

The Inclusion of LGBTQ Youth in Catholic Schools:
Opportunities to facilitate their wellbeing

by

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A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of
Education In the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Carmen Gartner, 2018

University of Victoria

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Abstract

Students who may or may not openly identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer (LGBTQ) face institutionalized heterosexism and victimization in schools. These experiences can be amplified for those students attending Catholic schools. Watered down discrimination policies and lack of inclusive supports can encourage these students to find ways to hide their gender or sexual nonconformity. While the Minister of Education in Alberta announced that all schools need to support students in the form of GSAs (GAY STRAIGHT ALLIANCES or GENDER AND SEXUALITY ALLIANCES), some Christian schools are outright opposing the formation of these clubs in their schools. Literature in the area of LGBTQ education points to the necessity of school supports as these students are some of the most at-risk youth. The purpose of this literature review is to explore the factors needed to develop a fully inclusive and supportive school environment for LGBTQ students attending Catholic schools.

Keywords: LGBTQ, inclusion, Catholic, curriculum, support, policy, GSA, bullying, sexual minority, at-risk students

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Dedication

To my grandmother Hazel Holt, for always encouraging us grandchildren to pursue education and celebrating our educational milestones. You are missed.

To Alanna, for always being ready with a pep talk when I needed it the most. To Kylie and Julie for taking care of Carl and allowing me to miss so many family dinners.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This paper examines the various factors involved for schools to build an inclusive community for their lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer (LGBTQ) students. In order to best support LGBTQ students, schools must: (i) build a positive climate, which includes drafting strong policies and creating school-based programs such as gay straight alliances, and (ii) work to include LGBTQ histories and representation in curriculum.

LGBTQ students exist in the Catholic education system at high school; however, little is being done to help support this vulnerable population. Research has shown that one in five Canadian LGBTQ youth experience bullying every day (Government of Alberta, 2014). Over the past three years, the Edmonton Catholic School District (ECSD), the district where I am currently employed as a teacher, has received negative media attention regarding their vague anti-discrimination policies and procedures concerning LGBTQ students (Ramsay, 2015). This “hot button” issue has raised concern for the well-being and safety of these students in ECSD especially after a student was denied access to the bathroom of her chosen gender. Upon examination of the current literature, it becomes apparent that most LGBTQ youth in Catholic schools do not feel safe and supported by their school or district. Although grassroots movements by individual teachers to support LGBTQ students exist (Morris & Page, 2016), a strong theme in the research is that Catholic schools are not doing enough to support these youth.

Lack of support is not the only barrier to the well-being of LGBTQ youth. The omission or silence of LGBTQ in curriculum or the classroom setting is also quite damaging. The hidden curriculum of schools pushes heterosexual normalcy. For example, Pascoe (2007) argues that schools “set up formal and informal sexual practices that [reflect] definitions of masculinity and

femininity as opposite, complementary, unequal, and heterosexual” (p. 28). This lack of visibility or representation in curriculum labels LGBTQ students as “other” and could potentially open these students up to bullying. In this vein, it is important to explore the school climate, school-based support- such as gay straight alliances- and ways in which the LGBTQ population can be represented in classroom based instruction.

Personal Interest

As a queer educator within ECSD, I have a personal interest in the welfare of LGBTQ youth. Over the past five years, I have been the lead teacher for our school’s gay straight alliance (GSA) and have seen first-hand the ambiguity of the status of the club as well as its lack of school and district support. When I first approached our administration about starting a club in our junior high, they were shocked and unsure how to respond. After a call to the Superintendent of ECSD, they told me that I could set up a club, but could not name it GSA, I had to call it “something that embraces Catholicity.” Four years later, schools are now able to call their groups GSAs, although this is not often promoted throughout the district. The Alberta Teachers Association has formed their own GSA which meets monthly to discuss LGBTQ teacher welfare and ways we can educate our fellow colleagues. (For more information, visit their site here: <http://ecteachers.ca/how-we-help/committees/teacher-gsa-committee/>). We have even marched in the Edmonton Pride Parade the past two years.

As a teacher, I have also seen the struggles of some of my LGBTQ students. “Sexual minority students feel less safe, less engaged, less respected, and less valued in schools than do their heterosexual peers” (Morris & Page, 2016, p.117). Some of these students have poor relationships at home, experience bullying at school, and suffer from anxiety as a result. The mental health of all students is imperative and schools must be safe and supportive

environments. For these reasons and based on the information uncovered in my literature review, I wonder to what extent LGBTQ youth feel safe and supported in Catholic schools?

Background

Much of the research regarding LGBTQ youth focuses on mental health, academics and victimization. A comprehensive study by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (2015) in the United States, for example, found that nationwide the majority of LGBTQ students have experienced bullying and name calling while at school. The Every Teacher Project (2015) surveyed thousands of Canadian educators about their perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ education in schools. This survey found similar results and additionally uncovered linkage between academic achievement and level of safety at school. Few studies have examined support for LGBTQ youth in Catholic school systems where the religious dogma tends to supersede LGBTQ rights. The purpose of this literature review is to synthesize current research and examine three areas of school climate, gay straight alliances, and LGBTQ curriculum as they relate to LGBTQ youth and their experiences in the Catholic school system.

School Climate

In this review, school climate has emerged as playing an integral role in the school experiences of LGBTQ students. A hostile climate towards LGBTQ students can lead to greater “risks of harassment, emotional, behavioural and social problems” (Liboro et al., 2014, p. 159). Schools must be safe and “welcoming to all students and in order to create a positive school climate for LGBTQ students, schools must promote respect and tolerance for the LGBTQ community” (Liboro et al., 2014, p. 160). Celebrating various days in LGBTQ history, such as *International Day Against Homophobia* or *Day of Silence*, help to increase visibility of these youth. Part of the school climate stems from staff and administration that have been properly

trained in terminology and language relating to LGBTQ students (Clark, 2010; Espelage & Robinson, 2012). If the staff incorporates more LGBTQ terminology into their daily instruction, this helps students to feel safe and comfortable in class. Training will also help to get staff involved and aware of LGBTQ issues. Often, schools can be places where sex and gender norms are reinforced. Simple phrases like, “okay guys, get out your books,” can marginalize some students. A knowledgeable staff will also help if students are experiencing any struggles relating to their gender or sexual identity as staff will feel equipped to listen to the student.

In addition to support staff and administration, it is equally important for schools and school districts to have strong policies in place that support and protect LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students report “higher rates of victimization and suicidality than their heterosexual peers” (Goodenow et al., 2006, p. 573) and this number has continued to climb over the years (Snapp et al., 2015). The inclusion of “sexual orientation and gender identity in anti-harassment policies can help break down heterosexism in schools” (Toomey et al., 2012, p. 189), but the policy must be clear and known to all staff and students. Students must know the protocols for reporting bullying or harassment at school and the reports must be well documented and taken seriously.

Curriculum

Schools with an LGBTQ inclusive curriculum report less bullying and harassment (Toomey et al., 2012). In fact, the presence of “LGBTQ-inclusive curricula has also been associated with greater peer support” and “classmates were accepting of LGBTQ people” (Snapp et al., 2015, p.581). Based on the literature reviewed, curriculum plays a key role to support and include LGBTQ students. As Alberta prepares to begin a six year curriculum overhaul (“Alberta begins six year,” 2015), there is a great opportunity to include the LGBTQ perspective.

Curriculum represents power and “demonstrates whose stories deserve to be told and who deserves to be represented-and most often, LGBTQ youth are not represented” (Morris & Page, 2016). Educators perceive a need to dilute or avoid gender and sexuality diverse content for fear of parent backlash (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2016). This is a huge disservice to the LGBTQ population as an inclusive curriculum can directly increase feelings of self-worth, and engagement. Findings by the GLSEN, suggest that “attending a school with an LGBT-inclusive curriculum is related to both a less-hostile school experience” (McGarry, 2013, p. 28) for these students. Ultimately the school can lessen negative outcomes for this vulnerable population.

Gay Straight Alliances

Another important piece in creating a positive school climate, is the creation of gay straight alliances or GSAs. GSA’s and other programs in schools not only add to the positive experience LGBTQ students can have, it also boosts the morale of the school community. Allies in these groups are proud supporters that fight for visibility within the school. Students at schools who have GSAs are much more likely to have access to supportive teachers and administration (Elafros & Fetner, 2015) which further adds to a positive school climate. GSAs provide youth with “significant opportunities for developing student agency, activism, and leadership” (Liboro et al., 2014, p.161).

Research Questions

The purpose of the first part of this study is to review the empirical literature on LGBTQ youth in Catholic schools. Specifically, as suggested in the preceding sketch of the research background, the following questions guide the review.

1. What school climate is most conducive to supporting the inclusion of LGBTQ students?

2. How can curriculum improve the wellbeing of LGBTQ students?
3. How do GSAs and other school-based supports aid in making LGBTQ students feel more welcome and supported in Catholic schools?

