

3-9-2012

## It's a Support Club, Not a Sex Club: Narration Strategies and Discourse Coalitions in High School Gay-Straight Alliance Club Controversies

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It's a Support Club, Not a Sex Club: Narration Strategies and Discourse Coalitions in  
High School Gay-Straight Alliance Club Controversies

by

Skyler Lauderdale

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Sociology  
College of Arts & Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:  
March 9, 2012

Keywords: social movements, narratives, youth activism, education, discourse coalitions

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to all the young people, school personnel, and allies who work tirelessly to ensure a safe school environment for all students regardless of sexual orientation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

It takes a committee to finish a thesis, so I must first give due thanks to my committee members. Dr. Cavendish, you helped me turn a thought into the thesis found on the following pages. Your guidance as chair—in class, in impromptu visits to your office, and in frantic late night e-mails—has proved invaluable throughout every aspect of this thesis. Dr. Mayberry, you helped me stay grounded throughout the whole process and your vast knowledge of the literature on GSAs has been very useful. Dr. Benford, your enthusiasm, support, and constructive comments helped make the thesis stronger.

I must also thank Dr. Donileen Loseke for her assistance with research methods and preparing the findings. Other faculty members—Ms. Christina Partin, Dr. Shawn Bingham, and others—provided encouragement throughout. Thanks to my cohort, other members of the Funded Four, for helping me in hard times and making me smile and laugh throughout this whole crazy process. We really are the best cohort ever, and I will always remember the good times we had. Thank you Veronica Doughman and Mary Catherine Whitlock for reminding me I could do this. Finally, huge thanks to my family and other friends for their continual support. I love you all very much.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	iii
Abstract	iv
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Theoretical Background/Review of Literature	4
A Partial History of LGBT Youth Activism and GSAs	4
Getting by With a Little Help From Friends: Adult Supported Efforts to Promote and Support GSAs	7
Incorporating Narratives	9
‘Locating’ the Setting in Narratives	11
Setting Difference and Morality	12
Discourse Coalitions in Social Movements	14
Chapter Three: Data and Methods	16
Data Sources	16
Analysis of Data	18
Chapter Four: GSA Controversy in Okeechobee, Florida	20
Whose Who? People Production and Meaning Work in Okeechobee	22
Yasmin Gonzalez	22
School Personnel	23
“Gay Youth”	24
Small Town and Religious Morality	25
A Club for Tolerance or Sexual Experimentation?	27
Chapter Five: GSA Controversy in Currituck County, North Carolina	31
Discourse Coalitions and People Production in Currituck County	32
Margaret Smiley	33
ACLU	34
Local Elected Officials	35
GSAs as Sexual Recruitment Clubs	37

Resolution and Aftermath	38
Chapter Six: Discussion and Implications	40
References	47
Appendix A. Okeechobee Controversy News Sources	54
Appendix B. Currituck County Controversy News Sources	58

## **LIST OF TABLES**

Table A1. List of Okeechobee Controversy News Article Sources	54
Table B1. List of Currituck County Controversy News Article Sources	58

## **ABSTRACT**

School reform efforts, such as those to form high school gay-straight alliance clubs (GSAs), are often met with resistance by school personnel and local community members. Using a sample of newspaper articles related to school reform GSA controversies in two Southern states (N=83) drawn from an initial sampling frame of GSA controversies receiving newspaper coverage between January 2006 and August 2011 (N=631), I use narrative analysis—including a discourse coalitions approach—to identify common themes of resistance in the narration of characters, plot, setting, and morals which GSA members and allies must overcome to successfully form GSAs. Substantively, I locate four major narration strategies in my analysis of the stories used to support or oppose GSAs: 1) character construction strategies that make positive or negative claims about stakeholders including school personnel, the GSA club, and its members, 2) counter narration strategies which attempt to portray the GSA as promoting sexual activity, 3) counter narration strategies which seek to oppose the GSA based on an idea that a GSA club and its members will recruit other students to become gay or lesbian, and 4) setting-talk narratives based on notions of ‘small town’ or Christian morality to show why or why not a GSA is wanted or needed. Methodologically, I locate one major finding for future scholars of narratives: the demarcation of setting-talk in



narratives which story the setting as implicitly containing the morals of the story. In my particular cases, setting-talk implicates acceptable religious or moral boundary expectations of the local citizenry. Overall, this thesis serves as a call for scholars to examine narratives in education and social movement research while informing researchers and educators of common resistance themes in GSA formation.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTRODUCTION

*Geography Club*, a young adult novel by Brent Hartinger (2003), recounts the story of a group of teens who form a high school support club for LGBT<sup>1</sup> students in their “smallish” fictional hometown (Hartinger 2003:12).

“What kind of club?” Terese said. She sounded suspicious. “You mean like a gay-straight alliance?” I’d heard about gay-straight alliances at other schools. Other big-city schools, that is. There were no gay-straight alliances in our town, maybe not even in our entire state, and there weren’t going to be any anytime soon. If Reverend Blowhard could get so worked up over something as innocent as a teacher talking about contraceptives in a health class, it wasn’t hard to imagine what he and his cadre of concerned parents would do over the existence of a gay-straight alliance at the local high school. The mushroom cloud would be visible for miles around.

“Well,” Min said, “we don’t need to tell anyone that’s what kind of club it is. We’ll just say it’s a club.”

“You have to,” Ike said. “You have to say exactly what you are. They can’t deny any club, not as long as you follow all the rules.” (Hartinger 2003:60-61)

After a moment of secretive conversation hidden deep in the stacks of the school library, the students agree to start a club, but they decide they need a name that hides the true intent of the club’s creation for fear of facing condemnation in the school and the community.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the terms LGBT youth, LGBT students, and sexually marginalized youth interchangeably. Also, I use youth, young adult, and adolescent interchangeably to refer to high school aged students.

“Hold on.” Ike was barely breathing too. “There’s still one problem. If we start a club, it has to be open to every student in the school. That’s the policy.”

“Too bad we can’t say it’s a gay club,” Terese said. “That’d keep everyone away.” It was a joke, but it didn’t sound like one, because she sounded so bitter.

Kevin hadn’t said anything in a while, and I figured it was because he’d changed his mind and now he didn’t want anything to do with this club thing. Or me.

So I was surprised when his face suddenly lit up, and he whispered, “I got it! We just choose a club that’s so boring, nobody would ever in a million years join it!” He thought for a second, “We could call it Geography Club.”

We all considered this. This time, I saw smiles break out all around.

Geography Club, I thought. No high school students in their right minds would ever join that.

In other words, it was perfect. (Hartinger 2003:60-63)

Fearing the local social consequences of starting a gay-straight alliance club (GSA), the adolescent characters in Hartinger’s novel decide to call their group ‘Geography Club.’ Metaphorically, this moniker reflects the major theme in the events of the novel: the students’ desire to remain undetected while they come to know, navigate, and, in the end, subvert the acceptable moral boundaries and contentious social terrain of their school and community related to their sexuality (Brown 2006).

In much the same way as depicted in the fictional account by Hartinger, high school students who attempt to form GSA clubs in schools located in towns like the ‘smallish’ one in *Geography Club* often face stigmatization and even warlike resistance from fellow students, teachers, administrators, and community members (Biegel 2010, Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). This understanding forms the foundation for the scope and aim of this thesis. I seek to more fully understand the ways in which narration strategies and discourse coalitions are employed by supportive actors (including students, newspaper editors, and American Civil Liberties Union staff) and oppositional actors

(including unsupportive school personnel, teachers, and community members), and other stakeholders to further or stifle, respectively, the GSA.

Narration strategies, discourse coalitions, and key story elements, I argue, are especially important for research in local social movements, such as one to form a high school GSA. This thesis will present findings based on narrative analysis of two GSA controversies which took place in ‘smallish’ Southern settings to uncover common narration themes in public controversy surrounding GSA formation and activities. First, I will examine literature from multiple disciplines to construct a theoretical framework grounded in social movements and education topics related to GSA controversies followed by an introduction to the literature on narrative identity, which informs my methodological approach. Following a section which discusses the data collection and research methods, I present findings from a narrative analysis of newspaper coverage of Southern GSA controversies. Finally, I discuss the theoretical and methodological significance of my findings and implications for future research. Since literature suggests that LGBT youth who attend schools with active GSAs report feeling safer at school, earn better grades, and are less likely to skip classes than LGBT youth who attend schools without GSAs (Walls, Kane, and Wisneski 2010), it is paramount we conduct further research about the controversy surrounding the establishment of school GSAs.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND/REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **A Partial History of LGBT Youth Activism and GSAs**

LGBT youth groups, some in conjunction with support or encouragement from straight youth allies and adults, have been organizing since at least 1966 (Cohen 2005, Russell et al. 2009). While the beginnings consisted mostly of disconnected and scattered grassroots efforts (Cohen 2005), in recent years the movement has successfully mobilized youth supporters and increased momentum within schools through GSAs and other means (Mayberry 2006, Fetner and Kush 2008). Various school, community, and nationally based groups have used social movement tactics including the formation of newsletters, other print and electronic media, and work to incite public discourses about issues faced by sexually marginalized youth such as discrimination. Together these individuals and groups seek “to counter isolation, achieve personal or political change, and define sexual identities” (Cohen 2005:81, Miceli 2005). Further, sexually marginalized youth beginning to organizing in schools “marks a moment in which young people are stepping forward to claim support for lesbian and gay rights on their own terms” (Fetner and Kush 2008:118).

