

## SEXUAL MINORITIES IN HIGH SCHOOL

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES:  
SEXUAL MINORITIES IN HIGH SCHOOL

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## **ABSTRACT**

Although liberal attitudes toward homosexuality have been increasing in recent years, sexual minority youth continue to face bullying and isolation at school. Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) have recently emerged as a solution to this problem. While research demonstrates positive effects of GSAs, little is known about the specific processes through which GSAs work to improve the school climate. We must also consider that GSAs operate in high schools which function as their own bounded social worlds with unique sets of rules and social hierarchies. These hierarchies influence both gay and straight youth's experiences, including who gets bullied, and who carries out the bullying. Using qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews with 50 students from 6 Windsor high schools, including 21 lesbian, gay, bisexual, bi-curious, pansexual and queer (LGBPQ) youth, this study explores these issues. I begin by examining how status hierarchies in high schools vary based on the size of the school and average parental income. In doing so, I argue that status hierarchies should be re-conceptualized from being thought of as simply vertical to accommodate multiple sources of status and varying competition. I then delve into an examination of how status and bullying are interconnected. Here, I find that for both gay and straight students, social networks work to prevent isolation as well as bullying. Bullying in high schools also takes on a situational nature, as bullying episodes often predominate in certain areas and in front of certain status group audiences. Finally, I explore how social networks intersect with gay-straight alliances in various social hierarchies, and how GSAs work as social networks that have a protective ability against bullying. I find that GSAs can work to

improve school climate and challenge existing hierarchies, but this is tempered by the hierarchies in place. Implications for anti-bullying strategies are also discussed.

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It does get better.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH AT SCHOOL, STATUS HIERARCHIES AND BULLYING**

Whether life's disabilities left you outcast, bullied, or teased,  
Rejoice and love yourself today  
'Cause baby, you were born this way  
No matter gay, straight or bi, lesbian, transgendered life,  
I'm on the right track, baby I was born to survive

- Lady Gaga “Born this Way” (2011)

“High school, those are your prime suffering years.  
You don't get better suffering than that.”

- Frank Ginsberg “Little Miss Sunshine” (2006)

High school can be either a wonderful or tumultuous time for adolescents. For the popular students, or those at the top of their school’s social hierarchy, high school life can consist of going to the coolest parties, driving desirable cars, wearing the latest fashions and living lives which emulate those of students depicted in popular television shows and movies – high school is the “best time of their lives”. For others, particularly those who fall at the bottom of their school’s hierarchy, the high school years are often spent in turmoil. These youth are unlikely to be invited to parties, may be harassed or completely ignored by their peers, and often feel unable to express their personal style in a world where conformity to norms of dress and behaviour are valued. Unable to cope, some will eventually drop out of school, while others will tragically commit suicide; unfortunately, many of the students that fall into this latter grouping are sexual minority<sup>1</sup> youth.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “sexual minority” throughout this dissertation as an all-encompassing term representing all the various sexual identities and orientations, with the exception of “LGBPQ” to represent my sample

Bullying, and in particular that of sexual minority youth, has received much attention in recent years; media coverage of the dire consequences of this social problem is plentiful, though not always sympathetic. One of the most notable cases is the 2008 murder of Lawrence King, an openly gay 15 year old boy who lived in the United States. King was shot in the head “point blank” by a male classmate, Brandon McInerney, whom he had asked to be his valentine and stated that he had a “crush” on. Prior to his murder, King had been bullied relentlessly by peers at his Oxnard California junior high school, yet reportedly remained proud of his sexuality. Media accounts depict King as a boy with a difficult home life, and as “a troubled child who openly flaunted his sexuality and wielded it like a weapon” through his flamboyant dress and wearing of make-up (Setoodeh 2008). Reports also state that McInerney’s lawyer went so far as suggesting that King was “asking for it” by having sexually taunted his client. In 2011, Brandon McInerney was sentenced to 21 years in prison for the execution-style murder of Lawrence King. While some saw this verdict as justice being served, others felt it to be “band-aid” solution which ignored the larger issue of violence toward sexual minorities (Thomaston 2011).

In 2011, 15 year old Canadian teen Jamie Hubley committed suicide. An openly gay student who enjoyed figure skating, Hubley left an online “suicide note” video explaining that he was depressed; life was hard and he could no longer take it anymore, and he hated being the only openly gay boy at school. Allan Hubley, Jamie’s father explained that his son had been bullied throughout grade school and high school. He had even moved his son from a Catholic school to a public school, but as there were no other

‘openly gay’ students there either, Jamie was yet again a target. Jaime had even been involved in his school’s gay-straight alliance, but the bullying did not stop. In light of Jamie’s death, Canadian media reports have suggested that as students are coming out at younger ages, schools need to become better equipped to handle issues of sexual identity (Burke 2011). Sadly, countless other sexual minority youth across Canada and the United States have committed suicide in recent years due to being bullied at school, and the reports of teens taking their lives are continuously coming forward.

Attempts to address this growing problem have recently emerged. The “It Gets Better” project founded by American author Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller, has received much attention in its efforts to assist sexual minority youth who are victims of bullying. Begun in September 2010 following the suicide of Billy Lucas, a gay teen who was victim of homophobic bullying at his Greensburg Indiana high school, the campaign offers the message to sexual minority youth that once they get beyond bullying, life gets better (Bolichowski 2011). The campaign has received numerous submissions from ordinary citizens, media personalities, celebrities and politicians, including U.S. President Barack Obama, all citing “It Gets Better” through online videos. Many of these people have shared their own experiences and cited their success as proof that one can overcome the negative effects of bullying (It Gets Better Project 2013). In addition to this campaign, celebrities such as musician Lady Gaga have joined the fight to end homophobic bullying by writing inspirational songs to support sexual minority youth, such as “Born this Way” which was quoted at the opening of this chapter. Television personality Ellen DeGeneres regularly speaks out against homophobic bullying and suicide; on her daily talk show,

DeGeneres often brings light to this issue and offers heartfelt messages regarding those who have taken their lives.

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) have also come forth as a school based solution to this social problem. GSAs can be described as school-based, student-led organized groups for all, regardless of a member's sexual orientation or gender identity. GSAs typically provide support, education and a safe and affirming place for sexual minority students and their straight allies to "hang-out." Kosciw et al. (2012) find that the existence of GSAs can make schools safer and more welcoming for sexual minority students, and provides critical support for sexual minority students and their straight allies. Kosciw et al. (2012) also report that students in high schools with gay-straight alliances experienced less harassment and fewer assaults because of their sexual orientation, and were more likely to report incidents of both. These students also reported a greater sense of belonging to their school community.

Despite these various projects, campaigns and clubs, school climate studies (discussed below) demonstrate that at school, sexual minority youth continue to be bullied at rates much higher than their heterosexual peers. National school climate studies in both Canada by Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere (Egale), and the United States by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN), as well as numerous other research studies, demonstrate the various forms of harassment that sexual minority youth endure at school. The high percentages at which sexual minority youth face verbal and physical harassment, particularly in comparison to their straight peers, is startling. This leads us to wonder why this is the case, and what can be done to ameliorate it.

Many social scientists have theorized reasons as to why sexual minority youth face harassment and bullying at levels much higher than those of their straight peers. One of the most popular explanations is that of gender non-conformity, in that gay and lesbian youth are reprimanded by their peers for an inadequate gender performance (Connell 1995; Horn 2006; Pascoe 2007). The literature on masculinities is quite salient in this regard, as males who fail to perform a hegemonic masculine ideal are marked as “fags” by peers (see Connell 1995). This policing of gender also occurs with females; as high school functions as “heterosexual marketplace” those who do not perform proper feminine ideals, including talking about boys or being overly concerned with appearance, are chastised for improper performances of femininity (Coleman, 1961; Stinchcombe, 1964; Duncan 2004; Horn 2006; Payne 2007). While these literatures certainly provide valuable theoretical tools for examining why the harassment of sexual minority youth takes place, they do not answer the question of why some youth who do not conform to gender normative ideals - in either appearance or behavior - leave high school unscathed by their peers and cite quite positive high school experiences. In light of this, we must ask why it is the case that some sexual minority youth have an easier time at school than others, and what is unique about their experiences.

In a time of changing norms surrounding homosexuality, we also struggle to understand what it is about schools that make them such a unique setting where homophobic harassment of sexual minority youth frequently takes place. For example, a recent study by Anderson and Fetner (2008) demonstrates that younger cohorts are typically more tolerant of homosexuality and that liberal attitudes among all cohorts

toward homosexuality have increased over time, which may be due in part to social and political factors. Canadians in particular are more liberal minded toward homosexuality than their American counterparts, which may be partially attributed to our social policies, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage. Why is it that in a time when people are becoming more accepting of homosexuality and gay rights do sexual minority youth continue to be bullied at such high rates? Perhaps the social setting of high school plays a larger role than some have initially considered.

High schools (and junior high schools, where they are present) function as their own bounded social worlds, creating a unique environment where the general social “rules” of the outside world do not apply (Milner 2004). For example, social hierarchies present in high schools enforce their own set of rules espousing who is popular and who is not. These hierarchies influence both sexual minority and straight youth’s experiences of high school, including who gets bullied, and who carries out the bullying. While we know that these hierarchies exist and are well documented in the literature (see Milner 2004; Collins 2008) we do not know which factors influence the shape and size of these hierarchies, and how these hierarchies look in various school settings. Nor do we know how these hierarchies in turn may or may not influence the experiences of sexual minority youth.

Furthermore, while we know that sexual minority youth experience high levels of bullying, we do not know which students are responsible for this bullying and where they are situated on their school’s hierarchy. As mentioned previously, we do not know all of the reasons as to *why* sexual minority youth are so frequently targeted. There are

competing claims on why students bully others and how this influences students' level of popularity. Recent explanations into this matter claim that bullying has nothing to do with victim characteristics, and that homophobic epithets are not always intentionally used as homophobic (Pascoe 2007; Jacobson 2011). However, it is theorized that those trying to attain status at their school often single out those that are isolated and therefore easy targets (Collins 2008, Faris and Felmlee 2011). In this vein, it may be likely that sexual minority youth who lack social connectedness are singled out by those seeking status at their school. It is here where gay-straight alliances may provide a key to this research puzzle, as they provide critical social support and thus, may help reduce isolation (Kosciw et al. 2012). Prior to examining how GSAs help sexual minority youth and reduce bullying, we must look at the setting that they are operating within as we do not know how various environments, with various hierarchies present, help or hinder the efforts of a school's gay-straight alliance.

### **THE PROBLEMS SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH ARE FACING AT SCHOOL**

Studies examining the harassment of sexual minority youth describe their experiences as situated in an environment that is influenced by the "school climate"; but what does this mean exactly (Taylor and Peter 2008; Kosciw et al. 2012)? The school climate can be defined as "a product of social interactions among students and with teachers, is influenced by educational and social values, and has been shown to relate to social situations within classrooms and to the school as a whole" (Koth, Bradshaw and Leaf 2008:96). Theories of school climate examine perceptions of the school as an

organization by those who work or attend class there; this includes the general "we" feeling and interactive life of the school. In particular, sociological theories of school climate present the school as a cultural system of social relationships among family, teachers, students and peers (Anderson 1982). School climate studies have provided valuable insight on measures of school disorder including perceptions of safety and victimization (Welsh 2000). These studies also have practical utility, as they seek a means for prevention and intervention of school disorder through conscious efforts by school administrators, teachers, parents, students and community groups (Welsh 2000).

National school climate studies by Egale and GLSEN that focus on the schooling experiences of sexual minority youth demonstrate that they face a particularly hostile climate. According to findings from GLSEN's 2011 United-States based school climate survey approximately 90% of sexual minority students were verbally harassed and 40% physically harassed because of their sexual orientation; overall, 60% of sexual minority students do not feel safe at school. GLSEN also finds that there are specific places that sexual minority students avoid because they feel unsafe or uncomfortable; these include locker rooms (37.5%), bathrooms (34.1%), the cafeteria or lunch room (18.6%), schools grounds such as parking lots (15.4%), and hallways (13.9%) are among the most avoided (Kosciw et al. 2012).

The authors of the GLSEN 2011 study also compare and contrast the experiences of sexual minority and straight students which they derive from a population based study of U.S. middle and high school students conducted by Harris Interactive and GLSEN in 2005. With regard to verbal harassment, approximately 92% of sexual minority students

have been harassed for a personal characteristic compared to 47% of heterosexual students, and 68% of sexual minority students experienced sexual harassment compared to 28% of heterosexual youth. With regard to safety, the authors report that 70 percent of sexual minority students reported feeling unsafe at school because of at least one personal characteristic, while this was true for only about 20% of heterosexual students (Kosciw et al. 2012).

The findings in Canada are similar to those reported by GLSEN. Results from Egale Canada's (Taylor and Peter 2011) first national survey of homophobia in Canadian schools report that 6 out of 10 students report being verbally harassed and one in four physically harassed due to their sexual orientation. Shockingly, three-quarters of lesbian, gay and bisexual and 95% of transgender students do not feel safe in Canadian schools. Sexual minority students in Canadian schools also avoid specific spaces including change rooms (53.2%), washrooms (45.8%), and hallways (45.4%), to and from school (37.3%), schoolyard (34.7%), the cafeteria (34.5%) and school buses (34.5%). Alarming, there appear to be very few places at school where sexual minority students do feel safe.

Victimization of sexual minority youth is linked to negative outcomes, such as decreased academic performance, lower grade point averages, learning difficulties and leaving school (Saewyc, Skay and Pettingell 2006; Kosciw et al. 2012; 2009). Sexual minority youth also report higher rates of suicidal ideation, drug use and sexual risk taking (Espelage et al. 2008), more depressive symptoms, less companionship with best friends and less closeness with mothers (Williams et al. 2005). Findings from a recent study of Austrian sexual minority youth associate suicide attempts with a lack of

acceptance at school and harassment experiences (Ploderl, Faistauer and Fartacek 2010). If harassed or assaulted, sexual minority youth are less likely than straight youth to report it to school staff, perceiving them as unsupportive and believing that no action will be taken or that the situation will get worse (Taylor and Peter 2008; Kosciw et al. 2012).

### **GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES: BACKGROUND, STRUGGLES AND BENEFITS**

Emerging in the late 1980s in California and Massachusetts, gay-straight alliances were created through Project 10, which aimed to prevent gay and lesbian students from bullying (Fetner and Kush 2008). In 1990, a group of Boston-area lesbian and gay educators came together to foster safe and supportive schools for sexual minority educators and students, and subsequently named themselves the Gay and Lesbian Independent School Teacher's Network. In 1995, this group became a national organization, and in 1997, changed its name to the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (Fetner and Kush 2008). GLSEN is now the largest supporter of GSAs through education and resources, and also offers a national registry of GSAs in the United States (GLSEN 2013).

In Canada, a comparable group to GLSEN, Egale Canada – Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere, was founded in 1986. Egale is a national organization committed to advancing equality and justice for sexual minority people and their families across Canada. Egale's website recently hosted the first national school climate survey on homophobia in Canadian schools and the final report is now available on its site. The organization's aim is to use the information from the survey to provide educators and

policy makers with information to make Canadian schools safer for youth (Egale Canada Human Rights Trust 2013; Kosciw et al. 2012). Like GLSEN, Egale has created a national registry of GSAs and offers information and resources to students looking to start their own gay-straight alliances (My GSA 2013). Representatives from Egale also work to assist students and administrators looking to form GSAs through advice, support and advocacy (Helen Kennedy personal communication February 2009). With the assistance of Egale, students from Squarepark High<sup>2</sup>, a public high school in Windsor, Ontario, successfully lobbied the Greater Essex Country District School board (GECDSB) for a gay-straight alliance. It was approved in February, 2009, by Heather Liffiton, director of the public school board, becoming the first in the system (Lajoie 2009). The process of gaining approval, however, was not easy.

Prior to being approved in February of 2009, students at Squarepark High had been turned down by the GECDSB numerous times in their request for a gay-straight alliance. Accused of using “stall tactics”, the GECDSB listed various reasons for not granting approval on GSAs, including: wanting to first examine how other boards across the province had implemented GSAs; claiming that GSAs would segregate students and staff and that they discriminated between different forms of harassment rather than address the larger problem of bullying; that policy guidelines needed to be developed for how GSAs would run; and finally, that a large scale study on the problem of sexual orientation based bullying needed to be administered to gauge its prevalence within high schools in the city (Macaluso 2009a, b). As it was blatantly obvious that numerous studies

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<sup>2</sup> Name of high school has been changed

had already documented the problem of bullying of sexual minority youth, proponents of the gay-straight alliance were becoming increasingly irritated with the GECDSB. Prior to February 2009, GSAs had been in place at most high schools in the Halton District School Board in Ontario for almost two years; representatives from Halton could not understand why the GECDSB was refusing to let Squarepark students form a GSA (Macaluso 2009b).

Around the time this struggle was occurring, the Ministry of Education had released policy memorandum 145 encouraging “all school boards to provide safe, inclusive, and accepting learning environments in which every student can succeed.” This memorandum later became implemented through the document “Caring and Safe Schools in Ontario”, published in 2010 (Ontario Ministry of Education). Armed with this memorandum, along with support from the community, Squarepark students continued to lobby the school board for a gay-straight alliance. A conference call was held with Egale representatives in the presence of community advocates, teachers and students to convince the GECDSB to allow GSAs. With increasing pressure from local sexual minority activists on school board trustees, the presence of a lawyer (also a parent) who argued that the stand against GSAs was a violation of the Ontario Human Rights Code and Safe Schools Act, and the attention of the local media (including radio stations, news broadcasts, and newspaper articles), the school board finally allowed Squarepark students to form the first GSA at their school (Lajoie 2009; Macaluso 2009c). Once Squarepark had its GSA in place, other public high schools in the city began forming their own gay-straight alliances, and the GECDSB grew more supportive. In conjunction with Windsor

Pride, the GECD SB hosted Safe Schools Forums in 2011 and 2012 for interested high school students and their teachers, which included guest speakers, stage performances, workshops and panel discussions on gay-straight alliances.

In the United States, gay-straight alliances are flourishing in many schools because of the 1984 Federal Equal Access Act. Passed by President Reagan, this act states that if schools allow one non-curricular student club, then it must allow all clubs to form (Miceli 2005; MacGillivray 2007). Despite this Act, individual GSA groups face varying levels of acceptance by administrators and district school boards (Fetner and Kush 2008). Some schools have gone as far as barring all extracurricular groups from forming rather than allow a GSA at the school (Miceli 2005). For example, in Utah, students filed a federal lawsuit against the Salt Lake City District School Board after it banned all non-curricular clubs from forming for this reason. The lawsuit was originally resolved in favour of the school board; fortunately, legal and community pressure later caused the decision to be reversed (Lee 2002).

In Canada, there is no equivalent law to the Federal Equal Access Act. However, in British Columbia and Alberta, teacher associations have developed official policy to support the creation of gay-straight alliances in junior and senior high school (Wells 2006). In Ontario, prior to 2012, students and administrators had to independently petition school boards to allow the presence of GSAs in their school and depended on the approval of school board directors to “officially” exist. For example, in Hamilton, Ontario, GSAs were approved by a public school board director that had been sensitive to equity issues and willing to allow them (D. Pike Personal Communication October 2008).

As previously discussed, this was also the case in Windsor, Ontario with the WECDSB. At the time of data collection (2011) the three Catholic Schools in this study in which interview participants attended did not have gay-straight alliances, as they were not permitted at this point (although many of the students interviewed from these schools desired them).

A recent turn of events in Ontario has been considered a victory in the fight to permit gay-straight alliances in all schools, including those under Catholic boards. On June 15, 2012, the Provincial Liberal government's "Accepting Schools" Bill 13 was passed. As a result, all schools – public or Catholic – must allow students who are willing to form gay-straight alliances, and to call them as such (Houston 2012). In addition, the legislation allows schools to permanently expel students for bullying, rather than just suspend them. Former Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty stated, "We will not tolerate bullying of any kind, at any time, for any reason"; McGuinty added that the recent suicide of sexual minority youth was on his mind while drafting the bill (Leslie 2011). When the bill was initially proposed, the Liberal government had stated that while Catholic schools must allow the clubs, they did not have to let students call them gay-straight alliances. However, after hearing from students who did not want principals or trustees dictating the names of their clubs, Provincial Education Minister Laurel Broten added an amendment to the bill that would allow students to name the anti-homophobia clubs "gay-straight alliances" (Houston 2012). The amendment was fueled by an incident reported by Catholic school students Leanne Iskander and Taechun Menns from Mississauga, Ontario, who were threatened with disciplinary action if their GSA advocacy continued,

and whose school went as far as banning rainbows (Baluja 2011). Broten added that it is of absolute importance to tackle bullying in schools, and in particular, homophobic bullying in high schools, which remains steadfast (Cross 2012).

In its reading stages, Bill 13 was not embraced by all; the Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association called the word gay a “distraction” and claimed that the anti-bullying legislation does not protect all students (Canadian Press 2012). Prior to the stipulation that the groups must be called gay-straight alliances, the President of the Ontario Catholic Trustees, Nancy Kirby, proposed calling GSAs “Respecting Differences” clubs instead. In Windsor, Ontario, the location of this study, the introduction of this Bill was also met with resistance. The Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board (WECDSB) had not allowed GSAs, but in 2011 made mandatory the establishment of “social justice equity” clubs. Superintendent Michael Seguin had claimed that gay-straight alliances were not inclusive of all, and that equity clubs were an attempt to address the bullying of all students, including ethnic minorities and obese kids, and not just sexual minority youth (Cross 2012). Interestingly, following the passing of the bill and the amendment that even Catholic schools must call the groups GSAs, Seguin stated that the Catholic board fully understood what the law said and would comply with it. He added that the social justice clubs would continue to be mandatory and emphasized that gay-straight alliances will be run under adult supervision to ensure that they are handling issues in an “appropriate and respectful way,” just as the other clubs do (Thompson 2012). Seguin holds firm that Catholic schools have always been inclusive, despite what has been said about them.

An article printed in the city's newspaper, *The Windsor Star*, on the day following Seguin's announcement included an interview with 15 year old female and Catholic high school student Adriana Unis (Pearson 2012). Unis explained that she had been taunted by peers because she was gay; she had been told that because she was a lesbian, her parents should have killed her. Now that she was legally able, Unis would be starting a GSA at her Catholic high school and feels the name "gay-straight alliance" is important because it clearly shows that sexual orientation is nothing to be ashamed of. She believes that if, such a club had been present the previous year when she was bullied, she would have sought out help. This is an interesting incident considering the claim that Catholic schools have always been inclusive.

In addition to school climate studies touting the benefits of gay-straight alliances, both qualitative and quantitative research studies in a variety of fields, including sociology, psychology, social work and education, have emerged citing positive findings. In their study of survey responses from sexual minority students in the United States, sociologists Walls, Kane and Wisneski (2010) compare the school experiences of those who attend schools without GSAs, those who attend schools with GSAs but are not members, and those who attend schools with GSAs and are members. The authors found that the presence of a GSA positively affects school experiences even if youth are not GSA members; GSAs increase subjective experiences of safety and make supportive allies more visible as a resource. Additional quantitative studies from psychological and social work perspectives also show that students in LGB support groups such as gay-

straight alliances report lower victimization and suicide attempts (Goodenow, Szalacha and Westheimer 2006; Kosciw, Greytak and Diaz 2009).

Students in schools with GSAs perceive them as influential in enhancing the overall school climate toward sexual minorities; through their in-depth interviews with sixteen high school students, education researchers Varjas et al. (2006) report that students perceived the overall climate as comparatively better when a GSA was present. Educational researchers in both Canada and the United States have developed manuals to assist students, educators and parents in creating and maintaining GSAs at school, while citing the positive outcomes of GSAs including improved safety and fewer incidents of harassment (see Wells 2006 and MacGillivray 2007). Therefore, it appears that GSAs are working well. However, aside from the study by Walls et al. (2010) very little is known about the specific processes through which GSAs work to change school climate. We also do not know in which school environments GSAs may be most effective. This is a gap in the literature this study aims to address. As we will see, GSAs do not exist in a vacuum; they must compete with more mainstream school clubs and activities, as well as an aspect research on gay-straight alliances has yet to consider – status hierarchies.

### **THIS STUDY: RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In this dissertation, I examine how, ultimately, a combination of factors come together to help or hinder the effectiveness of gay-straight alliances in high schools. In employing a comparative analysis of both gay and straight students at schools with and without gay-straight alliances, I will attempt to tease apart factors that lead to varying

experiences. In Chapter 3, I examine the social hierarchies that are present in various high schools. Based on the “on the ground” perspective of the students interviewed, I describe how these hierarchies are constructed, including how these differ among the schools based on factors such as income and school size. This is done in an effort to map out the various terrains in which gay-straight alliances are (and are not) located and the differences which result. In light of this information, I ask: “In what ways do status hierarchies in high schools vary based on the size of the school and average parental income of the students’ parents? How do factors such as good looks, economic resources, and extra-curricular activities influence one’s position in these various schools?” Finally, I ask whether status hierarchies should be re-conceptualized (from being thought of as simply vertical) to accommodate multiple sources of status and varying competition?

In Chapter 4, I examine the argument that students use bullying as a means to gain popularity and how this relates to the bullying of sexual minority youth. From the perspective of students, I reveal who they perceive are responsible for bullying others. The experiences of sexual minority youth who face harassment are contrasted with those who cite positive experiences while examining the ways in which isolated youth may be “targets” for those seeking upward mobility. Here, I am examining the intersection of social networks and status hierarchies, and illustrate how and why the literature on status hierarchies needs to take into account students’ social networks. I am specifically looking at how students use their social networks to buffer themselves from status hierarchies, and ultimately, bullying. I ask the following research question: how do students use social networks to navigate status hierarchies in their high school?

In Chapter 5, I bring together the findings from the previous two chapters in order to highlight the environments in which gay-straight alliances seem to be working best. Based on student accounts, I will identify the processes which appear to be effective in challenging homophobia and positively transforming the school climate. Here I reveal how some GSAs can be successful in fostering deep social networks that help buffer sexual minority youth against bullying. Gay-straight alliances can be very strong and help prevent social isolation, as well as help improve the school climate, or they can be weak and have little role in this. I also include insight from students at schools without gay-straight alliances concerning their thoughts on how one might benefit from them, and how students at these schools use social networks to help them in different ways. I address the following research questions: How do social networks intersect with gay-straight alliances in various social hierarchies? How do GSAs work as social networks that have a protective capacity against bullying? And finally, can students be in protective social networks without having a gay-straight alliance at their school, and if so, how?

### **PEER CULTURE: STATUS HIERARCHIES AND THE QUEST FOR POPULARITY AT SCHOOL**

In his seminal book *Freaks, Geeks and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* Murray Milner (2004) elaborates his subculture theory, which provides a valuable lens through which to examine why social hierarchies are present in high school, and subsequently, how class manifests itself through these hierarchies. Beginning with his definition of status as "the accumulated approval and

disapproval that people express toward an actor or object" (p.29), Milner goes on to provide an explanation of how and why peer subcultures and status hierarchies emerge in school life. In doing so, he offers answers to questions such as "why are teens obsessed with brand-name clothing, peer cliques, or who they eat lunch with?" Drawing on the ideas of sociologist Max Weber, Milner believes that high school cliques, or "status groups" as Weber would call them, emerge in settings where there are few avenues of upward mobility for the lower ranked. Milner theorizes that this has nothing to do with the teens themselves, such as their age or immaturity, but rather stems from the particular social conditions which they face.

Milner (2004) likens high school status groups to social castes in India, where hierarchies are derived through basic intimacies such as eating, dating and marrying. Norms and pressures for conformity are developed through these intimacies. According to Milner, in both Indian castes and high school cliques, people are obsessed with their appearance, social ranking, maintaining social distance from inferiors, and so on. These intimacies create thick social conventions which if violated, bring severe social sanction. Similarly, the "mean" edge that teens often engage in, such as put-downs or harassment of peers, is used as a status-group strategy to maintain dominance and boundaries. Thus, when the jocks put down the nerds, for example, they are using this as a method to maintain status at the expense of others.

Milner (2004) contends that schools are (still) run by adults; having no political power, coupled with money and spare time creates an acute status consciousness among youth. The only control that teens have in this society is to invent their own social realm

within schools. As teens are also excluded from the "producer" role in society, but are granted the "consumer" role, many now have a disposable income they are eager to spend. This consumer role is evidenced by the billions of dollars global companies spend marketing products such as clothing, music and movies directly to teens (Davies and Guppy 2010). Commodities are used as status defining symbols, as the isolated world of high school peer groups creates pressure for cliques to display their status through consumer goods.

Davies and Guppy (2010) add another important element to Milner's theory which may help further explain how school settings fuel status competitions. According to these authors, there is another important social process which occurs in high school – age grading. The authors explain how the rise of youth culture is tied to the historic extension of education, in which young people spend longer portions of their lives in schools. Secondly, they maintain that age-graded classrooms create a large amount of homogeneity – this might be the only place in society where students spend the majority of their day with same age peers. As a result, a bounded social world that Davies and Guppy term "unnaturally homogeneous and rather exceptional" (p. 3) is formed. Further societal trends interact with this age-grading process – smaller families that place more attention on children's individuality, coupled with greater affluence that leads teens to become consumers – help forge identities that are age distinct. According to these researchers, the status preoccupation of teenagers results from a combination of age-grading, keeping kids isolated in their own world of little economic power, and also having few responsibilities apart from attending school.

The need for teens to display their status through commodities, or consumer goods, is where class distinctions between peer groups begin to emerge. While some youth may work at part-time jobs, others come from more affluent families which provide for their children's every desire. For instance, parents who want their children to be popular may purchase various goods for them (Milner 2004). Coincidentally, youth who have more money at their disposal are often those with higher status.

Findings similar to Milner's have been discussed by others. In his study of youth at Elmstown high, which he later revisited in 1976, Hollingshead found that popularity was a function of class. This was enforced by parents, and also generated by the kids themselves, who had sorted themselves according to what he calls "self-feeling" – that is, an internalized sense of class that largely determined an adolescent's choice of social activities, including who he or she is friends with and dates. In a later study on the sexual behaviour of teenage girls conducted in the 1980s, Sharon Thompson (1995) found that for females, popularity was associated with being white and middle class. Thompson discusses how in one popular student's group, every female had disposable income which she had not had to work for; several of these girls even had their own cars (p. 53). This sense of class was enforced by middle class parents, who "groomed" their children for certain roles to take on in high school, such as one parent who encouraged his daughter to join the tennis team, which he viewed as a suitable activity for her.

It is arguable that while economic resources are primarily a means of status, they are not necessarily the basis of it. However, the literature certainly does discuss how wealth (among other aspects) is linked to popularity. In his book *Violence: A Micro-*

*Sociological Theory*, Randall Collins (2008) describes status hierarchies present in high school. At the top of the hierarchy are the popular, elite, fashionably dressed, the athletes (or jocks) and of course, the wealthy. Many wealthy students are often classified as the "preps"; these students are academic achievers, are also involved in extracurricular activities, and wear fashionable clothes (Bishop et al. 2004). In her study of the social processes at work in adolescent girls' peer groups, Durham (2002) found that prep girls tend to come from wealthy families and are trendsetters with regard to fashion, music and so forth, among other students. According to Milner (2004) the social ideal is the person who works hard and plays hard; in high school, this is embodied by the "preppie." Preppies generally conform to adult expectations, but also like to have a "good time" so they are not labeled as "nerds" or "brains."

While status systems can be hierarchical (widespread agreement on how groups are ranked) or pluralistic (little agreement or even rejection of rankings), the literature typically presents those in high school as hierarchical. According to Collins (2008; 2011), those at the top possess the most emotional energy, and dominate the centre of attention; they typically are found where the most fun is happening, such as at parties. Milner (2004) also depicts parties to be an important aspect of high school life. Accordingly, youth that do not have to work at part-time jobs have more time to maintain an active social life with peers, and to thus attend or hold events such parties. Milner also discovered that holding parties is an avenue for upward social mobility among youth, particularly if alcohol is provided. At large schools especially, events such as parties help strengthen the solidarity of subgroups who attend them.

According to Merten (1996) a general symmetry exists between an individual's social status and the activities in which he or she participates; for example, "nerds" are unlikely to play sports (see also Kinney 1993). As Davies and Guppy (2010) suggest, sports are an avenue through which informal hierarchies and older notions of gender infuse student life. Further, teachers and administrators often accentuate the status of sports and athletes (Milner 2004). While athletics, such as football and basketball provide one with high social status, particularly for males, cheerleading (although perhaps not as prevalent in Canada) can provide the same for females. Interestingly, cheerleaders are also characterized by their physical attractiveness and typically come from wealthy families (Milner 2004). Yet, other extra-curricular activities render their participants to a middle status. According to Collins (2008) those in middle-status groups are moderately sociable and have some network contacts. These include musicians, drama clubs, counter-cultural groups, intellectuals, nerds, working-class or rural youth – basically, the "average" kids who are not noticeable in any respect.

A central feature of those in low status groups is that they are socially inept – not fun, playful or particularly skilled at social interaction (Collins 2008). Nerds, or smart bookworm types who are openly preoccupied with academic success, are at the bottom of the social structure, as are "loners", or those who do not have appear to have any friends. Also at the bottom of hierarchies are "dorks" or "geeks"; these students are considered inept with regard to fashion (either deliberately, or not), are rarely invited to social events and typically have low grades, and poor athletic skill (Garner et al. 2006). While these appear to be the common findings in the literature, the majority of these studies are done

in the United States. It is important to assess if similar hierarchies are reported by the students in my Canadian sample. This is an aspect my study aims to address.