Definitions

LGBT/LGBTQ/- lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning. This acronym does not encompass all genders and sexual orientations. This acronym is used as it was used in the research featured in this literature review.

GSA- This acronym can be referred to as gender and sexuality alliance or a gay straight alliance.

Queer- An umbrella term for sexual and/or gender minorities

Allies- Friends and supporters of LGBTQ people.

Inclusive- Celebrating the diversity and uniqueness of each individual.

Research Pathway

In order to locate literature on LGBTQ in Catholic schools, I used a variety of search terms that yielded results across multidisciplinary studies. “LGBTQ youth” brought up many articles relating to mental well-being, suicide, bullying and absenteeism. While all of these terms can relate to the school experience, this search was too broad. Another problem that I ran into, was the fact that some researchers use the acronym “GLBT,” “LGB,” “LGBT” or “LGBTQ” therefore, I used all of these acronyms in my searches to yield the most results. Next, I added “LGBTQ youth and Catholic schools” to my search. This way, I was able to weed out articles not related to the school experience. Once I had a few solid articles, I then skimmed their references to find specific authors and search them. For the final phase of my search, I included “Canada” to my search as much of the research I was finding was from the United

States or Australia. It became apparent to me that there are not many studies on Canadian LGBTQ youth in Catholic schools. Much of the literature I reviewed came from the Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education, Sex Education and the Journal of Youth and Adolescence. All twenty-eight peer reviewed articles are qualitative or mixed methods studies. Much of the reporting of LGBTQ experiences were personal narratives or survey type methods. Revealing such personal experiences lends itself to be more of a qualitative approach.

In the following sections, I will use my findings to detail the experiences of LGBTQ youth in Catholic schools and the three main criteria necessary for LGBTQ youth to feel safe and supported in Catholic schools. I will also propose an implementation guide for Catholic educators to use when creating an inclusive school environment.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this section is to explore some of the literature on ways schools, specifically Catholic schools, can support and include their LGBTQ students. There is no “one size fits all” for how schools can create safe and supportive environments. However, the literature consistently points to three areas which are necessary for the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTQ students: a positive school climate (including strong policies), access to gay straight alliances, and LGBTQ representation in the curriculum (Fetner et al., 2012; Porta et al., 2017; Walls et al., 2010). These three themes guide the research questions answered in this literature review: What school climate is most conducive to supporting the inclusion of LGBTQ students? How can curriculum improve the wellbeing of LGBTQ students? How do GSAs and other school-based supports aid in making LGBTQ students feel more welcome and supported in Catholic schools? Using empirical evidence, these three questions are answered in the following sections.

The empirical findings in this literature review answer the first research question, what school climate is most conducive to supporting the inclusion of LGBTQ students? A positive school climate has been shown to promote “feelings of safety and respect, and student learning and is associated with lower levels of mental health problems” (Porta et al., 2017 p. 490). Themes that arose from the literature in this area show that school climate is affected by numerous factors including teachers, students, administration, and school-based policies. In the first subsection of the review, the focus will be on the importance of supportive teachers and administrators. The themes that emerged from the literature reviewed in this area, show that schools with a greater number of supportive teachers and GSAs have the most positive climate for LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2013; Russell & Snapp, 2016).

The second subsection will focus on school-based policies and the feelings of safety LGBTQ students experience when the policies clearly include anti-LGBTQ discrimination (Toomey, et al., 2012). Findings from this review show that clear anti-harassment policies are “arguably the most important first step to...promote safe school climates” (Toomey, et al., 2012).

The second section focuses on ways curriculum can improve the wellbeing of LGBTQ students. LGBTQ students have a higher rate of truancy than their heterosexual peers as many do not feel safe and accepted at school (Espelage & Robinson, 2011). Studies reveal that having an LGBTQ inclusive curricula can give students a sense of validation, and a more positive experience of school (Kosciw et al., 2013; Morris & Page, 2016; Snapp et al., 2015). Sub themes that emerge from the literature are: less victimization, accepting classmates and a safe and fair learning environment are all linked to LGBTQ representation in curriculum. These subthemes will be further investigated in the review that follows.

The third section of the literature review answers the question of how GSAs and other school-based supports aid in making LGBTQ students feel more welcome and supported in schools, and specifically in Catholic schools? Findings show that schools with GSAs report more supportive teachers and administrators (Elafros & Fetner, 2015) as opposed to schools without GSAs found that students were unable to find supportive teachers and noted it was risky to search them out (Elafros & Fetner, 2015). Another theme in the review of GSA literature, shows that these student led groups allow students to congregate, socialize and talk about issues without ridicule or judgement (Liboro, et al., 2014). GSAs directly connect to the positive school climate LGBTQ students need in order to aid in their positive schooling experience. The groups offer safety, support and respect for these students (Porta et al., 2017) ensuring the full inclusion and integration of this high-risk group into the general school population.

Based on these findings, there is much to explore regarding the factors needed for schools to build an inclusive community for their LGBTQ students. In the following sections, I review the literature in light of the three questions to be answered.

School Climate and LGBTQ Youth

Introduction. The first research question explored in this literature review is “What school climate is most conducive to support the inclusion of LGBTQ students?” School climate, in this sense, is the overall quality and character of school life. It is “based on patterns of students, parents, and school personnel’s experience of school life” (“What is school climate,” 2007). “A positive school climate promotes healthy youth development” (Porta et al., 2017, p. 490) and more academic engagement. School climate consists of supportive teachers, administrators and a positive morale amongst the students. Supportive administrators show their students and teachers that they “have your back” and will step in to help you at all costs. Part of this support comes in the form of policy and procedures for acceptable behaviour at school. This is the reason behind my inclusion of *policy* as part of the school climate.

Review. LGBTQ students thrive when they feel a positive and supportive school environment. A hostile environment can severely increase truancy and negatively impact academic achievement (Kosciw et al., 2013). Coming to terms with one’s own sexuality is very difficult, add to that a “school environment’s heterosexism and homophobia may place many LGBTQ and questioning students at-risk for depression, suicidality, drug use, and school problems” (Birkett et al., 2009, p. 990). The comprehensive Canadian study, the *Every Teacher Project* (2011), surveyed thousands of educators from K-12 to understand their perceptions of what inclusion and safety looks like for LGBTQ youth. The data overwhelmingly showed that “the safety of marginalized students depends on their inclusion as fully respected members of the

school community” (Peter & Taylor, 2011, p. viii). In order to be an inclusive member of any community, you must have positive and supportive members around you. In this review section I will explain how supportive teachers and administrators can enhance the school experience for LGBTQ youth. Teachers who support and connect with LGBTQ students stand up for them and make them feel respected and valued. Administrators have a responsibility in the development and enforcement of strong anti-bullying policies that protect these vulnerable youth.

Supportive teachers and administrators. A study conducted by Kosciw et al. (2013), found that “having a greater number of educators at school who are supportive of LGBTQ students....decreased incidence of victimization, greater self-esteem, and higher GPAs” (p. 55). This same study showed that schools that have gay straight alliances, also have a greater number of supportive LGBTQ teachers (Kosciw et al., 2013). Teachers who are involved with gay straight alliances or those who have had LGBTQ training, would be more open and educated to the issues facing these youth as well as feel equipped to intervene to prevent bullying. Russell and Snapp (2016), found discipline disparities between LGBTQ youth and their straight peers. Citing one reason is because these students are at a greater risk of bullying, “they are especially at risk of retribution” (p. 211). Many schools have a “zero policy” for fighting which leads to suspension of all parties. Once suspended, students are labelled “trouble makers” and remain under close supervision (Russell & Snapp, 2016, p.211). Now labelled a “trouble maker,” LGBTQ students may have a hard time connecting with sympathetic and supportive teachers.

Policies. Another factor in creating a positive school climate for LGBTQ youth, is the creation of clear policies that include gender and sexual orientation. Often, schools have very general anti-bullying policies “that do not make explicit mention of sexual orientation or gender expression” (Espelage & Robinson, 2012, p. 309). The omission of LGBTQ youth in policies

automatically creates inequality within the student population. “When schools have anti-bullying policies that are enumerated to include sexual orientation and gender identity...they communicate clearly that anti-LGBTQ bullying is unacceptable” (Russell & Snapp, 2016, p. 213). A few years ago, the Edmonton Catholic School District created a policy aimed to include sexual orientation and/or gender expression, however, this policy fell short as it did not name LGBTQ nor outline what procedures will be taken to ensure harassment or bullying of LGBTQ students will be addressed (For more information, go to:

[https://www.ecsd.net/AboutUs/Overview/Administrative-Procedures-](https://www.ecsd.net/AboutUs/Overview/Administrative-Procedures-Manual/Administrative%20Procedures%20Manual/AP%20160.PDF)

[Manual/Administrative%20Procedures%20Manual/AP%20160.PDF](https://www.ecsd.net/AboutUs/Overview/Administrative-Procedures-Manual/Administrative%20Procedures%20Manual/AP%20160.PDF)). Conversely, Edmonton Public Schools created a strong sexual orientation and gender identity policy easily accessible on their website (<https://www.epsb.ca/ourdistrict/policy/h/hfa-bp/>). This policy is reviewed yearly and clearly identifies all students, staff and families who may identify or who are “perceived” to be part of the LGBTQ spectrum. This powerful policy leaves no room for question or loopholes.