The first initiatives of the now national GSA movement began in New York City where the first secondary school club for gay students and straight allies was formed by students in 1972 (Cohen 2005). New York City was also chosen as the site for the Harvey Milk High School, a school founded in 1985 by the Hetrick-Martin Institute to provide a safe and inclusive learning environment for LGBT students (Miceli 2005). And in 1984 in Los Angeles Virginia Uribe—a psychologist and school counselor—started Project 10. Project 10 existed to provide a support group in schools for youth to meet and discuss issues they faced with harassment during school hours and problems with their lives outside of school (Uribe 1994).

The first GSAs, a type of school club now commonly defined as existing “to create a more visible cultural and structural change that might improve the environment of fear, intolerance, and discrimination of LGBT people in which all students existed” were formed at two elite private schools in Massachusetts in the 1980s (Miceli 2005:27). Many of the first GSAs, in a manner similar to Uribe’s Project 10 in Los Angeles, were begun by supportive counselors and teachers to support LGBT students or as part of larger district or statewide initiatives (Griffin et al. 2004, Russell et al. 2009).

Researchers have described four major roles that GSAs generally serve within schools: “counseling and support; ‘safe’ space; primary vehicle for raising awareness, increasing visibility, and educating about LGBT issues in school; and, part of broader school efforts” (Griffin et al. 2004:11, also Valenti and Campbell 2009).

Although GSAs may take different forms in each school, these youth groups have spread rapidly across the nation. In 2004, roughly 1,000 GSAs were registered with the

national organization Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) which provides organizational resources and institutional support to GSAs and schools across the country (Griffin et al. 2004). Today, the number of GSAs hovers around 4,000 (GLSEN N.d.).

Today, GSAs are primarily initiated by students to organize LGBT youth and their straight allies, although a teacher or staff member is required to serve as an adult or faculty advisor—at least in public schools (GLSEN N.d., Russell et al. 2009, Valenti and Campbell 2009). Although there are mixed recollections about the naming of GSAs, the successful framing of these clubs as alliances between both LGBT youth and their heterosexual peers promoted the ideas that “gay and lesbian issues should be of interest to everyone” (Miceli 2005:28, also see Cortese 2006 and GLSEN N.d.).

Fetner and Kush (2008) examine the relevance of social context in their analysis of factors which led to early adoption of GSAs nationwide. Their findings show that “the social contexts in which young people live have a major impact on their ability to form GSA groups” (Fetner and Kush 2008:125). Further, their research marks the first study on a national scale to examine any factors that “extend beyond the high school itself” in explaining the social forces at play in the successful formation or suppression of GSAs (Fetner and Kush 2008:126). GSAs in their study were least likely to be found in Southern or rural areas. Much of the diffusion of GSAs, then, has occurred in urban or suburban areas in the Northeast and West (Fetner and Kush 2008). They place their research within academic discourses concerning social movements; however, their explorations call for further understanding of the power of schools and the community to

shape and either allow or stifle activism and organization of GSAs—factors my findings expound upon.

**Getting by With a Little Help From Friends: Adult Supported Efforts  
to Promote and Support GSAs**

The Massachusetts Safe Schools Program, established in 1993, was formed to promote strategies to improve “the safety and educational outcomes for gay and lesbian students” in the Massachusetts secondary school education system (Miceli 2005:30). Notably, this program is the largest and most funded state education program for LGBT youth. Along with Project 10 in Los Angeles (Uribe 1994), the Massachusetts Safe Schools Project marked the genesis of governmental, school counselor, and administrator efforts to provide full inclusion of LGBT students in the social landscapes of the schools.

Following the successful organization of the first GSAs in schools, Kevin Jennings, who served as faculty advisor for one of the first GSAs at a high school in Massachusetts, formed the organization now known as GLSEN in 1994 to assist in issues faced by gay and lesbian educators. Over time GLSEN’s focus shifted to its present role “helping communities to improve the lives and educational experiences of LGBT students” (Miceli 2005:33). GLSEN also gained visibility by promoting networking between GSAs across the country. As Miceli (2005:33) writes:

In 1998, the organization began its efforts to register GSAs in high schools throughout the country so that they could be linked together to share information and experiences. This registry of GSAs became the first way to measure the rate of expansion of the GSA movement.



GLSEN's GSA registration project, initially known as Student Pride USA, was organized in 1998 to promote interconnectivity between GSAs to leaders in their communities and with each other (Miceli 2005). Presently, GLSEN hosts the most detailed listing of GSAs nationwide and provides a multitude of resources for GSAs and student activists. There are guides for students who wish to form GSAs in their schools, pre-planned curricula and activities for GSAs to use within their clubs, schools, and communities, and information for training educators and community members to raise awareness of issues LGBT students face (GLSEN N.d., Miceli 2005). Informed by social movement theories, Miceli writes that GLSEN's mobilization strategies of a "students rights agenda" have been effective in crossing territorial boundaries to unify and strengthen GSAs as well as to "raise consciousness, and build the power of numbers" (2005:110, 116).

The GSA Network, based in California, is another larger organization established by Carolyn Laub to promote networking among student activists for the promotion of social change within the GSA movement (Miceli 2005). Although the GSA Network was formed years after GLSEN and the Massachusetts Safe Schools Program, it is primarily notable for its focus on youth activist leadership through the active operations and continued goal formation of the organization in mobilizing and training youth to promote social change within schools across California (Miceli 2005). GSA Network was, and is, instrumental in shifting the role of the California GSAs from being oriented more toward individual counseling and support to visible

student activism within schools and local communities for social and structural change for LGBT students and allies.

Adult supporters, including GSA advisors, become involved in supporting sexually marginalized youth for a number of reasons (Valenti and Campbell 2009), and use a number of diverse strategies to advocate on behalf of LGBT youth (Graybill et al. 2009). In previous research, GSA advisors often supplied rich narratives when interviewed about why they became involved. GSA advisors tell stories about close friends or relatives who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender and their “protective attitude toward LGBT youth” (Valenti and Campbell 2009:234). They talk of their worries about being fired, losing credibility with other educators or community members, or of “being accused of recruitment to the ‘gay lifestyle’” (Valenti and Campbell 2009:238). Narratives, then, help adults make sense of their GSA movement involvement. Continuing sections will look more closely at the role of narratives broadly but also their involvement in social movements.

### **Incorporating Narratives**

“Narrative analysis,” Riessman states, “is grounded in the story of the particular” (Riessman 2008:11). Scholars in the multidisciplinary study of narratives are interested in formal story elements such as plot, characters, and the moral of the story as well as “the social role of stories: the ways they are produced, the ways they are read, the work they perform in the wider social order, how they change, and their role in the political process” (Plummer 1995:19). Stories may be told for a wide variety of purposes across many contexts: to construct Arabs as enemies of the United States (Merskin 2004),

to serve as cautionary tales used by street-based sex workers to avoid or rationalize risk (Roche, Neaigus, and Miller 2005), to construct continuity in the face of debilitating illness (Rimmon-Kenan 2002), or to make sense of one's autobiography (Bruner 1987) to name a few.

Although scholars of narrative and narrative identity historically developed a body of literature distinct from social movements studies, some scholars are beginning to incorporate narrative methods into their research on social movements. Within social movements, including those to form GSA clubs, narratives can serve as a call to action and mobilization (Polleta 2006) or justify state legitimation and support for a particular issue (Tatum 2002). Giving due attention to narration strategies and narratives in social movements is important, Davis (2004) writes, "since analysis of narrative. . . illuminates core features of identity-building and meaning-making in social activism. It also sheds new light on movement emergence, internal dynamics, and public persuasion, and addresses cultural aspects of activism that get short shrift in movement research" (p. 4).

Specifically in education research, where other scholars have used narrative methods in research, narratives have been shown to influence how school personnel think about constructed types of students (Stein 2001), how proponents of multicultural education "have created identities that reflect a melodramatic view of the moral order, with victims, villains, and heroes" (Nelson-Rowe 1995), or, as the findings of the current study suggest, how narratives are used to construct sexual minority students as disrupting the moral order of small town communities. For all the discussed reasons, narrative

analysis is a fruitful research method for uncovering and understanding common themes of dissent students face as they attempt to form school-based GSAs.

### **‘Locating’ the Setting in Narratives**

All stories must take place *somewhere*, known as the setting or the scene, and often the somewhere plays a pivotal role as stories unfold. After all, where would Thoreau be without Walden Pond? Literary theorists and scholars have written on the role and significance of the setting in literature (Dianotto 2000, Glen 1990, Mallory and Simpson-Housley 1987, Nordby Gretland 1994), sometimes within a field of inquiry called American Literary Regionalism (Fetterley and Pryse 2005, Jackson 2005). Proponents argue “it is region itself that deserves thoughtful consideration for its potential in studies of American literature and culture” (Jackson 2005:1). Much more than a mere backdrop, region and place become the settings where culture is produced, negotiated, or collected by story characters. Regional differences and place-identity, then, are a constructed reality with tangible consequences for characters and plot in narratives—at least in narratives presented as fiction.

