



Protective Factors associated with clubs that serve LGBTQ+ youth at the middle school level

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Abstract

In the 2020 / 2021 school year, Galvin Middle School participated in a behavioral health survey and the results showed high rates of genderqueer students self-reporting feeling sad / hopeless most of the time and not feeling like they had peer connections within the building. This study explores how the presence of a GSA-like club can improve mental health outcomes for LGTBQ+ identifying students at the Middle School level. The success of this intervention will be determined by administering surveys to assess if the club has boosted positive emotions and peer connections as a way to evaluate if there was an increase in protective factors for involved students.

Discussion

From the research conducted thus far, LGBTQ+ individuals are one of the most high-risk populations nationally and based on The Middlesex Youth Behavioral Health Survey genderqueer students are the most high-risk population now within Galvin Middle School. This signals a clear need for intervention. Although school counselors are trained in multicultural awareness, the unfortunate truth is that not every student who is genderqueer may be able to receive the interventions they need. School counselors may not be able to readily identify genderqueer students in need as they may be resistant to being honest in non-anonymous surveys to identify at risk students.

Despite being high risk, there are a variety of interventions that have been shown to increase resiliency, positive coping strategies and overall positive health outcomes for the LGBTQ+ population. This includes, improving school climate by removing anti-LGBTQ+ curriculum, promoting education for educators on working with this population, creating opportunities for inclusion, providing spaces to foster peer to peer support and attendance to a GSA. There is research backing that students have a higher capability to understand and be able to discuss LGBTQ+ topics at the middle school level - showing it is not too early to implement an intervention focused on LGTBQ+ identity. Additionally, there is research that confirms the positive impact extracurriculars have on the whole student body. Going forward with conducting new research it is important to consider the multicultural identities of students as their LGBTQ+ identity will not be the only facet of their identity that affects them. Furthermore, when an adult is working with the LGBTQ+ youth population it is also important that they examine inwardly, addressing any biases and noting any room for personal improvement.

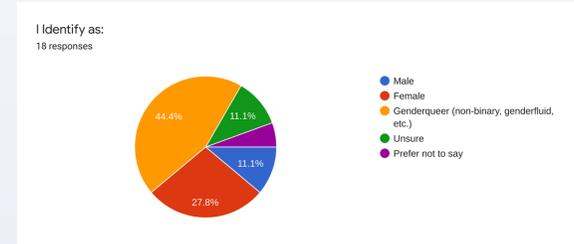
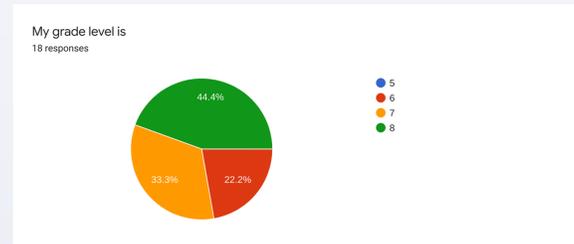
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Methods and Participants

Diversity club is based on the GSA template with an emphasis on student's different identities as well as learning about different cultures. Diversity Club membership varies between 18 and about 25 participants and includes grades 6-8. The club has "open enrollment" so members may join at any time and is offered at no fee to promote inclusion and remove any barriers for student inclusion. Although Galvin Middle School has 5th grade present in the building, a decision was made in conjunction with administration and club advisors to follow the standards set by NAGLY and start the club in 6th grade. Diversity Club takes place once a week and meets for one hour.



Success of The Diversity club was measured by comparing the results from 3 data points, rankings on how students were feeling prior to the club starting in the 2021/ 2022 school year, about one month into the club's creation and approximately 5 months into the club's implementation. Additional factors considered will be student self-reports and club advisor. Since GMS uses trimesters, grades will unfortunately not be a data point that can be considered for this intervention as grades for the second trimester will not be available until after the intervention's success is already being considered. If students rank, they have built new peer connections, have spaces they feel able to be themselves and rank feeling sad / hopeless less often in conjunction with ranking the Diversity club highly on measures on feeling included and able to be themselves it will be clear that the club has achieved its goals on assisting LGTBQ+ students by creating protective factors for negative health outcomes.

