

# Beyond Safe Spaces: Ecological Insights from Students and Educators in Alberta Gender and Sexuality Alliances

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## ABSTRACT

Gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs) are student-led, teacher-supported clubs that promote inclusion and well-being for 2SLGBTQI+ youth in schools. This qualitative study examines how GSAs operate across ecological levels within Alberta's current socio-political climate, drawing on interviews with students, educators, and support staff. Guided by self-determination theory and a socio-ecological framework, the findings show that GSAs can function as micro-ecologies that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness while also reflecting institutional, policy, and socio-political constraints that shape students' experiences in uneven ways. Educators and allied professionals play critical boundary-crossing roles in sustaining GSAs and mediating tensions across student, school, and policy contexts. This study contributes a contextually grounded understanding of GSAs as complex relational spaces that support, but do not uniformly guarantee, student well-being within contested educational environments.

**Keywords:** gender and sexuality alliances, 2SLGBTQI+ youth, self-determination theory, socio-ecological framework, school climate, educator allyship

## RÉSUMÉ

Les « Gender and Sexuality Alliances » (GSA) sont des clubs dirigés par des élèves et soutenus par des enseignants qui favorisent l'inclusion et le bien-être des jeunes 2SLGBTQI+ au sein des établissements scolaires. Cette étude qualitative examine le fonctionnement des GSA à différents niveaux écologiques dans le contexte sociopolitique actuel de l'Alberta, en s'appuyant sur des entretiens menés auprès d'élèves, d'éducateurs et du personnel de soutien. S'appuyant sur la théorie de

l'autodétermination et un cadre socioécologique, les résultats montrent que les GSA peuvent fonctionner comme des micro-écosystèmes favorisant l'autonomie, la compétence et les liens relationnels, tout en reflétant les contraintes institutionnelles, politiques et sociopolitiques qui façonnent les expériences des élèves de manière inégale. Les enseignants et les professionnels associés jouent un rôle essentiel, transcendant les frontières, pour soutenir les GSA et apaiser les tensions entre les contextes des élèves, de l'établissement scolaire et des politiques publiques. Cette étude apporte une compréhension ancrée dans le contexte des GSA en tant qu'espaces relationnels complexes qui favorisent, sans toutefois le garantir de manière uniforme, le bien-être des élèves au sein d'environnements éducatifs contestés.

**Mots-clés :** Alliances pour le genre et la sexualité, jeunes 2SLGBTQI+, théorie de l'autodétermination, cadre socioécologique, climat scolaire, solidarité des enseignants

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs) are student-led, teacher-supported organizations that create safe and affirming spaces for Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (2SLGBTQI+) students and their allies. We use the acronym 2SLGBTQI+ in alignment with Statistics Canada and Canadian policy contexts; the "+" encompasses additional identities (e.g., asexual identities). Research shows that GSAs promote acceptance, reduce discrimination, and can foster belonging among gender- and sexually diverse youth (Porta et al., 2017). Within schools, GSAs offer emotional and peer support, help create more inclusive environments, and raise awareness of 2SLGBTQI+ issues within broader school communities (Griffin et al., 2003). These activities, including access to resources and social or extracurricular opportunities, support school climate and identity expression in inclusive school cultures (Poteat et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2022). At the same time, GSAs are dynamic and evolve with student leadership and shifting socio-political contexts; their influence depends on relational, institutional, and socio-political forces.

Despite these benefits, many 2SLGBTQI+ students in Canada continue to experience schools as unsafe or insufficiently inclusive (Di

Stasio et al., 2023; Taylor & Peter, 2011). Discrimination, harassment, and exclusion continue to be common, particularly in US-based studies, though similar patterns have also been reported in Canadian contexts. These experiences are associated with diminished well-being, lower perceptions of safety, and negative academic outcomes (Kosciw et al., 2015; Szalacha, 2003; Truong & Zongrone, 2022). They also reflect not only interpersonal dynamics within schools but also broader socio-political and policy contexts operating across ecological levels.

In Alberta, recent provincial legislation has significantly influenced the experiences of gender- and sexually diverse students. In late 2024, Bills 26, 27, and 29 introduced restrictions related to gender-affirming care, parental consent for name and pronoun changes, and participation of transgender athletes in female sports categories (*Bill 26: Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2024 (No. 2)*, 2024). These measures have prompted public debate and legal scrutiny regarding their alignment with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Alberta Human Rights Act. The use of the notwithstanding clause through Bill 9 further limits immediate Charter-based challenges (Canadian Bar Association Alberta, 2024), with implications for how GSAs are supported and enacted in schools.

While the data for this study were collected prior to the introduction of these specific legislative measures, they reflect an ongoing and evolving socio-political context in Alberta characterized by increasing public and policy attention to 2SLGBTQI+ issues in schools. As such, the findings are interpreted in relation to both the conditions during data collection and the broader trajectory of policy developments shaping GSAs. Because follow-up member checking with participants was not feasible, we do not make direct claims about how these more recent legislative changes were experienced.