Social science scholars have largely only tacitly considered the setting as an important story element; however, some existing literature—albeit disconnected—does explore this topic in one form or another. Coulter and Smith (2009) find that ‘placing’ the events of a story is “[e]ssential to story construction” (585). Similarly, narrative scholars have written that setting and scene “[have] been at times shown to be equally or even more pivotal for narrative structure than temporality” (Georgakopoulou 2003:415). Others see story setting as working in interaction with time to produce an orientation

strategy used by storytellers and interpreted by audiences to give meaning and insight in narratives (De Fina 2003). Baynham argues for understanding “a constitutive relationship between space/time orientation and narrative action in discourse” and researching “the ways that narrative actors and narrated selves are produced in time/ space” (2003:348). Finally, Tuan describes how language is often used to construct places and assign meanings to them (1991).

### **Setting Difference and Morality**

Zerubavel (1991) writes that “[s]eparating entities from their surroundings is what allows us to perceive them in the first place” (p.1). Zieleniec adds that “[t]he social world....is one which makes its own space” (xii). Social interactions, then, are inextricably linked to intersubjectivity on an ordered social plane of space, place, and time. That is, all interactions happen in some place and at some time and within “mental fields” (Zerubavel 1991:15) or “different spaces of play” (Zieleniec 2007:xiii) which “are created, produced or designed for particular purposes” (Zieleniec 2007:xiii).

Negotiating understandings of Euclidean, cultural, emotional, or social distance are integral here. Through lumping and splitting practices we construct meaningful social differentiations through spatial and boundary distinctions. Much like the physical walls of the built environment, it is through differentiation of ‘mine’ and ‘your’s,’ ‘today’ and ‘yesterday,’ or ‘here’ and ‘there’ that we assign meanings and construct the world around us. Although temporality is a commonly accepted necessity for proper plot development, setting, place, and spatial distance are less often discussed, under-theorized, and less often to be given due treatment in narrative identity research.

Still, it is in examining setting and constructed difference that we begin to see how moral and emotion codes can become embedded within the setting or scene. Extending Zerubavel's work to include forms of collective identity, the collective construction of the 'small town' as an "insular self that is clearly cut off from one's surrounding environment" facilitates the construction of a particular set of acceptable ideological, social, and moral ideals (Zerubavel 1991:13-14). 'Real' cultural morals are, at least in the empirical cases I research later in this thesis, packaged within the narrative setting—echoing the findings of literary theorists discussed previously. Although it might be argued that social norms or morals exist only in social interactions regardless of setting, I argue—in line with others—that people “cop[e] with space” and “do with space” in extremely meaningful ways (Lussault and Stock 2010:11). This “mental geography has no physical basis but we experience it as if it did” (Zerubavel 1991:15).

The “mental zoning” (Zerubavel 1996:429) of small town residents, I will argue, not only constructs boundaries around the 'small town' in the form of an 'us' versus 'them,' it constructs an expected morality for those living within its boundaries, since people “tend to downplay differences within [their] own group as well as among others, as evident from the extremely broad categories” they use to assign meanings to themselves and others (Zerubavel 1991:17). In downplaying personal differences, a typified 'average small town citizen' character is constructed and serves a sort of moral yardstick all embodied citizens are compared to. Much to the disapproval of the students attempting to form a GSA in these kinds of locations, this constructed person is churchgoing, conservative, and, of course, heterosexual. The “small town” cultural code,

then, which I describe, holds dire implications for students attempting to form GSAs or enact school change.

### **Discourse Coalitions in Social Movements**

A discourse coalition can be understood as “a group of actors who share a certain construct. . . .presented as a narrative, or *story line*, in which elements of the various discourses are combined into a more or less coherent whole. . . .” (1993:45-47, emphasis in original). Further, as Hajer—likely the primary proponent of analyzing discourse coalitions—writes:

“A discourse coalition is thus the ensemble of a set of story lines, the actors that utter these story lines, and the practices that conform to these story lines, all organized around a discourse. The discourse coalition approach suggests that politics is a process in which different actors from various backgrounds form specific coalitions around specific story lines. Story lines are the medium through which actors try to impose their view of reality on others, suggest certain social positions and practices, and criticize alternative social arrangements.” (Hajer 1993:47)

Hajer writes substantively about environmental movements and public policy. Other extant literature uses the term in analyses related to Australian public policy on global climate change (Bulkeley 2000), ecological modernization and political opportunity structures (Van Der Heijden 1999), or as contributing to a methodological framework for researching narratives in public policy (Jones and McBeth 2010). However, few scholars outside of these areas—and few American scholars at all—have

considered the implications or usefulness of a discourse coalitions approach to researching narratives in social movements or school change.

Hajer identifies three general advantages of using this approach for understanding narration strategies and the “process of giving meaning to the vague and ambiguous social world” (Hajer 1993:48). Taking a discourse coalition approach to research on narratives in policy and social movements where argumentative meaning is constructed and conveyed has three advantages according to Hajer:

“ . . . (1) it analyzes strategic action in the context of specific sociohistorical discourses and institutional practices and provides the conceptual tools to analyze controversies over individual issues. . . .in their wider political context; (2) it takes the explanation beyond mere references to interests, analyzing how interests are played out in the context of specific discourses and organizational practices; and (3) it illuminates how different actors and organizational practices help to reproduce or fight a given bias without necessarily orchestrating or coordinating their actions or without necessarily sharing deep values.” (Hajer 1993:48)



## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **DATA AND METHODS**

#### **Data Sources**

As the first step in researching high school GSA controversies, I searched newspaper archives for more information about current and recent events. I chose to use Newsbank, a large database which searches 549 local, regional, and national newspapers for data collection. An initial search for “gay-straight alliance” yielded 2,932 articles, letters to the editor, regular or guest columns, and editorials published between January 1, 2006, and August 20, 2011. Since high school GSA adoption, local controversies, legal battles, and club activities became the primary concerns of this project, sources which did not fit these content criteria were excluded. Commonly excluded sources included content about high school honor graduates who were members of, among other clubs, their school’s GSAs, articles which merely list all the extracurricular clubs available at a particular school, articles concerning non-high school GSAs (e.g. middle school, college, university, or community GSAs). 631 articles published in 169 newspapers from 36 states and the District of Columbia fit the initial inclusion criteria set for this project.

I analyzed data by “close reading” to identify pivotal GSA controversy stories to focus and expound upon (Loseke 2011:258). Immediately I was drawn to controversies

in small towns particularly in the South as being ripe with narration strategies worthy of researching—locations Fetner and Kush noted were less likely to have established GSAs (2008). Empirical data for this thesis, then, center on GSA club formation controversies which occurred in the small Southern towns of Okeechobee, Florida and Barco, North Carolina: the setting of Okeechobee High School and Currituck County High School, respectively. I examined a total of 83 newspaper articles<sup>2</sup>, including editorials and letters to the editor. In the case of Okeechobee High School, I sampled 51 articles published over a 20 month period from November 2006 to July 2008—the day after the initial lawsuit was filed until shortly after the judge’s final ruling in the legal case. In the case of Currituck County High School, I sampled 32 articles published over a three month period from September 2006 to November of the same year with one notable exception—an article published in October 2007 which looks at the controversy one year after the initial incidents took place.

I chose the cases and the stories I present for three major reasons. First, these two controversies received a significant amount of local and regional newspaper coverage—over 13% of the newspaper articles in my large initial sampling frame. Second, I feel the news coverage of these cases allow me to explore the roles of narration strategies and discourse coalitions surrounding social movements. Finally, given the growing body of literature on GSAs is moving toward a better account of common themes in public controversy surrounding GSA formation, the contributions in my analysis of these cases

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendices B and C for a complete listing of newspaper article data included in the analysis for this paper in the cases of Okeechobee, Florida and Barco, North Carolina, respectively.

to the obstacles clubs face as they engage in school reform efforts are significant and timely (Mayberry, Chenneville, and Currie, forthcoming). Although the stories I present are not the full range of stories presented in the 83 articles I analyzed from my larger sampling frame, these stories are representative of the kinds of stories discussed in these articles. While I have attempted to present an accurate sample of stories present within my data in my analysis, it must be noted that other stories do exist in the data I collected.

Although most articles concerning the controversies in these two locations were printed by newspapers in their respective state, the sample includes news stories which were printed by out-of-state newspapers including *The New York Times* and others. The narratives located within newspaper sources, and a few minor mentions in extant literature (Biegel 2010, Newton 2010, and Whittaker 2009), represent the only readily available sources for study of these particular controversies.

### **Analysis of Data**

The newspaper data I have collected have prominent themes of movement discourse, public persuasion, and cultural aspects of activism—themes a narrative analysis approach is capable and appropriate to study. Within each case selected, I used narrative analysis methods to identify key story elements including the characters, plot, intended audience, the morals, and the scene or setting in which the story takes place (Loseke 2011). The remainder of the thesis will present findings concerning GSA controversies at Okeechobee High School (OHS) in Okeechobee, Florida and Currituck County High School (CCHS) Barco, North Carolina. I will briefly discuss the key story elements of each case and present findings from my narrative analysis related to the

public controversy over GSA formation. Finally, I will discuss the implications of this paper for future research in narratives or social movements and future topics for research.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **GSA CONTROVERSY IN OKEECHOBEE, FLORIDA**

One notable case of controversy surrounding GSA establishment occurred in the state of Florida. Okeechobee High School senior, Yasmin Gonzalez, met resistance even before she approached her principal about forming a gay-straight alliance club in September 2006. Despite following proper protocol for forming a new school club as directed under school district policy—locating a faculty advisor and writing a club charter—Gonzalez was unable to receive approval for the club by Principal Toni Wiersma (*The Palm Beach Post* November 16, 2006). Wiersma “refused to recognize the club, citing contradictory reasons” (*The Palm Beach Post* November 16, 2006). Initially, Wiersma said the “school didn’t allow any non-curricular clubs on campus. When Gonzalez pointed out there were several others, Wiersma reportedly said the school had too many” (*The Palm Beach Post* November 16, 2006).

