comparable is outside the scope of this dissertation, it is a unique question to ponder for future research.

Faculty advisors that are assigned. One participant, who had experiences both as a student and later as an advocate, spoke at length about the negative impact of having a faculty advisor that was assigned by the administration and not chosen by the students. This participant (P10) explained:

Schools would threaten advisors, or schools would assign advisors who didn't give a fuck about the GSA. That was, in Alabama, super damaging. I know that the success of GSAs, especially in public schools, hinged on whether or not their advisor was willing to work with them.

Forcing a faculty member to serve as an advisor for a GSA meant that the students could not guarantee that the advisor was supportive and affirming of their needs. In addition, by “threatening” to assign a faculty member to a club that is contested and viewed as politically controversial seems to undermine the success of the club in the long run. As this participant noted, “The person who was assigned to help you didn't want to help and didn't want to invest that energy.” This participant’s preference was to have the students select the advisor to help start the club. Student selection was the norm in this data.

Student-led effort. In addition to students having agency in choosing their advisor at the start of the GSA, it appears to be crucial for the effort to start a GSA in the pre-formation stage

to be student-driven and not faculty-driven. The reasoning for this is two-fold. First, often students have more security in raising the issue to start a GSA compared to the faculty. This is a direct result of job insecurity, and a protection from negative consequences that students have that many faculty members and administrators do not. For example, one advisor (P11) mentioned that when her group started the GSA parents and community members called the school multiple times a day to complain. This experience was one that students were sheltered from, thus giving students more leverage in starting the group.

Secondly, student-led efforts to start a GSA have an advantage at undercutting the perception that adults are coercing students into a “gay agenda”. As one advisor (P13) noted:

I think that because it was student-initiated, it had that much more legitimacy. This is not something from liberal teachers trying to push down all our throats. This was something that the kids wanted and that the kids made an effort to do...And the fact that the superintendent supported it. Those two things are why it worked.

To illustrate the point of a faculty-led effort to start a GSA ultimately being unsuccessful, one advocate (P8) stated:

But these students had started talking to the teachers, and they had five teachers lined up, wanting to be an advisor. That's actually kind of uncommon. The teachers were really doing the pushing, when we know best practice shows that when it's student-led and student-driven, that tends to get the better results. These teachers were really doing the fighting.

Within the school system, student-led efforts appear more legitimate, as the above quotes imply. While faculty and staff support can go a long way toward supporting the successful formation and maintenance of GSAs, as will be explored further in this chapter, student support pressures administration into directly addressing their needs.

The concluding task of the pre-formation stage. Taken together, the defining mantra of this stage is: “We are going to try to start a GSA.” This leads into the formation stage of a GSA, detailed in the next section.

Formation Stage of a GSA

Myriad factors exist in the psychosocial environment that makes the process of starting a GSA difficult in the Deep South. As described above, many of these factors also demonstrate the need for a GSA and provide the momentum to start the club in the first place. The process of starting a GSA in the Deep South can feel like the perfect combination of factors coalescing but have to at least include a student willing to take a risk and the connection with a faculty advisor willing to support the group. This section will explore a number of supports and challenges that GSAs face in starting, as well as several options when a GSA cannot be started successfully within a school.

Strengths in the formation stage. Successful GSAs had key supports in the formation of their clubs in public high schools in the Deep South. While a discussion of challenges follows, it should be noted that an examination of strengths of this type could not be found in the extant literature. For all the strengths that the participants perceived as helpful in starting a GSA, they were matched and in some cases overwhelmed by challenges and threats to the group forming. Although not every school experienced every single strength mentioned, many experienced a similar process for starting their GSA and articulated similar strengths of the process. This section will discuss the themes that emerged from the data that supported the GSA in forming, including: supportive administration, legal support, a student-led process, the process of gathering information, laying groundwork with faculty and staff, keeping a low profile, and mastering paperwork.

Supportive administration. Participants discussed a variety of roles that administrators played in starting a GSA. Some of the administrators who were described were active opponents of the GSA, while others were supporters. Although no administrators were interviewed for this research, four advisors indicated that they had knowledge of the pressures that were put on the administration at their schools when starting a GSA. It was clear that participants at those schools who had at least one supportive administrator in the process of starting a GSA felt that it was an enormous benefit to the process. When asked specifically about the contexts that one advisor (P11) perceived as crucial for the GSA starting, she stated: “A principal who was willing to go to bat for me because she knew the law and was educated already.”

While it may seem that the title of “supportive administrator” implies that the administrator is personally supportive of the effort, but it should be noted that this is not always the way a “supportive” administrator is described in the data. Three participants described “support” as not actively obstructing or opposing the process of starting a GSA. One participant noted that her principal probably did not personally support the GSA, but she knew the law and did not interfere with the efforts:

My principal, even though her mindset would probably be conservative she was very clear on the law so that was a non-issue. And I found out later in fact that she did field a couple of parent phone calls that I never should have knew about. She just protected me and the students from all of that. She had a phone call or two and she said, 'this is the law what would you have me do?' (P11, Advisor)

In sum, while having an administrator that was supportive to the process was not a feature of all GSAs starting, it certainly paves the way for a smother effort if they are present.

Legal support. As was detailed earlier in the chapter, the law prevents a school from blocking a GSA being started in a public high school as long as certain conditions are met (for example, there is a faculty sponsor and the school is in receipt of federal funding). While the law

is certainly clear on this issue, it does not mean that administrators are clearly in favor of a GSA starting at their school. It was a common amongst participants to have direct experience with an administrator who attempted to block the process. All participants mentioned knowing about administrators who had attempted to block the process of starting a GSA. When students' right to start a GSA is thwarted, those involved may choose to rely on legal support to resolve the issue. This support can take the form of a "threatening letter" or what one participant called a "scary letter" addressed to school administration (and, presumably, their legal counsel). One advocate (P6) described the process her organization went through to offer legal support:

We contacted the person on our committee who is our attorney, who wrote a letter to that school clarifying to the school that the students have a right protected by the law to form a club as long as there are non-curricular clubs.

Sometimes, these threatening letters (sent from an organization like the American Civil Liberties Union, or ACLU) can resolve the issue and the GSA can form, as described by this exchange between the interviewer and participant:

Participant 11:	Things progress...
Interviewer:	They do?
Participant 11:	...very quickly once the ACLU got involved.

Of course, not all efforts to legally intervene are successful. These efforts are explained in the section about GSA efforts failing.

Student-led initiative. As described above when examining whether the effort to start a GSA should be student-driven or faculty-driven, student support forms the heart and soul of an effort to start a GSA in a public school in the Deep South. As one advisor (P13) stated, a student push for a GSA is what can get the ball rolling: "I understand it, once they ask for one the school doesn't have much of a choice. They can either provide it or cut out all groups all together."

Without student support, participants report that efforts to start a GSA either never get off the ground or outright fail. As one advisor (P2) noted, “The administration wasn't in a position where they could push anything LGBT related further than having me as a teacher. Without any students to push for it, it's been dead in the water.” This same advisor noted that the necessity of the effort being student-led was also a challenge:

One of my concerns about the process of establishing a GSA is how student centered it is. In a community like Atlanta, that's probably not a problem. In a community where the students are themselves, closeted, having to have to have students ask for the GSA make it really difficult.

The necessity of students leading the effort to start a GSA does not discount that a variety of social factors in this region may make that near impossible to achieve or make that effort come at a personal cost for those who raise the issue.

Managing expectations. One advocate (P5) mentioned that it was important in her role with a legal advocacy organization to help students, who are often excitable and inexperienced in such organizing efforts, to manage their expectations of the process:

I think it's really, honestly I can't say it enough, it's managing expectations. I feel like sometimes I see things in the news, I see things in the news and they're like, "Oh, well I want that, or I want to do that. Well that seemed pretty cool, so I want to be able to be on the news, or something like that." They want to get that 15 minutes of fame, which can happen with anybody of course, but then it's managing well what is this going to look like, this isn't just getting on the news. This isn't just being the center of attention for a little while, this is bigger than that.

This advocate said that students often want the GSA to start immediately and without much push back. Such push back, in various forms, can mean that students feel dismayed and may give up their efforts at the first sign of conflict that they were not prepared to handle. Thus, student efforts should be coupled with support from allies and adults to manage unreasonable expectations.

To prepare her students for such push-back, one advisor (P16) mentioned that she communicated frequently with her student leaders about how to manage challenges. She stated:

We talked a lot about just having to work. I talked to the original group members about having to work around and through invisible obstacles. Things that made the obstacles that they're not aware that are there. There are road blocks that teachers are throwing off that students aren't really seeing.

While the importance of the formation of a GSA being student-led is crucial, it appears that student-led efforts need the support and guidance of adults at all levels.

Gathering information. After students have mobilized behind an effort to start a GSA and some initial obstacles are overcome, participants described a process of “gathering information.” This information, thought of broadly as “assessment”, could refer to understanding the logistics and necessary steps in the process of starting a club at one’s school. As one advocate (P5) put it:

I would then encourage them [the students organizing the effort] to get their school handbook, and to know all of the rules, all of the rules, all of the regulations, you need to be versed in this, you need to be able to repeat this back to anybody if they ask you about.

Knowing the rules, and knowing them well, offer student organizers and their adult allies protection from efforts to thwart the process. Another student/advocate (P3) mentioned that a part of this “gathering information” process includes figuring out how much interest there may be in the student body for joining the GSA beyond the initial group of students who are organizing the efforts. She stated:

It's good for them to be able to have that group [of core organizers], but it's also helpful to me to have a group of students who are supported in their school to be able to pull from so that they can organize around the issues.

In addition to knowing how much interest there is in joining the GSA, one student (P14) mentioned that it was useful to “collect experiences of bullying and harassment” that students had experienced at the school in order to lend credibility to the need for a GSA.

Laying groundwork with faculty and staff. One crucial role that faculty advisors seem to play in starting a GSA, particularly in a school where backlash from other faculty and staff is anticipated, is to lay groundwork with potential allies to the GSA. One advisor (P16) mentioned that she sought additional faculty sponsors by approaching two colleagues whom she felt would be supportive:

There were two other teachers who I felt like would be interested and had been supportive. I approached them and said, "This is what needs to happen. He needs to be able to tell the principal something. I don't mind doing this, will you do this with me?"

Although neither teacher ended up being a co-advisor, due to fear of retribution, this advisor felt that it was her job and not her students' job to ask faculty to directly support the club.

Another advisor (P9), who was tapped by the principal to spearhead an effort to start a GSA, was strategic as she moved forward. She allowed the students to handle organizing other students, and she instead worked to educate her colleagues by creating a “safe space network.” This network, which she described as similar to a “safe zone” program that is discussed in Chapter 2, allowed faculty and staff to sign up on a list that demonstrated they were an ally for LGBTQ students in their school.

This advisor worked slowly over the school year to have conversations with her colleagues about why a GSA was necessary at her school. She did this, in part, by saying to potential allies:

Would you be willing to be part of a group that openly and just support the students so they know that something they encounter is a negative experience or harassment or teasing or bullying or whatever it might be, they have a safe place to go?

Over time, she amassed support from many departments within the school, such as the library staff, the office staff, and the school nurse. The effort to lay groundwork with faculty and staff was occurring simultaneously as students were organizing fellow students. Faculty taking such an engaged role in the process was part of what helped the GSA ultimately form and later succeed, according to these participants.

Keeping a “low profile”. While not discussed extensively by participants, one advisor (P16) did mention that she felt that her GSA keeping a “low profile” was important to helping it succeed initially while it was trying to form. This advisor mentioned that not drawing too much attention to the fledgling group helped protect students from negative attention from peers and parents who may have actively opposed such efforts. As she mentioned, “[w]e met kind of on the down low, unofficial, to craft our mission statement so that is available on my school's website right now.”

A second advisor (P9) also indicated that the principal at her school directed her to keep organizing efforts quiet. When asked if it was a direct order from her principal, she responded:

That was [a] direct [order] ... "Don't, we're not going to send this out to everybody because that would stir the pot" was the feeling. "We're going to upset people and we're going to create drama and chaos and conflict and split the school." That was kind of the fear. I've been there two years, so I went to who I knew were allies and there were a couple of teachers that I knew were allies. I started with them

The data on starting a GSA has more examples of groups that either refused to keep a “low profile” or were not afforded the opportunity due to the controversy created by the effort to start the club. For the particular advisor who mentioned keeping a low profile, it was important in supporting the GSA in forming at this particular school. This notion of a low profile, whether actively endorsed by the GSA and its members, or encouraged by administration, resurfaces across the lifecycle of the GSA from formation to maintenance.

Mastering organizational tasks. A number of experiences, coded as “mastering organizational tasks” represent one of the final factors that participants perceive as influencing the successful formation of a GSA. This category of data is meant to represent tasks that students and advisors have to complete in order to officially register the group within the school. One student (P12) called these steps “red tape” and another (P4) called them “hoops to jump through”, but all who referred to this knew that the success of the GSA depended on attention to these details. These tasks included completion of paperwork and submitting such documents for a deadline.

Pitfalls of paperwork. Across the board, participants who started a GSA mentioned that there were specific organizational tasks that had to be achieved that essentially amounted to paperwork. Most commonly mentioned were the creation and submission of a club constitution or mission statement, the signature of a faculty sponsor, and the delegation of a slate of student officers for the club. One advisor (P11) stated “[t]he only real rules for clubs is that you have to have a sponsor and you have to have a mission statement.”

While the tasks seemed small, the failure to be organized and complete this paperwork meant that the group would not successfully form. Some students were described (by P5) as being “organizationally challenged” when it came to being detail-oriented. One advisor (P16) felt like the focus on paperwork being perfect was one way that administration could thwart efforts for the group to form. She explained:

Sometimes the process seemed to be designed to prevent students from organizing student led clubs like this, organizations. It was difficult for them to gain access to the principal. They had to be undaunted by putting in multiple requests over a period of time and not getting a response back from the principal. They had to double check and be very careful about writing up their, I think it was a constitution or I don't know, I can't remember what the term was, but they had to write up the purpose of the organization...If they weren't as diligent and patient it would not have happened.

The fact that the student organizers were detail-oriented and were able to jump through hoops was part of what helped the organization form. It seems, from this example, that the administrator in this case was actively working against the group forming by enforcing rigidity with paperwork and also withholding her own time in meeting with the students to answer questions they may have.

Challenges in the formation stage. For all the strengths that the participants perceived as helpful in starting a GSA, they were matched and in some cases overwhelmed by challenges and threats to the group forming. Although not every school experienced these challenges, many did. These myriad challenges make GSAs a contested space from their beginnings as a new or forming student club. This section will discuss the themes that emerged from the data that challenged the GSA in forming, including: difficulty in finding an advisor, student organizational challenges, rejecting administrators, student opposition, opposition from parents, general community opposition, policy challenges, and general threats.

Finding an advisor. It should be apparent from previous discussions on faculty advisor concerns, particularly around job security and stigma, that finding an advisor for a GSA is not an easy task. One advocate (P10) mentioned that the process of finding an advisor was the major reason GSAs could not get off the ground. They explained:

Sometimes when the students are also told like, "Hey yeah, fine you can have this club if you can find a sponsor," which is a teacher right? All clubs for the most part depending on the school have to have some sort of club sponsor which is usually a teacher, that's their support person. Then sometimes there's a lot of intimidation in those teachers. It might be like, "Oh yeah students, you've got to find a teacher, and then you can start your club," but then you have teachers who are told it's a word-of-mouth thing, it's never on paper, "You don't want to support this club, because you may not be asked to work here again," or, "If you do come back, then you're going to basically not going to be teaching English, you're going to have study hall and gym, or PE or something."

Another participant (P1) mentioned that one GSA they work with took several attempts to start due to the difficulty of finding an advisor:

First time, actively shot down, second time, people were too afraid to do anything about it, and it just has sort of left the students in a position of just being stuck. There's not really anything they can do without an advisor, because they can't be a recognized group without an advisor.

Intimidation, indifference, and fear are major factors that seem to prevent interested students from connecting with their adult allies.

Multi-level opposition. Almost all participants described at least one constituency group in the school or broader community who raised an issue about the GSA starting. The constituency groups who opposed the GSA starting that were most mentioned in the data were: administrators, students, parents, and the broader community surrounding the school.

Rejecting or hostile administration. While administrators can certainly be supportive of efforts to start a GSA, they can also be antagonistic of the process and toward the people who are pushing to start the club. In some instances, administrators were openly hostile, uneducated about what a GSA is, and were personally opposed to the group for moral reasons. One advocate (P6) recalled a principal told the students who wanted to start a GSA: "No, you're not allowed. We're not going to have that in this school." One advocate (P5) described an interaction with an administrator as follows:

[The] administration was saying, "This is not the type of club that we need to have here. It is a very inappropriate 'sex club'." They kept calling it a 'sex club'. And it was tough. We gave the students talking points. Not telling them what to say, not leading them, but helping them clean up what they were already saying. And it was also intimidat[ing].

Other participants described the administration of their school as being split between support and antagonism. Participant 9, an advisor, described her principal being supportive of the

effort but her superintendent, who is elected by the community, was not supportive because he feared upsetting parents. Another participant mentioned a similar split amongst administration:

What was happening was that the principal was okay with it. The principal was signing off on it and things were fine. It was the school district administrator, the superintendent, who was fighting it, and was not letting it ... He wasn't signing off on it himself. So school board meeting after school board meeting, they were pushing it [the topic of starting a GSA] down and down the agenda. (P8, Advocate)

It should be noted that Boards of Education were not described in this data as ever being supportive of efforts to start a GSA.

Student opposition. Similar to administration, students can be both drivers and opponents of a GSA starting. The reasons for opposing the club mirror the social context, and include religious or moral opposition, bullying, and blatant homophobia. One advisor (P13) recalled the initial efforts to start her GSA were met with heavy opposition by the student body:

There was a petition started by students not wanting the club, trying to get to... They would rip down the signs about the meetings. We had a student in my class who was a troublemaker, to say the absolute least. All of the sudden [the student] shows up screaming with a Bible that gays are allowed to have a club, but he's not allowed to pray anywhere.

This advisor recalled that the outrage against the club by students frightened one potential co-advisor away. One advocate (P5) mentioned a group of students who were protesting the GSA starting and their subsequent participation in an LGBTQ-affirming school event called “Day of Silence” by “wearing shirts about religion, and Bible quotes and all of that, directly in response to those students who were trying to support Day of Silence.”

Parental opposition. Parents can impact a GSA in a multitude of ways, from being supportive (or not) of their child identifying as LGBTQ, to preventing their child from participating in a GSA, to actively opposing one forming at their child’s school. Their rejecting behavior can serve as a reason that students need the safety and support of a GSA in school, and

their opposition can also spark fear in the hearts of administration and teachers who worry about upsetting parents who may be opposed to a GSA. At the formation of one GSA, an advisor (P13) reported that parents in the community were so opposed to the club starting that “they went through the whole process and it got very, very ugly at school with parents calling the school, calling the superintendent, not wanting that gay club at school that had no business at school.”

Parents’ negative reactions to a GSA seemed somewhat limited and contained to when the GSA formed. While parents were reported to have actively opposed the GSA after it started, the most severe hostility and opposition certainly happened in the beginning stages. Common behaviors from parents included: calling administrators to complain about the GSA, calling administrators to try to get GSA sponsors fired, starting rumors about advisors that they are gay and/or spreading the “gay agenda” by turning children gay, and retaliating (or threatening to) by voting elected officials out of office. Interestingly, most parents’ negative reactions appeared to be directed at other adults, and mainly at administration. While the reactions did upset some participants, there were instances of administrators pushing back against negative reactions from parents. For instance, one advisor (P13) reported:

She [the superintendent] recounted the story of a parent calling up there [to the district administrative office] just absolutely throwing a fit about her child going to school somewhere that this [GSA] was allowed. The superintendent told the parent that she would be glad to give her the information on how to home school.

Extreme reactions and challenges do seem to present opportunities for adults to support the GSA and their members.

Community hostile to a GSA. Four participants used the term “community” opposition when it was clear that the opposition to a GSA forming was coming largely from parents. However, not all examples of community opposition were limited to the reactions of parents.

One teacher (P2), who recalled her failed effort to start a GSA, cited community pressure and social norms as responsible for blocking the formation efforts of the GSA. She stated: “Not to mention, a community that attacks anybody who's open at the school. We need a GSA and we don't really have anybody capable of pushing. The students are afraid to push for it. I can't, because of the situation I'm now in.”

Participant 2 is a teacher who felt she would be fired because she is a transgender woman. Other participants recognized that community members are often voters who can wield their opposition to a GSA or other LGBTQ issues as power over elected school boards and administrators. According to one advocate (P5):

Yeah honestly some of these folks they might have been getting pressure from the superintendent, who I believe are elected, and to them it was something that they didn't understand, they were worried about what the parent or the voters might say about it, and so they were pushing back. I don't understand this, this is weird, or this goes against God, a lot of times religion would be thrown into the mix, and to them it wasn't normal, it wasn't natural that type thing, so they were just like, "You know what? We don't want this here, you can do it on your own time"

This particular effort to start a GSA was successful, but not without a political fight that seemed to involve the entire community.

Policy. Efforts to start a GSA can face challenges at the policy level both within schools and from state law. One participant mentioned that the school board quickly changed school policy to require signed permissions slips for student extracurricular participation when pressured to allow the GSA to form:

And they changed their policy that all clubs had to have permission slips. And so that was a very tough thing to work through. And then they even went so far as to say... all of the clubs had an “opt out” in the handbook. And those were only given out at the beginning of the school year. So if you didn't get your club started, you know, half way through the school year your club was not going to be printed on the form. So parents had the option of saying “no I don't want my kid being a part of this club, this club, this club, period.” (P5, Advocate)

This felt, to the participant, like a direct way to undermine the GSA because administrators knew that a great many parents would be opposed to their student participating in a GSA. These regulatory policies do succeed at times in dismantling efforts to start a GSA.