The question remains of whether students really need to demonstrate their status through material goods, and does this indeed make a difference with regard to popularity and hierarchies? As fashion appears to be a central theme with regard to popularity, and keeping up with the latest trends can certainly be costly, is there a way to even the playing field? Milner (2004) provides suggestions as to how we may reduce this form of status competition. Milner believes that uniforms can blunt some of the most damaging and blatant forms of status competition among students, and suggests that schools require them. However, Milner also maintains that items such as mobile phones and backpacks became status symbols among youth in his study, with the most potent symbol being a car – particularly if it was a "cool" car that students drove to school on a regular basis. He also suggests that schools control the use of these others forms of status, such as limiting cell phone use or discouraging the use of private cars, but this does not seem to be a feasible solution. On a broader level, Milner believes that schools can create norms emphasizing solidarity and equality and reduce the extent to which differences in economic power are relevant to attaining status. It appears that students in counter-cultural groups may already be embracing this idea.

We should not assume that all students crave popularity; Milner (2004) explains that students in his study who participated in gay-straight alliances and other lifestyle groups enjoyed the fact that these had no rankings. For example, students who are “alternative” – punk, goth, hippy – are rejecting the hypocrisy they perceive as inherent in

the preppy lifestyle (p. 177). Garner et al. (2006) also find that strong oppositional crowds exist that openly challenge both preps and adult authorities. Similar to Milner's findings, these students include the "druggie/stoner" kids (those who do drugs) and/or the "freaks/goths" (those who dress in black, and have multiple piercings) and the "gangsta" crowds (those who listen to rap music, or make themselves appear to be criminals). In his study of American adolescents who form alternative peer cultures, Kinney (1999) also finds that some teenagers actively distance themselves from dominant adolescent crowds; these "headbanger or hippie" students were typically from lower or working class families who stressed authenticity rather than conformity for their social identities. Furthermore, many students also identify themselves as "normals" as they try to get through high school with the least amount of hassle (Garner et al. 2006). This implies that some students enjoy being a part of counter-cultural groups, and that many are simply looking for a place to be themselves in a world that places social value on conformity.

According to Milner, school size is also a factor related to the presence of social hierarchies. He claims "as the size of student body increases, it is more difficult for those on top to control those below" (p. 128). Milner maintains that status is inexorable or a relative ranking - that is, when the status of some is increased, the status of others will go down. Milner also believes that an increase in school size increases the likelihood of pluralism. That is, larger schools, or those with 1500 students or more, would be *less* likely to have rigid hierarchies, where some groups are perceived as better or worse, or higher or lower than others. According to Milner, a larger school would be more pluralistic in that sense that more distinct social identities would be present, as well as a

greater amount of equality and tolerance of other racial or ethnic groups (or perhaps sexual minority students in this case of this study) and that all subcultures would be relatively equal in status. Any claims of superiority by a specific group will be contested by others. Milner also theorizes that a larger student body results in the segregation of groups, which in turn produces peace. He claims that people who live in two separate worlds that have little to do with each other have little reason to fight. Similar to Milner, Collins (2011) believes that the closer the contact with the same set of people, the more frequent bullying becomes (therefore, the more students, the less frequent bullying would be). In this dissertation, I explore these claims made by Milner (2004) and Collins (2008) by examining how social hierarchies vary according to the size of schools in my sample.

While Milner tells us about existing hierarchies, what he does not tell us is how hierarchies are formed in the first place, and the factors that lead to variation between hierarchies in different schools. This is an important and understudied element that my study aims to inform. We also know little about where sexual minority youth fit into their school's social hierarchy. One study has found lesbian girls who participate in athletics such as basketball are popular (Pascoe 2007). However, another has found that girls cannot be lesbian and be popular (Payne 2007). We do not know how popularity for sexual minority youth varies across schools and which other activities may be sources of status. For example, how does involvement in extra-curricular activities affect the social status of sexual minority youth at school, and is there any influence on bullying? While the work of Milner and others cited above tells us much about which students are popular, where various students fall on their school's social hierarchy and why, they do not tell us

which of these students are the ones bullying others and why students resort to bullying tactics. As discussed below, recent scholars have attempted to answer this question with regard to how bullying and the social hierarchies present in schools are intertwined. However, there appears to be disagreement around the issue of where bullies are situated.

### **WHY STUDENTS BULLY: BULLYING AS STATUS ANXIETY**

Randall Collins (2008) maintains that schools are an ideal setting for bullying, as he likens them to “total institutions.” Students contribute to making their school a closed system, as they can exclude parents and those at home from it. The division between teachers and students which include “no snitch” rules, restricts information flow among these groups, thus teachers are not fully aware of bullying incidents among students. In this total institution, there is no escape from close contact with the same people day in and day out. As a result, the weak cannot get away from tormentors and victims are easily accessible. Collins also asserts that total institutions are areas of high information. Within tightly bounded and dense peer networks, status rankings and reputations are widely broadcast and are difficult to escape. In an earlier work, Collins (2004) discusses how interaction rituals also take place within these bounded networks when individuals are focused upon a common activity, are assembled in the same place and share an emotional experience. These rituals also give rise to emotional energy among participants, as well as group solidarity and feelings of membership (Collins, 2004).

Collins (2008) also maintains that as children move from elementary to secondary school, bullying becomes more collective, more concentrated on a small number of low-

status victims, and more verbal and psychological than physical. The beginning of the sexual marketplace in the teen years imposes a prestige system in which everyone becomes publically ranked, and this gives an ideological justification of which types of bullying are permissible. As students become older, bullying becomes tied to gender-segregated status hierarchies; girls verbally abuse other girls in terms of their low status in the sexual attractiveness and dating market. On the other hand, boys bully others mainly for their perceived low standing in terms of physical aggression. Collins explains that victims of bullying are those who are socially isolated, unpopular, shyer and less confident. An ideology of cultural inferiority is used to justify bullying the weak; in American (and Canadian) public schools, this often takes the form of accusations of homosexuality, even if one is heterosexual (Pascoe 2007).

How does harassment and bullying tie into status hierarchies? According to Milner (2004) students can move up the hierarchy by putting others down. However, Milner predicts that harassment comes from those just above the weak, who are "wannabe" popular students, rather than from those at the top of the hierarchy. He further claims that the elite rarely persecute the weak, though they make instigate it. Randall Collins (2008; 2011) also argues that bullies are in the *middle* of status hierarchies. These bullies pick on network isolates – those students that are the lowest in the hierarchy and who lack friends, allies and the emotional energy to defend themselves. Collins defines bullying as an ongoing relationship, where bullies torment the same group of people, and carefully distinguishes bullying from scapegoating, where everyone in a group "gangs up" on a victim. He explains that scapegoats may come from the *elite group* and use practices

such as mockery, exclusion and malicious gossip to pick on isolates or those who do not conform to cultural standards. For example, when a group of girls gang up to verbally attack a low-ranking girl, this would be scapegoating according to Collins.

A separate body of literature that examines the social positioning of bullies within a school's hierarchy comes to different conclusions. In their study investigating the popularity of middle school students, Thunfors and Cornell (2008) found that bullies were among the most popular students in the school; nearly one quarter of the popular students were identified as bullies. Moreover, popular students were less likely to be identified as victims of bullying. The authors suggest that the positive relationship between bully status and popularity may indicate that bullying facilitates the attainment of popularity; students use coercive behaviours such as intimidation, insults and social exclusion to gain high status among peers. Thunfors and Cornell note the negative consequences of this finding; if popular students are bullies, then it may be difficult to convince other students that this is undesirable behaviour that should not be emulated.

A recent article by Faris and Felmlee (2011) examines aggression from a social network centrality perspective. Using data from a longitudinal study of North Carolina adolescents, the authors find that students use aggression toward peers to climb the social hierarchy; aggression remains common among centrally located students, with the exception of very few students at the top and bottom of the social hierarchy. Gender differences also exist, as girls use less physical but more indirect aggression toward peers. In their study of social networks present among children in Midwestern United States classrooms, Gest, Graham-Bermann and Hartup (2001) found that network centrality is

most strongly associated with teasing, showing off, bossing and picking on others; thus, being high in status was associated with aggression. Another study by Faris and Ennett (2012) also finds that aggression is motivated by, and is instrumental for social climbing. Using data from a US survey of middle and high school students, the authors explain that the outcome of aggression is higher social status, even when aggressors do not hold these goals. The authors theorize that characteristics that make these students popular (or central), such as affluence, attractiveness, athleticism or charisma, are those that enable them to influence, manipulate or dominate peers. Also, occupying a central position in a school's social network increases opportunities to engage in aggressive interactions with one's peers (see also Burkowski et al. 1996). However, the question of how aggression increases status, particularly when bullies are often disliked, remains a mystery. This puzzling question will be explored within this dissertation.

While Collins' (2008) stance on the social position of bullies stands in contrast to the literature discussed above, he does note that while aggressive children are perceived as popular, they are generally disliked. In their study of middle school students in the Midwestern United States, Rodkin and Berger (2008) found that aggression is tied to high levels of dislike, yet bullies had higher social status than their victims when examined in terms of popularity. Only boys who bullied girls were viewed as unpopular. In their study of 555 Canadian students in grades 6 through 10, Vaillancourt, Hymel and McDougall (2003) found that despite being disliked and viewed as aggressive by peers, bullies were seen as socially powerful and perceived by peers to exhibit more competencies and assets, such as being physically attractive, being good athletes, and wearing stylish clothing.

Female bullies were often attractive, and males were athletic. Even more unexpected are Vaillancourt et al.'s (2003) finding that bullies reported feeling well integrated with their peer group and not lonely. It would appear that social competencies, and assets are granted a high amount of power in a school setting – students who bully are disliked, yet remain central.

According to educational researcher Ronald Jacobson, we are asking the wrong questions when it comes to the reasons why people engage in bullying. Jacobson (2012) explains that researchers typically seek to examine the motivations behind bullying, the qualities that make victims targets and the relational power imbalance between the two parties. Once we understand why victims are targeted, we attempt to help the victim become less of a target, and try to help bullies become tolerant of the “targetable” qualities held by victims. On the contrary, Jacobson suggests that the victim is only incidental to the bullying encounter; that is, bullying has nothing to do with the qualities of the victim, including whether or not the victim is gay, but rather, is simply an attempt by the bully to gain status with peers through public domination of a classmate. In attempting to validate his argument, Jacobson explains that the majority of literature on bullying describes it as a social event enacted in front of onlookers and bystanders, and when bullying is done in an isolated place, such as a bathroom, bullies are quick to broadcast what they have done to their peers.

In his 2010 study, Jacobson examines the bullying of a sixth grade boy named Matthew who became the target of his popular classmate, Jake. While on the playground, Jake and two male friends would engage Matthew in a “bump” game, where they would

attempt to knock him out; this rapidly escalated as Jake recruited 30 other students to join in on “bumping” Matthew out of the game. Jake and his two friends were later hailed as celebrities by their peers, while Matthew continued to face ostracism and eventually transferred schools. Jacobson questions Jake’s reasoning for picking on Matthew, which he claimed was because he liked to “make him cry” (p. 439). Rather, Jacobson points to the fact that Jake only began bumping Matthew when students began to gather around the game. Thus, he believes that a bully’s actions are aimed at manipulating what others think about themselves, not the victim, and that the victim’s public tears solidify the status of the bully. While Jacobson agrees that the victim often has some “weakness” that a bully can publically expose, he maintains that this is the least salient detail. Similar to the literature discussed by Faris and Ennett (2012) above, he also adds that lowering the targets’ status becomes a means of increasing the bullies own status; however, Jacobson too is unsure how this works. In closing, Jacobson leaves us with the question: “How does humiliating a classmate, and using difference as a point of reference, become a viable vehicle to engender status in the eyes of one’s peers within the culture of schooling?” This points to the importance of examining how status is negotiated within a school setting.

Other studies lend support to Jacobson’s idea that social context and the presence of peers matter a great deal when it comes to bullying. In their study of the role that peers play in bullying on the school playground, O’Connell, Pepler and Craig (1999) find that peer presence is positively related to the persistence of bullying episodes and that peers are likely to behave in ways that reinforce bullying behaviours. According to the authors,

peers reinforce bullying by acting as passive observers and not helping the victim, while others actively join in on the bullying. With peers functioning as an attentive audience and reinforcement, bullies receive validation in their attempts at dominance. Randall Collins (2008) also discusses group dynamics which reinforce bullying; as bullies typically have larger social networks than their victims, they often have “assistants” that aid them in bullying, as well as “reinforcers” – peers that join in by jeering and observing bullying incidents.

In their study of Finnish sixth graders, Salmivalli et al. (1996) examine how group context matters when it comes to bullying. The authors found that boys frequently participated in the roles of reinforcer and assistant during the bullying process, while girls were often the outsider or defender of the victim. The authors also found that one’s status played a role in the position one would occupy; only high status children took on the role of defender of the victim, as high status enabled certain students to defend victims without becoming victims themselves. Conversely, victims had the lowest status and were rejected by their peers. Collins (2008) also explains that bullies chose fearful victims, those who are socially isolated, timid, shy, unpopular or less confident, and are also unlikely to retaliate. This lends support to the idea that bullies target the weakest or “easiest” victims.

In a second study examining peer networks and bullying in schools (also carried out with Finnish 6<sup>th</sup> graders), Salmivalli, Huttunen and Lagerspetz (1997) find that cliques also play a large role in where bullies are located, as they found that children who behaved similarly in situations of bullying tended to associate with one another. Among

males, aggressive children hung out together; however, among females, bullies and victims often belonged to the same social networks. This makes sense, as females participate in more relational forms of aggression, and much of this harassment may be going on behind another girls' back. Shockingly, all children who engaged in bullying, either as bullies, assistants or reinforcers, belonged to larger peer networks than more pro-social children and victims. The authors maintain that their research points to the importance of paying attention to peer networks in school classes and restructuring networks in cliquish schools as a way to help solve bullying problems.

In her book *Dude, you're a Fag*, an ethnographic field study of a California high school, C.J. Pascoe (2007) also lends support to the argument that bullying may be about status anxiety and not necessarily homophobia. Pascoe found that the boys who were called "fags" were not always gay, but often heterosexual, and that those hurling the epithet at others did not always intend for the epithets to be homophobic. One third of the boys that Pascoe interviewed revealed that while they would use the term "fag" to insult each other, they would not actually direct it a homosexual peer; to this group of guys, gay was a legitimate identity (though perceived as biologically based). In addition, the boys who most often threw the "fag" epithet at other boys were not the most popular, but rather, appeared to use the term to maintain their own status and avoid being called a "fag" themselves. Pascoe points out that name calling also serves as an interactional process used by boys to demonstrate masculinity; it serves to repudiate femininity or weakness, as a "fag" is defined as someone who is powerless, weak and unmanly. The rejection of a "fag" identity is a practice whereby through mocking weakness and

enacting dominance, boys attempt to construct their own masculine identities as heterosexual. Similar to Milner's (2004) and Collins (2008) work, Pascoe finds that the bullies are not always the most popular kids at school.

The argument that bullying is not about characteristics of the victim, but rather about a bully's attempt to gain popularity is a controversial argument, particularly in reference to sexual minority youth. As we previously saw, national studies from both Canada and the United States show that sexual minority youth experience all forms harassment in much larger numbers than straight youth do (Kosciw et al. 2012; Taylor and Peter 2011). However, as these studies are based on self-report data, perhaps we lack representation among sexual minority youth who are not bullied. As Collins (2008) maintains that isolated, shy, and less popular youth are victims of bullying, perhaps one of the factors contributing to sexual minority youth being harassed in larger numbers is due in part to the higher incidence of isolation faced by these youth. Studies show that sexual minority youth face higher rates of isolation and less social connectedness at school (Pearson, Muller and Wilkinson 2007; Rivers 2001), but it is unknown whether this isolation leads to, or is a by-product, of bullying. By the same token, we also know little about how sexual minority youth who have strong social support and are involved in various extra-curricular activities fare in comparison. In their study of the friendships networks of unpopular, average and popular children among 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade children in the United States, George and Hartmann (1996) find that unpopular children were likely to be friendless in comparison to their popular peers. These authors maintain that further

research is needed to determine if smaller friendship networks have negative consequences for youth.

## **SUMMARY**

This dissertation aims to examine the intersection of status hierarchies and gay-straight alliances. While the literature relays the message that GSAs are working well and help reduce the harassment of sexual minority youth, little is known about the specific processes through which GSAs work to change school climate. An important aspect to consider is that gay-straight alliances do not exist in one singular type of high school environment; they are situated in schools with various hierarchies present, and we know little about how the experiences of being in a GSA vary in these different settings. In examining hierarchies, we also find that there is much literature on the various types that exist, but little is known about how these are formed, and why these vary among schools. In this vein, I argue that average parental income of students matters with regard to the formation of status hierarchies. Using Fraser Institute data, I uncover the economic background of students at each high school in my sample. Secondly, based on my sample of large schools with over 1500 students and small schools housing fewer than 1000 students, I argue that the size of the school also plays a role in shaping the status hierarchies that are present.

We also know that the existence of hierarchies leads some students to do anything in order to maintain or raise their place within their schools status system, thereby gaining popularity; however, I believe that this quest is likely to vary depending on how

pronounced a school's hierarchy is. It is here that bullying comes into play. Bullies can be middle status or upper status students, and are often engaged in sports or other extra-curricular activities which can aid their quest for status attainment. While bullies are often disliked, they appear to remain central and have large social networks which make them well known to a wide variety of their peers; on the other hand, their victims of bullies are often isolated and weak. We now know that sexual minority youth face higher rates of isolation and less social connectedness at school, although we know little about how sexual minority youth who have strong social support and are involved in various extra-curricular activities fare. Perhaps it is here that we may examine my previous inquiry of why some youth who do not conform to gender normative ideals leave high school unscathed by their peers and cite quite positive high school experiences, and conversely, why in other schools, certain sexual minority youth may drop out or sadly, turn to suicide.

## **CHAPTER 2: METHODS**

### **BACKGROUND: STUDYING GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES IN WINDSOR, ONTARIO**

“I come from Windsor. I tell everyone that. I say this plainly: My city has been through thick and thin, and we always come out stronger.”

- Sandra Pupatello, former MPP and member of the Ontario Liberal Party

The City of Windsor, Ontario, has a population of approximately 217,000. It is often described as a blue collar town, due to the historical presence of "The Big Three" automotive manufactures; General Motors, Ford Motor Company, and Daimler Chrysler, as well as the large number of "spinoff" jobs in a variety of skilled trades. The city's economy relies heavily on automotive manufacturing, and when many of these factories recently closed, the city's unemployment rate rose to the highest in the province at 10.7% (Statistics Canada 2012). As a result, many families have left the city and moved to more booming parts of the country, including the province of Alberta. The economic downturn has also rendered the city's real estate market as one of the most affordable in the country; currently, the average price of a single family home is \$164,123 (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation 2013) creating a true buyer's market for those able to purchase a home.

Despite the high unemployment rate, many wealthy areas in the city remain and this will become further evident in my discussion of certain high schools. A unique feature of the city is its proximity to Detroit, Michigan. Thousands of Windsor residents are employed in lucrative careers “over the border”; approximately 5000 Windsor

residents work in the health care industry in Metro Detroit, while others work in various fields including engineering, business and law (Detroit Regional Chamber 2006). These “Windsorites” commute to work in Michigan on a daily basis, while residing in Windsor and maintaining a Canadian citizenship. A common misconception is that due to its proximity to Detroit, Windsor is crime ridden – this is simply not the case. While Detroit has recently been called “The Most Dangerous City in the Country” (United States) by Forbes Magazine (2012) for four years in a row, a stark contrast can be witnessed by the differing murder rates between the two cities. In 2011, there were 358 murders in the City of Detroit, while there was only a single murder in the City of Windsor. According to Statistics Canada (2012), this is the fifth lowest homicide rate per metropolitan area in Canada, with 0.3 cases per 100,000 people.

The racial/ethnic composition of Windsor is also very diverse and multiculturalism is celebrated throughout the city. For instance, the month of June features a "Carousel of the Nations" festival where various ethnic groups create their own "cultural villages" throughout the city, offering native cuisine, crafts and other items. Despite this diversity, as well as the heavy (though declining) influence of local worker's unions in the city (heard loudest in the automotive sector), Windsor has a reputation as being a “socially conservative” city among those advocating for sexual minority rights. For example, as discussed in my previous chapter, senior administrative members of the public school board were very resistant in allowing gay-straight alliances to form, a resistance which initially went unchallenged for many years. This was echoed by a

Squarepark High<sup>3</sup> teacher I spoke with. In response to her insistence that a GSA be allowed at her school as they existed in other cities across Canada, she had been told by a school board official “this is Windsor, it's a blue collar town, it's more conservative” (Ms. Smith, female, Squarepark Teacher).

Windsor is perceived as lagging behind other cities in Ontario in supporting sexual minority youth at school. Partially as a result of this, a community advocacy group called “Service Alliance for Equality” (SAFE), a gay-straight alliance, was formed in the city. SAFE’s initial mission was to assist local service providers in becoming lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) friendly and to establish more resources for the city’s sexual minority community. SAFE members offered valuable support to students and teachers attempting to form the gay-straight alliance at Squarepark. Coincidentally, my initial interest in this project arose from my involvement in several sexual minority advocacy groups in the City of Windsor, including SAFE.

I became involved with the Service Alliance for Equality group in the summer of 2008 prior to the start of my PhD studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. A friend (and sexual minority community advocate) had invited me to join SAFE based on my Master’s level research interests in the area of sexual minority youth. I had also read about gay-straight alliances in the American literature, and had heard of the existence of these groups in other parts of the province, such as Toronto and Waterloo, yet I knew of none in Windsor. It was in SAFE meetings where I had first heard that students in

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<sup>3</sup> Squarepark is a pseudonym; all names of high schools in this study have been changed

Windsor (specifically, at Squarepark high school) had attempted to start a GSA, yet had been turned down several times by the public school board.

Although I moved to Hamilton in September of 2008, a colleague who was heavily involved in advocating for sexual minority rights in the Windsor community kept me abreast of any gay-straight alliance developments. While visiting Windsor during the reading week break of February, 2009, I was invited to attend a meeting with school board officials, community members and Squarepark students and teachers.

Representatives from Egale Canada were on conference call during this meeting to help place "pressure" on the public school board to allow a gay-straight alliance at Squarepark High. As discussed in Chapter 1, shortly following this meeting, Heather Liffiton, director of the public school board, approved the formation of a gay-straight alliance at Squarepark, making it the first in the system (Lajoie 2009). It was a memorable experience to be a part of this exciting development in the city of Windsor. At that moment, I knew that for my dissertation research, I wanted to speak to teens at Squarepark (and later, from other schools) in order to gather their experiences of high school life, and more pertinently, why they fought so strongly for a gay-straight alliance.

I realized that looking at these teens' experiences without examining larger social patterns their lives are embedded in would distort issues of inequality and result in an overly individualized analysis (Pascoe 2007). My task was to devise a research project that not only captured the voices of these teens, but also the events that were "bigger than them." I knew that I needed to document what was occurring at the school-board level and beyond that, the government level, with respect to gay-straight alliances. I also

believed that there must be something distinctive about Squarepark High – why had its students been the first to rally for a GSA in Windsor? As we know that high schools are unique environments where the general social “rules” of the outside world do not apply (Milner 2004), I wondered along what dimensions these “rules” varied? For example, if I compared Squarepark students’ accounts to those of youth from other schools, what larger social processes might I find at work? How would I compare student experiences along some important aspects that would allow me to capture these differences?

From the time I began conceiving this project, I regularly looked through *The Windsor Star*, the city’s newspaper, for any stories pertaining to gay-straight alliances in Windsor high schools. As the newspaper had printed several articles on the students’ struggle to obtain a GSA at Squarepark, I believed this to be a valuable tool in assisting me to keep track of local events. I was also sent gay-straight alliance related articles by colleagues that were interested in GSA developments outside of Windsor from sources including ‘The Globe and Mail’, and ‘Xtra - Canada’s Gay and Lesbian News’, among others. I gathered relevant articles and filed them away, ceasing article collection when the Ontario government mandated that all schools must have gay-straight alliances (see Chapter 1 for these and other details). These articles are useful in that I am able to explore change over time regarding gay-straight alliance development in Windsor, something I cannot do with my interview data alone (Warren and Karner, 2005). Along with the articles, I desired to speak with community advocates that played important roles in assisting Squarepark students’ fight for a GSA. The initial goal of the adult interviews

was to round out my perspective of gay-straight alliance development in the City of Windsor.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

After deciding that I was interested in studying gay-straight alliances, I had to choose which aspects I found most intriguing and that I would also be able to effectively study. My research interests came to centre on questions of what makes a GSA beneficial for sexual minority youth in secondary schools, and how the benefits of a GSA might vary depending on other factors present in the school. For example, could a gay-straight alliance be a haven in a social world filled with cliques and hierarchies, or conversely, does the presence of status hierarchies make it more difficult for GSAs to exist? Pragmatically, I wondered how gay-straight alliances helped to combat bullying against sexual minority youth. As I had read that students in schools with GSAs felt safer, were more likely to report incidents of harassment, and attended school more, I was left wondering exactly *how* this worked. Surely, I did not believe that GSAs were a “magical” solution to bullying of sexual minority youth; there had to be some factors that were going on “behind the scenes” in schools. These inquiries lead me to form the following research questions.

In my first substantive chapter, I ask the following research questions: “In what ways do status hierarchies in high schools vary based on the size of the school and average parental income of the students’ parents? How do factors such as good looks, economic resources, and extra-curricular activities influence one’s position in these

various schools?” Finally, I ask whether status hierarchies should be re-conceptualized (from being thought of as simply vertical) to accommodate multiple sources of status and varying competition? This chapter will lay the groundwork for the rest of the dissertation; I will map out the hierarchies that are present based on the “on the ground” perspective of my respondents, and aim to identify how these hierarchies are constructed.

Taking into account the information learned in the previous chapter, in Chapter 4, my research questions delve into how status and bullying are interconnected; is it high status students that are responsible for bullying their peers? Or rather are bullies low-status peers who are trying to gain status? I also ask the following research question; how do students use social networks to navigate status hierarchies in their high school? In addition, I am interested in learning why some sexual minority youth face harassment in high school, while others cite positive experiences. I am curious as to how friendships and involvement in extra-curricular activities might influence students’ experiences in high school.

Chapter 5 builds on Chapters 3 and 4 in using the following research questions: How do social networks intersect with gay-straight alliances in various social hierarchies? How do GSAs work as social networks that have a protective ability against bullying? And finally, how can students be in protective social networks without having a gay-straight alliance at their school? In addition, I am interested in examining whether GSAs members perceive that this group has had some wider influence on the school climate such as reducing homophobic language, fostering acceptance by peers, and educating

peers on sexual minority issues. As well, I will explore whether gay-straight alliances have any impact on the existing hierarchies at a school.

### **COMPARATIVE CASE DESIGN**

In order to answer my various, and not so simple research questions, it appeared I would have to compare and contrast the experiences of students at schools with and without gay-straight alliances, and ask some key questions to help me identify the larger factors present. My goal in using qualitative methodology is ultimately, to examine how a combination of factors come together to help or hinder the effectiveness of gay-straight alliances in high schools and to tease apart factors that lead to varying experiences. As mentioned in my introductory chapter, I employ a cross-unit comparative design to explore the experiences of my case population, that is, lesbian, gay, bisexual, bi-curious, pansexual and queer (LGBPQ) students and their heterosexual peers (some of which are allies) in high schools with and without GSAs (Berg, 2004).

Along with the fact that three of the schools in this study have gay-straight alliances, and three do not, these schools also differ based on their size, the average parental income of their students, and “public” (belonging to the Greater Essex County District School Board) versus “Catholic” (belonging to the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board) membership. As I had contacts at Squarepark, and it was the first to have a GSA, I knew it would be important to speak to these students. Bridgeview and Southridge had also formed GSAs that had been in existence for approximately two years by the time I was able to interview students, so I believed it vital to also speak with

students from these two schools as well. I then wanted to compare the experiences of sexual minority and straight youth at non-GSA schools; in order to do so I needed to find three schools which compared to these on some significant aspects. School size and average parental income of students (along with the Public/Catholic school distinction) offered excellent points of comparison. Drawing on these various aspects in a comparison allows me to contrast the on-the-ground experiences of students and describe how the hierarchies in various schools are constructed.

In order to further illustrate the points of comparison among the schools in my sample, I will provide demographic information about each. Squarepark High is situated in a high income neighbourhood, although students from surrounding lower income areas also attend. Fewer than 1000 students in total attend the school. According to Fraser Institute findings, the average parental income of students at Squarepark is \$64,700 (Report Cards – School Performance 2010). This school houses a strong creative arts program, which requires an audition for admittance into various drama, music, dance and visual arts classes. These take place in the early morning prior to regularly scheduled classes. This program draws students from across the city and county, as it is the only high school in the city with a performing arts program. Fraser Institute findings also show that 6.5% of Squarepark students have special needs, and that none have English as a second language (ESL). Squarepark has a city-wide reputation as being "gay friendly" (which is echoed by teachers interviewed) and it seems only fitting that the first GSA was formed here.

The second public high school with a gay-straight alliance in my sample is Southridge High. This school is situated in a high income, or wealthy area of the city known as "South Windsor." According to Fraser Institute findings (2010), the average parental income is \$85,900; the second highest in the city. Southridge is the only school in the city that houses an "advanced placement" program, (students refer to it as the "enriched" program) the aim of which is for students to "experience university level curriculum while in a high school setting", and to give students a "competitive edge when applying for university" (Advanced Placement Program Brochure 2013). Southridge is also particularly well known for its competitive math program. According to my respondents, students in the advanced placement program regularly compete in province-wide math and physics competitions. Students in this program take classes on year long system; that is, rather than take four classes a semester like their peers in academic or applied courses, enriched courses run the full year. Thus, students in this program are separated from their academic or applied peers, as timetables do not easily allow for enriched students to take a mix of "regular" courses as well. As for other aspects of the school, 6.0% of students have special needs, while 4.2% are English as a second language (Fraser Institute Report Cards on School Performance 2010). Southridge is one of the largest high schools in the city; approximately 1500 students attend the school.

The third and final public school with a gay-straight alliance is Bridgeview secondary school. Bridgeview is situated in a very "rough", low income part of the city known as the "West side." According to the Fraser Institute findings (2010), parents' average income is \$39, 800, rendering it the lowest in the city. According to my

respondents, Bridgeview's student body is also very ethnically diverse, as many students are recent immigrants to Canada. Fraser findings confirm these reports, as 43.0% of the students are English as second language (Fraser Institute Report Cards on School Performance 2010). In addition, 6.3% of the students have special needs. The student body is also one of the smallest in the city, as 500-600 students attend this school.

I now turn to Catholic schools, which as discussed, I will be comparing. I begin with Faith High, which is situated in a low-income neighbourhood in the city's west side, near Bridgeview high school. Although Faith is in close proximity to Bridgeview, I believe it offers a better comparison to Squarepark, as the average parental income of \$56,100 is close to that of Squarepark's students at \$64,700 (Fraser Institute Report Cards on School Performance 2010). Furthermore, Faith houses an International Baccalaureate (IB) program which attracts students from around the city (as does Squarepark's arts program) including some from very high income families. The program offers "a rigorous and academically demanding curriculum for highly motivated, socially conscious, university bound students" and provides students with "the opportunity to develop themselves intellectually, spiritually, culturally, socially, and physically through academic and co-curricular programs" (International Baccalaureate Organization 2009). Unlike Southridge's enriched program, students are able to take courses from different streams; for example, students may take IB courses in one or more of six subject areas, and "regular" academic courses for the remainder. According to the Fraser Institute findings, 18.6% of students at Faith High have special needs, and only 0.5% is considered to have English as a second language.

Secondly, Blessed Souls high school offers an excellent comparison to Southridge on some key demographics. Blessed Souls is situated in the same high income neighbourhood as Southridge High, which is known as "South Windsor." While Southridge's average parental income is \$85,900, and the second highest in the city, that of Blessed Souls is \$92,600, rendering it the school with the highest average parental income in the city of Windsor (Fraser Institute Report Cards on School Performance 2010). I believe that these two factors offer excellent points of comparison when examining the accounts of students at a high school with a GSA in a high income neighbourhood, with a school in a high income neighbourhood that does not have a GSA. In addition, Blessed Souls is similar in size to Southridge, as it too has approximately 1500 students. Blessed Souls has fewer English as a second language students, at 0.5% (compared to Southridge's 4.2%), but more special needs students at 12.2% (versus 6.0% at Southridge).

The third and final Catholic high school in my sample is Sacred Saint high school, which compares well with Bridgeview High. Sacred Saint is situated in a lower income area of the city, in the central or downtown area of Windsor. Respondents report that the school offers a breakfast program, as well as resources for low-income students such as diapers and care packages for expectant teens (or those already parents), and Christmas gifts for those students whose families cannot afford them. Although Sacred Saint is not in close proximity to Bridgeview, there are several similarities. For example, the average parental income of Sacred Saint students is \$45,200 and therefore, the second lowest in the city (recall that Bridgeview had the lowest, at \$39,800) (Fraser Institute Report Cards

on School Performance, 2010). Sacred Saint also has a high number of students for whom English is a second language (32.0%), as many recent immigrants also attend this school. This is the second highest number in the city, while Bridgeview had the highest (43.0%). Sacred Saint has more special needs students than Bridgeview, with 17.3% compared to their 6.3%. There are under 1000 students at Sacred Saint; a larger student body than Bridgeview (500-600). As Sacred Saint and Bridgeview have the lowest average parental income in the city, as well as the two highest English as a second language number of students, I believe they offer strong points for comparison. See Figure 2.1 below for a summary of the size and average parental income of each school.

As discussed in Chapter 1, at the time of data collection, the Catholic school board did not allow gay-straight alliances in its high schools. Thus, I chose Catholic schools simply with the goal of capturing how the experiences of sexual minority youth differed at those schools with and without gay-straight alliances. As many of the public schools in Windsor were quickly forming GSAs during the time of my data collection, Catholic high schools were selected because they offered the only non-GSA comparison. I do understand that the educational context of Catholic schools differs, as the faith-based education system of Catholic schools teaches the good news of Jesus and His Gospel at its heart (Ontario Catholic School Trustees Association 2007). Catholic schools have also been criticized for sidestepping progressive policies related to sexual orientation or gender identity due to perceived conflict with religious beliefs (Callaghan, 2009). This comparison also points out some challenges that sexual minority youth in Catholic schools face and further highlights the need for gay-straight alliances in high schools.

