

Embodying LGBTQ+ Safety

An Ethnographic Exploration of safe spaces and how different actors and environments can embody a safe space by diving into high school Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs).

Master Thesis

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For many people, high school was a wonderful period in their lives where they learned a lot about themselves and made friendships for life. While I understand this and have many high school memories I still talk about with my friends, this period can also bring back feelings of not belonging, being lonely, and being bullied. The high school environment is experienced as an unsafe space by many students, and many deal with sexism, discrimination, racism, and homophobia. This thesis will focus mostly on the latter, looking at the perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ+ students in Dutch high schools, for which the data was collected during a three-month fieldwork period between February 1st and May 1st, 2022.

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Abstract

Navigating the unsafe space of Dutch high schools, teachers and students have collaboratively created safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students, known as Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs). These GSAs usually have meetings once a week and focus on being a safe space for students to learn more about their gender, sexuality, and overall identity. In addition, many also have an activist focus, where they have the additional goal of a more accepting and inclusive high school environment. This thesis is the output of a three-month field research period within high schools in the cities of Breda and Tilburg, arguing that LGBTQ+ students within high school Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) experience feeling unsafe in their school environment. In addition, this thesis shows how LGBTQ+ students navigate the unsafe school environment and how safety is embodied by different places and people. Beyond the academic world, this thesis tries to incite a debate in the Dutch education system and local governments on inclusion and exclusion within high schools, and the importance of safety, especially for minority students.

Keywords: Safe spaces, inclusivity, embodiment, Gender and Sexuality Alliance, LGBTQ+ community, high schools.

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Introducing Gender and Sexuality Alliances

It is difficult to describe what this space is. Of course, you know that you are not the only one, but here it is extra visible that you are not alone. It is also very helpful, as you can ask any question you have or help to answer the questions of others. Even if you do not have a question, you still learn so much from the advice that others give. Besides that, it is just an open space, a free space where you can be who you want to be, and no one will judge you for it.¹

The space that this high school student is referring to is the GSA, which stands for Gender and Sexuality Alliance (or Gay-Straight Alliance). These alliances are groups of individuals of different sexual orientations, sexes, gender identities, and gender expressions (GSA Network 2022a) and are often led by teachers or the students themselves. In the last case, students are often supported by adult supervisors, who are usually teachers or other staff members of the high school. Such student groups have formed in many schools, where the focus is on social support, facilitating discussions, and advocating for relevant issues for the LGBTQ+ youth (Murchison et al. 2021, 296). The LGBTQ+ abbreviation stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning, with the + representing other sexual identities such as asexual, pansexual, and intersex individuals. In the Netherlands, GSAs are supported by COC Netherlands, an organization that advocates for LGBTQ+ rights. This support consists of guidance from GSA coordinators, promotional materials, and campaigns such as Purple Friday and the International Day of Silence. Having a safe space is important for all LGBTQ+ students, and research has highlighted how it is especially important to include transgender and gender-diverse youth, as the rates of depression and suicidal thoughts are much higher compared to the general population. For transgender and gender-diverse individuals, the depression rate is 52% to 54% (Dhejne et al 2016), whereas this is 16% among the general cisgender population (Tebbe & Moradi 2016).

School environments are often experienced as unsafe, where LGBTQ+ students, do not feel free to express themselves or feel the space is safe to discuss topics such as sexuality and gender. But why are people with sexual and gender identities that are different from the norm treated differently? According to anthropologists, we often categorize something to be ‘natural’ and bound to biology, while it is cultural, and invented by humans (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2020,

¹ Interview with a 16-year-old high school student who is a member of the GSA 23-02-2022

231). As culture is therefore learned, it differs in different environments and groups of people, which is seen for example how the cultural elements of clothing, language, and music differ per cultural group. Gender and sexuality are also cultural concepts, which many people find difficult to accept (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2020, 232), leading to unequal treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals who are then treated as ‘others’. One of the reasons why this is not accepted is because gender has a biological component and is often used interchangeably with the term ‘sex’ (Walker & Cook 1998, 255). While sex concerns anatomy and chromosomes and is, therefore, a biological term, gender is socially constructed and refers to roles, behaviors, and identities related to the different sexes. Likewise, sexuality has sexual desires as a biological element. Mukhopadhyay et al. (2020) try to explain this by relating gender and sexuality to food and describes how:

“We have a biologically rooted need to eat to survive and we have the capacity to enjoy eating. What constitutes ‘food,’ what is ‘delicious’ or ‘repulsive,’ the contexts and meanings that surround food and human eating—those are cultural.” (232).

Therefore, while both gender and sexuality are linked with biology, they are experienced through the cultures to which an individual has been exposed.

The two constructs of gender and sexuality have been linked in many ways. In European and U.S. gender ideologies, heterosexuality was seen as the ‘normal’ sexual preference and was linked to gender role performance, where for example, ‘masculine’ men are attracted to ‘feminine’ women by nature. Therefore, homosexuality was often seen as inappropriate, as gay men stereotypically act more feminine for example (Katchadourian & Lunde 1972). The link between gender and sexuality, in this case, is that when sexuality is seen as abnormal, it is linked to other ‘abnormalities’, such as gender (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2020, 232). The notions of gender and sexuality will continue to shape and inform our lives, however, awareness of these structures can be raised through anthropological research methods where history and its consequences can be analyzed and show how gender ideologies shape and limit people’s possibilities (Mukhopadhyay et al. 2020). In this research, ethnographic work helps to create an understanding of the high school culture, and how this is navigated by LGBTQ+ students in the safe space of Gender and Sexuality Alliances, within the context of the Dutch school system which is experienced as an unsafe space.

In 2018, Columbia University did research on Dutch school climates in collaboration with GLSEN and the Dutch GSA Network, with a focus on LGBTQ+ youth in the Netherlands

(Pizmony-Levy 2018). This research showed the positive effects GSAs can have on school climate, as LGBTQ+ students with a GSA at their school were more likely to report a general acceptance of LGBTQ+ people among the students, more likely to feel a sense of belonging, less likely to be absent due to feeling unsafe, and less likely to hearing biased remarks (Pizmony-Levy 2018). Research has also shown that 47% of LGBTQ+ students had heard others in their school making racist comments (Pizmony-Levy 2018), which could therefore mean that there is a lack of an intersectional approach within the GSA and that LGBTQ+ students of color are excluded from GSAs that are meant to be a safe space for all. While this information originally led me to focus the research on LGBTQ+ students of color and their experiences with (un)safety in high schools, this changed during the fieldwork process as I experienced that the GSAs where I did my research consisted mostly of white students. However, the focus on safe spaces is still relevant as the fieldwork revealed that safety was not only an issue for many LGBTQ+ students but how large of an influence the education system and school policies have on LGBTQ+ safety.

To fully understand the different experiences of structures I followed the meanings and embodiment of safe spaces, which allowed me to demonstrate how an LGBTQ+ safe space shifts, as well as contribute to ethnographic research on the safety of LGBTQ+ students and highlight the importance of intersectionality in the education system. This led me to the following research question:

How is (un)safety experienced by LGBTQ+ students within high school Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) in the region of Breda and Tilburg, the Netherlands?

This thesis, therefore, explores the experiences of LGBTQ+ high school students that are members of GSAs along with how safety can be embodied through different places and people. Here, the LGBTQ+ students are the main group of participants, as the focus is on their safety and experiences. However, as other actors influence their safety, school staff members also play a role in this research. For them, the focus is on how they perceive the school's social safety and to what extent they are a safe space for LGBTQ+ students.

Researching (un)safe spaces

Several anthropologists have presented the human body as something which is a cultural space of itself (Duranti 1997; Munn 1996; Rockefeller 2001), which implies that safe spaces are not only found in places, but also in people. In this thesis, I will refer to this as the embodiment of safety and safe spaces, as the notion of embodied spaces refers to “the metaphorical and material aspects of the body in space as well as body/space to communicate, transform, and contest existing social structures.” (Low 2003, 16). Here, the bodies refer to the teachers, students, and other actors within the social structure of high schools and the Dutch education system.

The main fieldwork locations were three different high schools in the region of Breda and Tilburg, the Netherlands. All three of these high schools have a GSA that was initiated by teachers during this school year. This means that the high school GSAs where the fieldwork was conducted are young and, in many ways, still searching for the structure that would fit them best. I however do not believe this made them less than other, older GSAs, as it seemed they were extra open to new ideas, tips, and more information. During this fieldwork period, I got in contact with students, teachers, one vice-principal, and several other staff members at the high schools.

The data of this ethnographic research consists of participant observations (8) at GSAs, (14) interviews with students, (5) interviews with teachers and other school staff, and many smaller informal conversations, which were conducted between February 1st and May 1st, 2022.

The activities that were observed during this fieldwork were the GSA gatherings at the three different schools. Participant observation was used as the method here, as it allowed me to engage with the students by joining their interactions and meetings. This gave insights into how different actors, mostly the teachers and the students, interact with each other. Besides observing the GSA gatherings, I occasionally actively participated in their meetings as well. This was not something I had planned out before going to the meeting but was dependent on the topic that would be discussed in the meeting. For example, if the meeting was focused on student struggles within the school I would observe, but if students were split up into groups I would join in on their conversations. The GSA gatherings were also the locations where I gained access to the research participants. Here I had informal contact with the high school students, which helped to build trust and make them comfortable with being research participants (O’Reilly 2012). With these students, I also conducted semi-structured interviews, which were mostly done at their high school in the private study rooms. This method was used

as it allowed me to understand the student's perceptions and experiences of being a part of the LGBTQ+ community, the GSA, safety, and their school environment.