These provincial laws stand in tension with federal human rights protections, highlighting the complex legal landscape shaping school experiences for 2SLGBTQI+ youth. While education falls under provincial jurisdiction, constitutional guarantees under Section 15 of the Canadian Charter create ongoing ambiguities for the implementation of inclusive policy. This tension between legal protection, policy restriction, and institutional enactment is central to understanding how GSAs function in practice.

Within this contested landscape, GSAs cannot be understood only through their intended purposes or documented benefits. Their day-to-day functioning is shaped by how policies are interpreted and enacted at the school level. Educators and support staff play a critical mediating role, negotiating policy, institutional expectations, and care practices that influence students' experiences. Analyzing these mediating practices is essential for understanding how GSAs operate across ecological levels and how their supportive potential is both enabled and constrained.

Gender and sexuality alliances therefore function as important yet complex sites of support. They are not static entities that automatically transform school cultures but are dynamic relational spaces affected by student leadership, advisor roles, school conditions, and sociocultural narratives about gender and sexuality. As Truong et al. (2021) note, GSAs are often "formed and reformed" in response to changing contexts. Attending to this fluidity enables a more precise understanding of how GSAs function as affirming microsystems that can foster belonging, support, and self-expression for 2SLGBTQ+ students, while also operating

within broader institutional and policy constraints at the exosystem level and across shifting socio-historical conditions within the chronosystem.

While prior research has established the protective functions of GSAs, less attention has been paid to how they operate under increasingly restrictive policy conditions, particularly from the perspectives of educators and school staff. Teachers and support personnel play key roles in sustaining GSAs, mediating policy constraints, and supporting student-led initiatives (Griffin et al., 2003; Marx & Kettrey, 2016). As intermediaries between students and school administration, educators navigate tensions that arise when student advocacy intersects with institutional regulation.

In response to this context, the present qualitative study brings together student and adult perspectives to examine how GSAs operate across ecological levels within Alberta's current socio-political climate. Guided by a socio-ecological framework and informed by self-determination theory (SDT), the study examines how GSA participation influences students' experiences of belonging, autonomy, and competence, as well as educators' perspectives on the role of GSAs. By examining interactions among policy environments, institutional conditions, and everyday GSA practices, this study contributes to understanding the evolving role of GSAs in complex educational contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### GSAs, School Climate, and Youth Well-Being

Research consistently shows that gender and sexuality alliances in schools are associated with reduced bullying and discrimination and with more inclusive climates characterized by increased safety and belonging for 2SLGBTQI+ students (Ioverno & Russell, 2020; Marx & Kettrey, 2016). Beyond school-wide effects, these spaces can function as relational ecosystems where students connect with peers, develop leadership skills, and cultivate a sense of belonging (Wagaman, 2014) while also supporting inclusive peer networks that respond to diverse needs (Woodford et al., 2018).

At the same time, much of the literature groups sexual orientation and gender identity under a single 2SLGBTQI+ umbrella, which can obscure important differences among students. Emerging scholarship has highlighted that GSAs are not uniformly experienced as safe or inclusive spaces. Research points to the predominance of Whiteness, the marginalization of racialized and transgender students, and the uneven distribution of voice and belonging within some GSAs (e.g., Brockenbrough, 2015; McCready, 2010). These critiques emphasize the importance of examining GSAs not only as supportive environments but also as spaces shaped by broader power relations that can reproduce exclusion. Such dynamics are further influenced by intersecting factors such as race and ability, which shape how students access and experience GSAs. As a result, students may experience belonging, visibility, and support within GSAs in different and uneven ways.

Building on this work, the present study explores how students and educators understand GSAs as spaces that support belonging, identity expression, and participation while considering, where data allow, intersecting student experiences within Alberta's socio-political and policy context.

Despite the presence of GSAs in Western Canada since the early 2000s (Peters et al., 2018; Saewyc et al., 2020), significant challenges persist for 2SLGBTQI+ students. These include systemic discrimination, bullying, and disproportionately high rates of self-harm and suicidality compared with cisgender heterosexual peers. Recent studies document elevated victimization and depression alongside lower self-determination, reflecting constraints on autonomy, competence, and relatedness within school environments (Di Stasio et al., 2023).

A substantial body of research has investigated GSAs in relation to mental health (Li et al., 2019), school climate (Griffin et al., 2003), youth empowerment (Ioverno & Russell, 2020), and social-emotional well-being (Marx & Kettrey, 2016). These studies link GSA presence to improved school climate and student adjustment (Day et al., 2020; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2019; Heck et al., 2011; Poteat et al., 2013; Szalacha, 2003). However, few studies have examined how these alliances are experienced by students and adults in Western Canadian high schools, where distinct policy and socio-political conditions shape their operation.

Considering both perspectives is important for understanding GSAs within this context and for informing broader discussions of GSAs as relational and policy-mediated spaces that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In particular, differences in policy frameworks, legal protections, and educational governance across Canadian provinces influence how GSAs are established, supported, and sustained. Examining GSAs within these underrepresented contexts therefore contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how local conditions shape their possibilities and limitations across diverse educational settings.