Such extreme measures to stop GSAs forming are not limited to policy change at the school level. They can also extend to the state capitol. As a reactionary measure to the number of GSAs starting in one state, an advocate (P8) noted that the state legislature enacted a bill that required “school districts must provide a list of school extracurricular activities and clubs to parents in the student handbook, and parents...had to sign students up for their clubs.” When asked specifically why a state legislature would pass such a bill, and what impact it would have on GSAs, this advocate stated:

No student would be allowed to participate in a school club or activity without parental permission. It was strictly aimed at GSAs. What kind of paperwork and headache and administrative bullshit, sense does that make, to put that on an already under-resourced and under-funded school? It was strictly aimed at GSAs, to keep GSAs from forming, to keep them from thriving, to keep kids from joining.

GSAs are being contested both within and outside of schools, and the skill set it requires to navigate these myriad challenges is vast.

Failing to form a school-based Gay-Straight Alliance. Given how highly contested GSAs are, and how few supports can be offered for efforts to start these clubs, it should serve as no surprise that there are times when an effort to start a GSA outright fails. Failure to form a GSA, although not the explicit focus of this dissertation, did emerge as an important theme in the data. Reactions to the failure to start a GSA ranged from disappointment and shock to acceptance and expectation of such failure. Some efforts were described as “lost causes” and others appear to be jumping off points for future organizing.

This section discusses the creativity exhibited by participants in the face of myriad challenges, in ways that create new spaces for LGBTQ youth in lieu of traditional, school-based GSA. This section also discuss what happens when a GSA fails outright to form, and what possibilities this may open up for community organizers in such an instance.

Creative Alternatives to School-Based GSAs. There are times when the barriers presented to starting a GSA seem insurmountable to the students and their allies. Two notable cases of creativity in the face of such obstacles are developing a covert GSA and developing a community GSA.

Covert GSAs. One participant (P3), who had experiences both as a student and later as an advocate, described her high school GSA as a “covert” one. Because there were many barriers that accompanied forming a GSA, the pre-existing philosophy club functioned as the GSA for their school. She explained that the “philosophy club” offered a cover for students who wanted to attend GSA but would not be able to get their parents’ permission to attend:

I know that a lot of students who weren't out came to philosophy club because of the stigma attached within the school and outside of the school from GSA. Also the fact that many parents, whether that be a generational difference or a cultural difference, a lot parents were not very accepting of even those who went as an ally to the GSA.

This club functioned with the full support of the faculty advisor, who helped maintain its cover:

What the GSA ended up being was they would meet for a few minutes before and then the group and its faculty advisor came to philosophy club. The GSA faculty advisor co-lead philosophy club.

While this covert club was able to draw in students who otherwise would not be able to attend a more public GSA, the secret nature of the group did appear to come at a cost. The participant explains:

[The group] not going by the name of a GSA was a little harmful in a way because it also perpetuated an erasure of queer students in my high school. Rather than having a loud and proud GSA or even a quiet but steady GSA, the fact that we essentially had no presence of one perpetuated that erasure but at the same time acknowledging the important of the creation of a safe space when sometimes ... When people really uphold the outness, the loudness, if you have to think about that maybe in a rural high school in NAME OF STATE maybe what you need is a subversive philosophy club GSA. (P3, Advocate/Student)

Interestingly, the phenomenon of a covert GSA was mentioned by an advisor who had her students read a novel about students who started a “geography club” that was essentially a GSA. While this phenomenon was not a focus of this research, the emergence of the theme of a covert GSA could merit further investigation.

Community GSAs. When barriers to starting a GSA at school are insurmountable, but youth still need and want a safe space, a community GSA is another alternative to a traditional GSA model. Two participants mentioned community-based GSAs starting in their communities. Essentially, these are groups that function much like a traditional GSA but they meet at community locations (like public libraries and other accessible spaces). One participant (P10) stated “I was working to facilitate our community GSA, which was for folk who didn't have that space outside of schools and also to help foster leadership amongst high school leaders.” This space outside of schools is a key component to the community GSA. \

Another participant (P3) mentioned that she was proud that her community helped start the community GSA. She stated “What's really beautiful is the community recognized the need, created a community GSA that meets at our local LGBT center.” Although not probed fully, since they were not the focus of this research, one thing that community GSAs appear to offer is a connection between the LGBTQ network and youth in schools who need a safe space that their school is denying them.

Failure to Form a GSA. While this research addressed successful examples of GSAs forming and being maintained, participants spoke at length about examples of outright failure to form a GSA about which they had experienced or knew about. Interestingly, all examples of an out-and-out failure involved hostile administrators who were able to derail efforts to organize a club.

Following up after a failed effort. One advocate (P1), who supported youth in forming GSAs, mentioned that they stay in touch with interested students even at schools where the effort has failed:

I do keep in contact with those students and check in every few weeks and ask, "How's it going? Is there anything that I can [do?] ... Do you need me to speak to someone? Is there a teacher I can meet with?"

This advocate offered resources, met with administration to educate them on the needs of LGBTQ students, and continued to support the students in raising their voices for a GSA. This type of youth leadership support demonstrates optimism about the organizing efforts of youth to succeed with a GSA in the future.

In the face of failure, another advocate (P8) mentioned connecting youth to each other. In fact, he mentioned that he was often not the impetus for students to connect with other students who had successfully formed a GSA. He commented:

Young people stay in touch, and are forming networks naturally. They use Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, other sources. Often times they know best how to brainstorm around failure. They support each other.

When efforts fail to start a GSA in a school, it offers an opportunity to creatively make space for LGBTQ youth in a less contested space (such as a community or covert GSA). It also is an opportunity to continue to build youth leadership by offering resources, and to strengthen the informal LGBTQ network, particularly amongst youth.

The concluding task of the formation stage. Taken together, the defining mantra of the formation stage is: “We will form a GSA at our school.” As mentioned in this section, there are occasions when these efforts fail. However, when efforts are successful, GSA members and supporters enter the maintenance stage of a GSA. Members move from “we will form a GSA at our school” to “we will keep our GSA running at our school now that it has been established.” This mantra leads into the maintenance stage of a GSA, detailed in the next section.

Maintaining a Gay-Straight Alliance

Just as myriad factors exist in the psychosocial environment that makes the process of starting a GSA difficult in the Deep South, many factors exist that threaten the group as it grows and ages. While some groups did not experience the overwhelming challenges that others did, all participants discussed challenges that the group faced in the maintenance phase of GSAs. The process of maintaining a GSA in the Deep South can feel like a constant hardship, and some of the difficulty that existed when trying to form the group accompany the group as it ages. Not all factors were challenges, however. Participants discussed a number of supports for GSAs in the maintenance phase. This section will explore the most prominent supports and challenges that GSAs face in maintaining the club in this region, as well as some closing thoughts on overall theory development from this research.

Strengths in the maintenance stage. Once a GSA has successfully formed, it seems imperative that its members and advisors set about the goal of building and maintaining a strong club. Although some prior strengths followed the GSA from its formation phase to its maintenance phase, several new strengths emerged in this phase. This section will discuss the themes that emerged from the data, including: organizational best practices, commitment to a student-led group, tenure for faculty, and the LGBTQ network,

Organizational practices. Data that demonstrated “best practices” of GSA leaders, members and the club were coded as “organizational best practices.” Many times participants identified practices which helped the GSA grow strong, weather challenges, and recruit and grow membership. Likewise, the absence of these best practices was identified as challenges to the GSA maintaining its presence within a school system.

Agenda and goals. As basic as it may sound, participants stated that having a clear agenda for their GSA meetings was a crucial practice that helped make the club strong. Likewise, having goals that the GSA was working toward helped to strengthen the group and give it a purpose. Two examples of year-long goals that GSAs developed were 1) reducing stigma against LGBTQ students (mentioned by P4 and P15) and 2) educating faculty and students on why saying “that’s so gay” is offensive (mentioned by P17).

Having a GSA goal seems equally as important as who has input in developing the goal. Four participants commented that it was important that the group together developed the goal or goals for the year. One student/advocate (P10) elaborated:

I think having the vision development be a meeting, like having your first meeting being like, "What do we want to do this year," is really important. I think when just a president or just the leadership team decides what's going to happen, then the group buy in is not there as much.

This quote suggests that student leaders need to learn to solicit input from their peers in order to get buy-in from them. This may be a skill that needs to be developed in some youth leaders, as one former student leader (P4) noted:

I think thinking critically about your meetings and having a year-long plan or a more long term plan for what you're doing is really important and that's not something I knew how to do as a 10th grader getting started in this.

Supporting student leaders may be one opportunity to strengthen GSAs within schools.

Curriculum and programming. Just as important as having an agenda and goals are having curriculum and programming for GSA meetings and events. The curriculum and programming attract new members to the GSA, energize current members and give the group a purpose, and keep meetings exciting. When speaking to the dual importance of having an agenda and curriculum, one student/advocate (P3) said:

Having a curriculum, having an agenda set, it's really important to have an overarching theme so that each of your meetings is going towards some final goal. Picking an objective ... It's the same way ... Developing a curriculum for a GSA would be the same as developing a lesson plan for any other learning environment. Having some overall objective and then having sub objectives in order to get there.

Notable programming and curriculum ideas included national awareness days such as Transgender Day of Remembrance and Day of Silence, movie nights, LGBT history month events, bake sales, general social events, and sexual health workshops. One advisor (P13) described her students designing their own t-shirts as a programming activity:

We're working on getting shirts. They wanted to have shirts that we got to design, got to do some GSA shirts, because all the other clubs have shirts. I anticipate that being interesting, I think, because that might remind that loud obnoxious group [of opposing students] that we're here.

Some of these programs came from the youth themselves, and others came from the LGBT network and the internet. Part of the function of programming, it seems, is to help the group have a visible presence within the school.

Regular meetings. Participants perceived regular meetings, when they happened, as a strength, and its absence contributing to struggling and its membership floundering without purpose. As one student/advocate (P10) mentioned:

Something that cannot be under stressed is meeting regularly, which sounds so basic, but is so important and so many schools fall apart because the one leader doesn't have the energy to do it all the time, or their school doesn't give them the space and it doesn't feel like there's continuity. It doesn't feel like it's building.

Most GSAs that met regularly met weekly at a certain time during or after school. Two GSAs met monthly. One participant felt that a combination of regular and longer meetings was ideal to increase membership numbers:

Meeting regularly is really important. Some of the largest participant numbers have actually been in some clubs that don't meet for very long. The problem with clubs that don't meet for very long is they can't get anything done. They have no outside project, they have no set agenda, but that's often times the only thing they can get from administration. We're allowed to meet during lunch or something like that, but they still met regularly. (P3, Advocate/Student)

Participants whose GSA met weekly seemed to think this was a beneficial schedule to keep.

One benefit to having regular meeting times is that students who cannot attend every week can still count on the space and can attend when they are able or can secure permission or transportation. As one advisor (P11) noted, "There are a lot of kids who say, 'I can't come for the whole thing, I have to leave part way through' and that's always fine. There's no mandatory attendance, anyone can come. They join in when they can."

Swag. Free trinkets and other "freebies", also called "swag", were referenced as something that helped GSAs in their maintenance phase. The first way that swag was helpful was by serving as a recruitment tool for potential members. According to one advisor (P11):

We have club fairs and stuff and just kind of advertise that way and we kind of have a little bit of swag, whether it's a social bracelet or button or whatever and little quarter sheet little fliers that say this when we meet, the condensed version of a mission statement, this is what we are all about and meet the incoming 8th graders and all that stuff.

Swag can get students' attention and can also get information out about the club in order to draw new members in.

The second interesting point about swag is that it seems to help raise the visibility of the GSA around the school. One advisor (P13) commented:

Everybody loves a little bit of swag. If you can get something inexpensive like a button or a bracelet, that's pretty cool. Then you get to see all the instances of that. You know, around school. And that's kind of awesome.

Wearing GSA swag can be a way that allies can express their support for the group in a relatively subtle way. Swag is sometimes provided by the LGBT network, and other times is purchased with funds raised by or donated to the GSA.

Commitment to a student-led group. Allowing the GSA to be formed by and largely run by students is an important best practice in helping GSAs maintain their existence in the region. Some of the principles previously discussed, such as allowing students to push for change and allowing students to demonstrate their leadership abilities, apply for the maintenance phase of a GSA as well. The key practices under the principle of a student-led group are: allowing the group to be student-directed, meeting the students where they are at, and allowing the group to evolve over time.

Allowing the group to be student-directed. Advisors and students alike discussed the importance of student “agency” and “voice” in the process and programming of the GSA once it was established. One advisor (P11) started the semester off by seeking student input:

And that first meeting every semester I just kind of look at the mission statement, here's what it is, you guys get to talk about it and decide whether it meets your needs and your expectations for what you want from this group.

One student (P14) felt that the group was successful in part because students were able to lead the meetings and their advisor was fairly passive. The student explained:

We just have to have a teacher with us when we're in the school after hours. He sits there and he'll listen and if people are being too explicit or something, he'll tell them to take it a

notch down. He's really nice. He'll contribute to our conversations. He'll find things online for us to watch. Generally, he just lets us do what we need to do.

Allowing students to “do what [they] need” seemed important to GSA success.

Meeting students where they are at. Faculty advisors and advocates spoke about the importance of what one advocate (P6) called “meeting students where they are at.” This meant allowing for students to develop and grow at their own pace and along their own trajectory without being forced in a direction by adults. One advisor (P17) mentioned that she, personally, did not think that marriage equality was the most important issue for which the GSA should be organizing. However, students were excited to talk about the topic and so she let the students take the lead in programming. Another advisor (P11) mentioned having big ambitions for the GSA, but ultimately allowing students to take the lead in deciding its programming and its pace:

I try for GSA to be, you know, a presence. A real entity that people know about. But again, if students are not ... If they're really excited, if they want to make posters, if they want to design buttons. If they want to design t-shirts, if they want to canvas the cafeteria to talk about an issue or whatever, I just try to make sure that they have the resources to do that. But, if they're a group of kids who are like, many we just really want to hang out together, that's fine too. That just happens to be the thing they need right then.

This advisor felt that by allowing students to ask for what they needed meeting to meeting and year to year, it allowed the GSA to stay relevant in its students' lives. This ultimately strengthened the group.

Faculty advisors and advocates also mentioned that they saw their role as one of a mentor and guide. For example, students would get excited and ambitious about programming and would want to unrealistically accomplish more than could be done in a school year. One advisor (P9) addressed this by developing the following philosophy:

I would do that kind of guidance with them. Wanting to support, encourage, empower and not squash and put out their dreams, but to also be realistic. Let's be realistic so we accomplish.

She said she would tell the students “Let's cool this down to three ideas for this semester instead of ten.” Meeting the students where they are at in the GSA maintenance phase allowed for students to get excited and take ownership of the work without risking failure to accomplish much due to unrealistic goal setting.

Allowing the group to evolve over time. The final example of a commitment to the GSA being a student-led group involves anticipating that the group will evolve over time and allowing it to do so without resistance. Data was coded under this category if it referred to the GSA growing, changing, altering the focus or programming, or going through an “ebb and flow” as three participants mentioned.

Four participants mentioned that there are a variety of types of GSAs, and that it is normal for the GSA to oscillate between the types over the years. The first type of GSA mentioned was a “social” GSA. One student/advocate (P10) described a social GSA as:

We're going to hang out and we're going to share a space and we're going to play games and have parties, and that's what we want. That's super valid and important just to have fun space to be queer and trans and young.

The second type of GSA is a support group. According to the above student/advocate, a support group model for a GSA is: “We're going to show up and we're going to talk about the shit we have going on. It's not really about programming. It's processing because it is hard to be here like we are. That's really important too.” Finally, the third type of GSA is an activist GSA. This student/advocate described this type of group as follows: “Activist GSAs are more centered on education and programming and, ‘We're going to have a rally. We're going to have a trans day remembrance event.’” This model of the three types of GSAs was attributed to Gay-Straight Alliance Network, a non-profit organization in the LGBTQ network. These types are important to understand so that students and advisors can see ebbs and flows of the group as natural.

It seems to strengthen the GSA when students are allowed to reassess its purpose and play a role in redirecting its programming. One advisor (P11) mentioned that she purposively makes space for students to reassess the GSA at the first meeting of every school year: “I feel like its ebb and flow. I always talk to students [about the programming and purpose] when we meet, when I have the first meeting during the semester.” Instead of trying to direct the group’s mission herself as an advisor, she instead allows youth to direct the programming because “it will just be more effective that way.”

Tenure for faculty and staff. Tenure offered to faculty and staff, in addition to mentions of job security or job protection, seem to support a GSA in the maintenance phase. Although tenure can be crucial to an advisor agreeing to help start the club, this protection can strengthen the GSA over time by maintaining a stable relationship with an advisor. As one advocate (P7) noted:

Obviously having an advisor that’s not going to be fired and have some sort of job security in their role helps. I think actually that’s another thing to mention just how just for the staff people that run the GSAs it’s a reality that you can be fired for being gay. That’s it’s an actual flight risk to their livelihood...

Obviously the absence of this risk is personally beneficial to faculty or staff member, as well as beneficial to the club. The club benefits by having a faculty member who feels more secure in their role and may be more willing to take risks to support the club, it’s programming, and it’s visibility within the school.

This advocate (P7) mentioned that in addition to tenure, having a faculty advisor who has a secure position socially within the school also benefits the GSA.

For maintaining them, it’s folks that like the straight football coach that somehow is the GSA advisor and no one going to question kind of their role in the community or their sexual orientation. They’re able to sustain the club through transitional periods without

having to worry about, “Well, maybe I shouldn’t do it this year. There’s no gay students because it will lower my profile as X, Y, or Z.”

Job security and a solid social standing can allow a faculty advisor to stick with the GSA over time. As will be discussed below, this longevity of an advisor can buffer against the problems of turnover that sometimes plague GSAs in high schools.

LGBTQ network. The broader community network of LGBTQ people and organizations that exists around the GSA can provide a number of important supports to the group after it has formed. One major contribution of the LGBTQ Network in the maintenance stage is providing training for youth leaders. These trainings can happen on an individual GSA level, or they can happen at a GSA summit. The summit was described by five participants specifically as a training workshop that brought together a number of GSA members from the area. One participant described a GSA summit as:

[At the meeting we discuss]: "This is how you lead a meeting. This is what you do. This is how you write a workshop. This is an idea of what you can do."...I think that's another reason why GSA summits are so important is that people can share ideas for what their groups do that's been successful and people can take ideas and move with that [back to their GSA]. (P10, Advocate/Student)

This training can then help youth lead their GSAs.

Another contribution of the LGBTQ network at this stage is in creating LGBTQ-inclusive space in the community. As seven participants mentioned, the creation of this space helps youth connect to each other across school district lines. This connection allows youth to get inspired about what is going on in nearby schools, and allows them to share ideas with each other. Youth also report being able to problem-solve any challenges they are having with other youth, and drawing support and strength from this connection as is indicated by this participant’s statement:

[S]haring space and learning from each other and collaborating within our region is so powerful. Just feeling that in those spaces, that sharing space with other queer young

people, is so radical in NAME OF STATE. Even all of us showing up to that space was an act of resistance. Beyond that, growing as leaders, sharing skills, sharing information, sharing contact information, that was really powerful for us as young people. (P10, Advocate/Student)

Another student (P14) described the importance of peer-to-peer networking in the broader community:

It's really networking. I'll sum it up as networking. The people who are the senior members of GSA know a good many people and if information needs to get out word of mouth, it will. I can only go so far using Facebook and Remind 101 and the other things that we do. Having contacts readily available. That's been a big thing when we need a little help.

The LGBTQ network can provide support when GSAs, as this participant says, "need a little help" brainstorming anything from recruitment challenges to overcoming threats to planning fun events for their members.

Challenges in the maintenance stage. As with the strengths at this phase, some prior challenges followed the GSA from its formation phase to its maintenance phase. Several new challenges emerged in this phase of the GSA. This section will discuss the themes that emerged from the data that describe challenges GSAs face in maintaining their space over time. These include harmful organizational practices, such as: the advisor, interpersonal issues amongst students, recruitment and maintenance of members, turnover, logistics, and programming. Other themes involved constant opposition from some familiar sources, including: parents, students, faculty and staff, and the community. An emerging threat in this phase is the fear of GSA failure, which will conclude this section.

Harmful organizational practices. Some of these challenges had to do with the people in leadership and with group dynamics, such as problems with the advisor and infighting and other interpersonal problems. Other harmful organizational problems included organizing skills

such as how to recruit and retain membership, how to manage the various organizational tasks required to maintain the GSA, and how to counter turnover of students. Finally, there were challenges related to logistics and programming that negatively impacted the GSA and threatened to harm its existence.

The advisor. The GSA advisor can play a crucial role in supporting the GSA at its inception and during its maintenance. However, the advisor can also behave in ways that are harmful to the group. Six advocates and students mentioned the concept of “adultism” which was defined as adults undermining or belittling the worth or role of students in general or specifically undermining students in the GSA. This behavior can leave students feeling unappreciated, as this student explained:

I can't tell you how many young people will have bursts of energy but then they'll just deflate, because their experience has told them that they can't be that excited about something, or that no one is going to take them seriously. (P8, Advocate)

One student (P12) mentioned that she felt that adultism was a part of a wider cultural context, which underscored why it was so important that the GSA was student-led and the advisor was supportive of its students:

I think it goes along with the fact that it's really hard for people to come out. Especially in the South. Students are used to adults being their enemies when it comes to LGBT things. We're used to adults not understanding, or, "I wasn't raised that way." Things like that. It's harder for us to find adults who are trustworthy and what not. I think it's just best if this is an area of our lives where we can have control. A lot of the time, control is taken from us. There's a lot of invalidation going on. This is a good way for us to claim our identity.

This student went on to mention that “the advisor, and how they either support or silence the students, can make or break the GSA.” Adultism is in direct opposition to student-led leadership, which was identified in the previous section as something that strengthens GSAs in the maintenance phase.

Another challenge that advisors can pose, according to five students and advocates, is making the GSA a reflection of their own wants and needs. This tendency seems to negatively impact the students involved, as one student/advocate (P10) explained:

It's when the advisors want to be the savior and they want themselves to be the fulcrum on which it moves. That's not good for building youth leadership and it's also not good for making the GSA a space that young people actually want to be in. Then it's all centered around what the advisor thinks those young people need.