Ultimately, I conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with 21 participants: four teachers who supervised or started the GSA at their high school, one biology teacher, one teacher who is a member of this school's care team, and one vice-principal, and fourteen students who are GSA members. The first four research participants were found directly through the GSA network. This was done through their website where there is an overview of high schools in North Brabant that have a GSA along with their contact information (GSA Netwerk 2022b), as well as through my contact person at COC Netherlands. With the use of snowball sampling (O'Reilly 2012), I gained access to other staff members and students with the help of my existing research participants. Through this type of sampling, I was able to find six students who are GSA members for the semi-structured interviews. The other eight students I interviewed were sampled through Instagram. I used this online method to make the group of research participants more diverse, as my participants thus far were mostly white girls and non-binary students. Using Instagram, I had a wider reach and was able to interview a more diverse group of different sexualities, genders, and ethnicities. Additionally, I decided to use this social media method because access to students was generally more difficult than I had expected, as many students did not want to participate or were unreliable. The online method helped here, as only those interested would send me a message to schedule an interview. The fact that this contact was also more informal and more anonymous might have also made the students feel safer and more eager to help.

Interestingly, diversity based on ethnic background is minimal within the group of research participants as most are white. This is important to note as it confirms what previous research has said about the exclusiveness of inclusive spaces which disregard intersectionality. While LGBTQ+ safe spaces are seen as spaces that protect queer people from the heterosexist society (Croff et al. 2017, 233), not everyone feels safe in these spaces (Battle & Bennett 2005; Taylor 2008). This is mainly because LGBTQ+ safe spaces tend to ignore the importance of race and ethnicity when it comes to safety (Cisneros & Bracho 2020, 1496). Fox and Ore (2010) additionally argue that the "safe space discourse continues to operate within a normalizing gaze of a white, masculinist, middle-class subject, rendering queer subjectivity in a most simplistic and reductive manner and producing an illusionary safety" (631). This means that while there are safe spaces that focus on the inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals, they contribute to the exclusion of queer people of color. While I had minimal access to this group of students, their perceptions and experiences are ever the more important when it comes to understanding

discrimination and racism within the school environment and how this intersects with gender and sexual diversity.

Ethics and positionality

While I am not a high school student and have never been a member of a gender and sexuality alliance, I do consider myself to be an insider. As a queer woman of Puerto Rican descent, I have had experiences of unsafety based on my sexuality, ethnicity, and gender in many environments, of which the high school environment is one. These experiences have led me to research social safety, which does lead to biases. As I had experienced the high school environment as an unsafe space, it was something I expected to have again before I started my fieldwork. It was important for me to be aware of this as I want to draw conclusions based on the experiences of the participants rather than on my personal experiences. While this awareness is important, it does help me relate to the students who experience unsafety and, in several cases, being open about my own experiences made the research participants more comfortable sharing their own stories of discrimination and homophobia. Considering this, I would argue this research to be an insider ethnography (O'Reilly 2012, 98).

By incorporating research participants with different roles (students, teachers, and principals) with different perspectives on the safety of students, I did not only get a better picture of the perceived safety but also encountered participants who were inside of the school but still outsiders to the GSA or the LGBTQ+ community which helped me reflect on my own biases towards school environments. The main element that I picked up here was that there are many teachers and other staff members actively working on a safer space for students within their courses, but this is unfortunately often difficult to notice when the general education system fails to apply an intersectional approach. The first chapter 'The Dutch Education System' will expand on this further.

Lastly, an important element of the ethics of this research is the anonymization of research participants. The names of the schools and students are kept anonymous, and no pseudonyms will be used. The reason for this is that identity plays an important role in this research and is a sensitive topic for many individuals. More specifically, gender identity is a large factor in the group of participants, where transgender, gender non-conforming, and non-binary individuals often have chosen new names in replacement of their deadnames.² As names are gendered, I, therefore, choose to refrain from using pseudonyms and when quoting from

² The term deadname refers to one's birth name which an individual changed as a part of their gender transition

research participants, I will address one's role, which is student, teacher, or another staff member.

Structure

The first chapter 'The Dutch Education System' introduces the site where I conducted my research: High schools. Diving into the Dutch education system is the focus of this contextual chapter, and it shows how the education system builds upon notions of inclusivity and exclusivity based on sexuality, gender, class, and ethnicity. It is argued that the context of Dutch high schools is an unsafe space, which can be seen by how it divides students and how they (fail to) engage with diversity within their courses. The interlude after the first chapter describes my experience in the field and forms a bridge to the second chapter 'GSAs as safe spaces', which elaborates on the construction of safe spaces within a larger, structural, unsafe space. This process of creating a safe space goes hand in hand with possible frictions between the school and its system, as well as how a safe space meant to make students feel included might not be a safe space for other minority students. Chapter 3 'Individuals as safe spaces' explores the embodiment of safe spaces and shows how individuals can shift between their roles. I argue that an individual's role can depend on the environment, which is explained by looking at the roles of teachers, students, and my role as a researcher. While most of the fieldwork was conducted in the physical world, it is important to consider what happens beyond the school environment. Therefore, chapter 4 'Online safe spaces' focuses on LGBTQ+ safety in the online space, how the online space is linked back to the high schools, and how an unsafe school environment can extend into the online space. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings and answers the research question, along with a reflection on the research's societal and academic relevance.

The Dutch Education System

Cecile: And what would the ideal situation look like?

Student 1: That we wouldn't have to be so careful... we have an arrangement that we never advertise the time or place of our GSA meeting, just because it is dangerous. It would be nice if everything was calmer and that our decorations wouldn't be trashed. And if people wanted to know more about the GSA, that would be nice.

Student 2: What I would like... our school building is very new, and we are never allowed to hang anything up. It is stupid, and it looks like a hospital, it is horrible. I have visited my sister's school and they have pride flags, posters, that kind of stuff. And I notice that when you walk into that school there is a relaxed atmosphere. At our school... well the perfect situation would be that you feel accepted, and that the atmosphere is so good that a GSA would not be necessary. That you can be yourself everywhere and there is no bullshit.³

A school environment is a place where students spend a lot of their time and therefore makes an impact on them. As schools can influence children's academics and well-being, it is important that the school system is of quality and gives equal treatment to all its students. This quality consists of several factors, such as the composition of the students, its resources, along with the policies and practices that are enforced by the teachers, school principals, and the general education systems (OECD 2018, 188). The conversation above with two high school students shows how the school's atmosphere influences them. The fact that their school does not let them hang up pride decorations does not only show how the environment looks dull, but it also reflects the way that LGBTQ+ students are generally treated in school environments. It reflects how not enough attention is paid to the needs of LGBTQ+ students and how they have to be invisible, hiding their sexuality or gender identity within this environment. While the element of safety is often not as visible, physical elements such as pride flags and posters can represent that a space accepts and supports the presence of LGBTQ+ individuals.

³ Interview with two high school students who are members of the GSA. Student 1 is 12 years old, and Student 2 is 17 years old 20-04-2022

This chapter provides context to the Dutch education system, its structure, and how they exclude minority students based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and race. By not actively working towards an inclusive program, high schools are struggling with diversity, which is supported by academic literature and the data from this research. We will expand on the various levels this can be seen within high schools as we look at the start of a student's high school career, to what they are taught in their classes.

After finishing primary school, children go to high school, where the ages are on average between twelve and eighteen. In the Netherlands, high schools are divided into several different levels: *vmbo* (preparatory vocational secondary education), *havo* (senior general secondary education), and *vwo* (university preparatory education).⁴ The level that a student attends is based on the school advice they receive at the end of primary school, which is based on the student's talents, learning abilities, and test results.⁵ In the last year of primary school, known as group 8, students also take an end test that focuses on language and mathematics, which is not something students can fail or pass but is added to the school advice.⁶

While this might seem like a good system to make such each student gets the best fit, how students are matched shows how the Dutch school system is linked to inequality and exclusion of minority groups. A case in which this is especially visible was reported by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in 2018, which compared the academic achievements of children with migration backgrounds from 35 countries. This report showed how in the Netherlands, children with a migration background are more likely to end up studying on a *vmbo* level than those students without a migration background, which affects their job chances later. In a journalistic article by NOS⁷, El Hadioui, a sociologist from Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, and The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam recognized this problem and mentioned that there are cases where children from different ethnicities had the same Cito scores⁸ but were sent to different high school levels, showing how this selection process is not neutral. Looking at the school system through an intersectional lens, this selection program is

⁴ Facts derived from: <https://www.onderwijsloket.com/kennisbank/artikel-archief/hoe-zit-het-nederlandse-onderwijssysteem-in-elkaar/#:~:text=Na%20het%20basisonderwijs%20zijn%20er,er%20drie%20vormen%20van%20vervolgonderwijs>, accessed on 01-06-2022.

⁵ Facts derived from: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/schooladvies-en-eindtoets-basischool/toelating-voortgezet-onderwijs-gebaseerd-op-definitief-schooladvies>, accessed on 01-06-2022.

⁶ Facts derived from: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/schooladvies-en-eindtoets-basischool/verplichte-eindtoets-basisonderwijs>, accessed on 01-06-2022.

⁷ Facts derived from: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2223470-veel-ongelijkheid-in-het-onderwijs-het-is-echt-vijf-voor-twaalf>, accessed on 30-05-2022.

⁸ Test results from the final primary education exam.

problematic and shows how students are treated unequally based on ethnicity. In addition, this is also telling for inequality based on sexuality and gender identity within the school system.

According to the core objectives of Dutch education, students need to learn how to be respectful when it comes to diversity, and since 2012, schools are obligated to recognize sexual diversity (Meerhoff 2016). However, it has become clear that many schools do not know how to realize this (Hagen 2018), as the law does not dictate how this should be treated or how much attention should be given to integrating diversity in their lessons (Meerhoff 2016). These core objectives therefore reveal how the Dutch parliament acknowledges diversity but fails to deal with the work that should be put in to make sure that schools adhere to the objectives.