## Teacher-Leaders and Adult Allyship in GSAs

Teacher-leaders and school staff play a critical role in supporting and sustaining GSAs. As adult allies, they provide guidance, advocacy, and organizational structures that enable these student-led groups to function within schools. Research suggests that GSAs supported by engaged teacher-leaders are associated with more inclusive climates and stronger perceptions of safety and belonging (Quasha et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2009). Through their involvement, teacher-leaders facilitate meetings, coordinate events, and support advocacy that affirms diverse gender identities and sexual orientations.

Beyond these roles, teacher-leaders act as intermediaries between students and school administration, navigating policies, accountability structures, and power dynamics. This role is especially significant where 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion is contested. In practice, this mediation can involve supporting students' identity expression while navigating parental expectations, responding to resistance, maintaining confidentiality, and negotiating institutional constraints; for example, advocating for student-led initiatives while aligning with school policies, or protecting student privacy in contexts where disclosure may carry risk. These forms of mediation illustrate how educators navigate power dynamics between adults and young people by balancing advocacy with institutional accountability. We explore these dynamics further in the findings.

Schools with GSAs report higher perceived peer and teacher support, particularly when inclusive policies are in place (Day et al., 2020). In these contexts, educators foster belonging while modelling allyship and critical engagement with equity and social justice (Mayo, 2013).

Engagement in GSA-related work also involves reflection on positionality and professional responsibility. In our study, some teacher-leaders did not identify as 2SLGBTQI+, creating both challenges and opportunities for reciprocal learning. As Mayo (2013) suggests, participation in GSAs can deepen awareness of inequities and foster commitments to advocacy and social change, positioning GSAs as spaces of mutual learning between students and educators.

Although prior research emphasizes GSAs' role in student well-being and empowerment, fewer studies consider teacher-leaders' lived experiences or how their facilitation shapes daily GSA practices. Addressing this gap, the present study explores both student and educator perspectives, offering a more comprehensive understanding of GSAs as relational spaces supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness across ecological levels.

## Positioning the Present Study

Collectively, this research shows GSAs' role in shaping school climate and student well-being while critiquing the tendency to treat sexual orientation and gender identity as a single category. Although distinct, these dimensions are often grouped, which can obscure differentiated experiences (Truong et al., 2021; Truong & Zongrone, 2022). To address this gap, the present study investigates how GSAs respond to the unique and overlapping needs of identity, orientation, and belonging, drawing on the perspectives of students and educators within Alberta's socio-political and policy context. This focus also contributes to a growing body of Canadian research, which remains less represented than the predominantly US-based literature.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Socio-Ecological Framework

This study draws on a socio-ecological framework informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory to examine the multiple influences shaping 2SLGBTQI+ students' experiences and development. Ecological levels refer to the layered social contexts in which individuals are embedded, ranging from immediate interpersonal settings (e.g., peers and classrooms) to broader institutional, community, and societal structures. This framework provides a lens for understanding how students navigate school environments, interact with peers and educators, and negotiate relationships across home and community contexts. Bronfenbrenner (1979) conceptualized human development as occurring within a set of nested and interconnected systems, each exerting distinct yet interrelated influences on the individual.

While the socio-ecological framework is useful for understanding multiple levels of influence, it has been critiqued for underemphasizing power relations and intersecting identities, as well as for presenting systems as more stable and bounded than they may be in practice (Neal & Neal, 2013). These critiques are particularly relevant in research on 2SLGBTQI+ youth, whose experiences are shaped by shifting socio-political contexts and unequal power dynamics across settings. In this study, we attend to these critiques by considering how GSAs operate as relational and policy-mediated spaces within and across ecological levels.

Within this framework, five ecological levels are commonly identified:

1. **Microsystem** – The immediate settings in which direct interactions occur, including family, peers, teachers, and school environments. These interactions play a central role in identity development, emotional well-being, and social relationships.
2. **Mesosystem** – The relationships and interactions between different microsystems, such as connections between home and school. For example, consistent or conflicting messages from parents

and educators regarding 2SLGBTQI+ identities can shape students' sense of safety, belonging, and self-understanding.

3. **Exosystem** – External contexts that indirectly influence students' experiences, including school policies, administrative decisions, community attitudes, and media representations. Provincial legislation related to 2SLGBTQI+ students, as enacted through school and district policies, operates at this level.
4. **Macrosystem** – Broader cultural, social, and political forces, such as legislation, dominant social norms, and systemic discrimination, that structure the experiences of marginalized groups, including 2SLGBTQI+ youth.
5. **Chronosystem** – The dimension of time, capturing how shifts in societal attitudes, policies, and life transitions influence students' experiences and development over time.