While three of these high schools are public, and three are Catholic, I do not believe that this distinction makes a difference with regard to the formation of status hierarchies. Catholic high schools in the Province of Ontario are publicly funded through Catholic-rate taxpayers; unlike religious based private schools in other parts of Canada, students do not pay yearly tuition. In addition, non-Catholic students can attend Catholic high schools. While the fact that Catholic schools did not have GSAs was one of my main points of comparison, the absence of GSAs also made it difficult to recruit sexual minority participants from these schools. As GSA dances and other events (to be discussed) were valuable recruiting grounds for Public school students, I did not have this opportunity with Catholic school students. As a result, I have fewer sexual minority students from Catholic schools in my sample. See Figure 2.2 below for a breakdown of participants by self-identified heterosexual versus sexual minority identity.

**Figure 2.1 Table Outlining School Characteristics**

<b>School Name *P/C (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Average Parental Income</b>
Blessed Souls (C)	> 1500	\$92,600
Southridge (P)	> 1500	\$85,900
Sacred Saint (C)	< 1000	\$45,200
Squarepark (P)	< 1000	\$64,700
Faith High (C)	~ 500	\$56,100
Bridgeview (P)	~500	\$39, 800

\*P – Public High School, C – Catholic High School

**Figure 2.2 Breakdown of Participants by School and Heterosexual vs. Sexual minority (self-identified)**

<b>School Name *P/C (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Number of Students</b>	<b>Heterosexual Identity</b>	<b>Sexual minority Identity</b>
Blessed Souls (C)	10	8	2
Southridge (P)	8	5	3
Sacred Saint (C)	10	7	3
Squarepark (P)	11	3	8
Faith High (C)	5	2	3
Bridgeview (P)	6	4	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>21</b>

\*P – Public High School, C – Catholic High School

## **METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION**

In order to gather student accounts, I decided on a semi-structured interview format, which allowed me to gather rich data, capturing the unique experiences of each participant. I used standard questions across participants, but was able to probe their answers, and address or clarify their questions (Berg 2004). I decided this method would work best because I wanted to target key questions regarding each student’s high school, but I also wanted to allow for students to speak freely in a conversational manner with me and not partake in a rigid interview schedule. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to “see” what was really going on in high schools, as very few qualitative studies on social hierarchies exist. For example, as the majority of studies on social hierarchies described in Chapter 1 rely simply on student ratings of peer popularity, I was more interested in

knowing why some students were described as popular, and not simply their place in a status hierarchy.

I carried out several pilot or "pre-test" interviews before the start of data collection in order to ascertain how effective the interview was in eliciting the type of information I was seeking and the time that it took (Berg 2004). The length of interviews ranged between 30 minutes to one and a half hours. The average interview duration was approximately 45 minutes. Participants were offered an honorarium of a \$10 gift card for a popular coffee shop chain in appreciation for their time. All interviews took place in mutually agreed upon public, quiet locations. The majority of interviews were held in space provided to me at the University of Windsor (where I am a former student), while others took place in coffee shops. In addition, one interview took place over Skype, a software program that allows users to make calls over the internet, and two took place over the phone (using a phone conversation recording device, of which participants were informed and consented). The interviews with the five adult GSA advocates took place in their homes.

The first set of interview questions address issues of social hierarchies and bullying; for example, are there different social groups at school; are some kids considered popular; also, are there students who give others a hard time? I initially experienced difficulty in devising a way in which to ask students about social hierarchies; as a result, the wording of this set of questions was "borrowed" from a quantitative research approach known as Social Cognitive Mapping (Cairns, Perrin and Cairns 1985; Cairns et al. 1995) which asks students to free-recall the names of peers, friends and

social hierarchies in their school. These questions have been effective in large scale quantitative studies (where students are first interviewed, then responses coded and analysed with statistical procedures). Although this study is qualitative in nature, these questions provided a heuristic device to help organize student responses. For example, my first question, which I borrowed from the Social Cognitive Mapping literature, was "Tell me about your grade: are there some people who hang around together a lot, and who are they?" These questions seemed effective in garnering responses from students, as they were able to extrapolate the various social groups present at their school, and not only who the popular students and bullies are, but why they were popular.

My second and third subsets of questions were easier to design. The second set of questions examines students' perceptions of school climate, such as where students feel safe at school. I referenced GLSEN's school climate study to help create these questions, as I wanted to ensure that I did not miss any important aspects of school climate and safety; therefore, I attempted to cover all areas that GLSEN covers in their questionnaires (Kosciw et al, 2012). For example, I include questions about many different forms of harassment, including relational or cyber bullying, which I had initially not considered asking. My last set of interview questions deal with gay-straight alliances. Although these mainly applied to those students in public schools, the Catholic students who had wanted to start gay-straight alliances in their school were able to address several of these questions. Examples of these questions include why students are or are not involved in their school's GSA, activities they take part in through the GSA, and why they feel it is important for a school to have a gay-straight alliance.

## **RECRUITMENT OF INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS**

As I wanted to be able to secure any eligible students for participation in my study as I came into contact them, I applied for ethics approval at an early stage. I received approval by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board in the spring of 2009 (see Appendix A for the McMaster University Ethics Approval Form). Upon returning to Windsor in 2009, I continued my involvement in SAFE, and was invited to work on Windsor Pride's Research and Education group. Windsor Pride is a non-profit organization that aims to increase public awareness and understanding of sexual minority issues. In addition to running a yearly Pride festival, Windsor Pride operates a community centre, offers various support groups, and partners with local organizations to provide information and training on the needs of the sexual minority community. Through this group, I become better acquainted with teachers from Squarepark high school and Bridgeview High, schools that I would eventually attempt to recruit students to interview, as well as various students that would occasionally attend meetings. I discussed my research interests with both groups and its members, and all told me they would do what they could to aid my recruitment. Thus, SAFE and the Windsor Pride Research and Education working group were my first avenues for recruitment. For example, the Director of Windsor Pride posted my recruitment flyers in the Pride office (see Appendix B for the recruitment flyer template).

As the teachers I had met were not permitted to tell their students about my study during school hours (I was told this by a school board employee who was in attendance at a SAFE meeting), nor did I formally apply for ethics approval through the school board

itself, as this would be timely and painstaking. I had to be creative in my recruitment efforts. I decided to begin by recruiting those students from public high schools that I knew had established gay-straight alliances; apart from Squarepark, these were Bridgeview and Southridge high schools. My community contacts from the groups I volunteered with agreed to mention my study to those they knew who fit my recruitment call. Teachers told students involved in the GSA outside of school hours, those on SAFE or from Windsor Pride that worked with youth from these schools mentioned it to them, and parents in these groups who had children at the aforementioned schools mentioned it to them. In addition, teachers further assisted my recruitment efforts by inviting me to events where I was able to recruit high school students without violating any school board regulations. Thus, I began recruiting participants before I had even completed my research proposal, as I anticipated difficulties in obtaining my sample.

Once my research proposal was approved, and my interview schedule in place, I was ready to delve into my recruitment, and knew that I would have to use every opportunity at my disposal. I began recruitment at the first Windsor gay-straight alliance dance, which took place in the spring of 2010 at Squarepark high school. Students from any high school, both public and Catholic, were invited to attend. Here, I approached students and asked for their names and email address and permission to contact them at a later date regarding participation in my study. This is also how I initially contacted some Catholic school students who had attended the dance. A subsequent GSA dance took place the next year at Bridgeview High in the spring of 2011 where I approached students in a similar manner and later emailed them (see Appendix C for the email template).

In the spring of 2011, an important and monumental event occurred – the Greater Essex County District (Public) school board held its first annual gay-straight alliance conference. My teacher contacts from Squarepark high school took the lead in planning in this, along with other volunteers at Windsor Pride. I was asked to co-host a panel discussion on gay-straight alliances with teachers and students, and I accepted. While I was not permitted to "officially recruit" during this event, as it was held by the school board, I did approach a couple of students I had contacted prior about their willingness to participate in my study; several interviews did occur as a result. Furthermore, my role as a panel moderator increased my visibility among students present and confirmed my place as a friendly face in the community for those who had not met me prior to this event.

A very successful recruitment avenue was the social networking site Facebook. With Facebook, "groups" can be created that users can join. For example, Squarepark and Southridge high schools each have their own GSA groups on Facebook where they post information about meetings, events, and so on. I became a "member" of these groups, and posted my recruitment information here. I briefly described the purpose of the study, approval from the research ethics board and my contact information asking students to email me if interested in participating in my study (see Appendix D for the Facebook message template). Snowball sampling was perhaps my most successful recruitment method, as participants passed on study information to their friends and school mates, or gave me names of friends that I could message on Facebook about my study. The method was useful, as participants could vouch for the safety and legitimacy of my study to their

friends and acquaintances (Berg, 2004). Snowball sampling was especially useful for obtaining students from Catholic high schools, as only few Catholic school students were present at the GSA dances, and other community events I had attended.

With regard to the five adults, or gay-straight alliance advocates, that I had interviewed, I directly approached them about participating in my study and they agreed. Two of these adults are teachers at Squarepark high school and were instrumental in fighting for gay-straight alliances. The third is a child and youth worker at Bridgeview high school, and is also a union representative who fights for the rights of sexual minority teachers and students. The fourth is a community advocate and PhD candidate, who is considered a local "expert" on sexual minority issues, and was present during many school board meetings. The final adult interviewed is a public health nurse who fought for GSAs in the early stages when they were simply an idea in the mind of Squarepark student. While I initially believed that these interviews would be part of my dissertation, as I carried out my analysis, I did not find them pertinent to the themes I developed in my analysis. In addition, these interviews revealed personal struggles of the adults and did not speak to the issues of school climate, status hierarchies or bullying. The only portion used of the adult interviews is that with Squarepark teacher Ms. Smith, which is cited above. These interviews may be used in future publications deriving from my data.

Participants were given the Letter of Information to read regarding the study, as well as a list of free and confidential counselling agencies in the city should they feel a need to further discuss their experiences (see Appendix E for the Letter and Appendix F for the List). Permission to participate was obtained through signed consent forms from

the youth and adults themselves (see Appendix G for the consent forms). As previously mentioned, of the six high schools in the sample, three were public (part of the Greater-Essex County School Board) and three were Catholic (part of the Windsor-Essex Catholic District School Board). The three public high schools in the sample had gay-straight alliances. Squarepark High was the first in the city to form a gay-straight alliance (established in the spring of 2009) while Bridgeview High and Southridge High quickly followed suit as the next two schools in the city to establish GSAs, officially forming their groups in the fall of 2009. Of the 50 students in this sample, 25 attended public high schools, and the majority (20) of these were involved in their schools' GSA. Conversely, 25 students attended the three Catholic high schools: Sacred Saint, Blessed Souls and Faith High. While several students at these schools attempted to form gay-straight alliances at their school, none had "official" gay-straight alliances or informal groups serving a similar purpose at the time of interview. These interviews took place during the months of April to October, 2011 (see Appendix H for the Interview Schedule).

### ***Recruitment Guidelines***

The lower age limit of 16 was selected as these students had experienced some time in high school, and had experiences to draw upon for discussion. The McMaster Research Ethics Board had approved this age; as sexual minority youth may not be “out” to their parents, parental consent would be problematic to obtain. My goal was to minimize retrospective accounts and maximize recall of high school experiences. However, after exhausting most of my recruitment avenues in searching for current high school students, it was necessary that I include those who had recently graduated in order

to increase my sample size. Therefore, the upper age limit of 21 was selected as these students had typically not been out of high school for more than two years.

Participants were asked to self identify their sexuality identity if they felt comfortable doing so; all reported their sexual identity to me. Of the 50 students, 29 identified as "straight" or "heterosexual"; 10 identified as "gay"; 1 as a "lesbian"; 2 as "bisexual"; 3 as "bi-curious"; 3 as "pansexual" and 2 as "queer." It is important to note that no participants identified as transgender or transsexual; I will use the acronym "LGBPQ" in reference to those sexual identities present in my sample. With regard to gender, 18 participants identified themselves as "male"; 30 as "female"; and 1 each as "gender queer" and "male/female." I also provide a breakdown of participants by age in Figure 2.3 below.

**Figure 2.3 Breakdown of Participants by Age**

<b>Participant Age</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
14*	1
16	13
17	7
18	13
19	9
20	4
21	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>

\*Parental consent provided

## **ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEW DATA**

The analysis of interview transcripts is assisted by QSR NVIVO 8, a software program used to aid the analysis of qualitative data. All interviews were audio-recorded in order to prevent loss of details due to recall from memory (Silverman 2003). I fully transcribed each individual interview, and then uploaded each transcript into the aforementioned program. In order to ensure confidentiality and guard my research subject's identities, any identifiers were removed and respondents were assigned a pseudonym to represent their names (Berg 2004). Each high school has also been given a pseudonym to further protect my participants' confidentiality.

The focus of the interviews is to make inferences regarding status relations, social networks, gay-straight alliances and school climate. Participants were asked to reflect on their high school experiences including their social relationships and the social structures that exist in their high school. It is the variation around the shape and strength of students' social networks, network boundaries, and status processes that are the key focus of this study. I use the subjective interpretations of my participants in order to re-create these relationships and structures, and to capture their variation across school settings. In order to examine this variation, I elaborate existing ideas about status cultures found in the literature, such as those discussed in Chapter 1 and examine how these apply to the high schools in my sample (see for example, Milner 2004; Collins 2008).

In addition to examining how the current literature applies to my cases, this study also aims to create new ways of thinking around issues of bullying, gay-straight alliances and school climate through an examination of the social mechanisms at play in high

school. In order to guide this inductive analysis, I draw upon techniques from Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory model, as I employ the "constant comparative method." This method involves a constant interplay between proposing statements of relationships, and verifying possibilities incident by incident. For example, this is how I created the Status Differentiation Ideal Types discussed in Chapter 3. My data were initially coded numerically according to interview guide questions. I then organized categories into thematically related groupings of ideas (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Subsequently, themes used for axial coding included *social hierarchies, school climate, experiences of harassment, and experiences in a gay-straight alliance*. Axial coding focuses on emerging categories; through axial coding, I examined central phenomena and causal conditions where these categories became interrelated, returning to the data and looking for text that supported or refuted my themes (Creswell 1998). I also used memo writing to help me elaborate categories, specify their properties and examine possible relationships between categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967). I present the quotes which best exemplify the themes discussed.

### **ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY**

Many of my characteristics as a researcher, including my identity as a heterosexual, working class white woman, and my age (late 20s at time of data collection), may impact the research process. In interviewing this age group, it was important that I appear non-threatening. For example, I dressed very casually, a technique others interviewing adolescents have used (Pascoe 2007). In an attempt to minimize

status differences with respondents and build good rapport I attempted to use everyday speech and vocabulary so I would not appear as a “stuffy” researcher (Fontana & Frey 2003). From time to time, I shared my own high school experiences or my knowledge of popular culture that respondent's referred to; this was done as an attempt to develop common ground, an important aspect of building rapport (Berg 2004). Having attended a Catholic high school myself (in fact, one in which I interviewed students from), and sharing these experiences, aided this process.

Qualitative research studies on school climate present a certain advantage over traditional quantitative studies, which are the most frequent measures of school climate. While studies such as GLSEN's (2011) National School Climate Survey report positive effects of GSAs, the model questionnaire they employ is closed-ended, meaning respondents simply circle a response without room for elaboration on an issue. Moreover, such a survey does not take into account people's qualifiers for the answers they select, and may create false opinions if an insufficient list of alternatives is given (DeVaus 2002). This presents a disadvantage because meanings attributed to behaviour may not be inferred, as the context surrounding responses is not articulated by the respondent or understood by the researcher (Mac an Ghail 1994). The benefit of qualitative research is that it can supply the intricate details of phenomenon that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods alone (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

As the analyses presented here are based on a small, selective sample of students from various high schools, no claims can be made that these findings represent the experiences of all LGBPQ or straight youth in those high schools discussed, or all high

schools in general (Creswell 1994). While quantitative researchers may argue that this aspect of qualitative research as not generalizable to other persons is a weakness, the underlying point is that this type of research is only generalizable to the specific situations studied (Strauss and Corbin 1998). It could be argued that certain schools selected for this study may generate predictable findings; for example, that logically, an Arts High school would have a flatter hierarchy. However, the goal of this research is not to simply document these hierarchies, but rather to examine the social processes involved in their formation, and how they may ultimately be challenged. In the next chapter, I begin my analysis by describing the hierarchies present in six different high schools, and the factors which influence how these hierarchies are constructed.

### **CHAPTER 3: STATUS HIERARCHIES**

#### **CHAPTER OUTLINE/PURPOSE**

In this chapter, I describe the social hierarchies that are present in six different Canadian high schools based on the “on the ground” perspective of the students I have interviewed. Drawing upon their accounts, I examine factors which influence how these hierarchies are constructed, and how they differ among the high schools my respondents attend. This is done with the ultimate aim of mapping out the various terrains in which gay-straight alliances in the study are (and are not) located. In painting a picture of the hierarchies that exist in these various high schools, I will ultimately address how the presence of strong vertical, or conversely, horizontal (or lateral), social differentiation creates varying experiences among students in high school. Given that we know that status matters with regard to bullying, I consider how status matters in schools with and without gay-straight alliances. While this chapter cannot directly answer these questions, it lays the groundwork for subsequent chapters to do so.

Originating with the work of James Coleman (1961), studies of youth culture and schooling have received much attention in sociology. In his seminal piece "The Adolescent Society", Coleman explains that adolescents have become "liberated" by parents and mass media. As a result, they are no longer solely satisfied by doing well academically, but want to achieve socially. This "liberated adolescent society" is more focused on social activities such as dating and parties than academics. In this society, those who are physically attractive, athletic, and possess strong social skills and material status markers are in the leading crowds. Using data acquired from seven high schools in

a metropolitan United States region, Garner et al. (2006) revisit Coleman's (1961) study and find that much remains the same; athletic ability, physical attractiveness and money/possession of brand name products continue to be associated with popularity. They also note three major changes that have come about in schools, including growing racial/ethnic diversity, a great range of oppositional cultures and increased tension, often along class lines. As Canada celebrates multiculturalism, and many immigrants chose to reside in Ontario, the influence of ethnic diversity on peer cultures will also be an aspect this study explores (Boyd and Vickers 2000). Drawing upon Milner's (2004) Subculture Theory, the peer culture and status hierarchies' literature, I examine the presence of traditional and newer sources of status that are found in Canadian high schools.

While we know that hierarchies exist and are well documented in the peer culture literature, the focus of this research, unlike that of previous work in this area, is to show how these hierarchies are formed in the first place, and to uncover factors that may influence the formation of status hierarchies in various school settings. In depicting this, I ask "In what ways do status hierarchies in high schools vary based on the size of the school and average parental income of the students' parents? How do factors such as good looks, economic resources, and extra-curricular activities influence one's position in these various schools?" Finally, I ask whether status hierarchies should be re-conceptualized (from being thought of as simply vertical) to accommodate multiple sources of status and varying competition?

In order to address my research questions, I examine two Windsor high schools that house over 1500 students with the highest average parental incomes in the city (over

\$80,000 per year). I compare the experiences of these students with those of students at smaller schools (those with less than 1500 students) which I describe as middle and low income schools (having an average parental income of \$64,500 or less). Among these four schools are two with the lowest average parental incomes in the city and very small student populations (approximately 500 students). As I argue that the two main factors that lead to this variation come from school size, and the average parental income of parents, this comparison uncovers the surprising ways in which these variables may influence the shape of status hierarchies in high school.

### **ANALYSIS: LARGE HIGH SCHOOLS**

#### ***Tall Vertical Hierarchies***

As discussed in Chapter 1, the student subculture literature typically presents status hierarchies as tall, vertical social structures with clear membership. At the top of the hierarchy we find the "jocks"; this category mainly refers to male football and basketball players though may include other sports (Milner 2004). In her study of minority integration at mainly white high schools, Holland (2012) found that participation in athletics offers black and Latino males an avenue to gain social status. Also topping the status hierarchy in high school are the "preps"; these students are academic achievers and are also involved in extracurricular activities, and wear fashionable clothes (Bishop et al. 2004). Cheerleaders and pretty, trendsetting females, typically from wealthy backgrounds, are also found at the top (Durham 2002). Wealth for both males and females seems to be a key feature of high status youth.

Those in middle status groups are often involved in extracurricular activities such as band or drama - those which carry less caché than sports. Intellectual youth, those from working-class backgrounds, and other “average” kids that are not noticeable in any respect are also found in the middle (Collins 2008). Conversely, nerds, or smart bookworm types who are openly preoccupied with academic success are at the bottom of the social structure, as are "loners", or those who do not appear to have any friends. Also at the bottom of hierarchies are "dorks" or "geeks"; these students are considered inept with regard to fashion, are rarely invited to social events and typically have low grades and have poor athletic skill (Garner et al. 2006). This section explores how my research findings compare to the literature.

The two high schools in this study that have the highest income and the largest amount of students are Blessed Souls and Southridge. Recall that both these schools have a population of 1500 or more students, and a very high average parental income; \$85,900 for Southridge, and \$92,500 for Blessed Souls – the second highest, and highest in the city, respectively. Beginning with Blessed Souls, all of the students that I interviewed, with the exception of one, say that a strong vertical hierarchy is in place at their school. Students describe the school as “especially cliquy” (Fran<sup>4</sup>, female, straight, Blessed Souls) and often identify athletes, preps and “pretty girls” as those at the top of the hierarchy, mirroring findings in the research literature (Collins 2008; Milner 2004). Students clearly describe vertical hierarchies as present, and many have interesting ways of doing so, as Marcus does:

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<sup>4</sup> Names of Research Participants have been changed

I'd call it more like a fat man [the shape of the hierarchy]. Like, he's got a small head, so there's the popular kids, but then it's, a lot of the school is generalized and still together, but then there's still that small part at the bottom that...the loners, the outcasts, the small cliques of people (Marcus, male, straight, Blessed Souls).

This student describes it in “steps”:

It was those 3 steps. It was loners, preps, and then athletes; that's how I saw it. People who were prep, they were all classy and everything...but they didn't do much around the school, they just walked around acting cool. And then the athletes were on top...they were big muscle guys...you can't say anything wrong with these guys, cuz that's not gonna put you in a good spot in the whole high school clique. And nobody really bothered the music or the drama people...we wouldn't pick on them, cuz they're still doing something good, you know? (Leo, male, straight, Blessed Souls).

Again, we see that the preps and athletes are described as those on top of the hierarchy.

With regard to females, those often depicted as being on the top are the rich “bitchy” perfect looking girls. According to the respondents from Blessed Souls, those involved in activities other than athletics such as student council, band or play are not the most popular, but are not “losers” either. This reflects Collins’ (2008) categorization of these activities as middle status. Students at Blessed Souls appeared to have no trouble describing the hierarchies present in their school. This speaks to the entrenched nature of the hierarchies at this school, and how easily visible they appear to students there.

Several of the students that I interviewed from Southridge are in the enriched program, which can also be classified as a “gifted” program. According to these students, this creates hierarchies within each academic stream at school, as Jenny states:

I find that among streams, there's like, their own pyramid, kind of, um, Southridge is really streamed because there's non-semester and semester classes, and enriched classes are always non-semester, so we run full year (Jenny, female, straight, Southridge).

As Jenny explains, the students in the enriched program are enrolled in courses that run on a full year schedule, rendering it difficult to take non-enriched classes, as these are semester based courses. As a result, these students tend to mainly socialize among their enriched peers, and are not always fully aware of who is “on top” in the applied or academic streams. However, among the non-enriched students at Southridge, the traditional form of vertical hierarchy is described, with athletes being among those at the top.

I think it would be like a rectangle with boxes in the middle. Well, because you have certain groups that were all at the top. So you had your jocks, your preps, your pretty people; they were all at the top. And then you had your smart people right underneath, and then, underneath that you had like, everyone else (Tania, female, bi-curious, Southridge).

Tania’s explanation reflects the common sentiment among non-enriched students at Southridge, with students explaining that specifically, it is the football and hockey players, and the track team at the top. Girls, typically described as the "pretty ones" who frequently associate with the athletic guys, are also said to be located on top of the hierarchy. Non-enriched students from Southridge also describe the hierarchies with ease.

According to several students at Blessed Souls, teachers reinforce these hierarchies through their treatment of particular students. For example, specific students’ names are said to be consistently heard on the morning announcements, and it is believed that teachers favour these students. Tony states:

Definitely the preps and the athletes. Again, just because they were the ones that their names were being shouted out every day on the announcements. Their names got stuck in your head...I would say that the school is, it's half their fault, the school sets everything up...the school should change the system there if they wanna fix the overall problem of bullying and all that stuff (Tony, male, straight, Blessed Souls).

Tony makes an interesting statement here, alluding to the fact that these students are bullies; this issue will be further explored in the subsequent chapter. He also raises an important point, in that teachers and administration are partially responsible for putting these students up on a pedestal. Interestingly, Marcus explains that he became involved in a variety of sports for this very reason:

I always tried to get on the teachers good side too...if they see that you're doing a lot of stuff, and you're active in the school, they like, prefer you more a little bit, and they look to you and are more lenient with you, I guess you could say. So, I was trying to do that, which I was, I was in football, soccer; I did wrestling, track and field (male, straight, Blessed Souls).

This coincides with findings from Milner's (2004) study that teachers and administrators often accentuate athletics, which thereby heightens the status of athletes of those who participate in school sports. Marcus did appear to be well known among his peers and admitted that he enjoyed the status afforded to him by his involvement in sports. However, he did not believe that he was at the very top of his school's hierarchy. It appears that the school itself may facilitate the creation of status hierarchies among its pupils rather than promoting equality among various student abilities. This is an example of how extra-curricular activities fuel status hierarchies more so than the core curriculum (Davies and Guppy 2013).

As is the case with the other Catholic schools in the city, students at Blessed Souls High are required to wear a uniform. However, there is an occasional break from this uniform; Catholic high schools offer "dress down days" on which students do not have to wear their uniform to school. On these days, students are able to display their status through fashion, as Rebecca explains:

**Rebecca:** I remember first dress down day...every single person wore a plaid shirt, and the second dress down day everyone wore their Bench [name brand] sweaters and skinny jeans. Everyone kind of dressed the same for the first few dress down days, everyone just did it.

**Interviewer:** Kind of like the trends basically?

**Rebecca:** Yeah (Rebecca, female, straight, Blessed Souls).

Similar to what Rebecca explains, several students I spoke with from Blessed Souls report feeling pressure to look their best on dress down day, which typically includes a desire to conform to the latest fashions in order to fit in with stylish peers. Sonya, a student at Blessed Souls, explains the general sentiment: “On dress down day, it's your time to shine, kinda like, your personality; you wanna express how you wear, and just wanna show everyone how I dress” (female, straight). It appears that having uniforms somewhat amplifies class distinctions on dress-down days. Students view this as an opportunity to express their personal style through clothing, though ironically, their style is often dictated by clothes they believe their peers will approve of.

Although students at Blessed Souls regularly wear uniforms, they do indeed find other avenues to display their class apart from clothing; this is often through consumer goods. At Blessed Souls High, cars and electronic gadgets are reported to be the most salient markers of class (and subsequently, high status) for men, while for females, purses, sweaters, and even tights are used. As this student explains:

The athletes and the preppy people [are most popular] just because money talks I guess. They would come to school in a brand new jeep or brand new shoes every day, brand new watches. It wasn't every single day that you would notice it, but you'd notice it throughout the year...There was a BMW 7 Series, like, c'mon (Tony, straight, male, Blessed Souls).

While for the popular girls:

Shoes, hair, like, a lot of preppy girls that I know...they'll wear flip flops and fancy clothes and bracelets and necklaces and have big purses. I know there's a lot of girls, they'll wear really bright pink coloured tights...they're also the type that will hike their skirt [the uniform kilt] up to like, to a belt basically (Anne, female, bi-curious, Blessed Souls).

Even while dress codes are in place, students continue to find ways to express their individuality, and in doing so, also display their class. For example, one student asserts that the rich kids “have their own take” on the uniforms. These students reportedly find ways to show their class distinction by wearing their uniforms in unique ways, such as flipping up shirt collars, or rolling up the sleeves to differentiate themselves from the rest of their peers. While Milner (2004) asserts that uniforms may help blunt some of the most damaging forms of status, students are able to manipulate their uniforms, even though this “display” is likely less damaging than that sought through brand-name clothing. Although uniforms may downplay one source of status, it seems there will always be “accessories” that students can draw on to reflect their class.

### ***Role of Income in these hierarchies***

According to the youth I spoke with, and as highlighted in the analysis above, it appears that wealthy youth are positioned at the top of the hierarchy at both Blessed Souls and Southridge high schools. As Marcus explains “the popular kids were the wealthy kids; kids that had money, or that show that they had money, cuz Blessed Souls was a pretty wealthy school” (male, straight). When asked what made someone popular at Blessed Souls, Anne has this to say:

...always having high tech stuff, um, like, the newest clothes and newest like, gadgets and stuff like that. And always the nicest jewellery, bags and stuff like that (Anne, bi-curious, female, Blessed Souls).

High status among peers seems to be inextricably tied to class and wealth. As discussed in the previous section, the popular athletes and preppy kids display their wealth-derived status through consumer commodities. This finding is consistent with Milner's (2004) argument that consumerism takes on a larger role in signaling status in settings where producer roles are not emphasized, with high school being the prime example of such a setting. Similarly at Southridge, the popular kids are depicted as those who are wealthy. Trying to be modest in his disdain for his school's social hierarchies, Peter explains:

...there's some very nice people around who are under-rated compared with some of the popular kids now, but I don't...I try so hard to be open-minded to them, and not judge them just because they have more friends, and maybe more money and more status (Peter, male, straight Southridge).

Mary similarly states:

We have the popular people which would be a mix of girls and guys, and they usually wear expensive clothing, they have lots of money, you can tell. And, they usually have good hair, too (female, straight, Southridge).

Peter also describes how many of the popular kids at his school fit “the spoiled rich kid stereotype.” As Southridge is a public school, and students are not required to wear uniforms, clothing is frequently mentioned as an important marker of status. Brand names such as American Apparel, Hollister, or Abercrombie and Fitch are among the most prestigious – yet ironically, these brands do not even have retail locations in the City of Windsor. These youth must travel to Michigan, or elsewhere in Ontario such as Toronto to purchase such clothing, a task that is often facilitated by parents. As Milner (2004) states, youth's preoccupation with status symbols creates an acute need for money. I argue

that this would make it much easier for those from wealthy backgrounds to acquire these markers of status.

Many of the students I spoke with believe that wealthy youth use their financial resources to gain notoriety among their peers. For example, several respondents from Blessed Souls eagerly discuss a popular group of males at their school. Accordingly, this is a tightly knit clique of five males are from wealthy families; they live in large homes in desirable suburbs of the city, and each frequently holds “exclusive” house parties. Recall Milner’s (2004) assertion that holding parties tends to elevate one’s status, particularly if alcohol is provided. A poignant description of this group, which I will call “The Fab 5,” is provided:

...they were just guys that were like, had a lot of money and thought that they owned the entire school. And everybody wanted to be their friend, and everybody wanted to hang out with them, everybody wanted to go to their parties and like...Like they either made you feel very *in*, or made you feel very, very, *out*. And even the kids that were in their group, were subject to scrutiny and like, "why are you wearing that?" kind of thing (David, male, gay, Blessed Souls).

Ironically, the girlfriends (and some friends) of these popular males at Blessed Souls, are also reported to have formed their own clique. These females, which I will call “The Group of 7”, are said to be from wealthy families and are at the top of their school’s hierarchy, as Melissa explains:

If it had anything to do with money, but if you had what people wanted, like, the name brands, and the right highlights and the right tan, and being pretty enough, and you always wanted to be skinnier...Like, this group of 7 girls, they were all like, so beautiful and so perfect it seemed like on the outside, and everybody just...wanted to be that skinny, they wanted to play those sports...I think that if you have those things, then that's what made you popular. But if you weren't as pretty as people, as these girls, then you didn't make it, kind of thing (Melissa, female, straight, Blessed Souls).

Similar to Milner's (2004) discussion of the Indian caste system, group intimacies create norms and pressures to conform. These cliques create their own norms around behaviour, dress and appearance, which are adhered to by its members. As witnessed in the account of "The Fab 5", even within-group members who do not conform to the group are scrutinized. With regard to those outside the group, Milner explains that followers of high status groups are essential to maintaining the groups' status. However, these "followers" at times pose a threat and may have to be "put in their place." In David's above account, we see this aspect when he explains that if you are an outsider to the popular group of males, they make you feel that way.

According to several of my respondents from Blessed Souls, they believe that the school itself has certain financial expectations it places on students. While students at this school have the highest average parental income in the city, not all students are wealthy.

As Leo explains:

**Leo:** They [the school] would ask for a lot of money, and I remember my parents would always get upset. They would just ask for random things, like foundations or different fundraisers and they'd kinda like demand the money, it's like, 'you do this and you get to go here, if you don't pay for this, then you're not gonna do this.'

**Interviewer:** So they didn't realize that not every student was rich?

**Leo:** Right. And they'd have those things where if you can't pay this, then you'll come and we'll help you out, but who wants to isolate themselves and be like "I can't afford this, will you help me out?" Nobody wants to do that (Leo, male, straight, Blessed Souls).

The school itself is described as reinforcing class distinctions by assuming that all students can afford to give freely to various charities. Although assistance is offered to those who cannot pay various fees, administrators appear to neglect the fact that students

may not feel comfortable asking for financial assistance, or may even get teased for doing so. Coming from a lower income family and attending a school where peers drive luxury vehicles can be especially intimidating. If schools are placing the same financial expectations on the entire student body, this could create anger and frustration among those who are not as wealthy as their peers.