LGBTQ+ students are more likely to be the victim of bullying (Kuyper 2015, 67) and violence (Sijbers et al 2014), which is often assumed to be caused by the norm of heterosexuality in high schools (Meerhoff 2016, 158), which can lead to LGBTQ+ students feeling unsafe within their school environment. This also became evident during the research, where many students explained how homophobic remarks lead them to feel unsafe, and how it is frustrating when the school and teachers do not actively punish these other students.⁹

Whether this is during math, French or social studies class, Batsleer (2012) described schools as 'hegemonically heterosexual'. Within heteronormative structures, heterosexuality is regarded as the norm, while homosexuality is sexualized and seen as a topic that should not be spoken about in public areas such as schools, therefore silencing queer individuals (Ryan 2016, Richardson 1996). One of the high schools where I conducted my research was clearly hegemonically heterosexual and little was done to make students feel safe in the school environment. Comparing the experiences of students I talked to throughout the fieldwork, it became clear that in the cases where the LGBTQ+ community is more invisible, female students and students of other ethnicities also tend to experience more unsafety.

While most of my conversations were with students who are a member of the GSA, some of the conversations outside of this alliance gave additional insights into the high school environment. One of these students is a Muslim student of color, who when I told them about what I was researching, began describing their experiences with teachers and fellow students.¹⁰ While this conversation was a while ago, it has stuck with me throughout the fieldwork and the thesis writing process, which I believe is because this student told their experience so matter-of-factly.

⁹ Fieldnotes 10-03, 19-04, and 07-05-2022

¹⁰ Fieldnotes 10-03-2022

This student explained how:

“The school I used to go to is a lot more diverse, which I think I only realized once I came to this high school. Here everyone just stares at me, and I do not feel connected to most other students. For example, during our lunch breaks, I gave up sitting in the cafeteria because it just did not feel comfortable to be stared at by all these people while you are eating. So now I just find another place to have my breaks. I also get a lot of ignorant questions about my appearance and my hijab such as: ‘What does your hair look like?’ or ‘What hair color do you have?’ And this is not just from students, even some of my teachers have asked these kinds of questions!”

Being that this exclusion and discrimination also comes from staff members, it is unlikely that students who feel unsafe will address this to the school. The experience of this student reflects how exclusivity is a structural problem within the Dutch education system, as minority students are excluded by different individuals and do not feel protected in these public spaces. While I only talked to one student with this experience at this high school, during one of the GSA meetings at the school it became clear that this was a reoccurring theme. This was their first GSA meeting, where the teacher and the three students talked about how they feel unsafe because of their sexuality, and that they recognized this unsafety among other minority students.¹¹ These conversations came with a mix of emotions, where the students showed sadness and anxiety, but also anger and disgust towards some of the events. Two of these students gave an example that was especially telling about the school environment and the discriminating and racist tendencies of their peers:

Student 1: “For one of our school projects, we wanted to find out what the students’ perspectives were regarding diversity in the school. And well... I cannot say that we were surprised, but it was extremely disappointing to have that confirmation of what students thought. We handed out surveys for them to fill in and there were a lot of discriminating comments.”

Student 2: “One of the answers was really extreme, where one student said: ‘I am glad that our school is the way it is because I do not want to be around (n-word)s.’”

¹¹ GSA meeting participant observation 10-03-2022

While they expressed how this behavior was upsetting and shocking, they also explained this was exactly what they expected to happen at their school. After this, the conversation led to a case where a classmate started to laugh when the LGBTQ+ community was mentioned during a class, and how most teachers ignore these students. The teacher that guides this GSA then started talking about why it is so important in these exact moments that teachers step in and say something, even if it is not for punishment, but to have a conversation about it. As explained by this teacher, it should not be expected that one teacher ends all homophobia and harassment, but rather stepping in during these moments will stop the normalization of LGBTQ+ hate and would reflect how the school values the safety of minority students. In these cases where teachers do not step in, we see how the lack of a clear approach within the inclusion policies of the Dutch government leads to the lack of intervention, therefore upholding the heteronormativity of the school environment.

What is bullying?

Another important element in education policies regards bullying, and how according to Formby (2015), the notion of bullying is inadequate when discussing homophobia. Bullying has been extensively researched (Formby 2013, Rivers and Cowie 2006), as well as homophobic and transphobic bullying (Guasp 2012, Jones and Hillier 2013). While educational policies reflect this interest in bullying and even UNESCO (2012) and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA 2012) have addressed homophobic bullying on an international level, more and more researchers are looking into the emphasis on the risks and vulnerability of LGBTQ+ youth (Formby 2015). This ‘vulnerabilisation’ of LGBTQ+ youth is quite common in sexuality and gender research (Cover 2012) and this presentation of this group always being at risk is reinforced in school environments.

While it should not be dismissed that many LGBTQ+ students experience homophobic bullying, it is important to understand where the focus should be. When individuals in the LGBTQ+ community are portrayed as suffering and always at risk, this suggests a focus on the individuals rather than the heteronormative education system (Rasmussen & Crowley 2004, Airtton 2013) that needs to be addressed. Additionally, when the focus is on the riskiness of a group, this can lead a school to fail to understand what their own role here is when it comes to how they contribute to the heteronormative school environment (Rasmussen 2006).

Therefore, when the focus is put on the binary between the victim and the bully, the influence of the high school environment, which is a powerful heteronormative institution, is

dismissed and causes a simplification of a complex situation that is affected socially and culturally (Ringrose & Renold 2010, 574). An example that demonstrates how the solution to bullying is put onto the ‘victim’ can be seen in the It Gets Better campaign, which is an online non-profit that was founded in the United States in 2010.¹² They have posted many videos in response to the high number of LGBTQ+ suicides and promote the idea that it will get better. According to Harris and Farrington (2014), this campaign fails to recognize how ‘it’ will not get better for everyone and puts the responsibility of improving one’s happiness onto the individual rather than recognizing the influence that structural powers such as high schools have.

Lesson materials and inclusivity

Besides reacting to remarks made by students, the influence that teachers have on the inclusivity of the school environment also applies to what they teach during their courses, and to what extent they put in the effort to ensure safety for the students. The first course one will most likely think of when it comes to discussing sexuality and gender would probably be biology, which is often linked to sex education. Research has shown that when it comes to this topic, teachers find homosexuality a difficult topic to discuss with their students, due to the many misconceptions regarding sexual diversity among students, as they often link homosexuality to the inability of having children and HIV/AIDS (Van de Bongardt, Mouthaan & Bos 2009, 67). Because of this, teachers must have not only the knowledge about the sexual development of adolescents, STDs, HIV/AIDS, anticonception, and cultural diversity, but know how to communicate this with their students and can deal with more personal questions or problems from the students (Allen 2005; Greenberg 1989; Milton et al. 2001).

During an interview with a high school biology teacher at one of the schools where I conducted the research, she explained the importance of sex education and how these are her favorite chapters to teach. She explained that being open is important, while also remaining aware of the environment in the classroom. “When the class atmosphere is safe and students are more open, it is much easier to have conversations about it [sex and sexuality]. When this is not the case, I usually teach the direct, factual information about the chapters instead of the fun stuff, such as linking personal stories to it,”¹³ she explained. She added that after these classes, students often come to her with a variety of questions related to the body and sex, such

¹² Retrieved from: <https://itgetsbetter.org/>

¹³ Interview with high school biology teacher 20-04-2022

as sexuality, the aesthetics of boobs, porn, and fetishes. When it comes to the topic of the LGBTQ+ community, the biology teacher explained that she thinks it is important to use examples of people that the students know outside of the school environment such as Dutch celebrities such as Loiza Lamers, a Dutch model who won Holland's Next Top Model in 2015. According to this teacher, using celebrities that are well known by the Dutch youth helps them understand different topics and shows them how, in this case, transgender individuals are common in our society.

While many teachers try their best to make their lessons inclusive, the content of lesson materials often does not leave space for flexibility of the different themes, which is especially visible in the lesson plans for the older students, where the textbooks are mostly technical rather than addressing the relational and social-emotional aspects of sexuality (Van de Bongardt, Mouthaan & Bos 2009, 70). Here, there is a focus on the process of reproduction and safe sex, and information regarding different sexualities and genders is often disregarded.

Additionally, many lesson materials are not updated enough, explained the biology teacher, as the production and making of new textbooks often takes a long time. Fortunately, I got to see an updated, more inclusive biology book during my fieldwork. In the chapter Reproduction and Sexuality, the biology book included the image of the gender astronaut, which can be seen below (Image 1).



Image 1: Astronaut (GSA Network)¹⁴

¹⁴ Translation of the astronaut: Gender is a mix of different elements. Which elements these are is shown by the astronaut. On the left of the astronaut the text reads: Gender expression: how you present yourself to others. On the right from top to bottom it reads: Gender identity is who you really are, sexual orientation is who you fall in

This astronaut represents gender, and how it is a mix of the elements of gender expression, gender identity, sexual orientation, and sex. It was developed by the GSA network to show how humans are more than just a body, and how some people do not identify with the gender that was assigned to them at birth. To this, the biology teacher added that discussing these topics with students is not just important for the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community, but to normalize it as well through for example the use of stories of famous Dutch people who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community and by showing that sexuality and non-heterosexual sexualities are simply a part of nature. This normalization that this teacher mentioned is also mentioned as an important element by teachers and students who are a part of a GSA. What is meant by this normalization is connected to making textbooks and lesson plans more inclusive.

During one of the conversations I had with a teacher we discussed how heteronormativity can be found in many high school courses.¹⁵ This mathematics teacher, who also helped build up the GSA at this high school and is present at most of their meetings, explained how by making small alterations within the existing program, it is quite simple to make any topic more inclusive when it comes to sexuality and gender identity. To illustrate what this can look like, I came up with the following two exercises that are similar to the teacher's example.

Exercise 1: Tom, Wim, and Job are going to the movies with Hanna, Olivia, and Charlotte. How many combinations of couples can be made from this group?