Within this socio-ecological framing, interpersonal relationships among students, teachers, and families are situated primarily within the microsystem and mesosystem, while institutional structures and policies operate largely at the exosystem and macrosystem levels. Distinguishing among these levels is critical for understanding how adult actions shape student experiences. For instance, a teacher's allyship or advocacy within a GSA may foster belonging and autonomy at the mesosystem level while simultaneously being supported or constrained by school or district policies operating within the exosystem. Importantly, these dynamics are not static; they unfold within the chronosystem, as shifts in legislation, public discourse, and school practices over time reshape both the conditions under which GSAs operate and the meanings they hold for students. Attending to these interconnected and temporal dynamics enables a more precise understanding of how GSAs can provide micro-level affirmation while functioning within broader institutional contexts and evolving socio-historical conditions.

## Self-Determination Theory

This study also draws on self-determination theory (SDT) to understand 2SLGBTQI+ students' well-being and motivation at the individual level. Self-determination theory is a widely used framework for examining human motivation and personality development and emphasizes the role of social and contextual conditions in supporting individuals' natural capacities for agency, self-motivation, and psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to SDT, optimal functioning and well-being depend on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Center for Self-Determination Theory, 2023; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

- **Autonomy** refers to the need to experience choice, volition, and a sense of control over one's actions and decisions.
- **Competence** involves the need to feel effective and capable of meeting challenges, including developing skills and achieving mastery.
- **Relatedness** refers to the need to feel connected to others through meaningful, supportive relationships that foster belonging and social inclusion.

When these psychological needs are met, individuals are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation and engage in behaviours that promote personal growth, well-being, and adaptive functioning (Bureau et al., 2022; Gillison et al., 2019; Peters et al., 2018). Social contexts that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness—often described as autonomy-supportive environments—are particularly important for fostering engagement, effort, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lynch et al., 2009). For 2SLGBTQI+ students, environments that affirm identity expression, support skill development, and provide meaningful social connections are especially critical. Research indicates that students in autonomy-supportive contexts, such as GSAs, report higher levels of well-being and are more likely to openly express their sexual orientation and gender identity (Legate et al., 2012).

**Table 1***Alignment of SDT and the Socio-Ecological Framework in Understanding GSAs*

| <b>Socio-Ecological Level</b> | <b>SDT Needs Supported</b>        | <b>Examples in GSAs and School Contexts</b>                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Individual                    | Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness | Students explore and express gender and sexual identities; develop confidence through leadership and advocacy; experience affirmation and belonging within GSAs |
| Microsystem                   | Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness | Supportive peer relationships; teacher-leaders acting as allies; family acceptance or resistance shaping students' sense of safety and self-worth               |
| Mesosystem                    | Autonomy, Relatedness             | GSAs buffering negative classroom or home experiences; consistency or conflict between messages from educators and families about 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion           |
| Exosystem                     | Autonomy, Competence              | Administrative support for GSAs; policies enabling or restricting pronoun use, GSA activities, or participation; access to resources and staff mentorship       |
| Macrosystem                   | Autonomy, Relatedness             | Provincial and federal policies affecting inclusion; dominant societal discourses shaping school climates and perceptions of legitimacy for GSAs                |
| Chronosystem                  | All three needs over time         | Evolving legislation; increased or decreased public support; students' changing needs and identities across schooling trajectories                              |

*Note.* This table summarizes how self-determination theory and the socio-ecological framework are integrated, with the second column identifying key contexts in which these processes occur.

As shown in Table 1, this study integrates self-determination theory (SDT) with a socio-ecological framework to examine how students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported or constrained across multiple levels of influence. While SDT foregrounds individual motivation and well-being, the socio-ecological framework situates these processes within relational, institutional, and socio-political contexts. Together, these frameworks highlight how GSAs function as school-based contexts in which self-determination is shaped by peer and educator rela-

tionships, interactions across home and school settings, institutional policies and administrative practices, broader cultural norms and legislation, and changes over time that influence students' identities and well-being.

Guided by this integrated socio-ecological and self-determination framework (see Table 1), the study's methodological design was developed to capture how GSAs are experienced and enacted across multiple levels of influence, from individual students to institutional policy contexts.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

Guided by an integrated socio-ecological framework and self-determination theory (SDT), this study used a mixed methods design to examine how gender and sexuality alliances are experienced and enacted across multiple levels of influence. The broader study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches; however, the present article focuses on the qualitative component to foreground how participation in GSAs supports or constrains students' self-determination through lived experiences.

This qualitative approach enabled an in-depth examination of how students, educators, and allied staff make sense of their involvement in GSAs within specific school and socio-political contexts. The analysis centres the perspectives of 2SLGBTQI+ and heterosexual cisgender students who participated in GSAs, as well as teacher-leaders and support staff who supported these clubs. Consistent with a reflexive qualitative approach, attention was given to how participants' accounts were shaped by context, and how researchers' perspectives informed the interpretation of these experiences.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the university research ethics boards affiliated with authors Suzanna So Ha Wong and Maria Di Stasio prior to data collection. Informed consent was secured from all adult participants. For participants under the age of 18, parental consent and student assent were obtained in accordance with institutional ethics guidelines. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality.