Discussion. This review examines empirical literature which answers the question, What school climate is most conducive to supporting the inclusion of LGBTQ students? The results presented indicate that a positive school climate is a result of supportive teachers, administrators, and clearly enumerated anti-harassment policies (Toomey et al., 2012). The literature reviewed clearly shows that students thrive when they feel that they belong and are respected at school. Administrators and teachers play an important role in facilitating a positive school climate. When students feel they are supported, they will have better attendance, higher GPA’s and higher self-esteem (Kosciw et al., 2013; Russell & Snapp, 2016). Overall, it is clear more work needs to be done within Edmonton Catholic Schools to create stronger anti-discrimination policies that show LGBTQ students and all students, that their wellbeing matters.

Summary. In summary, this review examines literature which answers the first question, what school climate is most conducive to support the inclusion of LGBTQ students? The findings show us that school climate is not solely the pleasant atmosphere of the school itself. Within the school, all students must feel safe and valued and an integral part to the school community. Supportive teachers, and administrators who enforce clear LGBTQ bullying policies are needed to support this high-risk population. Equally important are teachers who will step in to stop homophobic bullying. Over time, increased victimization can lead to isolation, depression, and anxiety. Without supportive teachers, this victimization can lead to “an elevation of negative outcomes for these youth because of increased internalized homophobia” (Birkett, et al., 2009, p. 999).

Curriculum and LGBTQ Youth

Introduction. The second question explored in this literature review is How can curriculum improve the wellbeing of LGBTQ students? In Canada, curriculum content is mandated, controlled, and designed provincially or by territory. In Alberta, Education Minister, David Eggen (2016) gathered around 400 educators to rewrite the current K-12 curriculum over a six year period. It is imperative that the curriculum writers build a curriculum that includes everyone. According the Alberta Education website (2018), the writers include a balanced representation of Alberta’s geographic and demographic diversity, and also include representation from Francophone and First Nations, Métis and Inuit teachers (French, 2018). There is no mention that the LGBTQ community is involved in curriculum rewrite. This is very concerning as curriculum “demonstrates whose stories deserve to be told and who deserves to be represented” (Morris & Page, 2016, p. 118). The silence of LGBTQ in curricula indicates that

this group does not deserve to be spoken about or their histories and community are not important.

Review. Building an inclusive curriculum benefits all students, not just those that identify LGBTQ. An LGBTQ inclusive curriculum provides “other students with an opportunity to understand experiences that may differ from their own” (Snapp et al., 2015, p. 582). Greater acceptance amongst peers directly affects the wellbeing and self-worth of these students. Understanding others builds empathy and can help to reduce any discrimination or prejudicial attitudes (Snapp et al., 2015, p. 582). Numerous articles reviewed have shown that schools that include LGBTQ issues in curriculum are safer and homophobic bullying is significantly reduced (Kosciw et al., 2013; Snapp et al., 2015; Toomey et al., 2012).

Engagement. A theme found in the review is the connection between inclusive curricula and higher school engagement (Kosciw et al., 2013; McGarry, 2013). Absenteeism can increase when students don’t feel safe or accepted at school. “When students don’t feel connected to their school, they’re more likely to miss classes and even full days of school” (McGarry, 2013, p. 27). Inclusive curricula also validates the LGBTQ community as students are able to see themselves and others that share their identity. The LGBTQ identity becomes normalized in the classroom therefore building an inclusive environment. Greater engagement in school, can also translate to higher academic achievement (Kosciw et al., 2013).

Willingness. Another overarching theme uncovered in the literature, was the individual teacher’s willingness or unwillingness to discuss LGBTQ issues in class (Maher & Sever, 2007; Dimito & Schneider, 2008; Ferfolja & Ullman, 2016). Often educators “perceive a need to dilute or avoid gender and sexuality diverse content believing that parents will complain” (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2016, p. 2). Especially for new teachers, the threat of a parent phone call to the school

is extremely worrisome. In Catholic schools, the barriers are even greater when addressing LGBTQ issues in school. Community pressure and district pressure may deter administration from encouraging or supporting their staff to address these issues (Maher & Sever, 2007). Progressive Catholic teachers may find themselves providing both secular and Catholic answers when facilitating LGBTQ discussions in hopes to appease all parties.

Discussion. This review examines empirical literature which answers the question, How can curriculum improve the wellbeing of LGBTQ students? The findings show that LGBTQ inclusive curricula can directly affect students' wellbeing and self-worth at school. Students have a stronger connection to school and are more invested as they are seeing themselves reflected and represented in curriculum. It is important for curriculum writers to ensure they are equally representing the diversity within the general population and allowing all stories and histories to be taught. This literature review comes at a time when Alberta is undergoing a major curriculum overhaul. It is the hope that the Education Minister understands the need and value of including LGBTQ stories and history into the new curriculum. In light of the high risk of depression, suicide, and alcohol abuse that these youth face, it is ever more pertinent that they are not excluded or further marginalized in the curriculum.

While teachers must adhere to the provincially mandated curriculum, there is still room to include LGBTQ authors, stories, personalities and important figures into classroom-based instruction. While some teachers are often hesitant to infuse LGBTQ content into class for fear of administration or community backlash, the challenge to engage these vulnerable youth is there. I would strongly encourage teachers to step out of the "heteronormative box" and expand their lessons to include the LGBTQ perspective.

Summary. The findings in this review show that inclusive curriculum is a key component to the wellbeing of LGBTQ youth. While barriers may exist in a Catholic school district, teachers must advocate for this group to ensure that their perspective is represented in curriculum and daily instruction. An inclusive curriculum helps to build empathy, understanding and respect for others. As educators, we are called to educate the whole person and develop ethical citizenship.

GSAs and LGBTQ Youth

Introduction. The final research question explored is How do GSAs and other school-based supports aid in making LGBTQ students feel more welcome and supported in Catholic schools? GSAs greatly impact the school climate by providing and building community (Porta et al., 2017). The literature reviewed unanimously shows that schools with GSAs show the most positive effects on LGBTQ youth (Walls et al., 2010). GSAs provide a beacon of hope and safety for LGBTQ youth as they provide a gateway to supportive adults (Porta et al., 2017). These safe spaces for LGBTQ youth allow safe membership and safe activity within the school context (Fetner et al., 2012). They become places where students can freely express themselves without fear of judgement or being misunderstood.

Review. Schools that have GSAs can drastically improve the school experience for LGBTQ youth (Elafros & Fetner, 2015). Students involved with GSAs are more likely to have more friendships with other students across a variety of sexual identities therefore adding to a more positive experience of school (Elafros & Fetner, 2015). Conversely, students at schools without GSAs “felt more isolated and withdrawn” (Elafros & Fetner, 2015, p. 563). This is a concern as LGBTQ youth are at a higher risk of having mental health problems than their heterosexual peers (Kosciw et al., 2009; Olsen et al., 2014). GSAs have been found to

significantly “reduce mental health and substance abuse issues, including suicide, depression, alcohol use, and smoking (Porta et al., 2017, p. 490).

Safety. GSAs provide a sense of protection, safety, and advocacy for LGBTQ students. Studies have found that students have an increased sense of “safety and lower likelihood of harassment experiences” (Porta et al., 2017, p. 490). Without GSAs at school, students may experience isolation and fear when being harassed as they do not know to whom they can turn for support and guidance (Walls et al., 2010). GSAs provide a safe space where LGBTQ youth can seek counselling and guidance from students who understand what they are experiencing. Educating others about the plight of the LGBTQ community is one way to advocate for GSAs. Many GSAs hold awareness days that help to educate the greater student body about current LGBTQ issues. Schools with GSAs also report fewer problems related to bullying and victimization of LGBTQ students (Porta et al., 2017).

Access to supportive teachers. GSAs are student led, school-based groups facilitated by teacher volunteers. These groups put students in touch with supportive teachers who will advocate for them as well as the group. Having supportive adults at school is the “strongest positive influence for LGBTQ students” (Kosciw et al., 2013, p. 58). When students feel they are supported by their teacher, they are more likely to have higher self-esteem and higher engagement at school (Kosciw et al., 2013). As well, students are able to report any bullying or victimization to their trusted teacher who can advocate for them.

Discussion. This review examines empirical literature which answers the question, How do GSAs and other school based supports aid in making LGBTQ students feel more welcome and supported in Catholic schools? The results presented indicate that establishing GSAs in schools promotes safety, improves the school climate, and connects LGBTQ students with

supportive teachers. GSAs also build a support network for these youth and facilitates friendships with like-minded students. The findings also uncover an increase in school engagement and higher GPAs (Olsen et al., 2014).