Exercise 2: Bo, Noa, Julia, Tomas, Anna, and Samir are going to the movies together. Bo identifies as non-binary and is pansexual. Noa identifies as non-binary and is asexual. Julia identifies as a woman and is heterosexual. Tomas identifies as a man and is homosexual. Anna identifies as a woman and is omnisexual. Samir identifies as a man and is bisexual.

How many combinations of couples can be made from this group?

While the first exercise does not mention gender or sexuality and it could therefore be said that it is just as inclusive as the second exercise, it does reinforce the notion of heteronormativity, which refers to the norm of heterosexuality that is often invisible (Warner

love with, and sex is the assigned gender at birth. All these elements are not binary and are therefore presented with these arrows, which on the left say feminine/woman and on the right say masculine/man. For the element of sex, intersex is also show in between the arrows. Below the astronaut reads: A human is more than just a body. Most people feel and act based on the expectations based on their assigned birth gender, but this is not always the case. Freedom of sex gives everyone the space to be themselves.

¹⁵ Interview with high school mathematics teacher and GSA mentor 24-02-2022

1991). This “assumes a binary conception of sex (male/female), corresponding gender expression (masculine/feminine), and a natural attraction to the opposite sex (heterosexuality)” (Krebbekx 2021, 18). The mathematics teacher added that this is not necessarily something to implement in every second of each class, but that:

“Personally, I believe the realization and the awareness among teachers are the most important. Yes, it will take a long time, that is true, but I would like to see it implemented even if it is just about some small details, for example, the assumption that when you are not a woman, you are a man. This is so easy to change to the categories of ‘man’ and ‘not woman’”.

Incorporating small changes such as the math example mentioned seems like an easy way towards inclusivity. However as this is not incorporated in many textbooks yet, it needs to be initiated by the teachers. Most teachers I spoke to during the research advocated for this and some encouraged their colleagues to do the same. Making changes in the rules and regulations of the education system is something that can take a long time, which leads to an environment that excludes students of ethnic and sexual minorities. Here, the role of the GSAs comes in, as this is meant as a safe space for students to talk about their experiences with peers while advocating for a more inclusive school environment.

To summarize, the Dutch education system is an unsafe space on the different structural levels of the system, the schools and teachers, the school materials, and an overall lack of an intersectional approach. The next chapters will expand on safety and how different spaces and people can embody safety.

Interlude

It is early in the morning, just a quarter past eight on Monday. I walk towards the classroom on the first floor of the building and notice the familiar smell of the school's cafeteria coffee. As I have already been to a couple of GSA gatherings at this school, I feel comfortable walking around the building and greeting some of the staff that I usually encounter in the mornings. The gatherings are in the same classroom each week: the classroom of one of the teachers who started the GSA. He teaches mathematics, which is reflected by the classroom, which has geometric figures hanging from the ceiling, as well as a corkboard filled with printed-out math memes. Besides the usual furniture a classroom has such as tables, chairs, and a digital board, another noticeable element of the classroom is the LGBTQ+ elements. Next to the digital board, there is a large pride flag hung up on the wall, regarding which the teacher had previously told me "I think it is important to have the pride flag in my classroom. Not just for the GSA, but for the students to hopefully see me as someone who will accept them and will not judge. I do plan to upgrade to the progress pride flag, but I have not been able to find such a big flag with a small budget."¹⁶ In addition to the pride flag, there are several LGBTQ+-related posters on the wall in the back of the classroom. Especially the Purple Friday poster with its bright colors stands out on the grey brick wall.

Besides the small talk between the teacher and me about the open day, the classroom is quiet. This changes when the first bell rings, and I start to hear the students walking up the stairs in the distance. As the first students enter the classroom, it feels like the environment immediately shifts from a standard mathematics classroom to a space that I perceive as full of open conversations, strong opinions, and many different personalities. Not only is the space now not quiet anymore, but the room physically changes as students push the tables against the back wall and place the chairs in an egg-like shape, which opens around the digital board. Slowly, more and more students start entering the classroom. Some of them sit on one of the chairs within the circle, while other students decide to sit on the tables.

As the second bell rings and the GSA gathering officially starts, the teacher welcomes the students but does not sit down in the circle like he usually does. Instead, he grabs a marker and starts writing on the whiteboard next to the digital board. While he writes down the first word, the students stop in their conversations and look at the whiteboard, trying to figure out what the teacher is writing down. As the teacher is writing, the room is quiet, but gasping

¹⁶ Fieldnotes 08-02-2022

sounds along with loud voices start to fill the room as the students read what the teacher has written down. “Maybe you will grow out of it.” is written on the whiteboard and the teacher sits down and asks the students if they have heard this sentence before. The teacher sat down, and the students let each other take turns and closely listen to each other’s experiences with this statement. Similar to some of the other statements that were discussed, the students explain how this is not just something that has been said to them, but also something they have thought about themselves, where they internalized the homophobia, they experienced in their environment. One student adds to this conversation that “even if [my sexuality or gender identity] is something that changes in the future, this is how I currently experience my life. It does not matter if it changes, it is still valid.” To this, the teacher responds that this is a beautiful statement. Two other students are also passionate about the topic and have lots to say. They are two of the older students, around 17 years old, and how they formulate their opinions to the younger students often feels like they are giving advice to their siblings, or their younger selves.¹⁷

¹⁷ Vignette based on GSA meeting participant observation fieldnotes 14-03-2022

GSAs as Safe Spaces

Chapter one gave insights into the Dutch education system, and how schools often struggle with making the school environments inclusive and safe. This chapter will dive into creating safe spaces and how GSAs try to be a safe space for LGBTQ+ students within the context of the Dutch school system that is unsafe. In addition, this chapter will expand on frictions between the GSAs and the school itself, as well as how a space that is meant to be inclusive might not be accessible for everyone.

Shifting spaces

The interlude prior to this chapter gives us a look into what a GSA gathering looks like. There are two main elements that I want to highlight based on this vignette. First, I will explain how a space can shift from a regular classroom that represents the generally unsafe school environment to the GSA space where students feel safe being themselves. Second, this chapter will give insights into how safe spaces can be created and how this is seen within the GSA.

The second paragraph of the vignette highlights how a classroom shifts from a regular classroom to the GSA room, which is seen both by physical and intangible changes in the environment. While there are LGBTQ+ elements such as the pride flag and purple Friday posters in the classroom, the space also changes as the students move the tables to the sides of the classroom and place the chairs in a circle. Because of this physical change, the GSA space represents learning differently compared to the classroom space, where students do not only consume the knowledge they receive from their teacher, but it is more of an interaction between different actors who want to share their knowledge and experience on the LGBTQ+ community. For example, during one of the GSA meetings students were discussing their favorite LGBTQ+ media sources, after which the teacher told me he bought one of the books that was highly recommended by a student.¹⁸

Similarly, during interviews with several students they have expressed the importance of having a teacher within the GSA, especially in the cases where they are also a part of the LGBTQ+ community and can share their life experiences with the students.¹⁹ During one of the interviews, a student spoke about the three GSA counselors at their school and their role in the GSA.²⁰

¹⁸ Interview with a teacher who is a GSA member 24-02-2022

¹⁹ Instagram interviews with students on 22-03-2022, 18-04-2022 and 20-04-2022

²⁰ Online interview with 18-year-old high school student who is a member of the GSA 18-04-2022

Cecile: “Regarding the teachers who join the GSA gatherings, what is your opinion on the presence of teachers during the meetings?”

Student: We have three counselors. One is a heterosexual cisgender woman who is just an LGBTQ+ supporter, so that is cool I guess. The other two counselors are cisgender gay men, and they just have a lot of knowledge on LGBTQ+ issues.

Cecile: What kind of knowledge?

Student: “One of them in particular has told us about his high school experience and how he would have liked to have a GSA growing up, for example when he came out of the closet at 15 years old. He spoke about how he would have liked the support and how there was not really such a thing as education regarding sexuality and gender identity. I think it is really important not only to listen to his experience to understand what it was like in the past, but also because this lack of LGBTQ+ advocacy is still visible in many spaces. So well...I think the knowledge I find the most valuable is the advice they can give, because they have been on this world for a longer time. So I guess that life experience, how they are going through life with their identity and how they are able to be proud.

Where the classroom does not focus on exploring one’s identity, the GSA gatherings provide the opportunity for LGBTQ+ youth to safely explore theirs. In the interview excerpt above, it shows how a teacher can be a role model and inspiration for students.

Additionally, many students expressed that without having teachers who are part of the GSA, it would be more difficult to organize meetings and implement changes in the school, for example when it comes to organizing purple Friday or implementing gender-neutral toilets.²¹ One student talked about this and explained how:

“The teachers organize things with the budget for example. We also had a plan to make a book corner, where everyone in the school could easily find books that contain LGBTQ+ topics. This is then communicated with the teachers so they can carry out the

²¹ Instagram interviews with students on 06-04-2022, 20-04-2022 and 26-04-2022

plan. We do not really have a big influence on the school because we are just students, so those teachers are able to do a bit more and have more impact.”²²

Therefore, while the presence of teachers during GSA gatherings is appreciated by most students, it also seems necessary when it comes to advocating for a safer space outside of the GSA environment.

This necessity of the teachers is something that is important to question, and was a discussion point in some of the high schools I visited during the fieldwork period. While it is understandable that students benefit from different perspectives during gatherings and require the help of teachers when it comes to budgets, it also sheds a light on the way GSAs are viewed by the high school. The fact that the student mentioned above says that the GSA itself does not have a big influence suggests that the school does not understand the importance of the GSA and going into conversations with LGBTQ+ students in order to implement positive change. In addition, this implies that the school does not see the GSA as a tool to make the high school environment more inclusive, but instead uses the GSA to exclude LGBTQ+ students from the rest of the school, in a way that makes the students feel like they are still listened to by the high school. During several conversations with teachers and staff members, this issue of who leads the GSA and who is taken seriously by the school board was raised.²³ I often noticed that teachers were worried that the GSA would not be taken seriously. During one of the participant observations especially, I observed how the teacher that joined the GSA was focused on the organization of future events while the students were focused on socializing with each other, which led to some frustration.