Given the sensitive nature of participation and the potential for parental or community hostility, particular care was taken to protect students' confidentiality. Recruitment and consent procedures were designed to minimize risks of inadvertent disclosure, and participants were reminded that they could decline to answer questions or withdraw at any time without consequence. Interviews were conducted via Zoom during COVID-19 school closures, and

participants were able to turn off their cameras and choose private settings within their homes to support their comfort and privacy, particularly in situations where others may have been present in the home. Identifying details were removed from transcripts to ensure that students' identities and participation in GSAs could not be traced.

Two members of the research team identify as gender and/or sexual minorities, which informed a reflexive approach to the study. This positionality shaped the development of interview questions attentive to identity, disclosure, and safety, and supported rapport-building with participants. At the same time, the research team remained attentive to differences between researchers' and participants' experiences and engaged in ongoing reflexive dialogue throughout data collection and analysis. Further discussion of reflexivity and positionality is provided below.

### Research Questions

This qualitative analysis was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are 2SLGBTQI+ and heterosexual cisgender students' experiences of participating in GSAs?
2. In what ways do GSAs support or constrain students' self-determination?
3. How do teacher-leaders and support staff understand the role of GSAs within their schools?

Together, these questions attend to individual experiences, relational dynamics, and institutional contexts, reflecting the study's integrated socio-ecological and SDT-informed framework.

### Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a larger mixed methods study on GSAs conducted across multiple Alberta school divisions. The qualitative sample included five student participants and 10 educators and support staff, all affiliated with schools hosting active GSAs. Students self-identified as either 2SLGBTQI+ or heterosexual cisgender allies and had par-

ticipated in their school's GSA. Educators and support staff were invited based on their current or prior involvement in GSA-related work, as the study focused on experiences within GSA-affiliated contexts. This purposive sampling strategy enabled the collection of in-depth, context-rich data from participants directly engaged in GSAs.

Racial and ethnic demographic data were not systematically collected. However, most student participants who were actively involved in GSAs self-identified as White during interviews. One participant, who identified as a non-White ally, had not participated in a GSA but expressed curiosity about joining. Racial and ethnic identities are reported only where participants chose to self-disclose during interviews. Information about the research team and their positionalities is provided below to contextualize data collection and analysis.

## Research Team and Reflexivity

The research team consists of university faculty members and former schoolteachers with a shared scholarly interest in supporting 2SLGBTQI+ students in secondary school contexts. The team has published peer-reviewed research on GSAs, 2SLGBTQI+ education, and related policy and historical issues. Authors Di Stasio and Harley contributed to data analysis and interpretation, supporting the development and refinement of themes. The team brought varied positionalities to the study, including members who identify as 2SLGBTQI+ and those who do not. This diversity informed a reflexive approach, with ongoing discussions about how researchers' perspectives and assumptions might shape interactions with participants and interpretations of the data.

For example, reflexive dialogue informed decisions about how to approach sensitive topics, including identity disclosure and family dynamics, and how to interpret participants' accounts with attention to context and power relations. During analysis, team members revisited emerging themes to consider how their own assumptions may have shaped initial interpretations, particularly in relation to experiences of safety, inclusion, and educator support. These discussions led to refinements in coding and theme

development to better reflect the complexity and variability of participants' experiences.

Author Wong conducted all student and educator interviews, with a graduate research assistant co-conducting one interview. Building trust and rapport was particularly important, especially as many interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, marked by school closures and reliance on virtual communication. To support connection, interviewers and participants engaged in informal conversation at the beginning of each interview, and participants were able to guide the depth of disclosure. Interviewers also attended to language and pacing to support participant comfort. All members of the research team completed Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) training, which informed attention to inclusive language, power relations, and participants' diverse identities throughout the research process.

Author Wong, a visible minority with more than 30 years of teaching experience, brought extensive professional and relational experience to support an empathetic and inclusive interviewing approach. This positionality informed sensitivity to issues of race and representation; however, the limited racial diversity of the sample constrained the extent to which these dynamics could be examined in depth. The research team engaged in ongoing reflection on how positionality shaped both data collection and interpretation, particularly in relation to whose experiences were foregrounded and how issues of race and inclusion were understood within the study.

## Data Collection

Participants in this qualitative analysis were drawn from a larger mixed methods study that also included a quantitative online survey. At the conclusion of the survey, students were invited to indicate their interest in participating in individual interviews with a member of the research team. For interested students under the age of 18, parental consent and student assent were obtained prior to scheduling interviews.

Data were collected through virtual semi-structured interviews, as in-person data collection was not feasible during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach allowed participants to share experiences related to GSAs while ena-

bling probing and clarification as needed (Cohen et al., 2013). All interviews were conducted by the first author.