The establishment of GSAs in Catholic schools is most important as these students can feel that they don't belong given Catholic teachings. It is so important that teachers, and administrators establish and consistently run a GSA group in order to show acceptance and solidarity with these students. The findings in this review show that GSAs impact self-esteem and school engagement and also connect LGBTQ youth to supportive teachers and peers. Schools want all students to feel safe and included and the establishment of GSAs does just that.

Summary. In summary, GSAs play an integral role to the wellbeing of LGBTQ youth. The presence of GSAs in schools has been shown to reduce truancy, increase feelings of safety and connect students with supportive teachers and peers. Building a support system for these at-risk youth is extremely important and GSAs are an excellent way to be a visible group for students to come together. GSAs provide opportunities for self-advocacy, activism, and leadership (Liboro et al., 2014).

Overall Summary and Recommendations Summary.

This literature review answered three research questions: (a) What school climate is most conducive to supporting the inclusion of LGBTQ students? (b) How can curriculum improve the wellbeing of LGBTQ students? (c) How do GSAs and other school-based supports aid in making LGBTQ students feel more welcome and supported in Catholic schools? Based on the evidence of twenty-eight peer reviewed studies which used quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches; overall, it was found that all three areas: school climate, curriculum, and GSAs can drastically enhance the school experience for LGBTQ youth. The literature highlights the risk

LGBTQ youth face in regards to truancy, substance abuse, and victimization at school and the factors needed to support these students. Future studies focusing on the safety and supports in place for LGBTQ youth specifically in Catholic schools may be useful when addressing the wellbeing of Catholic LGBTQ students. Further to that, it would also be important to measure teacher training in LGBTQ terminology and issues within Catholic schools to contextualize the supports offered to staff.

Recommendations. Based on the evidence provided in the literature review, it is apparent that the LGBTQ population in schools is at increased risk of bullying, institutionalized homophobia, and exclusion within their school community. Therefore, schools need to examine ways in which they can be more supportive and inclusive of this population. The current policy in place at Edmonton Catholic Schools is not comprehensive enough and does not provide administrators with a clear guide when handling victimization of LGBTQ students.

Unfortunately, there is very little that exists as a “concrete” guide for Edmonton Catholic schools on ways to create inclusive sites for their LGBTQ students. Often, teachers are scared to visibly show allyship with LGBTQ students as others may take this as going against Catholic teaching or promoting their own “agenda.” I believe it is necessary for Edmonton Catholic schools to have a universal guide book used in all of their school sites, that outlines the best practices needed to create an LGBTQ inclusive school. This guidebook is a series of recommendations that would build on the current LIFE framework in Edmonton Catholic schools. Using the conclusions drawn from the literature review, my recommendations would serve as a reference for both administrators and teachers on ways we can be true allies and best support our LGBTQ students in Edmonton Catholic Schools.

Chapter 3: Implementation

Introduction

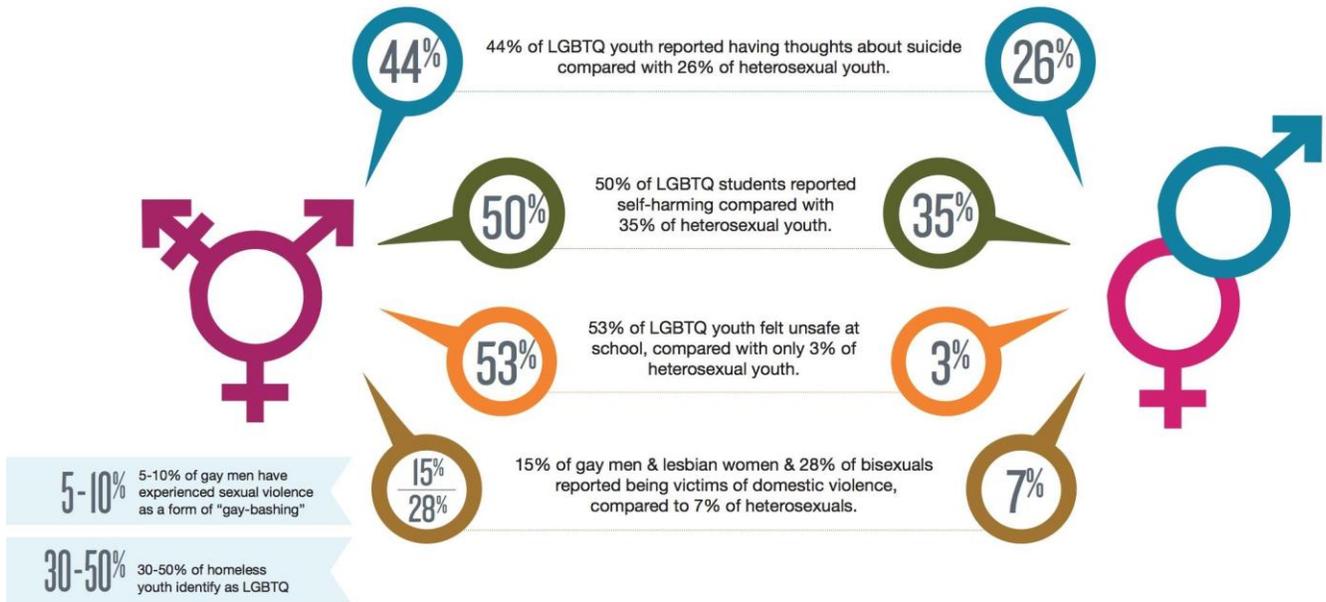
There are numerous reasons why I have chosen to examine the plight of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer (LGBTQ) youth within Edmonton Catholic Schools. However, the primary driver behind this project is to help these students have a positive school experience within the Edmonton Catholic School District (ECSD). I believe that through educating all staff within the district about the challenges and hurdles LGBTQ students face, we can work together to truly make our district safe and inclusive. Additionally, it is clear from the literature reviewed in this document that this group of students is extremely vulnerable and faces a higher rate of bullying, victimization, and isolation than their heterosexual counterparts (Birkett et al., 2009). While ECSD has tried to support these students through the LIFE (Lived Inclusion for Everyone) framework, which I will speak about further in this document, there is still a disconnect within the district to truly understand the alarming statistics and balance the teachings of the Catholic church.

Framing the LGBTQ Context in Alberta

In 2014, the Government of Alberta released some staggering statistics about LGBTQ youth in the province. Double the amount of LGBTQ youth reported having thoughts about suicide compared to that of their heterosexual counterparts and over half of LGBTQ youth feel unsafe at school:

Figure 1. LGBTQ Supports Infographic Government of Alberta (2014). Direct link to this data: <http://www.humanservices.alberta.ca/documents/LGBTQ-supports-infographic.pdf>.

LGBTQ community experiences adversity:



These shocking numbers prompted the Alberta Education Minister to action and in the spring of 2014, Bill 10 passed allowing the establishment of gay straight alliances (GSAs) for any student in Alberta schools regardless of Catholic or public school.

Support for student organizations

16.1(1) If one or more students attending a school operated by a board request a staff member employed by the board for support to establish a voluntary student organization, or to lead an activity intended to promote a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and fosters a sense of belonging, the principal of the school shall

- (a) immediately grant permission for the establishment of the student organization or the holding of the activity at the school, and
- (b) subject to subsection (4), within a reasonable time from the date that the principal receives the request designate a staff member to serve as the staff liaison to facilitate the establishment, and the ongoing operation, of the student organization or to assist in organizing the activity.

(2) For the purposes of subsection (1), an organization or activity includes an organization or activity that promotes equality and non-discrimination with respect to, without limitation, race, religious belief, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, family status or sexual orientation, including but not limited to organizations such as gay-straight alliances, diversity clubs, anti-racism clubs and anti-bullying clubs.

Figure 2. Act to amend the Alberta Bill of rights to protect children (2014)

Bill 10 ignited heated discussions within ECSD in regards to government interfering or mandating ideologies within schools. Worried that Religious rights and freedoms were being infringed upon, Bishop Henry of Calgary penned a letter in December 2014 to his parishioners arguing that GSAs are an infringement on parental rights and really there isn't a need for these groups as bullying affects all students.

The mandating of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) is problematic for a number of reasons. It infringes parental authority over their children, the freedom to instruct one's children in a manner consistent with their faith, and citizens rights to manifest their religious beliefs by worship and practice in the absence of coercion or constraint by government.

A number of recent studies have identified groups of students who are most often bullied. The Toronto District School Board Research Report reported that students most frequently face bullying attacks based on their physical appearance (38%), their grades or marks (17%) their cultural background (11%) or their gender (6%). It is imperative that we address the root issue - bullying.

Figure 3. Pastoral Letter Bishop Henry to Diocese of Calgary (2014). Full document found here:

https://gallery.mailchimp.com/b94c6c43263afb74033548543/files/2014_12_12_Pastoral_Letter_Bishop_Henry.pdf.