While it is important that the school board sees the importance of listening and working with students from the GSA, it is also important that it is clearly communicated what the goal of the GSA is. Some groups might want to focus on a safe space within the GSA, while others focus more on the general school climate and are more activist. At one high school, a staff member of the care team explained how eventually the goal for the GSA is for it to be led and running by the students, instead of the teachers being the main organizer.²⁴ While many of the students that were interviewed are a member of a GSA that is led by students, at those schools where teachers initiated the alliance and handle communication with the school board, it can be

²² Interview with 17-year-old student who is a member of the GSA 20-04-2022

²³ Fieldnotes 08-04-2022 and 19-04-2022

²⁴ Interview with high school teacher and care team member 13-04-2022

questioned whether it might not work to change leadership if this leads to the GSA not being able to advocate for LGBTQ+ issues outside of the GSA.

The intangible changes that can be seen in the change of environment regards the change of atmosphere in the environment. Where usually the classroom is a space focused on what a course is supposed to teach the students, this space is focused on how the students feel, interacting with those who have similar experiences and struggles when it comes to sexuality and gender, and changes that should be implemented in the school to make the environment safer and more inclusive.

The difference in interaction is not only between the teacher and the students but also between the students themselves. Where in the usual classrooms, students are split up depending on what grade and level they are in, there is no such division in the GSA gatherings. There is one GSA per school and is free to join for anyone who is part of the LGBTQ+ community or considers themselves to be an ally. This means that a 13-year-old *vmbo* student can be a member of the GSA, together with 16-year-old *vwo* students. In addition, while students might feel hesitant to join the GSA, there are little obligations for members. Many students expressed how they appreciate how GSA participation does not have set rules. One student explains how:

“When different topics are discussed, you do not have to participate in every conversation or discussion. And actually, you do not have to talk about anything if you do not want to. You can ask questions or answer other students’ questions, but you always have the choice to do so, which is not usually the case in the classroom of course.”²⁵

Having this space without the regular classroom customs confirms and explains how the GSA meetings are often described as talking groups rather than a high school course. In addition, this shows how as a high school classroom shifts to a GSA gathering, the interactions, obligations and relations shift as well.

While the vignette gives a good depiction of a GSA meeting, I want to elaborate on what is said during these meetings. What particularly stood out to me was the mix of playful and more serious topics. Specifically at one of the high schools I observed, there was a different LGBTQ+ topic that would be discussed in the weekly gathering. It stood out to me that the way in which these topics were discussed was often lighthearted. For example, the students’

²⁵ Interview with 16-year-old high school student, who is a member of the GSA 23-02-2022

favorite artists were discussed, or games were played to get to know each other. What I found particularly interesting here is that quite naturally, these playful conversations led to more serious topics such as what they saw in the news regarding LGBTQ+ rights and violence. While this mix of topics showed how the students were naturally interested in LGBTQ+ news, as conversations between the students often led to these topics without incentives from the teachers, it also showed how within the short time span of a gathering, which is usually around an hour, it is possible to shed a light on many topics. While this is not necessarily a tactic that is applied by the GSA leaders, I would argue that this is a successful way to open up the floor to conversations and should be applied outside of the GSA environment as well.

Creating safe spaces

Safety is often discussed with the use of the term ‘safe space’ and is defined as a space where an individual can express their ideas and feelings regarding topics that might be experienced as sensitive, such as diversity and oppression (Blum 2000; Garcia & van Soest 1997; Hyde & Ruth 2002). In this sense, safety refers to a safe space where one is protected from psychological or emotional harm, rather than physical (Holley & Steiner 2005). According to Boostrom (1998), this harm is “concerned with the injuries that individuals suffer at the hands of society” (339). Originating from the women’s movement of the late 20th century, the concept ‘safe space’ has been mentioned more and more in the social and political sectors (Cisneros & Bracho 2020, 1495). However, safety is not the same for everyone, and what is experienced as a safe space for members of one group, might be experienced as unsafe by another. This means that when creating safe spaces there is this dilemma of on the one hand wanting to create an exclusive space for those who feel unsafe in other environments, while on the other hand wanting to be inclusive to create a community (Cisneros & Bracho 2020, 1495). This concept of safe spaces is used frequently when talking about the LGBTQ+ community, where individuals often feel unsafe due to their gender or sexual identity in heteronormative environments. While this heteronormativity is often not acknowledged (Davies 1997), schools are entangled with heteronormative practices, as seen in the example mentioned in the first chapter.

According to GSA research in the Canadian and American context by Fetner et al. (2012), GSAs provide a safe space for LGBTQ+ students, which is consistent with the fieldwork findings. One student said, “since I have been a member of the GSA, I notice that I

feel so much more comfortable with myself, and I have become a lot more confident.”²⁶
Another student explained that he experienced the GSA as a safe space for LGBTQ+ students as:

“There are people who know how you feel because they have had similar experiences. We do have some counselors whom you can talk to about anything, but not all teachers really understand LGBTQ+ stuff. So, I would prefer to go to someone of my age or your age with similar feelings, and there are a couple of people like that in my GSA.”²⁷

Not only does this example show how a student benefits from having LGBTQ+ peers they can talk to but that I as a researcher was seen as someone who has knowledge and experience on LGBTQ+ topics. I will elaborate on this in the next chapter, which will dive more into individuals as safe spaces.

In addition, Fetner et al. (2012) argues that connections between group members are even stronger in contexts where students deal with strong antigay opinions from their surroundings (199-200). While it might seem odd that students feel safer in safe spaces where the outside environment feels more unsafe, it is likely that in the everyday school environment students feel more closeted and invisible, and therefore feel extra deeply tied when they can connect with like-minded peers. However, this raises the question of what this means for those who do not feel safe enough to even join the GSA. When students already feel unsafe because they are discriminated against due to their race, ethnicity, religion, or class, it is likely that they will not participate in the GSA, which could expose them to more unsafety because of their sexuality or gender identity. While GSAs might promote being inclusive, this element might be one of the explanations as to why many GSAs are predominantly white students.

The learning process

From the participant observations and interviews, it became clear that the GSAs do much more than share experiences. Throughout the fieldwork, I observed how much students learned from each other about different pronouns, gender identities, sexualities, and so much more. It showed me how the GSA can be a community for LGBTQ+ youth and helps them explore their identities.

²⁶ Interview with 17-year-old high school student, who is a member of the GSA 06-04-2022

²⁷ Interview with 15-year-old high school student, who is a member of the GSA 18-04-2022

One of the observations I find particularly telling is that of two of the students who were present in most of the conversations I joined. Coincidentally, the first time I joined this group was also their first time at the GSA, and throughout the weeks I got to observe their participation. In the beginning, I recognized that they were a bit more on the background during group discussions, but that quite soon, they flourished. I saw how open these students were with each other and felt safe to share their thoughts as they navigated their identity. Often, I felt impressed because of this, especially because I had learned how the space outside of the GSA does not provide the same safety as the GSA space. One of the conversations that these students had with each other regarded gender identity. A student who was questioning their gender was talking to some of the other students and mentioned how their mother suggested a boy's name that she liked if that student decided that they wanted to identify as a boy. The way in which this was told was very lighthearted and informal, and some of the other students responded positively, making comments such as 'I really like that name, it suits you!' or 'And what do you think about that, do you want to use that name from now on?'. Not only does this show the trust these students have for each other, but it illustrates how being a member of a GSA is a learning process, also when it comes the ways in which one wants to be supported, and how to support other LGBTQ+ youth.

The students give each other advice, ask the teacher for advice, or the other way around, where the teacher asks students for advice. Where the teachers ask for advice is quite varied when it comes to what the questions are about. Usually, I saw how teachers wanted to check up on the students, for example how they experienced purple Friday, what stood out to them on this day, and what ways to improve would be. During one of the GSA gatherings, the students addressed how changing rooms feel unsafe for LGBTQ+ students and that the school should accommodate these students. Here, the teacher explained how he was aware that for transgender students there was a different changing room that they were allowed to use, but that he and the school had been unaware that changing rooms feel unsafe for cisgender, but non-heterosexual students as well. Again, this highlights how listening to the experiences and opinions of those in the LGBTQ+ community is an important element of GSAs. It shows how the learning process is continuous, and how it is important that schools apply the suggested changes that the GSA advocates for in order to make the environment safe for all students.

In addition, they learn a lot about the LGBTQ+ community and its history from each other. Regarding learning more about sexuality and gender, one student said: "I think the GSA really helped me open up and start thinking about sexuality and gender, especially when you

meet others who have similar thoughts and feelings.”²⁸ Looking back at the first chapter, this seems to align with the core objectives of education set by the Dutch government (Meerhoff 2016). However, it seems that the initiative to implement this in schools comes from a couple of teachers and the students within the GSA, who are likely already more interested and knowledgeable on sexuality and gender topics.

It could be said that the high schools which have GSAs use these alliances to check off diversity from their to-do list, as a way of proving they have now met the needs of all students. Here, it seems that the GSA space, meant to be a safe space for students, only highlights how LGBTQ+ students are excluded within the school environment. While one of the high schools, where my fieldwork was conducted, showed how the ‘higher ups’ of the school see the importance of the GSA and supports it,²⁹ this was a lot less at the other two high schools, where I got the impression that both the GSA teachers and students felt they had to prove the importance of their group.³⁰ Here the paradoxicality of a high school safe space can be seen, where the GSA is meant to support students and in a way protect them from the outside school environment, while it is also expected that this group advocates for a better general school climate, which is made difficult by the high school and overall education system itself.