This student/advocate humorously summarized the problems a faculty advisor can create as: “[a]dults, a rough time: the GSA story.”

Interpersonal issues. Three participants described what was coded as “interpersonal issues” amongst their members as a challenge that GSAs face in maintaining their existence after they form. The day she decided to take over as a GSA sponsor, this advisor (P13) noted the “drama” she had to deal with:

The day I said I would do it, I had two different people come and tattle to me about things two other people in the club were doing. I was like, "Um, no. No, this is not the way this works." It's probably a good thing I said, "yes," because I feel like it would have disbanded. It's been a lot of work doing some team building and stuff like that.

One participant described the interpersonal issues as not very serious, explaining:

Other than just interpersonal arguments and fighting, which is not something that is really damaging to the club itself, it's more just damaging to people's attendance but that really kind of evens itself out with people coming in and people going out. There are a couple of times where I have clashed with one of the leaders but that's mostly on just logistics and technicalities. (P14, Student)

Whether interpersonal squabbles threaten membership or the entire existence of the group, what is clear is that they are something with which participants wish they did not have to deal.

One advisor (P13), who described her group as “chaotic” due to the in-fighting, hypothesized the dysfunction as an effect of the challenges the group faced in getting started:

“it's a pretty dysfunctional club, if we're being real honest. I think they were born in such chaos, that they're all very much constantly on the defensive and worked up about stuff.” These challenges can directly threaten the longevity of the group, as this advisor noted: “[m]y goal next year is to actually have service projects that we do things together. This year, it's just to keep them from disbanding because they've been fighting so much.”

Recruiting and maintaining members. Recruiting members and keeping members engaged is a challenge that four participants faced. One student (P15) mentioned that at recruitment drives, fellow students seem uncomfortable talking about the GSA. This discomfort harms students' ability to recruit members to join the club:

I think the biggest problem was just getting people to come and talk like when we would have those tables set out in the lobby. They would just walk by and it was hard reaching out and being like, "Hey, stop by." We even had bake sales and stuff where it was like free food. It was like okay if you come, you'll get free food. They were like incentives almost. I think the biggest thing was just getting people comfortable with talking about it.

One advocate (P8) mentioned that a GSA he worked with had difficulty with recruitment early on, but this was mediated by support:

Their GSA had a little bit of a hard time recruiting their first year, but they got over that pretty quickly. That's what I mean by going the extra mile. If you have great support systems that are there at first, but then you hit a roadblock, the advisor needs to be able to support those students in a way that's going to bring them along and not scare them even further or just leave them out on their own.

The support and stability provided by the faculty advisor seemed to overcome the challenges in recruitment that the students faced in this example.

The lack of membership can prevent groups from engaging in the types of activities that they want to, as this advisor (P16) mentioned: “If we can get more members we can do more. We just can't do a lot with four people.” GSAs naturally thrive on members, and without a strong membership base the organization can stall or disband.

Student organizational skills (or lack thereof). When participants discussed challenges related to faulty leadership, struggles to get students to complete necessary tasks, or a developmental limitation of youth in leadership positions, this was coded as “student organizational skills”. Similar to the theme of “organizational skills” that challenged the starting of a GSA, these challenges included disorganization, inability to delegate or share power, ability (or not) to run a meeting, and a general inability to diffuse tension that naturally occurred in the GSA.

One student/advocate (P10) was very self-aware in describing their lack of vision. In speaking about their regrets, they said:

If I could go back and be a GSA president differently, I would have worked much stronger. I would have worked to create a stronger team of leaders, because I think when other people didn't want to take initiative, I just filled that void with myself. That was not a good way to build infrastructure.

This student/advocate did not feel that they had the support of their faculty advisor to navigate their leadership position. The participant perceived this lack of support as something that weakened the GSA.

These organizational skill deficits were often recognized by faculty advisors who were actively involved in the GSA, and were factored into the role the advisors played in relationship to their students. For example, one advisor (P9) described how she recognized the strengths in her students and actively worked to support them:

The students were smart. They had good ideas. Kind of organizing the ideas was the challenge and that's what I would find myself kind of doing, is helping them organize and to follow through. How are you going to follow through with that? What's your plan for that? That's just students. That's not these students, but that's all student organizations in high school and in college sometimes too, but in high school in particular. I knew it wasn't just these.

This advisor, and others who spoke about the concept, recognized that the gap in organization skills was something that was common in many other high school students due to lack of experience and age.

Student turnover. Any data related to students graduating and moving on from GSA, and this causing either 1) a challenge to the group directly or 2) an indirect challenge that was anticipated or planned for was coded as “student turnover.” This code emerged as distinct from student organizational problems, and the theme emerged from issues of general membership retention for the GSA. It seems that a turnover of students, typically every four years from 9th to 12th grade, was a particular challenge for the GSA in maintaining its existence.

Two participants at two separate schools mentioned when the leaders who helped found the GSA graduated this created a vacuum of leadership from which it was difficult to recover.

One advisor (P16) described this process:

The original leadership graduated so we had some of the members who became leaders in the group who were friends of the original leaders... they were their younger friends who were coming into the school who were Freshman or Sophomores when their group got started. In year 2 and year 3 it seemed like okay we're here, now what? The kids who were the leaders then had lived through and witnessed the big battle [it] was just to exist but knowing that they didn't know quite what to do yet as in, "What do we do? Do we raise awareness? Do we raise money? Do we donate to charity? Do we try to change people's opinions?" You know, what our goal was then?

The turnover in leadership was difficult to recover from at this particular school, and resulted in a lack of momentum for several years.

One participant connected the issue of leadership turnover to the broader context of advisor support and school climate:

I think that that can have a lot to do with whether or not the advisor is a good fit for the group and is able to mentor those people and develop their skills, and also whether or not the school climate in general is accepting and open, so the students are able to serve in

the group without feeling like they would be harassed or bullied, or pulled out of their schools in some cases. (P1, Advocate)

This particular theme, not unlike others discussed in this chapter, appears to be related to other factors. Therefore, in order to ameliorate the challenge of turnover that GSAs face, it may be necessary to address multiple factors at once.

Programming. Programming was coded as a challenge in the maintenance phase insofar as it was expressed as a difficulty for students and advisors to develop engaging programming for their members. This challenge included finding a programming theme and purpose for the GSA for the duration of the school year. As one student (P13) mentioned, her GSA was struggling to find a purpose in its programming:

We meet every other week right now because it's state testing time and I have to do a lot of tutoring. Are we just going to meet every week and brief on each other and just be a safe place? Or, are we going to have some kind of activity that we do that gives us purpose?

One student (P15), who joined the GSA several years after it formed, implied that the programming in her GSA was weak and dull: “That year they didn't really do as much as I'd hoped. They had random meetings. They had a few different events but honestly none of them were really memorable to me.” In this quote, there is an intersection between dull programming and irregular meetings as two things that weakened the GSA.

Challenges in programming are not just issues that plague students. The challenge also impacts advisors. One advisor (P13) expressed feeling daunted by the task of finding a purpose and related programming:

This is my biggest challenge right now, really. Exactly what are we going to do? What are we going to do to be relevant?...The challenge is what exactly do we do? What kind of service do we do? What kind of project do we do? That's our biggest challenge right now.

This programming challenge at this particular GSA was remedied, in part, by using the larger LGBT network and online resources to get some ideas for future activities. The advisor (P16) explained:

One of the student leaders would come to a meeting and say, "Okay, well I looked on this website and these are some ideas I've gotten from looking around here." That's mostly what I did for year 2 and year 3 is like prowl around through the GSA websites and any other sites that I thought could give me some direction and see if it could fit with our community and our group.

Two other participants mentioned relying upon the larger LGBT network as a means to enhance their programming, particularly through what one advisor called the "ebb and flow" years of lackluster student leadership.

Multi-level opposition. One theme that emerged in the maintenance phase for GSAs was that of multi-level opposition. It should be said that direct opposition itself was not unrelenting, but what was unrelenting was the *threat* of opposition from various constituency groups which was ever-present in the minds of the participants. Six participants acknowledged that the opposition was significantly less in this phase, while five participants mentioned that opposition increased in this phase, providing a nearly even split.

Parental opposition. Although parental opposition seemed strongest in the phase when GSAs were forming, this opposition did not go away once the GSA had formed. In examples where parents continued to pressure the GSA and the school administrators, it seemed to be related to how visible the GSA was in the school and wider community.

Our principal approached me. She got a call from a parent who asked, who had seen our signs [advertising the GSA]...She complained to the principal about the signs and said that the signs were graphic. "Take down those graphic, awful signs." She had somehow come in after hours so seeing some signs. (P9, Advisor)

The principal at the school, after receiving pressure from that parent, then pressured the advisor to remove GSA signs that said the words “lesbian”, “gay”, “bisexual” or “transgender” because she now viewed these words as “controversial and offensive”. While this particular advisor did not relent by changing the language on the signs, she did mention feeling a constant pressure that this type of incident may happen again.

Negotiating parental opposition extends to the student members of the GSA in a different way. Students, advocates, and advisors alike mentioned that many students have to lie about where they are so their parents do not find out they are attending a GSA meeting. One advisor (P16) explained:

At every meeting for years I would venture to say that this is true 100% of the time. At every single meeting we've had in the existence of the club at least one member who's sitting in that meeting has lied to their parents about being where they are. I know just at any meeting I could say, "All right, whose parent thinks you're somewhere else?" At least one kid is going to raise their hand which is why I try to keep it confidential because when they're telling their parents they're going to mass or whatever the story is.

Parental opposition that students must negotiate is clearly related to the degree of family acceptance that the student has within their home for their LGBTQ or ally identity.

Student opposition. GSAs faced opposition from students in the maintenance phase. Some of the opposition was considered serious by participants or threatening to the group or its members, while other student opposition was considered less so. One constant challenge from students that was present at about the same level was students ripping down signs and other promotional materials from the GSA.

One expression of student opposition to the GSA was in starting religious GSA counter-clubs. Instigated and supported by students, and to some extent the faculty members that agree

to be advisors to such groups, these counter-clubs were a way to directly protest the GSA's existence within the school. One advisor (P16) mentioned this type of opposition group:

We have these competing student groups that pop up every now and then that are like Christian-based student groups. There are some science teachers who sponsor them and their groups are a direct reaction to the fact that we exist. I have to be aware of who's doing the sponsoring of these groups and I have to build relationships with the teachers at school so that I can figure out, "Who are the people who support us but are not going to come out and wave a rainbow flag for us? Who will help us exist?" That's kind of what we have to do.

This example shows how students and faculty come together to oppose the GSA in an openly antagonistic manner.

Religious counter-clubs were not the only expression of faith-based anti-LGBT sentiment expressed by students. Sometimes students would express their opinions on their t-shirts, as happened in this example with students protesting Day of Silence:

Then you had other students who were going to school wearing shirts about religion, and Bible quotes and all of that, directly in response to those students who were trying to support Day of Silence. (P5, Advocate)

After one GSA started, an advisor (P16) mentioned that students who were religiously opposed to the club would show up to try to convert their LGBT classmates and their allies to Christianity. She stated: "[t]here were a lot of people there who considered this a possible opportunity to bring, I don't know, to witness to their classmates who may have needed to have a membership in a religious group." While this "witnessing" made GSA members uncomfortable, she reported that many were not surprised by this behavior in their classmates. In fact, many seemed to see this behavior as inevitable.

While it does not seem as serious as starting a counter group, throwing a Bible, or trying to witness to LGBT classmates, four of the six students described feeling ignored by classmates. Others sensed that while their classmates were polite, they were extremely uncomfortable with

the GSA existing and being public about their activities. One student (P15) described the challenges of trying to recruit members as follow:

As far as the students go it was either neutral like we had a lot of booths in the very front lobby of the school and sometimes I would ask, "Hey do you want this information?" They would just act like they didn't hear me or some of them were actually pretty vocal and they would be like, "No I don't believe in that." I was like, "Oh, okay. Well it's here if you want the information." And they're like, "No, I'm good."

While this does describe challenges in recruitment, it more obviously captures a passive aggressive behavior from students who are against the GSA existing by pretending not to hear the student while she is trying to deliver information. Another advisor (P13) mentioned that if the GSA has a public event, like a bake sale, they often have to be covert about who the bake sale benefits:

If we try to have a bake sale we can't tell them it's for the GSA or they won't buy it. We have to be really vague. When we do a bake sale we're like, "Oh, it's a student group. Buy this cupcake." They don't really care but if you tell them it's for the GSA they'll just walk away and won't do it.

Participants who reported this level of low-simmering hostility would mention that there was tension between advertising the group and not wanting to stir up greater levels of hostility from students.

Faculty and staff opposition. One area where opposition consistently increased from the forming to the maintenance phases was the level of faculty and staff opposition that GSAs face. It should be mentioned that like students, faculty members can be a source of support and a source of opposition at every phase of the GSA's existence. In analyzing the data, it was clear that faculty opposition in the maintenance phase was both subversive and overt. In some instances, this opposition was effective in ostracizing students and their faculty advisors alike.

Participants mentioned several examples of subversive opposition to the GSA and its members. One sub-theme of faculty and staff opposition was that student members of the GSA were treated differently by faculty once said faculty found out of their membership or their LGBT identity. One student (P15) mentioned her advisor helping her navigate this when she personally experienced it: “[e]specially in the South, that faculty [advisor] helps because sometimes you do encounter things where you're like this student said this or this professor is kind of acting different towards me since they found this out. He definitely helped with that.” This is an obvious example of faculty being both the source of and antidote for opposition and discrimination.

Faculty advisors mentioned their own experiences with discrimination and hostility from colleagues in the maintenance phase. Most of these examples were coded as “subversive” under this theme of faculty and staff challenges. One advisor (P16) said that she had resigned herself to not being popular with colleagues after the GSA started:

I do remember thinking, and this is just kind of joking but kind of not. I remember thinking, well, I'll never get teacher of the year. To get teacher of the year is voted on by your peers. I thought well, I guess I'll never get that but oh well, it's not a big deal. I knew that I was going to be sacrificing some support of other teachers at that school.

This same advisor said that she got a reputation for being “weird” among her colleagues and she “was the teacher that got the reputation for I don't know what.” A different advisor (P17) mentioned that the subtle hostility from her colleagues about the GSA led to feeling that her collegial relationships were compromised: “I think I didn't feel insecure in my job so much as I felt insecure in my relationships at my job.”

Not all experiences with faculty opposition were subtle or subversive. Some were outright hostile, directly threatening, or could count as forms of bullying behavior. One advisor (P16) mentioned an experience with her colleagues that her students were exposed to:

They [other faculty members] were talking to each other but they were talking to each other about the group in the hall during class change and they were using some really harsh language about it. They were using some insulting language. Specifically, they use the word “fag” and so a teacher had come to me who had overheard them...

In this particular instance, the principal at the school spoke directly to the offending teachers and indicated that this type of behavior would not be allowed. However, it had a negative impact on the students who felt that the GSA was in danger of going away. Another overt example of faculty opposition to the GSA and its programming was from an advisor (P17) who had otherwise positive experiences in her school system. In this example, GSA members were providing faculty with a training on how to use encourage the use of supportive and affirming language for LGBT youth in their classrooms. The reaction was hostile:

The teachers, there was this small handful of teachers who were overtly dismissive and hostile towards the kids and towards the cause. Who honestly really just didn't give a fuck, pardon my language, about the student body using the language towards gay kids. They didn't care. They were the same teachers who would protect their right to be non-PC, so you've got that whole kind of like anti-PC language and that too, that whole issue, the sort of political ... Not sort of, but very political. Basically, they were conservative and they were vocal in this meeting and they were offended. They were offended. They didn't want to talk about gay kids.

When asked how she felt in witnessing that behavior from her colleagues, she responded: “I am used to very ... I expect to be ... I hate to say this. I honestly just expected to encounter intolerance. I expected it.” It is unclear why faculty and staff hostility seems to increase in the maintenance phase while parent and community hostility decreases. One reason, which will be discussed in Chapter 5, may be that faculty, staff, and students have more exposure to the GSA

as time goes on whereas parents and community members are only aware of it as the controversy surrounds the group's formation.

Community opposition. Community pressure and opposition, like that from parents, appeared to be less of a challenge in the maintenance phase compared to the formation phase. However, notable incidents of community opposition were still present in the data. All of these incidents were in response to the GSA having some sort of community presence at a variety of events such as Pride. One student (P15), who was trying to advertise National Coming Out Week in her community, shared about the push-back she received:

I know we did some other events where we went out in the community. I mean it was Columbus so a lot of places we would go we would have these flyers and they were like, "No you can't put that flyer up in my store."

One advisor (P9) and her GSA had no challenges from the community until they had already formed and were well into their second year. Described in part above, this group formed by being strategically quiet about their efforts. After the group commissioned a float and appeared in the community Homecoming parade, tensions between the community and the group quickly escalated. The advisor first described the "classy" float that caused the controversy: "[n]othing, no words, no gay, no lesbian, no bisexual, no transgender, no acronym, no nothing, but a big old rainbow and rainbow t-shirts and rainbow wigs and rainbow socks, so there were rainbows." Despite what the group thought was their best effort to be "classy" and "appropriate", the harsh response from the community was severe and it was swift. She described the reaction from the community:

I mean, it's an event and we had our coming out. Then we had a lot of push back from the community, that we were corrupting the community and that we were corrupting the children. The superintendent got calls. The principal, assistant principals got confronted. I got a report, they were Google searching me to find out who I was because I'm obviously brainwashing these kids. A very strong and unexpected response after having such a quiet

first year, and the float was not over the top. It was not in your face. It was very classy. There were rainbows, but they're rainbows.

Similar reactions of community members appear with this example, including calling and threatening administration, and assuming that the faculty member is “brainwashing” the students.

Referring to the constant threat of push-back from community members, one advisor (P16) felt like the group found a way to handle the pressure through strategically keeping a low-profile: “[n]o, it's not as hostile because we're figuring out how to navigate it. It's almost like our existence is tolerated now as long as we don't call a lot of attention to ourselves.” Again, it seems that the amount of opposition from the community that a GSA receives is directly related to the level of visibility that the GSA has. It also seems that this threat of push-back influences the community-based activities and the general presence the GSA has.

Challenges in the social environment. While challenges from within the school system, such as opposition from various constituencies, were present in the data there were some challenges that could best be attributed to the broader social environment. These challenges were more nebulous, but very real forces that impacted the GSA in the maintenance phase. Often these challenges were structural in nature and less attributable to specific individuals. Challenges that the GSA experienced in the maintenance phase that arose from the social environment were coded under this theme. These included the continuation from the formation phase of fear, safety, and stigma (discussed together), and the emergence of transportation as a social challenge for students.

Fear, safety, and stigma. Fear, safety, and stigma manifested in unique ways after the GSA had started and were in the maintenance phase. Fear impacted attendance at GSA meetings, and influenced the types of programming and how “out” the group was within the

school and community. One advisor (P9) was ordered by her principal to keep a low-profile for her GSA as time went on, due to various fears:

Don't, we're not going to send this out to everybody because that would stir the pot" was the feeling. "We're going to upset people and we're going to create drama and chaos and conflict and split the school." That was kind of the fear.

Although this particular principal knew that she legally could not stop the GSA from existing, she wanted to stifle any “drama” and was afraid of upsetting the parents and community. Stigma, pervasive in the community and the region, appears to impact how open and out the GSA is within the school. This stigma was discussed as coming from “the state,” “the church”, or “the South” in very general terms. As one student (P12) mentioned “It's [the GSA] not very well advertised in my school. It's just like the South and people can be really weird about that kind of thing.” Even supportive, or semi-supportive parents, were not immune to impact of stigma. As one student/advocate (P3) explained:

Essentially, everyone in there ended being a GSA member, which was really fascinating partially because it was a lot more approachable for parents to [think] "I'm picking my kid up in philosophy club instead of Gay Straight Alliance."

While these parents may have known that their students were attending a GSA meeting, they had an easy out by telling others that their child was attending philosophy club to avoid any stigma from their social networks.

Vague (as opposed to direct) safety concerns from the social environment impacted GSA members and faculty. One teacher (P2), remarking on why she no longer felt safe after being outed as a transgender teacher who wanted to start a GSA, mentioned: “[t]hat's something that I don't have a choice but I'm not comfortable with it. For my own safety and my own career, I can't stay.” When pressed about whether she had received specific threats that impacted her safety, she had not but she felt that her safety was threatened or could be. Safety concerns also

guided the support that advocates provided students in the maintenance phase. One advocate (P7) mentioned that any legal support offered in the face of challenges was guided by the student's level of safety. He stated:

From MY ORGANIZATION's perspective, yeah, that's how it should go because it's really about building that youth leadership as well as ensuring their safety and that we're not pushing them into anything that they don't want to do or that makes it unsafe.

Like many challenges detailed in this section, it appears that overcoming great odds to start the GSA does not mean that the challenges in the social environment simply dissolve.

Transportation. One theme that emerged in the social environment in the maintenance phase was transportation. While transportation barriers could manifest at the individual level for youth trying to find a way to attend a GSA meeting, three participants discussed the lack of transportation as a regional issue that they perceived was unique to the Deep South.

First, three participants mentioned that low-income students face particular transportation issues. Particularly, low-income students may not have transportation of their own and therefore have to network with peers or parents in order to attend GSA meetings. Lack of transportation for low-income students may also mean that they have to have conversations with parents about attending the GSA and this may not be welcomed or easy. Also, low-income students may be forced to work after school, when GSA meetings typically occur, and therefore their socioeconomic status precludes their attendance in the group after it has formed. One student (P5) offered the following perspective on how lack of transportation and the need to work impacts students' ability to participate in a GSA:

...a lot of times GSAs meet after school, or they may even meet before school, so if you're taking the bus, you don't have a way to get home. You don't have a way to get to the school ahead of time, so you may not be able to participate all the time, you may not be able to be a leader. Students who don't have to work, that are able to go to the afterschool meetings, are able to do that.

In this example, the lack of transportation intersects with GSA involvement to have a specific impact on low-income students.

The inability to get from place to place was discussed as a problem of the Southern region. One participant (P12, student) mentioned that “public transportation either does not exist or it sucks in the South.” Another student/advocate (P10) had the following perspective:

Getting rides places, especially in places like NAME OF STATE where there is no public transportation that's worth anything, and especially for rural communities as well, was going to take you early to the GSA meeting, or is your parent able to pick your 9th grade self up from school so you can go to the meeting?