Bishop Henry does not cite where he received these statistics so they are difficult to verify. However, the literature review in this document and even statistics gathered from the Alberta government tell us that LGBTQ youth specifically are at a significantly higher risk of bullying and victimization than that of their heterosexual counterparts (Birkett et al., 2009; Espelage & Robinson, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2016).

In 2014, Archbishop Richard Smith in Edmonton also wrote a letter to the Catholic community arguing that we should not single out one group of students but we should protect all students. Smith also touches on the fact that Catholic schools should be able to name new initiatives and decide on content that will be in “accord” with Catholic doctrine.

Catholic schools insist that the approach to protecting children be a fully inclusive one. Sadly, students may be subjected to bullying for a variety of reasons, such as race, body image, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and others. Cyber-bullying is a particularly terrible phenomenon from which no student is immune. We fully support the government's laudable goal of fostering safe environments in schools. In fact, we already have policies for this very purpose. Any legislation aimed at this objective should demonstrate to all vulnerable students that they are embraced by the province's concern.

This one goal of creating safe, inclusive environments can be attained in many ways. This is why we challenge any suggestion that one method be not only privileged among others but also mandated. Furthermore, our rights as Catholic schools are engaged here. All aspects of school life must be permeated by our faith. The exercise of this right requires the freedom to determine both the name and content of our initiatives so as to accord with our doctrine.

Figure 4. Pastoral Letter Archbishop Smith to Diocese of Edmonton (2014). Full document

found here: <https://caedm.ca/Portals/0/documents/archbishops%20office/2014-12->

[12_LetterfromArchbishopSmithreBill10.pdf](https://caedm.ca/Portals/0/documents/archbishops%20office/2014-12-12_LetterfromArchbishopSmithreBill10.pdf)

Following the enactment of Bill 10, and the numerous pastoral letters from the bishops, ECSD decided to hold “community consultations” with members from the Edmonton Catholic community. Teachers, administrators, priests and parents were invited to weigh in on initial drafts of a Catholic policy regarding bullying, discrimination and the setup of peer support groups. According to the Catechism of the Catholic church, homosexuality is intrinsically wrong as “they close the sexual act to the gift of life (Catholic Church, 2333). The passage continues to state that while homosexuality is disordered, we still must show compassion and discrimination should be avoided (Catholic Church, 2358). This teaching of the Catholic church is one that is cited often in defense of those that may criticize that Catholic schools are not protecting LGBTQ students or that current policies are too broad. For example, Administrative Policy 138 found in the ECSD goals 2015-2018 states that “each person is welcomed, accepted, and supported as a child of God; therefore, any discrimination is unacceptable and will be addressed” (Inclusive Communities Action Plan, p. 1.)

While it is important to highlight that all students are accepted and supported, there is no mention of LGBTQ youth specifically. In March 2018, a progress report on LGBTQ policies published by Public Interest Alberta, found that ECSD’s current policy meets only 4 of the necessary 26 legal requirements resulting from the passing of Bill 10 and Bill 24 in Alberta (Progress Report on LGBTQ policies of Four Alberta School Boards, 2018). The omission of the terms “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “transgendered,” “queer,” or “questioning,” being one of the criteria the district’s policy fails to meet. A stand-alone policy regarding discrimination of LGBTQ youth needs to be added to the administrative policies in ECSD.

According to the Catholic church, “homosexual persons are called to chastity” (Catholic Church, 2347). In light of the Catholic church’s teachings, ECSD was nervous of allowing

GSAAs to exist in Catholic schools and felt they may go against Catholic teachings. In 2015, a new department within ECSD was created to draft a Catholic version of a peer support group that would infuse Catholicity, prayer and Catholic teachings to be called a LIFE group.

The LIFE framework

The goal of the LIFE framework (Lived Inclusion For Everyone) is to infuse Catholicity into the newly passed Bill 10. The framework provides guidelines for the formation of the groups, the facilitation of the groups, general norms and naming of the group. LIFE groups are encouraged to infuse prayer into meetings, scripture and Catholic teachings into discussions. The school chaplain or school counsellor is also encouraged to co-facilitate the group. Groups are also encouraged to “support the mission, vision and core values of the school and the district” as well as explore from a “catholic perspective a variety of issues, including sexual orientation, gender identity, bullying...” (LIFE, 2017, p.2). In light of the Catholic teachings on homosexuality, this policy is worrisome. The last thing we need is to have an LGBTQ youth being told they are valued and respected but their gender identity or orientation is disordered. The Christian expression “love the sinner, hate the sin,” is the basis for much of the policy making in ECSD and is the “root of the association of sexually diverse youth with mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Callaghan, 2016). It is these kinds of mixed messages that confuse both students and teachers which may in fact deter them from being a part of the group. Interestingly enough, while the framework cites the Alberta school act, it does omit section 16 (3.1) which states that “the principal shall not prohibit or discourage students from choosing a name that includes “gay-straight alliance” or “queer-straight alliance” (Alberta School Act, 2017, p. 25). Currently the LIFE framework identifies the principal as

having final approval for the name of the group.

E. Naming of LIFE Framework student groups

The students may select a respectful and inclusive name for the LIFE group as per legislation (*School Act, s.16.1(3)*)(see Appendix A) after consulting with the principal. These names will incorporate language that is respectful of the teachings of the Catholic Church, and will respect the inclusive intent of this document.

Figure 5. LIFE Framework in Edmonton Catholic Schools (2016-2017)

The grey area has caused some anxiety around LIFE group facilitators. Some teachers within ECSD are encouraging their students to think of a name other than GSA or QSA as using these terms in the district is frowned upon and often discouraged.

“Some students will ask about using the term GSA. This is a good time to reflect on the LIFE Framework and what we believe as a Catholic District about inclusion. Also, take the time to think about the name GSA. It stands for Gay-Straight Alliance. Does that name reflect your group and who you are? Some groups in their discussions have found the term GSA is too binary and it excludes all those who identify outside of the Gay/Straight Alliance. Developing a name that reflects your school, your motto, or mascot, or theme, as well as your mission as a group will be more authentic”-(Creating a LIFE group-best practices, 2017. Link:

<https://edmontoncatholicschools.sharepoint.com/sites/D0020/Shared%20Documents/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=%2Fsites%2FD0020%2FShared%20Documents%2FDocuments%20and%20Articles%2FGender%2C%20Identity%2C%20and%20Sexual%20Orientation%2FSupport%20Clubs%20for%20Youth%2FCreating%20a%20LIFE%20Group%2Edocx&parent=%2Fsites%2FD0020%2FShared%20Documents%2FDocuments%20and%20Articles%2FGender%2C%20Identity%2C%20and%20Sexual%20Orientation%2FSupport%20Clubs%20for%20Youth>).

Figure 6. Creating a LIFE Group-Best Practices in Edmonton Catholic Schools, 2017

Facilitators end up naming their group in relation to their school mascot which causes confusion as to what the group actually is. The following year, Bill 24, “An Act to support gay straight alliances” was passed which further strengthened the right to call a GSA a “GSA.” Now teachers in ECSD feel slightly relieved that the law is on their side, however general attitudes within ECSD see these bills as contradictory to church teachings and are subsequently hesitant or refusing to put their full support behind these groups.

Extending beyond the LIFE Framework

While it is extremely important for schools to have anti-bullying policies, specific mention of LGBTQ students must be incorporated. By acknowledging the “presence of gender nonconforming and LGBTQ students and enacting and enforcing policies and practices designed to provide a safe place for them” these students may experience less harassment at school (Toomey et al., 2012, p. 188). Including LGBTQ students into policies also shows them that they are valued as is, and any sort of discrimination or harassment they encounter is equally as important to address as it is for their heterosexual peers. Additionally, explicitly naming LGBTQ also closes any loopholes or “misinterpretation” of policies. “When you say, ‘bullying’s not okay,’ it is up for interpretation, and it often takes on an interpretation that is compatible with the status quo” (Liboro, 2014, p. 171). If ECSD truly wants to show solidarity and support for these students, it needs to start with a strong district wide sexual and gender minority policy that outlines the rights of these students. The Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) consulted with a LGBTQ professor to create an extensive Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) policy in 2016. This policy is reviewed every year and is proudly displayed on the EPSB website. The policy clearly names and identifies the various sexual orientations that exist on the spectrum rather than general terminology. The specificity of this policy is a great exemplar that ECSD could model.