Interviews were video- and audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy, and all identifying information, including names and specific school locations, was removed prior to analysis to protect participant confidentiality. Teacher-leader and support staff interviews were typically longer than one hour and were conducted via Zoom in the evenings or after school hours. These interviews focused on educators' and support staff members' experiences with GSAs, their understandings of student participation and well-being, and their perspectives on the role of GSAs within their school contexts.

While member checking was initially planned to support interpretive validity, it was not feasible to implement. During follow-up, participants did not respond to requests for additional engagement, which occurred during periods of COVID-19-related school closures and heightened demands on their time. As a result, the analysis proceeded without participant validation, which is acknowledged as a limitation.

In addition, although most participants involved in GSAs self-identified as White during interviews, racial and ethnic demographic data were not systematically collected, limiting analysis of how race and ethnicity intersect with participants' experiences. This remains an important limitation, particularly given existing research on the predominance of Whiteness in many 2SLGBTQI+ spaces.

The interview data generated through these procedures were analyzed, as described in the following section.

## Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analytic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Student and educator transcripts were initially coded separately to attend to participants' distinct roles and perspectives within GSAs. The research team then conducted a cross-case thematic analysis to identify patterns of convergence and divergence across participant groups.

Analysis was guided by both self-determination theory and a socio-ecological framework. Self-determination theory informed attention to expressions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in participants' narratives, while the socio-ecological framework focused analysis on how these experiences were shaped across relational (microsystem and mesosystem), institutional (exosystem), and broader socio-political (macrosystem) contexts. Through iterative comparison, the analysis examined how educators' actions—such as advocacy and allyship—related to students' experiences of belonging, autonomy, and agency within these contexts.

Themes were reviewed in relation to both coded extracts and the full dataset. Themes were then refined and defined to capture key aspects of participants' experiences and how GSAs functioned within interconnected social and institutional systems. The three overarching themes identified through this process are presented in the Findings section.

## Methodological Considerations

The relatively small and purposive sample limits the generalizability of findings; however, the study prioritizes depth, nuance, and interpretive insight over representativeness. Pandemic-related constraints shaped recruitment and data collection but also highlighted the importance of relational and institutional supports during periods of disruption. The study's ecological focus provides a foundation for future research examining GSAs across broader populations and comparative contexts.

## FINDINGS

This section presents key findings from the thematic analysis of interviews with students, teacher-leaders, and support staff involved in school-based GSAs. Participants are identified using pseudonyms. Guided by self-determination theory and a socio-ecological framework, the findings illustrate how GSAs can function as relational and institutional spaces shaping students' experiences of belonging, agency, and support across multiple levels. Three interrelated themes were identified: (1) safe spaces and psychological safety (relatedness), (2) autonomy and competence through GSA participation, and (3) educators as boundary-crossers.

## Safe Spaces and Psychological Safety (Relatedness)

Using self-determination theory within a socio-ecological framework, the analysis indicates that GSAs appear to play an important role in fostering psychological safety and relatedness at the microsystem level. Student participants described GSAs as spaces where they felt safe, affirmed, and supported, particularly through interactions with teacher-leaders, allied staff, and peers. Rather than being merely welcoming, GSAs were often experienced as important anchors of support within broader school environments that students described as less secure or inclusive. While participants described meaningful benefits associated with GSAs, these findings reflect specific experiences within the study context and should not be interpreted as representative of all GSAs or student experiences.

Elizabeth, a Grade 10 student who identifies as queer, emphasized the importance of adult and peer support: "I think having the support system of the teachers in our GSA club is important.... Even some of the [GSA] students are really nice. There are just a lot of support systems for us in the club." Elizabeth's account points to the importance of adult support within the GSA, but it also suggests that peer support may not have been experienced uniformly. Her comment that "even some" of the students were "really nice" may indicate uneven comfort or trust within the club, suggesting that belonging within GSAs can be partial, relational, and still in formation rather than fully secure. At the same time, the ambiguity of her phrasing leaves open multiple interpretations, including the possibility that she had limited interaction with some students or was still navigating relationships within the group. These accounts suggest that while GSAs can foster meaningful emotional support, experiences of peer belonging within these spaces may remain uneven and negotiated.

Affiliation with GSAs was associated with a sense of safety and emotional support through relationships with trusted adults and peers; however, these supports were not experienced uniformly, highlighting the role of relational context in shaping belonging.

Lisa, a student who identified as an ally, described the GSA as a protective space within a school environment characterized by social division and hostility: "There definitely are benefits of having a GSA at our school...it would be a lot easier if that [GSA club] was known to everyone.... It's like, "this is a friendly place"...and it would just be safer for everyone." Lisa's account highlights not only the protective role of GSAs but also the difficulty of making them visible and recognizable within divided school environments. Her emphasis on the need for the GSA to be "known" suggests that safety is not automatic; it depends on whether students can identify and access the GSA as a supportive space, and whether that space is publicly legible within the school context.

Extending these patterns, teacher-leaders and support staff similarly emphasized the importance of GSAs as spaces where students could express themselves more openly than in other school contexts. Pete, a GSA advisor, described how students navigated varying levels of comfort in identity expression: "At its best I think [a] GSA club is a place [where] students can feel comfortable and safe.... A GSA club is a space where they can represent themselves differently."