This was a crucial challenge for GSAs in the maintenance phase because youth who may need to stay after school for meetings may not have the freedom to do so without telling their parents. These parents, as mentioned in other sections, may not support their child's LGBTQ identity or their participation in such a group.

Fear of GSA failure. One final challenge that existed in the maintenance phase was the fear of the GSA failing. Experiences were categorized in this way if they discussed participant fear that the GSA was going to fail imminently (in the coming school year) or if the participant worried that one day it might fail. Participants also discussed a notion that, as one participant (P5, Advocate) put it, the “GSA is never going to be on solid ground. There is too much opposition from lots of places.”

Participant 16, an advisor, mentioned the tension between being too visible and the fear that the GSA may fail.

No, it's not as hostile because we're figuring out how to navigate it. It's almost like our existence is tolerated now as long as we don't call a lot of attention to ourselves. I'll start to hear more rumbles from the school community when we participate in the day of silence. Like we did spirit week last year. As long as we keep our head down and don't call attention to ourselves they seem to be all right with us, but if we do anything that's awareness raising...we have to be really vague.

As this advisor notes, as long as the GSA is not too visible, its existence is not threatened. However, fear of failure is on her mind to the point that it dictates the types of programming the GSA participates in.

The Theory of GSA Formation and Maintenance in the Deep South

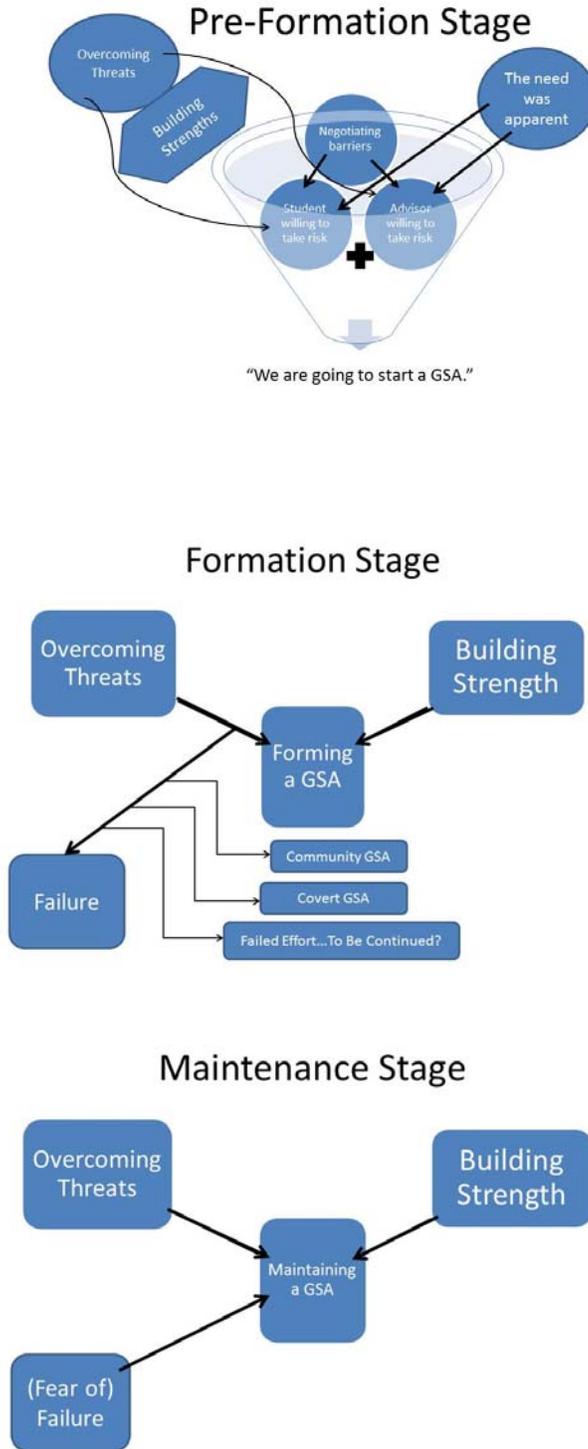
This chapter provides extensive detail about the categories and codes used to develop the core concepts of the emerging theory, which is presented visually at the start of this chapter. This section will detail the core concepts so as to expand on the initial discussion earlier in this chapter. This section will also describe the relationship between the concepts, categories, and codes and will close with a basic visual representation of the theory in Figure 1.

Core concepts. Through an iterative process of interviewing, memoing, data analysis, and member checking, a theory of GSA formation and maintenance emerged. This theory includes three core concepts that describe the distinct phases of a GSA: pre-formation, formation, and maintenance. These three core concepts have been described at the beginning of the chapter, and were used to frame the findings. Relatedly, there were four core concepts with a variety of categories and sub-codes that applied to the three phases that emerged in the final coding and theorizing stage (See Appendix H). These concepts are: negotiating barriers, failure, overcoming threats, and building strength.

As codes were refined, dropped from the theory because they were not consistently supported by data, or merged with other codes it became clear to me that the “essence” of the process was much more than a long list of strengths and challenges at each stage of a GSA (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) suggests that in the later stages of coding and theorizing the researcher should change the codes to verbs. This change reveals a process of “doing” instead of just “being” and this set of actions describes the emerging theory of what is going on in the data

(Charmaz). This transformation and its impacts are described below. It should be noted that while these four concepts relate to the three stages they do not always relate in the same way or to the same degree. These differences in application and degree will be noted below and expanded in Chapter 5. An overview of the full theory is presented below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Theory of GSA Formation and Maintenance in the Deep South



Negotiating barriers. This core concept was defined as any barriers or challenges that needed to be overcome in order to explore starting a GSA in the pre-formation stage. As data analysis progressed, the categories of “challenges in the pre-formation stage” and the specific challenges for the student and advisor willing to take a risk merged into the core concept of “negotiating barriers.” I arrived at this core concept by thinking deeply about the process of “getting started”. I asked myself the following questions: why do faculty and staff choose to become advisors? Why do students choose to start a GSA? What prevents faculty, staff, and students who may be supportive of such efforts from eventually trying to form a GSA? This last question led to my identifying actual and potential barriers from the data that prevented others from forming a GSA. I was also able to identify personal challenges and social challenges that participants experienced. Personal challenges, as opposed to macro ones, which were coded in this category were: being outed as LGBTQ or being perceived as LGBTQ, family acceptance, job security, and the perception that advisors are coercing students. It became clear to me that the concept of “overcoming” or “negotiating” these challenges was central to the pre-formation stage. All participants who had experience forming a GSA mentioned that they had to negotiate at least one challenge in their personal and professional lives. Many participants had to negotiate several barriers in order to commit to starting a GSA.

Advisors mentioned specific concerns they had to negotiate before agreeing to become an advisor. These specific concerns included job security and the perception that they were coercing students (which was stigmatizing). One advisor (P11) had an easy negotiation because she had so much support. But she recognized that other faculty might have a more difficult negotiation if they were approached about being an advisor:

Again throughout everything that happened I was also really clear on the law. I feel like there weren't any reasons why I was hesitant to put myself out there but I do wonder. If I were a brand new teacher or even if I were a teacher in the current climate of the evaluation process and tenure not really meaning very much anymore and if I had the principal that I have right this minute as opposed to either of the previous two, would it have been as easy for me.

Students, too, had unique barriers to negotiate when deciding whether or not to help start a GSA. These included the risk of being outed or perceived as LGBTQ and family acceptance. One student/advocate (P10) mentioned that students who did not have family support could not negotiate a way to help start a GSA: "I think also, with my high school, which was similarly [economically] privileged, if people who wanted to start GSAs had families who wouldn't back them, they weren't going to mess with that." Another student (P12) mentioned that students who weren't willing to be out were not able to become early leaders that could help start the GSA: "When you start telling people about GSA, you kind of out yourself as well. Not everyone is comfortable with that."

The specific sub-codes of "challenges in the broader social context" were: fear and stigma, lack of safety, faith or religious opposition, and invisibility of LGBTQ youth in schools. These sub-codes were included earlier in this chapter. It should be noted that not all challenges in the broader social context or personal barriers applied to the pre-formation stage only. Many continued to impact the GSA in later stages.

Failure (Failing). Failure was omnipresent as a core concept in understanding how GSAs are formed and maintained in this region. I was very interested in the examples of covert and community GSAs as a response when the GSA could not be formed in a school. At first, I was not sure how to code these experiences, or if they were even relevant to my developing theory. Initially, I coded them as "covert" and "community" and continued with my memoing

and analysis. I found it curious that even though I was asking participants about success, they would tell me about failures. Some participants shared personal stories about GSAs they knew that failed to form. Curiously, other participants discussed myth-like failures that they had heard of in other towns or other states but had not personally experienced. I memoed about what I titled a “storm cloud of failure” that seemed to be hanging over participants. Since examples of GSA failure, and the threat of failure, continued to emerge across the data I captured it with a code and allowed my thinking to continue to deepen. I was not sure if the code would emerge as a core concept or not.

As the three stages of a GSA solidified as core concepts, it was clear that the notion of failure cut across this model. The pervasiveness of failure mentioned by participants, coupled with the power that failure seemed to have at every stage, solidified my thinking that this concept was core to my theory. I applied “failure” as a core concept to examples of failure to form a GSA, responses to the failure to start a GSA within a school, and fear of GSA failure, which occurred in both the formation and maintenance stages. The responses to the failure to start a GSA within a school were listed under the category “creative approaches to GSA failure” and included a community GSA and a covert GSA. As one student/advocate (P3) mentioned, instead of succumbing to a failed effort to start a GSA within a school she “was working to facilitate our community GSA, which was for folk who didn't have that space outside of schools and also to help foster leadership amongst high school leaders.”

The fear of failure in the maintenance stage seemed to be on the minds of participants. For example, one advisor (P13) stated:

We're always at risk [of not existing], honestly. I worry that the GSA won't be around in a few years because sometimes it's a struggle to get members, to find programming, to

get the energy. I worry we will fail. And I worry that we will have to start the process of forming all over again. And I don't think it would work this time.

This fear, which was reported by nine participants, created a pressure to strengthen the GSA through programming and recruitment efforts. It was a crucial force that motivated and challenged participants at the formation and maintenance stages, making it a core concept in this theory.

Overcoming threats. The core concept of “overcoming threats” was another omnipresent theme in understanding this process and developing a theory about GSA formation and maintenance. I adopted Charmaz’ (2014) method of changing all codes to verbs, and it was clear to me that the challenges experienced by participants were not merely static. Participants would mention challenges they faced, and this was often accompanied by a strategy to overcome the challenge. As data analysis and theory development progressed, the concept of “challenges” changed into the core concept of “overcoming threats”. This change was made because it seemed to capture the essence of the process: one of resilience, survival, and overcoming challenges. While challenges permeated the data at every stage, the essence of the process was that participants were *overcoming* these challenges. This makes sense, in that I interviewed participants with successful experiences starting and maintaining GSAs.

This core concept applied to any examples of challenges at any level that participants needed to overcome in order for the GSA to survive. One example of this is an advisor’s (P9) and her students’ response to GSA signs being ripped down by hostile students:

One of our signs got ripped down for our meeting. That's it, one of ours. We had back up plans. We had plans to have signs behind signs because we expected signs to get torn down. We had thought through, when this happens, this. The person that tore the sign down got caught and got called out. That was good.

This quote perfectly captures a threat (signs being ripped down) and a way to overcome the threat (having extra copies so the sign can be replaced).

These myriad threats fell into 6 categories with 11 sub-codes and are listed in more detail Appendix H. Of course, not all GSA stories of formation or maintenance faced the same threats. Categories and sub-codes were included in the data if participants mentioned them on multiple occasions and/or if the degree of the threat seemed significant to me. It should be noted that all GSA stories included examples (often multiple examples) of having to overcome threats at various stages, and this pervasiveness across the data explains why it rose to the level of a core concept.

Building strength. The final core concept involved building the strength of the GSA. My thinking about challenges and strengths developed in tandem. I again changed codes to verbs, and it was clear that strengths were not stagnant in the minds and experiences of participants. It wasn't that strengths were listed by participants, or banked in case they needed them. Rather, it was that participants were leveraging these strengths in service of forming or maintaining the GSA. I thought deeply about these strengths, and the process of "building" strength and power. My thinking led to some lingering questions about which strengths are essential to the process of a successful formation and maintenance of a GSA in this region. I explain this lingering question at length in Chapter 5.

Another omnipresent theme, this was used to describe any example of supports at any level that the group and its members or supporters use to strengthen the GSA. Again, the core concept of "building strength" seemed to capture the process better than simply "strengths." There were 11 categories with nine sub-codes and again are listed in more detail in Appendix H.

One quote, by Participant 9 (an advisor) captures the category of “student organizational skills” as a way that the GSA built its strength:

It really wasn't hard for her [student willing to take a risk] to get students to support her, but she did not have great organizational skills. In order to be an organization, our school did have some guidelines which were good, because the school had guidelines, she had to get organized before she could even be considered an organization, so had to get signatures.

In this quote, the student had to take a weakness and build strength by improving her personal organization. This improvement built the strength of the GSA.

Another participant (P10, student/advisor) identified the LGBTQ network and in particular youth leadership summits as a way of building the capacity of GSAs:

Interviewer: So youth summits can serve as a leadership training or an informal way of...youth realiz[ing] what could work really well in [their] school?

Part. 10: Yeah. I think that's a huge part of those summits is, "My GSA played Jeopardy with LGBT 101 terms." Another GSA is like, "I like that. We're going to do that." That sharing of ideas is amazing.

The LGBTQ network provides the summit, which helps to build the strength of GSAs in the community.

Similar to the experience of overcoming threats, participants did not always have the same strengths or if they did it was not always to the same degree. The idea that people, strategies, social contexts, or resources were used to strengthen the GSA helped unite all participants' stories in the emerging theory, which is why it emerged as a core concept.

Overview of the emerging theory. A basic visual representation of the emerging theory, absent a detailed picture of the relationships between the core concepts, is pictured below in Figure 2. More detail about the emerging theory and its implications will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Figure 2: Overview of Stages of GSA Development



CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION

The present study sought to describe the process of GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South through interviews with 17 participants who were or are GSA student members, advisors, and/or community advocates. Through the use of coding, memoing, and member checking, three distinct stages of GSA development emerged, with four inter-related core concepts. This discussion chapter builds on the detail of the emerging theory introduced in Chapter 4 by describing the categorical relationships between the concepts of the theory. An illustrative case will follow, using a fictional account of a GSA in the Deep South that applies the core concepts and many of the categories and codes. Next, the discussion will detail how the theory was validated, using member checking of transcripts, member checking of the theory, and triangulation. Following the section on validation will be a section on how this current theory relates to current research. Then, implications of this theory for social work practice and policy will be discussed, followed by a discussion of questions that went unanswered in the study and limitations of the present study. This chapter will end with closing thoughts on the research project.

The Theory of GSA Formation and Maintenance in the Deep South: A Closer Examination

The six core concepts of this theory of GSA formation and maintenance, pre-formation, formation, maintenance, negotiating barriers, overcoming threats, building strengths, and failure, have been detailed in Chapter 4. This section will examine the relationships between the core

concepts and will offer implications for each phase and the overall theory. For a detailed visual representation of the entire theory, please refer to Figure 1 in Chapter 4.

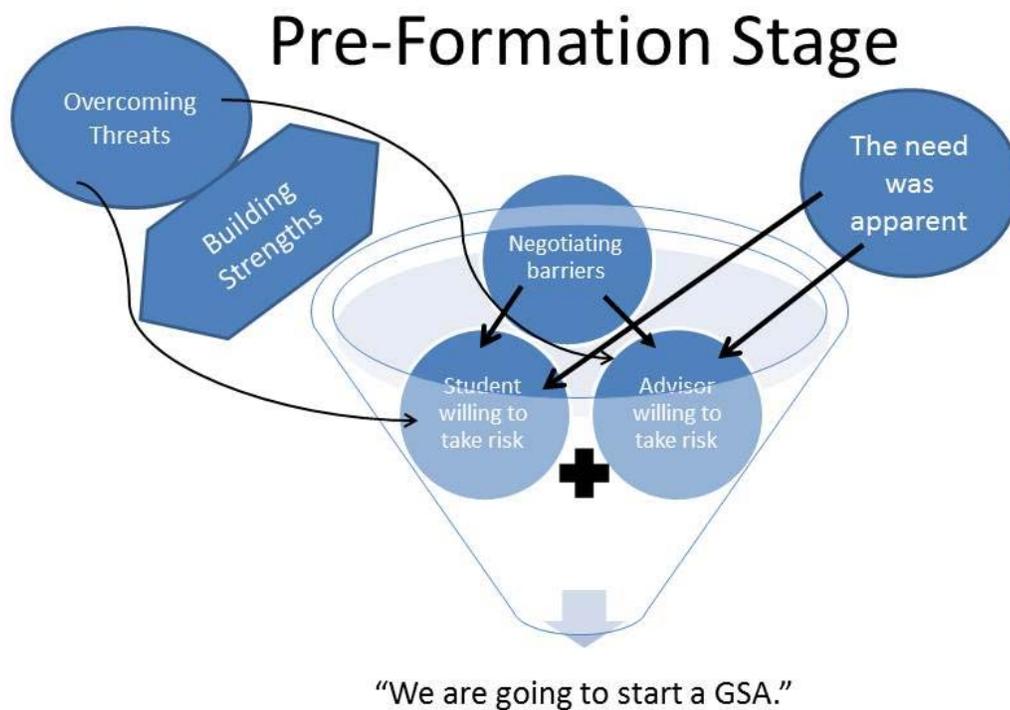
Categorical relationships. Although the core concepts are listed and described in Chapter 4, a more detailed picture of the relationship between core concepts is crucial in understanding the emerging theory of GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South. These relationships have implications for ways that social workers and other organizers can intervene to support the GSA process at each stage.

Relationship between core concepts, categories, and codes in pre-formation stage. As described in Chapter 4, the pre-formation stage emerged as a distinct stage prior to the direct efforts to form a GSA. Two categories emerged as key in this stage: a student (or students) willing to take the risk to start a GSA, and an advisor (or multiple advisors) who was willing to do the same. These individuals had to negotiate challenges in the social context (such as fear and stigma) and barriers in their personal lives (such as job security and family acceptance) in order to feel confident in stepping forward to help. The addition sign between student and advisor implies that both are necessary in the equation in order to proceed with efforts to form a GSA.

The funnel shape implies that all three core concepts and their sub-categories in the funnel are necessary in order to move forward with efforts to form a GSA. The strengths, sitting between the challenges and the funnel, offer a buffer between outside challenges and the student and advisor as they consider whether or not to agree to form a GSA. While the different shape of the strengths is not meaningful, the thinner arrows directed by the challenges toward the funnel are. These thinner arrows, compared to the thicker arrows from the “negotiating barriers” circle and the “need was apparent circle”, imply that the impact of the challenges are lessened since the strengths act as a buffer. As described in Chapter 4, six of the nine participants who started a

GSA had researched their legal rights and had received support from the LGBTQ Network, and this was empowering to them in the pre-formation stage and beyond. The perceived need to start a GSA, which includes an awareness of negative school climate, impacts both the student and advisor in such a way that it motivates them to move forward with efforts to start a GSA.

Figure 3: Relationship of Core Concepts, Categories, and Codes in the Pre-Formation Stage



Relationship between core concepts, categories, and codes in formation stage. As described above, the formation stage emerged as a distinct stage following the pre-formation stage and prior to the maintenance stage. Three core concepts emerged in this stage: overcoming threats, building strength, and failing. The concept of “overcoming threats” was

used to describe any examples of challenges that impacted the GSA and its members and supporters. These challenges had to be overcome in order for the GSA to form in this stage. The complete list of categories and codes is explained in Chapter 4 and can be found listed in Table 3.

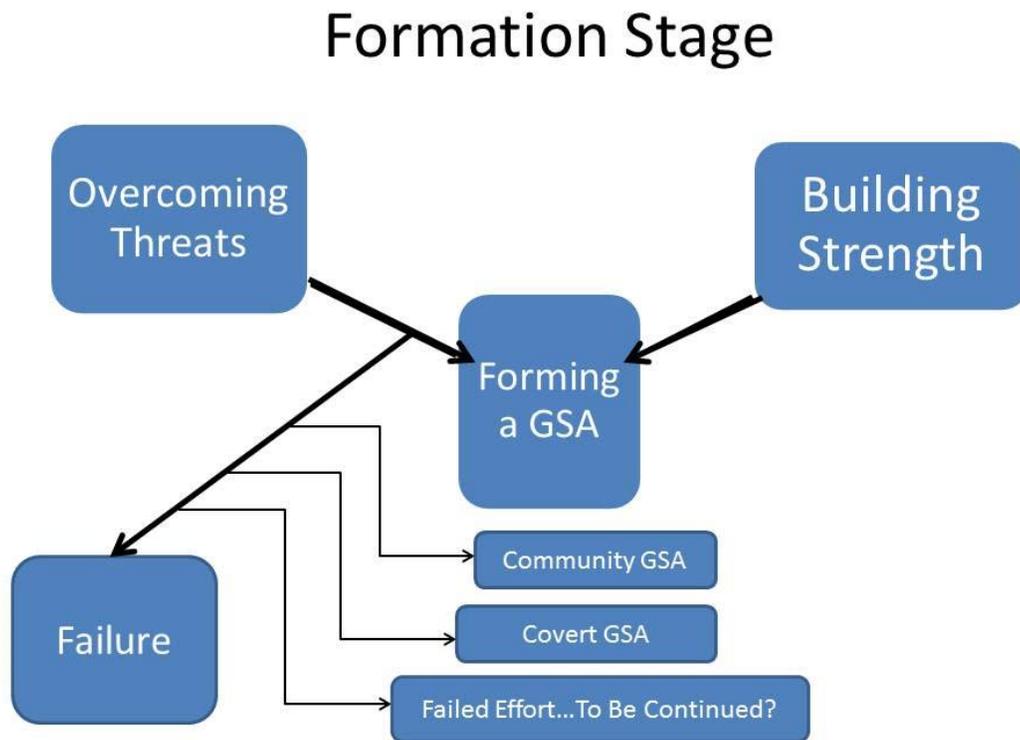
The core concept of “building strength” was applied to any example of strengths or supports that helped the GSA form. As there were a number of strengths that were distinctive enough to help illustrate the theory, a more detailed description of the strengths can be found in Chapter 4 and a list can be found in Table 3. The concepts of overcoming threats and building strengths were present in all GSA formation stories, although the degree of each concept varied. The arrows are meant to show that the core concepts both impact on the process of forming a GSA. As is illustrated in Figure 4 below, the actions of overcoming threats and building strength were both a part of the GSA formation story.

