

Mea Culpa: Sexual Minorities in Catholic Schools

by

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Bachelor of Education, University of Alberta, 2002
Master of Religious Education, Newman Theological College, 2013

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This project focuses on the role of GSAs in Edmonton Catholic High Schools. It looks at how Catholic educators are called to work towards social justice in their classrooms, schools, and districts. Unfortunately, the district has been neglecting sexual minorities and perpetuating structural violence against them by denying the existence of GSAs in their high schools. The literature review presents a statistical overview of the research that demonstrates that LGBTQ students are at the highest risks for suicide and school-related problems such as truancy, bullying, and homophobic victimization. Homosexual youth when compared to their heterosexual peers are at higher risks for depression, substance abuse, homelessness and street involvement, sexual abuse, violence, and HIV risk behaviour. This project examines current legislation, the purposes of GSAS, the misconceptions and frequently asked questions surrounding GSAs, and what Catholic schools can do to provide support that is aligned with the Roman Catholic Church's views about homosexuality.

Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	vii
Dedication.....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Roman Catholic Obligation to Social Justice.....	2
Heteronormative Oppression.....	3
Faith and Beliefs.....	4
Where do we go from here?.....	5
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	6
Language.....	6
LGBTQ Terms and Definitions.....	7
Historical Trends.....	8
Statistics.....	14
Suicidality.....	14
School-related problems.....	16
Homelessness and Street Involvement.....	20
Violence.....	21
Substance use, sexual abuse, and HIV risk behaviours.....	22
Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) in Schools.....	23
What is a GSA?.....	23
What do GSAs do?.....	24
The Major Roles of School-Based GSAs.....	24

Misconceptions and FAQs.....	25
Legislation.....	29
Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.....	30
Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act.....	30
Bill C-250 – An Act to amend the Criminal Code (Hate Propaganda).....	31
Bill 13-Accepting Schools Act, Ontario Education Act.....	31
The Alberta School Act, Section 45.....	32
The Alberta Teachers' Association, Code of Professional Conduct.....	32
The Alberta Teachers' Association, The Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers.....	32
Alberta Teachers' Association, Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Long- Range Policy 18.....	32
Permeation.....	34
Chapter 3: Project.....	37
Introduction.....	37
LIFE Framework.....	43
Advocacy Groups.....	46
Peer Support Groups.....	47
Counselling Groups.....	47
Motivation.....	49
Presentation.....	49
Conclusion.....	57
Chapter 4: Reflections and Recommendations.....	58
Role of the Educational Professional.....	58
Theory in Action.....	61
Recommendations.....	64

Appendix A.....	67
Appendix B.....	68
Appendix C.....	70
Appendix D.....	72
Appendix E.....	74
References.....	75

List of Figures

Figure 1: What do GSAs do?

Figure 2: Sample of 4 slides from Sexual Minority Statistics Presentation

Figure 3: Online Kahoot Quiz on LGBTQ Terminology

Figure 4: Common Misconceptions and FAQs about GSAs

Figure 5: Screenshot of iSMSS website

Figure 6: iSMSS video, *Being Marissa*

Figure 7: LIFE Framework Presentation

Figure 8: Resources available through the ATA

Figure 9: Survey Monkey, Presentation Feedback

Dedication

Dad, you are an inspiration of faith, love, and determination. You are the reason I believe in miracles and I could not have finished this without your example of strength.

Mom, thank you for believing in me and your constant support.

Annie and Peggy, my little sisters with big hearts.

Luke and Elizabeth, my source of smiles, snuggles, and giggles.

My friends, thanks for waiting for me and all of your encouragement.

“Ruby and Ginger, we can for our long walks again”.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In our times a special obligation binds us to make ourselves the neighbor of every person without exception and of actively helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by recalling the voice of the Lord, "As long as you did it for one of these the least of my brethren, you did it for me" (Matt. 25:40). (Gaudium et Spes, p. 27)

Roman Catholic Obligation to Social Justice

As a member of the Roman Catholic Church we understand that we are inclined to cooperate with others in order to help make the institutions of society better serve the common good. The obligation of social justice falls upon each person but that task can seem insurmountable when we work alone; we must work within the Church to identify the needs of society, and, by the use of appropriate means, to meet these needs locally, regionally, nationally, and globally. We are called to "follow the poor Christ, the humble and cross-bearing Christ in order to be worthy of being sharers in His glory" (Gaudium et Spes, p. 27).

The world has entered a new phase of social existence, with potential for great good or great harm and Christians, therefore, are expected to respond by promoting the common good not only of small groups but all of humanity. As a member of the Church we are called to "walk unhesitatingly according to his own personal gifts and duties in the path of living faith, which arouses hope and works through charity" (Gaudium et Spes, p. 27).

When we ensure that all of humanity's basic needs are met, all are better able to enter into a closer relationship with Christ.

The meeting of basic needs, however; is not enough in the way of social justice and equality. There is a need to address the structural violence and peacelessness experienced by different groups and individuals alike. This injustice exists within all structures of society and across the globe.

In His preaching He clearly taught the sons of God to treat one another as brothers. In His prayers He pleaded that all His disciples might be "one." Indeed as the redeemer of all, He offered Himself for all even to point of death. "Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). He commanded His Apostles to preach to all peoples the Gospel's message that the human race was to become the Family of God, in which the fullness of the Law would be love (Gaudium et Spes, p. 32).

The Church standing in solidarity with our Christian brethren can begin to bring about societal change that will protect the poverty stricken and marginalized. Their works will bring about a restructuring of the global constructs that tend to value the individual over the collective well-being. The peacelessness often experienced by those who are struggling in society can be alleviated bringing them closer in relationship to God the Father and their communal family of God's children.

Pope John XXII assembled the greatest minds in the Roman Curia to address the relationship between the Catholic Church and the modern world in the Second Vatican Council. In a modern world, on the cusp of globalization, he recognized the need to bring God's loving message to more and more people across the globe in such a way that it met them where they were as a society. As biblical revelation becomes a reality, acculturation or enculturation stresses that the mystery of God's saving love is to become accessible to the understanding of successive generations, in spite of their exceedingly diverse historical situations. Under the guidance of the

Holy Father, Pope Paul VI, there is a significant emphasis on our call as Christians to social justice and care for all of humanity.

Promoting and protecting human rights was a sentiment expressed by the Roman Catholic Church in 1965 in the four Apostolic Constitutions resulting from Second Vatican Council. How are we advocating for human rights and standing up against injustice in 2015? Who are the marginalized in today's society? What are we doing to challenge and change structural violence in the 21st century? Are we continuing the problem or embracing diversity within our Catholic schools? How are we sharing God's message with our diverse school communities?

Heteronormative Oppression

Unfortunately, Alberta's Catholic School Boards are maintaining a structure of heteronormative oppression. Heteronormativity is the complex ways that heterosexual culture can be perceived as the elemental form of human association, the model of inter-gender relations, and the unequivocal basis for reproduction in society (Sumara and Davis, 1999, p. 324). It is the understanding that heteronormative culture means to see, read, and think 'straight'. It is the assumption that individuals fall into a specific biological sex determined at birth that determines their gender, adopt distinct gender roles, and that heterosexual orientation is the norm. This overarching disposition in Alberta's Catholic Schools is exclusionary because it fails create legitimate safe spaces in their institutions for all individuals. In Alberta, our publicly funded Catholic School Boards have turned their backs on their Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer (LGBTQ) students, families, colleagues, and their allies in favour of ineffectual rhetoric. I wish to challenge Edmonton Catholic schools to re-evaluate their stance on Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) based on psychological, legal, professional, historical, and catechetical frameworks.

My previous graduate work in area of religious education will provide legitimacy to my arguments and demonstrate that I have examined this issue from a variety of angles. I have a deep respect and love for the Roman Catholic Tradition, Church, and Scripture. My research in the areas of challenges and resiliency for LGBTQ students and their allies have allowed for growth in my personal faith journey. It has revealed to me that in my desire for social justice and the challenging of structural violence that I did not hear the voices of those who marginalized because they are a sexual minority. My ignorance was perpetuating heteronormativity in my classroom, in my school, and ultimately in society. As Roman Catholics we are called to accountability and to challenge injustices against humanity. As protectors of human rights we need to be the change we want to see in the community and in the world. As Catholic educators we want to give our students hope and help them achieve to their full potential as an essential and valued part of God's kingdom.

Faith and Beliefs

When teaching my students about faith and beliefs it helps to discuss that you can have faith but have beliefs that are in transition. We are allowed and encouraged to questions and challenge our understandings of Church, Tradition, and Scripture to bring oneself closer to God and deepen our faith. The Catholic Church, and by extension Catholic Schools, want their faithful to contemplate societal issues and reconcile the past, present, and future to honour God's love. Hill et al (1997) provide a helpful distinction between faith and beliefs:

“Faith and beliefs are related and interact with each other but should be kept distinct. Without distinction it is possible to think that we are losing our faith, when in fact, we are simply questioning some of our beliefs. Beliefs can change significantly and yet faith can remain strong in its commitment. In fact, in some cases, a change in beliefs can help make our faith commitment even stronger” (p. 75).

It is from a desire to strengthen Catholic Schools and honour our faith commitment that I have focused my research and advocacy for change for LGBTQ students and their allies. All students in our care deserve to feel safe and welcome in our schools. We are called to protect all members of society and share in God's love for them.

Where do we go from here?

Multiple studies over the past two decades indicate that sexual minority youth are at the highest risk for suicide, attempted suicide, sexual assault, bullying, violence, truancy, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and high-risk promiscuity. From a legislative standpoint there have been federal and provincial advances for individuals that identify as a sexual minority to recognize and protect their basic human rights and freedoms. Gay-Straight Alliances are one of the many ways that we can systematically offer support and a safe space for LGBTQ students and their allies in the school system. GSAs can be found in many of the public high schools within Alberta; currently however, there isn't one that can be found in the many publically-funded Catholic schools. The primary concern of this particular project is examine how high schools in the Edmonton Catholic school district can support GSAs to permeate faith, love, and fellowship.

Throughout this paper, we will look at statistical information and trends that emerge as challenges for LGBTQ youth and how the absence of GSAs in faith-based schools, specifically Edmonton Catholic High Schools is perpetuating systematic violence. We will be examining federal and provincial legislation around sexual minorities and protecting human rights is congruent with the mandate of Catholic educators when supporting GSAs. We will also examine church doctrine and documents that call Catholics to accept and provide for the LGBTQ community and their allies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, there will be an examination of the literature and statistics associated with my topic. First, I will present a list of common LGBTQ terms and demonstrate the importance of promoting respectful language when discussing sensitive issues. There will be brief overview of the evolution of LGBTQ youth related research before relating a significant amount of statistical information from a wide range of sources regarding sexual minority youth. Once the primary issues relevant to LGBTQ adolescents have been identified it will lead the discussion of GSAs and their vital importance to not only sexual minorities but to all youth. Next, I will present human rights legislation from both provincial and federal levels and its relationship to our professional obligation as educators in Alberta. Finally, I will be relating this culmination of research information to Edmonton Catholic's commitment to religious permeation and how GSAs fall in line with our goals of faith, love, and fellowship.

Language

When beginning to discuss a topic it is necessary to develop a common understanding of the fundamentals and provide students with the appropriate language to communicate effectively. When discussing LGBTQ issues it is necessary to use language that is accurate and respectful. Unfortunately, those who have been marginalized in any regard by society have experienced the brutality of verbal abuse or have been insulted by someone's ignorance. It is from wanting to dispel misunderstanding and empowering individuals to speak from the place of respect that the list of terms and definitions is placed intentionally at the beginning of this document and not at the end. The list provided is from the *Gay-Straight Student Alliances in Alberta Schools: A Guide for Teachers* (The Alberta Teachers' Association and Kristopher Wells, 2006, p. 5-6) is not exhaustive but it is a reasonable starting point for this discussion.

LGBTQ Terms & Definitions

Ally: A person, regardless of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, who supports and stands up for the human and civil rights of LGBTQ people.

Bisexual: A person who is attracted physically and emotionally to both males and females.

Gay: A person who is physically and emotionally attracted to someone of the same sex. The word gay can refer to both males and females, but is commonly used to identify males only.

Gender identity: A person's internal sense or feeling of being male or female. Gender expression relates to how a person presents his or her sense of gender to the larger society. Gender identity and gender expression are often closely linked with the term transgender or trans-identified

.

GSA: A school-based gay–straight student alliance found in some high schools across North America.

Heterosexism: The assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that this sexual orientation is superior. Heterosexism is often expressed in more subtle forms than homophobia.

Heterosexual: A person who is sexually and emotionally attracted to someone of the opposite sex. Also commonly referred to as straight

Homophobia: Fear and/or hatred of homosexuality in others, often exhibited by prejudice, discrimination, bullying or acts of violence.

Lesbian: A female who is attracted physically and emotionally to other females.

LGBTQ: A commonly used acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, transsexual, two-spirited and queer identities. *Sexual minority* is a synonymous term.

Queer: Historically, a negative term for homosexuality. More recently, the LGBTQ communities have reclaimed the word and use it in a positive way to refer to themselves.

Transgender/Trans-identified: A person whose gender identity, outward appearance, expression and/or anatomy does not fit into conventional expectations of male or female. Often used as an umbrella term to represent a wide range of nonconforming gender identities and behaviours.