### ***Counter-Cultural Groups***

While subculture theory is useful in describing the reasons why students seek status, there appears to be an assumption implicit in the theory that *everyone* is seeking status. Although some students who attend Southridge and Blessed Souls certainly feel pressure to attain popularity, not all students that I spoke with from these schools report craving attention or high status. Many of these students reject the consumerist environment of their high school and aim to carve out their own identity in a social world where conformity to popular fashions, activities and appearances are valued. The follow exchange demonstrates this view.

***Interviewer:*** Is popularity important to you?

***Diana:*** Not really. Like, I could care less, it, I just wanna have a group of friends that I get along with and I don't feel awkward around, that's what really matters to me (Diana, female, straight, Blessed Souls).

Peter also had this insight:

Once you leave high school I don't think it's gonna matter who's popular or not. You're gonna get a job, be at work, and uh, you know, it's not gonna matter who wears the Hollister jeans everyday or whatever, it's uh, it's so insignificant, I feel, popularity (Peter, male, straight, Southridge).

Similar to Diana's account, many students that I spoke with simply desire a close group of friends that they could trust and make it through high school with. As with Peter, a few

others express disdain toward those who always want to wear the latest fashions and brand names, as they feel this is an insignificant feature of high school life that has no bearing on their own future success.

Comparable to Milner's (2004) findings that large schools allow for many subgroups to emerge, it would appear that at both Southridge and Blessed Souls, students are able to name a variety of peer groups other than the jocks, preps or pretty girls.

Catherine, a Southridge student, describes several that she sees:

And then there's sort of the more, the geeky kids, there's more artistic kids, which I guess is sort of my group of friends, more artistic, and then there's sort of more "athletic." Actually, at Southridge, there's like, the hardcore enriched people, as I like to call them (Catherine, female, straight, Southridge).

Oppositional crowds such as those discussed by Garner et al. (2006) are also portrayed at these schools, including the "druggie/stoner", "freaks/goth" and "gangsta" crowds:

Um, there's a lot of like...heavy metal type kids. I know there's a group of Asian, all Asians kind of flock together, they also have their own dance team...And uh, then there's the stoners who all hang out outside. Uh, they kinda mix with the gangsters I guess, like the "street" kids, if you would call it that. People who like, I guess, get in trouble with cops and stuff like that (Anne, female, bi-curious, Blessed Souls).

Anne also mentions a newly formed counter-cultural group present at Blessed Souls:

And I guess there's like, the "scene" kids who'll do their hair up, with hairspray and then like, tons of black make-up and stuff, like huge lines around their eyes, mascara, lipstick, and bows in their hair and stuff (Anne, female, bi-curious, Blessed Souls).

Gay-straight alliances are also considered by some to be counter-cultural groups (Milner 2004). As we will see in the next chapter, they may not always be accepted at schools where strong hierarchies are present, nor do students always feel comfortable admitting

they are members. While straight youth from Blessed Souls and Southridge high schools rarely mentioned their lesbian, gay, bisexual, bi-curious, pansexual, or queer (LGBPQ) peers during their interviews, several Blessed Souls respondents report hearing verbal harassment directed at sexual minority peers. Those interviewed from Southridge discuss their sexual minority peers in more positive terms, although there was little discussion of where these students fell on their school's hierarchy. Based on my participants' accounts, I have little way to gauge where LGBPQ students fall on their school's hierarchy. However, in the next chapter, I will explore the networks of sexual minority youth and the activities some are involved in, which may shed light on this issue.

As we will further explore in the subsequent chapter, high school life is not always easy for those who do not conform to the mainstream or popular groups in high school. Those who have their own unique style, are overweight, do not conform to gender and sexual norms, or are simply "different" in any way are often chastised for this by their peers. While individuality is often a marker of success after high school, during high school, peers often reward conformity (Robbins 2011). I now turn to students' experiences at what I consider the middle and lower class schools that also have less than 1500 students, as these schools offer a stark contrast to those discussed above.

## **SMALL AND MEDIUM HIGH SCHOOLS**

### ***Horizontal Hierarchies***

As previously mentioned, the literature describes hierarchies as elongated, vertical structures with specific students located at the top, in the middle and the bottom; an

absence of this type of structure receives little or no attention in the literature. However, the student subculture literature does state that not all students are preoccupied with belonging to status hierarchies, and many students form their own counter-cultural groups. Alternative “punk, goth or hippy” kids who reject the preppy lifestyle and “normals”, those content with simply getting through high school, do indeed exist (Milner 2004; Garner et al. 2006). The section below demonstrates that not all high schools contain the typical top-down pattern of popularity. In some schools, alternative or counter-cultural groups share an equal place in their school; the conditions under which this occurs are explored.

At Sacred Saint, a school of less than 1000 students, with an average parental income of \$45,200, about half of the students interviewed report that some form of hierarchy is in place. These students can distinguish between peers at various status levels; however, among these students, the hierarchy is not reported to be vertical in shape as found at Blessed Souls and Southridge (where multiple groups are portrayed as at the top, including the athletes, “rich pretty girls” and preps). At Sacred Saint, it is solely the athletes who are said to be on top; in particular, basketball and football players are those who are said to receive the most attention. Chantal sums up the common view of the hierarchy:

I would say its 3 groups...at the top, it's if you play any sports, everyone knows you...like if you play good, your name is on the announcements... if teachers try and describe you and another student doesn't know, they'll be like "oh the student that plays this and that" and you'll be like "okay I understand." And then I'd say it goes to like the musical kind of people, like if you can sing, if you can play any instrument, or if you're in um, the plays, you're in the middle. Then at the bottom, would be just everyone else there (Chantal, female, straight, Sacred Saint).

Chantal's description is similar to that we saw depicted earlier at schools where more strong hierarchies are reported, and where in addition to athletes being located at the top, those students in the performing arts are said to be located somewhere in the middle of the hierarchy. Again, this mirrors findings by Collins (2008) that band and drama are middle status activities. Another issue which becomes evident in this account is that again teachers are described as reinforcing traditional status hierarchies by praising students that excel at sports. This is similar to the reported treatment of athletes by teachers at Blessed Souls and coincides with Milner's (2004) findings that teachers often accentuate athletics.

Among the other half of students interviewed from Sacred Saint, a horizontal form of peer status structure appears; many report that they do not really "see" popularity, and cannot describe any clear hierarchies in the ways that their peers have. These students explain that there are no clear cut status divisions among their peers based on which activities they participate in, but rather that students are often involved in multiple clubs or activities, none of which are considered more prestigious than others:

There's a lot of, a lot of people overlap, and some of them who do sports also do music, so it's kinda not like music is something losers do, or whatever (Stacey, female, straight, Sacred Saint).

This discussion of "overlap" of involvement in extra-curricular activities stands in contrast to Milner's (2004) assertion that groups such as bands, drama clubs or choirs create their own distinctive subculture and are self-contained, and tend to have low to moderate status. While this is reported to be the case at schools like Southridge and Blessed Souls, it does not appear to be applicable at all high schools. In addition, numerous Sacred Saint students report that those who are friendly and highly involved in

many activities are popular or well known at school, including those involved in student council, which is said to be a middle status activity at other schools.

Finally, students from Sacred Saint also report seeing peer groups divided between those who share a similar ethnic background. As Sacred Saint houses the second highest number of English as Second Language (ESL) students, following Bridgeview, it has a very ethnically diverse student body. However, these ethnic peer groups were described as self-contained and were not discussed in terms of status by those who reported hierarchies. Squarepark High, with less than 1000 students, and an average parental income of \$64,500 per year, provides an interesting case from which to examine and contrast student experiences from other schools. Squarepark has a reputation in the city as the “performing arts school” due to its renowned performing arts program. Perhaps this facet has a unique influence on the peer social structure, as none of the students interviewed from Squarepark report that a vertical form of status hierarchy exists. Greg captures the general sentiment:

It's pretty even...our school, it's an arts based, it's pretty much like, the really good at sports, the really good at drama, the really good at music, those are the 3, but even then, I wouldn't call them above everyone else... I find at least that popularity is pretty [much] on the same level, there's not people who are more popular, not the point of you can't go up and talk to them...I wouldn't say there's a large hierarchy there (Greg, male, straight, Squarepark).

Although no students report that vertical hierarchies are in place, the majority I spoke with did report that a popular group of students does exist – the drama kids – specifically those in the school’s performing arts program. In particular, the most popular among the drama students are said to be those that have leading roles in the school’s productions.

This is quite interesting, as drama clubs are typically found to be middle status activities (Collins 2008). Perhaps contributing to their popularity is the fact that the school performances are often showcased in larger venues in the city of Windsor, and draw many people to performances, bringing much attention to the school and its star actors. In addition, the popular television show “Glee,” about a fictional group of teenage misfits in a high school glee club, may play a role in bringing positive attention to the performing arts. Dubbed as “The Glee Effect,” show choirs, bands, and musical theatre, are said to be gaining popularity because of the show. The show has also been credited for helping to dispel negative stereotypes around those who participate in show choirs (Chen 2010).

While sports are not reported to be a priority at this school, several students report that some of the athletes are well known. However, as also reflected in Greg’s quote, the athletic students are not described as higher in status than others, which was reported to be the case at the other high schools previously discussed. Derek provides a poignant description of the uniqueness of student life at Squarepark that coincides with the majority of accounts from students I spoke with at this school:

It's different from any other high school I've been to and this is my third high school. I realize that with any high school there's still gonna be small cliques, but with this high school, people are more blended together I find...people are just more like accepting everyone...Instead of making fun of them for who they are, people just accept them for what they are instead of trying to take that as a negative (Derek, male, gay, Squarepark).

Squarepark is portrayed as offering a friendly and tolerant environment for its students. In their accounts, several students describe it as a “smaller school” and attribute some of this diversity to that fact. Milner (2004) describes the ideal type of a pluralistic high school, where distinctive social identities are present and subcultures are relatively equal in

status. It appears that Squarepark seems to fit a pluralistic model based on the fact that students are reported to be accepting of others and relatively equal in status and class (to be further discussed below).

I turn next to Faith High, one of the smallest schools in this study, with approximately 500 students (average parental income is \$56,100). When asked if hierarchies were present at their school, no students interviewed could describe any type of vertical status hierarchy, and none reported that certain students are considered to be popular over others. There are also no students portrayed as standout “basketball stars” or “football stars” – my participants explain that if a student plays one sport, they are likely to play another, as many athletes are on multiple teams due to the small number of students.

There was a lot of crossover. Like, all the time, like, I don't know, it's a really small school so it was kinda close knit I suppose, like, kids are into art also did sports... it was mostly just like, who your friends were didn't matter, like if they did sports or if they were into art, um, it was just like whoever you hung out with, as far as I could tell (Caitlin, pansexual, female, Faith High).

This “crossover” was said to contribute to the co-mingling of many different students. The student body was also described as “friendly” and “welcoming”, and free of “mean” cliques that were hostile to other students. This stands in stark contrast to Milner’s (2004) belief that large schools would be more pluralistic, as more distinct social identities would be present, and that all subcultures would be relatively equal in status. It appears that small schools, such as Faith, depict the opposite, in that a small number of students at a school might create greater intimacy among those who attend – as Victoria explains, “I'd say the size of the school really made a difference cuz we were small and everybody was

really, really close” (female, straight, Faith High). Based on these findings, it appears that small school size may weaken social boundaries that are present in larger schools, while promoting greater social proximity among students.

Recall that Faith houses an International Baccalaureate (IB) program; the only reported division among students is that between the International Baccalaureate students and others, as students in this program take classes that are separate from the rest of the student body. Slight contention around this issue is shown:

The only divisions I could think of would be the IB students versus the non-IB students. And it was only because somebody told me one time, they're like "oh, the non-IBs, they don't like us IBs." And I was like "oh, really" and... I heard this from other people, the non-IBs thought the IB students thought they were better than other people... but they never really go to know them. It's just pre-judging (Amy, female, straight, Faith High).

Although student life at Faith High appears ideal in many ways, a source of tension from some students toward IB peers appears to exist. This coincides with Davies and Guppy’s (2010) discussion of the subculture literature, which over the decades, has made the claim that most schools have a generic form of peer stigma against high achieving students. In particular, the high achieving students at Faith cannot “hide” their academic accomplishments; as they take courses in a separate academic stream, it is possible that this “singles them out” and can potentially create resentment from other students.

I turn next to Bridgeview, which is similar in size to Faith with approximately 500 students. Recall that Bridgeview houses students with the lowest average parental income students in the city, at \$39,800. Students here report only the most basic semblance of a status hierarchy. Similar to students at Sacred Saint, students at Bridgeview explain that athletes are the most well known at their school, or considered the most popular. There is

no discussion of the existence of groups such as preps; as this social group is closely tied with being middle or upper class, it is not surprising that discussion of this group is absent. No mention is made of students who are considered to be middle status, or who participate in traditional middle status activities such as drama or band. In addition, the Bridgeview students in my sample did not report participating in these types of activities. However, all students brought up the existence of groups or cliques formed around ethnicity. The following accounts capture the sentiments of Bridgeview students:

The people, who do, like, sports, are all very close it seems. And then...lots of people who are from the same country hang around...it's just like, people who play sports and then just everybody else (Dawne, female, lesbian, Bridgeview).

But there is (*sic*) cliques based on race and ethnicity, there is, oh yeah. Cuz it's an ESL [English as a Second Language] school, so you know? (Patricia, female, bisexual, Bridgeview).

Bridgeview houses many recent immigrants to Canada, many of whom are currently learning the English language and are said to only socialize with those of their own ethnic background. As Bridgeview contains the highest number of English as second language students in the city, this is logical, as it would be difficult to converse with others. This finding also speaks to the multiculturalism of Canada and its diverse immigrant population. Immigration has been the largest contributor to the growth of the visible minority population in Canada, with about 7 in 10 of visible minorities being immigrants. More immigrants than Canadian-born have chosen to settle in urban areas, attracted by economic opportunities and the presence of others from their countries. Since the 1940s, a disproportionate number of immigrants have chosen to reside in Ontario; as of 1996, 55% of all immigrants live in Ontario (Boyd and Vickers 2000).

Although Bridgeview is considered a “rough” school, students that I spoke with told me they enjoy attending a small high school, as many of the students are friendly toward each other. One student who transferred to Bridgeview noticed a dramatic change from her previous school, which coincidentally, is Southridge:

I find that the school that I transferred to Bridgeview from, Southridge, that was extremely [hierarchically] structured, I noticed that...like, I couldn't go up to some of the cool girl and talk to her, cuz it'd just be like, you know, and her friends would all...it just wouldn't happen, I couldn't see it. It was such a big change when I went to Bridgeview cuz it wasn't like that at all (Patricia, female, bisexual, Bridgeview).

Patricia purposely transferred to Bridgeview from Southridge shortly after one of her friends had. She claims she was unhappy at Southridge, partially due to the rigid vertical hierarchies that she believed were in place. For example, she felt as though she could not join the girls' volleyball team there, as she explains that a clique of girls known as the “volleyball girls” discouraged others from trying out. Conversely, Patricia now plays on multiple sports teams at Bridgeview.

Again, according to these student accounts, it appears that a small student body fosters a more pluralistic school environment that is also more inclusive. While Milner's (2004) assertion that a large student body creates a more accepting environment does not seem fitting here, his claim that a tendency toward pluralism in schools is stimulated by a more varied racial and ethnic composition of the student body does seem fitting. This coincides with the accounts of Bridgeview students who believe that the multicultural environment of their school helps generate greater acceptance toward others, while also creating a better work environment. The value of ethnic diversity may also be indicative of Canada's reputation as a country that celebrates multiculturalism, as Canadians hold

moderately high tolerance and attitudes toward multiculturalism (Berry and Kalin 1995). In addition to ethnicity, sexual minority students also appear to be accepted in a pluralistic school climate.

***Role of Income in these Hierarchies***

Based on the accounts of students, popularity for students at both Blessed Souls and Southridge high schools seems explicitly intertwined with income – that is, the popular kids are reported to come from wealthier families, possess more material goods, and intentionally or not, use money to bolster their social status. Conversely, at the remaining schools – Sacred Saint, Squarepark, Faith and Bridgeview - aspects of income or wealth such as cars, designer goods, or other consumer commodities are rarely, if ever, mentioned by students as markers of status. For instance, although hierarchies are described by several of the students at Sacred Saint, with those who play sports as being on top, there is no discussion of the athletic kids having money or possessing items that make them seem “cool.” Christina discusses this:

We're [Sacred Saint students] not very rich, even the jocks that I'm talking about...they don't have a big ass house; so again, they're not very high and mighty. But then again, there's like, a lot of middle kids; there's just a lot of chill people like, no one is rich, nobody has their own car, kind of thing, so I think it's just, if you're in a more laid back, down to earth group of people, you might feel more comfortable (Christina, female, straight, Sacred Saint).

In contrast to students at Blessed Souls who were said to drive Hummers and BMWs, Christina describes students at Sacred Saint as not even possessing their own cars.

Popularity instead seems to derive from being good at sports, rather than from what material goods one possesses. Several of the students from Sacred Saint say that athletics

are what makes someone popular, as Lauren states: “probably some of the most popular people, people that I found to be popular are like, the teachers, like absolutely love, are the people that, like, are involved in athletics” (female, straight, Sacred Saint).

A part of the explanation as to why the interconnection between income and popularity is absent at Sacred Saint, unlike at Blessed Souls, is that many students at Sacred Saint are from lower income families and likely cannot afford the commodities those at higher income schools can. If you recall, students at Sacred Saint have the second lowest average parental income in the city. According to one of my respondents, the school administration seems cognizant of this fact:

I think Sacred Saint has a really good way of making it, if you don't have money, making you feel like you're at home still...And no one knows they're helping you out. Um, they do a Christmas give every year...if they know you're not making that much money, they'll call you down and ask "if there's anything you could get for Christmas, what would you want?" For the girls who got pregnant at young ages, they get stuff too, for like, their kids, like they'll help them supply diapers and toys and stuff (Chantal, female, straight, Sacred Saint).

In addition to providing Christmas gifts and assisting pregnant teens, respondents also report that Sacred Saint has a breakfast program for its students. The fact that teachers and administration are portrayed as recognizing the need to assist is outstanding. This stands in contrast to the experiences of students at Blessed Souls who feel their school demands more money than they can afford, and feel ashamed to ask for help.

At Squarepark, an entirely unique status structure exists. As discussed, all of the students described the drama students in the performing arts program as most popular. Only minor mention of income came to the fore when interviewing these students. One

student, Justin, described the popular students (those in the creative arts program) in the following way:

The popular kids tend to be the rich, [creative arts program] kids...More popular people tend to be the ones who have very wealthy parents, who are very well off, um, who'd maybe be [in] art and dance over drama, or art or all three of them, for that matter, um, that everything just gets given to them, or supplied to them. Those tend to be the people you hear more about (Justin, male, gay, Squarepark).

Interestingly, Justin was the only student who made mention of wealth in describing his peers. Justin's explanation is rational however; as students are admitted into the competitive performing arts program solely through audition, these students would likely have had extensive training in dance, vocals, art or drama prior to commencing this program at Squarepark. It would be difficult for families with little or no disposable income to enrol their children in such activities. The role of income and popularity appears to be more complicated at Squarepark than at some of the other schools.

At Faith High school, students generally had difficulty naming who was popular, as students are reportedly perceived as "equal" in status. Again, there is no discussion of commodities or wealth as boosting a student's status. Caitlin provides some general insight into what makes students popular at Faith:

There were some popular kids, but usually those were the people who were nice to everybody and that's what made them most popular...they were the ones helping out and stuff, and just, generally nice to everybody and would like, talk to anybody (Caitlin, female, queer, Faith High).

Caitlin's account reflects the general sentiment toward popularity at Faith High. While Caitlin and other students discuss how the International Baccalaureate program draws students from across the city, including some very wealthy ones, no mention is made of

these wealthy students as more popular than others, or of them possessing or displaying commodities. Perhaps the small number of students at Faith discourages youth from singling themselves out for reasons such as wealth, as it would draw a less favourable reaction from their closely knit peers than it would at a larger institution. Additionally, academics may provide a stronger basis for identity and status differentiation than at other schools, given that this is the only school in the city to offer the IB program.

At Bridgeview, popularity is depicted as structured similarly to that at Sacred Saint, as those involved in sports were described as the most popular, yet none were said to be wealthy, display commodities, or even to hold house parties. In addition to athleticism, certain traits such as kindness are said to help elevate a person's status:

Definitely people who are in sports teams; sports is very popular at my school, so if you're in sports, "oh hey, there's so and so, they won the basketball team" so everyone really knew them...when I did notice these people, they were really nice, and they did get along with everyone, that's why they're so popular. We have roughly 500 students; really small school (Susie, female, bicurious, Bridgeview).

As Milner (2004) notes, while participation on sports teams increases status for those involved, the status granted also helps establish friendships across social boundaries such as race. At a school like Bridgeview where popularity does not appear to be tied with wealth, those involved in sports are likely able to use the status they gain to create friendships across various ethnic groups and become noticed among the student body. This is similar to Holland's study, as minority males were able to gain social status and make friends through participation on sports teams.

The lack of perceived wealth at Bridgeview also speaks to the difficulties immigrants often have in adjusting to the labour force. Compared to those born in

Canada, many immigrants experience higher unemployment rates, hold jobs that do not reflect their level of training and education, and earn lower levels of income (Boyd and Vickers 2000). While some of these difficulties may reflect the process of adjustment in a new country, others attribute these differences to racial discrimination. In their study examining ethnicity and income in Canada in 1991, Lian and Matthews (1998) found that all visible minorities had below average earnings in each category examined, while most European ancestry had above-average earnings. After controlling for education and other social variables, the authors found that almost all Asian groups and most of those of Latin American descent and Middle Eastern ancestry fared the worst. As the student body at Bridgeview (and also Sacred Saint) includes many immigrants, particularly of Middle Eastern decent, it is apparent that there are larger reasons as to why wealth is not a marker of status at these schools. It also speaks to why the schools with the largest immigrant populations in Windsor are situated in some of the “roughest” neighbourhoods.

### *Counter-Cultural Groups*

With regard to school size and counter-cultural groups, Milner (2004) asserts that smaller schools contain fewer students with distinct social identities, and therefore, less counter-cultural groups. My findings echo this facet of Milner’s work; among the four comparison schools I present, only a small variety of counter-cultural groups are discussed. Caitlin discusses those she sees at Faith High:

Some kids were kind of tough, like you know, like, the thuggish kids...the “ganstas”, and like, the stoners were kind of doing their own thing, they were like, the stoner/metal heads, they did their own thing (Caitlin, female, pansexual, Faith High).

In addition to this account, students at Bridgeview describe one peer group that is considered counter-cultural; the “geeky” students who share an interest in video games. While several Squarepark students describe peer groups with distinct styles of dress and “gangsta” girls, none of these groups were described in the context of being “outcasts”. As Squarepark is a performing arts school, perhaps these identities are celebrated rather than relegated to outsider status.

While some may perceive the lack of distinct social groups at smaller schools as negative, or that these students lack unique self-expression, the students themselves have positive ways of describing their peer relations:

At Sacred Saint, like, people will have their own cliques of, like, some will be more popular, some less popular, but then like, those are just like their best friends and like, their main groups. But at Sacred Saint, like, everyone was always welcome. We were kind of like, one big family (Melanie, female, straight, Sacred Saint).

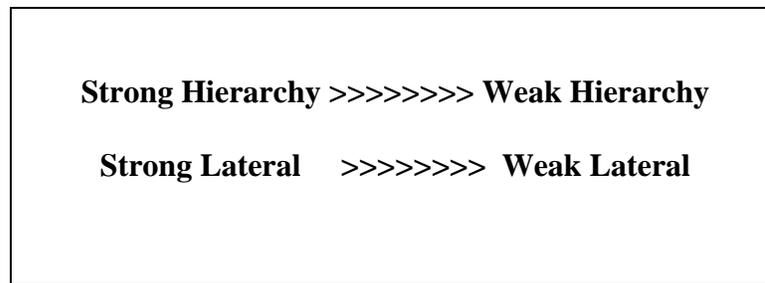
It is interesting to note that Melanie describes the student body as a “family” – this term was also used by students at Faith High, while no students from Blessed Souls or Southridge described their school in this manner. Victoria, a Faith High student states: “with a smaller school, you get to meet everybody, so you get to know you who get along with” (female, straight, Faith). Students interviewed enjoyed attending a small school, and several expressed a desire to send their own children to a smaller school in the future.

### ***Summary of Findings***

In order to describe the differences in status among various groups within a school, I introduce the term “status differentiation.” This differentiation varies along two dimensions: hierarchical versus lateral, and strong versus weak. For example, the schools

in my study having the greatest amount of status differentiation are the large, high income schools – Blessed Souls and Southridge – and can be characterised as having a “strong hierarchy.” Conversely, those with the least amount of status differentiation are characterised as having a “weak lateral” formation and include the smaller, low income schools in this study – Bridgeview, Faith High, Sacred Saint and Squarepark.

**Figure 3.1 Status Differentiation Ideal Types**



Students that I spoke with from smaller schools (those with less than 1500 students) describe peers relations at their school in more intimate ways, or with more dense interconnections. While this research is not claiming that these smaller schools are utopian in any way, students do report a greater sense of belongingness, and less conflict among those at varying levels of whatever hierarchy exists. As there is much cross-over among students in extra-curricular activities, students at smaller schools appear more closely connected. This dense interconnection among peers averts the emergence of vertical status hierarchies. As there are no firm boundaries in place, students repeatedly interact with a varied and wide amount of their peers and less status differentiation exists.

Conversely, students from larger schools (those with more than 1500 students) describe numerous peer groups at their school which have varying amounts of status. At

these schools, students situated at the top of the hierarchy possess large amounts of status, while those at the bottom possess only small amounts; thus, large amounts of status differentiation exist. As there are many students, the number involved in various extra-curricular activities does not overlap to the extent that it does at a smaller high school like Faith High. These sparse interconnections among peers due to the large school size open up the possibility of vertical status hierarchies. Only those who repeatedly interact form their own groups which contain boundaries that keep others out, and only a few “in.”

## **DISCUSSION**

While research by Milner (2004) and Garner et al (2006) presents status hierarchies as mainly vertical with few competing groups, this chapter demonstrates that hierarchies vary depending on the size of the school and the average parental income of the students that attend it. While traditional sources of status such as good looks, economic resources and involvement in activities such as sports typically render one to the top spot in a status hierarchy, my research demonstrates that these “ingredients” for popularity do not work in the same way at all schools, and that forms of overlap do exist. While this research confirms that among large, high income schools traditional sources of status such as those discussed by Garner et al (2006) exist, it cannot say the same for smaller, lower income schools. Thus, I argue that status hierarchies should be reconceptualised from simply being thought of as vertical to accommodate multiple sources of status and varying competition.

Based on student accounts, there appears to be a strong hierarchy in place at both Blessed Souls and Southridge high schools. At these large, high income schools, the traditional forms of status discussed in the American literature, such as that by Randall Collins (2008) are mimicked. At the top of the hierarchy are the popular, elite, fashionably dressed, the athletes (or jocks) and of course, the wealthy. As various studies maintain that youth who have more money at their disposal are those with higher status (Hollingshead 1975; Thompson 1995) my findings echo these with regard to “The Fab 5” guys and the “Group of 7” popular girls at Blessed Souls, who are said to be wealthy and sit on top of their school’s social hierarchy. The hierarchies appear to be deeply entrenched at these two schools, as most students were able to easily describe them.

While brand name clothing is often a marker of high status, this does not appear to be entirely blunted by the requirement of uniforms at Catholic schools, standing in contrast to Milner’s (2004) belief that it would. Regardless of whether uniforms are worn, students find ways to display their wealth and status through items such as shoes, mobile phones and purses, and on a grander scale, cars. As Milner’s subculture theory appears to make the assumption that all students crave status, this does not appear to always be the case. Students at both Southridge and Blessed Souls reject the consumerist environment of their high school and aim to carve out their own identity, seeking close companionship with fewer friends rather than school-wide popularity. Not all students at schools with vertical hierarchies are preoccupied with climbing to the top.

At Squarepark High, Sacred Saint, Bridgeview and Faith High schools, we do not see a strong hierarchy depicted as we did at both Southridge and Blessed Souls. I argue

that we can conceptualize these schools as having weak lateral forms of status differentiation because we see multiple sources of status and varying competition. Also at these schools, wealth does not readily appear as a marker of status. At Sacred Saint, half of the students interviewed report that athletes are among the most popular at school; students can “shine” by excelling at certain sports, particularly basketball at this school. As Davies and Guppy (2010) suggest that sports are an avenue through which informal hierarchies infuse student life, I certainly agree. I argue that in schools such as Sacred Saint where sports are important, and where students have less access to wealth and material goods as forms of status, sports take on a strong importance in creating popularity. As Milner’s (2004) findings that teachers and administrators often accentuate the status of sports and athletes can also be applied to this study, students may also use this as a reason to get involved.

While sports are important at Sacred Saint, not all students agree that this creates a strong hierarchy as it might at other schools. The general consensus among students at Sacred Saint is that well known students are involved in a variety of extra-curricular activities, none of which relegate participants to one level of status over another. At Squarepark High, a school whose focus is performing arts, drama and other arts students are considered by some to be the most popular – this may be tied to wealth in less obvious ways – but overall, a pluralistic school environment is said to exist. Students describe a unique and diverse high school environment where students are greatly accepting of their peers, particularly when it comes to self-expression.

At Faith High, the student body is described as harmonious, with only traces of animosity toward high achieving students evident; this demonstrates that this is a difficult facet of peer stigma to counteract. The small size of this school and the overlap of involvement in extra-curricular activities seem to facilitate the presence of a weak lateral form of status differentiation. Students do not “rank” some as on top of others in terms of status. Finally, at Bridgeview High, while athletes may be well known, students explain that the varied ethnic composition of the school and the small size creates a pluralistic environment where students know each other well, and do not rank others and the activities they are involved in as above or below their own.

In further comparing my findings to those from Milner’s (2004) subculture theory, I disagree with his claim that a larger school size (1500 students or more) would lead to a more pluralistic environment, and less rigid hierarchies. As my findings demonstrate, at the two largest schools in the city, Blessed Souls and Southridge (which both have 1500 or more students) there are very distinct notions of who is at the top of the hierarchy and no discussion of pluralism. Milner also believes at larger schools, more distinct social identities would be present and that all subcultures would be relatively equal in status; again, the opposite appears to be the case. Among the smaller schools in this study, including Sacred Saint and Parkside, and the smallest – Faith and Bridgeview, while some students such as athletes were identified as more popular than others, the status hierarchies were not depicted strong and the school environment is generally described as pluralistic. I argue that as a school gets smaller, so does the rigidness of hierarchies; size seems to play an important role in the creation of hierarchies.

While this chapter offers unique insight into the experiential differences of students at both public and Catholic high schools of varying size and income, it cannot address the perceptions of all students at these schools. Future research is needed to address the various theoretical gaps presented here. For example, as no students in my sample were self-reportedly wealthy, the accounts of these students would be insightful, as they too likely face pressure to “fit in” and may be able to describe their “view from the top”. As the fewest number of sexual minority students were interviewed from both Blessed Souls and Southridge high schools, future research should examine the hierarchies in large, high income schools from the perspective of sexual minority youth.

While school administration is said to assist those in financial need at Sacred Saint, it would be useful as to ascertain whether students in need at this school feel comfortable asking for assistance. Future research could also address the status hierarchy structure in schools that are small (under 1500 students) but have a high income student body, as well as schools that are high income and have a small student body (under 1500) in order to explore the varying effects of these factors. As my study cannot untangle these two factors (nor does it aim to), research that further explores both size and income as separate constructs would be of interest. Finally, as the majority of students in my sample identified as Caucasian or of European ancestry, further research needs to be done on whether various ethnic groups perceive these school environments as pluralistic.

In the following chapter, I will explore how these hierarchies are tied into bullying and how the pressure to become popular and fit in may in turn, create bullies – that is, the pressure to be popular may encourage students to bully others in order to climb their

school’s status hierarchy. As students are often afraid to speak out against bullies, I will explore potential reasons why. I also examine how involvement in extra-curricular activities not only facilitates popularity in some schools but may indirectly be preventative against bullying for some youth. While we know that sexual minority youth face more harassment than straight youth, I examine how one extra-curricular club – a gay-straight alliance - can help prevent bullying against these youth. As gay-straight alliances are a non-tryout, open group for all, they may be especially crucial in helping to fight isolation and creating friendship networks for youth who are not involved, or afraid to become involved, in other activities. I will demonstrate how for sexual minority youth in particular, isolation, including the absence of a gay-straight alliance at their school, may have negative consequences that render these youth vulnerable to being bullied.

**Figure 3.2 Table Outlining Schools and Hierarchies**

<b>School Name *P/C</b>	<b>Size</b>	<b>Average Parental Income</b>	<b>Hierarchy Type</b>
Blessed Souls (C)	> 1500	\$92,600	Strong Hierarchy
Southridge (P)	> 1500	\$85,900	Strong Hierarchy
Sacred Saint (C)	< 1000	\$45,200	Weak Lateral
Squarepark (P)	< 1000	\$64,700	Weak Lateral
Faith High (C)	~ 500	\$56,100	Weak Lateral
Bridgeview (P)	~500	\$39, 800	Weak Lateral

\*P – Public High School, C – Catholic High School

## **CHAPTER 4: STATUS ANXIETY AND BULLYING**

### *Chapter Outline/Purpose*

In this chapter I explore the theoretical argument used by Faris and Felmlee (2011) that bullying results from status anxiety; that is, students bully others to guard their social positions, or move up in their school's status hierarchy. There are disagreements in the literature by as to which students are carrying out the bullying. For example, Milner (2004) and Collins (2008) argue these are "wannabe" popular students trying to attain popularity, while others such as Thunfors and Cornell (2008) argue those who are already popular bully to maintain status. I examine this question using students' accounts of who they believe are responsible for bullying others, and where they perceive that these "bullies" are situated in their school's status hierarchy. I also discuss students' self reported incidents of being harassed or bullied and the various forms they have experienced. Based on their self-described involvement in extra-curricular clubs, various activities and their friendship circles, I outline how these students' social networks may guard against bullying, or conversely, leave them more vulnerable to it.