²⁸ Interview with 15-year-old high school student, who is a member of the GSA 07-04-2022

²⁹ Fieldnotes and interviews with students (23-02-2022 and 24-03-2022), teachers (14-02-2022, 13-04-2022, 20-04-2022, and 24-04-2022), and the vice principal (14-04-2022)

³⁰ Fieldnotes 08-03-2022, 10-03-2022, 11-04-2022 and 19-04-2022

Individuals as Safe Spaces

The previous chapter showed what GSAs look like and how they can embody a safe space for LGBTQ+ students. This chapter expands on embodiment and shows how individuals can embody a safe space. The focus here is to show that individuals can shift roles here and that I experienced how my position shifted during my fieldwork at the high schools. Besides this, the chapter will show how both teachers and students in the GSA embody safety for others in the LGBTQ+ community.

Researching and experiencing embodiment

Today, I took the time to reflect on my position in this research and realized that like the places and people I have encountered in the high schools, my role shifts depending on the situation.³¹ While I find it difficult to give names to these roles, I can describe what they look like. First, I take on the role of the researcher, where I join the GSA meetings and interview different actors to gather data and write about LGBTQ+ safety. Especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, I got the impression that students perceived me as an adult and were a bit hesitant about talking to me. This felt quite formal at times, which is also obvious by the way many students addressed me with *u*, but often later in the conversations switched to referring to me as *jij*.³² Similar to this change of pronoun, I often feel how my role shifts from a researcher to someone who the teachers or staff members see as someone who has knowledge on LGBTQ+ topics and can aid them in improving bettering their GSA. For example, I have been getting questions on what I observe in the GSA gatherings, what I would suggest they do to improve, or where they can get more information on topics such as sex education and dysmorphia.

During my conversations with the students, the shift is from a researcher to someone who is a member of the LGBTQ+ community who they might see as someone with similar beliefs and experiences, and someone who they can trust.

In most of my conversations with research participants, my sexuality naturally came up in conversation, for example when they asked why I am writing my thesis about the LGBTQ+ community, or when I shared some of my own experiences as a queer woman

³¹ Fieldnotes 17-03-2022 and 30-03-2022

³² *Jij* and *u* are both ways to address people in Dutch, where *u* is considered polite and formal, while *jij* is informal.

during the interviews. While I did expect that this would make the students feel more comfortable around me, in some moments I felt especially honored when students told me about their experiences. For example, when students shared traumatizing experiences during their transition, or when students told me about their sexuality while they are still in the closet. To me, this shows how students trust me, and how in a way, I am seen as a safe space for them.

This excerpt from the fieldnotes shows how, while talking to LGBTQ+ students about their experiences within the school, we talked about a lot of topics that can be seen as sensitive. Here I noticed that I as a researcher could be seen as an embodiment of a safe space, but that my role seemed to shift between a researcher and a fellow queer individual. Here, I recognized that as a researcher, many students were more distant, which often changed once the students realized that I am queer and told them about some of my experiences. Therefore, when I was perceived as a queer individual, I was mostly seen as a safe space for the students, which often led to our conversations being more reciprocal rather than a structured interview format. In these cases, the students would be more open about their perspectives on a variety of topics, such as their experiences with homophobia and coming out. Here, the language they used in our conversations was also interesting, where this use of *u* and *jij* symbolizes how during our conversations, there were shifts between a professional interview and a conversation between friends or acquaintances.

One of the most important anthropological insights is how the human body cannot be separated from its lived experience (Mascia-Lees 2011, 2), which means that we need a focus on embodiment. According to Van Wolputte (2004), embodiment is defined as how we inhabit the world, the source of our personhood, our self, subjectivity, and how we are preconditioned to intersubjectivity (259). While psychological approaches focus on the divide between the individual and the collective, Csordas (1994) takes a more phenomenological approach and depicts the self as an undefined process that engages with the world (9). Here, the world can take different shapes and through one's interactions, one can be objectified as an individual with one or multiple identities. Therefore, as the self is defined through interactions with others and is dependent on the context, one's role can change and, in this case, can embody safety in particular spaces or around LGBTQ+ individuals.

Additionally, I had an interesting experience during one of the GSA meetings I attended.³³ As in the interlude, this gathering was supposed to be led by a teacher, but this role shifted onto me when the teacher was absent, where I felt my role shift from researcher to ‘stand-in’ teacher.

Teachers as the gatekeepers

Besides how I as a researcher can embody safety, the teachers, especially those who guide the GSAs, embody safety. According to Fassinger (1995), safe spaces are facilitated by teachers who are approachable and supportive. The GSA teachers that were interviewed all explained how this was one of the most important things for them. As shown in the interlude, they try to do this with both physical and immaterial elements. While physically decorating their classrooms with LGBTQ+ elements, they mainly focus on being approachable to the students, even outside the GSA hours. One of the teachers who helped setting up the GSA explained how he feels that it is important to provide a safe space to the students, especially at his school, as it is quite conservative.³⁴ He argued that “people often pretend that they are tolerant and accepting, but in reality, they are ‘consciously unaware’ of certain things in our society.” Elaborating on this, he explained how nowadays, it is almost impossible to not see where changes are needed, and how minorities are excluded in the school environment. Therefore, this teacher feels you must actively be denying how individuals are treated unequally to protect yourself or the institution you present from having to change. Being consciously unaware is thus described as the easy way out of not implementing an intersectional approach to policies and the classroom environment, and in the case of LGBTQ+ youth, reinforcing the heteronormativity of the high school environment.

“When I read more about feminism I discovered intersectional feminism, which felt like an explosion of knowledge. It felt like I have been looking at this tiny box, not realizing all the things beyond this small group of white feminists. And this school is such a homogenous group [of mostly white students and teachers], which makes it even more important that everyone opens their eyes”, he added.

³³ Fieldnotes from GSA gathering 21-03-2022

³⁴ Conversation with GSA teacher 08-03-2022

Relating this back to the first chapter, this teacher's quote shows how important it is to be aware of the intersectional approach that is needed in the education system. It is unfortunate that teachers often lack knowledge on intersectionality, and that this is only applied by them when feminism and inclusiveness are already personal interests.

Where the educational program lacks inclusiveness for LGBTQ+ students, this is also seen in the education that teachers receive, which does not properly prepare them for their job. According to Macintosh (2007), there is a need for improved teacher education and a need for educators to engage in conversations regarding the curriculum (41). This does not mean that teachers should be the ones to solve the problems of homophobia and discrimination, but rather, a start to creating a better environment for students would be to acknowledge the heteronormative system.

Interestingly, this embodiment of a safe space goes beyond the students, as teachers are a safe space for their colleagues as well. During one of the interviews, a teacher described how teachers trust him to ask LGBTQ+-related questions and see him as an expert on the topics.³⁵ In addition, several of his colleagues have come out about their sexuality to him, which he said was quite surprising but that he was glad that this safety extends beyond the students even when this was not planned.

Embodying unsafety

Unfortunately, students express how there are often only a couple of teachers who they trust, and there are many who make them feel uncomfortable during class and in the general school environment. A recent study on youth in the Netherlands reported on how teachers treat their students (Kaufman & Baams 2022). This report highlighted how among the students who voiced being bullied, 14% of the heterosexual students explained that this bullying came from their teachers, while this is 24% among LGBTQ+ youth (Kaufman & Baams 2022, 102). In addition, this contrast is even larger when it comes to gender identity, where 13% of bullied cisgender students reported bullying by teachers, compared to 43% of gender minority students. During one of the GSA meetings I attended, I asked the students to what extent they felt safe at their school, which led to students sharing some of their most traumatic experiences in their school.³⁶

³⁵ Interview with teacher who is a GSA member 24-02-2022

³⁶ Fieldnotes from GSA gathering 19-04-2022

One student elaborated on trusting teachers and staff by talking about how they are treated by saying:

“Because I have alopecia, other students treated me differently and comment on my appearance. The school then allowed me to be an exception to the rule and let me wear a hat. However, apparently, they did not inform all staff members because when I was sitting in the cafeteria, one of the staff members pulled my hat off in front of everyone, which was extremely hard for me. I am not comfortable with having no hair, and that is why I now wear a wig. I know this is a personal example, but it is also part of the reason why I do not feel comfortable to talk about my sexuality, as I already feel like I am treated differently I do not want to add to this. Other students might experience this unsafety, but then because of their sexuality or gender.”

It is interesting how this student considers joining a GSA as making yourself vulnerable to more unsafety. Where in the case of this student they cover up having alopecia by wearing a wig, one’s sexuality or gender identity is also either hidden by the student or made invisible by the heteronormative education system.

Another student added that teachers kept misgendering him and made comments such as “but you are actually a girl, right?”, and another added how their sexual assault was not taken seriously by the school. The attending teacher took these stories very seriously, however, these stories show how ultimately, the general school environment needs to be safe for complete safety within the GSA as well. While most students did consider their GSA to be a safe space at this school, the teacher explained how when she does not attend, other students are likely to come and harass the GSA members. Here, we see how a space can shift from unsafe, which is the general school environment, to safe in the GSA gathering, and back to an unsafe space when the GSA is harassed. This is telling on the role of individuals when it comes to safety, where one individual might embody safety for LGBTQ+ students, another might embody unsafety. The construction of safe spaces is therefore an ongoing process, where teachers are seen as ‘safe bodies’ and are gate keepers to the GSA space, where they exclude unsafe bodies such as the harassing students.

Students embodying safety

In addition to teachers, students themselves are the biggest embodiment of safety for their fellow students. The interlude shows how two of the older high school students talk about LGBTQ+ topics and are giving their opinion and advice on different situations. Giving back to others in the LGBTQ+ community is a reoccurring theme, where students want to help others who are exploring their identity and educate students, teachers, and parents on LGBTQ+ topics.

