



Rainbow Health Ontario

Forging policy for LGBT youth: Schools as sites of activism and resistance



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Thursday, 25 March **2010** from 1:30 – 3:00 PM

overview . . .

1. sketching the landscape
2. resilience + resistance
3. further evidence from the research
4. doing something . . .
5. politics of “doing something” . . .



1. sketching the landscape . . .

Azmi Jubran

David Knight

Marc Hall

Jubran and Knight filed human rights complaints against their school districts for not protecting them against vicious and ongoing bullying, much of it homophobic in nature. They both won. Hall filed a complaint against his school for not allowing him to take his boyfriend to the prom. He also won.

Jubran: http://www.cbc.ca/canada/british-columbia/story/2005/10/25/bc_jubran-bully20051025.html

Knight: http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/bullying/cyber_bullying.html

Constance McMillan

In Mississippi, Constance's school board not only did not allow her to take her girlfriend to the prom and dress in a tuxedo. They also cancelled the prom altogether. The state court said that doing so was against her constitutional rights but stopped short of demanding that the prom go ahead as planned



Jamie Lazarre

1984 – 2002. Committed suicide in Prince George BC.

Hamed Nastoh

1986 – 2000. Committed suicide in Surrey BC.

Shaquille Wisdom

1994 – 2007. Committed suicide in Ajax, ON.

From Capital Xtra 31 Jan 2008

After Wisdom's suicide both [the principal] and the Durham District School Board told Xtra they were **unaware** of any bullying until reports appeared in the media.

[H]owever, [he] insists the school is **doing everything** it can to protect students.



- LGB youth face **higher levels** of rejection, discrimination, and violence in their families, in school, and in their communities.
- also, greater stress, anxiety, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation.
- lower levels of protective factors such as family and school connectedness.

McCreary Centre Society. Download their report, *Not yet equal: The health of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in BC* from: <http://www.mcs.bc.ca/node/14>

- LGBTQ students are exposed to language that insults their dignity as part of **everyday** school experience.
- LGBTQ students experience much higher levels of verbal, physical and other forms of **harassment** than other students.
- many LGBTQ students do not feel **safe** at school.
- many teachers **look the other way** when they hear homophobic comments.

Egale (Safe Schools Campaign + First National Climate Survey on Homophobia in Canadian Schools)
<http://climatesurvey.ca/report/2009.03.25%20-%20FINAL%20-%20LOWRES.pdf>



Teachers' issues . . .

- some teachers and staff feel **uncomfortable** talking about homophobia;
- some **don't feel equipped** to do so;
- many are **not aware** of resources to support students;
- many **fear** parental backlash based on so-called "family values"; and
- many **fear** being perceived as queer.
- We describe these sorts of issues as **The politics of naming and saying**

What is at risk . . .

- self esteem (internalized homophobia and transphobia)
- isolation (social experiences with peers)
- physical and emotional safety
- ongoing bullying
- general sense of belonging
- victimization by culture of fear
- homelessness
- drug / alcohol abuse
- suicidal ideation / suicide
- **educational achievement**



2. resilience + resistance . . .

risk:

- compromised family relationships
- hostile school environments

“[M]ore attention is needed to the ways that risk and resilience may operate at multiple levels or in multiple contexts” (Russell, 2005, p. 3)

resilience:

- supportive school policies
- family affirmation
- friendships
- positive self esteem

“Resilience refers to an end state of **positive adaptation** and development

describe[s] young people whose development is optimal in the context of significant adversity”

(Russell, 2005, p. 4).



3. further evidence from the research . . .

Psychological distress and suicides are connected to the social conditions in schools, which **stigmatize** and **marginalize** LGBT youth (Gilbert 2004; Kelleher 2009; Lipkin 2002).

Heterosexual students experienced similar psychological health effects from homophobic remarks. They also reported feelings of social withdrawal, depression, and personal distress (Poteat 2008).

Queer and **questioning** youth were more likely to report incidents of bullying and homophobic victimization compared to heterosexual youth. Questioning youth reported the highest levels of homophobic bullying and harassment (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig 2009).

Youth who are **out** about their sexuality identity were victimized more in schools. Male youth were victimized more frequently than female youth (D'Augelli 2002).

Schools have the ability to lower negative outcomes for LGBTQ youth by creating positive school climates and by implementing strategies to reduce incidences of homophobic bullying and harassment (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig 2009).

Physical education classes and other athletic settings are where queer youth feel the most unsafe, vulnerable, and unsupported (Barber & Krane 2007).

“Given the **overwhelming research** indicating the serious nature of the health, wellness, and safety concerns that sexual minority youth experience, the **creation** of positive school climates, **provision** of inclusive mental health and social services, and **access** to nonjudgmental education and health care providers **are critical**” (Wells, 2009, p. 9).



4. doing something . . .

Homophobia has risen to the forefront of discussion” (p. 7).

Realizing the promise of diversity: Ontario’s equity and inclusive education strategy. <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.pdf>

- revise the Health and Physical Education curriculum so that **by Grade 6 all students** will learn about gender stereotypes and homophobia.
- **provide all** school staff **with training** on gender-based violence, [and] homophobia . . .

Shaping a Culture of Respect in Our Schools: Promoting Safe and Healthy Relationships. Report downloadable from <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/safeschools/publications.html>



- **All** staff and students need education on the issues of homophobia, transphobia, intersexuality and heterosexism. (Policy excerpt from the Greater Victoria School Board)
- The School District needs to encourage the integration of same-sex family messages into **curriculum** during **elementary grades** and into school district policies. (Policy excerpt from the Vancouver School Board)

Positive change at Thunder Bay school board

“The two parties developed a document entitled Proactive Steps in Preventing Homophobic Harassment which the **Board has agreed** to adopt and promote.”

(September 8, 2005)

<http://www.egale.ca/index.asp?lang=E&menu=33&item=1170>

The Board is further committed to **providing each student** with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours needed to live in a complex and diverse world.

(Policy excerpt from the Toronto District School Board. Document available: http://www.tdsb.on.ca/_site/ViewItem.asp?siteid=15&menuid=5018&pageid=4377

LGBT youth can **learn** and earn credits in a **safe**, harassment-free, equity-based environment

[S]tudents have all experienced a broad range of homophobia in their former school settings.

(Excerpt from the Triangle Program website: <http://schools.tdsb.on.ca/triangle/mission.html>



5. politics of “doing something” . . .

“LGBTQ youth are coming out at **younger** and younger ages” (Wells 2008).

“> 40% of homophobic hate crimes documented by Janoff (2005) are perpetrated by [male] teenagers” (Wells 2008) .

***It’s elementary:
Talking about gay
issues in school (1996)***

***It’s still elementary
(2007)***

Films show examples of teachers teaching about gay issues in age-appropriate ways to students in various grades. The film ignited a firestorm of protest from the Christian Right and other conservatives. The 2007 update interviews children (now young adults) in the original film.

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1. Educate school personnel about homophobia and heterosexism in schools.
2. Create safe school environments for all students (lobby for policy).
3. Address homophobic language and behaviour.
4. Develop the use of inclusive language and behaviour.
5. Consider gender as a spectrum rather than a duality.
6. Strategize against backlash politics.

Social support **networks** and **communities** ameliorate negative affects of hostile school environments (D’Augelli 2002; Kelleher 2009; Luhtanen 2003).

What’s been done is only the tip of the iceberg. “While we have a lot more visibility and a lot more awareness, it hasn’t really translated into **concrete improvements** in most schools”
Kevin Jennings
Former ED, GLSEN

thanks !

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