With regards to bullying, The School Climate Bullying Survey (Cornell, 2012) presents the following definition: "Bullying is defined as the use of one's own strength or status to injure, threaten or humiliate another person. Bullying can be physical, verbal or social. It is not bullying when two students of about the same strength argue or fight" (p. 2). Collins (2008) also stipulates that many forms of confrontation cannot be classified as bullying, including a fight between two groups who are on the same "horizontal" level in a hierarchy. In order to properly examine bullying incidents, we need to know the social

position of students in their school's status hierarchy, yet the literature tells us little about where sexual minority youth are situated. In my own master's thesis, I found that sexual minority youth are reported to be the lower status or unpopular youth and that the jocks or preps were typically the ones harassing them (Bortolin 2008, 2010). While at least one study has found that girls cannot be lesbian and be popular (Payne, 2007), we do not know how this varies across schools. Aside from Pascoe's (2007) study which found lesbian girls who played basketball had high status, we know little about how involvement in extra-curricular activities affects the social status of sexual minority youth at school. Drawing mainly upon Collins' (2008; 2011) work on bullying, which he discusses as part of his sociological theory of violence, as well as the work of various scholars, I explore the following research question: how do students use social networks to navigate status hierarchies in their high school?

In an attempt to answer this question, I employ an in-depth analysis of student accounts regarding those that are said to be responsible for bullying others, and where we may locate these students on their school's status hierarchy. In addition, I examine the theoretical claim that bullying is about status anxiety, in that it is not about characteristics of the victim or perpetrator, but rather situational in nature. In order to flesh out this argument, I explore the accounts of both sexual minority and straight students and how their experiences support such claims. Similar to the last chapter, I begin by employing a comparison among schools that have strong status hierarchies and those that do not with respect to identifying which students are described as bullies, and if this is similar or different in either grouping of schools.

In my second phase of analysis, I compare the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, bi-curious, pansexual and queer (LGBPQ) students that were harassed with those who were not, as well as straight students who were and were not harassed. This is done in an attempt to determine if and how their position in a social network makes a difference with respect to experiencing bullying. For example, do social isolates, either sexual minorities or straight, report more harassment, and how does this tie into their high school's status hierarchy? In exploring these questions, I consider the fact that youth who are isolated at school may be targeted for bullying. This chapter ultimately uncovers why the literature on status hierarchies needs to take into account students' social networks and their intersection with bullying.

### **A NEED FOR CONCEPTUAL CLARITY: SOCIAL NETWORKS, STATUS AND POPULARITY**

There is a current lack of conceptual clarity in the literature on status and bullying, as various authors bring together multiple claims and use different concepts to discuss this complex issue (Burkowski and Pizzamiglio 1996; Gest et al. 2001; Vaillancourt, Hymel and McDougall 2003). Before I begin my analysis, I must articulate these concepts which are often used interchangeably. Beginning with the concept of social networks, this refers to how well known students are and is often measured by the number of social ties among peers. Within social networks, centrally located students are those who possess the most ties and are most well known (Cairns et al. 1995). Studies have attempted to capture the concept of social networks using quantitative data. For example,

researchers examine the number of times children are named by classmates as members of informal peers groups, with a larger amount of nominations equally higher centrality (Faris and Felmlee 2011). Farmer and Rodkin (1996) list a number of characteristics associated with peer centrality, in that socially central youth are often athletically skilled and are prosocial in peer leadership. In addition to athleticism, socially central peers typically possess affluence, attractiveness and charisma (Faris and Felmlee 2011). Central students are described as the most popular students. In their study of friendship and social networks in an American classroom, Gest, Graham-Bermann and Hartup (2001) found that perceived popularity was associated with actual popularity and network centrality.

As discussed in the previous chapter, status hierarchies represent a vertical status structure, where one's place is determined by various skills and traits, including involvement in certain extracurricular activities. For example, those involved in athletics are at the top, while those in activities such as band, drama and art are found in the middle. Also found in the middle are students described as "normals" who try to get through high school without any "hassle" (Garner et al. 2006). Similar to network centrality, one's place in a social hierarchy is determined by traits such as sociability, affluence, and physical attractiveness. Those possessing these traits are frequently located at the top, while those on the low end are often shy, socially awkward or inept and labelled as "bookworms" or "nerds" (Collins 2008; Milner 2004).

The concept "popularity" frequently appears in the literature alongside the concepts of "status" and "centrality," and is often used ambiguously and without clear definition. In their study of the effects of extra-curricular activities on popularity, Eder

and Kinney (1995) simply ask students to name which “students in the class are most popular” (p. 303) without elaborating what they define as “popular.” Studies also find that being popular coincides with being well liked by peers; in their article on popularity as an affordance for friendship, Burkowski and Pizzamiglio (1996) describe popularity (and friendship) as being conceptually dependent on the construct of liking. Conversely, numerous studies also demonstrate that popular students are often disliked and perceived as aggressive (Collins 2008; Vaillancourt, Hymel and McDougall 2003).

Bringing together the above concepts in order to examine bullying can be challenging. While these concepts measure the different aspects of peer culture discussed, they also overlap to a large extent. For instance, someone located at the top of their school’s status hierarchy likely possesses a large amount of social ties (and centrality), and is regarded as popular to their peers. Conversely, as social ties loosen or become “fewer”, students tend to move down the social hierarchy, as those who are isolated or lack friendships are often found at the bottom of their school’s status hierarchy, and are not considered to be popular by their peers. The term “popular” was used in interviews with these students, as it is more familiar to them than the terms status and networks. As a follow-up to the interview question “are there people who hang around together a lot?” students were asked if they considered these people to be popular. Student participants were also asked if popularity was important to them. While the terms “popular” and “popularity” were open to interpretation, participants’ most often described them as synonymous with “being well-known among teachers and peers.” In my analysis below, I employ the term as my participants have, although I later evaluate its usefulness.

## **ANALYSIS: WHO ARE THE BULLIES?**

### ***Large Schools with Strong Hierarchies***

Recall that there is much disagreement in the literature regarding who bullies whom. Both Collins (2008; 2011) and Milner (2004) argue that bullies are typically middle status students who bully in order to achieve upward mobility in their school's status hierarchy. In examining aggression from a social network perspective (using the method of friendship nominations), Faris and Felmlee (2011) purport that students use aggression to climb the status hierarchy. These authors find that the most aggressive students are those located in middle status positions, while those at the bottom do not have as much capacity for aggression, and those at the top have little cause to use it. In this study, the authors' use of the concept of social networks appears to coincide with one's place in that status hierarchy.

Conversely, others like Thunfors and Cornell (2008) argue that bullies are among the most popular students in the school – by popular, they appear to mean those at the top of the status hierarchy. Similarly, Gest et al. (2001) find that aggression largely exists among high status students. Burkowski and Pizzamiglio (1996) maintain that being in a central network positions increases opportunities to engage in aggressive interactions with peers. Other researchers believe that lowering the targets' (or victims) status becomes a means of increasing the bullies' own status; however, the social process in which this works seems to be largely unknown (Faris and Ennett 2012; Jacobson 2010). The analysis below examines my findings in relation to the concepts of status hierarchies, social networks and popularity. I begin by describing who the bullies are in various

schools – those strong hierarchies versus those with weak lateral hierarchies – ideal types which I established in Chapter 3.

We begin by examining bullying at schools where it appears most pervasive, which also happens to be those that have the most salient status hierarchies. At both Blessed Souls and Southridge, it appears that although perceived as high in status, the "popular kids" are not well liked – a theme echoed through the literature (Vaillancourt et al. 2003; Rodkin and Berger 2008). For example, a popular group of male students at Blessed Souls (also discussed in the previous chapter) that threw "exclusive" parties are described as being disliked, although students also want to be friends with them, creating an interesting paradox. As this student states:

Yeah, they were the guys that all had money. They all live...in like, really ritzy houses, so they yeah...and they thought they were like, above everyone else and whatever, yeah, nobody liked them unless they liked you or whatever, and it was stupid...it's ridiculous (Marcus, straight, male, Blessed Souls).

As discussed in the literature, those with high status are frequently talked about and envied by peers, yet simultaneously disliked by them as well. As Faris and Ennett (2012) found that popular students have the ability to influence or manipulate others, perhaps students find themselves both drawn into, yet repulsed by the popular students' actions. For example, Marcus, the male quoted above, admitted that he is often invited to parties these males throw, yet other times, he is lied to by them about weekend plans; he wants their friendship, but at the same time despises them. As Milner (2004) maintains, those competing for status vacillate between being nice and being mean, depending on whether they see the other person as a threat. Perhaps the times he is not invited to their parties,

Marcus (a member of the football team) is perceived as a threat, while at other times, he is not. As previously mentioned, Marcus possesses high status afforded by athletics at his school, but he does not believe himself to be at the top of the status hierarchy.

I would add that this “niceness” to other persons that Milner (2004) mentions also seems to vary by physical location. In particular, students at Blessed Souls explain that often when members of a clique are isolated, they will be nice people; they will talk with classmates, work in groups with them, and so on. However, when a popular clique is united, in the cafeteria for example, students report being treated as outcasts if they approach the group. The following account illustrates this:

It was like, a distinct group of like, 7 or 8 girls and if you had classes with them and they were separated, well then they were your friend, but as soon as you were like in the cafeteria and go "hey, did you study for that test? Like, we're gonna be partners or whatever" they would just be like "oh God, oh God" [pretend you're not there] kinda thing. They were terrible (Melissa, straight female, Blessed Souls).

Another two students from Blessed Souls that I spoke with reiterated this notion, in that several of the students who are said to be popular will converse with them when separated from their clique, such as in a classroom setting, but ignore them in the “public” areas of the school, such as the hallway or cafeteria when the entire clique is present. These findings highlight the situational nature of bullying at Blessed Souls High.

Particularly among females, there appears to be a strong mean edge to those who are described as popular. At Southridge, one female states that the popular girls are “pretty much b-i-t-c-h-s [*sic*]” (Mary, straight, female, Southridge). As Monica, a student at Southridge also describes, females will “emotionally and verbally harass their friends if they don't do something that they want them to, they can make them feel left out easily”

(bi-curious, female). When discussing the popular, or high status, girls at their school, students from both Blessed Souls and Southridge often referenced the popular movie *Mean Girls* in describing their female peers who bully others; rich, pretty girls who treat those outside their circle of friends very crudely.

Take for example, the group of popular girls at Blessed Souls high school discussed in the previous chapter who fit such "mean girl" description. This "Group of 7" girls is reported to openly mock peers, including repeatedly verbally harassing girls that are labelled "freaks" or outcasts as they pass in the halls. According to Collins (2011), this behaviour is classified as scapegoating, as this group of girls is ganging up to verbally attack a low-ranking girl. Although Collin's definition does not classify these incidents as classic cases of bullying, my respondent Melissa explains that she and her friends continually feel victimized by this group of girls. Ironically, these girls are said to be involved in an anti-bullying program at school:

The best part is that...they called them, "bully buddies" or something like that, and it was um, a student, they took candidates from every class and those two candidates in your class, they were the kids that you were supposed to go to if you were feeling bullied, that you could talk to, it was these kids [the popular kids] (Melissa, straight, female, Blessed Souls).

According to this respondent, teachers cherish these students, as they often display themselves as friendly, innocent, and involved in extra-curricular activities; yet, Melissa reports that she and many of her friends dislike them.<sup>5</sup> Melissa states that teachers do not realize the types of bullies these girls really are. In their study of teacher and peer nominations of bullies, Leff et al. (1999) explain that teachers only identify half as many

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<sup>5</sup> I was not able to interview any girls in the "Group of 7."

bullies as students do; the authors theorize that this may be because of the students' social status and characteristics. There could also be a network effect involved. As little information flows between students and teachers, "no snitch" codes would prevent teachers from discovering how students feel about their peers (Collins, 2008).

From the perspective of Southridge and Blessed Souls students, those who bully others perceive themselves to be at the top of their school's status hierarchy, but may not actually be at the very top according to their peers. As Krista explains "mostly a lot of them did [give others a hard time] because they *thought* [emphasis mine] that they were at the top and everyone was beneath them, they could do whatever they wanted to (straight, female, Blessed Souls). Similar to Vaillancourt et al.'s (2003) findings that female bullies are often attractive, and males athletic, when asked which kids were bullies at both of these schools, frequently mentioned are the athletes or jocks (specifically the football players) and as we have seen, the "mean, pretty girls." One student includes the preps in this category, as Leo states "There's always douche bags, and it's usually the preppy kids" (straight, male, Blessed Souls).

These findings above present a theoretical dilemma and lead me to wonder if we are asking the right question when we ask why popular students are not well liked. As popularity has been found to be associated with likability (Burkowski and Pizzamiglio 1996), and my study shows that many popular students are heavily disliked by their peers, I believe that popularity is not the best concept to capture what is occurring in high schools. In the examples above, and in their interviews with me, students used the word "popularity" when describing their peers. However, it seems that student's references to

popularity are instead capturing the status position of their peers. I turn to the next section to examine whether this also appears to be the case at small and medium schools.

*Small and Medium Schools with Weak Lateral Hierarchies*

Turning now to the schools where social hierarchies are found to be weak lateral, I examine those who appear to be bullies, or tormentors of peers, in these settings. It is much more difficult to tease apart who the bullies are in these schools, as the social hierarchies are weak, and there appear to be fewer students regarded as popular or as bullies overall. However, the accounts given do provide some indication of who students view as responsible for targeting others in harassment attempts, and those who are disliked. Beginning with Sacred Saint, students mention the popular students as being disliked, as Maya explains:

*Maya:* It's kinda like you have the really pretty people are like popular people that no one really likes, but they're still up there.

*Interviewer:* Why are they popular if no one likes them?

*Maya:* Exactly; I think it's not that they're popular, I think they think that they're popular and everyone kinda just follows along and doesn't really say anything to their face cuz they're scared, kinda thing (Maya, straight, female, Sacred Saint).

In her use of the term “up there” we can assume that Maya means that these students have a high spot in the school’s status hierarchy, even though they are disliked by peers. Maya goes onto explain that it is the muscular, athletic males at her school that give others a hard time. In her account, Maya also offers us a glimpse into why students are popular if they are disliked – fear. Perhaps this fear may come from not wanting to be singled out for verbal or physical harassment by the popular students or the muscular males. This

idea will be discussed further in the next section. Another Sacred Saint student has a similar perception of who the bullies are. When asked which students gave others a hard time, Christina states: “Well, just generally anyways, like, the jocks you could say, and the girls that want to date them” (straight, female). Recall that the jocks were described as those who were “on top” at Sacred Saint.

Examining Squarepark High next, we see again that the students described as “most popular” are disliked, and tend to treat others poorly. Four students from this school spoke of an incident where the drama students - who they described as “popular” - created a “burn book” which insulted many members of the student body. Nick explains:

Actually, ironically, there was a burn book at our school that the... really, preppy drama kids decided to put together and they said all these terrible things about everyone... it was eventually shown to the school and was brought out into the open, right, and the thing that was really terrible about it was they didn't get in trouble because they were in the school play and they didn't want to suspend them because they were the leads of the play (Nick, gay, male, Squarepark).

The term “burn book” has been co-opted from the movie *Mean Girls*. In this 2004 film, the most popular (and coincidentally, mean) group of pretty girls create a book filled with photos and insulting captions of many of their peers. Similar to that which occurred in the movie, the “burn book” at Squarepark is said to have targeted many students and teased them on aspects including their weight and outfits – an interesting example of life imitating art. All of the students that spoke of the incident were angry that the persons responsible were not reprimanded because they were the leads in the school play; these students were said to be popular and heavily favoured by teachers. The fact that students

responsible did not get reprimanded for their actions, nor was there any mutual retaliation classifies this incident as what Collins' (2008) describes as scapegoating.

In addition to the “popular drama kids”, other students from Squarepark are said to give others a hard time. Two students that I spoke with from Squarepark bring up a rather upsetting occurrence of bullying. According to these students, a group of “mean, prissy girls” at their school regularly torment a young boy named James who appears to have a developmental disability, and who some perceive to be gay. Andrew describes the incident:

I guess he was gay, so a lot of people picked up on that and he would do anything for attention, and so, like, a lot of girls took advantage of that and made him do all sorts of embarrassing things, and filmed him doing embarrassing things, and posted them on the internet. And I don't know, cuz they all thought it was funny and they just sort of like, made him their little lap dog type thing, but, I would consider it bullying (Andrew, straight, male, Squarepark).

According to Kylie, another Squarepark student who discusses this incident with me, this group of girls torment James on a routine basis and embarrass him in front of the student body. It is debatable whether this incident constitutes bullying or scapegoating. James, the male in question, appears to be a network isolate – he is described as a loner, physically smaller than his peers and as awkward. Like bullying, this appears to be a continuous relationship, as this group of girls regularly torment this young boy. As we know, Collins (2011) believes it to be scapegoating when a group of high ranking girls gangs up on one victim, which also applies here. Apart from this, it again appears that the girls carrying out these actions are disliked by peers. As Kylie states: “No one really cared about these girls, they just thought themselves they were awesome” (straight, female, Squarepark).

However, neither of these students report attempts by others to end the harassment of James – there is no discussion of attempts to intervene and stop this from occurring, which leads me to believe that perhaps students were afraid to stand up to the girls carrying out the harassment.

Students at Faith High School depict this school as quite harmonious. Recall that no hierarchies are reported and that the student body is very small. Again, there is not much discussion of students who are bullies, or those who scapegoat, but a couple of incidents were brought up to me. Beginning with Paul's account:

There definitely are a lot of jerks, um, at my school. Um, most of them are all male, again, um, who tend to hang around with like, the jocky crowd, um, there are a lot... [who] have a very bad attitude about things, and they tend to, not necessarily bully, but pick on other people (Paul, gay male, Faith High).

We see a common theme beginning to form here – jocks as responsible for tormenting others. While jocks are not clearly identified as popular or high ranking, since many students are said to participate in multiple activities, they are a group traditionally described as popular (or high in status) due to their athletic physique, likely a group that others fear standing up to.

In addition to these males, a group of girls is discussed as those who torment others. Caitlin provides an interesting account:

These girls, they're the ones who think they are super cool...they totally thought they were hot shit. Like, two, like, were knocked up at the time, and they were like, the ghettoest [*sic*] girls at our schools and *nobody* liked them...[those] whose lives are out of control, they feel they need to be super tough and threaten other people, no thank you (Caitlin, pansexual, female, Faith High).

Yet again, this account demonstrates that students who bully or harass others are highly disliked by their peers. It is difficult to say whether or not this group of girls have high status. It is likely that they do not, yet these girls likely perceive themselves as having high status and feel they have the social caché to get away with treating others poorly. That is, unless their attempts to control others are about status anxiety, an idea that is explored in the next section.

At Bridgeview, the final school in this analysis, we see that again, not many bullies or students who torment others are discussed. While many students talk about getting into physical fights, most of these were due to personal vendettas, and had little to do with the topic at hand. However, one group is brought up, and this points to a common thread between accounts discussed by students from the other schools:

*Interviewer:* Are there students who tend to give others a hard time?

*Dawne:* Girls who wear a lot of make-up and little clothes, they seem to pick on a lot of girls. Like, there's this one girl at my school, she's new, and she wears make-up and tight little clothes and she likes to put other girls down I see (Dawne, lesbian, female, Bridgeview).

What is it about social networks of girls that cause girls to gang up on others and attack them? Collins (2008) maintains that bullying behaviour becomes more collective as students get older, and that females tend to use relational rather than physical aggression, and this is readily apparent from my participant accounts. According to Thunfors and Cornell (2008), female bullies have a greater likelihood of being popular than their male counterparts, and bullying plays a unique role in the process of achieving and maintaining popularity among middle school girls.

The question arises yet again: if these students are so heavily disliked by others, why are they described as popular? Again, this points to the inadequacy of the concept of popularity as these findings lend more support to the idea that where one sits on the hierarchy or their status differential may be a better descriptor. It also appears that in schools with weak lateral hierarchies, that fewer bullies are readily identified. This makes sense; as there are fewer status differences between students, strong hierarchies do not exist. As students who are said to *believe* that they are the most popular are those described as bullies, this supports findings which suggest that students use aggressive behaviours such as intimidation, insults and social exclusion to gain high status among peers (Thunfors and Cornell 2008). Particularly at the large, high income schools, these students may be bullying in an attempt to obtain the top “spot” in their school’s hierarchy by instilling fear in their peers.

## **YOUTH, ISOLATION AND BULLYING**

### ***Who do Bullies Target?***

Popular explanations of bullying often focus on the characteristics of bullying victims. For example, Collins (2008) maintains that the victims of bullying are those who are socially isolated, unpopular, shyer and less confident. Collins further explains that an ideology of cultural inferiority is used to justify bullying of the weak, and this includes those who are perceived to be homosexual. Isolation appears to be a commonality among victims of bullying. In their study of the prevalence of bullying behaviours among U.S. youth, Nansel, Overpeck and Pilla (2001) find that youth who are socially isolated that

lack social skills may be more likely targets for bullies. Yet other researchers like Jacobson (2012) suggest that victims are only incidental to bullying encounters. Bullying has little to do with whether a victim is gay, but rather is simply an attempt by the bully to gain status with peers through public domination of a classmate. Supporting Jacobson's argument is his observation that the majority of the literature depicts bullying encounters as taking place in front of an audience of peers. Others support this assertion and find that peers are likely to behave in ways that reinforce bullying behaviours (Collins 2008: O'Connell, Pepler and Craig 1999). In the following section, I explore students' experiences of being bullied, and the forum in which this bullying occurs. Additionally, I examine how students' social networks function in relation to bullying experiences and how gay-straight alliances begin coming into play.

### *LGBPQ Youth that were Harassed*

For many of LGBPQ youth in this study, harassment is most typically experienced as verbal. The majority report being called names like “faggot” and “homo” and teased for their appearance, most often as they walk down the hall. Several also face physical harassment, including Robert who had a rock thrown at his head, and others who were pushed and shoved in the hallway. For many, the constant fear of being attacked is the most pervasive source of anxiety they face – many worry about staying away from certain peers and avoid specific areas in and outside of school where they believe they could be victimized.

Apart from facing harassment, many sexual minority youth who are or were harassed believe that others ignore or tease them because they are different or do not

conform to the popular students' expectations. Many feel isolated, lonely or lack friends at their high school, as Eddie states:

I honestly didn't have friends I hung out with, that I called all the time, um, a lot of things broke off after grade 8 and so yeah, I didn't really honestly have friends. I knew and talked to people, but it's like, when it came to the weekend, who I'm gonna call or who I talk to? (Eddie, gay, male, Sacred Saint)

Eddie spends much of his time at Sacred Saint in the music room where he practices piano. He is also involved in several school bands but does not report interacting with his band mates. In discussing the high school he attended *prior* to Squarepark High, Derek similarly states:

I didn't have like, a lot of friends. I had one close friend there, like I was friendly with everyone, but I had like, one close friend really; I didn't really talk with a lot of people. I didn't go out much, I didn't do much of that, just because like I had said before, like, I didn't like going to parties and stuff just cuz it made me uncomfortable cuz it felt like everyone was like, staring at me cuz I was like, the gay kid there, you know what I mean? (Derek, gay, male, Squarepark).

Derek was not involved in any extracurricular activities at his previous school, and spent as little time at school as he could. He explains that his male peers did not speak to him (except to harass him) and that he was weary of girls that only wanted a “gay best friend.” At Squarepark, his current school, Derek is involved in the gay-straight alliance and explains that he has made friends through it - an issue that will be further explored in the following chapter.

Robert, a former Sacred Saint student – who has been expelled for missing too many days of school - experienced several instances of harassment. Not only did he have

a rock thrown at him, but he reports having been “stuffed” into a garbage can. He further explains that at Sacred Saint, he had no close friends:

**Interviewer:** Who did you have lunch with, study with, hang out with?

**Robert:** No one by grade eleven. Grade nine I had friends, I hung out with just, I hung out in Campus Ministry, just helped clean, helped cook, helped do all that stuff for people who were unfortunate and then I got kicked out by grade eleven (Robert, gay, male, Sacred Saint).

Anne had similar troubles; she was bullied for holding hands with a heterosexual friend. Following her peers having witnessed this, she was persistently taunted and rumours of her sexuality constantly circled at school. Upon starting high school, Anne had fallen away from her grade school friends, as many of her current friends were attending another high school. Anne reports having trouble making friends at Blessed Souls, her high school, as she explains:

I had just fallen away from my grade school friends and found my new group of friends. I was hanging around with the one friend I was walking to Southridge with mostly, and then she introduced me to my other friends. So we were all kinda a close knit group...Everyone else who wasn't my friend, they always like, avoided me or shunned me, or ignored me and stuff like that, because they didn't want me hitting on them (Anne, bi-curious, female, Blessed Souls).

Anne attributes her harassment to being bisexual and the irrational fear that many hold in which they believe that sexual minority people will “hit on them.” Anne’s friends attend a neighbouring high school, so she is able to see them afterschool or walk with them to school, but at her own school, she admits to being very isolated. Like Eddie, Anne is also involved in band at her school. While band is typically a middle ranking activity (Collins 2008), some students practice in isolation and like Annie and Eddie, do not seem to form many social ties. Also, Anne was not involved in any extra-curricular activities at Blessed

Souls apart from the Art Club in grade nine, thereby not deriving social status, or the ability to form social ties from extra-curricular activities.

While some students described themselves as lacking friends, but wishing that they had people to hang out with, others describe themselves as loners, outcasts or "misfits" and give the impression that they are not concerned about their lack of friends, or lack of social ties. These students often state that they prefer hanging out alone, do not "like people", or do not care what others think. As the following accounts demonstrate:

I guess it would be the loners; the ones who don't really fit in or don't wanna fit in. Like, I never really cared about other people, or what they think about me, so I just did my own thing and they did their own thing, so I hang around with them cuz we have similar interests and we got along...and I like them, they like me, but now I don't really hang out with anyone except for myself (Susie, bi-curious, female, Bridgeview).

While David similarly states:

I didn't wanna associate with people; I don't really like meeting new people all that much, so um, at the beginning of high school it was really hard since I didn't really hang out with a lot of people from my grade school. What I ended up doing is during lunchtime...I would avoid the cafeteria...I was actually um, hanging out with these security guards in grade nine, so I'm pretty sure that would be the definition of a loser right there (laughs) (David, gay, male, Blessed Souls).

The students above attribute their lack of friends and isolation as something that is within their control – they did not want to give the impression that others *chose* not to be friends with them. Although they were "isolated by choice," this did not protect Susie or David from being bullied, as both report verbal harassment by peers.

There were also several students that were harassed at their previous high schools, but these students moved to schools with gay-straight alliances because of the unpleasant experiences at their old high schools (I delve further into how their experiences at a

school with a gay-straight alliance differ in the following chapter). Interestingly at their current high school (with a GSA), they did not report any form of harassment. For example, Jeff explains:

But I found before, that, um, that I felt threatened because I wasn't okay with myself and since going to Squarepark and being in the GSA, its gotten better. I'm in the GSA, and also in the music program, and um, after school bands too (Jeff, gay, male, Squarepark).

Jeff was harassed at his previous high school yet reports that he did not face bullying at his current school. At his current school, he is also involved in several extra-curricular activities, including the gay-straight alliance and cites a supportive friendship network. Similar to Jeff's experiences, two other students, Patricia, and Derek (account above) report experiencing harassment at prior schools but not at their current schools (that have GSAs). They also stated that they felt uncomfortable attempting to join extra-curricular activities at their previous schools, although they wanted to. At their current school, however, they both report becoming involved in various activities - Patricia in sports and both in the gay-straight alliance. Through the gay-straight alliance, these youth were thus able to form social ties with other students.

According to the sexual minority youth in this study that were harassed, certain places on campus were reported to be worse than others, in that bullying occurred in these areas more often. In particular, the gym class and the locker room were frequently mentioned by males as uncomfortable places where bullying often took place. For example, Paul contends that males would often make "comments or remarks" in the gym change room, so he would avoid gym class whenever he could. He states:

I have definitely decided to skip gym class quite frequently, um, it's my last class this semester and I usually go to my cafeteria or to my French class, or to another teacher's class, just to waste time, cuz I don't like the environment of my gym class (Paul, gay, male, Faith).

Similarly, Brian states:

In gym [I've been harassed]. I'm not very good at athletics, so people have messed with me for that (Brian, gay, male, Faith).

While not currently experiencing harassment, Nick had in his early years of high school.

He too mentioned physical education class as a difficult place for him to feel comfortable:

**Interviewer:** Are there students who tend to give others a hard time?

**Nick:** Yeah, not as much now, but when I was in grade nine, cuz I've always been at Squarepark...especially before the GSA came into play, there were a few comments, like grade nine gym for me was the worst class ever, because I was still in the closet, and like, they saw signs in me I guess, or whatever you'd like to call it, and they'd make fun of me and stuff, and I'd get so offended, but um, not as much anymore though (Nick, gay, male, Squarepark).

In their study of homophobia and transphobia in high school, Haskell and Burtch (2010) find that gender norms related to masculinity are more rigorously policed by classmates than those related to femininity. Females have more leeway with regard to gender expression than do males, as females who violate gender norms are not punished as severely as males. For example, participants in their study reported that “effeminate” males were most likely to experience harassment, particularly in physical education class. This translates to Haskell and Burtch’s (2010) finding that sexual minority youth feel unsafe or uncomfortable in change rooms. The authors describe physical education classes as an environment where teachers usually do not intervene, (as they may be reluctant to enter change rooms to avoid allegations) and where being "roughed up" can

be passed off as legitimate. They also explain how for males, the jock culture is associated with homophobia, and that aggressors always seem to be male. As we have seen, it is indeed the jocks that are reported to consistently pick on or torment others, particularly the effeminate gay males. Eddie, a gay male at Sacred Saint high school, also states that the jocks at his school have the mindset that every guy finds them attractive and wants to sleep with them. Parallel to this, in my master's thesis research, I found that many heterosexual males reported discomfort changing in a locker room with gay peers, because they did not want to be "hit on" by them (Bortolin 2008, 2010). I also argue that due to the lack of supervision by teachers in these areas, places like change rooms become central spaces where students rank and enact status based on physicality.

In conjunction with the theory that harassment has less to do with victim characteristics and more about the bully seeking higher social status, we can observe that in line with Jacobson's (2012) argument, the gym and locker room offer an audience to witness the bullying of sexual minority youth. In this realm, those that do not excel at athletics offer fodder for harassment, and an audience of athletic males provide encouragement for the bully to continue what they are doing. These findings also supports the idea that bullying is very situational in the sense that it seems to predominate in certain settings, such as locker rooms, with certain status group audiences, in this case, male jocks, and using a cultural frame to attack which in this case, includes conceptions of masculinity and sexuality.

The above accounts also largely support the idea that students who lack strong social networks and social support face harassment by peers (Collins 2008; 2011). With

no one to turn to or hang out with, these youth are often alone and may become easy targets for their bully peers. Particularly at Catholic schools, this isolation may have particularly harmful effects, as all gay males from Catholic schools reported harassment. We also begin to see hints that gay-straight alliances may help ameliorate some of the harassment, as students purposely moved to schools with them.

***LGBPQ Youth that were Not Harassed***

Another interesting finding is that among sexual minority youth who played sports, were involved in school activities (where they could derive status) or had strong social networks, no incidents of harassment were reported. In her ethnographic study of masculinity and sexuality in high school, Pascoe (2007) discusses how sports grant status to sexual minority females (in addition to heterosexual males). Pascoe found that the “Basketball Girls” which included sexual minority members, were at the top of their school’s hierarchy and instilled both fear and respect in other students. For example, Liz, who had been the Prime Minister of her school, states:

Right away I was dating an older individual from grade nine, and she had put me into a good hierarchy, I would say? And made me join student council and made me join band, and whatever else I needed, um, which I think helped me position who I was at that time and grow this confidence, pride thing, for myself, not for anything else. This is who I am, this is how I'm gonna act, I think that intimidated a lot of high school people, um, and from there, I became Prime Minister (Liz, queer, female, Sacred Saint).

All of the various extra-curricular activities that Liz was involved in made her highly visible to her peers – she explains that many of her peers knew who she was, including the jocks. Caitlin, a pansexual female at Faith High who was not harassed for her sexuality explains: “In grade 9 and 10, I was really involved in a lot of sports.” Patricia, a

bisexual female from Bridgeview High was involved in slow pitch and made many friends. Particularly at the beginning of high school, it seems that becoming involved in activities works to provide visibility, friendship and support.

Similarly, Nathan had older friends and a wider social network, and he was also involved in a variety of extra-curricular activities including student council. He too did not report any forms of harassment:

Yeah, I never had problems with it, but... I had a lot of friends who were either older or tougher than me, that if anything happened, I had people who could back me up...but nothing ever happened, or I was never in a situation where I needed the back-up or whatever, but I always had a lot of friends who would back me up if I needed to (Nathan, gay, male, Southridge).

While others are not heavily involved in extra-curricular activities, they do report having a strong friendship network at their school:

I had my best friends, like, me and these 3 people, and then there was always other people hanging around, and then like, my sister's friends were always there too, so there was a big group of us (Michelle, queer, female, Squarepark).

Similarly, Justin explains:

I never once felt...my health or my safety was at risk...I've heard rumours and I've heard the insults at my school, but then again, I was always with friends, always just did my thing, no one ever really cared (gay, male, Squarepark).

Justin, the founder of the school's gay-straight alliance, was highly regarded by his peers and described by them as popular – he was often referenced by students that I interviewed from Squarepark. Even teachers I spoke with from Squarepark stated that Justin was popular; they cite this as a key reason that there had been so much support for the GSA

from the student body and why he had been successful in forming a GSA over past students at the school.