The principal’s initial rejection of the GSA led Yasmin Gonzalez, the club’s founding president, to contact the ACLU, which filed suit against Principal Wiersma and the Okeechobee County School Board (OCSB) on Yasmin’s behalf. The ensuing legal battle stretched out over a 20 month period from November 2006 to July 2008. The lawsuit sought immediate school and district approval for the club to form as a non-

curricular student group allowed to meet on campus. Further, the lawsuit alleged that Wiersma and the OCSB violated the Equal Access Act in failing to recognize the club.

The Equal Access Act, passed by Congress in 1984, states that public secondary schools receiving federal funding which allow even one non-curricular club (e.g. a chess club) to meet on campus must afford the same privileges to *all* other student-formed non-curricular clubs as well. The Act states that all non-curricular clubs must be treated the same way regarding their ability or inability to post signs on campus, use the school's intercom system, or participate in club activities and field trips, among other things. Initially, the Equal Access Act was intended to protect the rights of student Christian clubs such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes to meet; however, in recent rulings courts have ruled the same provisions apply to GSA clubs as well (Biegel 2010).

Ultimately, the lawsuit ended with judgment in favor of Gonzalez and the GSA club. Judge K. Michael Moore's ruling stated that the school district<sup>3</sup> "violated the club's First Amendment rights by refusing to recognize it as a non-curricular student organization. . . .[and] is statutorily obligated by the federal Equal Access Act to grant the club the same rights that other non-curricular student groups in public schools have" (*The Stuart News* July 31, 2008).

I located three major narration strategies in my analysis of the stories used to support or oppose the GSA: 1) "people production" (Loseke 1993:207), "meaning work" (Snow and Benford 1992:136), and what I call setting-talk where narrators make claims about and define the GSA club, school personnel, and the town of Okeechobee, 2)

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<sup>3</sup> Gonzalez and the ACLU had previously withdrawn lawsuit claims against Principal Wiersma in a hearing on February 28, 2007 (*Ocala Star Banner* 2007).

published counter-narratives which aim to reject or discredit the club and its members based on notions of ‘small town’ and religious morality, and, finally, 3) attempts to demonstrate or refute whether the club stands in violation of the school districts abstinence-only sex education policy or promotes “premature sexualization” of students (*Fort Pierce Tribune* January 12, 2007). Each of these interrelated findings is discussed in turn below.

### **Whose Who? People Production and Meaning Work in Okeechobee**

A major component of the narrative plot found in the data deals with the “rhetorical practice of ‘people production’” (Loseke 1993:207) or “meaning work” (Snow and Benford 1992:136) in which stories fight to define or give meanings and narrate characters or actors in particular ways. These constructed stories are used, in this case, to give reason or support to whether the GSA should be allowed to form. In this subsection, I focus on the construction of GSA founder Yasmin Gonzalez, school personnel, and the disembodied type of person known as “gay youth”. Another character, the typified ‘average small town citizen’ is discussed elsewhere in the thesis and in a proceeding subsection, as this character is narrated almost inextricably from notions of small town and religious morality (see next subsection).

*Yasmin Gonzalez.* Gonzalez, the founding president of the OHS GSA, figured prominently in the newspaper articles which discuss the legal battle and contentious politics related to this particular case. Although narratives sometimes portray Gonzalez as an “attention seeker” (*The Orlando Sentinel* December 3, 2006), she is more frequently narrated in supportive articles as an innocent youth standing up for justice and

protecting other students “in the face of taunts and condemnation” (*The Star-Ledger, NJ*, April 7, 2007) even though, as a graduating senior, she will unlikely be at OHS long enough to see the benefits of the club. She agrees, stating “. . . at least other students will have someone to talk to, which is something I didn’t have” (*The Star-Ledger, NJ*, April 7, 2007). “You shouldn’t have to grow up feeling like you’re alone,” Gonzalez believes, “It was just terrible. I saw that something was wrong and I’m trying to change it” (*Ocala Star-Banner* January 2, 2007). In the quote below, she describes feelings of loneliness and bullying and her hopes for the GSA:

“When I was going through middle school and early high school, I had a lot of people bothering me,” she said, explaining why she thinks a Gay-Straight Alliance is important. “But I didn’t talk about it, mainly because I didn’t have anyone to talk to. I just wanted it to be a place where people could go and talk about things without having to worry.” (*The Palm Beach Post* April 7, 2007)

*School Personnel.* Many of the newspapers from which I collected data implicitly or, occasionally, explicitly took sides with Gonzalez and the GSA members in published editorials. These editorials commonly criticize the school district for banning the GSA, bring to the forefront the legal realities of the case with respect to previous cases won by GSAs, and stress the infallibility of the Equal Access Act. Therefore, school personnel most often are constructed as ignorant in their treatment of Gonzalez and other members of the GSA. OHS student Heather Zipperer states that she feels school personnel are embarrassing themselves by taking it this far. “It shouldn’t be such a big deal,” she says. “Those kinds can’t help who they are. And it’s wrong to tell them they’re wrong” (*The Orlando Sentinel* December 3, 2006). ACLU attorney Robert Rosenwald echoes her sentiment: “The bottom line is Okeechobee administrators had a moral and legal



obligation to obey the law and stop sending the signal that their gay and lesbian students are second-class citizens. . . .” (*The Orlando Sentinel* December 3, 2006). Journalists agree, arguing that Gonzalez’s lawsuit with the school district is just, as she is standing up for students’ “right[s] to an education in an environment free of harassment” (*The Palm Beach Post* December 2, 2007).

“*Gay Youth.*” In sharp contrast, narratives about disembodied “gay youth” authored by school personnel and the school district’s legal counsel attempt to portray sexual minority students as sexually active or forming the GSA to “promote homosexuality and sexual activity. . . .” or sexual experimentation (*The Orlando Sentinel* December 3, 2006). As stated by Barbara Weller, one of the district’s attorneys, the school district’s “concern has always been the potential for sexualization, that the topics discussed would perhaps lead to increased sexual experimentation” (*The Palm Beach Post* July 31, 2008). Further, “gay youth” are seen as attempting to expose other ‘morally pure’ students with obscene or adult materials, as evidenced by the school district’s desire “to prevent contact by underage students with adult-only material” (*The Palm Beach Post* November 8, 2007). “Gay youth” are also sometimes narrated as being diseased, as evidenced by the district’s attorneys bringing in expert testimony on the “[n]egative health effects of homosexual sex” (*The Palm Beach Post* November 8, 2007). Finally, the district portrayed “gay youth” as bullying other students and questioned whether the GSA would “‘actually promote discrimination and harassment’ against students who believe that homosexuality is immoral or that it can be successfully prevented by ‘appropriate mental health counseling’” (*The Palm Beach Post* April 27, 2007).

## Small Town and Religious Morality

During her sophomore year at Okeechobee High School, Yasmin Gonzalez says a teacher told the class gay people “shouldn’t be alive.”

The next year she and her girlfriend were barred from buying a couples’ ticket to the prom because, she says she was told, two girls dating isn’t “*traditional*.”

Those incidents and her friends detailing verbal abuse from other students and instructors led Gonzalez to start a Gay-Straight Alliance in September. She said she hoped to promote tolerance in a *place* where she had found very little. (*The Stuart News* November 16, 2006, emphases added)

The moral of this story, as told by Principal Wiersma, other students, and school personnel, seems to be that gay students have no place (often literally) where they can be visible or active in their “traditional” community—a “place” where LGBT youth are often unwelcome (*The Stuart News* November 16, 2006). The narrative setting of this particular story, the small conservative central Florida town of Okeechobee, becomes a central component of the constructed narratives located in newspaper articles about the controversy.

When Yasmin Gonzalez began to form a GSA, school officials were quick to suggest the club goes against the small town morality in Okeechobee:

“School superintendent Pat Cooper and other school officials quickly weighed in. . . .saying GSAs would promote sexual activity and offend the conservative values of Okeechobee, a town of 5,500. . . .Judging from reaction by local ministers and letters to the editor in the local paper, many Okeechobee residents agreed. They called Gonzalez an abomination in the eyes of God and urged the ACLU to leave “our nice little churchgoing town alone.” (*South Florida Sun-Sentinel* April 7, 2007)

Here the setting, the small town of Okeechobee, is narratively described by residents as a “nice little churchgoing town” (*South Florida Sun-Sentinel* April 7, 2007).

Quite interestingly, this narrative description of the setting accomplishes more than

describing the physical attributes of the town, it communicates and affirms the prescribed Christian moral standards of which all ‘upstanding’ citizens must abide by and concerned citizens fight to protect. Further support for this argument is provided by school district superintendent Patricia Cooper, in an interview with a religious newspaper, where she “said she’s happy ‘conservative family values’ remain strong in the town” (*Ocala Star-Banner* January 2, 2007).