Transphobia: The irrational fear of people whose actual or perceived gender identity/expression departs from stereotypical gender roles and expectations.

Transsexual: A person who experiences intense personal and emotional discomfort with their assigned birth gender. Some transsexuals may undergo treatments to physically alter their body and gender expression to correspond with what they feel their true gender is.

Two-spirited: Some Aboriginal people identify themselves as two-spirited rather than as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans-identified. Historically, in many Aboriginal cultures, two-spirited persons were respected leaders and medicine people and were often accorded special status based on their unique abilities to understand both male and female perspectives.

There is power in language and the use of specific words can demonstrate empathy and acceptance or superiority and shame. Society and educational systems impress upon its participants that there are certain words or phrases that are not acceptable because they are offensive and/or come from times of oppression. Understanding that language can demonstrate society's past bigotry or persecution towards those of specific ethnic, religious, cognitive, illness, physicality, sexuality, and gender groups is one of the first steps towards healing past wounds and respecting individual identity. Occasionally, individuals do not realize that their language is offensive or discriminatory so it is necessary to educate each other and demonstrate with our own dialogue what is acceptable. For this example,

"Gypped" is arguably the most commonly used racist term in existence today. If someone buys a used car that turns out to be lemon, for instance, he's likely to complain, "I got gypped." So, why is the term offensive? Because it equates the Gypsy, or Roma peoples, with being thieves, cheats and con artists. When someone says that they "got gypped," they are essentially saying that they were conned (About.com, 2014).

Unfortunately, the challenge with offensive language does not end with specific words it also lies with the use of seemingly innocuous terms in inappropriate or derogatory ways. For instance,

Gay-This word is generally used and is appropriate to use if you are describing a homosexual individual. "Gay" in and of itself is not really a derogatory term. The problem with the word "gay" lies in the fact that people often use it in inappropriate ways. For example, many individuals use "gay" to say that something is stupid or lame. They might say "That TV show was gay last night." In this sense, it is very offensive to use the word gay, because using gay to describe something that is stupid or lame is also referring to homosexual people as stupid or lame (LoveToKnow Corp., 1996-2014).

Understanding and respect are key facets of GSAs. A GSA can become an educational resource to teach students and staff on how to use more inclusive language and challenge verbal violence towards students who identify as a sexual minority. Teaching empathy and respect are beneficial to all students regardless of their sexual identities because it demonstrates the "golden rule" or "*You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these*" (Mark 12:31).

Historical Trends

Before we begin studying and evaluating the emerging trends that are repeatedly reaffirmed through contemporary research regarding sexual minority youth it is important to understand the evolution of LGBTQ youth related research according to Wells (2010), Savin-Willaims (2005), and Rofes (2004). These trends help to understand how society's perception of the LGBTQ community has changed over the past 30 years. These societal shifts have influenced both the educational and legislative response to the needs of sexual minorities.

- **First stage response:** 1970s & 80s. During this stage, the experiences of LGBTQ youth were positioned as "*a distinct category from 'normal' adolescence*" (Savin-William,

2005, p. 49.) *LGBTQ youth in this stage were constructed as deviant, pathological, and in need of specialized medical intervention. For example, before 1973 homosexuality was considered a mental illness. After the American Psychological Association de-classified homosexuality as a pathology, research began to move beyond attempts to cure adolescents of homosexuality to a focus on helping them learn how to develop mastery over stigma and shame* (Wells, 2010, p. 18-19).

- **Second stage response:** *1980s & 90s. In this period, distinctive LGBTQ youth realities were recognized, although primarily through a clinical lens, as being at risk for increased drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, violence, suicide, and school-related problems. The research literature from this time period is dense with narratives of victimization, or what Rofes (2004, p. 41-62) identifies as the “martyrtarget-victim” paradigm (2004, p. 41-62). The key outcomes of this early research led to the widespread recognition of formal schooling as an exclusionary heteronormative site with tremendous consequences for the health and safety of sexual minority youth. Quantitative research studies on the risk factors associated with being or being perceived as a sexual minority youth became critical catalysts in advocating for educational interventions and political responses to the health and safety needs of LGBTQ students. Anti-gay violence and abuse in symbolic and physical forms became a serious source of concern* (Wells, 2010, p. 19).

- **Third stage response:** *Late 1990s and early 2000’s. This progressive stage is characterized by education for social change to ameliorate the social, cultural, and political marginalization of sexual minorities. Educational interventions focus on the creation of safe spaces, LGBTQ inclusive curriculum, and anti-harassment policy development. Advocacy is based in identity politics and liberal human-rights discourses*

that call for a “space at the table.” Rapid and significant gains are being made in law and legislation at the federal and provincial levels. For example, in 1998, the Supreme Court of Canada read sexual orientation into the Alberta human-rights statute, and in 2005 same-sex marriage was legalized in Canada. However, these gains are largely assimilationist in nature and the (hetero) normalizing structures of schooling have been left largely intact. During this time period, research on LGBTQ youth has begun to shift its emphasis and concentrate on a resiliency or developmental assets-based approach. The protective factors that enable LGBTQ youth to overcome discrimination and thrive as leading change agents in their schools are becoming an increasingly key focus for educational interventions and research investigations (Wells, 2010, p. 19).

• Fourth stage: Future response. *With increasing gains in the legal recognition and protection of LGBTQ individuals, Savin-Williams (2005, p. 49) argues that “banality” may be the wave of the future. He posits that youth are increasingly adopting a “post-gay” identity where sexuality is no longer considered the defining characteristic of their personhood. Savin-Williams (2005, p. 49) maintains that the everyday ordinariness of same-sex attractions may well become the defining feature for the future of LGBTQ youth. Because of these controversial claims, this fourth stage, banality, is currently one of the most contested issues in the field of LGBTQ educational studies. Many researchers argue that our society will reach a post-gay world at the same time we emerge into a post-racist world, neither of which appears to be on the horizon anytime soon (Wells, 2010, p. 19).*

In Alberta's public schools, from an educational policy standpoint they are most appropriately placed in a "third stage response" according to the societal shifts discussed. The

Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) has adopted policies that protect sexual minorities and respect their lived experience and place in contemporary society. There is a push to implement programs and curricular changes that will foster resiliency in sexual minorities and educate all students as allies. Unfortunately, the Edmonton Catholic School Board is stalled in the "first stage response" because while it does not tolerate bullying, there is still a stigma attached to identifying as LGBTQ. In 2011, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops recognized "that a same-sex attraction is not freely chosen, there is no personal culpability in having such an inclination" (p. 3). It does; however, condemns homosexual acts and claims that "same-sex attraction constitutes a trial" (2011, p. 3). I do not suppose that I can in any way affect the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Fortunately, I can question how she can reconcile that LGBTQ people are created and are loved by God and that they have no choice in their "inclinations" but must deny their sexuality. The Church recognizes that same-sex attraction is not chosen, it is not a psychological disorder but hermeneutics has not altered the Catechism yet. In the recent, 2014 Synod of Bishops on the Family, there was a great deal of discussion around the "pastoral attention towards persons with homosexual tendencies" but the result was a reiteration of past publications by Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict) that were approved by Pope John Paul II in 2003. Nothing has been changed due to the synod discussions; and in actuality, the synod cannot change the Catechism anyway. The hopeful result of the synod is that sexual minority issues are at the forefront of the Church's discussions and that is significant. Pope Francis seems to be aware that contemporary society of the faithful and the Church do not always agree on issues of "natural order" so there needs to be discussion. The purpose of my project is not to change the Catechism; rather, revisit our understanding of LGBTQ issues and how as educators we must support GSAs within a Catholic context.

The following statistics that are shared demonstrate the significant and often life-threatening challenges faced by LGBTQ adolescents. These qualitative and quantitative studies are primarily from North America, but there are some statistical studies from the United Kingdom that have been included as well. It is often reported by the researchers that their statistics may be lower than actual numbers due to the stigma attached to identifying as a sexual minority even in a confidential study.

Statistics

Suicidality

Studies on North American youth have repeatedly indicated suicide as the most common cause of death for sexual minority youth (Campos, 2005, p.20-21). The risk factors for adolescent suicide include substance abuse, feelings of hopelessness, sexual abuse, a history of family dysfunction, and the recent or attempted suicide of a family member or close friend (Remafedi, 1994; Russell & Joyner, 2001, p.1278). Researchers have also identified how sexual-minority youth also face distinctive risk factors such as a lack of family acceptance, age at which they come out or disclose their non-heterosexual orientation, gender atypicality, and bullying or conflict because of their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity (Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr, & Sites, 2006, p. 623), Remafedi, 1994).

The Suicide Prevention Resource Centre (2008, p.14) in the United States reported that sexual minority youth are 1.5 to 7 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. The US Secretary of Health found that one third of all sexual minority youth suicides occur before the age of seventeen (Gibson, 1994). Bagley and Tremblay (1997, p.30) found that gay and bisexual male youth in Alberta were 13.9 times more at risk for a serious suicide attempt than their heterosexual peers. Research from the province of British Columbia suggests that

lesbian and bisexual teen girls are nearly 5 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual girls (Saewyc et al., 2007, p.31).

A comparative report of the trends evident in three large-scale studies of 72,000 students in grades 7-12 in British Columbia (in 1992, 1998, 2003) found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, when compared with their heterosexual peers, were more likely to report a history of abuse and are six times more likely to attempt suicide (Tonkin, Murphy, Lees, Saewyc, & The McCreary Centre Society, 2005, p.16, 18). The Child Death Review Unit of the BC Coroner's Service (2008, p.16) conducted a review of youth deaths from 1997 to 2003 that identified 81 children and youth who died by suicide. Those at increased risk for suicide included Aboriginal, sexual minority, older youth (ages 17-18), male youth, and youth questioning their sexuality.

The staggering figures from these studies regarding sexual minority youth and the correlation with suicide should indicate that these students are in desperate need of support, they are indeed marginalized members of society. These facts and figures have significantly impacted the programming and policies at Alberta Education, the Alberta Teachers' Association, and at Edmonton Public School Board so why do they seem to have limited impact on Edmonton's Catholic schools? In 2005, researchers Williams, Connolly, Pepler, and Craig studied a sample of 97 gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning high school students from a large south central Canadian city (p. 474). This data was collected from a large-scale survey of 1,598 adolescents from five high schools (Williams et al, 2005, p. 474). Six percent of the students surveyed self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning (45 males and 52 females) (Williams et al, 2005, p. 474). Overall, the results from this study suggest that the depression and externalizing behaviours reported by sexual-minority and questioning youth are largely a result of their experiences with victimization and a lack of social support. Importantly, these risk factors are not

increased by a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity alone, but are exacerbated by the lack of a supportive and understanding social and educational environment (Williams et al, 2005, p. 481). Catholic educators have a professional and moral responsibility for providing for these students with recognized and organized support groups.

School-related problems

Adolescents spend a substantial amount of their time outside of home at school either as a student or as a participant in extracurricular activities. School is where students learn to interact appropriately, problem solve, and to create and maintain relationships. If schools are not supportive and cognizant of their total school population they are failing at inclusivity. A 2006 survey of students in grades 7-12, conducted by the Toronto District School Board, found that 8% of students identified themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, two-spirited, queer, or questioning (Yau & O'Reilly, 2007, p. 11). These results can be extrapolated to indicate that most schools have a substantial population of youth affected by the following issues and require guidance and support.

A 2009 study of 7,376 seventh and eighth grade students found that 10.5% self-identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and 4.6% identified as questioning their sexual orientation. This study found that when compared to their heterosexual peers, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning youth were more likely to report (1) higher levels of bullying, (2) homophobic victimization, and (3) increased negative health outcomes. Questioning students, who often experience the least social and educational supports, reported higher rates of bullying, victimization, depression, suicidality, drug use, and truancy when compared with both sexual minority and heterosexual peers (Birket, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009, p. 997-998).

A 2008 study found that heterosexual students "experience similar psychological and social consequences from being called homophobic epithets [i.e. "fag talk"]", including higher

self-reported withdrawal, depressed mood, and personal distress” (Poteat, 2008, p. 190). The report concludes that aggressive social climates are a significant contributing factor in homophobic bullying. Accordingly, school programs ought to specifically address student aggression and negative/hostile school climates, and how homonegativity can contribute to school-based bullying and violence. Varjas et al. (2008, p. 59-86) reported that verbal bullying/abuse targeting sexual minority youth was the most common type of school-related bullying. These authors found that between 70% and 80% of students targeted by anti-gay bullies were actually heterosexual, indicating that homophobic bullying is the most common form of bullying found in junior high schools and occurs across all racial and ethno-cultural groups.

A Canadian study of 77 lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth conducted by the McCreary Centre Society (1999) in British Columbia found that 66% of gay and lesbian students heard homophobic remarks made by other students at school. 37 % of gay and lesbian youth questioned felt like outsiders in their school. 17% reported being assaulted at their school within the past year. Almost 40% reported dramatically low self-esteem. 39% told a teacher or school counsellor that they were gay or lesbian. 37% stated that they hated or disliked school. 82% reported regularly hearing their peers make homophobic remarks at school. 28% reported also hearing their teachers making homophobic comments. In a follow-up study, the McCreary Centre Society (Saewyc et al., 2007) found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth, when compared to their heterosexual peers, were more likely to have experienced physical and sexual abuse, harassment in school, and discrimination in the community. They participate less frequently in sports and physical activity, and report higher levels of computer usage/time.