The accounts above lend credence to the idea that students who have strong social ties (networks), as well as those who were involved in extra-curricular activities (which often determine one's place in a status hierarchy) may not be targeted for bullying, or at least buffered from it. For example, Ellen, a Squarepark student also states that "in grade nine most of my friends were grade 12s" (lesbian, female). Sadly, there are fewer accounts to draw upon in this section, as more of the sexual minority youth in this study were harassed than those who were not. Many of the youth in this section who report no harassment also attend schools with gay-straight alliance. Collins (2011) hypothesizes that where there are groups of homosexuals in schools, they are less likely to be attacked. This factor may come into play at Squarepark - as it is known as the "gay-friendly" school in the City of Windsor, and had the first GSA, I find that LGBPQ students from this school report the most positive experiences. As several of the accounts above are from students that attend Catholic schools, I argue that here, social networks may be especially important as homosexuality is frowned upon due to religious teachings. Collins' (2011) argument may also apply to groups of ethnic minorities, as in Chapter 3 I found that the ethnic diversity at Bridgeview (and to a lesser extent, at Sacred Saint) led to a weak lateral hierarchy structure. While gay-straight alliances will be the focus of the next chapter, we can already see how sexual minority students involved in them report more positive high school experiences. We turn now to the accounts of straight youth in order

to examine whether social networks have a similar influence on their experiences with harassment in high school.

***Straight Youth that were Harassed***

While more LGBPQ reported being bullied than youth who identified as heterosexual, several straight youth reported frequent bullying occurrences. Christina, a Sacred Saint student, claims that she was bullied because of her appearance; she had been sixty pounds overweight, wore un-fashionable clothes and had not dated anyone during high school. As she recalls:

...a lot of people thought, I guess, thought I was a lesbian, including [a girl] that bullied me the first three weeks of high school... I was very scared, I just didn't want it to happen, like, what because I could potentially be a lesbian, I should be bullied now? (Christina, straight, female, Sacred Saint).

As Christina did not conform to feminine ideals of beauty, diet and weight, she was rendered an outcast by females. Adherence to gendered norms of physical appearance are strong in high school, and her difference is regarded as unacceptable by peers (Durham 2002; Horn 2007).

Melissa, a Blessed Souls student, was frequently verbally harassed for being overweight and not “pretty enough.” She had dated a popular, handsome jock throughout high school and many of the high status females (including the Group of 7 discussed above) constantly nagged her about not measuring up to him, as she states:

It was always behind my back, and then in class there was like, um, like a thing where they had started me like, "you know he cheats on you, right, cuz why would someone like that stay with you?" and there was like a confrontation like that (Melissa, straight, female, Blessed Souls).

Rumours were spread that Melissa's boyfriend had cheated on her at a party that she did not attend with him. Following this party, girls began writing graffiti in a girl's bathroom stall attacking both Melissa and the girl her boyfriend supposedly cheated on her with:

So in one day, this entire bathroom stall was completely covered in black sharpie between me and this girl, and nothing had even gone down, and it was all her friends and all my friends had just attacked this stall. The things that were written in it were things that I still to this day, it makes me cry (Melissa, straight, female, Blessed Souls).

Melissa claims that during high school, she did not know much about brand name clothing, was not regularly invited to parties, nor was she involved in any extra-curricular activities at school. She explains that she did not conform to the image of the popular girls at her school – her boyfriend was even told by male peers that “she didn't make the cut” as dateable material for him – shockingly, her female peers made sure she knew this too. This account fits Collins' (2008) assertion that as students become older, bullying is tied to gender-segregated status hierarchies; girls verbally bully other girls based on their low status in the sexual attractiveness or dating market. The girls at Blessed Souls who bullied Melissa seemed “stuck” on the idea that because of her “inadequate” looks, Melissa was not worthy of her boyfriend.

Aside from students that did not conform to ideals of beauty, those that participated in low-status or “uncool” activities during their spare time report experiencing harassment:

Freshman year I, when I, first came in I didn't know anyone, so I went with the first people I met, and um, you know, they were also in the arts program... We would eat lunch in the room designated "the games room" um, and it was sort of uh, a safe haven for maybe some of the kids who hung out by themselves [and] needed a place to eat lunch and... it was just a place, like, they had teachers supervising it, and they had a bunch of

board games, and you got more of the nerdy kids, I would include myself in that, and some of the arts kids who were a bit nerdier (Andrew, straight, male, Squarepark).

Those that are classified as “nerds” or “geeks” - whether the label is through self-identification or imposed by others - often experienced bullying. Recall from the literature discussed in Chapter 3 that these students typically fall on the bottom of the social hierarchy (Collins 2008). Jake, a Bridgeview student, classifies himself as a “geek” and “gamer”;

**Interviewer:** So who do you typically hang out with? You talked about the geeks...

**Jake:** Yeah, um, we started off with pretty much books and all that. We talked about books, there were a couple video game people in there, too, and we conversed about our favourite games, which for most of the time was Gears of War and Halo (Jake, straight, male, Bridgeview).

Several of the straight youth that were harassed also appear to be situated near the bottom of their school’s status hierarchy. Although some of these students surrounded themselves with other “low status” youth, they nonetheless claimed to have experienced harassment. While not completely isolated, the low status of these youth rendered them fodder for harassment by others at their school.

I uncovered an interesting phenomenon in examining instances of harassment - straight youth who stood up for others reported being bullied as a result. Christina, who had been bullied for her being overweight, also experienced bullying for attempting to stand up to other girls:

I was defending a kid for getting bullied...this kid was bullying my friend, so I said, "[girl], why are you bullying [friend]?"...she ends up telling people that I said "[girl], why do you bully little girls?" ... for the first 3 weeks, I hated high school, like, I actually hated it. Like, I went

home the first day, and I fucking cried.... I felt like I was in a TV show, I would plan other ways to go around – I would avoid her locker (Christina, straight, female, Sacred Saint).

Similarly, Stacey was picked on for defending a friend:

There's this one girl who really doesn't like me cuz I stood up against her for my friend...it was arts fest...she [friend] came onstage and [this girl] was like "this girl's a slut and blah blah blah", and I was like "you can't do that, I'll bet you don't even know her" ... she stood up and was like, threatening to fight me or whatever...Ever since then, she doesn't like me very much, so like, when we go down the hallways, she kinda just like, bumps into me sometimes...I think she plays basketball...(Stacey, straight, female, Sacred Saint).

This is an upsetting finding; as many anti-bullying campaigns often urge students to “stand up to bullying” these accounts demonstrate how difficult this may actually be. As we also know that bullies often have larger networks and more popularity, or higher status, than their victims (Thunfors and Cornell 2008), students may feel intimidated by these peers. While these aggressive youth are often disliked (Rodkin and Berger 2008), students may fear retaliation; that is, students do not stand up to bullies in fear of becoming victims themselves, particularly if these youth lack strong social networks to “back them up” and the bully has a wider network than they do, which is often the case. It is likely that Salmivalli et al.’s (1996) assertion that high status enables certain students to defend victims without becoming victims themselves is correct, as those in my study who lacked high status were victimized for doing so. The implication of these findings in regard to current anti-bullying strategies will be discussed in Chapter 6.

***Straight youth that were not harassed***

The majority of straight or heterosexual identifying students interviewed for this study report very positive experiences in high school. The heterosexual students who

report no instances of bullying or harassment describe being involved in a variety of extracurricular activities, including sports teams, school plays, band, student council and more. Many have a goal of making the most of their high school experience and meeting as many different people as possible. Through their involvement in these various teams and clubs, students report meeting making new friends and becoming "known" at their school. As Melanie maintains:

Um, they didn't give me a hard time because like, again, I was one of the popular kids because I did literally every club there was to do, and I was friends with every person in the school (Melanie, straight, female, Sacred Saint).

I know a lot of people because I do everything, and...I don't wanna say I'm popular, but I know a lot of people and that just, because I go to all the events and I'm very involved because I have to take pictures for everything, and so, people don't really give me a hard time (Greg, straight, male, Squarepark High).

Students referenced the fact that they were not given a hard time *because* they were involved in so many extracurricular activities, and that many students knew who they were because of this. While several straight students interviewed for this study claimed to “know many people”, among those that attended schools with the strongest hierarchies (Blessed Souls and Southridge) none claimed to be at “the top” of their school’s hierarchy. As students at the remaining schools did not cite the existence of hierarchies, none claimed to be at “the top” although several, including Melanie above, did believe she was “popular.”

Peter, a student from Southridge confessed to being surprised that he had not been bullied in high school, as he states: “I played the role of a gay character in the school play, which many, many people saw. Not one, uh, off comment about that...nobody has

even questioned my sexuality after that. Nobody has ever bullied me or picked on me” (straight, male, Southridge). Peter also explains that he has made many friends from his involvement in the school play, the environmental club and curling team at school. While these are not typically high status activities, he explains that these activities have provided him with a strong friendship circle. Peter created a network though the social ties gained in his extra-curricular involvement.

Several other straight youth interviewed for this study faced similar circumstances and were involved in multiple extra-curricular activities. While these were not high status clubs or activities, but rather “middle range activities”, they had nonetheless developed a wide circle of friends at their school. However, sports offered a “sure fire” way to gain popularity (or rather, a top spot in the school’s status hierarchy) and deter harassment. Being involved in a traditionally popular sport such as football may help the most:

In high school I went right to the athletes, I was on the football team, so nobody really picked on me, I didn’t get picked on (Leo, Straight, male, Blessed Souls).

A female at Faith High also discusses her involvement in sports:

**Interviewer:** What activities were you involved with at school?

**Amy:** I played a lot of sports, like I did volleyball; I would do cross-country, track and field, um, badminton. For grade 12 I also got involved in student council, I was a grade 12 rep (Amy, straight, female, Faith High).

Among many of the females who were not harassed, the same pattern emerges, as these numerous accounts demonstrate: “I do basketball, then volleyball, then soccer” (Chantal, straight, female, Sacred Saint) and one of her peers also states “Um, I’m in basketball, soccer, I pretty much do everything and anything” (Leah, straight, female, Sacred Saint).

Lauren reiterates the same idea: “I’m on the volleyball team, on the soccer team, and I’m going to throw for track. And then, one of the teachers is trying to start a softball team, so I’ll be playing that too” (straight, female, Sacred Saint). Maya states: “I’m in the play, student council, um, soccer and volleyball” (straight, female, Sacred Saint). And finally Fran: “I played volleyball and then one year I played basketball” (straight, female, Blessed Souls).

Note that all the females discussed above from Sacred Saint were involved in sports – recall in Chapter 3 that I made the claim that in schools where students do not have access to wealth, sports offer an avenue of upward mobility. None of these girls experienced any form of physical or verbal harassment; they explained that they got along with most people, that nobody “messed with them” and that they had a very positive high school experience. This is fitting with literature which describes status as linked to extra-curricular activities (Eder and Kinney 1995; Merten 1996). A study by Eder and Kinney (1995) on the effects of extracurricular activities on peer status finds that participation in activities provides a high degree of visibility for students, especially those who play or perform in front of large crowds, such as football players or cheerleaders. It appears that involvement on sport teams not only bestows high status on its members, but deters bullying through this status enhancement.

A couple of youth who were not involved in as many extra-curricular activities believed that their easy-going personality and demeanour helped deter bullying. These students cited that they were friendly with everyone, and did not like to “make waves” at school, as Tony explains:

I'm not somebody that's gonna stand out and be like "that guy's an asshole." I mean, I like to talk to people, I like to you know, have a good time, have a good conversation...so I managed to be fine around every group. I never had a problem with anybody. I just coasted, I went with the flow; I kept the spirits up in classes (Tony, straight, male, Blessed Souls).

The sexual minority youth I had interviewed were all friendly, gracious and kind people, so it is difficult to believe that friendliness acts as a factor in and of itself to prevent bullying or harassment. It is more likely the case that other factors including where one sits on the status hierarchy, as determined by measures such as the number and type of extra-curricular activities one is involved in, and social networks, as determined by the number of ties among students and how far they fall from the centre, are what must be considered here. While these are two separate concepts, they do appear to operate in tandem – the more activities one is involved in, the more social ties (or wide network) this creates, and vice versa. In the section below, I bring together my findings to consider how they contribute to what we know about bullying in high school, as well as the merit of concepts currently used in discussing this phenomenon.

## **DISCUSSION**

Based on my findings above, it appears that low-status social isolates are the most vulnerable to bullying and that either status or networks will ease students' vulnerability. The concepts of status hierarchy and social networks often work in tandem, as my findings demonstrate that students who have many friendship ties are also involved in numerous extra-curricular activities. Activities that grant status and promote social ties do not have to be those of the "highest status" – even middle range activities, for example,

student council, drama, the band and art also appear to enable students to form a variety of friendships and prevent bullying. It does appear that traditional sources of status, including sports such as football, do place their participants at the top of the school's status hierarchy and afford a large dose of status. This study also highlights the situational character of bullying. As we have seen, bullying episodes often predominate in certain areas, such as the hallway or locker rooms where peer hierarchies can establish "rules" in the absence of teacher supervision. These also occur in front of certain status group audiences such as clique members and athletic male peers. Gender is also an important element when it comes to bullying. While females may have more leeway than males in regard to gender expression, girl cliques do attack low status female peers who do not live up to standards of sexual attractiveness. Males who do not meet hegemonic masculine ideals by lacking athletic ability or appearing "effeminate" or are reprimanded by male peers who use name calling to demonstrate their own heterosexual masculinity.

My findings also show some support for Collins (2008) assertion that bullies come from groups that are close to the top, but not at the very top. While I cannot easily distinguish between these two spots with my data, student accounts provide clues to this. For example, the idea that students who bully are described as popular but that "no one really likes them" offers support. As we saw that popularity is often tied to likeability, these students are likely not at the very top of the hierarchy. Rather, they may be those attempting to move up further by using aggression, as Faris and Felmlee (2011) suggest. Also, Squarepark's drama club shows support for this argument – drama is not a traditionally high status activity, and these were the students considered to be bullies by

their peers. We also see more variation in who is described as a bully at Faith and Bridgeview High – the two smallest high schools with vertical hierarchies. At these schools, bullies are reported to be the kids that “think” they are cool, as opposed to those who peers actually believe are. These students might see bullying as an opportunity to become known to peers in the absence of a clear status structure.

In evaluating my findings, I believe that popularity is an inadequate concept in analysing bullying because popular students are often not well liked. Rather, status and social networks are more important concepts; capturing the high status or the central location of students tells us more than an arbitrary concept that is often used subjectively. I reject this concept as trying to capture anything of interest to bullying beyond what hierarchies and networks are capturing. For example, low status isolates are most vulnerable, but middle to high status and social ties ease vulnerability to bullying. Those with many ties are involved in numerous extra-curricular activities, have a lot of friends, are considered “cool” to most kids, and also know teachers.

In addressing my research question of how students use social networks to navigate status hierarchies in their high school, it appears that many of the sexual minority females purposely attempted to secure a high status through friendships and extra-curricular involvement, which did seem to elevate their status and fend off harassment. As my findings illustrate that sexual minority youth who had stronger networks were not bullied, just as straight youth in this study, I lean toward supporting Jacobson’s (2012) theory that bullying has little to do with whether or not a victim is homosexual. While students’ strategies of using networks or gaining status as a way to

avoid bullying may work to prevent bullying, this is a limited solution as it does not reduce the overall occurrence of bullying at a school, but rather shifts it to others who lack status and networks, who often may be sexual minority youth. As larger numbers of sexual minority youth face isolation, they happen to be easier targets for targets for those looking to bolster their status through bullying.

Thus, a variation in bullying and homophobia exists across high schools. We may see a reduction in bullying at schools with weak lateral forms of status differentiation; as status is not as important in these schools, we see fewer occurrences of bullying and fewer students who are easily identified as “bullies.” In these smaller, lower income schools, traditional sources of status such as consumer goods are not emphasized, and students are often involved in multiple extra-curricular activities which do not afford status to only a few. Recall my argument in Chapter 3 that the diverse ethnic composition and the small size present at Bridgeview and Faith High schools creates a pluralistic environment where students know each other well, and do not rank others and the activities they are involved in as above or below their own. In the absence of a ranking system (such as that more clearly seen at schools like Blessed Souls and Southridge) bullying is less prevalent as there is no need to climb a status hierarchy that does not exist. However, as there are no students (both straight and LGBPQ) in my study that self-admittedly place themselves at the top of their school’s hierarchy, future research must include the viewpoints of these students when examining the importance of status across various high school settings.

Finally, we ask, how do gay-straight alliances coincide with these research findings? Gay-straight alliances may be useful in that they discourage isolation and bring youth together, as we know that they provide a place for sexual minority youth to feel safe and create social networks (Pascoe 2007). Of course, at schools with GSAs, sexual minority youth may feel more comfortable being themselves and therefore reach out to others (and GSAs provide a place to do this). Overall, a club such as a gay-straight alliance that does not involve “try outs” or pressure to fit into certain types (such as an athlete) may offer a reasonable solution to the problem of isolation. Gay-straight alliances may also help students who feel they do not hold specific talents required to join activities such as band or choir. In the following chapter, I explore the ways in which gay-straight alliances promote friendship and the creation of social ties. I also examine how GSAs may alter school networks to challenge hierarchies and improve the school climate, which in turn eases homophobia and bullying.

## **CHAPTER 5: THE IMPORTANCE OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES**

### **CHAPTER OUTLINE/PURPOSE**

The current body of research on gay-straight alliances ubiquitously states that GSAs promote a positive school climate (Kosciw et al. 2012; Varjas, Mahan and Meyers 2006). Yet, few studies provide a clear explanation as to how this occurs. With the exception of a recent study by Fetner et al. (2012) which theorizes the role of GSAs as safe spaces, the literature on gay-straight alliances is typically descriptive. These studies focus on experiences of students within gay-straight alliances and how their lives at school have improved since joining the GSA. They also claim that the existence of gay-straight alliances not only provide support but make schools safer and more welcoming for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students (Goodenow, Szalacha and Westheimer 2006; Kosciw, Greytak and Diaz 2009).

While positive aspects have been uncovered, little is known about the ways in which a gay-straight alliance improves the lives of sexual minority students, and how this varies by school. Aside from a study by Walls, Kane and Wisneski (2010) which found that the presence of a gay-straight alliance positively affects school experiences even if youth are not GSA members and that GSAs increase subjective experiences of safety and make supportive allies more visible as a resource, very little is known about the specific processes through which gay-straight alliances work to change school climate and challenge homophobia. I argue that the majority of current research on GSAs lacks any in-depth theoretical engagement, an aspect this study aims to address. Using Mario Small's (2009) organizational embeddedness perspective, as well as Collins' (2004)

theory of interaction ritual chains, I explore how gay-straight alliances may operate as a context within schools where sexual minority and straight students can form personal ties and participate in rituals that provide an opportunity to counter social isolation.

In this chapter, I bring together findings from the previous two chapters in order to highlight the environments in which gay-straight alliances seem to work best. In addressing my first research question of how GSAs work as social networks that have a protective ability against bullying, I examine gay-straight alliances as a remedy for isolation. I use student accounts to identify the benefits of being involved in a gay-straight alliance and how in some cases, involvement has significantly improved students' lives. Drawing further on these accounts, I then identify the processes which appear to be effective in challenging homophobia and positively transforming the school climate. Here, I explore school-wide efforts undertaken by GSA members to educate their school about homophobia and their attempts to reduce homophobic language. However, this does not occur easily in every school, nor is it widely accepted by all the students within the school. In exploring the differences in success, I address the research question of: how do social networks intersect with gay-straight alliances in various social hierarchies? For example, do GSAs have the ability to flatten existing social hierarchies? Here, we find that gay-straight alliances can be very strong and help prevent social isolation. In addition, at some schools GSAs can help improve the school climate, but at others, they cannot. As schools with salient hierarchies have more students vying for status, negative peer rituals which espouse bullying may become more frequent and widespread, and

more difficult for teachers and students to disrupt. I argue that, ultimately, school climates are tempered by the social hierarchies that are in place.

In the second phase of analysis, I include insight from students at schools without gay-straight alliances and their thoughts on how one might benefit them. I explore how these students have attempted to promote understanding in their schools through anti-homophobia events, as well as carve out safe spaces to “hang out” as an alternative to school areas where they feel uncomfortable, such as the cafeteria. In a Catholic school setting where students lack the formal organizational support, these attempts were often met with severe resistance. I then address the research question of how students at schools without gay-straight alliances join social networks that protect them from bullying. As this chapter will show, the absence of a formalized context such as a GSA makes it much more difficult to facilitate ties among socially isolated youth. As we saw in the previous chapter that many sexual minority youth in Catholic schools were bullied, this chapter illustrates that a formal space such as a GSA is important for safety and friendship building.

## **SOCIAL CAPITAL AND BEYOND**

Initially formulated by Pierre Bourdieu (1988), the concept of social capital refers to “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 51). According to Bourdieu, these institutions may be socially created and can be guaranteed by a given name, such as the name of a family, school, or party. In

his review of the origins and applications of social capital in modern society, Portes (1998) explains that Bourdieu's use of the concept focuses on the benefits which accrue by virtue of participation, and that groups are deliberately created for this purpose. Although Bourdieu (1988) states that symbolic benefits may accrue from group membership, Portes believes that he emphasizes the outcomes of social capital as reducible to economic capital. Portes then turns to Coleman, who he claims refines this concept through his use of the role of social capital in the creation of human capital.

According to Coleman (1988) social capital is productive and makes possible the achievement of certain ends that without it may not be possible. He explains that if we begin with a theory of humans as rational actors, each having control over certain resources and interests, then social capital can be conceptualized as a resource that is available to an actor. Coleman goes on to describe social capital and explains that it “inheres in the structure of relations between and among actors. It is not lodged either in the actors themselves or in physical implements of production” (p. 98). Social capital comes about through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action, and is non-tangible. Coleman also maintains that the outcomes of social capital are not only economic but non-economic as well, an element he claims is underemphasized by Bourdieu. Coleman uses the example of study circles as a non-economic form of social capital, as he calls these “a cellular form of organization that appears especially valuable for facilitating opposition in any political system intolerant of dissent” (p. 99). Coleman explains that social capital accrued outside the family has a positive effect on educational

outcomes for children; this is particularly the case for those children whose families do not have strong social relations that constitute social capital.

In his book *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Randall Collins (2004) offers insight into how social bonds and boundaries are established while emphasizing micro-situational processes. At the centre of an interaction ritual is the process in which “participants develop a mutual focus of attention and become entrained in each other’s bodily micro-rhythms and emotions” (p. 47). Central to this perspective is the concept of interaction rituals (IR), in which two or more people are assembled in the same place, are focused upon a common object or activity, and share a common mood or emotional experience. In addition, there are boundaries to outsiders so participants know who is taking part, and who is not. These interaction rituals produce emotional energy (EE) in an individual, which includes a feeling of confidence, enthusiasm and initiative in taking action. The outcomes of interaction rituals also include a sense of group solidarity or feelings of membership. Symbols representative of the group such as emblems or words, icons or gestures are also produced. Lastly, feelings of morality or rightness in adhering to the group and respecting its symbols are experienced through interaction rituals.

Collins (2004) also discusses the concept of “social capital” but offers a definition that differs from that of Bourdieu and Coleman. He describes social capital as formed through trusting relationships which are attributed to network ties, or events in everyday life that consist of repeated social interaction. Network ties are a type of interaction ritual chain where certain symbols and emotions are recycled and can be improved. On the micro-level, positions in networks are created and sustained by the degree of success of

interaction rituals. Within “total institutions” such as high schools, a high ritual density exists and violations of group standards are ritually punished (Collins, 2008).

Building upon theories of social capital and their focus on the consequences of personal ties, Mario Small’s (2009) organizational embeddedness perspective examines the roots of personal ties – that is, *how* people form social ties. In his study of mother’s who have children enrolled in day care, Small found that the organizational context of the day care setting provided opportunities for interaction among mothers, creating friendships and social support. Small’s perspective draws attention to structure in context – that is, he focuses on the everyday structures in which people interact with each other. Small suggests that in the extent to which to it is organizationally embedded, the process of tie formation conditions other aspects of personal relations. For example, the childcare centres in his study provided mothers with multiple inducements and opportunities to interact through collective or shared tasks by encouraging parent involvement in events such as child parties and fieldtrips, resulting in friendships between mothers. The potential for everyday interaction was also fostered through the centre’s hours, as parents would interact during drop-off and pick-up hours. Small states that “friendship formation depends not just on the actors’ motivation but also the opportunities and inducements to interact produced by their social contexts” (p. 62) thus also emphasizing the importance of structure.

Following the principles described above, gay-straight alliances can be thought of as a form of social capital as they have the ability to create new solidarities and forge bonds among peers. Based on Collins’ (2004) perspective, they also function as a form of

interaction ritual that produces emotional energy in its participants. In order to deepen my analysis of GSAs, it is important to uncover *how* gay-straight alliances provide such an opportunity for gay and straight youth seeking a place to interact. Small's (2009) organizational embeddedness perspective guides my analysis by allowing me to examine how the organizational structures of GSAs differ across high school contexts. For example, while we know that GSAs are a safe place for sexual minority youth and their straight allies, we know little about the ways in which they promote ties and how this differs according to varying school contexts. Social hierarchies also come into play here – as we already know that social hierarchies vary according to size and income of the high school, and that students' experiences with harassment vary in these schools as well, we can see how context matters. I also examine how the ties created within gay-straight alliances influence other aspects of the lives of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, bi-curious, pansexual and queer (LGBPQ) youth in this study, as these move beyond friendship to more profound personal benefits for GSA members. Context comes to the fore when examining youth at schools without GSAs; a lack of a formalized space such as GSA deprives students of potentially beneficial interaction.

## **THE BENEFITS OF GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES**

### ***GSAs and the Development of Protective Social Networks***

At the conclusion of their interview, students were asked what they valued most about being involved in their school's gay-straight alliance. The most common responses include GSAs as providing a non-judgmental atmosphere where students could feel safe

and where they have no fear of being bullied. Here, students reported that they do not have to hide their sexuality, but can rather be open about it. The aspect of gay-straight alliances as being "safe-havens" is touted by several respondents:

...just a safe place is really important to have if some people don't have it at home or they *don't have a group of friends* [emphasis mine]. They just need acceptance from somewhere, and that's what the GSA is for...a safe place (Ellen, pansexual, female, Squarepark).

It makes it safer for anyone who is gay, bisexual, transgender, lesbian, etc, etc, it makes it safer for them, because now they have a place where they can go if they're feeling unsafe. And they can talk to the people there and find a solution for what's going on, and if there is no reasonable solution, they have someone to talk to instead of a diary, cuz a lot of the times, uh, being bisexual and being homosexual doesn't really come up around the dinner table (Jake, straight, male, Bridgeview).

Ellen and Jake bring up another important point – that for many sexual minority youth, home is a hostile environment where a close relationship with parents or siblings may be lacking (Williams et al. 2005). If parents and/or other friends discourage talk of homosexuality, the gay-straight alliance can offer students a place to be honest and open, and more importantly, comfortable in doing so without fear of being reprimanded. Ellen also makes an important point when she says that gay-straight alliances are really important for students if “they don’t have a group of friends.” An obvious, yet as it pertains to this dissertation, very important aspect of the GSA is that it facilitates friendship making by providing a context where youth have opportunities to interact (Small 2009).

As we saw in the previous chapter, isolation can lead to bullying; students who lack friends are often victimized by peers who see them as “easy targets.” In addition to preventing isolation, having friends can create a sense of belonging at school:

I think they need, like it's kind of, just a safe place is really important to have if some people don't have it at home or they don't have a group of friends, they just need acceptance from somewhere, and that's what the GSA is for...A safe place (Nick, gay, male, Squarepark).

You get friends in the GSA and it's just kinda like, you know what? These people accept me for who I am (Jake, straight, male, Bridgeview).

Greg, another straight male involved his school's GSA, states: "I've met a lot of new people and made a lot of new friends" (Straight, male, Squarepark). In addition to making friends, straight youth in this study discuss that since joining the gay-straight alliance, they have become more accepting, open and understanding of different sexualities. In their study of GSAs as safe spaces, Fetner et al. (2012) found that straight allies also play a crucial role through their involvement in the gay-straight alliance. The inclusion of straight allies in these clubs helps create a space in which closeted kids can participate, as they offer the added benefit of providing safety for students who are not ready to identify their sexual identity or are still questioning it.

Gay-straight alliances are also touted as a place to meet other LGBPQ youth, which many of my respondents say they would not have known otherwise. Along with this, friends and partners met in the GSA offered much needed social support. Nick states "it was really nice to meet other people that, who had the same views as me" (gay, male, Squarepark). Small (2009) points out that in many organizations, actors encounter homophilous individuals, or people which will resemble them more than those elsewhere. Within gay-straight alliances, youth are provided with the opportunity to meet other like-minded teens who may be more open and accepting of homosexuality than some of their peers in the larger school environment may be.

Students also benefitted from their involvement in other important ways:

**Interviewer:** Do you feel you personally benefitted from the GSA?

**Jeff:** Yes, well, I met my boyfriend. But um, also, I felt a lot of confidence. I don't know if that's just because I moved to Squarepark and the whole school is more accepting, but that's also because of the GSA, but yeah, I'm much more confident (Jeff, gay, male, Squarepark).

Based on Collins' (2004) perspective, gay-straight alliances can be viewed as a setting where gay and straight students participate in interaction rituals that produce a new, alternate source of emotional energy. For instance, this confidence that Jeff speaks of, as well as the sense of acceptance or social belonging, are forms of emotional energy that are produced as a result of interacting with others in the GSA. This is important as high school can be a setting that depletes emotional energy for youth who face a hostile school climate. As Collins (2008) explains that victims of bullying are those who are socially isolated, unpopular, shy and less confident, this sense of confidence can prevent youth from being victimized.

In addition to confidence that Jeff speaks of, several students that I spoke with report that they have become more comfortable with their own sexuality as a result of joining the GSA.

I'm more okay with myself now, than I was before. But I found before, that, um, that I felt threatened because I wasn't okay with myself and since going to Squarepark High and being in the GSA, it's gotten better (Nick, gay, male, Squarepark High).

Patricia similarly states:

I guess I can say I've learned to be more open about my sexuality in that it's not something that I have to hide, or it's not something I have to be uncomfortable about. You know? (Patricia, bi-sexual, female, Bridgeview).

Sexual minority youth often experience feelings of internalised homonegativity (Carragher and Rivers 2002). The fact that participating in a gay-straight alliance can assist students in becoming comfortable with their sexuality is a profound finding. Thus, the ties created within the GSA have deep personal benefits which extend beyond friendship. As these students have become more confident and accepting of their own sexuality, this will positively influence their future interactions and relationships at school as well as those in their adult lives.

Within the gay-straight alliance, students also take part in shared activities and events. Apart from weekly meetings which offer members a regular time and place to interact, members participate in activities and projects including making anti-homophobia stickers, tie-dying t-shirts, organizing “ally week” and creating other materials for anti-homophobia events at the school. Collins (2004) discusses how cultural capital results from successful interaction rituals. Within interaction, new symbols are created and forge a new level of understanding and reflection among participants. These symbols become memorable when they forge alliances. Strategies such as Pink and Purple Shirt Days, Tie-Dye Shirts, and Days of Silence (which will be discussed further below) become symbolically meaningful and ritually enacted and can bind GSA members, fueling their emotional energy and enthusiasm to participate in these various events.

In addition to the activities listed above, gay-straight alliance members report watching movies or television shows that deal with homosexual issues, having potluck lunches, and organizing gay-straight alliance dances. Field trips within the city also take place, for example, to Social Justice Conferences at the University of Windsor aimed at

socially conscious high school youth, and to attend talks on sexual minority issues by visiting speakers. GSA members from Southridge and Squarepark High schools also attended several conferences including the “Ontario Youth Rainbow Summit” which took place in Fergus, Ontario in 2010 and included workshops for high school students involved in or wishing to start a gay-straight alliance:

We went to kind of like, it was called a "Rainbow Summit." It was kind of a youth conference thing for GSAs. We went to that and met a lot of awesome people from other surrounding schools' GSAs, people I'm still in contact with, um, we did that, which was a nice trip, met some awesome people, learned more about what we could do for the later years of GSA (Nathan, gay, male, Southridge).

Similar to how the mothers in Small’s (2009) study formed friendships, youth involved in the gay-straight alliance build friendships through opportunities to interact, such as the collective or shared tasks such as those discussed above.

Finally, several of the students I interviewed spoke about the “types” of students in their school that are gay-straight alliance members. As Derek states:

I would say for the most part, most of our members are I guess you could say, are like, um, "outside the norm", in that kind of sense...They're the ones who dress more alternative, they're the ones who are more creative, artistic; they do their own thing, kinda deal...the straight ones who do come...they're kids who do their own thing (gay, male, Squarepark).

Justin, the founder of the GSA at Squarepark, similarly states:

It was more of the outsiders. It was a large portion of the people who started to talk to me and started to get to know on a personal level, I guess you could say that they were kind of the "outsiders" (gay, male, Squarepark).

Kylie also talks about students who attend gay-straight alliance meetings and states:

“Yeah, they'll [loners] come to the GSA and they won't talk much, but they look like

they're relatively comfortable, so, and they're there” (straight, female, Squarepark). Based on these accounts, it appears that GSAs also function as a social space for students who might not fit in elsewhere, while providing a place for them to feel comfortable. Gay-straight alliances also network isolated students, facilitating the creation of social ties through shared interaction, which in turn fuels their emotional energy and produces feelings of membership to the group (Collins 2004).

### ***GSAs and Strong Social Hierarchies***

For students at Southridge - which if we recall from Chapter 3, has a strong hierarchy – gay-straight alliances may offer a safe-haven in a school where sexual minority youth may not feel entirely comfortable. Gay-straight alliances provide a space where students can speak freely to friends without worry of being judged by peers or teased for not being “cool enough”, as Monica explains:

I think it's important that people know there is that safe space and that there's people that they can rely on and trust, and it's totally un-judging, and for me, I like that when I go there, I can just talk to the group of people, and I know that, you know, they're gonna be open and accepting to whatever I say. They're not gonna make fun of me, and it's just a good group of people that can hang around without fear of any bullying or anything (questioning, female, Southridge).