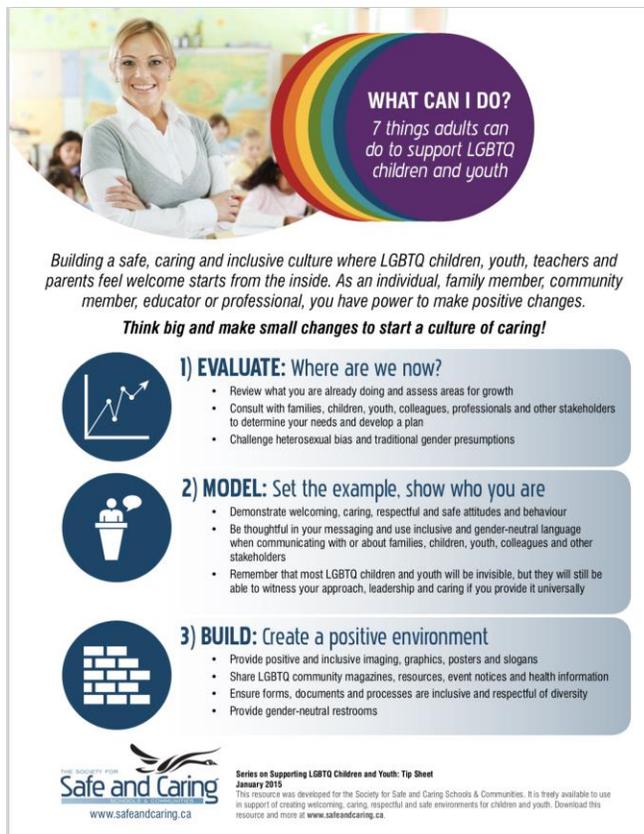
The Board is committed to establishing and maintaining a safe, inclusive, equitable, and welcoming learning and teaching environment for all members of the school community. This includes those students, staff, and families who identify or are perceived as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirit, queer or questioning their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. The Board expects all members of this diverse community to be welcomed, respected, accepted, and supported in every school.

Figure 7. Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Edmonton Public School District (2017). Full policy found here: <https://www.epsb.ca/ourdistrict/policy/h/hfa-bp/>

Where do we go from here?

While the LIFE framework does need some tweaking to specifically include LGBTQ, policies are just one element in the larger framework in creating inclusion for LGBTQ in Catholic schools. A multifaceted approach is needed to provide LGBTQ support and reduce the risks associated with this vulnerable group. An inclusive and supportive learning environment is needed which includes staff training in sexuality and gender diversity, taking on LGBTQ awareness initiatives, GSAs, and inclusion of LGBTQ histories or stories in class.

As teachers in Alberta, we are members of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). In 1996 the ATA received a grant from the Minister of Education to spearhead the Safe and Caring Schools initiative. This project "became a comprehensive social development, violence-prevention and character-education initiative designed to encourage socially responsible and respectful behaviour" (Safe and Caring Schools and Communities, 2018). In 2003, this committee officially received charitable status and became the Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities. This non-profit organization provides resources, information, and workshops for teachers and students on strategies that promote inclusiveness. In the "Toolkit" section of their website (safeandcaring.ca) they offer tip sheets for adults supporting LGBTQ youth, how to be an ally, and offer suggestions when setting up a GSA in school. One important factor when supporting our LGBTQ students is to create a positive environment. The tips offered on the tip sheet that follows suggest inclusive posters, providing LGBTQ resources, magazines, and ensuring documents and forms are inclusive and respectful (Tip Sheet Supporting LGBTQ, 2015). They also suggest providing access to gender inclusive restrooms.



WHAT CAN I DO?
7 things adults can do to support LGBTQ children and youth

Building a safe, caring and inclusive culture where LGBTQ children, youth, teachers and parents feel welcome starts from the inside. As an individual, family member, community member, educator or professional, you have power to make positive changes.

Think big and make small changes to start a culture of caring!

1) EVALUATE: Where are we now?

- Review what you are already doing and assess areas for growth
- Consult with families, children, youth, colleagues, professionals and other stakeholders to determine your needs and develop a plan
- Challenge heterosexual bias and traditional gender presumptions

2) MODEL: Set the example, show who you are

- Demonstrate welcoming, caring, respectful and safe attitudes and behaviour
- Be thoughtful in your messaging and use inclusive and gender-neutral language when communicating with or about families, children, youth, colleagues and other stakeholders
- Remember that most LGBTQ children and youth will be invisible, but they will still be able to witness your approach, leadership and caring if you provide it universally

3) BUILD: Create a positive environment

- Provide positive and inclusive imaging, graphics, posters and slogans
- Share LGBTQ community magazines, resources, event notices and health information
- Ensure forms, documents and processes are inclusive and respectful of diversity
- Provide gender-neutral restrooms

Safe and Caring
www.safeandcaring.ca

Series on Supporting LGBTQ Children and Youth: Tip Sheet
January 2015
This resource was developed for the Society for Safe and Caring Schools & Communities. It is freely available to use in support of creating welcoming, caring, respectful and safe environments for children and youth. Download this resource and more at www.safeandcaring.ca.

Figure 8. Tip Sheet Supporting LGBTQ Youth (2015). Full sheet found here:

<http://safeandcaring.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Tip-Sheet-Supporting-LGBTQ-youth.pdf>

The Safe and Caring Schools Society also stresses the importance of training and support to “colleagues, children and youth to build their awareness and knowledge and develop strategies for inclusion” (Safe and Caring Schools, 2015).

Based on the findings of the literature review, and the supports already in place from the Alberta Teachers’ Association, the following section offers a suggested timeline for implementing supports and staff training to ensure LGBTQ youth in Catholic high schools have a successful school experience.

Setting up our LGBTQ students for a successful school year

It is vitally important that both administrators and teachers work hard to develop a climate where all students succeed. One way in doing this, is to continuously challenge the heteronormative attitudes held within our schools and our districts. “School leaders should constantly refrain from presumptuously identifying all students as heterosexual” (Fraynd & Hernandez, 2014, p. 118). It is not only the job of our administration, but all staff need to be properly trained in order to best support LGBTQ students. “School environments can change to be more inclusive of LGBTQ students if school leaders create (and insist upon) opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to learn about LGBTQ issues” (Fraynd & Hernandez, 2014, p. 119) and to dialogue with them. Using gender neutral language makes a difference as “LGBTQ youth are highly attuned to the subtle signals around them” (Fraynd & Hernandez, 2014, p. 119), so it is important that all staff are on the same page when addressing LGBTQ youth.

As teachers, we often spend August planning and prepping for the courses we will teach the following year. Already a busy task, we often don’t have the time to properly plan for our extracurricular commitments. Below I offer a suggested timeline for setting up LGBTQ students for a successful school year. It is extremely important that administration and teachers look at 4 main areas when planning: policies, school climate, staff training, and GSAs.

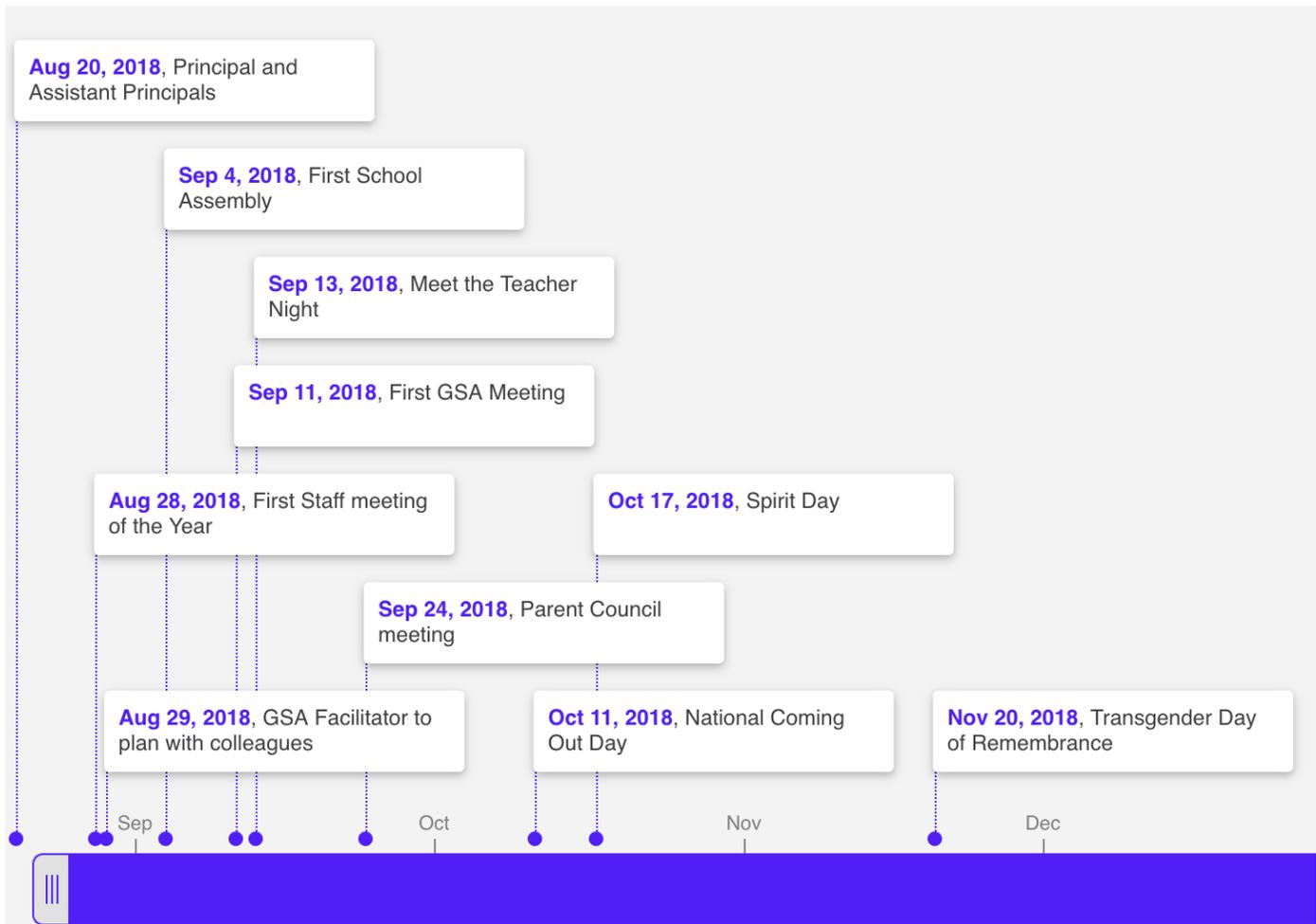


Figure 9. Suggested Timeline for setting up LGBTQ students for a successful school year.