Other narratives authored by local residents play similar roles in describing the GSA in opposition to small town morality. For example, a town resident tells a reporter “A Gay-Straight Alliance ‘is not a message you want to give your kids.’ The father of three said most people feel the same way in this ‘small, hick town’” (*Ocala Star-Banner* January 2, 2007). Here, it is affirmed that the interviewee, 31-year-old Dave Mangold, who we are told has three children, speaks as a representative of the typified ‘average resident of Okeechobee,’ saying that others agree that the GSA has no place in their community. Mangold also invokes religion, stating: “In the Bible it says it’s an abomination [to be gay]” (*Ocala Star-Banner* January 2, 2007).

The strong negative reaction from local residents prompted one reporter to write that Gonzalez “exposed deep conflicts over homosexuality in this Bible Belt town of 5,500” (*The Orlando Sentinel* December 3, 2006). Religion, again, comes into play as reasoning behind the dissent of the club. In another narrative in the same newspaper article, Gonzalez is portrayed in light of these notions of small town and religious morality:

“She’s been called an abomination to God, a sinner who’s going to hell, an attention-seeker bent on disrupting the tranquility of this rural cattle town on the

North shore of Florida's largest lake. Yet Yasmin Gonzalez, a 17-year old senior at Okeechobee High School, has no intention of backing down." (*The Orlando Sentinel* December 3, 2006)

In the above narrative, religious talk is connected to disrupting both the peace and moral expectations of the "rural cattle town" of Okeechobee (*The Orlando Sentinel* December 3, 2006). Here the notion of the town setting is used in conjunction with the religious themes to suggest that Gonzalez and others' actions to form a GSA disturb the order of the town itself. In another example of this, residents urge the ACLU, which represents Ms. Gonzalez in court, "to go back to Washington, where people are more tolerant, and leave our nice little churchgoing town alone. . . ." (*The Orlando Sentinel* December 3, 2006).

This subsection examined the constructed characters and plot in this empirical narrative before presenting findings which suggest that through what I call setting-talk, or telling of the setting or the scene—a key element of analysis in narratives—codes of morality are concurrently produced. Here, Christian morals were constructed through talk of the town of Okeechobee. To the intended audience of this narrative, the typified 'average citizen of Okeechobee,' these notions of Christian morality are often guiding principles used primarily to define or separate the small town setting from other possible settings i.e. the 'bustling metropolis.' The manner in which residents describe Okeechobee provides considerable insight into the appropriate moral standards that GSA members and sexually marginalized youth are seen as violating.

### **A Club for Tolerance or Sexual Experimentation?**

"The objection is not to a GSA, per se. The objection is to the premature sexualization of the students. . . . "We all agree that school boards can draw the

line,” said [school district attorney] Gibbs. . . . “If someone says ‘We want to start the Young Terrorists club,’ clearly that may not be in the best interest of the school board. ‘The Young Prostitutes [club] -- that’s where we draw the line.’” (*The Miami Herald* January 20, 2007)

As the above quote mentions, perhaps the most contentious narration in the case of the public controversy over the GSA at OHS relates to the goals of the club. Attempts were made by school personnel and the school district’s legal team to discredit the GSA or portray it in a negative light. Yasmin Gonzalez, her ACLU attorney Richard Rosenwald, and supportive allies devote considerable attention debunking these claims by plainly stated that the club will be formed to provide support for harassed students and prevent discrimination. In the earliest article published about the controversy, Yasmin Gonzalez states:

“If you’re gay in our community, you’re going to have harassment,” said Gonzalez, 17. “The Gay-Straight Alliance would help with the discrimination and there would be a lot of support for people.” (*The Stuart News* November 16, 2006)

In an article published exactly one year later, after the club is pressured by the school district to change its name and rid itself of the GSA moniker, Gonzalez’s ACLU attorney states: “From the beginning, the purpose of the club has been to prevent harassment and discrimination against gay students” (*The Palm Beach Post* November 16, 2007). Demonstrably, the GSA’s narrative relaying the club’s purpose remained steady from the beginning, still, the school district and their attorneys use narration strategies which misrepresented the club’s activities and aims on numerous occasions in an attempt to ban the GSA from meeting.

Likely the most popular narration strategy used by dissenters to reject the club surrounds the claim that the GSA is some kind of “sex club.” Although the data do not offer a concrete explanation for how this theme of dissent materialized, it is perhaps a reflection of the narrative character construction of the disembodied person known as “gay youth” as sexually active. According to David Gibbs, the school board’s attorney, the lawsuit is “not about gay rights but about allowing discussion of sex at a high school. The alliance is a ‘sex-based club,’ . . .” Gibbs believes (*Ocala Star Banner* March 19, 2007).

After a period of contradiction in the reasons given for the club’s initial ban, the school’s stance concentrated on the idea that allowing the club would violate school district policy related to abstinence-only sex education (*The Palm Beach Post* November 16, 2006). Superintendent Patricia Cooper sums up this argument, stating:

“My position was then and remains that we are an abstinence-only district, that our clubs are primarily dealing with curriculum or curriculum-related clubs and organizations and we would decline the request [to establish a school-sanctioned GSA],” Cooper told the paper. “We are an abstinence-only district and it’s abstinence from any kind of sexual behavior, whether it’s heterosexual or bisexual or homosexual, whatever it is.” (*Ocala Star-Banner* January 2, 2007)

This idea, that GSAs are in opposition to school district policy, led the school board to approve a new policy in a thinly veiled threat to get rid of the OHS GSA and prevent other GSAs from forming in the school district. This new policy prohibited “sexually oriented clubs and all groups that are based on sexual orientation” (*The Stuart News* October 10, 2007). Superintendent Cooper applauded the new policy “saying it will strengthen. . . existing policy. . . [and] ‘assure that student clubs and organizations do not interfere with the School Board’s abstinence-only sex education policy’” (*The*

*Stuart News* October 10, 2007). Regardless, this argument was rejected in court. In his final ruling on the case, Judge Moore stated that “the School Board. . . failed to show it oppose[d] the Alliance for reasons beyond ‘a desire to avoid the discomfort and unpleasantness of tolerating a minority of students whose sexual identity is distinct from the majority of students. . . .’” (*Fort Pierce Tribune* July 31, 2008).

## **CHAPTER FIVE:**

### **GSA CONTROVERSY IN CURRITUCK COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA**

After several instances of students putting gum on her locker at Currituck County High School in North Carolina, Danielle Smiley began searching the GSA Network website for information on organizing a club “to do something to put a stop to the misbehavior” (*The Daily Advance* October 4, 2006). After forming a constitution and locating a faculty advisor, the students met with Principal Harper Donahue and asked for formal permission to start a club. Although Principal Donahue did not initially deny the club, over a month passed before the club gained official approval after an intense local controversy which resulted in the school board amending its clubs policy.

Early on the school board was aware of the Equal Access Act and their requirement to provide equal access to all non-curricular student clubs. Janet Taylor, Currituck County School Board member stated: “The Constitution says we have an Equal Access Act - if you allow one [student club] you have to allow all,” she says. “Personally I don’t like to see [a Gay-Straight Alliance], but if I’m going to uphold the position I’m in I have to uphold the law” (*The Daily Advance* October 15, 2006). Ken Soo, the school district’s attorney, even explained to concerned citizens who packed into the first school



board meeting where the club was discussed that the Act will likely determine the school's actions. According to *The Daily Advance*:

“[The school board] ‘can’t discriminate against students’ right to form a club because that club happens to support a view different from the community’s or even school board members’. He said the right to free speech ensures students’ right to create a Gay-Straight Alliance, and hinted that it’s likely the club will eventually be approved.” (*The Daily Advance* October 4, 2006)

Throughout the controversy, newspaper coverage focused primarily on school board proceedings, interviews with Danielle and her mother Margaret Smiley, a group of vocal religious leaders, and a number of letters to the editor. One major finding in this case concerns the formation of “discourse coalitions” (Hajer 1993:45) of actors and their subsequent attempts to ban or support the GSA. Other findings indicate a common theme of narrative resistance to the club and its members based on an idea that the GSA will serve to recruit students to become gay or lesbian.

### **Discourse Coalitions and People Production in Currituck County**

Findings again indicate that the “rhetorical practice of ‘people production’” (Loseke 1993:207) or “meaning work” (Snow and Benford 1992:136) composed a key aspect of the narrative plot in ways similar to those in case one.

However, narratives in this case were found to revolve around two major coalitions of actors. A coalition of religious citizens expressed outrage over the club’s formation and attempted to keep the club from working, while a coalition of supporters worked to debunk the religious coalition’s claims and get the club approved. Each coalition attempted to perpetuate stories about key characters in ways which provided evidence for their intended outcome of establishing or banning the GSA, respectively.

*Margaret Smiley*. “It hit me very hard,” to hear about her daughter Danielle’s sexuality, Margaret states, and she admits that she initially “struggled with what God said about homosexuality” (*The Daily Advance* October 21, 2006). Throughout the news coverage of the CCHS GSA controversy, Margaret’s story is constructed as a person who is both Christian and supportive of the GSA and its president: her daughter Danielle. Although she believed she “would have disowned her [daughter]. . . .preaching at her 24/7,” or made her leave the home upon hearing the news of her daughter’s sexuality, Margaret emerged as one of the GSAs biggest supporters. Given that the religious coalition is the major enemy of her daughter’s GSA club, her work for the support coalition disseminates the idea that local citizens can simultaneously be a ‘good upstanding Christian’ and still support the GSA.