When Southridge student Tania describes the school climate at her school, she states: “I honestly think that at Southridge, people were afraid to admit if they were gay or not” (bi-curious, female, Southridge). Due to this, she was initially concerned that she would be teased for being in the gay-straight alliance. Tania explains that after being bullied for her weight, getting into physical altercations with peers, and battling depression, she “figured

that things couldn't get any worse" and decided to join the GSA. She did so in her last year of high school, being convinced to do so by her gay best friend:

Well, when I had all those issues going on, I'd go to the GSA and it'd be more accepting, and through GSA, and like, some of my own personal, like, counselling, and trying to choose my circle of friends better, I started to become more trusting. So I think if it wasn't for the GSA, I wouldn't be as trusting as I am now; like, I know that there is still room for improvement in my trust, but it's better than what it was (Tania, bi-curious, female, Southridge).

Tania was glad that she had become involved in the gay-straight alliance and as described above, found some solace in it. Collins (2004) maintains that gains of emotional energy by one person and the loss of emotional energy by another are reciprocally related. In this vein, the peer rituals that sexual minority youth are exposed to in a hostile school climate drain their own emotional energy, while leading their peers to gain status and emotional energy. In minimally or non-teacher supervised areas such as hallways or the cafeteria, negative peer rituals including teasing, bullying and isolation tactics can thrive. Spaces such as gay-straight alliances offer Patricia and others refuge from peer-dominated settings where these negative rituals occur.

Prior to attending Bridgeview High, Patricia had attended Southridge, but was not "out" there, as she explains: "when I was at Southridge, I wasn't going to tell anybody or come out cuz I didn't want the [negative] reaction." Similar to how Tania had described the school climate at Southridge, Patricia too depicts it as hostile toward sexual minority youth. Interestingly, Patricia moved from one school that already had a gay-straight alliance, to another. She found Bridgeview High to be more accepting and inclusive than Southridge; in addition to describing Southridge's school climate as hostile toward sexual

minority youth, she believes the peer groups to be cliquy and exclusive in comparison to that at Bridgeview. Collins (2004) maintains that persons who are low in emotional energy are likely to become the butt of jokes for those of higher status. Sexual minority youth who attend schools with strong hierarchies (and without GSAs) and who lack their own networks possess low emotional energy. As a result, they are picked on by those who possess higher emotional energy and status, as they are more likely to be in the centre of attention.

Monica reiterates Tania and Patricia's comment regarding Southridge. Monica is uneasy about coming out as bisexual as she feels that many of her peers are not accepting of diverse sexualities. She is reluctant to fully express her personal style and wear plaid shirts to school, because as she states: "people that wear plaid all the time are seen as lesbian." Although she says that she feels safe at school, Monica had this to tell me:

I think it's important to note that if I was out as bisexual, or if I was gay or transgender or anything, I wouldn't be comfortable walking around the school flaunting this or like...holding hands with my significant other of the same sex, because I would fear backlash (questioning, female, bisexual, Southridge High).

Unfortunately, although Southridge has a gay-straight alliance, the general atmosphere of the school does not seem supportive of sexual minority youth. Further challenges faced by these youth as they attempt to improve the school's climate will be discussed below.

## **HOW DO GSAs IMPROVE THE SCHOOL CLIMATE?**

### ***Combating Homophobia, Bullying and Creating Tolerance***

Homophobic language has unfortunately become common place in many high schools; in addition to terms like “queer” and “fag”, the phrase "that's so gay" has become pervasive in high schools with and without gay-straight alliances. According to the National School Climate survey carried out by Egale Canada, 80.6% of students in schools without anti-homophobia policies, and 65.4% of students in schools with these policies report hearing “that’s so gay” on a daily basis (Taylor and Peter 2008). With regard to my study participants, 35 out of 50 report hearing the phrase on a daily basis. Many students assert that the phrase is not meant to offend anyone, but rather, is used "jokingly." Students hear this type language referring to homosexuality so frequently that they contend it has become "normal."

That's so gay is everywhere; guys calling other guys "fags" and everything, and "no homo" um, besides that, no. That's all the...I don't wanna say "normal" but it's basically everywhere (Patricia, bisexual, female, Bridgeview High).

I argue that while some students may intend for these terms to be homophobic in nature, others may be using these terms in non-literal ways. As we saw in Pascoe’s (2007) study, these types of epithets are not always directed at gay peers. The pervasive use of these terms in today’s school culture suggests that these phrases may also be directed at students that are low in status, or those possessing low emotional energy.

Regardless of peers’ intent, "that's so gay" and a newer phrase "no homo" continue to be perceived as homophobic and disrespectful by many respondents in this study.

*Dawne:* You hear "that's so gay" and "no homo" used a lot. "No homo" means if a guy was complimenting your shirt to another guy, he'd be like "no homo" which means "I like your shirt but I'm not gay."

*Interviewer:* That's a new one.

*Dawne:* I find that one offensive. People sometimes they'll be like "this is gay" but they're not...I know they're trying to mean "this sucks." So it's not necessarily derogative, but it's still homophobic (Dawne, lesbian, female, Bridgeview High).

Both of the respondents quoted above attend Bridgeview High school. While some students may tolerate this type of language because it may be widespread, others are determined to do something about it. According to my respondents, one of the goals of the gay-straight alliances is to reduce the frequency and use of this type of language. Students at Bridgeview High are so bothered by the widespread use of homophobic language that they held a school-wide assembly to address the issue. Prior to the assembly, students were surveyed and asked how much racist or homophobic language they hear at school, and the assembly discussed this.

While the assembly was perceived to be an overall success, gay-straight alliance members did report backlash from certain students (further GSA backlash will be discussed later in this chapter). A particular challenge at Bridgeview high school is the previously discussed ethnic diversity of the student body – many recent immigrants to Canada attend this high school, some of whose cultures and religions believe that homosexuality is a sin (as is also the case at Sacred Saint High). Regardless, students from Bridgeview High report that the assembly has been an effective tool in dealing with homophobia, and homophobic language in particular.

Students from Bridgeview High also incorporated school-wide campaigns and events into their fight against homophobia, such as Pink-Shirt Day (where students wear pink in support of the fight against homophobic bullying), and a "Say another word" sticker campaign, which this student explains:

We had a "Say another word" sticker [campaign], where um, when people do good we hand out smile stickers...where uh, if people say "that's so gay" we'll say "can you think of another word to say instead of that word?" (Susie, bi-curious, female, Bridgeview High).

At Bridgeview high school, students who are in the gay-straight alliance are expected to intervene if they hear homophobia language, and the majority report that they do.

The GSA, everyone in the GSA, if they hear something like "that kid's gay" we'll be like "so?" We do stick up for a lot of things. And a few people outside the GSA who are close friends with the people in the GSA...[do the same] (Dawne, lesbian, female, Bridgeview).

Collins (2004) explains that human beings become charged with emotions and consciousness because they have gone through previous encounters. For sexual minority youth whose previous encounters at school have included victimization and harassment, they may now be filled with motivation to act on this problem. For these students, changing the perception of "gay" as stigma is the goal. Perhaps inadvertently, this attempt to stop their peers from using homophobic language also functions to disrupt hierarchies, as it challenges the notion that being gay is associated with "outsider" or low status.

Many of the gay-straight alliance members report that they perceive a reduction in homophobic language as a result of their efforts and the awareness that the GSA has brought to the issue. As Dawne also discusses during our interview "I think our school, I've actually heard less homophobic slurs, and it helped" (lesbian, female, Bridgeview). In

discussing the effects of the assembly on homophobic language use in the school,

Bridgeview student Rick also explains:

Yeah, actually, the language seemed to die down a little bit, but not all the way. Like, it went down a considerable amount from where it used to be (Rick, straight, male, Bridgeview).

The combination of school-wide attention to the issue of homophobic language, as well as attempts by students to correct their peers' use of homophobic slurs appears to be an effective approach in improving the school climate according to my participants.

Similarly to Bridgeview High, one of the main goals of the gay-straight alliance at Squarepark High school was to combat homophobic language; in particular, its founders had the goal of getting students to stop using the phrase "that's so gay." Students that I spoke with that are involved in the gay-straight alliance at this school report that they now intervene when homophobic language is used by their peers. The majority of students interviewed from Squarepark perceive that there has been a reduction in homophobic language, and particularly in the use of the phrase "that's so gay", since the inception of the GSA:

I don't see as much of that as I'd like for it, but it's definitely improving, but I don't use the remarks as much as I used to, so that's a good thing too (Greg, straight, male, Squarepark).

That was the big one [that's so gay]...And once it started, once...people actually heard about it [the GSA] and went "oh wow, that's actually happening here" it um, people, less and less people started saying it. Very significant, significantly less people (Justin, gay, male, Squarepark).

Justin also adds that in addition to students combating the use of homophobic language, many of the teachers at Squarepark High have joined in the fight. Justin, along with other Squarepark students report that teachers point out homophobia language and correct

students' use of it. Squarepark's gay-straight alliance also held Pink Shirt Day, Ally Week (where straight allies could show their support of the GSA and ending homophobia through various events, such as wearing tie-dye shirts), and the Day of Silence (where students refuse to speak for an entire day to bring awareness to the silencing of homosexuality).

There's instances where there's events we plan; like, we had a tie-dye meet up, we organized Ally Week... [which] is talking about gay rights, and that kind of stuff, and just... we're just trying to recruit people to come and support gay rights and that kind of stuff. Just informing people about the GSA and how... what the LGBT community has gone through and stuff like that. It's kinda like black history month kind of thing, but ally week (Ellen, pansexual, female, Squarepark).

The use of the gay-straight alliance as a platform to further discuss sexual minority issues is also discussed by Grace and Wells (2009). In their study of Canadian high school students who engaged in activism and cultural work to advance sexual minority inclusion, the authors found that the formation of gay-straight alliances worked to “fracture” heterosexual space in public schools by freeing sexual minority students from silence and exclusion often faced at school. GSAs became sites for sharing experiences, consciousness-raising and action planning. Based on Collin’s (2004) perspective, Pink Shirt day can be viewed as an attempt to re-claim a symbol that is given low status in jock culture and viewed as a symbol of femininity. This tactic also attempts to invert the status of symbols in the realm of teen clothing. Milner (2004) explains that schools can reduce the extent to which differences in economic power are relevant to attaining status by creating norms that emphasize solidarity and equality. Given that we know of the importance of clothing as a marker of status, Pink shirts propagate the notion of equality

rather than a brand name that would symbolize wealth. Straight allies aid attempts to rebuild networks among isolated youth, as friendships are formed among peers who likely would not have interacted outside of the GSA. The Day of Silence can also be viewed as a ritual whose aim is to disrupt normal patterns of interaction among students (to read about the activities that GSAs produce from a social movement perspective, see Fetner et al. 2012).

Teachers at Squarepark have started their own gay-straight alliance for staff within the Great Essex County District School Board (among public high schools). Teachers in the GSA for staff regularly meet monthly, outside of school hours in a public location. The meetings are open to any interested teachers in the School Board. GSA members at Squarepark have become aware of this group, and are quite proud of it.

Um, because the group heavily condemns homophobic behaviour. And because of the GSA there, they now have the GSA for staff too, that really educates the teachers too, cuz like, I'm sure there were teachers that weren't against it, they just didn't know how to deal with it or anything, so a GSA really helps teachers as well, and how they deal with situations like that, and I think that's really good (Nick, gay, male, Squarepark).

Similarly, Greg also states:

I don't hear a lot of that derogatory language because the teachers are very good about saying "stop that" and "what did you just say?"...a lot of the teachers are involved in the GSA for staff, um, lots of different things that the teachers are very involved in and it translates down to the students, and that stops a lot of it, like, "did you mean to say that? Don't you mean..." and other things like that (Greg, straight, male, Squarepark).

The involvement of teachers in areas such as the gay-straight alliance for staff demonstrates to students that teachers are working to improve the school climate for sexual minority youth, as well as educate themselves on these issues. Students at

Squarepark recognize the efforts put forth by their teachers and it is clear these have had positive outcomes, as they have the potential to disrupt tactics and rituals that students use in an attempt to climb their school's status hierarchy. For example, having teachers involved in fighting homophobia disrupts 'no-snitch' rules as the onus to report harassment does not rely solely on students (who may not 'tell' out of fear of further harassment). As I have argued in Chapter 4 that bullying is situational, the involvement of teachers also reduces the number of areas in a school where bullying episodes can occur. Teachers who hear homophobic language and witness bullying can challenge students both in and out of the classroom, unlike peers who may be unequipped to do so, or who do not out of fear of being harassed themselves.

Kim Hackford-Peer (2010) cautions that "safe spaces" such as gay-straight alliances fail to challenge the heteronormative status quo when sexual minority students are physically separated from other students. She argues that gay-straight alliances that are part of broader school efforts to raise awareness and provide education have the most potential for reframing discourses because they impact the daily lives of all students. We have seen these broader school efforts take place in both Bridgeview and Squarepark schools. However, broader school efforts are not always successful, nor are they always welcome in certain school climates. While the examples of Bridgeview and Squarepark point to gay-straight alliances that are working well to improve the larger school climate, not all GSAs are so successful in combating school wide use of homophobic language. For example, students at Southridge High did not report any perceived improvement in

language use by their peers, nor did gay-straight alliance members report that they or others intervene when homophobic language is heard. Lisa explains:

...people don't want to seem like they're pushing it. They don't wanna rock the boat really, get people ganging up against them, so most people like, I notice that some people feel uncomfortable with it, but they don't really like, try to stop it [homophobic or offensive language] (Lisa, straight, female, Southridge High).

This echoes findings in the literature. In their qualitative study of American high school students, Adelman and Woods (2006) found that students fail to intervene against homophobic comments toward sexual minority peers because of fear of losing status among peers, fear of losing friends and fear of being targeted as gay or lesbian themselves by friends. As discussed in Chapter 4, students also fear victimization themselves, particularly those that lack wide social networks or high status to “back them up.” Recall that Southridge has a salient hierarchy with jocks, preps and pretty girls reported to be located at the top, and many of these students reported to be bullies as well. Thus, negative peer rituals which espouse bullying may be more frequent and widespread as there are more students vying for status. As teachers at Southridge are not reported to be heavily involved in anti-homophobia efforts, this leaves too many unsupervised areas and bullying tactics for students to handle on their own.

In addition to the lack of perceived influence on combating homophobic language, Southridge High gay-straight alliance members report that their GSA bulletin board was vandalized, as flyers and posters were torn down and derogatory comments were written on it. When asked about the backlash to the GSA, Monica said:

There was, when we first made our bulletin board, someone, like, tore down one of the things and then wrote on it "God says no" and like, our

teacher quickly covered it up...I know that the teacher has [received backlash]... there's that website rate my teacher and she's gotten comments on there, and like, pretty much, 'no one really cares about your GSA' and things like that (questioning, female, Southridge).

On the "rate my teacher" website, students can post anonymous comments about teachers at their school and unfortunately, Southridge participants shared with me that the GSA sponsor had insulting comments written on her page. Students also faced backlash during GSA events:

It was during the Day of Silence, that was the most backlash I got. Because we'd walk into class, and it was like "what are you now, a queer?" and like, what the fuck are you talking to me about? And then you'd get that all throughout the hall, (Tania, bi-curious, female, Southridge).

Thus, it again appears that gay-straight alliances are not welcome equally in all schools, as attempts at improving the school climate are met with strong resistance at Southridge, which is unfortunate given GSA members' willingness to create change. This resistance likely has to do with the large student body at Southridge, and the strong hierarchy in place; I elaborate on this argument below.

While students who participate in gay-straight alliances claim that having a safe space is important, many of these students also focus on changing the local school culture which exists outside of the group. At Squarepark and Bridgeview, these attempts have been successful, at least partially due to the support of teachers who assist the efforts of GSA members in promoting non-homophobic language and making the GSAs activities part of the larger school culture. While students at schools such as Southridge are certainly valiant in their attempts to change the school culture, I argue that this is a difficult task given the social hierarchies present at the school, and the lack of efforts by

teachers to challenge these. Until everyone is “on board”, gay-straight alliance members can focus on promoting the GSA as a place to build social ties and attempt to include more isolated students who may also be the victims of bullying. The importance of gay-straight alliances to provide support to isolated youth is immense, given that sexual minority youth face higher rates of isolation and less social connectedness at school (Pearson, Muller and Wilkinson 2007, Rivers 2001).

### **NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES AND GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES**

While the majority of the youth interviewed who participated in gay-straight alliances were enthusiastic about their involvement, and demonstrated it to the student body through involvement in various activities such as Pink Shirt Day, Ally Week or the Day of Silence, several of the students I spoke with were often reluctant to admit to their peers that they were involved in their school's GSA. For example, straight GSA members (or allies) were often asked by friends why they would participate in such a club as they were not gay, while other straight allies were questioned by Christian parents about their participation.

My dad was raised a Christian and he is still a Christian, um, he is against homosexuality...he said to me...You're not gay, why are you in the GSA, you're not gay?" "Dad, uh, I'm a straight ally, you don't need to be gay to be in the GSA" (Jake, straight, male, Bridgeview).

I previously mentioned that students at Bridgeview received backlash from students whose religion forbade homosexuality. Dawne provides an example of an event that occurred:

I think the day after the assembly, we heard lots of backlash like "why are the gays doing this" not me personally, apparently just a lot of people heard that in the hallway. And then, right before the [GSA] dance, we heard "that's a gay dance, I'm not going, I don't want to be hit on" and just a lot of "why are they doing this" kind of thing. So they know we're there though (Dawne, lesbian, female, Bridgeview).

Dawne's statement "so they know we're there though" is quite powerful, as visibility can be a challenging issue for many sexual minority youth. In their qualitative interviews with 20 LGB youth, Lasser and Tharinger (2002) found that these youth engage in an ongoing process of "visibility management." Through this, sexual minority youth make careful and planned decisions about whether they will disclose their sexuality, to whom, and how they monitor the presentation of their sexual orientation in different environments.

Visibility is often a response to the environment; sexual minority youth continually exposed to hostile attitudes toward homosexuality may internalize negative feelings and lack self-acceptance. Hostile environments expose sexual minority youth to continued negative emotional energy. The lack of emotional energy faced in these environments works to drain youth of confidence and enthusiasm, and no feelings of belonging exist (Collins 2004).

Coinciding with LGBPQ students' lack of visibility is a lack of status and network centrality. Events such as the gay-straight alliance dance help promote network centrality, as students can network with non-GSA members who attend the dance. Students from other Windsor schools were also invited to the dance, offering further opportunity for youth to expand their networks. Similar to the teachers at Squarepark, teachers at Bridgeview helped students promote anti-homophobia initiatives including the dance. As school dances are typically thought of as a heterosexual domain, this works to subvert

heterosexism as the norm (and dances as a ritual that only heterosexual students engage in) and encourages students of all sexual orientations to become involved. In addition, negative rituals where sexual minority students would be ostracized are banned at these types of school sanctioned events (Collins 2004).

At Squarepark, students were fairly open and accepting of the gay-straight alliance and little backlash was reported. However, for heterosexual males, there was a slight challenge, as Greg and Andrew describe:

There's just a stereotype that I'm in the GSA, I'm gay... I always make sure to say "what does GSA stand for? *Gay-Straight* alliance. That's really the only thing that I've experienced. I have people assume, they don't ask me, which is sort of sad, but, I'm not very offended, you know, you can think what you want but I know who I am (Greg, straight, male, Squarepark).

I never really told people [that I was in the GSA]. In the GSA they said too, a disclaimer, like, they kept the door closed, and said they wouldn't tell other people in the school if you were in the GSA. I also believe the sort of general consensus in the school was you only join the GSA if you're gay. I was like, well, it's G-S-A, you know? Whatever, and so the general consensus was "you're gay if you're in the GSA" (Andrew, straight, male, Squarepark).

Research on the composition of gay-straight alliances has found that participants are predominantly white, heterosexual and female (Griffin et al. 2004). In addition, GSAs often lack sexual minority students of colour who may not see them as effective in meeting their needs (McCready 2000). The fact that heterosexual males are becoming involved in gay-straight alliances points to growth in this area. However, gender norms are particularly difficult for males to combat, as participation in activities that do not coincide with hegemonic masculine ideals is questioned (see Connell 2005). I argue that for students such as Greg who is self described as popular and friendly with most people

(as discussed in Chapter 4) involvement in the GSA may be “easier to get away with” while students sitting lower on the hierarchy may be more apt to be teased by peers. Perhaps popular students can provide a larger caché for the gay-straight alliance and perhaps even encourage others to join.

### **HOW DO GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES WORK?**

Gay-straight alliances help promote social ties simply by providing a context for the isolated students at the school to spend time, and shared activities provide further opportunities for interaction. For those feeling that they do not fit in at their high school, the GSA can offer a place to “hang out” and make friends. In his study of network inequality, Small (2009) helps deepen our understanding of isolation and cites that “the most disadvantaged person today may well be the organizational isolate” (p. 196), including the one disconnected from schools, among other institutions. According to Collins, socially excluded people and outcasts have the lowest emotional energy. GSAs provide a space where isolated youth have the opportunity to participate in interaction rituals that lead to the formation of network ties (Collins 2004).

In their study of gay-straight alliances as safe spaces in high school, Fetner et al. (2012) found that even narrow and hidden GSAs offer great sanctuary to members who feel extremely isolated. While these are all positive findings, I have little evidence that the LGBQ students in this study have moved up the hierarchy in their school as a result of their involvement in the GSA. However, students attempt to flatten hierarchies by promoting their own visibility and attempting to disrupt the use of homophobic language

by certain groups of people. Teachers can also disrupt peer tactics in locations that are under their purview including classrooms, hallways and other monitored areas. Teachers do this by policing homophobic language use and intervening in bullying incidents, as well as providing spaces where these rituals are forbidden.

While gay-straight alliances offer safe spaces for students to belong to, my findings are similar to Fetner et al.'s (2012) study of GSAs as safe spaces, in that at certain schools, GSAs are bound by cultural climates that vary greatly in their acceptance of sexual minority students. I argue that these climates are tempered by the social hierarchies that are in place in each school. In schools with strong hierarchies, my findings thus far demonstrate that the school climate toward isolated sexual minority youth is more hostile and the GSA members and staff have a more difficult time making “in-roads.” As we know from Chapter 4 that students engage in aggression to climb their school’s hierarchy, in larger schools with strong hierarchies, negative peer rituals may be more prevalent and difficult to intercept, as there are likely more students engaging in these in their quest for status. This is why gay-straight alliance members and teachers had more success at Squarepark and Bridgeview High. At smaller schools with weak lateral hierarchies, there are less negative peer rituals taking place, and a fewer number of incidents are easier to intercept.

## **NO GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCES: CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOLS**

### ***Finding a Safe Place in the Absence of a GSA***

LGBPQ students at Catholic high schools that did not have gay-straight alliances often found niches in their school where they could feel safe away from the larger student body. These students often cited supportive teachers who would let them use these rooms to “hang out” in. These spaces often included the drama, music or art rooms:

Like, everybody knew if you needed a spot, it was the art room. I don't know what it is like there now, cuz our art teacher is at [another Catholic High school] now. But I know there's some teachers who are always, like, an open door safe haven (Caitlin, pansexual, female, Faith High).

Several students in particular avoided the cafeteria at lunch time as they did not feel safe there. Coincidentally, the cafeteria is a place where youth who are on the bottom of their school's hierarchy are often harassed and feel excluded if they lack a “clique” to sit with (Robbins 2011). Milner (2004) explains that in the cafeteria, whom you eat with is even more important than who you date, as this occurs daily. Milner concludes that the teenage preoccupation of whom one eats lunch with is an aspect which symbolizes intimacy in expressive relationships. This occurs when status is an important consideration, as it is in high school. Jeff, a former Blessed Souls and current Squarepark student states:

[I hung out in] the band room...Um, actually, at Blessed Souls, in grade nine, I used to eat in there, I used to eat lunch in there with a couple of my friends, so, yeah, just because I felt safer there than in the cafeteria [gay, male, Squarepark].

Campus Ministry was another place where students at Catholic schools often went to “hang out.” There is an obvious religious connotation in the name of these spaces, but students who spent time there did not report partaking in any religious activities. It was

simply a place where they could relax, as these rooms often had couches and provided snacks. Students report that “outcast” or “nerdy” low-status kids are those that hang out there, rather than the high status youth at school. As Campus Ministry is associated with religion, some conflict emerged for Liz:

Campus Ministry I wanted to embrace, but didn't, I think that's the way it went. It was very Catholic for me and I didn't necessarily enjoy it. I really wanted to try and embrace the Minister there, um, but she really didn't wanna talk to you, she was older, and I wanted to almost look for questions about religion towards my sexuality and figure out why these weren't meshing up together, or why the bible bashed this or that...(Liz, queer, female, Sacred Saint).

While Campus Ministry offered a safe space where students could escape their peer cliques, larger school environment, and potentially bullying, it was not a place where they could feel comfortable and be open about their sexuality. LGBPQ students could not openly discuss sexual minority issues with their teachers or peers in this space, nor did they have access to information and resources as students in gay-straight alliances did.

Other LGBPQ students had teachers they felt comfortable around and would spend time in their classrooms before or after school and during lunch. These spaces offered an escape from the larger school environment where emotionally draining peer rituals thrive. In school spaces such as classrooms, teachers can play a role in neutralizing or even extinguishing peer status rituals and hierarchies. This is why peer rituals thrive outside of teacher supervised spaces (I would argue that the cafeteria is minimally supervised) with the exception of sport teams.

For sexual minority youth in particular, accepting teachers could be a valuable resource:

Um, definitely in, um, in any of my teachers' rooms...they've always made it, um, clear to any of their students that it's a safe place to go, if you ever need to talk... My law teacher, English teacher, um, my French teacher especially, I talk to her about anything and everything (Paul, gay, male, Faith High).

But just as teachers can be a valuable resource, they can also harm students with negative comments regarding homosexuality:

Like, you know how the Canadian Blood Services won't accept blood from a guy who's gay? Well, I was talking to my math teacher about that, and she starts going on about how it's a sin [to be gay] and how two men should never be together like that...it kinda put me into a bit of a depression for awhile (Brian, gay, male, Faith High).

Brian says he spoke to his guidance counsellor about this incident, but was told that it was simply the teacher's job to tell him the Catholic view on the issue. Brian also shared with me that he felt as if the teacher failed to make the classroom a positive space, and this made him upset. While it may be said that it is a "teacher's job" to promote the Catholic view on this issue, it is also a school's "job" to strive to ensure that all members of the school community feel "safe, comfortable and accepted" so that an "equitable and inclusive school climate" can be achieved (Government of Ontario Equity and Inclusivity Education Strategy 2009: 10). Clearly, this is an atmosphere that Brian's teacher did not provide for him.

If we recall from Chapter 4, all gay males from Catholic schools reported harassment. As these males were isolated, the availability of a space to facilitate network building would be valuable. While classrooms and Campus Ministries offered a safe space for LGBPQ youth during lunch hour or at other times throughout the day, they lack the clear meeting times and activities that gay-straight alliances offer. Although these

spaces provide sanctuary from areas such as the cafeteria where peer rituals are enacted, they do not provide a context for the type of interaction rituals that take place in GSAs. This is due to the fact that students are not focused upon a common object or activity, or share a common emotional experience as members of a GSA would. Alternative sources of emotional energy or a new set of symbols and cultural capital are not produced, and neither are feelings of enthusiasm to take action. In addition, there are no shared activities, potluck lunches, movies or other field trips that provide opportunities for interaction. In discussing what places persons at a disadvantage in today's society, Mario Small (2009) states that "it is not merely the absence of friends, but the absence of contexts in which friends continue to be made" (p. 196-97). We can see that without a space to interact, sexual minority students lack the ability to participate in an organization that may improve their well-being.

### ***Attempts to Combat Homophobia***

Several of the LGBPQ students that I spoke with (from all three Catholic high schools) had attempted to start a gay-straight alliance at their own school after learning that one had been formed at Squarepark High. These students felt a need to bring awareness to the homophobia they were experiencing at school, and also wanted a supportive, comfortable environment. Several had been the victims of homophobic harassment and wanted a safe place at school. The requests of the students were turned down by the principals at each of the three Catholic schools the students in this study were attending; that is, Blessed Souls, Sacred Saint and Faith High Schools. As Liz maintains:

We tried, when the gay-straight alliance was happening in Squarepark High, we tried bringing it to Sacred Saint, but we can't because it's Catholic. It's very simple; they shut it down right away (Liz, queer, female, Sacred Saint).

Faith High student Caitlin explained to me how she had tried to form a gay-straight alliance at her school – she had written a proposal and brought it to her principal along with other students, but she had been denied (as GSAs were not allowed to form in Catholic schools at the time). Following that incident, students attempted to show their support against bullying of sexual minority students through various events, including the Day of Silence. Two students from Faith High, both Caitlin and Paul, report trying to be involved in this event, but getting called down to the office and received detentions. One event Faith High administrators did allow was Pink Shirt Day; according to Caitlin, severe limitations were placed on students participating in this event:

We did 'Day of Pink' it's not necessarily for gay rights, but it's anti-bullying. There [was] a lot of rules...we had to be in uniform and we could only do it part of the day. You had to bring a pink shirt, put it on half way through the day, not for the entire thing...we wanted to wear all pink, but they wouldn't let us. And they tried to shut it down cuz they did think it was for gay rights, but it's not easy to back off, like there's a lot of fights for that (Caitlin, queer, female, Faith High).

Students did attempt to hold other events in order to promote anti-bullying, all while trying to “sneak in” an anti-homophobia message:

[my gay friend] was on the student council and... said "hey, I have this great idea, on Facebook there's this thing about wearing purple." So we made an announcement, and like, we posted things, we told just word of mouth and people actually ended up wearing purple. So that was cool, that was a first, we had never done that before (Christina, straight, female, Sacred Saint).

At Blessed Souls high school, Diana explains that the school held a “Wear Purple Day.” Similar to the students at Sacred Saint, students from Blessed Souls had heard about this anti-homophobic bullying event through social media sites including Facebook and wanted to promote this day. Although approved by administration, the anti-homophobia aspect seemed to be conveniently left out:

...they [administration] gave the announcement for purple day, they said "wear purple tomorrow against bullying" but they didn't mention anything about the suicides that had happened because of homophobic teasing. So a lot of my friends and I were really upset about that, seeing as that was the reason for purple day (Diana, straight, female, Blessed Souls).

The absence of any reference to homophobia renders homosexuality as invisible at these schools, and silences the voices of sexual minority youth. Small (2009) maintains that potential sources of social capital cannot be traced only to the imperatives of local actors, but also to institutional pressures occurring at the macro level of society. It is evident that principals and teachers at the school-level cannot shoulder all the blame for barring students from taking part in anti-homophobia activities, as they too face powerful external pressure from school boards. Fortunately for current and future generations of youth at Catholic high schools, as discussed in Chapter 1, the Provincial Liberal Government was able to exert its' own powerful influence on the School Boards across the province when Bill 13 was passed. All schools, public or Catholic, must allow students who are willing to form gay-straight alliances, and to call them such (Houston 2012).

## **DISCUSSION**

Based on my findings, I argue that gay-straight alliances are valuable contexts where gay and straight youth can build their social networks and combat isolation. In addition, interactions that take place within the gay-straight alliance build emotional energy and enthusiasm among members. Students who feel isolated or unaccepted by the larger student body see the GSA as a place they can go to feel safe, comfortable and accepted and meet like-minded others. In particular, at schools such as Southridge where the school climate appears particularly hostile toward sexual minority youth, the gay-straight alliance functions as a place to escape from negative peer rituals that include harassment and be oneself in a non-judgmental atmosphere.

While gay-straight alliances espouse a safe place for sexual minority youth and their allies to hang out, my research shows that students also use these spaces to promote school-wide change and fight homophobia. This is an unexpected but exciting finding, and shows that students' efforts within GSAs often extend beyond themselves. Positive outcomes did occur at Squarepark and Bridgeview, as students perceive a reduction in the use of homophobic language at their schools. Here, teachers and administrators backed the efforts of GSA members through their own attempts to interrupt negative peer rituals and to disrupt the spaces where they occur. However, students involved in the gay-straight alliance at Southridge did not report any perceived improvement in their school climate and faced hurtful backlash. While GSAs are able to provide a safe and friendly place for sexual minority youth and their straight allies, my findings also reveal that they do not have the ability to flatten hierarchies in all types of high schools. At schools with

strong hierarchies, gay-straight alliances members and teachers have a difficult time competing with teens' preoccupation to gain status.

I argue that gay-straight alliances appear to be more successful in improving the school climate at schools that do *not* have strong hierarchies. This is because at smaller schools, there are fewer cliques and students attempting to gain status, and therefore, fewer negative peer rituals and tactics to interrupt. Conversely, at large schools there are more students attempting to climb their schools' hierarchy. As we know from Chapter 4 that students use aggression in an attempt to gain status, more negative peer rituals are enacted as a result. I believe that as these rituals become widespread, it is difficult for teachers and GSA members to disrupt them. This is likely why at smaller schools - where there are no hierarchies to climb - and where teachers support students' efforts to disrupt homophobia, the gay-straight alliances' efforts are more successful.

At Catholic high schools without gay-straight alliances, students attempt to carve out safe spaces in art, drama or music rooms, teachers' classrooms or campus ministries. Examining this in reference to Small (2009) and Collin's (2004) perspectives it seems that these spaces do not provide the same organizational context as gay-straight alliances do, nor do students engage in structured interaction rituals in them. While the spaces students at Catholic Schools occupy can function as a sanctuary from unsafe areas such as the cafeteria where students feel a threat of harassment, they do not provide LGBPQ youth with the ability to expand ones networks as GSAs do, which in turn may leave students more susceptible to being bullied. Recall from Chapter 4 that all gay males from

Catholic High Schools reported experiencing some form of harassment, as did females with the exception of those who had strong social networks.