In one of the conversations I had with two LGBTQ+ students, they explained how having other queer friends helps someone to feel safer being themselves.³⁷

Student 1: Sometimes I do find it difficult to deal with [homophobia] because I know some people really struggle with that. I had that for a long time, and I did not feel the need to share my sexuality with others. Then I came into this warm queer bath, that is what it felt like, and I thought... well, this is the time to share.

Student 2: Pretty much our entire friend group is queer, except for two people.

Cecile: Does that make it easier to open up about your sexuality?

Student 1: Yes, but it is also... from the individuals who are 16 or 17 years old, we pretty much collected all the queer ones from the school into our group. That is really special, I do not think that this is the case in everywhere, which I do notice sometimes. For example, in some of the other friend groups I am in, I would not openly say anything about my sexuality, even though they do know I am queer. And in this friend group I would, because I can just be more open with them, as I know they have similar experiences. So that definitely makes it easier.

This interview excerpt shows how a student feels safe expressing their LGBTQ+ identity in an environment that is a safe group for LGBTQ+ individuals, while not expressing this identity in another group. While one might question why a student would consider this other group friendly and welcoming, it is important to consider other identity elements that might be important. Here, it might be the case that multiple minority LGBTQ+ youth feel some sense of

³⁷ Interview with two students, both 16 years old 24-03-2022

invisibility within the GSA or general LGBTQ+ community because of their ethnicity or religion and therefore chooses to explore different elements of identity in different social circles.

Besides finding a community, advocating for the LGBTQ+ community is something that many of the participants regarded as important to do. This shows how the LGBTQ+ students try to bring LGBTQ+ safety outside of the GSA space. During the interviews with several students, one student explained how he attempt to embody safety for students outside of the GSA by giving presentations about sexuality and gender for different classes.³⁸

Student: [Coming out] was not very scary, but it did feel a bit weird to be the one who has to break through that norm. When I got to high school there was no one who told me information about the LGBTQ+ community, so I decided to do it myself, even though I did not know everything about it at the time. I think it really helps not only the people who are thinking about their own sexuality or gender identity, but also people who might dislike the LGBTQ+ community.

Cecile: Why does it help those outside of the LGBTQ+ community?

Student: I think a lot of people see all the letters of LGBT and do not know what to do with it. Having a presentation, you see someone in front of you, it makes it more real. And you can also ask questions of course. Also, by engaging with them and explaining how to ask someone's pronouns and why it is important, it just all becomes clearer for them. And because the hetero and cis people are a large part of the school, it is important that they are educated if we want to create a safe space for the LGBTQ+ students. And for the students who might be thinking about joining the GSA, it helps if they already know someone, it makes that step smaller.

It is interesting how this student, and many other participants, see how there is a need for LGBTQ+ support and put themselves in a vulnerable position to try and fill this gap. It shows how the process of creating a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth needs initiative taken by the students themselves, where they are simultaneously wanting to have a safe space, while also making themselves vulnerable to harassment in order to reach out to other LGBTQ+ youth.

³⁸ Interview with 15-year-old high school student 07-04-2022

Online Safe Spaces

Outside of the physical world and the high school environment, students often use the online world to communicate with each other. This contact is through various social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok. This chapter will show how social media platforms can embody a safe space for LGBTQ+ high school students, how the online space is connected to their schools, and how an unsafe school environment can reflect unsafety in the online space.

In the field of anthropology, there are many misinterpretations regarding the reality of the online world (Frömming et al. 2017, 15). One of the reasons for this research gap is the fact that the process of digitalization was underestimated and has a large and fast-growing influence on societies (Miller 2016). Often, the distinction is made between the online world and the ‘real’ world, which is misleading, as both environments are strongly connected (Frömming et al. 2017, 13) and this separation ignores the fact that what happens online is still real (Boellstorff 2016; Hine 2000) and affects the physical world (Gershon 2011). It is therefore important that this chapter considers what happens alongside the physical school environment and how this intersects with the online world. In 2019 it was reported that of the Dutch youth, 93,5 percent of the 12- to 18-year-olds, and 98,4 percent of the 18- to 21-year-olds use the internet almost daily, of which 94,6 percent of the 12- to 18-year-olds and 98,9 percent of the 18- to 21-year-olds use it to access social media.³⁹ According to Hillier and Harrison (2007) and Pascoe (2011), adolescents use media to explore their identities and behaviors, and possibly to get to know lifestyles they cannot practice in the physical world. This particularly applies to LGBTQ+ youth, where one might only feel safe presenting their sexuality or gender identity online. This is supported by Russell (2002) who describes how:

“The Internet has provided sexual minority youth with a safe place in which to explore identities, come out to one another, and tell their stories...Such free spaces characterize the ‘virtual communities’ of sexual minority youth that have recently emerged, creating opportunities for the development of relationships that are not supported in the other contexts of their lives.” (261)

³⁹ Retrieved from CBS: <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/83429ned/table>

In addition, research has shown that suicidal thoughts and attempts were especially found among transgender and gender-diverse individuals who were assigned female at birth (Thoma et al. 2019). According to Austin et al (2020, 37), having a safe online community can have a lifesaving impact on transgender and gender-diverse youth. This research reported how the online world helped youth escape from the unsafe and violent physical world and experience belonging and hope for the future. From the conversations I had with many students from the GSAs, there were a couple of reoccurring elements that came up regarding social media usage. Here, it could be concluded that their motivations were to gain knowledge on LGBTQ+ subjects, explore their identities, and find people with similar experiences.

LGBTQ+ knowledge

As mentioned in the previous chapters, access to information about the LGBTQ+ community can be limited, and schools are lacking in this department. Some of the reasons for this lack of resources is because of heteronormativity that students encounter in the physical world, such as in school and home environments (Pascoe 2011). A couple of research participants elaborated on this regarding sex education in high schools, which is mostly focused on heterosexual relationships and reproduction. While students expressed that schools need a more inclusive sex education program, they can already get a lot of knowledge from the online world, in a way that also stays more anonymous. During one of the participant observations, in which different media and LGBTQ+ role models were discussed, the Netflix series *Sex Education* was discussed.⁴⁰ The students discussed how the show was both fun and educational, and how it was refreshing to watch a show that not only talks about different sexualities and gender identities, but that sex was portrayed as something that should be enjoyable, instead of just being meant for reproduction. When the education system fails to educate students on sexuality and gender, media such as this Netflix series can therefore be extremely valuable for LGBTQ+ youth. Not only that, but it aids those outside of the LGBTQ+ community as well, seeing as it can help diminish prejudices surrounding gender and sexuality and could translate into the physical school environment.

Social media was also often mentioned by students. In one of the interviews where I talked with two students, we discussed TikTok and what influence it has on them and their peers. One of the two students felt that you can see a big difference between those who had gotten to know their sexuality and gender identity before the rise of TikTok, and those who

⁴⁰ Participant observation GSA gathering 21-02-2022

started thinking about their identity during the peak of TikTok and the COVID-19 pandemic. She explained how:

“When everything for school was online many people came out or started to deepen their LGBTQ+ knowledge. You can see a big difference here, also by the way they speak about the queer community. Even though my parents are queer, it is not like I had the information that 13 years old of today have, which I think is cool that they know so much about different sexualities and gender identities. For example, I had seen a drag queen before, but I did not know anything about trans people at that age.”⁴¹

This also became apparent during the participant observation. While a lot of parts of this meeting were lighthearted, where for example, students discussed their favorite LGBT+ songs, the variety of role models that the students discussed shows the knowledge that the student was talking about in the interview. Elliot Page, a trans actor known from the series *Umbrella Academy*, and Billy Porter, from the Netflix series *Pose*, were two of the role models that were discussed. When discussing the show *Pose*, the students talked about how it is a historic series that they see as educational as it shows some of the LGBTQ+ black history and the aids pandemic. Here, they started talking about Marsha P. Johnson, the trans black woman who threw the first stone during the stonewall riots in New York. Interestingly, the two teachers had not heard of her, which shocked some of the students. Here, a couple of students mentioned how they had learned a lot of this from TikTok and discussed how they use social media to learn more about LGBTQ+ history. This shows how LGBTQ+ youth use social media platforms to learn more about the LGBTQ+ community, which they usually receive through the people they follow and see as role models (Bond, Hefner & Drogos 2009). Linking this back to safety, (social) media platforms can be seen as a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth to learn more about the LGBTQ+ community, as well as see representation. This representation is often not found in the physical world. As mentioned in the first chapter, Dutch course materials are often aged and do not use inclusive language. The online world therefore provides LGBTQ+ youth with the resources they need and lack in the physical world. Another student also mentioned what social media did for them by saying that:

⁴¹ Interview with 16-year-old student 24-03-2022

“Nowadays you see a lot of queer people on social media who are expressing themselves unapologetically, which also helped me. My thoughts here were like... well they are accepted by their friends and family so I will probably be accepted too, which honestly helped me a lot when I wanted to come out.”⁴²

Consequently, what is provided by the online world can be translated into the physical world. It shows that when students have a safe environment online, where they learn about other queer experiences, they might feel inspired and less intimidated to come out in the physical world.

Online connections

Regarding the exploration of one’s identity, students expressed that while they learn a lot from the GSA, a lot of this information can be found online as well, where there is this advantage of anonymity and less pressure compared to the physical world.⁴³ This is supported by the research of Lucero (2017), who explained how in their research, 68% of the participants preferred online communication rather than communicating in the physical world, as social media is experienced as a safe space, and cases of cyber bullying are quite rare (124). The online space is also where students from the GSA keep in contact with each other outside of school hours. Where GSAs are run by the students, I have noticed that there is more online communication between GSA members compared to GSAs created by teachers.⁴⁴ Here, various topics are discussed between members, from socializing to organizing the next GSA gathering. While a lot of this is done through WhatsApp, other platforms through which GSA students communicate with each other are Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok. One student explains how they coped with being harassed because of their appearance and being part of the LGBTQ+ community in the physical world through the use of social media:⁴⁵

Cecile: You say that getting those comments does not bother you, why is that?