Cathy and Rob also highlighted the contrast between GSAs and other school spaces, describing GSAs as calmer, safer environments where students experienced reduced vulnerability. These accounts reinforce the role of GSAs as microsystem spaces that support relatedness, while also underscoring that this sense of safety is not consistently experienced across all school contexts.

Beyond formal educators, GSAs also facilitated relatedness through allied professionals. Mary, a police officer working in one participating school, described the GSA as a space where students could seek support and build trust: "If you're having a crappy day...the GSA kids know that they could talk to me.... You know this is going to be a safe space." Mary's account positions the GSA as a site of trust and support; at the same time, the presence of a police officer within this space is not necessarily neutral. Given the long history of harm, surveillance, and exclusion experienced by many 2SLGBTQI+ communities in relation to policing institutions,

her inclusion points to the complexity of allyship within school-based support spaces. In this case, students appeared to experience Mary as a trusted adult; however, that trust should be understood within a broader social context in which police presence may not be experienced as safe or affirming by all students.

More broadly, while GSAs were widely described as safe and supportive, these experiences were not uniform. Students engaged with GSAs in different ways depending on their identities, levels of visibility, and roles within the group. Some 2SLGBTQI+ students emphasized opportunities for identity expression, while allies highlighted advocacy and support. These variations suggest that GSAs can function as both supportive and uneven spaces, where safety, visibility, and belonging are actively negotiated rather than guaranteed.

### **GSA Participation (Autonomy and Competence)**

Student interviews suggested that GSAs supported autonomy and competence by creating spaces for identity exploration, choice, and leadership. Within GSAs, students described feeling empowered to express themselves and take interpersonal risks.

Anne, a student who identified as 2SLGBTQI+, described increased confidence: “Having other students with the same hair colours as me makes me think they have the same feelings... we can do this freely in the GSA.” She also described how participation supported her decision to disclose her identity: “I think I would have been much more scared to come out without them.... It helped me figure out who I am...and know that I could be accepted at my school.” Her account illustrates how autonomy, competence, and relatedness intersect in GSA participation, particularly in relation to identity expression, exploration, and disclosure.

Across interviews, students described increased confidence, willingness to speak up, and comfort expressing identity. Teacher-leaders also observed these shifts, as George explained: “They are very much into the activist role...we try to give them a sense of agency... they get confidence from taking on roles where they can have an impact.”

These accounts suggest that, for some students, GSA participation supported movement from identity exploration toward increased engagement in leadership and advocacy.

### **Educators as Boundary-Crossers (Mesosystem Roles: Relatedness and Autonomy)**

Educators’ involvement extended beyond facilitation to mediating tensions across institutional boundaries. Within a socio-ecological framework, teacher-leaders and allied professionals functioned as boundary-crossers, navigating relationships among students, families, school administration, and policy contexts.

Pete described maintaining spaces for expression: “a place where students can feel comfortable and safe...represent themselves differently.” However, Cathy also highlighted the tensions involved: “Sometimes I receive phone calls from parents saying, ‘How dare you tell my child to come out.’” Her account illustrates how educators navigate competing demands between student well-being, family expectations, and institutional constraints.

Mary described managing confidentiality across home and school: “we have to be very aware of that...otherwise we would risk their safety.... I’m there to support them.” Her role required both advocacy and discretion within overlapping systems of care and authority.

Taken together, these findings illustrate how different actors contribute to sustaining GSAs: teachers create protected spaces, educators mediate tensions, and allied professionals manage safety across contexts. These roles collectively support GSAs as micro-ecologies of belonging and agency within broader institutional constraints.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study examined how Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) function as supportive yet contested spaces for 2SLGBTQI+ students in Alberta within a shifting and often restrictive socio-political context. Drawing on self-determination theory (SDT) and a socio-ecological framework, the findings show that GSAs operate as relational micro-ecologies that support

students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness while being shaped by institutional conditions, policy environments, and broader socio-cultural forces.

At the same time, GSAs were not experienced uniformly as safe or inclusive. While many participants described GSAs as supportive, these experiences varied by identity, visibility, and school context. Some students reported greater comfort when they could control their level of visibility, while others noted tensions related to representation and inclusion. Consistent with existing critiques, GSAs may reflect broader social hierarchies, including racialized, classed, and gendered dynamics. As such, GSAs can function as both supportive and constrained spaces in which inclusion is negotiated rather than guaranteed.

The findings highlight the role of GSAs in fostering belonging, safety, and identity affirmation for many students. These findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that GSAs are uniformly inclusive, as prior research has shown that such spaces may also reproduce exclusion related to race, gender, and visibility. Participants described GSAs as spaces where they could express their identities with reduced fear of judgement, often in contrast to other school settings. Autonomy was supported through opportunities for self-expression and participation in shaping activities. Competence developed through leadership and advocacy, including organizing events and engaging in school-based initiatives. Relatedness was fostered through affirming peer relationships and sustained support from teacher-leaders and allied staff with participants emphasizing the importance of trusted relationships. These findings are consistent with SDT while extending its application to GSAs as relational and institutionally mediated contexts of well-being.