In a study of over 13,000 high school-aged youth, Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, and Koenig (2008, p. 208-216) explored the relationships between homophobic bullying, negative health

outcomes, and parental and school support. They found that positive school climates and parental support were key protective factors mitigating against student drug use and depression. These authors identified victimization by peers as one of the strongest predictors for school disengagement for sexual minority and questioning youth.

An American study identified how sexual minority youth are five times more likely than their heterosexual peers to miss school due to concerns related to their personal safety (Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998, p. 897). In a study of middle school students, researchers found that 30% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students dropped out of school altogether (Elias et al., 1992, p. 41-57).

A comprehensive report from United Kingdom's Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) identified homophobic bullying as a significant factor in students being more likely to miss school, less likely to complete their formal education, and less likely to feel safe and make a positive contribution to their community. Correspondingly, another influential UK study reported that 72% of children who were bullied because of their sexual orientation had played sick or were truant to avoid abuse at school (Rivers, 2000, p. 13-18).

In one of the largest safe schools studies conducted to date, involving 237,544 students in grades 7-9, it was revealed that 7.5% of students reported being harassed because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation (California Safe Schools Coalition & 4-H Center for Youth Development, University of California, Davis, 2004). Of those students who were harassed, they reported lower grades (24%), higher absentee rates (27%), greater depression (55%), and were more likely to make plans to commit suicide (35%) when compared to their heterosexual peers. Not surprisingly, many sexual minority and gender atypical youth who have experienced

bullying report long-term mental health symptoms that are strongly correlated with posttraumatic stress disorder (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006, p. 1462-1482).

The sexual minority and questioning youth surveyed in these multitude of international research studies are very clear in suggesting that their schools have failed to provide them with safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments (Wells, 2009, p. 225). Many of these research findings were reaffirmed in a recent Canadian-based safe schools study conducted by Egale Canada, which found, for example, that 75% of the almost 1700 youth surveyed felt unsafe in their schools (Egale Canada, 2009).

It is a travesty that students are not feeling safe at school, how can we nurture the skills necessary to develop into socially responsible citizens if they are scared in one of the places where they spend the majority of their time. It is not surprising, that truancy and drop-out rates are highest amongst the students who feel the most threatened. It is based on these results that we have seen significant advances in LGBTQ rights and recognition in educational policy in order to create more equitable and safe experiences for students who belong to sexual minorities and foster resiliency.

GSAs are just one tool to build advocacy for LGBTQ students and their allies but is a fundamental starting point and will positively affect all students. Similar to affirmative action projects; or the hiring of ethnic or gender minorities, the purpose while opposed by some is an attempt to eliminate discrimination and provide opportunities for individuals outside of the majority culture. It is an attempt to have a workforce that is a more accurate representation of society as a whole; rather than perpetuating a singular ruling class who are the only ones who have access to opportunity and advancement.

GSA challenge the heteronormativity in schools. They acknowledge LGBTQ students and their allies by providing a safe space for discussion and support; meanwhile, educating the entire school community to become more empathetic and cognizant of sexual minority issues. There will always be those who are threatened by the unknown or resistant to change; but it is because schools want to build a more accepting and equitable society that we challenge areas of structural violence. Heteronormativity is a structural violence because it is exclusive to LGBTQ students and their allies who have an alternate understanding of normal.

Homelessness and street-involvement

Sexual minority adolescents are often at an increased risk for street-involvement as many are forced out of their homes and cast away from their support networks when they disclose or have their non-heterosexual identity exposed (Ryan & Futterman, 1998). Multiple research studies indicate that between 11% and 35% of street youth (1 in 5 on average) self-identify as a sexual minority or report questioning their sexual identity (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002, p. 773-777; National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009). These rates are most likely underreported since sexual minority youth are unlikely to reveal their sexual identity or gender orientation to authorities (Wells, 2009, p. 225).

A Seattle study of homeless youth found more negative outcomes for street-involved sexual minority adolescents than their heterosexual counterparts (Cochrane et al., 2002, p. 773-777). These outcomes included “more-frequent departures from home, greater vulnerability to physical and sexual victimization, higher rates of addictive substance use, more psychopathology, and riskier sexual behavior” (Cochrane et al., 2002, p. 775). Other research studies indicate that lesbian, gay, and bisexual homeless youth are 62% more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual homeless peers, and have higher risk exposure to sexual abuse

and exploitation, experience 7.4 more acts of sexual violence, and are at greater risk for drug abuse (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2009).

These research studies suggest that key intervention strategies for the street-involved youth population should also specifically target sexual minority youth and work to identify and build upon prevention programs that help youth to build positive social networks (Wells, 2009, p. 226).

Violence

In 2008, Statistics Canada issued results from the first social survey to collect national data on the extent to which gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals were victims of violent crime and discrimination (Beauchamp, 2008). The survey found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults experienced higher rates of violent victimization including sexual assault, robbery, and physical assault and rates of discrimination three times higher than heterosexuals. Statistics Canada found that the majority of hate crimes involve young people, both as the perpetrators and victims of hate crimes (Dauvergne, Scrim, & Brennan, 2008). For example, one in ten hate crimes in Canada are motivated by a person's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity and more than 50% of these hate crimes are violent in nature, result in physical trauma, and require medical intervention.

An American study involving more than 12,000 adolescents in grades 7-12 found that youth who reported same-sex or both-sex romantic attractions were more likely to experience extreme forms of violence (Russell, Franz, & Driscoll, 2001, p. 904). The youth surveyed were more likely to have been in a fight that resulted in the need for medical treatment and, in particular, bisexual youth were more likely to have been jumped and violently attacked (Russell, Franz, & Driscoll, 2001, p. 905).

Sexual minority youth are not only the victims of violence. In some cases they may also become the perpetrators of violence. DuRant, Krowchuck, and Sinai (1998) reported that young gay and bisexual males are more likely to carry and use weapons when compared with their heterosexual peers. This self-defensive behavior is often linked to youth feeling at-risk for violence based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation (p. 113-115). Russell, Franz, and Driscoll (2001) found that “youths attracted to the same sex were more than twice as likely to perpetrate violence” (p. 904- 905). This violence was often motivated by feelings of fear and a perceived need for self-defence.

There are very few safe social spaces for sexual minority adolescents to socialize and unfortunately many turn to nightclubs, that are located in more dangerous parts of a city where they may be the witness or object of violence (Wells, 2009, p. 226).

Substance use, sexual abuse, and HIV risk behaviours

Contemporary research indicates that sexual minority youth are at a higher risk for acquiring HIV than their heterosexual peers (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2009); Saewyc et al., 2006). Those sexual minority youth who are from racial or ethnic minorities are at an even greater risk for HIV infection. These increased instances of HIV-risk related behaviors “appear to be associated in part with a higher prevalence of sexual victimization” (Saewyc et al., 2006, p. 1108), stigma, lack of knowledge, discrimination, and fear of public exposure of their identities (Wells, 2009, p. 226-227). A large comparative survey, which analyzed a series of adolescent health surveys conducted in the Pacific Northwest (Seattle and British Columbia) from 1992 to 2003, found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents who reported a history of sexual abuse or assault were more likely than their heterosexual peers to have had an “early sexual intercourse debut, engage in unprotected intercourse, have multiple sexual partners or be involved in prostitution or survival sex, become pregnant, and use illicit

substances, including injection drug use” (Saewyc et al., 2006, p. 1104). This same study also found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth may engage “in HIV high risk behaviors as a way of coping with sexual orientation stigma and sexual violence they may experience” (p. 1104).

As a result of societal prejudice and discrimination, many sexual-minority youth often internalize society’s negative messages regarding sexual orientation and gender identity, and suffer from self-hatred as well as social and emotional isolation (Wells, 2009, p. 227). For some youth, substance abuse can be an attempt to self-medicate as a means to manage stigma and shame, to deny same-sex feelings, or as a defence against ridicule and anti-gay violence (Wells, 2009, p. 227).

Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) in Schools

What Is a GSA?

GSA usually stands for Gay-Straight Alliance, but it can also stand for Gender and Sexuality Alliance (which is a much more inclusive name). GSAs are school clubs in which students can talk and learn about sexual orientation, gender identity, and some of the issues that surround them. They’re set up just like any other student group, with a faculty advisor and regular meetings. Everyone is welcome--lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) students, as well as straight students, students with LGBTQQ families, and students who don’t have or need a label for their sexual orientations or gender identities. GSAs play a vital role in making schools safer for LGBTQQ students by providing supportive and accepting spaces as well as doing broader organizing work against homophobia and transphobia in school.

What Do GSAs Do?

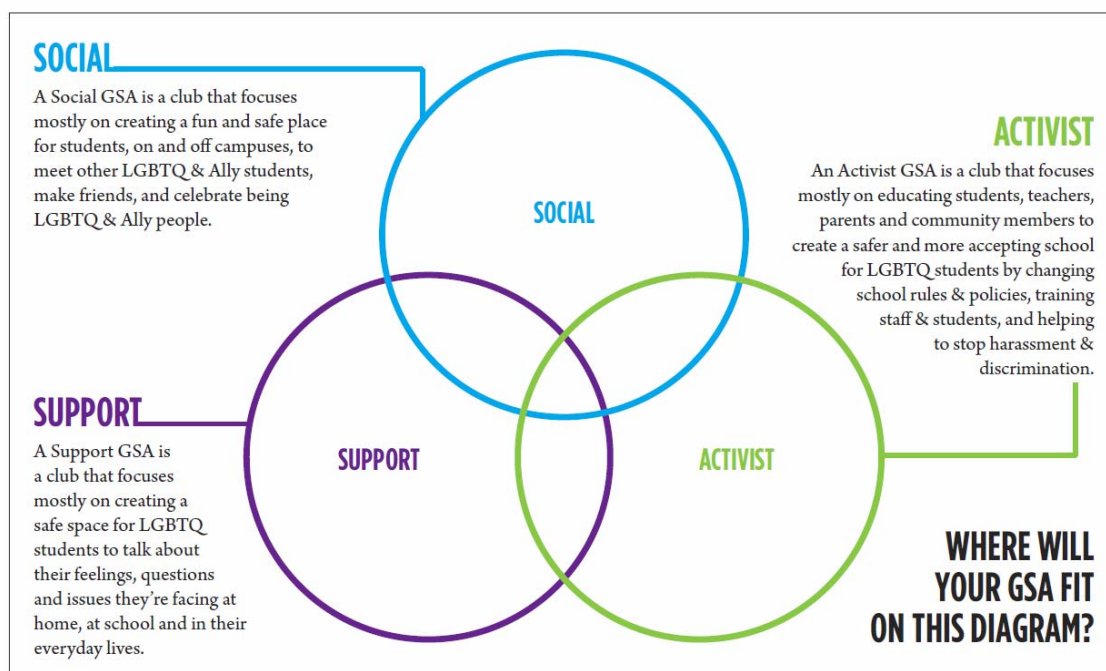


Figure 1. What do GSAs do?

All of these types of GSAs make school safer for LGBTQ youth. Many GSAs begin as social or support GSAs and over time start to do more activism. It is important to move toward doing more activism because it improves school climate and policies for current youth in the school, as well as affects institutional change for future LGBTQ youth.

The Major Roles of School-Based GSAs

It is important to note that the nature and role of GSAs will change based on the perceived school climate and the needs and concerns of the students and teachers involved. GSAs should not be understood as a one-size-fits-all approach that will provide a “magic cure” for homophobia and heterosexism in schools. Rather, GSAs can be more accurately understood as one vital part of a systematic approach to reducing bullying and improving student safety and acceptance of differences. Without the active support of the

entire school community (including administrators and, in some cases, the school board)

GSA's are likely to remain as isolated havens of safety for a small group of students.

(The Alberta Teachers' Association and Kristopher Wells, *Gay-Straight Student Alliances in*

(Alberta Schools: A Guide for Teachers, 2006, p. 24-25)

Misconceptions and FAQs

We don't have any LGBTQ students in our school. Why do we need a GSA?

Public Health Agency of Canada's (2010) research suggests that about 2 - 10% of students are sexual or gender minorities LGBTQ students often choose not to be visible when school climates are not inclusive. A primary purpose of GSA's is to increase students' feelings of safety, security, and acceptance at school, as these feelings are essential for students to engage in learning.

(Alberta Government, *Creating Welcoming, Caring, Respectful & Safe Learning Environments, Gay-Straight Alliances in Schools, 2013, p. 3)*

GSA's are dating clubs.

No, they are not dating clubs, nor do they promote sexual activity or behaviour. They are about valuing diversity, promoting safety, fostering respect, and improving school and peer connectedness.

(Alberta Government, *Creating Welcoming, Caring, Respectful & Safe Learning Environments, Gay-Straight Alliances in Schools, 2013, p. 2)*

Do GSA's try to convert heterosexual students into an LGBTQ "lifestyle"?

No, a student's sexual orientation or gender identity is not a "lifestyle" choice. Sexual orientation is usually established at a very early stage in a child's developmental process. Some students report knowing that they were different from others as early as age five or six. Other students state that they did not become aware of their sexual orientation or

gender identity until they were much older. Importantly, a person's sexual orientation is not simply an either/or, binary choice. Research findings and historical literature indicate that human sexuality and expressions of gender can most accurately be understood as operating along a broad continuum that ranges from an individual identifying as exclusively heterosexual to exclusively non-heterosexual. The exact determinants of what makes someone self-identify as heterosexual or non-heterosexual are not yet completely understood. However, contemporary research suggests that a person's sexual orientation is most likely not simply determined by any one single factor or influence, but instead represents a complex "combination of genetic, hormonal, and environmental influences" (Frankowski, 2004, 1828).