August

1. Principals, along with Assistant Principals should take time to review the school handbook and the policies included to determine if the anti-bullying policies included in the handbook are comprehensive enough.

Questions to ask:

Do we make it clear that our school values all staff, students, parents who identify or are perceived as LGBTQ?

Do we make it clear that all LGBTQ students, staff and parents have the right to be treated fairly with dignity and respect?

Do we make it clear that we have avenues of recourse if LGBTQ students, staff and parents feel they are being harassed or discriminated against?

Do we make it clear that any complaints of harassment or discrimination will be taken seriously, investigated, and dealt with in a timely manner?

Do we make it clear that we offer yearly professional development and staff training for all teachers, administration, office staff, and custodians?

Are the dates of LGBTQ awareness events listed on our school calendar?

2. First staff meeting of the year

Fraynd & Hernandez (2014) suggest administrators and teachers take an “Equity Audit” of their school to assist in planning for success for LGBTQ students. Schools normally analyze academic achievement data but the equity audit provides an “opportunity for data collection related to school wide sexual orientation, and most often brings to light glaring gaps in data related to sexual orientation” (Fraynd & Hernandez, 2014, p. 120). Having these types of conversations amongst staff are extremely beneficial for students as we become aware of gaps in our school or even the district. The following questions might be good questions to dissect with the staff at the first meeting in August.

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Table 1
Equity Audit Questions

Does your district have any active policies that support sexual orientation?

How and to what extent does your district's curriculum provide instruction related to sexual orientation?

If a group of students approached your school's principal and requested permission to begin a gay-and-lesbian support group, how would your principal or district likely respond?

Assess your school's library and media holdings related to sexual orientation. To what extent do students in your school have access to information about sexual orientation and what is the nature of this information?

Report two pieces of academic-achievement data (reading and math) that relate to this area of diversity. How are lesbian, gay, and bisexual students performing academically?

audits (Eretturo & Capper, 2007; Scheurich &

Figure 10. **Equity Audit Questions.** Fraynd & Hernandez (2014).

- Designate or have a volunteer teacher facilitator for the school GSA and decide on a start date for the first meeting. The Alberta GSA Network has abundant resources for teachers on their website which might be a good starting point for the facilitator in order to plan for yearly meetings. The Alberta GSA coordinator will also come and meet your facilitator to help plan and offer suggestions and resources. Link found here:

<http://albertagsanetwork.ca/index.php/teacher-resources/>

- The school GSA facilitator may also want to meet with the ECSD Inclusive Communities Consultant to go over ideas on how best to support and facilitate the group.
- Invite “Safe Spaces” from the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies & Services to your site to provide a training session to all staff. Link found here:
<https://www.ualberta.ca/ismss/classroom/professional-development>
- The Society for Safe and Caring Schools also provides professional development. Link found here: <http://safeandcaring.ca/services/workshops/>
- go over the school policies regarding LGBTQ bullying and harassment and inform staff of the protocol when handling these situations.
- Put up Safe Space stickers and posters around the school and ensure there is one located in the foyer of the school.



Figure 11. The Safe Spaces Initiative (2015). Full sheet found here:

<https://www.teachers.ab.ca/for%20members/professional%20development/diversity%20and%20human%20rights/sexual%20orientation/safe%20spaces%20initiative/Pages/Index.aspx>

September

1. *School Assembly.* In the first week of school there is normally a school assembly for all students. This is a great opportunity for the principal to announce the schools' GSA. The facilitator could also introduce themselves and invite all students out to the first meeting. At the school assembly it is also important for administration to highlight the schools' safe and inclusive policies.
2. *School announcements.* The first meeting date, time, and location of the GSA should be in the schools' daily announcements. Posters around the school with this information would also be very beneficial.
3. *September school newsletter.* School newsletters are emailed out to the school community and also posted on the school's website. The schools newsletter could include a list of all the clubs offered at the school including the GSA as a way to encourage participation. Example provided below:

FLEETWOOD PARK CLUBS 2017-2018		
HAVE FUN, JOIN A CLUB!!		
CLUB	OPPORTUNITIES	TEACHER SPONSOR
ANIMATION / COMPUTER SCIENCE	To educate students on Computer Science and Animation by doing various projects. Students will have fun while learning the fundamentals of computer. Weekly meetings, Fridays after school in B202.	Mr. McDonald
BEST BUDDIES CLUB	To build friendships between typical and exceptional students. Work on social skills. One-one hang out at lunch. Be a good friend. Participate in group activities. Meets during school hours and at lunch in A209/the Plaza.	Ms. Horton
BOARDING CLUB	To provide a positive space for board enthusiasts. Members are expected to exhibit safe boarding style and wear appropriate safety gear for boarding days (helmet), to behave in a safe manner both in school and on their boards, and to promote an inclusive and positive environment around the sport. Meetings Thursdays at lunch in B107 and pop up park days.	Mx. Bennett/ Mr. Snead
BOOK CLUB	Enjoyment of reading and discussion about text, promoting literacy. Members purchase their own texts if not available in the school, members organize the schedule of meetings and run the discussion. Meets Mondays at lunch in A216.	Ms. Miller-Tait
COGITATION CLUB	We strive to encourage the process and challenge students' ability to think logically, along with providing a platform for students interested in cogitation to connect to one another. Meets Tuesdays at lunch in A311.	Ms. Hiebert
EARTH CLUB	To raise environmental awareness and promote sustainable behaviour at FPSS. Weekly meetings, monthly service activities in the school, occasional district leadership opportunities. Meets Thursdays at lunch in A206.	Ms. Metcalfe
FILM CLUB	This club is for students that enjoy watching, talking about, and making student films. Watching and discussing films, collaboration on student scripts with the potential of creating small productions. All are welcome. Meets Fridays at lunch and after school when needed in B102.	Mr. Snead
FLEETWOOD PRESS	To publish a monthly school paper using student writing on student activity. Open to all interested students. Meets Tuesdays (2x per month) in A208.	Mr. King
FRENCH CLUB	Strives to promote French language speaking in the school and provides a place for those interested in speaking French/furthering their French skills. Members do not have to be enrolled in the French program. Members may drop-in or attend all Thursday lunch time meetings in A309.	Ms. Wilcox
GARDENING CLUB	To encourage students to grow plants for food and ambience. Help our teaching kitchen source herbs (basils, parsley etc.). Encourage entrepreneurship by hosting a plant/soil sale. Meets twice weekly to water and cultivate plants on Tuesdays after school & either Thursdays after school or Fridays at lunch.	Mr. Church
GAY / STRAIGHT ALLIANCE	GSA is a club with a desire to promote education, tolerance, and understanding about the LGBTQ community. This work is meant to result in safer and more caring schools and communities. Members are expected to maintain confidentiality around personal discussions, demonstrate respect for one another, and to share their message respectfully with others. Meets Fridays at lunch in A202.	Ms. L. Porter/ Ms. Stusiak/ Mx. Bennett
GRAD COUNCIL	To promote grad enthusiasm and involvement by planning activities together. Meetings announced on the app/facebook page throughout the year. Meets first Friday of every month in A308.	Ms. Chong/ Ms. Frederickson
	To introduce students to productive lifelong leisure activities. To give students	

Figure 12. Fleetwood Park School Newsletter (2017).

4. *First GSA meeting.* The first GSA meeting should be well advertised the first week of school. Most schools hold meetings during the lunch break but the students can decide what works best for them. Here are some suggested first meeting activities adapted from the Alberta Government series on Gay Straight/Queer Straight Alliances (full document here: <http://albertagsanetwork.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/starting-a-gsa-guide-for->

[students_hmjwb-1.pdf](#)) Start with an icebreaker activity- team building & getting to know you games.

- a. Brainstorm ideas for a name.
- b. Decide when, where and how often the group will meet.
- c. Come up with a mission/vision statement.
- d. Consider group rules and guidelines.
- e. Be inclusive- Reinforce that this group is for everyone.
- f. Promote the group! Design some posters to promote the next meeting.

