

Embedding LGBTQ Topics in the Curriculum: Looking at the Need, Examining the Barriers, and Considering the Possibilities in the Secondary School Setting

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Ah, high schools – sites of so many things! If asked to recollect your secondary school years, what do you remember? A favourite class or teacher? Inspired learning? Intense socializing? Being bullied? For several people, the last question might be the first one that they would remember if asked about their high school experience. Students may be bullied and harassed for a variety of reasons, including their real and/or perceived sexual and/or gender identities that do not conform to heterosexist expectations in society. Chesir-Teran defines heterosexism as a “setting-level process that systematically privileges heterosexuality relative to homosexuality, based on the assumption that heterosexuality, as well as heterosexual power and privilege are the norm and the ideal.” In other words, students who may identify or be perceived as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or any other sexual or gender identity that does not align with societal norms do not receive the same treatment as those who identify as heterosexual. These LGBTQ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer/questioning - students are therefore treated differently, negatively, especially by their peers, at school. There is plenty of research to support this (Meyer, 2011; Taylor et al., 2009; Presgraves, 2008; The Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008) and how chronic bullying negatively impacts those who are victimized in terms of attendance, academic success and social-emotional well-being (Meyer, 2011; Schneider and Dimito, 2008). And while many schools – but not all – have Gay Straight Alliances, a student-run, staff-supervised after-school group that offers support to our LGBTQ students and their straight “ally” friends, those students who may identify as LGBTQ or as an ally may not necessarily join a school’s GSA for a number of reasons such feeling vulnerable and/or stigmatized due to culture, religion and peers in the school. (Grossman et al., 2009; MacIntosh, 2007; McCready, 2004). What needs to be considered now in education is to integrate the voices of our LGBTQ students and community members in the classroom so that all students regardless of their sexual and/or gender identities are included in education. This article will discuss the need to seriously consider embedding LGBTQ topics in our classrooms from safety, theoretical, and policy perspectives. Recent qualitative research conducted in the York Region District School Board that examines barriers secondary school teachers face when considering implementing LGBTQ topics will then be explored, with a view to examining how to confront these barriers through the use of curriculum.

LGBTQ in the Curriculum - Safety

Students who identify as or are perceived to be from the LGBTQ community are at a higher risk of being bullied at school. This bullying can include but is not limited to verbal, written, physical, sexual and emotional harassment, harm, ostracism and more. Many studies have found that the effects of LGBTQ bullying have an adverse effect on a student’s sense of safety and well-being and in turn can negatively impact her or his chances of academic success. Egale’s First National Climate Survey on Homophobia in Canadian Schools (2009) provides startling statistics on the safety of our LGBTQ students. The Survey found that three-quarters of this marginalized group and specifically ninety-five percent of transgender students felt unsafe at

school, compared to one-fifth of straight students.ⁱⁱ Other studies confirm the lack of safety LGBTQ students experience at school: the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) found that “nearly nine out of ten students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans experienced harassment at school”ⁱⁱⁱ and Grossman et al. describe that “for many, relentless verbal abuse and other forms of harassment were part of their normal daily routine: handwritten notes, obscene and suggestive cartoons, graffiti scrawled on walls or lockers.”^{iv} The harmful effects of bullying on LGBTQ students are many, including feeling unsafe at school and in turn giving rise to possible increases in absenteeism, sexual risk-taking, depression, suicide attempts, alcohol and substance abuse. (Meyer, 2011; The Ontario Ministry of Education Safe Schools Action Team Report, 2008; Schneider and Dimito, 2008; Williams et al., 2005; Chesir-Teran, 2003). Clearly the impact of homophobic and transphobic bullying not only impacts our students psychologically, emotionally, socially and physically, but can impact their outcomes for success academically – completing secondary school and pursuing post-secondary studies.

LGBTQ in the Curriculum - Theory

Kevin Kumashiro’s *Troubling Education: Queer Activism and Anti-oppressive Pedagogy* challenges us as educators to consider how we can work against the bullying and oppressive acts against our LGBTQ students in our schools. He compels us to think about what assumptions we make about this group, what we consider “normal” in society and rather than compare our LGBTQ students and community against what this “normal” is, instead we can begin to engage ourselves and all of our students in better understanding this diversity through the use of representation in curriculum. What is first needed is deep reflection and understanding about the historical, political, religious and social contexts that produced the classification of “normal,” which therefore gave rise to “not normal,” or “othered” groups in society that have remained under-represented and invisible in everyday curricula. With this understanding we can begin to challenge heteronormativity in the curriculum with our students. Kumashiro asserts, “when students have the knowledge about oppression as well as critical thinking skills, they will be ‘empowered’ to challenge oppression.”^v This inclusionary model can benefit all students, regardless of sexual and/or gender identity.