Smiley criticizes the religious coalition for its treatment of her and her daughter. According to an interview published in *The Daily Advance*, “While Smiley said she anticipated some degree of harassment, she didn’t expect her and her daughter’s closest friends to desert them. “They’re treating us like we’re the walking plague,” she said (*The Daily Advance* October 21, 2006). Still, she is quick to follow with her daughter’s successes: “She’s doing well. She’s maintaining her grades” (*The Daily Advance* October 21, 2006).

Margaret wishes the religious coalition would see her daughter as a person, rather than a troubled or sinful teenager causing an uproar, and leave her and her family alone:

“It hurts, Smiley said. It hurts when people say things about her daughter, when they point and whisper, when they blame Smiley and her husband for Danielle’s homosexuality.

It hurts that when some people look at her, they just see a gay person, Smiley said. They don't see a teenager who spends too much time in front of the computer and on the phone. They don't see the good student who wants to go to college and become a history teacher or the girl who likes to read mythology and listen to classical music.

'I wouldn't wish this on anyone,' Smiley said. But, 'this is my baby. I'm not going to feed her to a bunch of hungry wolves.'" (*The Virginia-Pilot* November 11, 2006)

*ACLU*. Although the ACLU never pursued any legal action in this case, the group sent a letter to the school board outlining the legal precedence of the Equal Access Act and affirmed the rights of the students to form the GSA. Members of the religious coalition wrote letters to the editor to bash the ACLU for a variety of reasons. One letter by Louis Talmadge Mead states that the "equal rights thing means if another student decided to form a club called 'How to Rob a Bank' the ACLU would support that too" (*The Daily Advance* November 8, 2006). He went on to say that "[t]he ACLU isn't concerned about what is best for the school. They know nothing about using common sense" (*The Daily Advance* November 8, 2006).

Another religious coalition letter writer, Kevin Senn, stated that he believed the ACLU to be anti-religious:

"Why in the world has the ACLU gotten involved. . . .If the ACLU had their way every pastor would be silenced, but every other person would have their say and it wouldn't matter what was said. It's time for other men of God to stand up and let it be known that homosexuality is a sin and God condemns it. . ." (*The Daily Advance* October 23, 2006)

Other letters to the editor call for elected officials to resist the ACLU's influence and vote to ban the GSA. "The school board needs to hear from the people who elected them and pay the taxes in Currituck County, not the ACLU" Mead's letter states. Later in his letter, he compares the ACLU to the devil:

“Is the Currituck Board of Education going to vote for what is best for its schools or what the ACLU wants? There are two sides here: God or the devil. I would choose God's side and vote against the club.” (*The Daily Advance* November 8, 2006)

The ACLU, as part of the support coalition, rejects this narration strategy about their work. In an interview with Katy Parker, legal program coordinator for the ACLU of North Carolina, Parker acknowledges that the ACLU did send a letter to the school board but only after the organization was contacted by local residents. “We want to make sure the county knows about the law,” Parker states. “We are not threatening at all. We certainly wouldn’t take any action without contact from the student” (*The Virginian-Pilot* October 22, 2006).

*Local Elected Officials.* A letter from Nell Long, a member of the religious coalition, sent to members of the Currituck County Board of Commissioners states, “As you probably know, there is overwhelming sentiment in this county against a gay club, and it would behoove each of you, especially in this election ear, to not only listen to the majority voice of your people, but to act to put a stop to such nonsense” (*The Daily Advance* October 17, 2006). In a later telephone interview with *The Virginia Pilot* Long states that she does not “usually get involved, but this really got me concerned. . . .If they want to form a club in the community, that’s fine. Our children do not need to be exposed to this at this time in their lives” (October 22, 2006).

She urged the county commissioners to pay the school’s legal fees should the controversy result in litigation. Several commissioners agreed with Long’s idea in their responses, in line with the religious coalition. Commissioner Martin, who also teaches at CCHS, wrote in his response to Long that the “gay club can be stopped at the high school

if the Board of Education wants it to go away. . . . I think the school system is ducking its responsibility to the public and especially to the *good moral children* that we have here in Currituck” (*The Daily Advance* October 17, 2006, emphasis added). Another commissioner, Paul O’Neal, “said he was ‘certain’ the commissioners would defend the school board against a lawsuit over the gay tolerance club” and the purported pressure from the ACLU (*The Daily Advance* October 17, 2006).

An editorial in *The Daily Advance*, which takes sides with the support coalition, reasserts the rights of students to form GSAs based on the Equal Access Act while calling out the elected officials for their ignorance and maleficence:

Forget all the rhetoric spewing from Currituck's elected officials: there is no way, short of banning all student non-curricular clubs, to legally bar a high school student from forming a chapter of the Gay-Straight Alliance at Currituck County High School.

The 1984 Equal Access Act guaranteeing all students equal access to school facilities just won't allow the Currituck Board of Education to deny 11th-grader Danielle Smiley's request to form a chapter of the club. If the school board were to deny the request, the school district would be slapped with a lawsuit it's doomed to lose.

That of course won't stop county commissioners from thumping their chests and telling the school board that it should do the opposite of what the law requires, or from boasting - as some did last week - that they'll help fight any lawsuit sparked by denying Smiley's request.

School board members mustn't listen to such nonsense. Politicians often say and do dumb things. And fighting a 16-year-old's efforts to promote tolerance of diversity among her high school peers is one of the dumbest things Currituck officials could do. (*The Daily Advance* October 27, 2006)

Other citizens sent letters to the newspaper to express further disagreement with the school board and county commissioners since it began to appear that the support coalition was gaining ground. Currituck resident David G. Garraty wrote to support the GSA saying “community intolerance of individuals who happen to be born with a

different sexual orientation is neither good nor moral although it might be good politics” (*The Daily Advance* October 28, 2006). He “hope[s] the election results prove otherwise” (*The Daily Advance* October 28, 2006). Another letter, by Bill Wilkins, warns the school board members to expect trouble: “When the board members come up for election, we should let them know we do not approve of their actions. Many people met with the board members, expressing disapproval, but they seemed to ignore the will of the people of this county” (*The Virginia-Pilot* November 8, 2006).

### **GSA as Sexual Recruitment Clubs**

The second major theme of resistance located in news coverage rests on an idea that a GSA at CCHS would serve as a recruitment vehicle for somehow ‘turning’ unwilling students into gays or lesbians. This narration strategy is first found in a statement by pastor and religious coalition member James Harrington:

“What I’m opposed to is an organization that could lead to another lifestyle,” he said. “I can’t sit back ... I have to come out and tell you how I feel.” (*The Daily Advance* October 4, 2006)

Here, Harrington refers to homosexuality as a lifestyle. Danielle Smiley refuted this claim directly: “I’m not forcing anyone to go to this club,” she said before reiterating that she only wants “to have people treated the same” (*The Daily Advance* October 4, 2006).

Community members stood behind Danielle Smiley’s assertion and gave further evidence in favor of the support coalition. In one letter to the editor, Ryan Somma states: “I have homosexual friends, and not once have I ever felt tempted to try their lifestyle. That’s because I’m very secure in my heterosexuality” (*The Daily Advance* October 19, 2006). In a later letter, published after the GSA gained approval from the school board,

Sheryl Ann Lovitt states that she understands “the concerns and the fears of many people in this community but would like to remind them all that this club is not about promoting the gay lifestyle. The purpose is to promote tolerance of those who are different from ourselves” (*The Daily Advance* November 14, 2006). Further, she believes “[t]he idea that this club will somehow be detrimental to children attending the high school is ridiculous. . . .your children would still be exposed to gay students” (*The Daily Advance* November 14, 2006).

*The Daily Advance* has the last word for the support coalition:

“One 16-year-old is not responsible for other students’ sexuality.

Participating in a club doesn’t make someone gay. Gays are not ‘recruiting’ people, getting prizes for the most signature. The basis of the club is tolerance, which in this day and age is commendable” (*The Daily Advance* November 26, 2006).

### **Resolution and Aftermath**

In the end, Danielle Smiley received approval from the school board to form a GSA at CCHS. However, this approval came with stipulations in the form of new amendments to the school district policy for non-curricular clubs. Under the amended policy, students must obtain parental permission to join non-curricular clubs. Further, clubs are not permitted to use the name of the high school in identifying itself. The amendments give the principal power to deny clubs that require members to pray, encourage illegal activities or use race, sex, or religion as membership requirements. Non-curricular clubs such as the GSA must have a school employee attend meetings, “are

not sponsored by the school board, do not have access to the school's public address system, cannot deposit funds in school accounts, and cannot participate in the school yearbook" (*The Daily Advance* November 7, 2006). Margaret Smiley expressed concern upon hearing of the new policy changes and was quoted in the newspaper as saying "she hopes that students won't be denied membership because their parents won't allow them to join" (*The Daily Advance* November 7, 2006).

In the immediate aftermath of the GSAs acceptance, Smiley continued to face some harassment; however, she felt empowered:

"News of the decision spread through the school the next morning. Someone shouted "dyke" at Danielle in the hallway. But those kinds of things are getting rarer, she said. Her friends congratulated her. So did teachers and students she didn't even know.