Student: Well, I think you get used to it, but for me it helps to talk about it with other people, who I know I can trust. Talking to them makes it easier for me to deal with it.

⁴² Interview with 16-year-old student 25-03-2022

⁴³ Interview with 17-year-old student 06-04-2022

⁴⁴ Fieldnotes 29-03-2022 and 19-04-2022

⁴⁵ Interview with 13-year-old student 22-03-2022

Cecile: And who are those trustworthy people for you?

Student: For a very long time I was in a Snapchat group with many LGBTQ+ people, also from our GSA. I would chat with them, tell them about what I experienced and then... it was just such a big, warm group, and they are all so nice. You just know that they want to help and that feels good.

Thus, online platforms help students explore the LGBTQ+ community and their own identity and make friends online with similar experiences. Giving that the online world is a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth, it is important to learn from this space, and try to replicate this in order to create a safer physical world, such as the school environment. An example of how the educational system could apply this, is by using social media as a tool to reach LGBTQ+ youth, which could create a neutral safe space where students feel comfortable to learn about LGBTQ+ matters, ask any questions and voice their opinion on changes needed within the high school they attend.

Another aspect to consider here is that as LGBTQ+ youth often feel safer in the online world, this could mean that social media is potentially even more important for LGBTQ+ youth who fall into multiple minority categories, for example due to their race, ethnicity, disabilities, and class. Similar to the education system, mainstream media outlets often ignore the stories of women and people of color (Williams 2015). While this is a worldwide issue, this is especially seen in the United States, where for example in 2015, a lot of media attention was given to LGBTQ+ issues, but the murder cases of transgender women of color were extremely underreported (Williams 2016). Fortunately, with the growth of social media and its usage, social media has made many stories of violence and survival of people of color more visible (Williams 2016) and is used as an important tool to break the barriers of traditional media. An example is the hashtag #SayHerName that was spread to advocate for the protection of transgender women, which was able to reach a wide audience on social media.

In addition, networks emerge through social media, such as the #GirlsLikeUs movement, which is a movement led by transgender women of color (Jackson et al. 2018, 884). This network facilitates collective support within this community, as well as working towards an increased visibility of transgender women that does not only call for their safety but helps in shifting the image of transgender people in the media, where violence against transgender individuals is often trivialized and misinformation is spread (Hughto et al 2021, 33). Having this sense of community online shows how it can be a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth. In the

case of the #GirlsLikeUs movement, members of the community supported and encouraged each other on Twitter, which helps in shaping solidarity between transgender women of color and according to Bailey (2015) provides both emotional and psychological support.

Therefore, for LGBTQ+ students of multiple minorities who do not feel safe joining GSAs at their high schools, the online world and especially social media offer safety from the physical world.

Besides hearing the online experiences and perceptions of the students I talked to, I noticed how students felt more comfortable with online communication when it comes to being a participant in a research project. When I was introduced during in-person GSA meetings, many of the students responded enthusiastically about the research topic and being a participant. However, when I approached the students to ask for an interview, I was met with a lot of hesitation. Here, many students declined to be interviewed, or simply did not show up at our scheduled time. For the students who did want to partake, the first questions I usually got were: will it be anonymous, and where will it take place? It took me a while to start thinking about why this was the case, but when I started searching for participants online it soon became clearer to me. When I posed my search for participants on Instagram and this was reposted by the GSA Network account, my inbox got overflowed with messages from students who wanted to help. I realized that while my participants would be anonymous in the written thesis, they are likely to experience the school environment as a space that will never be fully anonymous. Here a student might feel like other students or teachers will hear about the interview, or that I would share insights from the interviews with their teachers or parents. In a different, online environment, I recognized that students felt more comfortable sharing very personal experiences, with this likely being so partly because the interview felt more anonymous.

A substantial amount of the interviews that were conducted with students took place through the contact I had with them online, through Instagram. There are many reasons why searching for research participants online can be helpful, such as geographical distance to the participants, physical disabilities, embarrassment and unwillingness to meeting in person with a researcher (Ayling & Mewse 2009, 566). When the online environment is experienced as a safe space by someone who feels unsafe in the general high school environment, having interviews in the online environment helps reach more LGBTQ+ youth, especially those who are concerned about anonymity. This is acknowledged by previous research, where it was observed that when participants feel safe with the familiarity, comfort and the safety of the internet, they appreciate the availability of online interviews (Mann & Stewart 2000). When

this is the case, participating in a research project is more likely to be experienced as relaxed and informal (Madge, O'Connor & Wellens 2004).

While some researchers might argue that through online interviews the researcher is not able to pick up and analyze all conversation cues due to the lack of body language, this was not problematic within this research. As argued by Seymour (2007), “we do not just leave the body behind as we enter cyberspace, and ‘real life’ is not somehow automatically more real than virtual experience (1194).” Therefore, I found that the online interactions I had with the participants are no less useful than the interviews in the physical world. Even if some conversational elements were missed in the online context, the fact that many participants felt more comfortable in this environment makes this method well-founded.

Here, students might have also felt more in control over what they wanted to share, as they could choose whether to turn on their camera or not, in what environment they would want to call, and what details they wanted to leave out to ensure their anonymity, such as the city they live in and the school they attend. While both the physical and online world were useful for me to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ students, it is therefore important to note that the choice of space has an influence on the conversation and the research.

However, being exposed to different kinds of people online also comes with its disadvantages. In one of the interviews, two students explained the online reactions their GSA received in response to purple Friday.⁴⁶

Student 1: While we had advertised purple Friday and asked people to wear purple clothing, only the GSA members did this, which made us stand out extremely on this day. A lot of people got berated and felt uncomfortable because of this.

Student 2: They would even name call if you were simply wearing a purple face mask.

Cecile: What were these reactions like?

Student 2: Well, I mostly heard this from other GSA members. The fact that I was walking with a group of people the entire day is probably why I did not experience it myself.

⁴⁶ Interview with 12-year-old student and 17-year-old student 20-04-2022

Student 1: On TikTok I saw a lot of posts with weird homophobic captions, where students had filmed the school or some of the students that wore purple that day. Also, I manage the GSA's Instagram account and there we got many hateful comments and strange private messages.

This shows how an unsafe school environment can extend to the online world, where in this case homophobia is spread on social media platforms and the safe space that GSA members try to create through Instagram is damaged by harassment. Therefore, while online can be a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth to explore their identities and learn more about the LGBTQ+ community, the online world can also be an extension and a reflection of the unsafe and heteronormative physical world. As mentioned in the previous chapters, schools and the general education system fail to make LGBTQ+ students feel safe in the physical school environment. When it comes to the online world, it becomes even more difficult for schools to support students that are harassed, as little can be done besides blocking specific accounts. Therefore, while it is important to acknowledge the positive influence of the online world on LGBTQ+ youth, I argue that when schools have no consequences for bullies in the school environment, this behavior will continue to the online space, where there is even less opportunity for adults to step in. The perceptions that LGBTQ+ students have of interventions confirms this, as many students feel that in the cases students do address harassment, little is done to improve a student's safety.

Conclusion

Gender and Sexuality alliances in high schools are established to create a safe space for LGBTQ+ high school students within the generally unsafe school environment, due to the lack of clear inclusion policies set up by the Dutch government. This thesis explored the notion of safe spaces and analyzed how different people and places can embody LGBTQ+ safety. The purpose of this thesis was not only to explore the Gender and Sexuality Alliances but rather to offer an anthropological lens on LGBTQ+ safety and what this looks like in the larger context of the Dutch education system, arguing that this system lacks an intersectional approach. Here, it is important to look at what safety and safe spaces mean, where we do not only discuss physical safety or violence but analyze safety within its sociocultural context. Therefore, the question this thesis focused on was: *How is (un)safety experienced by LGBTQ+ students within high school Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) in the region of Breda and Tilburg, the Netherlands?*

Looking into the context of the Dutch education system, this thesis explained how the high school environment is considered an unsafe space and excludes students based on sexuality, gender, race, and ethnicity. Due to this, the high school environment is heteronormative, and as policies are not adapted enough by the entire system, it becomes difficult for GSAs and LGBTQ+ students to create a safe space. Navigating the unsafe space, GSAs provide safety to LGBTQ+ students, where they are surrounded by individuals with similar experiences, can exchange advice with others, explore their sexuality and gender identity, and advocate for the safety and inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals. Through the fieldwork, I discovered how LGBTQ+ high school students try to explore their sexuality and gender identity in safe spaces, of which the GSA is one of the environments where they work on creating such a space.

Where the GSA embodies safety, so do various other individuals and spaces. Within the school environment, teachers and students themselves embody safety, where the teacher's embodiment shifts more as they take on the role of teacher, GSA counselor, and fellow queer person. In addition, the online world is often regarded as a safe place for LGBTQ+ youth, where they benefit from being anonymous and the rise of LGBTQ+ peers they can connect with through social media platforms.

Through the data I collected, I found that having such a space is important for LGBTQ+ youth, and how both in the physical world and the online space they try to find this. In addition,

this research highlights how changes are needed in the education system and school policies to guarantee that high schools are a safe space for all students. While GSAs provide positive change for the students, their impact in the school is often still through the actions of their supporting teachers, indicating that many schools do not see the importance of listening to the students, and might be treating the GSAs as an easy way to prove an inclusive school environment

Yet, the safe space a GSA tries to provide for LGBTQ+ students is often not a safe space for everyone. The whiteness of GSAs that was mentioned in academic literature is something that I recognize in the GSAs I observed, which brings us back to questioning the inclusiveness of safe spaces and who is to blame for this. Are GSAs responsible for the exclusion of student groups, such as students of color, or is the larger Dutch education system that excludes minority students to blame? To work towards a safe school environment, an intersectional approach needs to be applied, with clear policies and guidelines for high schools to implement.

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