My research shows that while gay-straight alliances promote many positive aspects for members, they do not always function as a “cure-all” against homophobia in all school settings. As the gay-straight alliances at the high schools in this study were relatively new (in place for only 2 to 3 years) at the time of my data collection, it will be worthwhile for future research/longitudinal studies to examine the impact of GSAs on school climate overtime. This must be added to an awareness of the status differentiation that exists within the school, including the specific reasons as to why the efforts of gay-straight alliances are more successful in schools without strong hierarchies. As gay-straight alliances are now permitted in Catholic schools, future research must also examine the challenges they face operating within a larger religious environment including how well anti-homophobia messages are received by students, and any potential backlash which may result. In the next chapter, I discuss the worth of GSAs in comparison to other forms of anti-bullying interventions as well as the aspects of anti-bullying initiatives that students view as memorable.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

Bullying has traditionally been described as an outcome of an individual person's psychological characteristics. Common explanations include an aggressive reaction pattern combined with physical strength in males, a primary caretakers' indifference toward the bully as a child, permissiveness for aggressive behaviour in the early years, or their use of physical punishment, as well as the temperament of the child. Victims of bullying are characterized as physically weak, passive or submissive, cautious, sensitive and quiet, and as suffering from low self-esteem (Olweus 1995). Conversely, the current body of research on sexual minority youth has begun to focus on schools as a setting where sexual minority youth are often susceptible to bullying, rather than on their risk at the individual student level. Russell (2011) argues that this change in focus represents a conceptual shift from individual pathology to the impact that schools climates have on youth. In arguing this, he states "LGBT youth are not inherently at risk – the environments they grow up in are the problem" (p. 126). I could not agree more, as throughout this dissertation I have argued that a sociological analysis deepens our understanding of bullying encounters by examining the contexts in which bullying takes place, and how and why this behaviour prevails in high school environments.

In Chapter 3, I found that status hierarchies vary depending on the size of the school and the average parental income of the students that attend it, demonstrating status differentiation across schools. I found that in large, high income schools, hierarchies are more salient. At these schools, I found that traditional sources of status such as good

looks, economic resources and involvement in activities such as sports typically raise youth to top spots in a status hierarchy. At smaller, lower income schools, more pluralism existed as it was more difficult for students to identify who the popular students are. Over fifty years ago, James Coleman (1961) identified how status flows to attractive females and athletic males, and my findings confirm this enduring aspect of school culture. However, there is at least a small amount of variation between schools and with this in mind, it would be interesting to ascertain how things differ in other national contexts and across historical times. In sum, I argue that status hierarchies should be reconceptualised from simply being thought of as vertical to accommodate multiple sources of status and varying competition.

Using these findings, in Chapter 4, I examined which students bully others, and which are themselves bullied. Here, I argue that at schools with strong hierarchies, students near the top of social hierarchy harass others in their attempts to gain status. At schools with weak lateral hierarchies, bullies are reported to be the kids that “think” they are cool, as opposed to those who peers actually believe are. This supports Collins (2008) assertion that bullies come from groups that are close to the top, but not at the very top. Across all schools, students that are isolated and lack social networks face more bullying than peers who have larger social networks. This includes the lesbian, gay, bisexual, bi-curious and queer (LGBPQ) youth in this study. Those who had strong friendships and were involved in a variety of activities at school did not face harassment by peers, while those who were isolated did. Bullying had a strong situational nature, as it often took place in specific locations and in front of certain status groups. I also concluded that

popularity is an inadequate concept in analyzing bullying because popular students were often not well liked. Rather, status and social networks were more useful concepts in my analysis. I found that capturing the high status or the central location of students tells us more than an arbitrary concept that is often used incorrectly.

In Chapter 5, I examined how gay-straight alliances provide a valuable context where youth can build their social networks and combat isolation, and are provided with opportunities to interact with each other (Small 2009). Using Collins (2004) framework, I argue that GSA members participate in interaction rituals which build their emotional energy and generate interest in changing the larger school climate. I discovered that while gay-straight alliances are espoused a safe place for sexual minority youth and their allies to hang out, students also use these spaces to promote school-wide change and fight homophobia through various tactics and rituals. As a result, the gay-straight alliances at Squarepark and Bridgeview were able to improve the school climate and challenge hierarchies. This did not occur at Southridge, demonstrating that GSAs do not necessarily have the ability to flatten hierarchies or improve the school climate at all schools. I argue that GSAs have more success at smaller schools with weak lateral hierarchies. I reason that this is because there are less negative rituals taking place which are directed toward sexual minority and other isolated youth. With teachers and administrators assisting the efforts of GSA members, it is easier to interrupt tactics that are fewer in number.

Russell (2011) asks what the characteristics of gay-straight alliances and gay-straight alliance participation are - aside from their presence at school - that are meaningful for students and promote positive adjustment. It is my hope that this research

has contributed to answering this important question, as well as to identifying the contexts in which GSAs are more successful. Taking the above findings into account, I argue that anti-bullying strategies cannot simply focus on attitudinal change. We must also take into consideration the structures and contexts which facilitate bullying behaviours, with schools being one of the main social institutions in which bullying episodes occur. As schools function as their own social worlds in which students exist autonomously apart from adults, we must tailor intervention strategies to work alongside the various facets of peer culture. This research also demonstrates that sexuality is an organizing principle of high school life – in schools where no GSAs exist or in strong hierarchy schools where sexual minorities are silenced, sexuality is rendered invisible. At schools that embrace GSAs, including those with weak lateral forms of status differentiation, sexuality is visible and often celebrated. Future studies in the sociology of education must also consider sexuality as an important aspect of peer culture and take this into account when theorizing about status hierarchies, school climate and bullying.

### **ANTI-BULLYING STRATEGIES**

We must listen to the students themselves when it comes to anti-bullying initiatives. In this vein, I include input from students on this issue in this section. This is done in an effort to understand which types of anti-bullying initiatives students believe have been memorable at their schools, and which they believe have not. Although the explicit intent of this dissertation is not to evaluate the effectiveness of anti-bullying programs, students were asked about anti-bullying programs which took place at their

school including those they found memorable, and those they did not. The focus of this chapter is not on programs or events pertaining to anti-homophobic bullying, such as Pink or Purple Shirt Days, or the Day of Silence, as these have been discussed in Chapter 5. Rather, I am curious to ascertain which types of initiatives “stick” in students’ minds. This is worthwhile as effective mediums of information transmission might be uncovered that can later be adapted to include anti-homophobia messages and improve the school climate for sexual minority youth.

*From Memorable to Unmemorable*

In discussing anti-bullying initiatives which took place at their schools, students had a great deal to share with me. Unfortunately, much of the information they shared was that anti-bullying programs and initiatives at their school did not seem relevant, interesting or effective. Although several students were able to speak to quite memorable events, recollection of important details was most often vague. One of the most memorable initiatives discussed is “Rachel’s Challenge.” Rachel Scott was the first student killed during the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999. Today, Rachel’s father Darrell and stepmother Sandy have created a series of empowering programs and strategies based on Rachel’s writings and drawings. The goal of the programs is to inspire students around the world to combat bullying and isolation by creating a culture of kindness and compassion (Rachel’s Challenge 2013). Participants spoke about this presentation as very powerful and chilling:

It all started with the Columbine shooting, right, there was this one girl and her name was Rachel, and she was the first victim killed...it was weird because she had dreams about the shooting happening and stuff like that. She drew pictures and like, there's this one picture of like, a flower and it

was bleeding or something and like, there was thirteen teardrops and like, that's how many students and teachers were killed. It's really weird, and her parents have like, talked about it, like they've done interviews and stuff like that. And so, I honestly don't know how it started, but like, it's called "Rachel's Challenge" and it's all about like, going against bullying and helping other people, stepping up, being the bigger person (Lauren, straight, female, Sacred Saint).

This presentation was also given at Blessed Souls High, as Leo explains:

I remember one memorable one; it was that one with the chain reaction, what's her name? Rachel's challenge; that was a big one. It was this girl, she was in Columbine. She knew it was gonna happen before-hand, she was having these dreams and things like that, and she tried to warn people; it gave me shivers. That was the most memorable, that was crazy. Just thinking about it gave me shivers. Everyone in the gym was silent and just listening to these people (her family) it was crazy (straight, male, Blessed Souls).

While certain facets of this presentation seemed to really “stick out” in students’ minds, it is unclear how well students internalized any type of take-away message regarding how to prevent bullying. Aside from Lauren’s account above which describes it to be about “stepping up, being the bigger person”, students simply spoke of how tragic the events described were, rather than how the presentation pertained to anti-bullying. For example, when asked to elaborate on the presentation, one Blessed Souls student explains “I don't know, it had to do with bullying too though” (Tony, straight, male, Blessed Souls) while another states “there was a thing called Amanda's challenge, I don't know if that was her name or not” (Fran, straight, female, Blessed Souls).

A similar recollection of events occurs with another assembly that had taken place at Blessed Souls. Mike Neuts, the father of Myles Neuts, a young boy who was the tragic victim of bullying at the hands of two of his peers, came to speak to students. On February 26, 1998 Myles was found hanging on the coat hook in the washroom at his

school. His air supply had been cut-off and brain damage occurred as a result. Myles died in the hospital six days later after his parents made the difficult decision to remove him from life support. Today, Myles' father travels around Canada presenting the story of his son to youth, educators and professionals to relay the message that bullying is unacceptable. Mike's presentations emphasize to children that they are all unique and should not pick on someone for being different. He also discusses the power of bystanders to stop bullying (M.C.B.N. Children's Foundation 2013). Blessed Souls student Sonya discusses the presentation:

We had actually an assembly last year...the father actually came and talked to us and his son hung himself. They came and talked to us, it was really sad. The dad was up there, just trying to be strong, and tell us about his story. That was one of the major things we had this year, I don't remember anything else (Sonya, straight, female, Blessed Souls).

A school mate of Sonya's has a divergent recollection of the event, as Rebecca states: "The bullies hung him by the back of his shirt, that's why there's (*sic*) no more hooks on the back of the doors." (Straight, female, Blessed Souls). While anti-bullying presentations that relay the most tragic outcomes of bullying appear to be the most memorable among students, the anti-bullying messages contained in these important presentations do not seem to be easily recalled by my participants.

Other anti-bullying initiatives that participants report include student council members at Blessed Souls and Sacred Saint painting words such as "love" and "don't hate" on the arms of other students, which students believed to be a "cool" idea. Students from all schools report seeing bulletin boards or posters with an anti-bullying theme, but few can recall the messages they contained. One Blessed Souls student recalls a poster

message ““You weren't brought up to be brought down”” (Rebecca, straight, female, Blessed Souls). Without any further context, it would appear that this poster places the onus of bullying on the victim as something they must prevent themselves. Ironically, this poster is situated in a school where cliques and bullying seem pervasive. One Sacred Saint student has a vague recollection of a poster that she believes to state: "don't put walls on the walls, like, its bullying and stuff" (Melanie, straight, female, Sacred Saint). I would argue that the anti-bullying message contained in that slogan is very unclear.

Christina sums up the common sentiment about the effectiveness of bulletin boards to promote anti-bullying messages in high schools:

As for um, things that are posted, there's a bulletin board, but nobody gives a shit about the bulletin board, k, so, if you're gonna have a bulletin board, you might as well not even bother cuz nobody is reading it, at a high school anyways. If you are somewhere else, but at a high school, people don't care about the bulletin board. I would read them, but others don't (straight, female, Sacred Saint).

Melissa similarly states: “I mean, there was like, a few posters around the school, I don't really remember what they said” (straight, female, Blessed Souls). As will be discussed below, the effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies is difficult to ascertain. In particular, it would appear difficult to measure the effectiveness of a strategy so innocuous such as posters which do not actively engage youth. Recommendations for strategies are discussed below, although as we will see, there do not appear to be any easy remedies for this problem.

Students had other interesting suggestions in regard to what type of anti-bullying attempts did not work at their school. Leo discusses “anti-bullying skits” that his peers would perform:

We used to have some anti-bullying like, skits or whatever...But it's not like anybody took them serious. When you got students knocking on the door and they come and do a skit in front of your classroom for 15 minutes, it's just like you know all these students, you really gonna take these people seriously when you know what they were doing on the weekend? You know what I mean? It's like, c'mon (straight, male, Blessed Souls).

Leo's statement is fascinating – students may not be likely to respond positively to their peers trying to promote anti-bullying messages, particularly when those peers do not practice what they preach. Recall the discussion from Chapter 4 when bullied student Melissa discusses how the mean, popular girls were peer helpers at Blessed Souls. The intended use of the peer helpers was to help bullied classmates, yet they were among those identified as bullies at her school. In this vein, guest speakers may be a more effective tactic granted there is a strong and clear take away message garnered from their presentations.

Another problem is that while presentations may initially be effective, they may not have any type of positive impact in the long run, as Melissa explains:

It was just basically like, I mean, I think we did have a few bully assemblies where like, a spokesperson who had like, a really bad experiences came and talked to like, all the schools about it, and everybody was shocked and was nice to people for about a week, and after that it was over (straight, female, Blessed Souls).

A similar occurrence is described by another Blessed Souls student who discusses an assembly titled “Challenge Day” with me:

*Interviewer:* What's Challenge Day?

*Diana:* Um, it's about...getting to know people for who they actually are, and like, breaking down the façade that you put on during school and stuff. And it was really eye opening because a lot of people they would talk about like, their actual feelings about things, and we would learn about

what they had gone through...And I had thought that maybe it would have helped the whole atmosphere of the school because then people know exactly what, or were surprised that so many people were going through things, and then the sad thing was, within a month, it just felt like it hadn't happened. Like, things went back to the way they were (Diana, straight, female, Blessed Souls).

It is striking that so many anti-bullying initiatives are described by Blessed Souls students, yet bullying appears to be a problem at this school. Administrators may recognize this and hold these assemblies in an attempt to address this issue. Perhaps the strong hierarchy that is in place at this school comes into play here, as students are desperate to elevate their social status in a school where status strongly matters. Despite many attempted anti-bullying messages, the desire to avoid social exclusion and gain popularity is stronger than the desire to stop bullying among some.

Taking into account the information gleaned above, it appears that students react most positively to anti-bullying messages that address the consequences of bullying; however, they do not always recall the “take-away” message of how to prevent bullying. Powerful guest speakers seem to resonate most in students’ minds, but it is distressing that students only remember anti-bullying messages that reference the death of someone. It is also questionable whether or not students even recall that the tragic outcomes discussed in these presentations are the result of bullying. Interactive workshops such as Challenge Day also appear memorable; yet, students reportedly went back to behaving as they had within a week. Perhaps workshops such as these should be followed up with weekly sessions, at least for a short while, to reinforce the message. It is important to note that students do not take seriously the efforts of peers who are involved in anti-bullying initiatives such as the performance of skits. This is even less likely when students are not

highly regarded by their peers who ‘know what they did on the weekend.’ In this case, speakers external to the school, or “guest speakers” may be more effective in engaging high school students. In the section below, I examine the implications of my research findings on various anti-bullying policies and strategies discussed in the literature.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

In his piece on challenging homophobia in schools, Stephen Russell (2011) notes that in the United States, several strategies have been shown to promote safety and well-being of sexual minority youth in schools. These consist of non-discrimination or anti-bullying policies that include actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity and expression; teacher intervention when harassment takes place and training teachers on intervention strategies; availability of resources, information and support at school about sexual minority issues; presence of school-based support groups or clubs such as gay-straight alliances, and finally, the inclusion of sexual minority people or issues in the school curricula. My research has demonstrated that when a combination of strategies is employed, as took place at schools like Squarepark and Bridgeview, the outcome is more favourable on improving the school climate. While Squarepark, Bridgeview and Southridge high schools all had gay-straight alliances which made resources available to students, the interventions and support from numerous teachers at both Squarepark and Bridgeview appeared to further facilitate the creation of a friendlier school climate, as well as challenge the hierarchies that were in place. While valiant efforts were made by Southridge students, no change in the school climate was reported. Of course, students at

Southridge also faced strong status hierarchies which gay-straight alliances seemed to have little impact on.

In order to further facilitate the efforts of gay-straight alliances, it my belief that schools must focus their efforts on reducing the importance of social hierarchies. While it would be entirely idealistic to suggest that hierarchies be done away with completely (in a perfect world, perhaps), this is a pervasive and enduring aspect of school culture (Garner et al. 2006). However, my findings suggest that certain strategies may be employed (along with those enacted by GSA members and teachers). As I have argued within the dissertation, athletes should not be the main focus of praise by teachers and administrators. While athletics are a valuable aspect of the schooling experience for many, other facets of school life are equally as important and more enduring. While the winner of the “Science Fair”, for example, may never be as popular as the quarterback of the football team, equal attention should be given to both types of students on the announcements, in the school paper, or in other broadcasts. Milner (2004) argues that this type of strategy would contribute to creating norms emphasizing solidarity and equality rather than superiority and inferiority.

Teachers must also become aware of bullying behaviour that is perpetrated and legitimised when engaged in by high status students. Bullies with high social status may display many positive characteristics which teachers seem to overlook, or give the “benefit of the doubt” to (Vaillancourt, Hymel and McDougall 2003). As these students may attempt to “sweet talk” teachers into believing they are not bullies, teachers must exercise caution when nominating them as peer counsellors, for example. Student

nominations may be a better form of peer selection. Although some argue that this may also be a form of popularity contest, an anonymous vote may make some more comfortable. Information flow between students and teachers is needed in order to help permeate the closed networks each are a part of at school.

In their review of research on factors for enhancing efforts to address bullying among students, Swearer et al. (2010) examine the impact of school-based anti-bullying programs and the challenges facing educators and researchers. The authors explain that the success of an anti-bullying program in one school cannot guarantee success in another as “the research suggests that the majority of school-based bullying prevention program have had little impact on reducing bullying behaviour” (p. 43). The authors list various reasons as to why they believe these programs fail, including the fact that school-wide programs are designed to reach all students, when only a small percentage are directly engaged in bullying behaviours. In addition, they argue that most programs fail to direct interventions at the social ecology that promotes and sustains bullying, including peers.

The focus on peers has recently drawn attention in the literature. We know that peers often reinforce bullying behaviours and that bullies often “perform” in front of an audience (Jacobson 2011; Salmivalli et al. 1996). This has led researchers to argue that removing the support of bystanders is a worthwhile strategy (Frey et al. 2009). I argue that programs addressing peers must do so very specifically and carefully. A good starting place would be to encourage peers to walk away from bullying episodes and not take part in cheering on the bully. Researchers also suggest that it is important for bystanders to intervene and suggest that students be given the skills and strategies in order to intervene

effectively, which may also include rewards (Cunningham et al. 2011). However, having all students attempt to intervene is not always a feasible strategy, as this renders students vulnerable to being bullied themselves (O'Connell, Pepler and Wendy 1999). Recall in my own findings that students who attempted to intervene were themselves harassed by their peers carrying out the bullying.

Salmivalli et al. (1996) found that when bystanders intervene, it is usually only students with high social status (although my findings indicate otherwise). In a similar vein, Vaillancourt et al. (2003) argue that if only high status students are likely to be successful in intervening against bullying, they should be the ones targeted in school-based intervention strategies. Utilizing high status students may be a worthwhile endeavour, yet as my findings indicate, may be difficult to execute, particularly when high status students are often disliked by others in the student body.

As we know that teachers cannot easily identify who the bullies are, especially when these students have high status (Leff et al. 1999; Vaillancourt et al. 2003) teachers would again need to employ peer nominations in order to identify those peers of high status that are also well-liked (and not bullies themselves). As Swearer et al. (2010) suggest these types of interventions must be tailored to each school, I also add that they must also take into consideration the hierarchies present and how these might create barriers or rather help facilitate change. Recall from earlier in this chapter when a Blessed Souls student discussed how he and others mocked the idea of their peers taking part in anti-bullying skits, particularly when they 'knew what the students did during the

weekend.’ This adds another complication to the idea of using students to help combat bullying, as students may not take peers’ involvement in these strategies seriously.

My findings point to the importance of combating isolation, particularly among sexual minority youth. We know that youth who are bullied may be avoided by other youth for fear of being bullied themselves or losing status among peers (Nansel, Overpeck and Pilla 2001) and that students also fail to intervene against homophobic comments toward sexual minority peers for the same reasons, including a fear of being targeted as gay or lesbian themselves by friends (Adelman and Woods 2006). As bullied youth face loneliness and difficulty making friends, intervention strategies in schools must also be focused on reducing isolation and friendship or network building. This should include offering a safe space for students to spend time in during lunch or after school hours as they may not feel comfortable in places such as the cafeteria. As I have argued, gay-straight alliances are one way to remedy this problem. The fact that GSAs are now allowed to Catholic schools is an important and long awaited aid to this problem. For those students who do not feel comfortable attending a gay-straight alliance, offering other forms of non-tryout or non-skill based clubs or activities that are welcome to all are a possible avenue for students to build friendship networks and social capital. These could be organized around activities, such as the games room at Squarepark High or any other interests that students find worthwhile.

Several useful suggestions for helping to create a more sexual minority friendly school climate can be applied. Van Wommer and McKinney (2003) argue that schools hire openly gay and lesbian teachers to serve as positive role models. This can be useful

as we saw that the openly gay teacher co-sponsor of the gay-straight alliance at Squarepark provided support to Nick, a gay student. The authors also suggest that adults who work closely with children, such as guidance counselors, train in the area of sexuality and sexual diversity. In addition, teachers should organize workshops on sexual orientation for student leaders, faculty and administrators. Recall that GSA members in this study (and other students from their school) had attended Social Justice Forums at the University of Windsor; students reported greatly enjoying these. These forums were very informative, as I was fortunate to participate in one that had been focused on issues around sexuality as a guest speaker.

Sadly, as I write these conclusions, the University of Windsor has decided to close the Centre for Social Justice Studies on the basis of budget cuts (Chen 2013). It is this Centre which helped co-create yearly social justice forums for high school students, a day of workshops that will be sorely missed. Society must recognize that bullying, particularly that of sexual minority youth, is a problem that deserves continued research and attention, not one that should be cut due to a lack of tangible results. This undermines the struggles of sexual minority youth and their attempts to improve their school climates while sweeping social justice issues away as unimportant and unnecessary. This is a step backward for the struggles of Windsor's sexual minority youth and all those that have worked hard to improve their schooling experiences. It is my hope that research such as mine identifies that there continues to be a need for anti-bullying strategies, particularly for sexual minority youth.

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**APPENDIX A: McMaster Research Ethics Board Approval Form**

McMaster Research Ethics Board

<b>McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)</b> c/o Office of Research Services, MREB Secretariat, GH-305/H, e-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca <b>CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH</b>			
<b>Application Status:</b> New <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Addendum <input type="checkbox"/> Renewal <input type="checkbox"/> Project Number 2009 071			
<b>TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT:</b> Exploring the Impact of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in Secondary Schools			
<b>Faculty Investigator (s)/ Supervisor(s)</b>	<b>Dept./Address</b>	<b>Phone</b>	<b>E-Mail</b>
T. Fetner	Sociology	23623	fetnert@mcmaster.ca
<b>Student Investigator(s)</b>	<b>Dept./Address</b>	<b>Phone</b>	<b>E-Mail</b>
S. Bortolin	Sociology	519-890-3028	bortolsj@mcmaster.ca
The application in support of the above research project has been reviewed by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster University Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants. The following ethics certification is provided by the MREB: <input type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is approved as presented without questions or requests for modification. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is approved as revised without questions or requests for modification. <input type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is approved subject to clarification and/or modification as appended or identified below:			
<b>COMMENTS AND CONDITIONS: Ongoing approval is contingent on completing the annual completed/status report. A "Change Request" or amendment must be made and approved before any alterations are made to the research.</b>			
<b>Reporting Frequency:</b>		<b>Annual:</b>	<b>Other:</b>
<b>Date:</b> June 23, 2009		<b>Dr. D. Maurer, Chair/ Dr. D. Pawluch, Vice-chair:</b>	

**APPENDIX B: Recruitment Flyer Template**

# Interested in talking about your experiences as a high school student?

**Consider participating in my study!**

My name is Sandra Bortolin and I am a graduate student in sociology at McMaster University. I am currently working on a research study about youth's experiences of comfort and safety in high school so that I can finish my doctorate degree.

I am looking to interview LGBTQ and straight youth ages 16 and up, who have attended (in the past 2 years) or are currently at the following high schools [*names of schools here*].

This study has been approved by the McMaster University Ethical Review Board. Any identifying information will be removed, and your information will be kept confidential.

Those people who participate in the study will get a \$10 Tim Horton's gift card as a thank you for their time.

Please email me at: **[bortolsj@mcmaster.ca](mailto:bortolsj@mcmaster.ca)**

**APPENDIX C: Email Recruitment Template**

**Research Study: School Climate and Gay-straight alliances:  
Sexual Minorities in High School**

Hi! My name is Sandra Bortolin, and I am PhD student in sociology at McMaster University. I am working on a research study right now and want to talk to you!

I am looking to **interview** lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender **and** straight youth, ages 16 and up, who have attended (in the past 2 years) *or* are currently attending a high school with *and* without a gay-straight alliance (especially if you are from [*high school names here*]).

Basically, I am interested in issues like:

- What life is like at your high school
- How you feel about popularity
- If you feel safe at school
- What kinds of things you do in your GSA (if your school has one)

So, if you think you might be interested in being in my study, please email me at **bortolsj@mcmaster.ca**. I will contact you to set things up. Interviews will take *about an hour*, and we will work out where the interview will take place.

This study has been approved by the McMaster University Ethical Review Board. Your information will be kept confidential (your real name will not appear in the study at all).

Those people who participate in the study will get a **Tim's Horton's gift card** as a thank you for their time. Finally, your participation is entirely voluntary – so if you choose to withdraw at any time during the study, it's okay.

*If you know of any friends who may want to participate, please let them know too!*

Please email me at **bortolsj@mcmaster.ca** if you think you might want to participate, or if you have any questions or concerns! Thanks!

Sandra Bortolin, B.A. (Hons.), M.A.  
bortolsj@mcmaster.ca or sandra.bortolin@gmail.com  
McMaster University  
Department of Sociology

If you have any further questions, you can also contact my faculty supervisor:

Dr. Tina Fetner  
Phone: 905-525-9140, ext. 23623  
fetnert@mcmaster.ca  
McMaster University  
Department of Sociology

**APPENDIX D: Facebook Recruitment Message Template**

I'm working on a study right now to finish my PhD and since you're such a well connected guy/girl, I'm hoping you can help me!

I'm comparing students from schools in Windsor with and without gay-straight alliances. So far, I've interviewed lots of people from [*high schools*]. However, I now need kids from [*high schools*] (schools without GSAs as a comparison).

They can be current students, or have graduated in the past 2 years. Do you know anyone from these schools, or recent grads? They can be straight or LGBT...I'd especially love to hear from the LGBT community, as I've got many from the GSA schools.

The questions are basically about popularity, social groups, school climate - safety at school, harassment, and that sort of thing. Nothing too personal. Interviews take about 30-45min, and I can even do them over the phone.

Anyways, sorry for contacting you out of the blue, but I'd appreciate any help. If you'd like to hear more about my study, I've love to share it!

Take care and hope to hear back!  
- Sandra

**APPENDIX E : Information Letter**



**Letter of Information**

School Climate and Gay-straight alliances: Sexual Minorities in High School

**Principal Investigator:**

Sandra Bortolin, M.A  
Department of Sociology  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

bortolsj@mcmaster.ca

**Faculty Supervisor:**

Tina Fetner, PhD  
Department of Sociology  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
(905) 525-9140 ext. 23623  
fetnert@mcmaster.ca

**Purpose of the Study**

I am a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at McMaster University. I am doing this study for my dissertation research. The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) *and* straight youth who are currently in or within two years of having graduated high school, including some students involved in their high schools' gay-straight alliance (GSA). I am particularly interested in your thoughts regarding what life is like in high school, including popularity, bullying, and comfort and safety at school.

**Procedures involved in the Research**

If you agree to participate, your participation will involve an interview which will take approximately one hour. We will work out where you would like the interview will take place so that you will not be seen by anyone who might connect you to the study and where no one is likely to overhear what you have to say.

You will be asked to answer a series of questions describing your experiences at school and your involvement in the GSA (if this applies to you). I will take notes during our interview and will audio record them, but only if you agree.

**Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:**

It is not likely that there will be any harm or discomforts associated with participating in the research. You may feel uneasy about reflecting on and disclosing experiences which may have been embarrassing or frustrating. You do not need to answer any questions you would prefer to skip. You can also end the interview at any time. If things come up during the interview that you feel you would like to talk to someone about, I am attaching a list of free and confidential

counselling services in your city. The steps I am taking to protect your privacy are discussed below.

**Potential Benefits**

This research will contribute to a better understanding of how to promote comfortable and supportive environments for LGBT youth and their straight allies and for all students. Finally, you will be given the opportunity to talk about your experiences of being a student in high school. Some people find that talking about their experiences provides them with new and useful insights.

**Payment or Reimbursement:**

You will be compensated with a coffee shop gift certificate for your involvement in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

I will not be using your name nor any information that may identify you. Nor will I be identifying any of the organizations through which you might have been recruited. I will protect your privacy.

Any notes will be kept in a locked file cabinet and audio files on a password protected computer. Only my supervisor and I will have access to these materials. Once my study is completed I will destroy any data you have provided.

**Participation:**

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided to that point will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise.

**Information About the Study Results:**

I expect to have this research completed by approximately the fall of 2012. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please contact me and we can arrange for me to provide you with the summary.

**Information about Participating as a Study Subject:**

If you have questions or require more information about the study itself, please contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Tina Fetner, at ext. 23623 or fetnert@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed and approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
c/o Office of Research Services  
E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

**APPENDIX F: List of Free and Confidential Counseling Services**

**Community Organizations which offer free and confidential counselling:**

**Windsor**

University of Windsor Psychological Services Centre.

Phone: (519) 973-7012.

Location: 326 Sunset Ave

Windsor, ON N9B 3P4

(Free for University of Windsor Students Only – useful if you are starting there in the fall).

St. Clair College of Applied Arts and Technology – Windsor Campus Counselling.

Phone: (519) 972-2727 ext 4226

Location: 2000 Talbot Rd W, Learning Commons, Rm 206

Windsor, ON N9A 6S4

(Free for St. Clair Students – useful if you are starting there in the fall)

Teen Health Centre – General Counselling

Phone: (519) 253-8481; Collect calls accepted

Location: 1585 Ouellette Ave

Windsor, ON N8X 1K5

(Free for all youth ages 12-25 years).

Drouillard Place

Phone: (519) 253-1073; (519) 253-4446

Location: 1102 Drouillard Rd

Windsor, ON N8Y 2R1

(Non-profit centre, offers short-term counselling)

Or please refer to:

<http://www.weareunited.com/ecom.asp?pg=programs>

for a more comprehensive listing of supported counselling services available in your area.

**APPENDIX G: Interview Consent Form**



**CONSENT**

Once this study is completed I would like to be able to keep the de-identified interview audio-tapes and use them in my future research. But I will do so only if you agree.

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Sandra Bortolin, of McMaster University. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study, and to receive any additional details I wanted to know about the study. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time, if I choose to do so, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

***I would like to be informed about any focus group discussion that may occur in connection with this research.***

**Yes**                      **Contact info (i.e. email address)** \_\_\_\_\_  
 **No**

I agree to participate

Yes  
 No

I agree to have the interview audio-taped

Yes  
 No

I agree that you can keep my interview tape for future research

Yes  
 No

## APPENDIX H: Interview Schedule

### **Demographics**

What is your:

- Race/Ethnicity
- Sexual Orientation
- Gender
- Grade in School
- Age
- School

### **SCM questions**

- Now tell me about your grade: are there some people who hang around together a lot?
  - Who are they?
  - Are there any boy's groups/girls' groups? (if either is not mentioned)
  - *My probe:* Are there certain activities these people tend to do together?
- Are there some people who don't hang around with a particular group?
  - Who are they?
  - Are there any people who don't have a group?
  - *My probe:* Would you say these people are popular?
- *My question:* Are there some students who tend to give others a hard time?
  - Physically, verbally, or socially?
  - Who are they?
  - Do any of these students tend to give you a hard time?
  - If so, how does this impact your life at school?
- What about yourself?
  - Who do you have lunch with? Study with?
  - Who would you invite to a party?
  - *My probe:* What activities are you involved in?
    - Is popularity important to you?

### **School Climate Questions**

- Do you ever hear any biased language at school?
  - Homophobic, sexist, racist remarks?
    - How often do you hear this?
  - Do teachers intervene if they hear this?
    - What do they do?
  - Do other students ever intervene?
    - What do they do?
  
- Do you generally feel safe at school? If not, which do you feel threatened b/c of:
  - sexual orientation
  - gender expression
  - religion
  - gender,
  - race or ethnicity
  - disability
  - other reasons
  
- Do you miss classes and/or days of school because you feel unsafe?
  - Reasons why?
  
- Have you ever experienced harassment and assault?
  - Verbal
  - Physical
  - relational aggression
  - sexual harassment
  - property theft (stuff stolen from locker/changeroom)
  - cyberbullying (facebook, myspace, messenger)
  
- In which parts of campus do you spend more time?
  - Are there areas you avoid?
  - Where do you feel unsafe?
    - Examples: Cafeteria, Hallways, Bathrooms/Change rooms, Buses, Gymnasium, Other
  
- Are there places in which you feel safe at school?
  - GSA (if they have one)
  - Drama club or other extra-curricular

- Other
- Are there people you feel comfortable talking to?
  - Teachers (out?)
  - Other students
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about what life at school is like?

### **GSA & Activism**

- How did you get involved in your GSA? (*If not, why not?*)
- Can you tell me a little bit about what you do in your GSA? (*If not, any knowledge?*)
  - For example, do you have regular meetings?
    - i. What is a meeting typically like? (i.e. talking, hanging out, eating)
- Do you take part in any activities inside or outside of school? (*Even if not in GSA*)
  - Day of Silence, pink shirt day, making/wearing buttons?
- Have you ever experienced backlash for being in the GSA or any of its activities?
- Why do you feel it's important to have a group like a GSA in high school?
  - How have you personally benefitted from the GSA? (*If not, say Do you...?*)