Educators and allied staff played a central role in sustaining GSAs and cultivating autonomy-supportive environments. Participants described teacher-leaders as providing safe spaces, advocacy, and emotional support, while also navigating institutional constraints. By foregrounding adult allyship, this study extends SDT beyond individual motivation to encompass intergenerational and relational processes. Relatedness, in particular, emerged

as co-constructed through ongoing interactions between students and supportive adults. At the same time, educators described managing tension related to confidentiality, parental expectations, and policy requirements, which could constrain both GSA practices and student autonomy. These findings highlight the complexities of adult involvement in student-led spaces.

A socio-ecological framework further situates GSAs within intersecting levels of influence. At the microsystem level, GSAs can provide spaces of safety and affirmation through supportive peer and adult relationships. At the mesosystem level, educators acted as boundary-crossers, mediating tensions between students, families, and school administration, particularly in relation to confidentiality. Exosystem influences, including school policies and administrative support, shaped the scope and sustainability of GSAs. At the macrosystem level, a broader political discourse and recent legislative developments in Alberta informed participants' concerns about safety, confidentiality, and the future of GSAs. Taken together, GSAs can be understood as counterspaces that both respond to and may help mitigate broader socio-political constraints. While GSAs can function as supportive spaces, these findings should be understood within broader dynamics that may also produce exclusion and uneven access. These findings further suggest that GSAs are shaped by distinct national and provincial policy contexts and may therefore function differently from those documented in predominantly US-based research.

Although this study did not explicitly examine race, disability, and ethnicity, most participants identified as White, reflecting patterns noted in prior research on the predominance of Whiteness in many 2SLGBTQI+ spaces (e.g., Brockenbrough, 2015; McCready, 2010). As a result, the findings likely reflect experiences more accessible within predominantly White GSA contexts and may not fully capture how racialized 2SLGBTQI+ students experience inclusion, or exclusion. Given evidence that Whiteness can influence participation and visibility within GSAs, future research should attend more explicitly to intersecting identities, including race, disability, and ethnicity.

The findings have implications for policy, practice, and professional learning. Gender and sexuality alliances may contribute to inclusive school climates, student well-being, and civic engagement, particularly in contexts where legislative changes affect confidentiality and student safety. Participants' accounts highlight the need for policies that protect student privacy and support educators in navigating the complexities. Supporting GSAs requires not only formal recognition but also attention to the relational and institutional conditions that sustain them, including professional learning, clear policy guidance, and administrative support.

The small, purposive sample limits generalizability but provides in-depth insight into participants' experiences. Data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic may also have shaped experiences of connection and participation, particularly through reduced in-person interaction. In addition, the absence of systemic racial and ethnic demographic data limits analysis of how these factors shape participation and belonging within GSAs. Overall, the findings should therefore be interpreted in relation to the study's scope and context.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how gender and sexuality alliances function as supportive yet contested spaces for 2SLGBTQI+ students in Alberta within a shifting and often restrictive socio-political context. Drawing on self-determination theory and a socio-ecological framework, the findings suggest that GSAs operate as relational micro-ecologies that support students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness while being shaped by institutional conditions, policy environments, and broader sociocultural forces.

Across participants' accounts, GSAs emerged as important sites of belonging, identity affirmation, and peer connection, particularly within school contexts not consistently experienced as safe or inclusive. At the same time, these spaces were sustained through the ongoing efforts of educators and allied staff, whose roles as boundary-crossers involve navigating tensions across home, school, and policy contexts. Their work, often involving advocacy, discretion, and relational care, was central to maintaining

GSAs as spaces where students could express their identities and develop confidence, agency, and leadership. In this way, self-determination is understood not only as an individual process but as a relational and institutional mediated accomplishment shaped across ecological levels.

Situating GSAs within this broader ecological context highlights their dual roles as both supportive and vulnerable spaces. While GSAs can function as counterspaces that can mitigate exclusion and well-being for many students, they are also shaped, and at times constrained, by broader socio-political conditions. In the context of recent policy developments in Alberta, participants' accounts emphasize the fragility of these supports, particularly in relation to confidentiality, increased regulation, and shifting institutional expectations. These conditions point to the need for educational systems to move beyond symbolic support toward policies and practices that actively protect and sustain GSAs.

Supporting GSAs requires attention to the relational and institutional conditions that enable them to function effectively, including professional learning, clear policy guidance, and sustained administrative support. Recognizing the boundary-crossing labour of educators and allied professionals remains critical, as this work occurs at the intersection of care, advocacy, and institutional constraint. Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of GSAs as vital spaces of belonging, agency, and support, while also emphasizing the ongoing work required to sustain them within complex and evolving educational contexts.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

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