LGBTQ in the Curriculum - Policy

In 2009, the Ministry of Education published its *Equity and Inclusivity Education Strategy* that directs school boards to implement strategies regarding equity and inclusivity in Ontario schools. The document describes how there is a need for action and that part of it includes the fact that “homophobia has risen to the forefront of the discussion.”^{vi} The document notes that marginalized groups such as those from the LGBTQ community face greater barriers to learning and that those barriers will influence their outcomes in life. The Ministry of Education’s *Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation (2009)* further explores the directives and expectations of *Ministry Policy/Program Memorandum (PPM) 119*, which outlines eight areas of focus for school boards to implement, including inclusive curriculum and assessment practices. The PPM describes how “(s)chools must provide students and staff with authentic and relevant opportunities to learn about diverse histories, cultures, and perspectives. Students should be able to see themselves represented in the curriculum, programs, and culture of the

school.”^{vii} Therefore, considering these safety, theoretical and policy perspectives where our LGBTQ students are concerned, I engaged in research to discover if and how LGBTQ voice was being represented in the curriculum and if not, what factors were preventing participants from doing so.

The Study

Over the course of several months in the Fall of 2011, I conducted a number of semi-structured interviews with secondary school teachers in the York Region District School Board to ascertain how LGBTQ student voice was being represented in their classrooms, if at all; and if not, what factors these teachers noted as barriers vis-à-vis exploring LGBTQ topics. In this small-sample qualitative interview-case study I endeavoured to speak with educators from a variety of teaching departments: English, Guidance, Health and Physical Education, Law, Special Education and Family Studies. Research was conducted after having obtained approval from the University of Toronto Ethics Review Committee as well as the York Region District School Board and interviews concluded in December 2011. The data that was collected through transcribed interviews allowed me to better gauge what sort of – if any – LGBTQ content is being included in certain classes, how participants felt about the written curriculum documents, and what barriers they face that prevent them from exploring LGBTQ topics in their courses. And some of the results were surprising.

All of the participants self-described as being open-minded and receptive to exploring LGBTQ topics in their classrooms and have engaged in doing so; however, some of them noted that this is not a prevalent manner of thinking due to different beliefs among staff members. A small number of participants expressed colleagues who feel uncomfortable in dealing with LGBTQ topics and were resistant to exploring this area with students as a barrier, which surprised me since I felt that as professional educators, we cannot allow for our personal and/or religious beliefs to prevent our students from learning about diversity in our classrooms. This barrier is what queer theorist Deborah Britzman challenges us to reflect upon as it directly affects the representation (or lack thereof) of our LGBTQ students and lends itself to the continuance of “othering.”^{viii} Is it ethical, then, for professional educators to deny our LGBTQ students the opportunities to have representation in the curriculum because of personal beliefs? This is undeniably a difficult question to unpack but it does affect our LGBTQ students and “straight” students in terms of their learning, what is kept invisible from them, left unexplored, as it perpetuates the continuance of heteronormative learning in our classrooms, and therefore perpetuates the continuance of “normal” versus the “other”.

So, though staff resistance was a noted barrier, the biggest one that all participants expressed was fear of dealing with parents and guardians in the community and that some might complain to the Administration about what Gerald Walton describes as concerns “that discussions about homosexuality might have some undue influence on their children.”^{ix} Along with this barrier, participants also noted that they felt unprepared and untrained to explore LGBTQ topics in their classrooms. They discussed how the curriculum documents are vague in this regard and that clearly-written curriculum documents directing teachers to explore LGBTQ topics as overall or specific expectations should be included. What was voiced by all participants is the need to have updated, inclusive curriculum documents with LGBTQ-specific language as well as

teacher-training as to how to approach not only the pedagogical side of embedding this marginalized group into the curriculum, but strategies to deal with students and community. All of the participants wished to see future training that incorporates pedagogical ideas with a view to including the voices of our LGBTQ students and community members.