A third and opposite process of forming a GSA emerged in this phase: failure or “failing”. Failure happens when students, members, and supporters cannot overcome the threats to form a GSA within the school. This core concept was applied in this stage to experiences of failing to form a GSA and to creative responses to GSA failure in school. These creative responses included forming a community GSA and forming a covert GSA. The failed effort is also labeled “to be continued?” in the model to indicate that when these experiences were relayed by participants they also discussed a game plan to reignite organizing efforts to start a GSA in the future.

Failure, and some of the creative responses to it, is a result of failing to overcome threats. The direction of the arrow from the concept of “overcoming threats” to the concept of “failure” is meant to imply that the process of failure is the result of threats that are too strong to

overcome. Although outwardly this is a process of deficit, it can also be viewed as a process of resilience and creativity since even in failure space can be made for LGBTQ youth when traditional attempts to start a school-based GSA are not possible.

Figure 4: Relationship of Core Concepts, Categories, and Codes in the Formation Stage

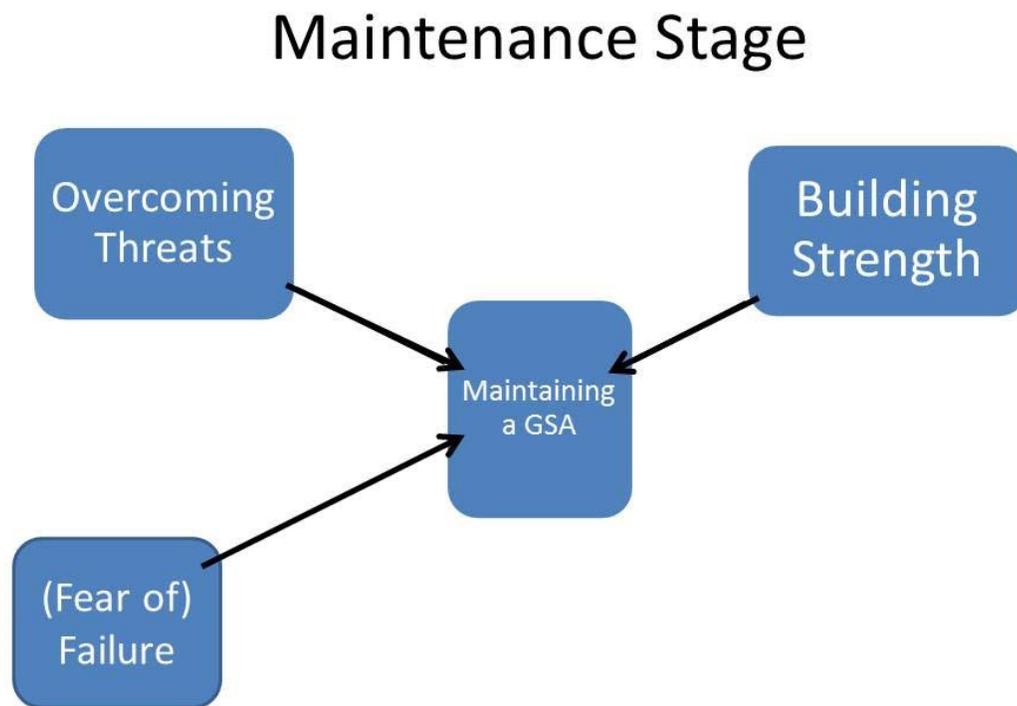


Relationship between core concepts, categories, and codes in maintenance stage. The maintenance stage emerged as a distinct phase of GSA development, as is described in Chapter 4. No new core concepts emerged that only impacted this phase, so the phase looks similar to the relationships between concepts and processes in the formation stage. Participants described the maintenance stage as one where members and supporters of GSAs had to overcome threats and build the strength of the GSA after it had formed. Notably, the law was not described as a

strength in this phase, suggesting that its protective impact is relevant in the pre-formation and formation phases only. Given that the law or legal support was used to help establish the group in the face of barriers at the administrative level, there seems to be little need for this type of support after the group has successfully formed.

No participant described the failure of a GSA from the maintenance stage, although this is entirely possible. Failure, as is depicted in the figure, was a threat to the process instead of an outcome like it was in the formation stage. Five participants described the fear that their GSA would not last due to a number of challenges highlighted in Chapter 4 (such as interpersonal issues and programming challenges). Failure operates on the ability to maintain a GSA, as is noted through the use of the arrow.

Figure 5: Relationship of Core Concepts, Categories, and Codes in the Maintenance Stage



Core concepts enter at multiple stages. It should be noted that in this model the core concepts of failure, the overcoming of threats, and the act of building strength were present in the formation and maintenance stages of GSA development. As codes evolved into themes and, later in the analysis, into core concepts, it became clear that these three concepts captured the process in a more universal way than earlier iterations of coding. As discussed above, the direction of failure changes from an outcome of the process (formation stage) to one that impacts or threatens the process (maintenance stage). The notion of overcoming threats and building strength remained much the same in both phases, although the nature of the threats and sources of strength may have shifted between phases.

Certain threats and strengths are ever-present. Some threats and strengths were present in all three stages of the theory. The LGBT network was listed as a strength in all three phases. It should be noted that students and faculty members willing to take a risk for the GSA have to remain present at all three stages because otherwise the group collapses. However, they appear in the pre-formation stage since it is here where they are most crucial. Their absence at this stage means that the GSA does not form and would not have been studied in this research project. Likewise, these students and faculty members need to negotiate through their challenges (in the social and personal realms) in order to feel comfortable helping to form or maintain the group.

Some threats and strengths were present in two of the three phases. Both the pre-formation and formation phases include the law or legal support as a strength in the process. Both the pre-formation and maintenance stages had shared threats in the broader social context, including fear, stigma, and safety. When comparing the formation and maintenance phases, there were a number of overlaps as well. For example, both phases involved multi-level

opposition from parents, students, and community members. They also shared strength in a commitment to a student-led process. Table 4 shows this information in a succinct format.

Specific threats and strengths are phase-specific. It should be no surprise that in an effort to generate a cohesive theory there was diversity within the experiences of the 17 participants and the GSAs they referenced. Certain threats and strengths did not appear in all phases of GSA development. Some appearances make perfect sense, such as the threat of not finding an advisor for the group being a major issue in the formation stage but not in the maintenance stage. Other appearances of specific threats and challenges were less intuitive and more surprising. Only threats and strengths that appear in one stage are discussed in this section.

The pre-formation stage had a number of unique strengths and challenges. The notion that the formation of a GSA was “serendipity” and the need for a GSA being apparent were strengths that obviously needed to happen prior to the GSA being formed. Likewise, specific personal barriers (such as job security, family acceptance, fear of being outed, and the perception that faculty members were coercing students) are barriers that need to be negotiated prior to the decision by a student or a faculty member to help form a GSA. While these forces may continue to impact the faculty and staff (for example, lack of family acceptance appears to explain some of the future threats students have in the formation and maintenance stages), they are less about negotiating the decision to be involved and more about general threats that the GSA may face.

Faith and religious views were discussed in future phases, but in different ways., When describing the pre-formation tasks, religious or faith-based opposition was discussed in the external, macro environment as something that needed to be overcome or negotiated by student or faculty supporters. In later phases, religious objections to the GSA or to LGBTQ people generally were discussed as motivating some opposition by parents, faculty and staff, students,

and community members. Therefore, the threat was coded as the person rather than nebulous faith-based opposition. This could explain why this code appears in only one stage.

Like the pre-formation stage, the formation stage also had a number of unique strengths and threats. As mentioned above, finding an advisor is an expected challenge at the formation stage. It makes sense that after the group has been formed and an advisor was necessary to its formation, this ceases to be a threat in the maintenance stage. It is also logical that the strengths mentioned only in this phase appear, since they largely relate to formation tasks. All strengths mentioned, from relying upon a supportive administrator to keeping a low profile, are either tasks that need to be accomplished to help the GSA form (such as mastering organizational tasks and gathering information) or are strategies (such as keeping a low profile so as not to call attention to the vulnerable group) that assist in helping the group form. These tasks and strategies may be less relevant once the group is already established.

It is curious that the threat of a rejecting or hostile administration rises to a code only in the formation stage. It could mean that administrators use their energy and hostility to prevent the group from existing, but that once it is established trying to dismantle it may seem like a lost cause or a poor use of energy. This may help explain why legal support is a category of importance in the pre-formation and formation stages, but less so in the maintenance stage. Specifically, legal challenges are levied at administrators (be they principals, superintendents, or boards of education) who try to block the process of starting a GSA.

Finally, the maintenance phase offers several threats and strengths unique to that phase. Some of these, like previous phases, are less surprising. Organizational practices, be they harmful or helpful, are only relevant once the organization has been established, which would exclude the two prior phases. Likewise, transportation threatens student participation in GSA

meetings and activities. Students need transportation to these activities only after the group has been formed, ruling out its emergence in the previous two stages.

Faculty and staff opposition arises as a threat in the maintenance phase only, and this is a surprising finding, largely because of its absence in the extant literature. When theorizing about the possible emergence in the maintenance phase only, the exact nature of faculty and staff opposition to the GSA provided context. Faculty and staff opposition, as described by the five participants who mentioned it explicitly in this category, arose in one of two ways. First, it arose in the form of subtle opposition to the students who participated in the GSA. Two student participants mentioned being treated differently by faculty and staff who knew they were GSA members or leaders. Second, it arose in blatant comments about the GSA or its programming. One participant described faculty and staff saying harassing and disrespectful things to GSA members and advisors after a mandatory training on LGBTQ competency organized and led by GSA members. Two participants described faculty members saying rude and disrespectful things in response to GSA activities or GSA flyers. These statements were made in the hallways or classrooms of the offending teachers. Obviously, faculty and staff can only react to a GSA after it already exists.

Why did faculty and staff opposition not impact the formation or pre-formation stages, at least not to the extent that it rose to the level of a category in the theory? One possibility is that faculty and staff may be insulated from efforts to form the GSA because they are not directly involved in such efforts and are therefore unaware of the efforts. Another possibility is that they are purposely insulated from efforts to form the GSA because organizers are deliberately keeping a “low profile” to minimize opposition from faculty and staff.

It is curious that tenure rises to a category only in the maintenance phase. This can be explained largely by participant experiences. When looking back at the data to try to theorize why this category emerged only in one phase, it was noted that those who mentioned the issue had experiences only in the maintenance phase and not in the formation of a GSA. It is certainly related to the code of “job security,” which is a personal barrier that faculty supporters of the GSA need to negotiate in the pre-formation stage. The extent to which tenure (or lack thereof) impacts the formation stage is unknown in this sample but should be examined in future research.

The summary of this discussion is in Table 4. Cells in yellow denote threats and cells in green denote strengths. Items in **bold** denote categories, and non-bolded items denote codes.

Table 4: Comparison of Threats and Strengths Unique to Each Phase of GSA Development

Pre-Formation	Formation	Maintenance
<p>“It was just serendipity”</p> <p>The need was apparent</p> <p>The broader social context: Faith or religious opposition Invisibility of LGBTQ youth in schools</p> <p>Negotiating personal barriers Being outed as LGBTQ... Family acceptance Job security</p> <p>Perception that advisors are coercing students</p>	<p>Finding an advisor</p> <p>Policy</p> <p>Multi-level opposition: Rejecting or hostile administration</p> <p>Supportive administration</p> <p>Gathering information Laying groundwork w/ faculty and staff Keeping a “low profile”</p>	<p>Harmful organizational practices</p> <p>Multi-level opposition: Faculty and staff opposition</p> <p>The broader social context: Transportation</p> <p>Organizational practices</p> <p>Tenure for faculty and staff</p>

Mastering organizational tasks

Failure as both an outcome and a threat. As mentioned earlier, failure as a core concept was versatile and omnipresent. It appeared in the formation phase as an outcome that could give way to creative responses in the wake of failing to establish a school-based GSA. In this phase, however, failure is the result of a blocked process to start a GSA. This is likely related to the inability of those involved to overcome threats. In the maintenance phase, fear was a force that impacted on efforts to maintain the GSA. The possibility of failure was something that was on the minds of eight participants, and it was something that they feared and actively tried to avoid. Four participants mentioned that this fear led to efforts to strengthen the GSA and minimize threats. In this model, the core concept of failure is related to categories of “fear” and “survival/surviving” although the aforementioned categories did not rise to the importance of a core concept. The way that fear and any related stresses impact GSAs in this region may be fruitful to explore in a future research project.

Summary of the theory of GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South. This dissertation study sought to answer the following research question: how do GSA members and supporters perceive the individual, school, and community contexts that impact the successful formation and maintenance of GSAs in the Deep South? Through data analysis, a theory grounded in these perceptions was developed on GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South. This particular theory can help explain the individual, school-level, and community-level strengths and challenges that aid in the successful formation and maintenance of these groups. This theory also offers a framework for how core concepts interrelate, providing community organizers, students, and faculty members with opportunities to intervene to support the success of GSAs. As a unique contribution, this theory postulates that there are three important phases to

GSA development in this region: pre-formation, formation, and maintenance. Whether this theory has explanatory power for GSAs in other regions of the country remains unexplored, but this unexplored question may prove fruitful for future research.

Validating the theory

Grounded theory methods are not meant as a way to test theory, but instead to build theory that is grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2014). Ensuring that the methods are rigorous and assessing if the theory can have explanatory power for similar situations is an important step in grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2014). In order to address this concern, in the current study in addition to having participants check their transcripts for accuracy, which was described in Chapter 3, once the emerging theory was developed, I asked three participants to offer feedback to see if the theory seemed logical and explanatory.

Three participants agreed to discuss the emerging theory of GSA formation and maintenance and to offer their feedback. The three participants represented different roles played within a GSA and also represented knowledge of different stages in GSA development. Two conversations took place over video conferencing, and one conversation happened face-to-face. Participants were presented with a model of the emerging theory as well as a chart that listed the core concepts, categories, and codes in the emerging theory.

The first participant was a student who had experience forming and maintaining a GSA. This participant mentioned that the three stages of GSA development felt true for her. She stated that they had a number of tasks, like getting a core group of students willing to help for the GSA as well as finding a faculty member to do so. This student did say that she did not have any experience with what might have prevented a faculty member from serving in this capacity, but she did imagine that they had to negotiate a similar set of personal barriers. This participant

commented that she was surprised that opposition from administration was not present in the maintenance stage of the model, since it was a part of her experience. She also verified the core concept of “failure” as it was one that impacted her experience with a GSA at the formation and maintenance stages.

The second participant was an advocate who had experience helping GSAs after they had been formed. He also had experience supporting students in their attempts to start a GSA, but these efforts ultimately failed. This participant said he identified as a part of the LGBT network that actively supports GSAs. He also felt that the core concepts and categories represented in the pre-formation stage felt accurate to him. He provided an example of a failed GSA effort that could not organize at the formation stage because they could not find any faculty members willing to take a risk. In this example, he stated that one faculty member who might have stepped up to serve as an advisor was terrified she would be fired from her job. To him, this supported the notions that “negotiation of barriers” and a “faculty member willing to take a risk” were vital in the pre-formation stage. He also suggested that legal support may play an essential instead of a variable role in this stage since all experiences he had involved legal support in some manner.

The final participant was an advisor for a GSA who helped start the group and served as advisor for years after the formation. This advisor shared in her original interview that she had a number of barriers she had to negotiate in order to be willing to take the risk to help form the GSA. She supported the three phases of GSA development, the core concepts of “overcoming threats” and “building strength” as well as “failure” and “negotiating barriers”. For her, she thought that certain categories and codes would have been represented throughout the model, including: religious opposition, invisibility of LGBTQ youth, and job security.

In closing, the three participants consulted were able to support the emerging theory of GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South. They seemed to agree with the major phases of GSA development and found the concepts to be explanatory of the process. They also generally agreed with the four remaining core concepts. They had questions, as a whole, about how specific categories and codes emerged (or did not) in the various phases of GSA development. When I explained that the emergence of categories and codes depended on what participants brought up in their individual interviews, they seemed to understand this. The advisor asked to what extent being in the Deep South influenced the process, to which I responded that this was an outstanding question resulting from this dissertation.

Findings in Relation to Current Literature

In Chapter 2, a presentation of relevant literature was offered to justify the present dissertation study. In this section, the findings of the present study are compared to relevant findings from current literature. This discussion is organized based upon the findings for each of the three phases of a GSA: pre-formation, formation, and maintenance. There is no current theory on GSA formation and maintenance in the literature, whether nationally or region-specific, making this research project a contribution to current scholarship on the subject.

Literature as it relates to the pre-formation stage. A number of studies in the literature relate to findings in the pre-formation stage. These topics include: employment protection, religious opposition, invisibility, and organizing in conservative social contexts.

Employment protection. The results of this study suggest that a lack of employment protection, or the perceived threat that a faculty member could lose their job by being an ally to the GSA, is a major threat at the pre-formation stage. The literature is ambiguous when it comes to how employment protections (or lack thereof) impacts GSA advisors or potential advisors

when making decisions about whether to serve as a support for GSA formation. Watson and colleagues (2010), in their survey of 22 GSA advisors from around the country, found that pro-employment “public policy,” which included union protection and state law, was helpful in that it made GSA advisors feel secure in their jobs after they were already serving as advisors. The extent to which these protections exist in the Deep South was not explored in the current study, but three advisors did not feel that such protections existed for them.

In the same study by Watson and colleagues (2010), advisors felt that one “consequence to advocacy” was the risk of losing their job (p 113). The threat of job loss appears to be a common concern for advisors (Adams & Carson, 2006), but the extent that it impacts decision making about whether to be involved or not in the pre-formation stage remains unexplored in the literature and is one contribution of this study. Findings from this dissertation suggest that the threat of job loss has to be negotiated through as a potential personal barrier prior to a faculty member agreeing to be an advisor. Two examples were present in the data that suggested if this barrier cannot be negotiated by the faculty member (for example, by the teacher believing they either have some legal recourse in the face of being fired or they can live with the consequences if they are fired), they will not proceed and help the GSA in the formation stage.

Religious opposition. Research has demonstrated that LGBTQ people generally, and youth involved in GSAs specifically, face religious opposition from community members (Griffin et al., 2004). These studies often focus on a macro-level religious opposition to the GSA and have not examined the specific ways that this opposition impacts a GSA’s efforts to form or maintain over time. When examining the Deep South in particular, it is no surprise that religious opposition to a GSA emerged as a theme in the data, given that polling data suggests that this region is both highly religious and politically conservative (Gallup, 2015; Newman, 2012).

Findings from the current study support that religious opposition is indeed a threat or challenge for a GSA and its members, but expands this analysis in important ways. First, the findings from this study suggest that this opposition may play a stronger role in a GSA at certain times, such as the pre-formation and formation stages. In addition, this study identifies several specific people within a school system who have levied religious opposition to a GSA. These include: students, faculty and staff, administrators, parents, and community members. While the different sources of opposition could be thought of as one macro-level challenge, this study departs from current research in suggesting that who is directing the opposition may matter when examining how it impacts the GSA.

Invisibility. The findings of this study suggest that the invisibility of LGBTQ youth and the youth's needs within a school system contributes to the challenge of making the case that a GSA is needed in the pre-formation stage. While no studies could be located that examined how invisibility impacted GSAs in the pre-formation or formation stages, these findings do support the work of Gray (2009) in her examination of queer youth visibility in the Deep South. Gray noted that queer youth in this region did not see themselves represented in the media and that urban LGBTQ people in the Northeast and West were more often visible. Gray's (2009) findings seem to support why administrators and other faculty and staff have a hard time believing that LGBTQ youth are amongst the student population in their community. The later adult narratives of Sears (1991), Howard (1999), and McWhorter (1999) expand on the notion that the dual identities of "LGBTQ" and "Southern" are not represented often in popular culture, which could help explain why LGBTQ youth in this region are rendered invisible.

Organizing in conservative social contexts. As has been explored in Chapter 2, there is a paucity of research on youth organizing on conservative social contexts. By extension, there is

a lack of research on how such conservative social contexts impact strategies employed by young people to advance their social justice causes (Richards-Schuster et al., 2013). In their work examining LGBTQ organizing in Mississippi, Richards-Schuster and colleagues (2013) and Young and colleagues (2013) found that there were creative approaches employed by LGBTQ youth and allies to modify national materials and common customs defining who qualifies as “youth”. These modifications were employed creatively and strategically by youth who wanted to mold how free materials and common organizing conventions could fit their particular cultural contexts (Richards-Schuster et al., 2013; Young et al., 2013).

Findings from this study broadly support these previous findings. In particular, the response of youth in the face of failure to start a GSA in their school constitutes a similar creative adaptation to cultural realities. For example, when efforts to start a GSA were reported by participants in this study, there were efforts to start a covert GSA or a community GSA. While much more research is needed, these studies taken together suggest that there is a lack of recognition of the cultural realities of LGBTQ youth in the Deep South or other conservative regions in the U.S.

Literature as it relates to the formation stage. A number of studies relate to findings from the formation stage of GSA development. These topics or themes include: opposition from administration, barriers that advisors face, and the LGBT network.

Multi-level opposition from administrators. The opposition posed by administrators to a GSA is well-documented in the literature, and this study found many examples of such opposition. One participant (P5), an advocate, mentioned that she was told by an administrator that the GSA amounted to a “sex club” and was “inappropriate.” These experiences correspond to the findings of O’Shaughnessy and colleagues (2004) who found similar experiences amongst

GSAAs in California. O'Shaughnessy and colleagues (2004) found that administrators would levy charges that the GSA was not age appropriate, and would try to block formation and programming due to perceived sexual content.