(The Alberta Teachers' Association and Kristopher Wells, *Gay-Straight Student Alliances in Alberta Schools: A Guide for Teachers*, 2006, p. 25-26)

We can't let our students have a club about sex.

GSA's are not about sex. GSA's are about valuing all people regardless of whether they're lesbian, gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning. GSA's are like any other club; they offer students with a common interest a chance to connect and give students a safe place from the day-to-day grind of school. They're about creating a supportive space where students can be themselves without fear, and about making schools safer for all students by promoting respect for everyone.

(GSA Advisor Handbook, 2011, p. 8, www.gsanetwork.org)

It's just too controversial.

Sure, a GSA may be controversial, but if the students in the GSA aren't disrupting school, then the school can't use that as an excuse to silence them. If other students, parents, or

community members are in an uproar over a GSA, the school's responsibility is to address those people's concerns-not shut down a group that is peacefully doing its thing just because some people don't like it. Besides, when a GSA becomes a point of contention in a community, it really only proves the need for the GSA to exist in the first place.

(www.gsanetwork.org, *GSA Advisor Handbook*, 2011, p. 8)

How can GSAs support trans-identified students?

GSAs can assist in meeting the needs of trans-identified youth by helping to educate their membership and, in turn, the entire school community about gender-identity educational issues. For example, a GSA might decide to assess school/district policies and codes of conduct to see if they include protections for trans-identified students. Students might also survey the school's bathroom and locker room facilities to see if they are inclusive of trans-identified youth. For example, are there designated gender-neutral bathrooms or change rooms? Openly accepted and supported trans-identified students can have a profound impact in a school because they help to demonstrate how dominant perceptions of gender, representation and expression should be opened up to questioning and critique by all students (Mayo, 2004, p. 23-26).

(The Alberta Teachers' Association and Kristopher Wells, *Gay-Straight Student Alliances in Alberta Schools: A Guide for Teachers*, 2006, p. 27)

Do I have to be gay to join a GSA?

GSAs are open to all students and school staff who want to show respect and support for sexual and gender minorities. You do not have to disclose your sexual orientation or gender identity to participate. GSAs should always be welcoming, confidential and

inclusive. They should respect the privacy of individual members. GSA members may include: LGBTQ students and staff, students and staff with LGBTQ family members or peers, students who are picked on for being "different", and students and staff who are heterosexual allies.

(Alberta Government, *Creating Welcoming, Caring, Respectful & Safe Learning Environments, Gay-Straight Alliances in Schools*, 2013, p. 2)

When schools fail to provide students with legitimate safe spaces, they are perpetuating a systemic isolation of students and committing grave acts of injustice towards the “developmental tasks of adolescence related to self-esteem, identity, and intimacy” (Frankowski, 2004, 1828). These recognized safe spaces in schools come in the form of GSAs, not groups that simply promote a general, desensitized anti-bullying sentiment. Sexual minorities are one of the most discriminated against and at risk groups in society. "GSAs provide an important space for LGBTQ and allied students to develop the resiliency that will aid in their healthy social, emotional and cognitive development" (Wells, 2006, 27). Catholic schools provide for and allot significant funding to other at-risk, marginalized groups, i.e. First Nations Métis Inuit students. There is also funding provided and consultant support to combat cyber-bullying and digital citizenship. The continued support of these areas is of vital importance but for some reason the Catholic board fails to see the need to provide specifically for gender minorities in the form of GSAs. Groups that will require very little funding and are open to all students without exclusion. "When students do not feel safe or included in their schools, they are not capable of the ambitious learning that should be a fundamental part of the educational process" (Wells, 2006, 27).

Legislation

According to Clarke and MacDougall, the "acceptance of the status quo or a refusal to take concrete measures, such as permitting the creation of GSAs through law or policy, to help create a safe and appropriate space for queer and questioning students suggests an absence of the ethic of justice (2012). In Canada, its citizens have rights and freedoms that are protected by various governing bodies and societal watchdogs. The public education systems around the country are required to provide learning opportunities for all students based on these basic human rights without discrimination. It is understood that publicly funded separate or Catholic schools have an additional mandate when educating students but it cannot erase the laws of Canada or allow them to systematically deny the rights of any student or group of students.

In Alberta, Catholic schools have been allowed to systematically deny the rights of LGBTQ students who wish to create a GSA until recent legislation in March 2015. It has been recently legislated in amendments to Bill 10 that school authorities (public and Catholic) are required to allow groups to be formed, including gay-straight alliances (GSAs) or queer-straight alliances (QSAs) on school property if students express an interest in forming these peer-support groups. The question is now how will the Catholic school boards respond to this legislation? While legally this is a monumental step for public education, it will need to be monitored how this new legislation will be brought into practice at the district and school levels.

In the previous section, many of the myths or questions surround GSAs have been answered and demonstrate that these groups do not in any way threaten the Gospel message of Catholic schools. In the following sections, you will be introduced to different levels of federal and provincial legislation that support LGBTQ individuals. Included in this section on legislation is the Alberta Teachers' Associations commitment to combating systematic bigotry in schools against LGBTQ individuals and the desire to foster resiliency in this high risk demographic.

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

Section 15 (1):

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

(2) Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability

Although Section 15 (1) of the Charter does not explicitly make reference to sexual orientation in its equality provisions, since 1995 the courts have regarded sexual orientation as analogous to the other personal characteristics listed. The inclusion and the accommodation of difference represent the spirit of Section 15.

Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act

Under Premier Ed Stelmach, the government finally introduced legislation in 2009 to do what the 1998 court ruling had executed de facto, by explicitly including sexual orientation in the *Alberta Human Rights Act* (2000); but the government refused to include gender identity and added provisions requiring parental notification for school children. Although not expressly stated in the Act, as of April 2, 1998, sexual orientation is read into the Act by the Supreme Court of Canada as a protected ground of discrimination in Alberta. The provincial education ministry allowed a circumvention of that resistance by allowing faith-based schools in the city to seek incorporation into neighbouring boards. This shift towards a neo-liberal model, accompanied by a prioritization of schooling "basics", could not help but reduce the willingness

of school boards to move assertively towards LGBT inclusiveness, as well as the capacity to ensure comprehensive application of policy (Rayside, David, *The Inadequate Recognition of Sexual Diversity by Canadian Schools: LGBT Advocacy and Its Impact*, 2014, p. 204).

Bill C-250 – An Act to amend the Criminal Code (Hate Propaganda)

Bill C-250, which was passed in the House of Commons in February 2004, amends Section 318 (Hate Propaganda) and Section 319 (Incitement of Hatred) of the Criminal Code of Canada to include sexual orientation within the listing of identifiable groups against which hate propaganda is deemed a criminal offence. Correspondingly, the Edmonton Police Service's Hate and Bias Crime Unit considers threatening homophobic language to be a hate incident that should be reported to all school resource officers.

(The Alberta Teachers' Association and Kristopher Wells, *Gay-Straight Student Alliances in Alberta Schools: A Guide for Teachers*, (2006) p. 13-15)

Bill 13-Accepting Schools Act, Ontario Education Act

Recently, in response to publicity about homophobia in schools, the Ontario government brought in new legislation (Bill 13), the Accepting Schools Act, requiring, among other things, all publicly funded Ontario schools, including Roman Catholic schools, to allow GSAs if so requested by students.. The proposed section allowing for the creation of GSAs provides as follows:

303.1 Every board shall support pupils who want to establish and lead, (d) activities or organizations that promote the awareness and understanding of, and respect for, people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, including organizations with the name gay straight alliance or another name.

The Alberta School Act Section 45(8),(2014) p. 43

A board shall ensure that each student enrolled in a school operated by the board is provided with a safe and caring environment that fosters and maintains respectful and responsible behaviors.

The Alberta Teachers' Association, *Code of Professional Conduct* (2004), p. 1

(1) The teacher teaches in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of all persons without prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry, place of origin, place of residence, socioeconomic background or linguistic background.

The Alberta Teachers' Association, *The Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers*, (2004) p. 1

(9) Teachers have the right to be protected against discrimination on the basis of prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry, place of origin, place of residence, socioeconomic background or linguistic background and have the responsibility to refrain from practising these forms of discrimination in their professional duties.

Alberta Teachers' Association, *Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Long-Range Policy* 18 (2006)

18.A.26 The Alberta Teachers' Association supports the establishment of gay–straight alliance groups to create awareness and action that promotes the creation of safe learning environments for all students in Alberta high schools.[2005/13]

18.B.3 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to provide curricula and education resources that prepare students to support and contribute to a society that is open, pluralistic, democratic and free from

discrimination or violence based on a person's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

18.B.7 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge the Department of Education to require school boards to develop policy and procedures for dealing with discrimination on the basis of race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry, place of origin, place of residence, socioeconomic background or linguistic background.

18.B.21 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge Alberta school boards to develop district policies that specifically address the health and safety of sexual minority and gender-variant students, as well as those who are perceived as such.

18.B.22 BE IT RESOLVED, that the Alberta Teachers' Association urge Alberta school boards to develop district policies that specifically address the health, safety and employment concerns of sexual minority and gender-variant staff, as well as those who are perceived as such.

As citizens of Canada and educators, we are beholden to the laws of our country and the responsibilities that make up our professional codes of conduct. It is from this standpoint that as a school board, Edmonton Catholic, has been committing a grievous injustice to its LGBTQ students and their allies. I get the distinct impression from the reluctance from the board and the Catholic Archdioceses in Alberta that they do not really comprehend the seriousness of the risks associated with sexual minorities when they do not have the appropriate support. GSAs are just one step in this process but a necessary starting place to demonstrate solidarity and willingness to dialogue. It might be that the Archdioceses and Edmonton Catholic School Board is not totally

aware of the goals and appropriateness of GSAs but as demonstrated previously these are often misconceptions. Now in light of the recent amendments to Bill 10, The Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children (March 2015), that guarantees student access to

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 we can begin to move forward. It has been

demonstrated that GSAs are about respecting diversity and improving school and peer connectedness, and we can examine how they are a natural fit with Edmonton Catholic's Gospel values and commitment to their permeation.

Permeation

"This is what the Lord asks of you, only this - to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

Throughout this project so far I have made references to different elements of the Roman Catholic culture which is embedded in Church, Sacred Scripture, and Tradition. When talking about "Church" (with a capital "C") it is in reference to the apostolic Church where Christ (Jesus) is Lord and in him as a person and in his teachings all Revelation of the most high God culminates in fulfillment of the prophets (Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 75). Revelation continues to each generation in apostolic succession to the bishops, holy Fathers, etc. through the Holy Spirit and this living transmission or the living voice of the Gospel is what is known as "Tradition" (with a capital "T") (CCC, 77, 78, 79). Closely bound with Tradition is Sacred Scripture because they communicate with each other the mystery of Christ for the present time (CCC, 80). Sacred Scripture is "the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the

breath of the Holy Spirit" (CCC, 81). The Church is entrusted with both the transmission (Tradition) and the interpretation (Sacred Scripture) of Revelation and honoring both equally with devotion and reverence (CCC, 82). This is just a brief review of a very complicated relationship but it suits our purposes for this project in that it demonstrates the complexity of the doctrine and theology of the Church. I recognize the limitations of my project and know that it will have no effect on the teachings of the Church but I do hope it is interpreted in the spirit that is intended that it is not an attack against the Roman Catholic Church but rather a call to action directed at Edmonton Catholic Schools.

Edmonton Catholic Schools logically has a department that is focused on religious education and provides a multitude of resources, information, professional development opportunities, and links to facilitate Catholic theology throughout the district. It is from this department that I choose to focus this section of my literature review on the publication of the district Permeation Project (Edmonton Catholic Schools (ECS), 2011) that provides schools and teachers from grades kindergarten to grade 12 with a tangible way to more fully practice the faith with their students in any subject discipline. It is an extensive document that is a testament to the commitment of the school board to the Catholic faith and would be a valued resource to share with other Catholic districts. Permeation, however, is much more than just an alignment with curricular outcomes; religious dimension will be reflected in all aspects of school life (ECS, 2011, p. 5). It is the atmosphere that is created in a school by the explicit and implicit curriculum, extracurricular activities, social arrangements for staff and students, and the assessment of the school's progress in meeting the school's mission (ECS, 2011, p. 5). The Permeation Project (ECS, 2011) is a guide to assist administration, teachers, and support staff with achieving a Catholic identity in all facets of school life.

In Alberta, there is ongoing debate regarding the public funding of Catholic schools and what makes them different from public, secular schools. It is the permeation of the Gospel message that sets Catholic schools apart from secular schools, it is a multitude of teachings that culminate in to one central message that: God is love. Catholic schools look to the Church, Tradition, and Scripture for guidance to provide caring and effective education for all students in their present circumstances and lived realities (ECS, 2011, p. 14). For students who identify as LGBTQ and their allies, publically or privately, as Catholics we are called to love, regardless of the Church's stance on homosexual acts. The Church is clear that every human person is a unique and irreplaceable gift created in the image and likeness of God and redeemed by the blood of Christ (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011, p. 1) and that individuals have an intrinsic dignity which must always be respected. The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that persons with homosexual inclinations “*must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God’s will in their lives*” (2358). This altruistic message from the Catechism is compatible with the goals of GSAs and what they provide for LGBTQ students and their allies.