"If somebody doesn't ever stand up," Danielle said, "nothing's going to change." (*The Virginia-Pilot* November 11, 2006)

Unfortunately, some of the positive change may have been short lived. A follow up story one year after the events states that the GSA met twice in its first year of existence. Further, membership was down from the 30 Danielle Smiley believed would participate to only eight to ten students. Although Smiley suggested the club would be active in the school, the reporter was unable to gain any information about the club's activities or whether the club will continue. Smiley was not reached for comment.



## CHAPTER SIX:

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In the end, the members of the Geography Club in Hartinger’s novel decide to go public in forming a GSA—whatever the social consequences:

But all that was about to change. None of the six of us gathered in Kephart’s classroom—Min, Gunnar, Belinda, Ike, Brian, and me—had any idea what would happen when the teachers and other students found out about the Goodkind High School Gay-Straight-Bisexual Alliance. Would we be banished to Outcast Island? Or would we maybe, just maybe, be allowed to stay in the Borderlands of Respectability? (Let’s face it: the Land of the Popular was no longer an option.)

I didn’t care. None of us did. Because wherever we ended up, we’d be there together. And I knew that even the ugliest place in the world can be wonderful if you’re there with good friends—just like the most fabulous place on earth is pretty boring when you’re all alone. And when it came to friends, you couldn’t ask for better ones than Min, Belinda, Brian, and yes, even Ike and Gunnar. (Hartinger 2003:225)

Actions by students to form GSAs should be permitted to flourish. After all, “[p]eople live their lives and tell their stories,” Gullestad (1996:32) writes, “within socially structured conditions, but their actions and stories also have a potentially transformative impact on ‘society’” (quoted in Eakin 2007:131). This rings especially true in small towns such as those in *Geography Club*, Okeechobee, or in Currituck County, where locating other support might prove especially difficult.

This thesis explored two cases of school and community battles over establishing GSAs in small Southern towns. I chose these two cases because news coverage was especially dense, and Fetner and Kush (2008) revealed that the Southern geographic region, along with rural and small town locations, were significantly less likely to have established GSAs. This research provides further insight into why these places are slow to adopt GSA clubs since people in these places think of themselves as different from people in cities or regions of the country where GSAs are more likely to form.

Overall, my research provides two major types of findings. In terms of substantive findings, I present four previously unreported narration strategies in public discourse concerning GSA establishment: 1) character construction strategies that make positive or negative claims about stakeholders including school personnel, the GSA club, and its members, 2) counter narration strategies which attempt to portray the GSA as promoting sexual activity, 3) counter narration strategies which seek to oppose the GSA based on an idea that a GSA club and its members will recruit other students to become gay or lesbian, and 4) setting-talk narratives based on notions of 'small town' or Christian morality to show why or why not a GSA is wanted or needed. As far as methodological findings, I discuss the importance of what I call setting-talk for future research, where narration of the setting implicitly contains the morals of the story. Each of the four common narration strategies is discussed in turn below regarding intent to discredit or support GSAs. This is followed by a further elaboration about the importance of setting-talk. Finally, I present several suggestions for future research.

The first major theme of dissent and support uncovered in my research deals with unsupportive individuals and groups constructing characters and telling stories about the GSA and its members to discredit their work. My findings indicate that, in both cases I research, the disembodied type of person known as “gay youth” is often constructed as sinful, diseased, sexually active, and/or as forming the GSA for sexual experimentation or recruit other students to become gay or lesbian. Related to support, GSA presidents, both of whom I studied gained support from local newspapers, were narrated as standing up for justice, promoting tolerance, or simply as normal teenagers. Elected officials and school personnel were narrated disparagingly in both cases as ignorant or, in some instances, even malicious in their attempts to prevent GSAs from forming.

The second common theme of dissent uses rhetoric to describe GSAs as promoting sexual activity. Actors, including community members, school personnel, and a school board’s legal team, frequently narrated the GSA as a hotbed for sexual experimentation or sexually transmitted diseases. Further, the perception that GSAs would potentially discuss sex acts in meetings—thus violating the federal abstinence-only sex education for public schools—led both school boards to amend or enact policies to prevent these activities. Still, supporters universally and consistently stated that GSAs are formed solely to provide support for harassed students and prevent discrimination.

Another common theme of dissent is based on an idea that GSAs serve to recruit other students to become gay or lesbian. GSA members and allies were quick to dispute this claim, calling it ludicrous or reiterating that membership would be voluntary. Rather than recruitment, supporters say, GSAs would prevent harassment, provide support for

people, or promote tolerance. Still, based on the parental consent policies enacted in Okeechobee, Currituck County, and other high schools across the country (Whittaker 2009), some evidence suggests this theme of dissent could be a common one beyond the cases I research.

The fourth and final major narration strategy I found relates to dissent on the basis that GSAs have no place in small towns. Community members' setting-talk communicates and affirms the prescribed Christian moral standards of which all 'upstanding' citizens must abide by and protect by, in these cases, speaking out against GSA clubs to prevent their formation. Notions of the setting as being 'churchgoing' or a place ripe with so-called 'conservative family values', coupled with frequent religious narration, constructs a small town Christian morality used primarily to define or separate the small town setting from other possible settings. The typified small town citizen fears the city as a place completely unlike the small town—perhaps in line with Tönnies' ([1887] 2002) depiction of differences in small communities versus large cities in his concepts of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* or Zerubavel's (1996) notions of lumping and splitting. The manner in which residents describe the setting provides considerable insight into the appropriate moral standards that GSA members and sexually marginalized youth are seen as violating.

Methodologically, the importance of setting-talk informs researchers of narratives about the possibility of narratives' potential power to story the setting as containing the morals of the story. Specifically, narration strategies which discussed the 'small town' setting often implicitly implicated acceptable religious or moral boundary expectations of

the local citizenry which the GSA is seen as opposing. Although the moral is a common story element considered in narrative analysis, the remarkable fusion of moral with the under-researched setting holds implications narratives scholars should consider in their own research.

Overall, findings indicate that youth attempting to form GSAs might encounter resistant narration strategies authored by discourse coalitions, unsupportive parents, the local community, and/or school personnel. My work, drawing together previously disconnected literatures from multiple disciplines, indicates that narration strategies and the work of discourse coalitions are important considerations with implications for scholars of narratives, social movements, and scholars in all disciplines who study GSAs. Although the two particular cases studied ended in the ‘simple’ result of the GSA being approved, multiple narration strategies and discourse coalitions played prominent roles in the newspaper coverage of the events.

Future research should investigate how stories about disembodied “gay youth” are influenced by cultural codes related to adolescent sexuality and/or morality. Given the federal mandate for abstinence-only education policies in American public schools (Santelli et al. 2006), future research should examine how the school setting is also packaged with a morality of heteronormativity and innocence. Research should address how the sociohistorical production of public discourse about adolescent sexuality relates to GSA formation and other school change efforts, school board policies, and related state and federal laws.

The teenaged students in my cases were truly active agents in forming a club to promote a change in their school and community. This is in contrast to the ‘at-risk’ narrative often pervasive in the published literature which focuses on sexually marginalized students’ difficulties in navigating their education (see Griffin and Ouellett 2003 for an outline of historical trends in addressing LGBT issues in schools). Although many researchers’ contributions have helped give a better understanding of sexually marginalized youth and strategies to promote equality, recent research (Mayberry, Chenneville, and Currie, forthcoming) and my own study indicate the potential for a shift away from the ‘at-risk’ narrative. My thesis indicates that the teens who were presidents or members of the GSAs in the cases I study did not think of themselves as ‘at-risk.’ Instead, they narrated themselves as standing up for justice, promoting tolerance in their schools or communities, and eliciting what they hope is lasting change. Future research should examine this shift from silence to safety to grassroots activism and mobilization more closely.

Finally, as I researched two rural and Southern cases in this thesis, future research should examine and compare controversies in rural environments such as Okeechobee, Florida or Currituck County, North Carolina to controversies in suburban or urban environments. Although Fetner and Kush (2008) found that suburban and urban communities in the Northeast and West were more likely to be early adopters of GSAs, further research should investigate and compare the discourses that emerge in suburban and urban areas as they are similar or contrast with rural discourses. Coupling this with a quantitative approach examining school and community demographic differences will

allow researchers to elaborate on the similarities and differences between suburban and urban communities and their respective GSA controversies as they compare or contrast to those found in rural areas.