GLSEN and Harris Interactive (2008) offer the most in-depth examination of GSAAs and LGBTQ student issues from a principal's perspective. In their national survey of 1,580 K-12 principals titled "The Principal's Perspective: School Safety, Bullying, and Harassment," they found that four out of 10 principals did not think LGBTQ students would feel safe in their school. When asked about whether they perceived their peers (other administrators) would be allies for LGBTQ school safety issues, 75% of those surveyed felt their peers would be encouraging or supportive. While this current dissertation cannot make claims about the percentage of supportive principals, this number does seem high when compared to the examples of hostile administrators encountered by the 17 participants. A further examination of levels of hostility from principals could be the topic of future research.

Advisor barriers. Some research examines both the characteristics of GSA advisors and the experiences that they face in their role. Research suggests that many advisors find their role rewarding, and anecdotes from advisors in this study suggest that this is the case (Russell et al., 2009). At the same time, advisors also face barriers and challenges. Barriers highlighted in the literature can be an extension of what was explored in the pre-formation stage. For example, advisors may face a lack of resources, may feel vulnerable due to their minority sexual orientation, or may feel a lack of support from the community (Russell et al., 2009; Toomey et al., 2011).

This current study supports previous findings that advisors face. In particular, this study found that advisors had their jobs threatened by parents and community members. They also

faced subtle threats from administration. These findings are underexplored in current research, and they are concerning: they underscore the importance of job security for teachers, who play a crucial role in the GSA. Current research does not make the distinction between the three phases of a GSA, making this one important contribution of this current study.

LGBTQ network. Current research has suggested that the presence of community-based LGBTQ resources and support can play a role in GSA formation and maintenance in schools. Fetner and Kush (2008) were influenced by social movement theory, which suggests that areas with more access to LGBTQ social networks and resources are more likely to be early adopters of GSAs. Indeed, in their research examining what predicted the early adoption of GSAs, they found that areas with fewer resources were less likely to be early adopters of GSAs (Fetner & Kush, 2008). The South was the region with the lowest percentage of early-adopter schools. Kosciw and colleagues (2014) also found that students in the South had less access to LGBTQ resources and community-based supports. Both of these studies lack an important examination of exactly how these resources support the GSA in forming or maintaining over time.

Instead of focusing on the deficits of this region, the current study found that the LGBTQ network did play a role in supporting GSAs at all stages. This particular study extends current research by providing information about the ways that the broader LGBTQ network functions to support the GSA. This is an important contribution to the field of social work, in that if we understand better *how* the network functions to build strength we can work to replicate these relationships between an existing network and the GSAs in the community.

Literature as it relates to the maintenance stage. The literature offers a number of findings that relate to findings in the maintenance stage of a GSA from this study. These topics include: opposition from faculty and staff, as well as access to transportation.

Multi-level opposition from faculty and staff. Faculty and staff opposition to a GSA and its members is present in current literature. Although present in the literature, the focus is on subtle forms of opposition or ways that faculty and staff passively resist intervening to make the school climate safer for LGBTQ students. Kosciw and colleagues (2014), in their nationally representative survey of over 2,000 students, found that the majority of youth were unwilling to report incidents of LGBTQ harassment to teachers because they did not think the teachers would take the situation seriously. Relatedly, over 60% of these youth said that teachers and staff did nothing to intervene after they received complaints of peer-to-peer harassment (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Very few studies highlight incidents when the faculty and staff themselves are the perpetrators of bullying or hostility. Mishna and colleagues (2009) did find that teachers, staff, and administrators were mentioned as perpetrators of harassment by the nine youth interviewed from Canada. Findings from the present study extend findings in current research by describing specific examples of how faculty and staff behave in hostile ways toward students. These examples, provided in more detail in Chapter 4, include: the perception of being treated differently by teachers once they realize a student is a member of a GSA, serving as an outspoken leader of a GSA counter-group, and openly making pejorative remarks about LGBTQ people in the hallway at school. This level of detail is not documented in the literature, and suggests further exploration.

One additional and important contribution of these findings is the documentation of faculty-to-faculty hostility. Three of the six advisors mentioned feeling ostracized by their colleagues, facing hostility from them directly for serving as a GSA advisor, and having to directly challenge hostile language about LGBTQ people from their peers. While the majority of

literature focuses on neutralizing bullying that is peer-to-peer in nature, there are no studies that explore harassment from faculty toward their colleagues and toward youth. This warrants further exploration in future studies that could examine the social context and regional differences in these behaviors, effective solutions for minimizing these behaviors, and an exploratory examination of the pervasiveness of these behaviors.

Transportation. Access to transportation has been examined minimally in LGBTQ youth literature, and when it has been examined it is in terms of functioning as a social support or resource for LGBTQ youth. For example, Nesmith and colleagues (1999) found that family or friends willing to provide a ride to an LGBTQ-related event were providing a much-needed form of social support. Access to transportation, seen broadly as a part of a package of social supports and links, can contribute to LGBTQ youth feeling less isolated and emotionally distressed (Doty et al., 2010). The link between access to transportation (particularly public transportation) and GSAs is related to existing literature insofar as it links LGBTQ youth to a support system. The relationship between access to public transportation and overall strength of GSA efforts is unexplored and could provide fruitful material for future research.

Findings in Relation to Existing Theories

In Chapter 2's discussion of the literature, four theories are presented as having informed the development of this research project. In this section, I discuss how the theories go beyond influencing the research protocol and design to how they can help understand portions of the research findings. Specifically, queer theory, oppression theory, systems theory, and social movement theory are examined for links to research findings. These theories, taken together, undergird the emerging theory of GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South.

Queer theory. Queer theory provides a natural link to understanding participant responses. By highlighting the binary systems of male/female and straight/gay it helps to explain why certain identities are marginalized within broader culture (Marinucci, 2010). As one participant astutely noted, “schools are microcosms for the larger community,” and, therefore, the marginalization that LGBTQ youth face in the community is reflected within the school system.

The notion that those who stray from social norms can be “punished” is central to understanding how queer people and their allies experience oppression, stigma, and exclusion (Butler, 2010). These experiences of oppression, stigma, and fear manifest in the experiences of participants in the study. Seven participants described feeling marginalized, unsafe, and invisible. These feelings stemmed from how they were treated by a number of hostile parties including: parents, administrators, faculty and staff, fellow students, and community members. These feelings and experiences were captured in the core concepts of “overcoming threats” and “negotiating barriers”.

Queer theory can also help explain some opposition to the GSA forming or being maintained. Since this theory speculates that those people or identities considered “abnormal” will be shunned or punished in order to try to achieve conformity to the dominant part of the binary identity, it highlights the pressure on such groups in the formation stage. GSAs in many cases represented something that challenged community norms both within and beyond the school. Five participants mentioned that GSAs and/or LGBTQ people were not considered “normal” or “natural” in their transcripts. Others mentioned similar opposition from various people that was tied to religious norms of what constituted a “natural” person or marriage in the

eyes of God. Queer theory's relationship to faith-based opposition should be explored in any future studies.

Oppression theory. Related in many ways to queer theory, oppression theory seeks to explain how and why dominant groups obtain power over oppressed groups. Examples of oppression in the study were rich and pervasive across GSA phases, states included in the sample, and roles participants played in a GSA. Notably, the core concepts of “overcoming threats” and “negotiating barriers” illustrate the myriad experiences of oppression that GSA members and supporters face when seeking to form or maintain a GSA. Not all experiences labeled as “threats” are examples of oppression, but many are. These oppressions include: multi-level opposition, the negotiation of barriers in the social and personal contexts, and policy which can be modified to deliberately oppose GSA formation efforts.

Thompson's (2006) three levels of interaction in oppression theory are also present in the data. The social order, which maintains the status quo, seems related to policy modifications that are enacted to deliberately try to stifle GSA efforts. The social order is also maintained through a lack of employment protections for faculty members. These policies (or lack of policies) are a tool to maintain the status quo in favor of privileging straight and cisgender people. The cultural level's regulations about how groups treat and relate to each other seem related to experiences of a lack of family acceptance, religious and faith-based opposition, and opposition at the community level. Family- and faith-based messages against LGBTQ people are transmitted and help reinforce the privilege of the dominant groups, and this was reflected in the data. Finally the personal level, where people enact their thoughts and feelings about others, is demonstrated in the hostility and opposition that is emitted from administrators, students, and parents directly

to the GSA members and supporters. All of these forces seek to oppose LGBTQ visibility and support within a school system, which makes the oppression of LGBTQ youth more difficult.

Systems theory. Systems theory provides a useful lens through which to view participant responses in this study. Systems theory describes a process as a series of interrelated parts that each play a unique role in the maintenance of the system (Gortner, Nichols, & Ball, 2007). This theory helped me view the school as a system with a number of interrelated people whose roles were important to understand in relation to a GSA. For example, participants highlighted the specific role that principals and other administrators played in the pre-formation, formation, and maintenance phases. When a principal was described as supportive, it impacted the GSA system by making the formation and maintenance easier. Alternately, when a principal was described as antagonistic, this impacted the GSA system by making tasks (like submitting paperwork or reading announcements over the PA) much more difficult.

Participants discussed a number of roles that were vital to the emerging theory. First, in the pre-formation stage, a student or students willing to take a risk coupled with a faculty member willing to do the same was necessary in order for the GSA to advance to the formation stage. These students and faculty members played the role of organizer and innovator. Such students were described as “natural leaders”, “passionate” and “bright” suggesting that they brought these characteristics to the role that they played in helping form the group. Faculty members were described as “trusted” and an “ally”.

In the formation stage, a number of new roles emerged. The role of faculty advisor was a key one in this stage, as was student leadership. Administrators played both a role of support and of opposition according to participants in this phase. The role that members of the LGBT network played, including providing support to GSAs while they are forming, continued to be

important. Finally, a number of opponents in various roles emerged in this phase including those of students, parents, and community members.

Finally, in the maintenance phase, students and the LGBT network emerged as important positive roles within the system that supported the GSA. The role of advisor emerged as one that could have a negative impact on GSA maintenance, largely through tactics that were described as being “adultist”. Parents, faculty and staff also influenced the GSA in this stage largely through opposition. As a whole, the way that these people interrelate within the system is vital to understanding the emerging theory of how GSAs are formed and maintained.

Beyond the roles that people play, systems theory also helps us interpret the reactions that opponents have to the formation and maintenance of a GSA. When viewed through a systems theory lens, the formation and maintenance of a GSA represents a change to the school system and a threat to the status quo. Key forces are in place to maintain the status quo (an absence of a GSA) such as invisibility of LGBTQ youth and fear and stigma that many LGBTQ people and allies reported. In all three phases, whether participants are reporting actions to start the group or keep it running, they face multi-level opposition. While oppression theory and queer theory may cause us to view this as a way of maintaining power and dominance, systems theory may cause us to view these actions as a way of preserving homeostasis. While this dissertation did not include participants who were opposed to such efforts, if preserving the status quo is at the heart of their opposition this could inform how opponents are approached in terms of the messaging and communication to try to counter the opposition.

Social movement theory. Participants discussed issues of networks, resources, and relationships and these experiences seemed to relate directly to social movement theory. For one, social movement theory helps explain how the LGBTQ network in the larger community

emerges as a social support for and a potential driver of GSAs. As was explored in Chapter 4, all participants mentioned at least some connection between their GSA (or several GSAs they had experience with) and the wider LGBTQ network. Some relationships involved superficial connection, such as student members of a GSA taking field trips to local LGBTQ organizations. Other relationships were deeper, and involved the LGBTQ network providing considerable support to the local GSA. This support varied, from organizations donating money to GSA events, providing leadership training for students, and hosting youth events (such as community proms) for the students. This theory would suggest that when movements have the support of the surrounding community, they tend to be more successful. While tests of causality are outside the scope of this qualitative dissertation, the findings of this research project seem to lend credibility to this, which could be tested in future research.

Implications for Practice

The profession of social work has multiple intervention points, typically described as micro (or individual-level), mezzo (family or small group) and macro (broader social and policy) contexts (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2015). This study has implications for social work practice at all three levels. While some of the implications would be discussed in multiple levels (for instance, supporting family acceptance could be described in the micro and mezzo level) others are mentioned in only one section of practice.

Micro-level. Working with clients to impact the individual level is a crucial task of social work practice. As a strengths-based profession, social work seeks to enhance strengths and strategize with clients on how to minimize threats to their wellbeing. The following suggestions are ways to enhance strength at the micro level: support students, faculty, and staff and link GSA members and supports to resources. The tasks of avoiding assigned advisors,

neutralizing student and faculty opposition, and discouraging disorganization are ways to minimize threats at the micro-level.

Enhancing strengths. A variety of techniques can work to enhance strengths at the micro level in order to support GSAs in schools.

Support students, faculty, and staff in their efforts. GSA members and supporters face opposition, it seems, at every turn. This opposition can create feelings of fear, isolation, and invisibility for the students, faculty members, and likely administration and staff who support the GSA. As we know from research, these feelings can be especially dangerous in LGBTQ youth due to their risk of increased health and mental health challenges that are often the product of oppression (Russell, 2005). Supporting the advisors and members of GSAs, knowing they will likely face strong opposition in this region, is an essential social work skill at the micro level. This can include classic social work skills such as listening, demonstrating empathy, and validating feelings. It can also include more public demonstrations of support, such as intervening when observing oppression, mediating disputes between supporters and opponents of the GSA, and serving as a public ally of the cause both within and outside of the school.

Based upon the findings, supporting students, faculty, and staff may also include educating individuals about the threats they may face and the strengths that may be present to support the GSA. For example, it may behoove a social worker to help students develop the necessary organizational skills that can assist the GSA in becoming stronger. It may also include educating faculty and staff about their legal rights, where they can turn for additional support if they face opposition from their colleagues, and how they can avoid adultism by nurturing student-led action if they are advisors.

Link to resources. One way to support the efforts of a GSA, particularly when the group is facing opposition, is to link GSA members and supports to relevant community resources. These resources, as mentioned in the data, could be legal support that assists the members and supporters in challenging any illegal opposition to the starting or maintenance of a GSA. These resources may also be part of the LGBT network of non-profit organizations and supportive individuals in the community. Of course, in order to link members and supporters to resources a social worker must be aware of what resources exist in the community.

Minimizing threats. A variety of threats can be minimized at the micro level in order to support GSAs in schools. These include: avoiding assigned advisors, neutralizing student and faculty opposition, and discouraging disorganization.

Avoid assigned advisors. Although a small point, participants who spoke about assigned advisors mentioned that they were not successful. While an administrator may want to appear neutral and not “stick” any particular teacher with the controversial task of serving as a GSA advisor, a social worker should educate the administrator about why this will not work. In particular, there were stories about assigned advisors who felt uncomfortable with the club and ended up sabotaging the process. In addition, a social worker should understand that the advisor can play a crucial support role to students by making them feel affirmed and safe. It appears that voluntary advisors are best practice for GSAs in this region in order to avoid having a GSA advisor that is actively working against the group. In fact, a school social worker may be in a position to step up as an advisor if another volunteer cannot be found.

Neutralize student and faculty opposition. This study demonstrates that GSA members and supporters face a number of threats to the group existing. For social workers who practice within a school, it may be feasible to have conversations with opponents in an effort to neutralize

opposition. Most naturally, these conversations could occur between a social worker and students or a social worker and faculty or staff. The social worker could seek to listen to the concerns of the opponent. The social worker should also seek to educate the opponents on the legal rights of a GSA to exist and the reasons why such a group is necessary within the school.

Discourage disorganization. Social workers supporting a GSA should remember that failure to turn in paperwork related to starting a school-based club is an avoidable misstep in the process. A few participants in the sample mentioned that the failure to be organized could have resulted in a failed effort to start the GSA. Knowing that youth have not always developed reliable organizational skills, a social worker can educate students and their advisors about the importance of the timely submission of paperwork, and can help develop a plan for turning in paperwork on time. They can also discuss that while some opposition is difficult to neutralize (for example, opposition from community members), this is one way to minimize any threats to the GSA process and it is relatively easy to control.

Mezzo-level. Working with families and small groups is another crucial task of social work practice. The following suggestions are ways to enhance strength for GSAs at the mezzo level: encourage student-led efforts, lay groundwork with faculty and staff, and foster organizational practices. The tasks of encouraging family acceptance, helping adults avoid adultism, and planning for recruitment challenges and turnover are ways to minimize threats at the group or mezzo-level.

Enhancing strengths. A number of strengths encourage success for a GSA at the mezzo, or group, level. These include encouraging student-led efforts, laying groundwork with faculty and staff, and fostering healthy organizational practices.

Encourage student-led efforts. The notion that GSA formation and maintenance efforts can be student-centered and student-led emerged as a code in both phases. As was discussed in Chapter 4, in the formation stage participants noted that GSAs tended to succeed when efforts to start them were student-led. One advocate (P8) discussed a failed effort to start a GSA in Tennessee that lacked student leaders and members. In this situation, teachers were eager to show their support, but the advocate indicated that the efforts fizzled out due to lack of student support. Similarly, in the maintenance phase GSAs seem to grow stronger when students direct the efforts at programming, when adults meet the students at the level “they are at”, and when the GSA is allowed to evolve over time based on student need and interest. Participants mentioned that it was normal for GSAs to change focus from year to year, such as starting as a support group and evolving to have activist programming.

Social workers, when working with the GSA as a group, should remind students that they have power to direct the programming efforts of the GSA and this seems to strengthen the group over time. In addition, they should work to educate advisors that student-led efforts to both start and maintain a GSA appear to be more effective in the long run. Advisors in this sample seemed perfectly comfortable with youth-led efforts, but other advisors (or potential advisors) not sampled may not be used to letting youth take leadership positions over adults. Social workers can also normalize the evolution of the GSA’s purpose over time by sharing examples from other successful GSAs. This may be a challenge for some advisors (or some students) who want to push the group in one direction or the other due to their own passions. As one advisor mentioned, “the group’s purpose is not about me but about the students.”

Lay groundwork with faculty and staff. In thinking of faculty and staff as a group within the school system, efforts to educate this group about the purpose of the GSA as it is forming

appear to help strengthen the GSA. Two participants mentioned that this was a part of their strategy at the formation stage. Social workers within the school system could play an integral role in efforts to educate faculty and staff about ways that LGBTQ students are at risk for negative health and mental health outcomes, how GSAs work to counter these efforts, and ways that faculty and staff can serve as allies to these students within the school. Interestingly, efforts to educate faculty and staff appear to be at odds with efforts to “keep a low profile” for the GSA which was also mentioned as a strength in the formation stage.

While this study cannot resolve the tension between openly educating faculty and staff at the formation and also keeping formation efforts a secret, social work practice would suggest that building allyship and understanding for LGBTQ youth when possible is preferable. Participants who mentioned keeping formation efforts a secret, coded as “keeping a low profile”, mentioned that it was a strategic response to a hostile school climate. In order to assess which strategy would be most beneficial when starting the GSA, a social worker could meet with key students and faculty members who wish to start the group. Together, they could assess whether a low profile or an open process of education would be most effective.

Foster healthy organizational practices. After the GSA has formed, there are several organizational practices that a social worker could help foster within the group. Knowing that interpersonal issues, such as in-fighting and cliquish behavior, tend to negatively impact the group a social worker could educate GSA members about these issues. A social worker could also work with the group to find ways to work through any bickering and fighting in a healthy manner. Educating the group, meeting with individual members in conflict, or mediating any conflict within the larger group, could also help

In addition to mediating conflict, social workers could work with the entire group to develop cohesive programming, implement regular meeting times, and create agendas for the meetings. All of the aforementioned group tasks have been identified as strengths for the GSA as a whole. Building on individual leadership skills above (such as timely completion of paperwork) as well as group skills (such as programming and consistency in meetings and agenda) could be thought of as a broader set of student leadership support that benefits both the individual student and the group as a whole.

Minimizing threats. A number of notable threats arise at the mezzo level that a social worker may be uniquely prepared to address. These threats include: lack of family acceptance, advisor “adultism” in the GSA, and recruitment and turnover challenges that impact the group.

Family acceptance. The degree of family acceptance an LGBTQ student has, anywhere from fully accepting to fully rejecting of LGBTQ identity, can impact the GSA in ways that might not seem obvious at first. First, a lack of family acceptance was cited by nine participants as a reason why GSAs were necessary in schools. Second, five participants mentioned that a lack of family acceptance often forced students to lie to their parents about participating in a GSA or meant that they were unable to participate in the GSA altogether. Family acceptance, particularly for students who did not have it, was identified as a personally barrier that students had to negotiate in order to push efforts to start a GSA.

Many of the recommendations made in this section apply more easily to social workers in a school setting. Fostering family acceptance, however, can be the work of social workers who engage with families both inside of and outside of schools. Helping families to accept their LGBTQ child by lessening harmful behaviors (such as kicking their child out of the home or avoiding talking about their child’s LGBTQ identity) and increasing supportive behaviors (such

as providing unconditional love to their child and allowing their child to access age-appropriate and affirming LGBTQ materials) is key to fostering family acceptance (Ryan, 2010). One suggestion based on this study is social work practice that fosters family acceptance may actually be an indirect way to support GSAs.

Avoid adultism. Adultism, defined by the Free Child Project (2003), describes behaviors by adults that are “based on the assumption that adults are better than young people, and entitled to act upon young people without their agreement,” (p. 1). Six participants, who spanned the roles of student, advisor, and advocate, mentioned that this behavior in a group had a negative impact on GSA formation and maintenance. As one participant, who was both a student and later an advocate, astutely noted when the advisor wants the group to be “all about them” it is “not good for building youth leadership and it's also not good for making the GSA a space that young people actually want to be in.”

Knowing that adultism has been identified as a threat to GSAs, a social worker could help the group assess for it, identify ways to stop the behavior, and work one-on-one with the faculty advisor or other adults when necessary. Social workers can educate adults on best practices for working with youth. Social workers can also educate students in the group about how the adults exhibiting this behavior may often be coming from a kind and positive place in their intentions. By ultimately focusing on why youth-led efforts are a strength and not a threat, it may help to diffuse any defensiveness that adults may feel when their behavior is examined.