The Permeation Project (ECS, 2011) discusses the Gospel message of denouncing injustice by charging Catholic educators to become protectors of those who are marginalized or mistreated. The Catholic identity calls for a denunciation of oppressive structures and how faith that permeates and radiates the presence of God; needs to address oppression and abuse (ECS, 2011, p. 11). The Gospel message is clear that situations of abuse and oppression are to be named and eradicated and that the integrity and dignity of persons should not be compromised (ECS, 2011, p. 11). Heteronormativity in schools is a structural violence and injustice that does

not demonstrate compassion, sensitivity, or respect to LGBTQ individuals and their allies. If we are to truly accept and live a Gospel message that denounces oppression there needs to be consideration of how gospel virtues challenge present practice, especially in situations where dignity is being violated (ECS, 2011, p. 11).

Catholic schools are a reminder of how as Canadian society wants to nurture our children and young people to become responsible and caring citizens who are prepared for the world in a way that will further the common good of the whole and the dignity of the individual (2011, p. 177). Catholic schools model their ethics on the life and teachings of Christ the teacher who ministered to the multitudes, who lived and prayed with those deemed unlovable, who cured the sick and those cast aside by society. Throughout the gospels, Jesus continues to honour the ordinary activities of people's daily lives (ECS, 2011, p. 20). He calls them to dedicate their life to the service of the community, to love their enemies, and forgo judgement. Permeation is modeled by Jesus. Ultimately, it is in our relationships and our day to day experiences that God is revealed and where His work is done (2011, p. 20). Jesus taught with his entire being and loving those who were marginalized. Catholic educators are reminded of Jesus' sacrifice for those who had been silenced and they must look for those who are voiceless in today's society.

Chapter 3: Project

Introduction

There were many reasons I have chosen to explore GSAs in Edmonton Catholic Schools but the primary drive was to bring about positive change for all students. It is from a desire to educate both staff and students about the challenges that sexual minorities face and how we can create schools that are more supportive and inclusive. The research presented in the literature review is undeniable in that LGBTQ students are at the highest risks for suicide and school-related problems such as truancy, bullying, and homophobic victimization. Homosexual youth

when compared to their heterosexual peers are at higher risks for depression, substance abuse, homelessness and street involvement, sexual abuse, violence, and HIV risk behaviour. These needs of these students cannot be ignored and unfortunately there seems to be a disconnect within Edmonton Catholic Schools with the understanding of the statistics and what they can do to provide support that is aligned with the Roman Catholic Church's views about homosexuality.

On this journey as a graduate student there has been a lot of controversy, governmental debate, and media coverage surrounding GSAs in schools, specifically Catholic schools. Finally, new legislation in the form of an amendment to Bill 10 which was passed on March 10, 2015, has guaranteed that students have the right to access and form GSAs in any publically funded school. This is a tremendous triumph for the LGBTQ community and its allies. It demonstrates that change is happening and that sexual minorities can no longer be legally discriminated against in schools. This triumph; however, is only as powerful as the changes that follow it. The Edmonton Catholic School Board appears to recognize that the issue is important but I am curious to see how this impacts the front-line functioning of schools and not just the adoption of legal obligation.

There has been speculation on social media about potential legal action against the legislation on the basis of religious infringement guaranteed in the 1905 Alberta Act but officially nothing has been release at this point. From my understanding of the district policy and the literature presented against GSAs in Edmonton Catholic Schools there appears to be two main arguments that are used; the first officially being, reductionism and unofficially the second being, exclusivity. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (2011) describe reductionism as the understanding that by labelling a person as "gay" or "lesbian" we are seeing them only on the basis of their sexual orientation and that using these terms might be associated with cultural

movements that accept homosexual acts and behaviours as morally good (p. 1). The term that is deemed more appropriate is "persons with same sex attraction" because it does not use politically charged language and is viewed as more precise because it respects the belief that the human person is made in the image and likeness of God (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1986, n. 10).

The other argument that I have heard on numerous occasions but have not actually seen written anywhere is that GSA are exclusive because they are accessible to only one group of individuals. This verbal reasoning, while not on written record, demonstrates the misconceptions surrounding GSAs as a group open to every individual regardless of sexual orientation. It is called a Gay-Straight Alliance or Gender and Sexuality Alliance because all are welcome to become a part of a group that provides a safe space and advocates for a systematic approach to improving student safety and acceptance of differences. It appears that the concerns expressed by this argument also have more to do with an opposition to language rather than having its basis in fact. It is the use of the word "gay" that again seems to be crux of the argument that leads back to the notion of reductionism.

Etymology, or the study of how the meaning of words has changed over time, is a fascinating discipline and largely effects how we come to know and understand the world and our place in it. We use so many words to describe ourselves: female, teacher, Roman Catholic, aunt, sister, daughter, Kai-Ma, godmother, cousin, niece, divorcee, Canadian, friend, Anglophone, artist, student, etc. These words all have a connotation that contributes to your perception of me, but no one word describes me fully, they each describe a part of the whole.

Simply based on this understanding of reductionism you cannot fully know me from one adjective or noun, so are all these examples to be understood as reductionist terms? Many of

these terms can be viewed politically as well. Am I a feminist because I am female? Am I pro-life because I am Roman Catholic? Am I New Democrat because I am a teacher? Do I oppose the Official Languages Act because I am Anglophone? There is no way to derive who I am, politically or otherwise, simply based on the words used to describe me, so from this understanding all individual words used to describe a person are reductionist, and even words in combination are bound by the same limitations. This demonstrates the shallowness of the argument of reductionism, and that GSAs are not about promoting a politically gay agenda. From a political standpoint, GSAs could be understood as working for social justice, equality, and standing up for human rights. Meanwhile the Edmonton Catholic Schools could be viewed as promoting the same values; why is there such controversy?

The reason is fear. There is consistent debate in Alberta regarding publically funded Catholic schools and their viability. What makes them different from secular schools? This issue regarding GSAs is one of the differences. Unfortunately, if the continued discrimination of sexual minorities by denying the formation of GSAs in Edmonton Catholic high schools is what we pin our Catholic identity to we are in serious trouble as a district. One would hope that we could see this societal shift towards protecting the rights of sexual minorities and providing support to the most vulnerable section of the adolescent population as a major step towards constructing a peaceful social structure.

The protection of the oppressed is a sentiment that comes through in the Edmonton Catholic Permeation Project (ECS, 2011) and the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. GSAs are not about sex and they do not promote sexual activity or behaviour rather they teach staff and students to value diversity, promote safety, and foster respect to improve school and peer connectedness (GSA Advisor Handbook, 201, p. 8). I struggle to find a reasonable argument

theologically or morally reason for the backlash against GSAs by Edmonton Catholic Schools, other than the use of the term "gay" as opposed to "persons with same sex attractions". It is from this quandary that guided me to my first attempt at a project that would start with a series of anonymous interviews regarding GSAs in Edmonton Catholic high school.

Initially, the goal of the interviews was to inquire about sexual minorities in general, i.e. measure the depth of knowledge concerning the statistics surrounding LGBTQ adolescents, to assess awareness. The interviews would then proceed to ask about individual understandings of GSAs, i.e. a description of their role in schools and record any questions individuals might have had, to examine how GSAs are perceived. The final questions would investigate strategies for addressing the needs of sexual minority youth since GSAs at that time were not allowed in Edmonton Catholic high schools. I sent out emails to individuals asking for their participation in an anonymous interview that would help broaden my understanding of this issue from different levels of administration and consultancy roles within the district. I received only one affirmative response, most emails were ignored, and five were people unwilling to talk about this issue at all or told me that I needed to refer to the district policy. My project went down in flames and my heart went with it.

After having my hopes dashed and taking a little soak in the tub of self-pity, I was able to re-evaluate and press on with a new version of my project. I would revisit all the literature recommended by the district and re-examine the district policy. This would then be compiled into a professional development session that could be offered to the staff at my high school. The current system of professional development offered to the approximately 100 teaching staff at my school is to have four sessions running concurrently, allowing teachers to choose which

session best fits their needs. I hope to be included in one of these days once I present my project to the administration team.

The district Commitment to Inclusive Communities in Edmonton Catholic Schools policy

Alberta Education Act, School Act, Section 45(8), (2015)

states the following:

God saw everything that was made, and indeed, it was very good. Genesis 1:31

Edmonton Catholic Schools recognizes that we are all created in the image and likeness of God. As such, all human beings are inherently sacred and must be treated with dignity and respect.

An inclusive community is one in which each person is welcomed, accepted, and supported as a child of God, therefore any discrimination is unacceptable and will be addressed.

All students, staff, and families of Edmonton Catholic Schools will be provided with an inclusive, welcoming, caring, respectful, safe, and Catholic environment that promotes the well-being of all and fosters community support for achieving this goal.

All efforts to support the inclusive, safe, and caring learning and working communities within our District must be in accordance with the teaching of the Catholic Church and shall be grounded in the understanding of the person as a whole.

My professional development session will align with this policy and its regulations as outlined by supporting documents available on the Edmonton Catholic District website. I have had to

alter my use of the term GSAs to Lived Inclusion for Everyone (LIFE) Framework (CCSSA, 2015, p. 1) as it is the acceptable terminology used by a document distributed to Edmonton Catholic District principals on March 2, 2015.

LIFE Framework

The LIFE Framework is a guideline for the creation and operation of student groups that are comprehensive in their approach to inclusion and open to the exploration in a Catholic context of a variety of issues including bullying, sexual harassment, sexual orientation, gender identity, discrimination, justice, and respectful relationships and language (CCSSA, 2015, p. 1). The student groups themselves do not have to be referred to as LIFE groups but the naming of these groups is up to the discretion of the principal and the superintendent and use language that keeps with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

The LIFE framework draws upon a variety of resources to provide guidelines for teachers and administrators to facilitate the development and operation of inclusive student groups within a Catholic context. The framework draws upon the Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association (ACSTA) *Safe and Caring Learning Environments for Students*, the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta (CCSSA) *Commitment to Inclusive Communities*, and Calgary Catholic School District's (CCSD) *Supporting Inclusive Communities*. These groups are to be comprehensive in their approach to inclusion and open to the exploration of a variety of issues in a Catholic context.

Students can request LIFE Framework groups to be formed for the purpose advocacy, peer support, or counselling. These groups should be guided by faith and strengthen Catholic education with the integration of prayer, scripture, and Catholic teaching (CCSSA, 2015, p. 3). They can address, but are not limited to, same sex attractions, gender identity, discrimination or isolation due to body image, race, culture, language, school performance, anxiety, or social

isolation (CCSSA, 2015, p. 1-2). These groups must support the core values of the school district and uphold the sanctity of human life through discussions, acts of justice, and social action within the context of Catholic teaching on social relationships (CCSSA, 2015, p. 2).

Edmonton Catholic School Board is promoting the LIFE Framework rather than GSAs because it is believed that by following this configuration that they are more comprehensive and all encompassing in their approach to inclusion. They will be open to the exploration of a variety of issues including sexual orientation, gender identity, bullying, discrimination, justice and respectful relationships, and language in a Catholic context (ECS, 2015, p. 1). The hope is that under this organizational framework of student groups that they will do everything a GSA would do but will capture a larger segment of the student population that may be vulnerable or in need of support. The student groups should be seen as advocacy, peer support, or counselling groups and not alliances to ensure that all students are safe, welcomed, supported and no student is left out or left behind (ECS, 2015, p. 1-2). The support groups will incorporate language in keeping with the teachings of the Catholic Church and will better meet the diverse needs of each school community.

For 8 days, this was the determined direction by the Alberta Catholic school boards but with the amendments to Bill 10, students are now able to form GSAs. There has only been one official statement released by the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association (ACSTA) stating that it will continue to support the LIFE Framework because it is fully inclusive and more comprehensive because it embraces all students who are struggling. There is no mention of the terminology and reductionism but as it stands right now the legislation must be upheld. It would be a natural assumption that the LIFE Framework terminology might be adjusted somewhat but as a whole it stands as a reasonable support for students in the interim.

The primary concern with the framework is that it requires parents be informed when issues of human sexuality or sexual orientation may be discussed and that consent must be provided for student participation in such groups (CCSSA, 2015, p. 4). This is a grave matter that needs to be explored because it might "out" or disclose sexual orientation to parents or guardians before an individual is emotionally ready to deal with any potential fallout that might occur. This potential "outing" undermines the entire goal of providing support to students who are vulnerable so it is essential that this be addressed before the LIFE Framework is brought to fruition and brought more in line with the guarantee of confidentiality provided by a GSA framework.

At this point in my project I will be exploring the development of the LIFE Framework as it is currently presented by the CCSSA and promoted by Edmonton Catholic Schools. I will, however; make reference to GSAs and how we can bridge the gap between the two frameworks and how they are in fact both supportive of any student at risk but for my purposes I will be focusing on sexual minorities.