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**APPENDIX A:**

**OKEECHOBEE CONTROVERSY NEWSPAPER SOURCES**

**Table A1. List of Okeechobee Controversy News Article Sources**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>State</b>
November 16, 2006	ACLU Sues Okeechobee Schools	Margot Susca	The Stuart News	Florida
November 16, 2006	Lesbian Alleges Bias at School	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
November 16, 2006	Suit: Teen Club Banned	Staff	The Orlando Sentinel	Florida
November 16, 2006	School Sued Over Gay Club Ban	Associated Press	The Miami Herald	Florida
November 16, 2006	ACLU Taking Okeechobee Schools to Court	Margot Susca	Fort Pierce Tribune	Florida
November 25, 2006	Let Gay-Straight Club meet	Staff	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
December 3, 2006	Gay Student Won't Give Up Fight for Club - The Okeechobee High Senior Takes Her Case to Court Despite Insults and Fierce Foes	Maya Bell	The Orlando Sentinel	Florida
December 11, 2006	Lesbian Student Sues Florida School District Over Group	Maya Bell	The Victoria Advocate	Texas
December 13, 2006	District Asks Judge to Toss Lawsuit By Gay-Straight Group	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
January 2, 2007	Senior Pushes for Gay-tolerance Group at School - Her Quest is Not Very Welcome in Rural South Florida Community	Kelli Kennedy	Ocala Star-Banner	Florida
January 12, 2007	Gay-Straight Alliance Seeks Injunction to Meet	Derek Simmons	Fort Pierce Tribune	Florida

**Table A1. List of Okeechobee Controversy News Article Sources**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>State</b>
January 20, 2007	Gay and Straight Together	Steve Rothaus	The Miami Herald	Florida
March 19, 2007	Judge OKs Lawsuit from Gay-Straight Alliance	Associated Press	Ocala Star-Banner	Florida
April 7, 2007	Judge Allows Gay-Straight Group	Rebecca Panoff	The Stuart News	Florida
April 7, 2007	Court Orders Florida School to Allow Gay Student Group	Maya Bell	The Star-Ledger	New Jersey
April 7, 2007	Judge Rules Gay Club Can Open in School - Student's Suit Against Board Continues	Maya Bell	South Florida Sun-Sentinel	Florida
April 7, 2007	Federal Judge Says Gay-tolerant Club Can Meet at School	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
April 7, 2007	Gay-Straight Alliance Can Have Club at School - The Judge Says the Teen Plaintiff from Okeechobee Likely Will Win Her Lawsuit	Maya Bell	The Orlando Sentinel	Florida
April 7, 2007	Judge Rules Pro-gay Club May Resume it's Meetings	Associated Press	Ocala Star-Banner	Florida
April 7, 2007	Judge Orders a Florida School to Allow a Gay Tolerance Club	Terry Aguayo	The New York Times	New York
April 7, 2007	Ruling Supports Gay-Straight Club	Staff	The Bismarck Tribune	North Dakota
April 27, 2007	Lawyers Can't Ask Students' Sexuality in Bias Suit	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
August 15, 2007	Okeechobee School District Defies Federal Court, ACLU Says	Rebecca Panoff	The Stuart News	Florida
August 15, 2007	Okeechobee Board News 'Sex Club' Ban	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
August 15, 2007	Okeechobee Board Nears Ban on 'Sex-Based Clubs' Meeting at School	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
August 15, 2007	Okeechobee School Defy Court, ACLU Says	Rebecca Panoff	Fort Pierce Tribune	Florida
October 10, 2007	Okeechobee Schools Say No to Sexually Oriented Clubs	Colleen Wixon	The Stuart News	Florida



**Table A1. List of Okeechobee Controversy News Article Sources**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>State</b>
October 11, 2007	Okeechobee District Bans ‘Sex-Based’ Clubs	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
November 8, 2007	ACLU Asks for Delay in Gay-club Trial	Keona Gardner	The Stuart News	Florida
November 8, 2007	Delay Sought in Lawsuit Trial Over Gay Group - School Board Changes Policy	Keona Gardner	South Florida Sun-Sentinel	Florida
November 8, 2007	Schools to Use Experts to Fight Gay Group’s Lawsuit	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
November 16, 2007	Gay-Straight School Club Rebuffs Name Change Idea	Colleen Wixon	The Stuart News	Florida
November 16, 2007	Name Change Could Solve Gay Club’s Lawsuit	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
November 20, 2007	Gay-Straight Alliance Trial to Begin June 9	Kelly Tyko	The Stuart News	Florida
November 20, 2007	Judge Delays Trial of Alliance’s Lawsuit	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
December 2, 2007	Get it Straight, Okeechobee	Staff	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
January 31, 2008	Okeechobee Wants Ruling on Gay-Straight Alliance	Colleen Wixon	The Stuart News	Florida
March 4, 2008	ACLU Argues in Support of Okeechobee Student Club	Derek Simmons	The Stuart News	Florida
March 13, 2008	Is Gay-Straight Alliance Lawsuit Moot?	Staff	Fort Pierce Tribune	Florida
March 15, 2008	Lawyer Wants Student’s Claim Dropped	Alexi Howk	The Stuart News	Florida
March 20, 2008	Gay-Straight Alliance’s Name Off Lawsuit; No More Members	Staff	Vero Beach Press Journal	Florida
March 27, 2008	Two Students Join Gay-Straight Group	Staff	The Stuart News	Florida
March 27, 2008	School’s Gay-Straight Alliance Coming Back	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
April 11, 2008	Suit Filed by Gay-Straight Group’s Ex-Leader Tossed	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
May 7, 2008	Club’s Revival Too Late, Lawyer Says	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida

**Table A1. List of Okeechobee Controversy News Article Sources**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>State</b>
May 20, 2008	Judge Reopens Okeechobee Gay-Straight Club Lawsuit	Rachel Simmons	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
May 20, 2008	Student Gay Club Lawsuit Reopens	Keona Gardner	Fort Pierce Tribune	Florida
July 31, 2008	Judge Rules in Gay Club's Favor	Megan V. Winslow	The Stuart News	Florida
July 31, 2008	School Ordered to Let Club with Gays Meet on Campus	Kelli Kennedy	South Florida Sun-Sentinel	Florida
July 31, 2008	School Must Let Gay Club Gather	Daphne Duret	The Palm Beach Post	Florida
July 31, 2008	Judge Rules in Favor of Gay Club	Megan V. Winslow	Fort Pierce Tribune	Florida

Source: Newsbank 2011

**APPENDIX B:****CURRITUCK COUNTY CONTROVERSY NEWS SOURCES****Table B1. List of Currituck County Controversy News Article Sources**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>State</b>
September 23, 2006	Proposed Gay Tolerance Club Draws Fire - Paster Asks Christian Community to Oppose	Chris Day	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 10, 2006	Gay Teen, Pastors Spar Over School Club in Currituck	Chris Day	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 5, 2006	Student Fights to Start Gay- Straight Alliance	The Associated Press	The Sun News	South Carolina
October 11, 2006	Civil Rights Group Commits 'Full Resources' to Effort - School Board Expected to Decide Issue Nov. 6	Chris Day	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 14, 2006	Students Mixed on Gay Alliance	Chris Day	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 15, 2006	Letter: Gay-Straight Clubs Promote Diversity	Michael Dennis	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 15, 2006	Taylor Says She Can Help Board Reconnect t Voters	David MaCaulay	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 17, 2006	Officials: County Would Help Fight Club Suit - Suit Anticipated if Gay Tolerance Club Rejected	Chris Day	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 18, 2006	Currituck Forum Excludes School Board Candidates	David MaCaulay	The Daily Advance	North Carolina

**Table B1. List of Currituck County Controversy News Article Sources**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>State</b>
October 19, 2006	Letter: Insecurity Drives Anti-Gay Protests	Ryan Somma	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 21, 2006	Gay Teen Awaits Answer About Chris Day Club		The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 22, 2006	Request to Start a Gay-Straight Alliance Meets Some Resistance	Kristin Davis	The Virginian-Pilot	Virginia
October 23, 2006	Letter: Board Should Nix Gay-Straight Club	Kevin Senn	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 27, 2006	Editorial: OK Gay-Straight Group	Staff	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 27, 2006	Letter: Jesus Wouldn't Insult, Harass Gays	Richard T. Cartwright	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 28, 2006	Letter: Community Needs Tolerance, Too	David G. Garraty	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 31, 2006	Letter: Public Schools Going Down Without Religion	Kevin K. Senn	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
November 1, 2006	Candidates Weigh In on Gay Tolerance Club	David MaCaulay	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
November 5, 2006	Officials to Decide on Gay-Straight Alliance Decisions Could Be Made Monday Night	Kristin Davis	The Virginian-Pilot	Virginia
November 7, 2006	North Carolina News	Kristin Davis	The Virginian-Pilot	Virginia
November 7, 2006	Student Gay Tolerance Club OK'd	Chris Day	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
November 8, 2006	Your Opinions	Bill Wilkins	The Virginian-Pilot	Virginia
November 8, 2006	Letter: School Shouldn't Listen to ACLU	Louis Talmadge Meads	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
November 11, 2006	Pain and Support Paved Road to N.C. Student Group	Kristin Davis	The Virginian-Pilot	Virginia
November 12, 2006	Letter: Why Not Ban All High School Clubs?	Denise Mayne	The Daily Advance	North Carolina

**Table B1. List of Currituck County Controversy News Article Sources**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>State</b>
November 14, 2006	Letter: BOE was Fair on Gay-Straight Club	Sheryl Ann Lovitt	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
November 17, 2006	Letter: TDA Intolerant of Club's Critics	Holly Koerber	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
November 21, 2006	Letter: Parents Must Be Parents, Not Pals	Andrew B. Satterfield	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
November 22, 2006	Letter: Open Windows let Discussion Flow	Cordy Lavery	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
November 26, 2006	Letter: Gay-Straight Club Will Be an Asset	Maryanne Shultz	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
November 27, 2006	Letter: Gay Controversy Fanned By Media	Calvin Lacy	The Daily Advance	North Carolina
October 26, 2007	Year Later, Student Gay Club Struggling	Zac Goldstein	The Daily Advance	North Carolina

Source: Newsbank 2011