Results

Metrics indicating an increase in protective factors were an increase in positive peer connections, students reporting they do have a trusted adult in the building and students being able to identify a safe space within the building. The metrics of feeling sad / hopeless most of the time and a student feeling their identity was respected in school did not show the same positive increase and thus did not show a positive increase in protective factors from these metrics. All of the measures that specifically asked about the Diversity club at the 1 month and 4 month mark ranked highly with most students marking "agree" or "strongly agree". These metrics specific to the Diversity club show the club can be used to increase protective factors as students do feel comfortable joining and being honest with their identity. The statements shared by students about the Diversity club may exemplify the need for the club more than the data points. Students report feeling accepted during the club, feeling less alone in their identity expression and reporting the club has allowed them to find similar peers. These reports show a very clear increase in perceived protective factors for the involved students.

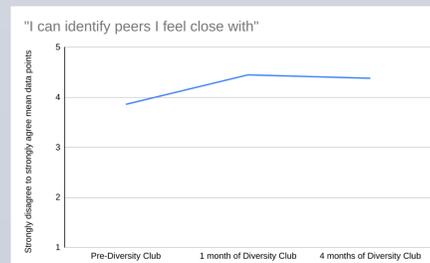
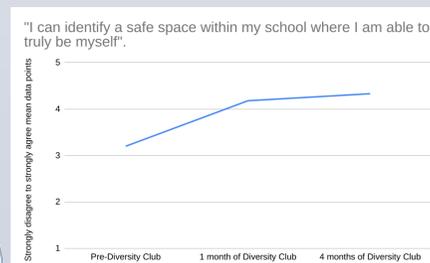
Student Quotes:

"Diversity helps me feel accepted, but it also motivates me to try to accept others at my school."

"Diversity Club is a great space to break away from stressors at school and just be yourself."

"I feel much better that there are more people who have the same identity as I do."

Selected Survey Results:



Implications for School Counseling Policy

A GSA-like club is incredibly important at the middle school level. Gender nonconforming students are at high risk for a number of negative outcomes and it is incredibly important to help create spaces for them to build peer connections and positively engage with their identity. Not all school counselors may be able to participate as a club advisor based on personal commitments but if they are able to, they may help build a relationship as a trusted adult for vulnerable at-risk youth in the club. Regardless of if school counselors are able to act as an advisor for the club they should make an active effort to secure funding, space and resources for the club. A school counselor should also act as a consultant for the club as many students may choose to share deep emotional statements and stories that a classroom teacher may have trouble processing with the group. If a club is unable to happen for whatever reason, school counselors should look for other creative solutions such as a queer lunch bunch or queer breakfast to ensure genderqueer and LGBTQ+ students as a whole have a space within their school they feel accepted.

Conclusion

The research shows the LGBTQ+ students are at an increased high risk for a multitude of negative health outcomes and this research is echoed by Galvin Middle Schools results from the 2020 / 2021 Middlesex Youth Behavioral Health Survey showing that this is a clear and pressing concern for middle school aged LGBTQ+ students. Gender-Sexuality Alliances / Gay-Straight Alliances have been shown to have a net-positive effect on the students involved and can help change the school climate for LGBTQ+ students through advocacy and education efforts. Students who identify as LGBTQ+ may be resistant to one-on-one counseling but can gain a lot from positive peer connections further emphasizing the need for a club like this. The research is clear and shows that a GSA-like club can increase positive outcomes for the students attending, hopefully lower rates of symptoms consistent with mood disorders and should become an extracurricular offered at more Middle Schools across Massachusetts and the United States as a whole. The results from this research study, although a small sample size, did show an increase in protective factors for involved students and echo the importance of GSA-like clubs from previous research. As one involved student shared, "It makes me feel safe and it helps me express myself", which is the entire purpose of having a club like this that supports LGBTQ+ youth.

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