The LIFE Framework operates based on the requests presented by the students and that schools need to be well prepared to establish student groups to address these needs. Through conversations with students, the purpose for the group should be identified to establish structured guidelines. Flexibility and responsiveness is essential because some students who have same sex attractions, and those who identify with different genders, as well as those who experience discrimination or isolation based on body image, race, culture, language, performance in school, social anxiety, lack of social connection, or other individual attributes, may be at-risk (CCSSA, 2015, p. 1). Once the needs of the student request are understood, it is up to the facilitators to establish a group or multiple groups that will function in either advocacy groups, peer support groups, and/or counselling groups.

Advocacy Groups

The purpose of advocacy groups is to create a social awareness in the school and advocate against all forms of discrimination that cause students to feel isolated or not included (CCSSA, 2015, p. 2). These groups will bring together students who feel socially vulnerable within the school community with students who wish to offer support and together advocate against discrimination. Students will be encouraged to look critically at the issues that bring harm to young people and respond appropriately from a Catholic context. These groups will promote social justice and activism while empowering students to recognize and share their God-given gifts with their school community (CCSSA, 2015, p. 2).

Advocacy groups, while driven by student concerns for social justice, should be led by a trained Catholic facilitator and assisted, when appropriate, by counselors, chaplains, or social workers (CCSSA, 2015, p. 2). The school principal and administration should work closely with this group to support and guide initiatives within a Catholic context. Their mentorship will facilitate alignment with school and district goals and act as a sounding-board for ideas and school-wide activities. These groups will be open to the exploration of a variety of social issues from the Catholic perspective and involved in activities that directed against all forms of bullying and discrimination. These goals can be realized in a variety of ways such as exploring current school practices and working with staff and administration to advocate for and improve inclusivity. Improvement combined with celebrations of the efforts that already made, make the school social structure more inclusive one. Advocacy groups are also able to sponsor activities throughout the school year to raise awareness and social consciousness regarding issues that cause pervasive harm to youth at local, national, and international levels. These activities could include awareness weeks, anti-bullying campaigns, peer advocacy initiatives, guest speakers, and information regarding social justice campaigns.

Peer Support Groups

The second element of the LIFE Framework is investigating the need for peer support groups at the request of students. Peer support groups would assemble students who experience discrimination and isolation within their school community or society at large with peers who are interested in providing support through facilitated discussions. These groups would also be led by trained Catholic facilitators and when necessary involved the assistance of school chaplains, counselors, and social workers (CCSSA, 2015, p. 3). The functioning of these groups would be based on the establishment of boundaries prior to discussions to ensure that all students involved are respected and do not feel pressured to disclose personal information. All students would be invited to participate but should not feel pressured to join. Extensive and ongoing training would need to be provided to peer supporters to build sensitivity towards students who are at-risk and guarantee everyone's safety. The inclusion of students in the development of peer support norms and ethical procedures would foster ownership and an intrinsic responsibility to the students seeking support. The key to any peer support team is trust, therefore; all members need to refrain from labeling or discussing students who are not members. When there is a need to explore areas where inclusion could be improved, staff facilitators will need to demonstrate complex communication skills that model sensitivity and demonstrate understanding to prepare students to "live fully and to serve God in one another" (ECS, 2013, p. 1).

Counselling Groups

The final group that can be established under the LIFE Framework, would be counselling groups that would assemble students who are experiencing discrimination, isolation, and a lack of inclusion with students who want to offer these students their support through facilitated discussions (CCSSA, 2015, p. 3). Groups would be led by trained Catholic facilitators with the assistance of psychologists, chaplains, and social workers to support students experiencing

challenges related to feelings of belonging, self-worth, identity, friendship, etc. (CCSSA, 2015, p.3). The key is to provide non-judgmental support to students who are marginalized by bullying or social exclusion based on, but not limited to, gender, sexual orientation, culture, size, physical or academic ability. Counseling groups can provide confidential support to students who are trying to understand their sexual identity and challenges related to their sexuality. Their most important task will be to listen and to provide as accurate information as possible, when asked to do so. At-risk students may talk about extreme sadness or feeling of hopelessness and it is not easy to make judgments about the depth of a person's depression or suicidal thoughts. A psychologist or social worker may be able to give some direction to follow or make a referral, if this necessary. A psychologist or social worker will also be able to advise when issues of safety may take precedence over confidentiality.

The goals of the LIFE Framework, while very similar to the goals of a GSA, has just recently been approved by the Alberta Catholic Superintendents. This framework will need to be ratified with the new amendments to Bill 10 but it is a reasonable starting point for change. I am bound by my contractual obligation to my school board and can work within this framework if it means that we are providing for sexual minorities and any student who is marginalized. The consequences of discrimination of any kind in youth leads to increased school-related problems, crime, violence, homelessness, substance abuse, physical and mental illness. Meanwhile, it deprives society as a whole of the contribution that excluded groups could make to our economic, cultural and intellectual life (ACSTA, 2001, p. 5). Breaking the cycle of discrimination involves changing personal attitudes, making institutions more accessible, and building an inclusive society where everyone shares in the benefits and responsibilities of an inclusive society (ACSTA, 2001, p. 5).

Motivation

If we want to see a more inclusive society that respects all individuals regardless of ability, age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, physicality, language, religious belief, colour, etc. then it must be a multi-pronged approach. It cannot be expected to start at the top and filter its way down or vice versa, it must happen at all levels at the same time. For the purposes of this project; however, I will be focusing on presenting to the staff at my school site. While it is a very small portion of society, it is a starting point that could potentially develop into further professional development sessions or even move out to other school sites if it is well received.

Presentation

As aforementioned, I would be presenting to approximately 20-25 teachers in a typical high school classroom setting that would have WIFI access and a digital projector linked to either a desktop or laptop computer to run my presentation. I would request that teachers bring a hand held device such as a smartphone or tablet that could access the WIFI. The presentation would take approximately 60-75 minutes depending on questions and discussions.

It would be my desire to create a welcoming and comfortable environment so I would plan on providing light refreshments at the beginning of the presentation that would run for 5 minutes before the pre-determined start time and 5 minutes after to accommodate all the early birds and those who need a little extra time to arrive, get a snack, and get settled. As in my classroom, I would project a welcome message and a countdown clock that would indicate when we were going to get started formally. Since, the primary presentation would be at my school I would know all the staff in attendance but if I was outside my school I would invite people to wear a nametag so I could address people by name. As a Catholic educator it is the norm to begin with a prayer fitting the given situation or theme. This would then lead me to give some

background about myself and why this is an important and relevant topic, introduce the goals for the workshop, and review the prospective agenda for the presentation.

The first section of the workshop would provide an overview of the alarming statistics that I presented in my literature review. It is important for educators to know how dire the situation is for some students who are sexual minorities and are at-risk. The statistics will speak for themselves and incite a moral obligation to these students who have been marginalized for too long. The struggle for normalcy without the dark and spiraling thoughts of suicide, homelessness, street involvement, violence, substance abuse, sexual abuse, or HIV risk behaviours is a plight that cannot be ignored. The following are some slides on suicide taken directly from my proposed presentation.

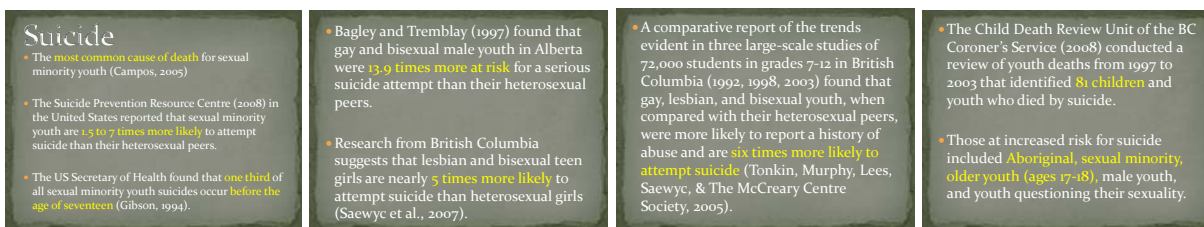


Figure 2. Sample of 4 slides from Sexual Minority Statistics Presentation

As Catholic educators, there is a need to work towards social justice and provide support for our students who could be struggling with one or more of these challenges. Obviously, not all students will fit into the high-risk category, but even when coming from supportive family situations there can be a lot of internalized shame, unasked questions, and feelings of hopelessness. Students need a safe and accepting space to inquire and feel welcome without judgement or fear. When these spaces are created, even when they are not accessed by students, just their presence has been reported to be comforting. Regardless, if we choose the LIFE Framework or GSAs the statistics are clear about the challenges faced by sexual minority adolescents and the responsibility of the school to provide support.

There has been a "culture of silence" that has existed for too long in Catholic schools so we have been afraid to inquire about what we do not understand ultimately leading to misconceptions. As I did in my literature review, I would present LGBTQ terminology near the beginning of my workshop so the participants could interact using respectful and appropriate language. Everyone would engage either individually or with a partner in an online quiz or activity that would introduce appropriate LGBTQ terms. It could be pointed out that this kind of activity could be replicated in the classroom or as part of a school-wide awareness campaign to build respectful communities and decrease acts of verbal bullying. Part of breaking the silence is demystifying the language surrounding the topic; if you can speak appropriately you can ask questions and communicate effectively. The following is a screenshot of the online quiz taken directly from my proposed presentation.



Figure 3. Online Kahoot Quiz on LGBTQ Terminology

In the spirit of enlightenment, the workshop would then move towards a presentation focused on GSAs. It is in this area, that I would simply present the foundations of a GSA. We would examine the misconceptions and frequently asked questions that surround the groups and

in the process dispel some myths. The following are some slides on GSAs: Misconceptions and FAQs taken directly from my proposed presentation.

GSAs Misconceptions and FAQs

We don't have any LGBTQ students in our school. Why do we need a GSA?

- Public Health Agency of Canada's (2010) research suggests that about 2-10% of students are sexual or gender minorities. LGBTQ students often choose not to be visible when school climates are not inclusive.
- A primary purpose of GSAs is to increase students' feelings of safety, security, and acceptance at school, as these feelings are essential for students to engage in learning.

GSAs are dating clubs.

- No, they are not dating clubs, nor do they promote sexual activity or behaviour.
- They are about valuing diversity, promoting safety, fostering respect, and improving school and peer connectedness.

Figure 4. Common Misconceptions and FAQs about GSAs

As educators in Alberta, we are lucky because we have access to an extensive online library of resources through the Alberta Teachers Association and the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS) at the University of Alberta. iSMSS is at the forefront of promoting gender and sexual minority equality in the province and nationally. The following is a screenshot of the iSMSS website taken directly from my proposed presentation.

Resources
Evidence-based resources to help increase knowledge, improve professional practice, and enhance services.

Home » Resources » Educators

LIGHTING THE WAY TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE
TEACHING • RESEARCH • SERVICE

Our Campaign

Research

Campus

Community

Classroom

Alumni

Resources

Support iSMSS

About Us

Educators

Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services

- LGBTQ Supportive Lawyer Reference List
- UofA Gender and Sexuality Related Courses
- 2013 Safe Spaces Campus Climate Report
- Terminology Sheet (English, French)

Edmonton Public Schools

- EPSP Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Website
- Board Policy HF, BP - Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
- Administrative Regulation HF, AR - Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
- Policy HF, BP - Safe, Caring and Respectful Learning Environments
- Administrative Regulation HF, AR - Safe, Caring and Respectful Learning Environments
- Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity: Recommended Fiction and Nonfiction Resources for K-12 Schools

SAFE SPACES

ALBERTA GOVERNMENT

VOLUNTEER

iSMSS
Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services

PRIDE WEEK

The Landing

Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS)

Like

875 people like Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS)

Figure 5. Screenshot of iSMSS website

As an introduction to the iSMSS website, I would play a video from their website that shares the story of a young transgendered woman and her struggle to become herself. This video is especially powerful because it also showcases her mother who is very supportive. This leads us to question how adolescents who do not have supportive family structures survive. I would argue that the school is one place where students should feel welcome and accepted for who they are. The following is a screenshot of a video on the iSMSS website taken directly from my proposed presentation.



Figure 6. iSMSS video, Being Marissa

As pointed out in the literature review, there are a number of federal and provincial documents that make reference to ending discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation. More importantly; however, is our professional obligation as presented by the Alberta Teachers' Association and the recent amendments to Bill 10 that guarantees the right for students to form a GSA at their publically funded school. What does this amendment mean to a Catholic School Board? How does this coincide with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church? The section following will look at how a GSA can easily exist within the LIFE

Framework (2015) currently supported by the ACSTA. The following are some slides on the LIFE Framework taken directly from my proposed presentation.