Plan for recruitment challenges and turnover. Groups require membership, and recruiting members for the GSA was a threat in the maintenance phase. Some of this challenge appeared to be explained by the threat of student turnover, which participants felt was a challenge shared by other high school student groups. Part of the challenge, however, did seem

to be GSA-specific. This included recruitment experiences (such as tabling at a student organization fair) that were met with hostility from other students. Recruitment of students friendly to the GSA was complicated by experiences where students did not have family acceptance of their LGBTQ identity and were, therefore, prevented from participating in the group that may have otherwise benefitted them.

Social workers can meet with the GSA to help students and advisors identify likely recruitment and turnover challenges that the group may face. A social worker may be in a unique position to discuss solutions to these challenges by empowering students in particular to develop an action plan. Some participants in this study mentioned that their group actively planned for turnover and deliberately recruited younger members for leadership positions. This seemed to buffer the group from failure when older students, who were often leaders, graduated. The social worker can normalize some of these natural challenges for the group to avoid burnout or frustration experienced by members. The social worker may also want to link students and faculty members to the wider LGBTQ network to help group members seek support and find inspiration from other GSAs who have successfully avoided or minimized these threats.

Macro-level. Working with large systems, such as organizations, communities, and policy systems, is a final core task of social work practice (Kirst-Ashman and Hull, 2015). Are GSAs helpful in developing positive school and community climate, or is an already positive school or community climate conducive to forming and maintaining a GSA? This study cannot resolve issues of causation, but results do suggest that whether the GSA is in pre-formation, formation, or maintenance stages a positive and supportive school and community climate can strengthen GSA efforts and support the people working to make the club happen.

The following suggestions are ways to enhance strength for GSAs at the macro level based upon this study: build positive school climate for LGBTQ youth and foster positive community support for a GSA. The tasks of opposing anti-GSA policy, expanding employment protections, and expanding public transportation (all policy goals) are discussed in the following section on policy implications.

Enhancing strengths. Based on the data from this study, social workers can focus on two specific macro-level tasks to strengthen GSAs in the Deep South. These two tasks are: building positive school climate for LGBTQ youth and fostering positive community support for a GSA.

Build positive school climate for LGBTQ youth. All participants in this study mentioned instances where hostility and pervasive discrimination against LGBTQ people impacted GSA formation and maintenance. Conversely, schools that had a relatively easy time forming their GSA noted that an already-existing positive school climate was helpful in this process. One participant at such a school mentioned that he felt they had an easier time starting and maintaining the GSA because faculty and staff were supportive of such efforts.

There may be little that social workers can do to change the minds of extremely hostile school faculty and staff. However, given the numerous examples of challenges and threats that GSA members and supporters face within the school environment from teachers, administrators, and even other students, it is worth the effort to try and buffer this hostility. One way to build support for LGBTQ students and a GSA is to create a safe space program within the school. One participant, who had a successful formation of her GSA with only minor threats to the process, started the process by creating a safe space program with faculty and staff. As has been discussed in Chapter 2's review of literature, a safe space or safe zone programs allow allies of

the LGBTQ community to receive training about LGBTQ issues and LGBTQ inclusion (Finkel et al., 2003). Once the ally attends training, they typically place a safe space sticker on their classroom door or another visible location (Evans, 2002). This visibility sends a message to LGBTQ and ally students that 1) the teacher or staff member is affirming of LGBTQ people and 2) that the teacher or staff member can offer assistance if issues of bullying or harassment may arise (Finkel et al., 2003). Safe space stickers may be an easy way for students to recognize who in the larger school environment may be able to help start a GSA, or who may intervene if issues arise in the maintenance phase. Social workers within a school setting may take the lead in starting a safe space program, may serve as a trainer for safe space curriculum, or may simply participate in the program to show LGBTQ students their support.

Four advocates from this study, who were a part of the LGBTQ network, mentioned that they helped support GSAs by providing continuing education for school personnel. The trainings mentioned were LGBTQ cultural competency training, anti-bullying training, and safe schools policy training. Since many school personnel (such as educators, counselors, and social workers) require continuing education credits to maintain their professional licenses, these trainings by the LGBTQ network can have a dual purpose. First, faculty and staff may be motivated to attend in order to get free or low-cost continuing education credits. Second, the trainings can provide much-needed information about how to build a positive school environment for LGBTQ youth. Social workers may suggest that such trainings are needed, may coordinate the training and advertise it to faculty and staff, and can build an ongoing relationship with LGBTQ advocates and organizations in the community. A social worker, being sensitive to many advocates and organizations being under-resourced, could advocate for payment for such training services rendered by the LGBTQ network.

Foster positive community support for a GSA. Threats and opposition to a GSA occur at multiple levels, including at the community level. Community members who are opposed to a GSA made their opposition known, according to participants, by calling and complaining to administration, threatening to sue the school, and threatening to have faculty supporters fired. As such, fostering positive community support for a GSA can be a crucial buffer for the GSA members and supporters at every stage of a GSA. While building positive climate within a school seems much more defined, the goal of fostering support for a GSA at the community level seems a bit daunting and nebulous. How might a social worker assess the level of support or resistance to a GSA at the community level? And where might a social worker start to build community support?

A suggested starting point is for a social worker to meet with GSA members and supporters (or initiators, if the GSA is in the pre-formation or formation stages) to assess community opposition and sources of community support. By helping members identify, plan for, and strategize about community opposition, GSA efforts may be more successful. It is likely that GSA members and supporters already have a sense of the level of opposition to their efforts from within the community. Therefore, the social worker can let students and supporters take the lead in identifying sources of opposition and support. Community asset mapping, which is a tool that literally maps supports and challenges within a community, may be one technique to introduce for assessment purposes (Griffin & Farris, 2010).

Once students and faculty members have the opportunity to assess community opposition, the broader LGBTQ network of people and organizations within the community can be engaged to offer assistance. The network may be able to provide legal support if opposition from the community is a part of what is blocking efforts to form a GSA. Although not identified

by participants, who were overwhelmingly focused on changing the school system, the broader LGBTQ network may want to consider hosting community workshops on LGBTQ youth, school climate, legal rights of GSAs, and the benefits of GSAs to reduce bullying and improve mental health outcomes. The challenge here is that the efforts may backfire and could alert otherwise neutral community members who may end up actively opposing a GSA. Again, students and supporters of the GSA should take the lead in deciding if these workshops have more benefit than risk.

Specific recommendations for national organizations. National organizations, such as GLSEN and GSA Network, play a role in supporting GSAs across the nation. Participants mentioned the training materials, research, and free swag from these organizations, all of which helped to build the strength of GSAs. It seems that these resources are very useful once a GSA is in the maintenance phase. There appeared to be a gap in mentioning these organizations prior to the maintenance phase.

The breadth of challenges that participants faced are likely not news to national organizations, but they may be able to support GSAs in this region in important ways. First, participants expressed immense challenges in the pre-formation and formation stages. The support that participants received at this stage was largely from local organizations. While local organizations may be in a better position to respond to crises on the ground, there may be additional ways that national organizations can support students, advisors, and local advocates. Legal support can be crucial in helping a GSA form, but community-based solutions (such as coalition building, advocacy training, and education that is culturally sensitive to the Deep South) may be a service that some GSA-serving national organizations have the expertise and the resources to provide over the long term. Secondly, the implications that employment

protections for faculty and staff and public transportation may uniquely benefit GSAs in the Deep South could provide an opportunity for national organizations to advocate for policy change. National organizations may be members of intersectional coalitions (for example, with anti-racism groups, anti-poverty groups, and labor unions) that can advocate for national and state policy changes that end up helping GSAs form in the Deep South.

Implications for Policy

Policy advocacy is a traditional task of the social work profession, as it can help to ameliorate social injustice (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2015). The findings from this dissertation have a number of implications for policy change and advocacy, including: opposing anti-GSA policy and the state and local level, implementing or expanding employment protections for teachers, and expanding public transportation in the region. Taken together, these policy goals may have a positive impact on GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South.

Oppose anti-GSA policy at the state and local levels. One might assume that high school GSAs are somewhat immune from the reach of state legislators. An examination of the findings, however, reveals that there are examples of legislators who introduced anti-GSA legislation at the state level, and this legislation has had an impact on GSAs. The clubs have to combat hostile state legislators who are introducing anti-LGBT legislation aimed at preventing GSAs from forming and weakening the ones that already exist. In addition to combatting state-level legislation, some participants reported having to combat policy introduced at the local level. These examples included: changing school policy to require signed permission slips from parents for all student participation in clubs, as well as changing school policy to dismantle all extracurricular clubs when it is clear that the school has to legally allow a GSA to form.

Participants who had experience with such policies often did not know what to do after these policies were introduced.

Social workers should educate and prepare students, faculty members, parents, and community members for opposing anti-GSA policy at the state and local levels. This preparation could include lobbying, media training to convey why these bills are harmful, and coalition building to defeat harmful legislation or school policies. This education could also include developing relationships with key legislators or school board members who are friendly to GSAs and the LGBTQ community. These relationships could lead to the introduction of pro-GSA legislation or policy.

Employment protections for teachers may lead to stronger GSAs. One surprising finding from the data is that the presence of employment protections (such as tenure and unions for teachers or the perception that an employee cannot be fired for arbitrary reasons) can bolster teacher and staff willingness to explore supporting a GSA in its early stages of pre-formation and formation. Conversely, the lack of such protections seems to prevent would-be advisors from agreeing to serve in this capacity with early efforts to start a GSA. As was explored above, employment protections for teachers have been established in the literature as a contributing factor to GSA advisor perceptions of safety within their schools.

Knowing that employment protections can be a deciding factor in whether or not teachers and staff become GSA advisors, it stands to reason that more pervasive employment protections for teachers and staff could indirectly strengthen GSAs. Social workers can educate community members about the link between employment protections for faculty and safer schools for students. Social workers can also build community coalitions to support legislation at the local, state, and federal levels that would offer increased employment protection for teachers and staff.

Expanded public transportation may lead to stronger GSAs. Perhaps the biggest surprise in the findings was how a lack of available public transportation impacted GSA participation. This lack of transportation was connected, in the minds of participants, to regional underfunding of infrastructure in the Deep South. Lack of transportation also complicated organizing efforts for GSAs in rural areas. In particular, youth who were not out to their parents or youth whose parents did not support their participation in a GSA and were unwilling to provide transportation after school when the GSA would meet were prevented from helping start the GSA in the pre-formation and formation levels, and, in particular, were prevented from participating in the GSA after it had formed.

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that expanding public transportation in this region could potentially benefit GSAs much in the way of the adage that a rising tide lifts all boats. Public transportation affords youth in this case the freedom to stay after school without necessarily involving parents in their whereabouts. Even with youth who have supportive families, accessible public transportation may relieve parents and guardians of the burden of transporting their child to and from GSA meetings. Since the relationship between GSAs and public transportation was not the explicit focus of this dissertation, and, therefore, the exact relationship between transportation and GSA participation was not probed to the fullest extent, further research on this topic is warranted.

Unanswered Questions

This study provides one theory of GSA formation and maintenance in the Deep South. Although efforts were made to develop rich and thick descriptions of the data, the very nature of this qualitative study raises some questions that cannot be answered through the analysis of this

data. Many of these questions could form the basis of future studies that build on the findings of this dissertation.

What Specific Role(s) do Administrators Play in the Process? Administrators were perceived by participants as playing both a supportive and an antagonistic role in the formation and maintenance of a GSA. Participants shared numerous examples of administrators in both types of roles. On several occasions, advisors mentioned that administrators played a protective or “buffer” role between the GSA’s members and hostile parents and community members. This seemed to be an important and unique role in GSA development. Administrators were not sampled for this study, and their inclusion could have allowed for more probes about this role as buffer, how administrators perceived themselves in the process, and could have allowed for additional strengths and challenges not identified by students, advisors, or advocates.

Administrators were also mentioned as being a chief source of opposition, particularly in the pre-formation and formation stages of a GSA. While it is difficult to imagine being able to recruit openly hostile administrators for a study such as this, it would be helpful to hear their perspective on starting and maintaining a GSA. In particular, hostile administrators themselves would likely be able to share a more nuanced picture of their own opposition and the logic behind their opposition to a GSA. If researchers and organizers can better understand the motivation behind such hostility, it stands to reason that they can strategize ways to work with or neutralize it. Again, since no administrators were sampled for this study these questions remain unanswered.

What Specific Role does Religion or Faith Play in the Process? Faith or religious opposition to GSA formation and maintenance was well-documented by participants in this study. Faith-based stigma and fear influenced the negotiation process of both students and

faculty members who were interested in starting a GSA in the pre-formation stage. In addition, faith or religion appeared to motivate much of the multi-level opposition from administrators, faculty, students, parents, and community members.

What remains less clear is exactly how or why religion influences this opposition. As was noted in the section describing the absence of administrators in the sample, likewise participants were merely speculating on the ways that faith or religion appeared to mobilize and motivate opponents to a GSA. No participants directly espoused such opposition themselves, and thus this speculation seems less useful in developing any response to it. What also remains unexplored is any religious or faith-based motivation to support a GSA. As this was not the explicit focus of this dissertation, I did not ask participants about this potential role nor did any participants bring it up on their own.

In What Ways are Experiences of GSAs Different from Other Student Groups?

This study offers one theory of how GSAs form and how they are maintained in this region, but it is unclear exactly if or how these specific experiences are different from the challenges and strengths experienced by other student groups. In the data, only two participants specifically mentioned that they felt the experiences of GSAs were distinct from those of other groups. Since a comparison of GSAs to other extracurricular groups was not the focus of this study, there were no questions in the semi-structured interview guide that asked about this topic. The question arose naturally in the data analysis process, when it was logical to wonder if the experiences of GSA members and supporters were unique.

It is assumed that there are both overlaps and areas of divergence when comparing GSAs to other student groups in this region. One area of overlap may be the seemingly common challenges of a lack of student organizational skills, turning in paperwork on time, developing

programming, and interpersonal fighting and “drama” in the club. Six students and advisors mentioned that they perceived these challenges as normal and common amongst youth clubs. Several challenges that GSA members and supporters faced did seem unique. Given the specific hostility related to the subject of LGBTQ people that came up in the data, it stands to reason that many of the challenges faced by the GSA are specific to the type of club they are trying to form or maintain. Many student extracurricular clubs seem politically neutral, such as the Key Club or sporting teams, which were brought up for comparison by participants. These claims cannot be made from this study, although further research to compare experiences of starting and maintaining a GSA could be analyzed against the experiences of starting and maintaining other student clubs in the region.

To What Extent are these Experiences Region-Specific? This study describes the experiences of 17 participants in an area defined by this researcher as the Deep South: Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee. As has been discussed in Chapter 4 and earlier in this chapter, while some participants did attribute several macro-level challenges (such as religious opposition, lack of public transportation, fear, stigma, and invisibility) to living in the Deep South, the majority of participants did not specifically talk about how the region impacted their perceptions or experiences. As one student (P14) put it, “I haven’t lived anywhere else so I don’t know if things are different.” It is assumed that many participants felt this way, since living in the cultural of the Deep South is all they have ever known.

Research on LGBTQ organizing and policy suggest that the Deep South as a region has a unique climate and specific structural challenges that could make the findings in this study unique compared to other regions. However, since this study focused on the experiences and

perceptions of people in only one region, claims that the Deep South is unique by comparison cannot be made. A comparative study of how these experiences are unique or similar to those in other regions could be a fruitful topic for future research. National organizations (such as GLSEN) may find this research question impactful for its organizing work.

Do Members Recognize their Story as one of Resilience? As I am a social worker trained to identify strengths and to build resilience, the experiences of all participants seemed to be ones of resilience, creativity, and strength. However, I was careful not to put this analysis on the data as it was not clear if participants saw themselves and their experiences in the same way. If participants saw their experiences as deeply troubled and negative, for example, it would not be true to the data to convey their perceptions as ones of resilience. Given that exploring if participants saw their stories as one of resilience was not the focus of this dissertation, the question remains unanswered.

While it is easy to become overwhelmed by the challenges and threats that these groups face in this region, and, at times, participants did seem overwhelmed (as was the case with five participants), it is also vital to examine resilience and strength. If participants overall seem succumbed to failure and negativity, a social worker would need to validate these feelings and work to build resilience. However, if participants already see their stories as ones of strength and resilience a social worker could take a different approach and find ways to use this resilience to a strategic advantage in the face of challenges. A future study that explores if and how students, advisors, and advocates see their experiences as one of resilience could be one step toward reframing a body of knowledge about LGBTQ youth that is overly-focused on risk, disease, and deficit.

When GSAs Fail, are Threats and Strengths Similar to those of Successful GSAs?

This study focused solely on experiences where GSAs were successfully formed and/or maintained over time. Nonetheless, participants described experiences of GSA failure, although not in depth. Since the focus was on describing how participants perceive what supports and challenges the successful formation and maintenance of these groups, the resulting theory offers one mechanism for this process. What remains an interesting question for future research is what process a failed effort undergoes. Do failed efforts to start and maintain a GSA face similar threats and strengths? And if so, is there a tipping point that can predict whether one GSA effort will succeed where another effort will fail?

Resolving these questions is interesting from an organizing perspective. If we better understand both the processes of success and of failure, we can offer strategies to minimize threats and exploit strengths. Stronger organizing tactics can theoretically lead to more successful efforts to start and maintain these clubs, which would ultimately offer more protection for LGBTQ youth who are a population at risk.

Are There Elements at any Stage that are Critical or Necessary for Success? Related to the above question about similarities in cases of failure is a question about what is crucial to help GSAs succeed. This dissertation identified a number of supports for GSAs, including: legal support, the LGBTQ network, a student-led initiative in starting a GSA, swag, and laying groundwork with faculty and staff. While this dissertation offers suggestions about what some of these elements may be, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to speculate about which of these elements is absolutely crucial for GSA success.

Similar to the above question, an answer to what elements are crucial for success is an important one for GSA organizers and advocates. If we can identify key variables that are

significantly associated with GSA success, then organizers and advocates and expend limited resources on strengthening these things. If we can hypothesize about what variables are necessary, then future research could test these variables in a quantitative model. Ideally, strengthening these key variables would lead to more successful efforts to start a GSA, and stronger GSAs after they form.

How do Threats Impact Members or Potential Members? Participants mentioned that the challenges of stigma, fear of being “outed” as LGBTQ, and safety concerns prevented some students from becoming members of the GSA. In addition, a lack of family acceptance and lack of transportation also prevented would-be members from participating. The literature suggests that GSAs can have a positive impact on school climate by reducing reported incidents of bullying and, in some cases, increasing graduation rates (Kosciw et al., 2009). What remains unexplored, both in this study and in the literature, is if any of these positive impacts are negated by the overwhelming challenges that GSAs endure in this sample. Do members of GSAs that face threats from multiple sources still feel safer and protected at school? Or do members and would-be members feel like targets? And, if they do feel like targets, do they still draw the same benefits that the literature would suggest? These questions linger for me, and would be important to explore for the Safe Schools Movement as a whole.

It seems important to understand if certain regional efforts to start a GSA face more entrenched and unrelenting opposition, as is suggested by this study. If so, it would be imperative for the Safe Schools Movement to acknowledge that the efforts to start and maintain a GSA are not the same regionally and may even be putting youth and faculty members in emotional and sometimes physical danger. Research should resolve if the therapeutic benefits of

starting a GSA that are touted by the literature and non-profit groups hold up in the face of the specific experiences of opposition and threat in this and perhaps other regions.

Limitations

This study answers the research question “how do GSA members and supporters perceive the individual, school, and community contexts that impact the successful formation and maintenance of GSAs in the Deep South?” One limitation of this study is that while the notion of the “Deep South” accurately describes participant experiences, its inclusion in the title may overstate the importance of region or location as experienced by participants. While 10 of the 17 participants mentioned the South or the Deep South as a cultural context that influenced their perceptions of individual, school, and community supports and challenges, seven did not mention it. I did probe about the meaning of the Deep South, but some participants (four) struggled to identify exactly how the region influenced their experiences. This could be because many of the participants had experiences only in the Deep South, so without having another region to compare it to it was difficult to understand how their surrounding cultural context influenced the strengths and challenges they faced in their GSA.

Few participants (only three) commented with changes to their interview transcript. While this could mean that transcripts were largely accurate, it could also mean that most participants did not review their transcripts because they did not have the time nor the interest to do so. Although I did check for meaning during the interviews, there still could be errors in the transcripts that were not amended. These errors could have impacted the interpretation of the data during analysis.

Another logistical limitation is that I chose not to do a pilot study to test the effectiveness of the interview questions. This decision was made due to a limited time available to conduct the

entire study. As such, the questions about how school and community demographics impacted GSA formation and maintenance were not effective at drawing out rich information from participants. I amended the questions based on participant feedback, but this ineffectiveness could have been avoided if the questions had been piloted prior to the full study launching.

All 17 participants had experiences that fit the roles of student, advisor, advocate, or a combination of student and advocate. One challenge in analyzing these diverse experiences is that while some participants referenced their perceptions at only one school, others (mostly advocates) discussed experiences at a number of different school-based GSAs with which they had experience. While I do not feel that the depth of perceptions was compromised, some participants spoke in generalizations about a number of school-based GSAs they had worked with. This meant that I was collecting composites or summaries of multiple GSAs alongside perceptions of only one GSA. For future studies, I would consider selecting participants only of one type of GSA experience.

Finally, this study focused on GSAs that had successfully formed or been maintained over time. Despite the focus on success, many participants (nine) shared stories of failure that they were familiar with or had directly experienced. When these experiences were mentioned, they were probed for further details. However, a focus on failed efforts to start or maintain a GSA was not the scope of this dissertation. As such, failure did rise as an emerging category in the theory but the examples of failure were somewhat thin since they were only probed if they had been mentioned by the participant. Additional questions about failure and what contributed to failure could have been added at the start of the study however the research made the decision to omit these questions and leave them for future studies.