5. *Meet the teacher night.* Meet the teacher night is a great way for parents to meet their child's teacher as well as familiarize themselves with the school. Parents will see posters advertising the school's GSA and safe space stickers as they tour the school which will further bring visibility to the group and show this school is a safe space. Principals can take this time to introduce the various clubs and teams offered at the school, including the school's GSA and the facilitator.

6. *Parent Council meeting.* Every month or so, administration will meet with parent council to consult and offer advice for what is best for students in the school. This council gives parents a voice in the school community and a chance to participate in the vision and goals of the school. At the first parent council meeting of the year, it would be advantageous to have the GSA facilitator speak to the parents about the GSA; the purpose, the mission statement, and what a typical meeting looks like. When parents have a better understanding of what happens at the meetings, they will feel more inclined to support it.

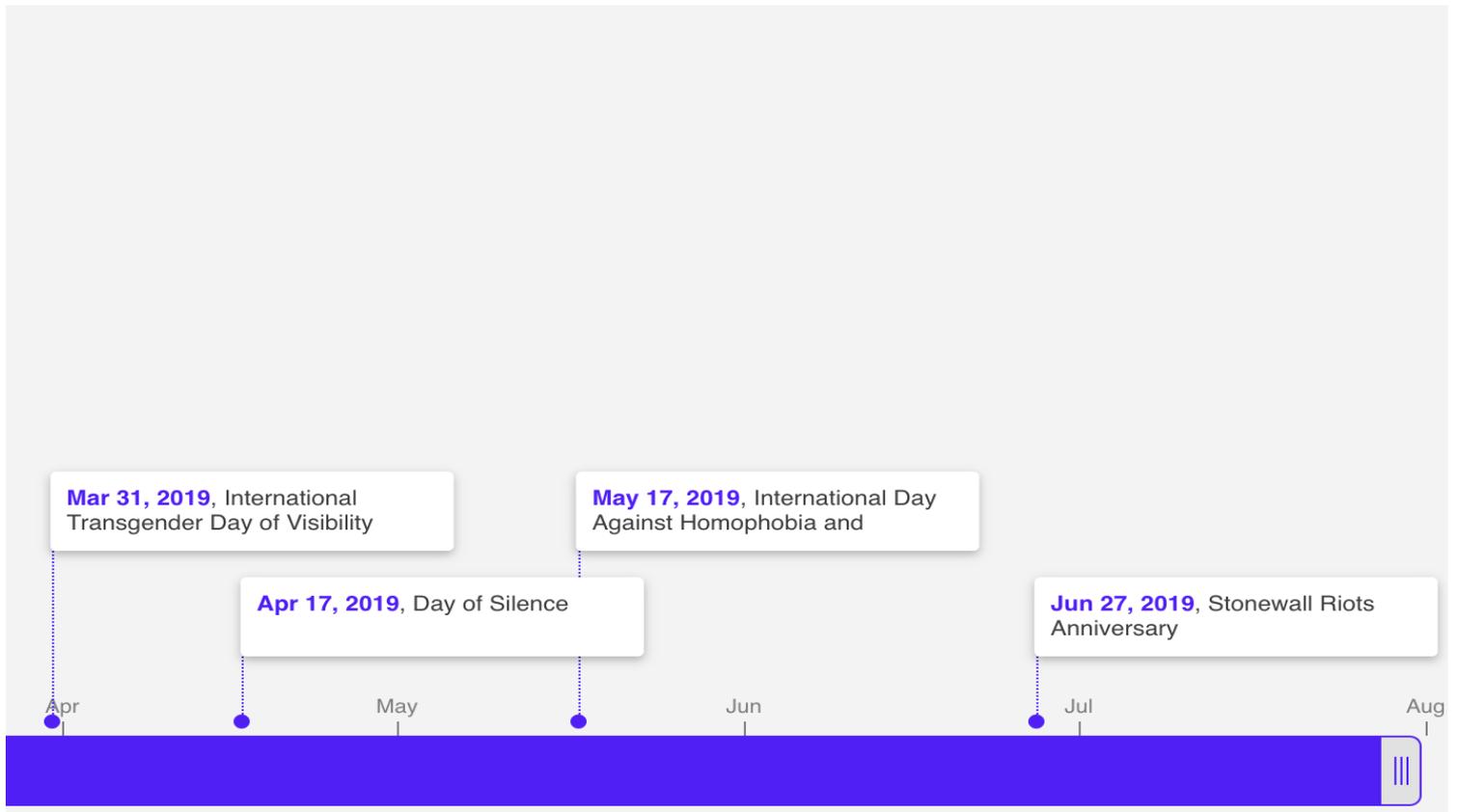


Figure 13. Suggested Timeline for setting up LGBTQ students for a successful school year.

Celebrating LGBTQ Awareness Days

Celebrating and acknowledging the LGBTQ community affirms their identity and gives the message of acceptance and respect. School leaders have a chance to design activities and celebrations that affirm LGBTQ youth. Committing your school to participate in a national program such as Spirit Day or Day of Silence protests shows solidarity and pride in the LGBTQ community. It also sheds light on the harsh reality for the LGBTQ community. The school's GSA could organize various activities, field trips, bake sales, and other initiatives to raise awareness for these important days. Below is a list of some of the LGBTQ Awareness days your school could celebrate:

National Coming Out Day- October 11th

Spirit Day- October 17th

Transgender Day of Remembrance- November 20th

International Transgender Day of Visibility- March 31st

Day of Silence- April 17th

International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia- May 17th

Stonewall Riots Anniversary- June 27th

June

June is LGBTQ pride month and a great opportunity for administrators and the GSA facilitator to reflect on the successes of the year and do a bit of planning for next year. It may be helpful for the GSA facilitator to survey the members of the group as to what worked and what the group and the school could improve on. It would also be advantageous to hear suggests from the GSA about what they would like to see for next year. June is a busy time of the school year, but setting an hour or two aside to review the successes and future plans for LGBTQ youth in the school, is extremely beneficial.

Conclusion

With the legal requirements of Bill 10, Edmonton Catholic Schools has tried to support our LGBTQ students in accordance with the law as well as Catholic doctrine. However, often times these two ideologies oppose each other placing many Catholic educators in a precarious position. Not wanting to go against Catholic teaching, or against the district, many ECSD teachers shy away from facilitating GSAs or being an outspoken ally for our LGBTQ students. This is a shame and ECSD needs to vocally support GSAs within all of our schools. The project I outline on the previous pages, gives a snapshot of what schools can do to support our LGBTQ students. However, more needs to be done at the district level in regards to policy writing and professional development. The current LIFE (Lived Inclusion for Everyone) framework is superficial and needs to be rewritten in a way that explicitly names “LGBTQ” and unequivocally advocates for these youth.

Just as schools prepare and plan for student success, we must remember to include proper programming for our LGBTQ students. Based on the conclusions drawn from the previous literature review, policies, school climate, staff training, and GSAs all play an instrumental role in the success of LGBTQ students. Having a supportive, understanding, and knowledgeable staff will immediately help LGBTQ students to feel safe and supported. If schools can do only **one** thing next year, I suggest having a professional development session on LGBTQ issues and terminology for all staff. Building empathy and understanding is the first step towards healing and acceptance.

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Appendix

Recommended Resources for Teachers and GSA facilitators

Alberta GSA Network- Offers professional development, and resources:

<http://albertagsanetwork.ca/>

AltView Foundation- Offers professional development, resources, and discussion groups for teens: <http://www.altview.ca/>

ATA PRISM Toolkits- Elementary and Secondary. These books are invaluable resources with lesson plans, terminology, and much more. Free hard copy available or PDF found here:

<https://www.teachers.ab.ca/For%20Members/Professional%20Development/Diversity%20and%20Human%20Rights/Resources/Pages/PRISM-Toolkit.aspx>

Bill 24- Guidelines for best practices. Familiarize yourself with the newest Bill passed by the Alberta Minister of Education: <https://education.alberta.ca/media/1626737/91383-attachment-1-guidelines-final.pdf>

Creating and Supporting a Gay-Straight Alliance- BC teachers. Great resource for setting up a GSAs including tips for meetings, recommended videos, and useful websites:

<https://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/SocialJustice/Issues/LGBTQ/GSA%20Booklet%202012-fourth%20edition.pdf>

GSAs and QSAs: A Guide for Alberta Teachers. Comprehensive package all about setting up a GSA in Alberta schools. Many resources shared: <https://cloudfront.ualberta.ca/-/media/education/ismss/documents/publications/gsasandqsasinalbertaschools2015.pdf>

My GSA. Excellent resource for setting up a GSA. Chapter 10 offers some unique ideas for GSA meetings.

http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/safe_schools/mygsa/gsa_guide.pdf

Pride Centre of Edmonton- Offers resources, health links, counselling, and much more! Check their facebook page.