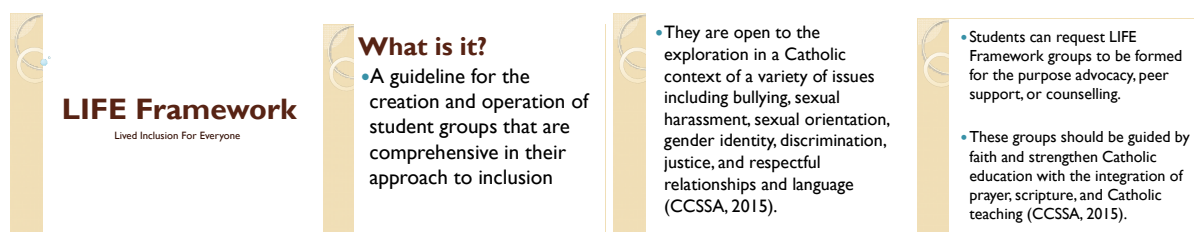


Figure 7. LIFE Framework Presentation

At the beginning of Chapter 3, there was a breakdown of the LIFE Framework into *Advocacy Groups*, *Peer Support Groups*, and finally *Counselling Groups* for any student with same sex attraction, struggles with gender identity, or experiences discrimination based on body image, race, culture, language, performance in school, social anxiety, or lack of social connection (CCSSA, 2015, p. 1). These three groups are compatible with the formation of a GSA whose main goal is to provide a safe space where students can talk and learn about sexual orientation, gender identity, and some of the issues that surround them. The *Peer Support* and *Counselling Groups* within a GSA provide all students regardless of gender or sexual identity a safe space where they can find an inclusive community free from judgments. The *Advocacy Group* aligns with the goal of GSAs to be involved in activism to improve the school climate and policies for current youth in the school, as well as affects institutional change for future students. The primary difference between GSAs and the LIFE Framework is confidentiality. The LIFE Framework insists that parents be notified when issues of human sexuality or sexual orientation may be discussed in accordance with section 11.1 (1) of the Alberta Human Rights Act (2000) (CCSSA, 2015, p. 4). This issue of parent notification has come been at the centre of current debate since the recent amendment to Bill 10. The argument against parent notification is that these are extracurricular groups and not part of the prescribed curriculum so they do not fall

under the same legislation. Mark Ramsankar, president of the ATA, has stated that the ATA is "calling for ministerial orders that will provide clarity, support and protection by preventing the disclosure of a student's membership in a GSA (or similar organization established under Section 35.1 of the *Education Act*) or participation in the organization's activities to any person without the explicit prior consent of the student" (2015). The CCSSA and Edmonton Catholic School District have not released any kind of response to this latest concern. I would advocate for anonymity to protect students from being "outed" before they are ready to share this with their family. This fact alone might discourage a troubled adolescent from reaching out for support at a time when they need it most.

The statistical information surrounding LGBTQ youth as one of the most marginalized and vulnerable section of society is staggering. Working for social justice for these students is exactly what we are called to do as Catholics. In Alberta, specifically in Catholic schools, very little has been done in the past to directly support sexual minorities. Recently, with the amendments to Bill 10, the Catholic boards have been forced to become openly supportive of GSAs and the students who wish form them. The bill guarantees students the ability to form a GSA but it is up to educators to facilitate this transition. I have heard numerous times that most people do not have a problem with GSAs but have been fearful of speaking against district policy. Fortunately, we have been empowered to support all of our students through the creation of GSAs which are statistically proven to save the lives of sexual minority youth.

It is important to realize that not everyone feels ready to become actively involved in the LIFE Framework or GSA at their school site. The purpose of my workshop is to educate and support teachers in creating more inclusive classrooms and schools. I would hope that individuals would walk away with a better understanding of the issues and where to find

information to answer their own questions and those of their students. It is at this point I would present information about making their classroom Safe Spaces (appendices A-E). The following are some screenshots of materials available through the ATA taken directly from my proposed presentation.



Figure 8. Resources available through the ATA

I liken it to the idea of recycling; you do not need to become an environmentalist to show environmental stewardship. When you put a recycle bin in your classroom then encourage the kids to use it and model environmental awareness by reducing, reusing, and recycling it ingrains itself as part of your classroom culture. If we create Safe Spaces we make inclusive classrooms that do not tolerate homophobia or heteronormativity.

At the closing of my workshop, I would invite teachers to participate in an anonymous survey using an online tool to collect feedback regarding the presentation and what supports might be of further use to them. This information could lead to future workshops or simply adding resources to a virtual classroom for independent teacher access. The following is a screenshot of an online survey taken directly from my proposed presentation.

GSAs in Catholic Schools Presentation

1. Overall, how would you rate the presentation?

Excellent
 Very good
 Fairly good
 Mildly good
 Not good at all

2. How useful was the information presented at this event?

Extremely useful
 Quite useful
 Moderately useful
 Slightly useful
 Not at all useful

3. Please share any recommendations or comments regarding the presentation.

4. Are there any questions you would like to be addressed?

5. How would you like to receive additional information regarding this topic?

Virtual classroom
 Future presentations
 Guest presenters
 I'm not interested in learning anymore about this topic
 Other (Please Specify)

Done

Powered by [SurveyMonkey](#)
 Check out our [pricing guide](#) and create your own now!

Figure 9. Survey Monkey, Presentation Feedback

Conclusion

Committed educators are always looking for ways to refine their craft and do what is best for their students. The consistent monitoring of the classroom climate is essential to creating optimum learning environment for all students. Teachers want to see their students succeed and become self-aware and confident learners; therefore, we must learn to recognize and honour all students on their life path. I am hoping that through increased awareness of sexual minorities we can make our classrooms more inclusive and foster resiliency in all of our students. It is essential to our vocation as Catholic educators to walk with Christ and provide love and fellowship to all students regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. We are called to love and not to judge. "And the king will say to them in reply, Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

My hope is that through increased awareness, discussion, and professional development we can educate teachers to become advocates for sexual minorities in their classrooms, their families, and their parishes. Advocacy is about creating a more just and peaceful society; a goal shared by Alberta schools and the Roman Catholic Church. I look forward to the changes the passing of the amendments to Bill 10 will bring to Edmonton Catholic School District and rejoice in the fact that I get to be a part of creating LGBTQ friendly schools for my students.

Chapter 4: Reflections and Recommendations

Role of the Educational Professional

When deciding to pursue a Master of Education degree it came from a place of wanting to feel inspired and challenge myself to become a better educator. I recognized that there was a major shift in education to a more student-centred, inquiry-based approach but I was unsure of how to create this environment in my classroom. I was becoming more cynical because I was so frustrated with not knowing how to meet these demands and when talking with my colleagues I realized that they were experiencing the same challenges. Over the past two years, I have been able to identify the issues that are most important to me (inclusion, accountability, and sexual minorities) and how to become a well informed and balanced advocate. Luckily, this has quelled my cynicism and inspired me to become more systematic in my approach to the challenges that arise in my classroom, school, district, and province.

From the beginning we have been asked to identify where we fit in terms of curriculum ideology or the "beliefs about what schools should teach, for what ends, and for what reasons" (Eisner, 1995, p. 47) and how it relates to everything we do. I learned early on that when determining your ideological stance it is necessary to understand that one of the problems with aligning ourselves with only one viewpoint we are limiting the authentic understanding of our pedagogy. As educators we often fit into elements of many different ideologies and we may be

mandated by something completely different from how we understand learning and teaching. It is from this realization that we can support the *problematic* nature of our jobs from an academic standpoint (Eisner, 1995). Due to this enigma and for the purposes of this reflection, I will be limiting my ideological stance to progressivism because it is where I feel the majority of my beliefs to be in agreement with my understanding of education. It is of primary importance to me as an educator and the ideology of progressivism that we examine the whole child as being a social and emotional creature and not simply an intellectual one (Eisner, 1995, p. 71). When approaching any student's learning, I want to provide educational experiences that will empower students to become increasingly able to deal with more complex and demanding problems (Eisner, 1995, p. 68). From this viewpoint, I feel that the school should provide a shared way of life and the social conditions that convey the social norms based on democratic principles (Eisner, 1995, p. 70). The classroom should offer opportunities for students to create their own rules for social living that are fostered by group process and collective intelligence (Eisner, 1995, p. 70). Based on my progressivist understanding, I view each child as an individual. I appreciate that all students come from different experiences and ability levels that will shape their interests and learning needs. From this perspective, my final project and my fundamental understanding of my role as an educator fits most naturally since it is already focused on pedagogical adaptability.

The program offered through the University of Victoria has challenged me from the beginning to develop my understanding of *inquiry as stance* or "the way of knowing and grounded theory of action for educational transformation" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009, p. 125). The majority of the courses and readings have lead to a better understanding of how inquiry produces knowledge and how practitioners learn from inquiry communities. There is a

change from the dualistic understanding of knowledge that sees it as just formal or practical to a concept of looking at local knowledge from a global context (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009, p. 126). This has significantly changed my understanding of my role as educator because it redefines the teacher-researcher-learner relationship. The role being mutually constructive and allows for the *practitioner* to move between roles within their classrooms and professional learning communities. As my understanding of *practitioner* shifts then so does my appreciation for everyone's purpose within an educational community. We are no longer individual teachers, students, academics, parents, etc.; we expand into a dynamic relationship that allows for movement between the roles of teacher, learner, and researcher. This significant shift in the understanding of practitioner within an inquiry community ultimately affects the "interplay of teaching, learning, and leading" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009, p. 132).

It is in this new light that the concept of my classroom and my school are changed into a site of inquiry; where I am able to take on a critical perspective towards the theory and research of others, ultimately connecting my work to larger issues (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009, p. 133). This expands my view on my role as a practitioner to someone who engages in fundamental issues to reinvent or construct frameworks with my students to draw on experiences and outside resources (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009, p. 133-134); and ultimately challenging me to make my praxis "deeply contextual, relational, and interdisciplinary [as well as] theoretical and interpretive. As my role as practitioners within an inquiry community transforms to better meet the needs of my students the lines begin to blur the lines between teacher, learner, and researcher.

It is from these foundational learning experiences in the program that I started to better comprehend my on-going role as a learner/researcher and continue my development into an

educational leader. I am able to challenge the way I perceive my role as an educator and how I respond to the problematic reality of teaching; there is no one size fits all method or simple solution to the issues that arise in my classroom or at my school. It is from that understanding that I approached my final project, an understanding that with every need there are multiple solutions. Students, teachers, coaches, administrators, consultants, etc. are at different positions on the learning continuum and it is necessary to work together to best respect the needs of all the individuals involved.

Theory in Action

Curriculum as a praxis or "theory in action" continues to broaden my understanding because it makes an explicit statement about the interests it serves. Praxis brings the collective well-being and emancipation of the human spirit to the forefront and makes an explicit commitment to all involved. It does not focus only on the individual; rather it pays close attention to the collective understanding and practices. As an educator, I am committed to constantly refining my praxis; I must be willing to pose questions that challenge the structure of my classroom, school, district, etc. I need to invite others to explore their own praxis and work collectively to better meet the needs of all the students in our classrooms.

Alberta Education (2010) has provided a framework for revamping the curriculum that will help all students reach their full potential. The document, *Curriculum Redesign: Understanding the Shifts* focuses on seven shifts that will augment my approach to education. This transition is to move towards a more student-centered and competency focused and will transform into a new curriculum that will be less redundant to allow for a greater depth of study relevant to the student's interest (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 1). As the curriculum shifts so will classroom and provincial assessment and the focus will move from print-based curriculum to

digital delivery (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 2). Alberta Education also promotes collaboration and synchronous co-development that includes partners and educational stakeholders (2010, p. 2). From my aforementioned progressivist understanding of pedagogy; it is the first shift that moves me away from the system and towards focusing on the child. This will have the most impact on my students and my role as a teacher. This shift allows me to become the designer of developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for my students; allowing them to reach their full potential. It encourages flexibility and choice that will allow me to provide personalized learning opportunities to increase my student's responsibility for their progress, learning, and assessment.

As a graduate from the University of Victoria, I feel that I am in a position to work collaboratively with my colleagues to develop our curriculum as a praxis to better meet the needs of individual students. Throughout the course work we have consistently been asked to challenge ourselves as educators by critically reflecting on what is happening in our classrooms, our schools, and our districts. These personal evaluations combined with accessing and synthesizing academic literature allows me to make better decisions for my individual students and my needs as a learner and educator. It is easy to become complacent and do things because it is what we have always done; however, this program reinforces that quality educators are always evaluating and evolving. The educational direction of the province and my district are in sync with this understanding. My school is slowly changing to align with these shifts but there is a lot of hesitation and resistance from some colleagues.

Early on in our program we looked at instructional leadership and read the book, *Change Leader* (2011). In it Fullan (2011), identifies 9 characteristics to "create conditions for people to experience the pressure and support of collective learning and to do so in very specific, concrete

ways" (p. 61-62). I think the most significant realization from this book relates directly to the influence I can have on my school and district is to "honour the implementation dip" (Fullan, 2011, pg. 72). One of the key features of being an effective instructional leader in a school is to know that not everyone is enthusiastic about educational transformation. If I do not recognize that the first few months are a learning curve and will be bumpy for people I will lose respect, damage my relationship with my community, and give the people who are the most resistant to change power to negatively influence others. I think there is a way to allow people to vent frustrations without it derailing the progress that has been made but it takes a conscientious and effective leader to facilitate this. This is an area where I can lose a lot of ground as a leader if I allow frustration to spiral into a resistant and negative mindset. This is not only significant for leading colleagues but for myself as well. It is easier to be motivated and breed motivation when I look for success in an area and be cognizant of my own internal dialogue. There is power in thoughts and the energy it brings to you, I believe that you can change your situation by focusing on the positive. I think that is what Fullan is referring to when he talks about the blast of new energy that is released when a breakthrough occurs and people are palpably motivated by the fact that they are getting somewhere" (2011, p. 72).