Closing Thoughts

This research study provides some guidance for social workers and community advocates alike. In particular, this study holds the potential to inform community organizing efforts for GSAs in this region in hopes that these efforts can become more effective. Given that many community change efforts, some of which were tangentially explored in the LGBTQ network, are often under-resourced this makes efficacy a noble goal. In theory, if GSAs can become stronger and efforts to form them can become more successful, this will extend protection for LGBTQ youth in schools. Questions remain about the efficacy of GSAs in this region, given the challenges highlighted by participants and the absence of GSAs in the Deep South in the literature.

This study seeks to remind readers that although there are myriad challenges for LGBTQ people and organizing efforts in the Deep South, there are still opportunities, resilience, and strength in this region. The participants and their work alone can remind us of such possibility. An examination of the extant research, as was presented in Chapter 2, skews toward risks, challenges, and deficits of LGBTQ people. A further examination of LGBTQ issues in the Deep South has a similar negative slant. Solely focusing on negativity, disease, and risk is at odds with the profession of social work, which seeks to build resilience and strength with clients at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. This study is one step toward that goal.

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APPENDIX A - IRB Approval

December 22, 2015

Sarah Young
School of Social Work
The University of Alabama
Box 870314

Re: IRB # 15-OR-406, "A Grounded Theory Study of the Context of Gay-Straight Alliance Formation and Maintenance in the Deep South"

Dear Ms. Young:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. You have also been granted the requested waiver of written documentation of informed consent for interviews conducted remotely. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on December 21, 2016. If your research will continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain consent from participants interviewed in person.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,


Carpani T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer
Office for Research Compliance

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

A grounded theory study of the context of gay-straight alliance formation and maintenance in the Deep South

Dear Potential Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Sarah Young and supervised by her Faculty Advisor, Laura Hopson, PhD. We are from The University of Alabama, School of Social Work. We hope to gain an understanding of what individual, school, and community supports exist that help gay-straight alliances form and/or continue to exist in the Deep South. You were selected as possible participants in this study because you are an adult (18 years or older) and self-identify as having experiences either participating in, advising, advocating for, and/or researching gay-straight alliances clubs in the Deep South region (defined as Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and/or Tennessee).

If you decide to participate, there will be an initial screening interview to make sure your experiences fit with our study and one interview session conducted with Sarah Young, the principal investigator. This interview may be done in person at a location of your choosing, or may be done over the phone or via a video conferencing software (such as Skype or Google Hangout). In the interview, you will be asked about your experiences with gay-straight alliances (GSAs), including: your personal leadership experiences with GSAs, the qualities and resources of others as they relate to the GSAs you are familiar with, the qualities of the schools and communities where GSAs exist that you have had experiences with, and your experiences with how the GSA was formed or what helped to keep them running. Each interview will be conducted in a safe place designated by you, the participant. The anticipated length of each interview session will be 60-120 minutes in length, although your interview may be shorter than this. All interviews will be audio recorded using a digital recorder. Even if your interview takes place over a video conferencing software, only your voice will be recorded (not your video image).

There are minimal risks or discomforts associated with your participation in this study. However, you may feel tired during interviews. You may discontinue the interview at any time you feel tired simply by informing the researcher. You may also choose not to answer any questions you do not wish to. This will not have any consequences to you as a participant, and it is your right to decline to answer any questions. Your participation will help researchers to understand GSAs in the Deep South, and potentially how to support these groups in a more effective manner. However, there are no personal benefits for you from this research.

All participants' identities will be kept confidential, and your real name will not appear in the transcript or any subsequent research or publications that result from this study. Information will be handled only by the Investigators or by a professional transcription service. Therefore, you should be aware that information you share may be heard by a professional third party for the purpose of transcribing our interview. I will do my best to minimize the use of identifying information during the interview (such as your name, the name of your school, or where you live). You may feel free to share as much identifying information as you choose. The

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 12-22-15
EXPIRATION DATE: 12-21-16

professional transcriptionist will delete all data related to your interview once they have finished transcribing the interview, and have a professional pledge of confidentiality. Once interviews are completed and transcribed, transcripts will be stored in the respective investigators' offices, in a locked file cabinets or in password-protected and encrypted electronic files. Your de-identified protected transcript will be retained indefinitely by the investigators. Individual information will not be furnished or released to any other agency, for any reason. Also, to prevent any possible risks to your confidentiality we will not use your actual name on documents. We will assign you a pen name. Transcripts and coded data will be kept on each investigator's password protected and encrypted computers.

Participation in the study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. After the contents of this consent has been reviewed with you, please keep the copy of the informed consent provided for your records.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact investigator Sarah Young (315)-396-5892, or Faculty Advisor, Laura Hopson, PhD, (205) 348-5270. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact Ms. Tanta Myles, The University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer, at 205-348-8461, or toll free 877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html or email participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu. After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the UA Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

Please place your initial beside the response that reflects whether you **will** or **will not** allow audio recording of your interview.

- You **may** audio record my interviews.
 You **may not** audio record my interviews.

Participant's Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Date

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 12-22-15
EXPIRATION DATE: 12-21-16

INFORMED VERBAL CONSENT STATEMENT

A grounded theory study of the context of gay-straight alliance formation and maintenance in the Deep South

Hello! I am calling/video conferencing to invite your participation in my dissertation research study being conducted at The University of Alabama. You were selected because I have either known you to have the necessary experiences for inclusion in my study OR you were recommended to me by someone who thinks you have necessary experiences. This research study examines people's experiences with and perceptions of Gay-Straight Alliances (or GSAs) in the Deep South as either a participant, an advisor, a researcher or an advocate. I would like to ask you some questions about this topic, which will take about 60 minutes of your time. The questions focus largely on your experiences and your opinions with or about GSAs, and you may share as much or as little with me as you choose. All of your answers will be kept confidential. In order to achieve confidentiality, I will use an audio recording of this conversation and will transcribe what we discuss. In doing so, I will not use your name on the transcript. Information will be handled only by me, the Investigator, or by a professional transcription service. Therefore, you should be aware that information you share may be heard by a professional third party for the purpose of transcribing our interview. I will do my best to minimize the use of identifying information during the interview (such as your name, the name of your school, or where you live). You may feel free to share as much identifying information as you choose. The professional transcriptionist will delete all data related to your interview once they have finished transcribing the interview, and have a professional pledge of confidentiality. All information, including transcripts, audio files, and forms, will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Data will be password protected and files will be encrypted.

Your participation will help us better understand the GSA movement in the Deep South, with the only risk being that you may feel tired from the interview or some questions may make you feel uncomfortable. However, answering these questions is voluntary and we can take breaks during the interview or stop it all together. That means you may refuse to take part in this study or, if you decide to participate in the study, you may decide not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or to stop the interview at any time.

Are you interested in participating in my study? [participant will say "Yes" or "No"; if they say "Yes" I will continue]

Thank you for your interest. Before we begin, I want to make sure that you do indeed fit my inclusion criteria. Can you please say "yes" or "no" as appropriate?

- I am at least 18 years old? [if "no" discontinue study by saying: "Thank you for your interest, but due to age of consent restrictions, my study is limited to those age 18 and older]*
- I self-identify as having been a student who participated in a Gay-Straight Alliance in the following state(s): Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, or Tennessee.*

UA IRB Approved Document
Approval date: 12-22-15
Expiration date: 12-21-16

- *I self-identify as having been or currently serving as an advisor or staff support person for a Gay-Straight Alliance in the following state(s): Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, or Tennessee.*
- *I self-identify as having been or currently serving as an advocate for Gay-Straight Alliances in the following state(s): Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, or Tennessee. This could include serving as a member or volunteer of a safe schools coalition or another group that supports the development and/or expansion of Gay-Straight Alliances in the aforementioned states.*
- *I self-identify as having research experience and knowledge about Gay-Straight Alliances in the following state(s): Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, or Tennessee. This research will allow me to expand upon the contexts that challenge or support GSAs, and this context is something I have direct experience of without being forced to speculate upon causes and contexts.*

Thank you for confirming that you are a good match for my research. Do I have your permission to audio record our conversation? [say "yes" or "no"]

May I ask the first question? [say "yes" or "no"]

UA IRB Approved Document
Approval date: 12-22-15
Expiration date: 12-21-16

APPENDIX B - Participant Screening Protocol

Potential participants will be asked if any of the statements apply to them:

1. I self-identify as having been a student who participated in a Gay-Straight Alliance in the following state(s): Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, or Tennessee.
2. I self-identify as having been or currently serving as an advisor or staff support person for a Gay-Straight Alliance in the following state(s): Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, or Tennessee.
3. I self-identify as having been or currently serving as an advocate for Gay-Straight Alliances in the following state(s): Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, or Tennessee. This could include serving as a member or volunteer of a safe schools coalition or another group that supports the development and/or expansion of Gay-Straight Alliances in the aforementioned states.
4. I self-identify as having research experience and knowledge about Gay-Straight Alliances in the following state(s): Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, or Tennessee. This research will allow me to expand upon the contexts that challenge or support GSAs, and this context is something I have direct experience of without being forced to speculate upon causes and contexts.
5. I am at least 18 years of age.
6. I am willing to be interviewed about my experiences in roles 1-4 above, and agree to have my interview audio recorded for the purpose of research.

Participants must say “yes” to 1, 2, 3 and/or 4, in addition to saying “yes” to 5 and 6. Failure to meet these criteria will result in exclusion from the study.

APPENDIX C - Informed Consent Statement

I read or reviewed this statement to face-to-face interview participants. Face-to-face interview participants signed the statement.

Dear Potential Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Sarah Young and supervised by her Faculty Advisor, Laura Hopson, PhD. We are from The University of Alabama, School of Social Work. We hope to gain an understanding of what individual, school, and community supports exist that help gay-straight alliances form and/or continue to exist in the Deep South. You were selected as possible participants in this study because you are an adult (18 years or older) and self-identify as having experiences either participating in, advising, advocating for, and/or researching gay-straight alliances clubs in the Deep South region (defined as Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and/or Tennessee).

If you decide to participate, there will be an initial screening interview to make sure your experiences fit with our study and one interview session conducted with Sarah Young, the principal investigator. This interview may be done in person at a location of your choosing, or may be done over the phone or via a video conferencing software (such as Skype or Google Hangout). In the interview, you will be asked about your experiences with gay-straight alliances (GSAs), including: your personal leadership experiences with GSAs, the qualities and resources of others as they relate to the GSAs you are familiar with, the qualities of the schools and communities where GSAs exist that you have had experiences with, and your experiences with how the GSA was formed or what helped to keep them running. Each interview will be conducted in a safe place designated by you, the participant. The anticipated length of each interview session will be 60-120 minutes in length, although your interview may be shorter than this. All interviews will be audio recorded using a digital recorder. Even if your interview takes place over a video conferencing software, only your voice will be recorded (not your video image).

There are minimal risks or discomforts associated with your participation in this study. However, you may feel tired during interviews. You may discontinue the interview at any time you feel tired simply by informing the researcher. You may also choose not to answer any questions you do not wish to. This will not have any consequences to you as a participant, and it is

your right to decline to answer any questions. Your participation will help researchers to understand GSAs in the Deep South, and potentially how to support these groups in a more effective manner. However, there are no personal benefits for you from this research.

All participants' identities will be kept confidential, and your real name will not appear in the transcript or any subsequent research or publications that result from this study. Information will be handled only by the Investigators or by a professional transcription service. Therefore, you should be aware that information you share may be heard by a professional third party for the purpose of transcribing our interview. I will do my best to minimize the use of identifying information during the interview (such as your name, the name of your school, or where you live). You may feel free to share as much identifying information as you choose. The professional transcriptionist will delete all data related to your interview once they have finished transcribing the interview, and have a professional pledge of confidentiality. Once interviews are completed and transcribed, transcripts will be stored in the respective investigators' offices, in a locked file cabinets or in password-protected and encrypted electronic files. Your de-identified protected transcript will be retained indefinitely by the investigators. Individual information will not be furnished or released to any other agency, for any reason. Also, to prevent any possible risks to your confidentiality we will not use your actual name on documents. We will assign you a pen name. Transcripts and coded data will be kept on each investigator's password protected and encrypted computers.

Participation in the study is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. After the contents of this consent has been reviewed with you, please keep the copy of the informed consent provided for your records.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact investigator Sarah Young (315)-396-5892, or Faculty Advisor, Laura Hopson, PhD, (205) 348-5270. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact Ms. Tanta Myles, The University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer, at 205-348-8461, or toll free 877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html or email participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu. After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the UA Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

Please place your initial beside the response that reflects whether you **will** or **will not** allow audio recording of your interview.

_____ You **may** audio record my interviews.

_____ You **may not** audio record my interviews.

Participant's Signature
Date

Investigator's Signature
Date

APPENDIX D - Informed Verbal Consent Statement

I read this statement to remote interview participants.

Hello! I am calling/video conferencing to invite your participation in my dissertation research study being conducted at The University of Alabama. You were selected because I have either known you to have the necessary experiences for inclusion in my study OR you were recommended to me by someone who thinks you have necessary experiences. This research study examines people's experiences with and perceptions of Gay-Straight Alliances (or GSAs) in the Deep South as either a participant, an advisor, a researcher or an advocate. I would like to ask you some questions about this topic, which will take about 60 minutes of your time. The questions focus largely on your experiences and your opinions with or about GSAs, and you may share as much or as little with me as you choose. All of your answers will be kept confidential. In order to achieve confidentiality, I will use an audio recording of this conversation and will transcribe what we discuss. In doing so, I will not use your name on the transcript. Information will be handled only by me, the Investigator, or by a professional transcription service. Therefore, you should be aware that information you share may be heard by a professional third party for the purpose of transcribing our interview. I will do my best to minimize the use of identifying information during the interview (such as your name, the name of your school, or where you live). You may feel free to share as much identifying information as you choose. The professional transcriptionist will delete all data related to your interview once they have finished transcribing the interview, and have a professional pledge of confidentiality. All information, including transcripts, audio files, and forms, will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Data will be password protected and files will be encrypted.

Your participation will help us better understand the GSA movement in the Deep South, with the only risk being that you may feel tired from the interview or some questions may make you feel uncomfortable. However, answering these questions is voluntary and we can take breaks during the interview or stop it all together. That means you may refuse to take part in this study or, if you decide to participate in the study, you may decide not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or to stop the interview at any time.

Are you interested in participating in my study? [participant will say "Yes" or "No"; if they say "Yes" I will continue]

Thank you for your interest. Before we begin, I want to make sure that you do indeed fit my inclusion criteria. Can you please say "yes" or "no" as appropriate?

- I am at least 18 years old? [if “no” discontinue study by saying: **“Thank you for your interest, but due to age of consent restrictions, my study is limited to those age 18 and older”**]

- I self-identify as having been a student who participated in a Gay-Straight Alliance in the following state(s): Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, or Tennessee.

- I self-identify as having been or currently serving as an advisor or staff support person for a Gay-Straight Alliance in the following state(s): Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, or Tennessee.

- I self-identify as having been or currently serving as an advocate for Gay-Straight Alliances in the following state(s): Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, or Tennessee. This could include serving as a member or volunteer of a safe schools coalition or another group that supports the development and/or expansion of Gay-Straight Alliances in the aforementioned states.

- I self-identify as having research experience and knowledge about Gay-Straight Alliances in the following state(s): Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, or Tennessee. This research will allow me to expand upon the contexts that challenge or support GSAs, and this context is something I have direct experience of without being forced to speculate upon causes and contexts.

Thank you for confirming that you are a good match for my research. Do I have your permission to audio record our conversation? [say “yes” or “no”]

May I ask the first question? [say “yes” or “no”]

APPENDIX E - Qualitative Interview Protocol

This protocol should be viewed as a loose guide. Questions and probes will develop in vivo as the interviews are conducted, as is required for grounded theory research. This protocol works in conjunction with the Informed Consent Protocol OR the Informed Verbal Consent Protocol.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. As we have discussed or as you may have seen on my recruitment materials, I want to talk with you about your experiences with GSAs in the Deep South. Again, as you may already be aware, my purpose is to learn more about the individual, school, and community factors that support the formation and/or successful functioning of GSAs in middle and high schools in this region.

For Face-to-Face Interviews: I have provided you with a copy of the informed consent statement. Please take a moment to read it. I will now read it aloud. [read consent form].

Do you consent to participate in this study and have your interview recorded? [if participant says “no” end interview]. If so, please sign and initial as appropriate.

For Remote Interviews (phone or video conferencing): I have emailed you a copy of the informed verbal consent statement. I will now read my statement to you [read Informed Verbal Consent

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Please remember, as we have discussed in the informed consent statement, that you may stop at any time.

Initial Question

1. Can you tell me a bit about your experiences with GSAs in your community?

Possible probes

2. Please describe the role you (and influential others or organizations) played in a GSA in your school or community? Tell me about any leadership you displayed in relationship to the

GSA. Can you tell me about any qualities and/or resources that you brought to the table that helped the GSA succeed? Can you tell me about any qualities and/or resources that others brought to the table that helped the GSA succeed?

3. Were you present for the formation of a GSA in the Deep South? If so, what do you think helped support its formation? What challenges did the group face when forming?

4. Were you present to help maintain a GSA in the Deep South? If so, what do you think helped support its maintenance? What challenges, if any, did the group face in maintaining its existence? How long has the group existed? What and/or who do you think has contributed to its maintenance?

5. Tell me more about the school where the GSA existed/exists? Probe: racial makeup of student body/income/location/presence of a visible LGBTQ community/other factors? Probe: What was it like to work in [x type of school, for example a school with a racially diverse student body]? How did working in your school with [x characteristic] impact your organizing efforts related to your GSA?

6. Tell me more about the community where the GSA exists? Probe: racial makeup of community/income/location/presence of a visible LGBTQ community/other factors? Probe: What was it like to work in [x type of community, for example a community that is racially diverse]? How did working in your community with [x characteristic] impact your organizing efforts related to your GSA?

APPENDIX F - Timeline for Completion of Study

	12/ 15	1/ 16	2/ 16	3/ 16	4/ 16	5/ 16	6/ 16
Dis- serta- tion Pro- posal De- fense	X						
IRB ap- proval ob- tained		X					
Par- tici- pant		X	X	X			

re-cruit-ment and data col-lection							
Data analy-sis		X	X	X	X		
Write Chap-ter 4			X	X			
Chap-ter 4 circu-lated to com-mittee					X		

Write Chapter 5				X	X		
Full text circu- lated to com- mittee					X		
Revi- sions to full text					X	X	
Final text to com- mittee						X	
Dis- serta- tion							X

de-							
fense							

APPENDIX G - Refined Coding Scheme

This coding scheme, detailed in Chapter 3, followed initial open coding and preceded the final coding scheme in Table 3.

CATEGORIES	CODES
Challenges GSAs face	
Demographics that challenge GSAs	
Demographics that help GSAs	
Facing Anti-LGBT forces in community	
GSAs evolve over time	
LGBT Network	
Responding to challenges in starting a GSA	
School climate	
Sex education	
South under-resourced	
Starting a GSA	
Supporting a GSA	
Supports for GSAs	
Surviving	

Types of GSAs	
Youth leadership and activism, generally	

APPENDIX H - Final Theoretical Coding Scheme

When a core concept appears as a crucial concept in another stage, it implies that all subsequent codes and categories are included unless otherwise indicated. Text that is *italicized bold* is a sub-code of the category above it.

Core Concept	Core Concept/Category/Code
Negotiating Barriers	Being outed as LGBTQ Family acceptance Job security Perception that advisors are coercing students.
Failure	Creative responses when failing to form a school-based GSA <i>Covert GSA</i> <i>Community GSA</i> Failing to form a school-based GSA Fear of failure
Overcoming Threats	Fear & stigma Safety Faith or religious opposition Being outed as LGBTQ... Invisibility of LGBTQ youth Family acceptance Job security Perception that advisors are coercing students Harmful organizational practices <i>The advisor</i> <i>Interpersonal issues</i> <i>Recruiting and maintaining members</i> <i>Student organizational skills</i> <i>Turnover of students</i> <i>Logistics</i> <i>Programming</i> Multi-level opposition

	<i>Parents</i> <i>Students</i> <i>Faculty and staff</i> <i>Community</i> Fear, safety, and stigma
Building Strength	Finding an advisor Multi-level opposition <i>Rejecting or hostile administration</i> <i>Student opposition</i> <i>Parents</i> <i>Community members</i> Policy
Pre-formation Stage	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Overcoming Threats</u></p> Fear & stigma Safety Faith or religious opposition Being outed as LGBTQ Invisibility of LGBTQ youth Family acceptance Job security Perception that advisors are coercing students <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Building Strength</u></p> LGBTQ network The law
Formation Stage	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Overcoming Threats</u></p> Finding an advisor Multi-level opposition <i>Rejecting or hostile administration</i> <i>Student opposition</i> <i>Parents</i> <i>Community members</i> Policy <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Building Strength</u></p> Supportive administration Legal support Student-led initiative <i>Managing expectations</i> Gathering information Keeping a “low profile” Hurdling organizational tasks <i>Paperwork</i> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Failure</u></p>

	<p>Creative responses when failing to form a school-based GSA</p> <p><i>Covert GSA</i></p> <p><i>Community GSA</i></p> <p>Failing to form a school-based GSA</p>
<p>Maintenance Stage</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Overcoming Threats</u></p> <p>Harmful organizational practices</p> <p><i>The advisor</i></p> <p><i>Interpersonal issues</i></p> <p><i>Recruiting and maintaining members</i></p> <p><i>Student organizational skills</i></p> <p><i>Turnover of students</i></p> <p><i>Logistics</i></p> <p><i>Programming</i></p> <p>Multi-level opposition</p> <p><i>Parents</i></p> <p><i>Students</i></p> <p><i>Faculty and staff</i></p> <p><i>Community</i></p> <p>Fear, safety, and stigma</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Building Strength</u></p> <p>Organizational practices</p> <p><i>Agenda and goals</i></p> <p><i>Curriculum and programming</i></p> <p><i>Regular meetings</i></p> <p><i>Swag</i></p> <p>Commitment to a student-led group</p> <p><i>Allowing the group to be student-directed</i></p> <p><i>Meeting students where they are at</i></p> <p><i>Allowing the group to evolve over time</i></p> <p>Tenure for faculty</p> <p>LGBT Network</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Failure</u></p> <p>Fear of failure</p>