LGBTQ Curriculum in the Classroom

How could LGBTQ topics be explored in our classrooms, then? With a combination of preparation, research, and being amenable to student voice, there are a number ways to include your LGBTQ students:

- Begin with researching LGBTQ personalities reflective of your subject area and have pictures displayed, names listed as part of possible project topics to celebrate their contributions.
- Explore historical events that demonstrate the oppression of this group (e.g. World War Two/ Pink Triangle, Stonewall riots in NYC) in subject areas such as History, English, and Family Studies.
- Consider same-sex word phrases in your examples, on tests, etc.
- Choose positive representations of the LGBTQ community for films, book selections (i.e. “Boy Meets Boy” by David Levithan) to support the normalization of the LGBTQ community.
- Encourage continued critical thinking skills through deconstruction: allow students to look for the “silences,” the “invisibility” in media, art, music, literature, of the LGBTQ communities (e.g. TV commercials and representation).
- Ensure the LGBTQ voice is represented when teaching about social sciences, social theories, families, health and physical education (e.g. healthy relationships).
- Use inclusive vocabulary that demonstrates to your students that you are not assuming everyone in the classroom is heterosexual.

Of course, before beginning this journey of embedding LGBTQ topics in your classrooms, there may be two preparatory journeys upon which to embark: a personal one, where there is self-reflection regarding what you are prepared to include in your classroom curriculum (i.e. representation of LGBTQ people? students able to do a project on an LGBTQ event?). The other journey is to prepare your students for this much-needed area of exploration, by establishing a “safe” space classroom; a classroom where students’ views are to be respected and discussion must occur in a respectful manner. When students see that you are serious and respectful about exploring LGBTQ topics with them, they will soon realize that they, too, need to be serious and respectful about what is being discussed.

In 2009, the Ministry of Education in Ontario published policy documents directing schools to address equity and inclusivity strategies in their schools. One area where equity and inclusivity can certainly be embedded is within classroom curriculum, where students from diverse backgrounds, including those from the LGBTQ community, can be engaged in positive representation in the classroom. Research strongly points out that LGBTQ students remain bullied and marginalized and theorists such as Kumashiro posit that by including their voices in the classroom not only will it have a positive impact upon those students, but also examining factors of their oppression with the entire class can be of benefit to all students in their understanding of their oppression. Though some teachers in this study describe a number of factors including negative community reaction, lack of training, clear curriculum expectations and staff resistance as barriers they face or fear facing when considering LGBTQ topics in their classrooms, the Ministry of Education's Equity and Inclusivity documents direct us to begin examining these factors or barriers and call upon us to create ways to address them, not only because it is now mandated, but for the safety and well-being of all of our students.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Chesir-Teran, D. (2003). "Conceptualizing and Assessing Heterosexism in High Schools: A Setting-Level Approach." *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 31:3-4, p. 267.
- ⁱⁱ Taylor, C., Peter, T., Schacher, K., Belsom, S., Gross, Z., et al. (2009). *Youth Speak Up About Homophobia and Transphobia: The First National Climate Survey on Homophobia in Canadian Schools – Phase One Report*. Toronto: EGale Human Rights Trust, p. 47.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Presgraves, D. (2008). *2007 National Climate School Survey: Nearly 9 out of 10 Students Harassed*. USA: www.glsen.org.
- ^{iv} Grossman, A., Haney, A., Edwards, P., Alessi, E., Ardon, M., et al. (2009). "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth Talk about Experiencing and Coping with School Violence: A Qualitative Study." *Journal of LGBT Youth*, Vol. 6, p. 26.
- ^v Kumashiro, K. (2002). *Troubling Education: Queer Activism and Antioppressive Pedagogy*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer. P. 33.
- ^{vi} The Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). *Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*. Toronto: The Queen's Printer for Ontario, p. 7.
- ^{vii} The Ontario Ministry of Education. (2009). *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation*. Toronto: The Queen's Printer for Ontario, p. 14.
- ^{viii} Britzman, D. (1998). "Is There A Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight." *Educational Theory*, 45:2, pp. 151-165.
- ^{ix} Walton, G. (2004). "Bullying and Homophobia in Canadian Schools: The Politics of Policies, Programs and Educational Leadership." *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, 1:4, p. 28.

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