As an educational leader in my school and district I want to positively effect change, specifically related to my final project and what it means for sexual minorities in Edmonton Catholic Schools. There is a major disconnect between an authentic movement towards an inclusive model of education within the Edmonton Catholic School District and what is actually happening. This program has taught me how to systematically bring about positive change in my classroom, in my school, and eventually in my district. I am not interested in pursuing an administration position within the district, I would rather work with students and my colleagues

in the classroom opposed to a boardroom. Educational leadership comes in many different formats but there needs to be a foundation in scholarly research to have an informed dialogue with your colleagues. I am hoping what I have learned from final project will be of use to my students and my colleagues when dismantling the structural hurdles to create truly inclusive and socially just environments for all students but specifically sexual minorities.

Recommendations

This project has been challenging but very rewarding at the same time. I would encourage everyone to learn more about how to support the LGBTQ students in your school and challenge heteronormativity in the existing structures in your school. In order to do this requires examination of the different elements of curriculum. The understanding of curriculum may appear to be a straightforward concept of the value matrix, or ideologies that direct a school's major means for addressing the aims it values (Eisner, 1995, p. 47, 49). However, as we look further into Eisner's (1994) understanding of curriculum it is expanded into 3 different types: *explicit*, *implicit*, and *null*. The *explicit* curriculum is the public goals and objectives for different subject areas that are often found in curriculum guides and course planning materials (Eisner, 1994, p. 87, 88). The *implicit* curriculum refers to the subtle sociological values and consistent behaviors that are being promulgated by the organization and culture of the classroom and the school (Eisner, 1994, p. 88). It is important to note that the *implicit* curriculum can often be the most important lessons children learn at school (Eisner, 1994, p. 90). Finally, the *null* curriculum refers to what schools do not teach or leave out from content or subject areas (Eisner, 1994, p. 97, 98). These items that are neglected can be just as important as what is included because a student's ignorance to certain elements affects their interpretation and perspectives when viewing a problem (Eisner, 1994, p. 97, 98). Understanding what curriculum is comprised of will allow you to assess all elements and strategize with your colleague about what needs to be addressed.

In Alberta, specifically in Catholic schools, very little has been done in the past to directly support sexual minorities. Recently, with the amendments to Bill 10, the Catholic boards have been forced to become openly supportive of GSAs and the students who wish form them. The bill guarantees students the ability to form a GSA but it will be interesting to follow this transition into realization. If you are interested in this topic be prepared to hear some very strong opinions that are archaic and in truth not at all aligned with the catechism of the Catholic Church. Most people do not really want to talk about it--*null curriculum* (Eisner, 1994)--because they are not sure what they are supposed to do or say. I have heard multiple times that people personally have no problem with GSAs but they are nervous to go against the district policies. Fortunately, these people are now allowed to show their support publicly without fear of reprimand. As individual comfort levels increase people will not shy away from talking about sexual minorities and what we can do as educators to be supportive.

As in most controversial topics, it is necessary as an advocate to be well informed and up to date with the latest developments surrounding it. I found a wealth of information from the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), Edmonton Public Schools, and the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS) at the University of Alberta that have compiled the statistics surrounding sexual minority youth and concrete examples of how to build inclusive communities. The resources provided will aide in building inclusivity for LGBTQ students in the *explicit, implicit, and null curriculum* (Eisner, 1994). I also found it helpful to follow the ATA, iSMSS, and Kristopher Wells on Twitter and Facebook to stay informed about local, national, and international developments that could affect the LGBTQ community. In addition to the news element, the links provided to the different personal stories shared by sexual minority adolescents was incredibly powerful. These are the stories you can share with your colleagues

that will make them stop and acknowledge the vulnerability of sexual minorities in our schools and the difference a school GSA can make.

The statistical information surrounding LGBTQ youth as one of the most marginalized and vulnerable section of society is staggering. Working for social justice for these students is exactly what we are called to do as Catholics. If you wish to pursue study in this area or to advocate for sexual minorities in a Catholic setting, I would recommend examining the Catechism, specifically 2357-2359. It is also helpful to read and understand the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' *Pastoral Ministry to Young People with Same-Sex Attraction* and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*. In order to have a balanced and respectful discussion in a Catholic setting it is necessary to actually know and understand the doctrine surrounding the issue. Regardless, of your own opinions surrounding sexual minorities, you are working within a Catholic context and must be respectful to the catechism and the foundations of the district. It would also be helpful to go through the *Commitment to Inclusive Communities* and "*LIFE Framework-Lived Inclusion for Everyone*" documents produced by the Council of Catholic School Superintendants of Alberta. I also suggest if you're interested specifically within Edmonton Catholic that you become familiar with the core message behind the *Permeation Project*. I will warn you now that some of this literature may go against your own beliefs but it is the Faith that is central to this issue.

GSAs and Catholicism can work together even if they do not necessarily see eye to eye. They both have clear goals of protecting, loving, and working towards a socially just society for all of God's children. God is Love and with Him all things are possible.

Appendix A



The poster features a blue and white checkered background with several quilt patches. The patches include:

- A patch with the text "Human rights" and "rights" in large letters.
- A patch with a rainbow-colored profile of a person's head.
- A patch with a rainbow heart inside a green circle.
- A patch with the text "Individual respect" and "respect" in large letters.
- A patch with the text "Everyone's responsibility" and "responsibility" in large letters.
- A patch with a red ribbon and a transgender symbol.
- A patch with two figures holding hands in front of a rainbow heart.

This is a **SAFE SPACE** where human rights are respected and where lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified and queer students, teachers, friends, families and allies are welcome and supported.

SAFE SPACE

Patchwork from the Youth Understanding Youth quilt, "Diverse Threads in Social Fabrics." To view more quilt patches or for further information on sexual orientation and gender identity educational issues, please visit www.teachers.ab.ca, select Teaching in Alberta, click on Diversity, Equity and Human Rights, scroll down to Resources and follow the links.

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Appendix B

Commonly Used Terms

Lesbian
A female who is attracted physically and emotionally to other females.

LGBTQ
A commonly used acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, transsexual, two-spirited and queer identities. Sexual minority is a synonymous term.

Queer
Historically, a negative term for homosexuality. More recently, the LGBTQ communities have reclaimed the word and use it as a positive way to refer to themselves.

Transgender/Trans-identified
A person whose gender identity, outward appearance, expression and/or anatomy do not fit into conventional expectations of male or female. Often used as an umbrella term to represent a wide range of non-conforming gender identities and behaviours.

Two-spirited
Some Aboriginal people identify themselves as two-spirited rather than as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans-identified. Historically, in many Aboriginal cultures two-spirited persons were respected leaders and medicine people. Two-spirited persons were often accorded special status based on their unique abilities to understand both male and female perspectives.

More terms and expanded definitions are available on the [ATA Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity webpage](#).
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LGBTQ Educational Resources

ATA Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Webpage
Go to www.teachers.ab.ca, click on Diversity, Equity and Human Rights (Gender Issues in Education), and follow the links. The webpage provides links as well as information on resources, including:

- Gay-Straight Student Alliances in Alberta Schools;
- A Guide for Teachers (booklet) and a workshop series on sexual orientation and gender identity.

To find out more about ATA LGBTQ workshops and resources, contact the ATA Professional Development office at 477-9485 (in Edmonton), 1-800-232-7208 (toll free in Alberta).

Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities
www.scscc.ca

- Creating Safe, Caring and Inclusive Schools for LGBTQ Students: A Guide for Counsellors
- Creating Safe, Caring and Inclusive Schools for LGBTQ Students: A Guide for School Administrators
- Safe and Caring Schools for Lesbian and Gay Youth: A Guide for Teachers

To order the above booklets or the Safe Spaces LGBTQ poster, brochure and sticker, contact SCSCC at 447-9487 (in Edmonton) or 1-800-232-7208 ext 487 (toll free in Alberta).

Videos from the National Film Board of Canada
www.nfb.ca/celebratingdiversity

Diverse Threads in Social Fabrics

Youth Understanding Youth QUILT

To read the youth artists' statements that accompany each of the panels on the quilt, please visit the [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity section of the ATA website](#).






SAFE SPACES

Welcome to Safe Spaces, a joint initiative of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and the Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities (SASC). In this brochure you will find definitions and information to assist you in creating safe, caring and inclusive spaces for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified and queer (LGBTQ) students, as well as their allies and families.

Why do we need safe spaces for LGBTQ students in our schools?

LGBTQ students often face discrimination and prejudice in schools. Research indicates that LGBTQ students have higher rates of suicide, drug and alcohol use, smoking and feelings of isolation and despair.

Students who feel unsafe in their school are less likely to learn, whereas students who perceive their schools as accepting, safe and welcoming improve their grades and attendance, and feel more hopeful about their academic and personal future.

The ATA and SASC Safe Spaces initiative focuses on three critical areas necessary to address discrimination and prejudice in schools: respecting human rights, respecting individuals and taking personal responsibility.

Human rights

Both the *Alberta Human Rights, Citizenship and Multiculturalism Act* and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Individual respect

Alberta's teachers are bound by the *Professional Code of Conduct*, which requires teachers to show respect for all students, including those who are or are perceived as being LGBTQ.

Everyone's responsibility

Everyone in the school is responsible for creating a safe, caring and inclusive environment and reducing homophobia and heterosexism. Here are a few strategies you can use to reduce discrimination and prejudice toward LGBTQ students in your school:

- Educate yourself about LGBTQ issues by visiting the Diversity and Human Rights section of the ATA webpage (www.teachers.ab.ca).
- Intervene in homophobic name calling when you hear it.
- Help students establish a gay-straight student alliance (GSA) or a designated safe space in your school.
- Request that an ATA LGBTQ workshop be held at your school as a professional-development opportunity.

Commonly Used Terms

Ally

A person who, irrespective of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, supports and stands up for the human and civil rights of LGBTQ people.

Bisexual

A person who is attracted physically and emotionally to both males and females.

Gay

A person who is physically and emotionally attracted to someone of this same sex. The word gay can refer to both males and females, but is commonly used to identify males only.

Gender Identity

A person's internal sense of being male or female. Gender expression relates to how a person presents his or her sense of gender to society. Gender identity and gender expression are often closely linked with the terms *transgender* and *trans-identified*.

GSA

A school-based gay-straight student alliance found in some high schools in North America.

Heterosexism

The assumption that everyone is heterosexual and that this sexual orientation is superior. Heterosexism is often expressed in more subtle forms than homophobia.

Homophobia

Fear or hatred of homosexuality, often exhibited by prejudice, discrimination, bullying or acts of violence.

Appendix C



Diversity • Equity • Human Rights • Diversity • Equity • Human Rights • Diversity • Equity • Human Rights • Diversity • Equity • Human Rights • Diversity • Equity • Human Rights

Association Workshops That Build Safe and Inclusive Schools

- Dealing with Bullying and Cyberbullying
- First Nations, Métis and Inuit education series
- Here Comes Everyone— Responding to Cultural Diversity
- Increasing Student Resilience
- Promoting the success of immigrant students and families
- Engaging Students in Thoughtful Social Justice Projects

Visit www.teachers.ab.ca and click on For Members; then Workshops, Courses and Presentations detailed descriptions of these and other Association workshops.

To find out more about the Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Committee:

Visit www.teachers.ab.ca
Click on Teaching in Alberta; then Diversity, Equity and Human Rights

Contact:
Andrea Berg, Professional Development
Telephone: 780-447-9400
Toll free: 1-800-232-7208
Fax: 780-455-6481
E-mail: andrea.berg@ata.ab.ca

Diversity, Equity and Human Rights



The Alberta Teachers' Association

ATTA 2015

The Alberta Teachers' Association



The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA)

believes that every child has the right to be taught in an inclusive environment that is safe and caring, respects diversity and the rights of all persons, and provides equitable opportunities for success.

The Diversity, Equity and Human Rights (DEHR) Committee

- studies, advises and makes recommendations on policies that reflect respect for diversity, equity and human rights;
- offers Inclusive Learning Communities Grants to teachers and supports activities that promote inclusion;
- produces *Just in Time*, an electronic newsletter;
- provides print and Web-based information and resources; and
- supports the work of its subcommittees.

The ATA's Code of Professional Conduct

The teacher teaches in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of all persons without prejudice as to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical characteristics, disability, marital status, family status, age, ancestry or place of origin, place of residence, socioeconomic background or linguistic background.

Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Grants

The Alberta Teachers' Association offers grants of up to \$2,000 to help fund projects aimed at creating inclusive school cultures that respect diversity, equity, and human rights. To qualify for a grant, applicants must be active or associate members of the ATA.

These grants support projects that promote inclusive learning communities that do the following:

- Advance the goals of public education
- Reflect the principles of respect for diversity, equity and human rights
- Foster and support the intellectual, social, physical, emotional and spiritual development of each child
- Build school cultures that reflect a commitment to intercultural education; gender equity; respect for differences in sexual orientation, gender identity, physical characteristics, mental ability or ancestry; First Nations, Métis and Inuit education; poverty issues; peace and global education; violence prevention; and anti-racism education
- Have ongoing impact on students and teachers

The DEHR Subcommittees

- Gender Equity
- Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Intercultural Education
- UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network (ASPnet)

The ATA Local DEHR Award

The purpose of this award is to recognize projects, programs, events or activities organized by a local association to promote diversity, equity and human rights. The deadline to apply for this award is early May.

Appendix E



**‘That’s So Gay,’
Is SO Yesterday**

Words can hurt.
Choose them wisely.

Inspire change.

PFLAG CANADA
PFLAG Canada is there when it seems no-one else is.
www.pflagcanada.ca

TD
Proud Sponsor of PFLAG Canada

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