Managing Sexual Diversity in Secondary Schools
Perspectives from Canada

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A report that explores the ways in which anti-homophobia and sexual diversity education is approached in two high schools under the jurisdiction of the Toronto District School Board, Ontario, Canada.
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Introduction

Despite increasing awareness and acceptance of sexual diversity, discrimination based on ‘homosexuality’ and/or gender non-conformity in schools remains a concern (Bailt, 2006; D’Augelli, Pilkinson & Hershberger, 2002; Ferfojla, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009; Hillier, Turner & Mitchell, 2005; Hohnke & O’Brien, 2008; Michaelson, 2008; Rudoe, 2010). International literature illustrates that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (hereafter LGBTQ) individuals frequently experience discrimination expressed through negative behaviours such as ostracism, harassment, and verbal and physical violence (EGALE Canada, 2011; Ferfojla & Hopkins, forthcoming; Hillier et al, 2010; Schneider & Dimento, 2008; Taylor & Peter, 2011). Indeed, schools are highly heterosexual organizations and such interpersonal discrimination provides one means to regulate and police sexual and gendered subjectivities. This regulation is reinforced by the institutional silences around sexual and gendered diversities in curriculum, practice and policy (Bellini, 2012; Callaghan, 2007, 2009; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Ferfojla, 2012; Taylor, 2008). Silence carries meaning (Foucault, 1978) and through such silence, the ‘Othering’ of LGBTQ subjectivities remains a reality (Atkinson, 2002). As a result, many LGBTQ teachers and students do not feel safe or comfortable within their own school community and may endeavor to hide or ‘manage’ their sexuality (Bellini, 2012; Holmes, 2001; Kendall & Sidebotham, 2004). The ongoing fear of, and/or experiences of, discrimination and social derision mean that LGBTQ youth are at greater risk of suicide and suicide ideation, homelessness, school drop-out and disengagement, substance abuse, and mental illness (Hillier et al, 2005; Peling, 2008).

Addressing homophobia in schools and educating future generations about sexual and gendered diversities is crucial for the creation of a world that is socially just and equitable to all people. Yet, few education systems proactively endeavor to instill in their curricula, pedagogies and policies, visible and explicit measures that enhance knowledge about this area of (in)equity or to promote school cultures where LGBTQ subjects feel free and safe to be open. However, the Toronto District School Board (hereafter TDSB) in Ontario, Canada, has developed and endeavoured to implement visible and explicit policy in relation to human sexuality, through the ‘Equity Foundation Statement and Commitments to Equity Policy Implementation’ (hereafter Equity Foundation Statement). This document and its commitments marks the TDSB as a front-runner in the endeavor to increase equitable practices in schools and to reduce discrimination against those perceived to be ‘different’ from the heterosexual norm.

This progressive position renders the implementation of the TDSB policy in schools as worthy of study and as a potential model to illustrate how cultural change could be created in other comparable education systems. Thus, this document reports on research that sought to understand how this human rights issue is enacted in TDSB schools that are deemed to be proactive in implementing TDSB equity policy and importantly how this implementation is occurring. The aim was to explore the approaches taken by schools perceived to be actively engaging in this equity area and the experiences of those affiliated with them.

TDSB equity policy

The TDSB is the largest school board in Canada with almost 600 elementary and secondary public schools serving in excess of 250,000 students within its jurisdiction (Toronto District School Board, 2012). The TDSB’s commitment to social justice, reflected in the Equity Foundation Statement mentioned above, defines ‘Antihomophobia, sexual orientation and equity’ as one of its five pillars of equity. This mandatory document, approved in 1999 (Goldstein et al, 2008), draws on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and provides all those working and learning under the jurisdiction of the TDSB with protections from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender diversity. Its progressive perspective is reflected in its specific articulation that ‘requires that ideals related to antihomophobia and sexual orientation equity be reflected in all aspects of organizational structures, policies, guidelines, procedures, classroom practices, day-to-day operations, and communication practices’ (Toronto District School Board, 2000, p. 13). Providing an inclusive curriculum in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity, removing biases and stereotypes in learning materials, ensuring equity in employment, providing counseling support and career guidance to students, providing teaching resources, committing to staff training and developing productive partnerships with the ‘lesbian and gay communities and other communities who identify themselves on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity to enhance educational opportunities for all’ (TDSB, 2000) are all pledged in the document. Thus, the document is relatively comprehensive in its approach, serious in its intent, and

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1 For more information on this policy’s development and history, see Bellini (2012); Goldstein et al (2008); McCaskell (2005).
appears to cover a broad range of systemic and individual practices’ (Goldstein et al, 2008, pp. 53-4). A review of the TDSB website attests to the institution’s pursuit of equity in relation to sexual orientation and gender diversity (as well as other forms of socio-cultural difference) through the provision of supportive LGBTQ messaging, resources, newsletters, advertising of professional development or educational opportunities for staff and students respectively, and the promotion of LGBTQ special events such as Pride Week.

Ball et al (2012, p. 110) write about the ‘juridification of practice’; that is, the incorporation of legislation on school policy. This is witnessed in the Canadian context where anti-homophobia and sexual and gender diversity education has been further tightened recently by two legislative amendments. The first, Bill 157 – Keeping our Kids Safe at School, mandates that all schools address and report any student behaviour that contributes to a negative school climate including homophobic comments, slurs and graffiti. The second, Bill 13 – Accepting Schools Act amends ‘the Education Act with respect to bullying and other matters’ (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2012). Importantly, it defines bullying to include ‘power imbalances between the pupil and the individual’ around sexual orientation and gender expression, (among other factors), and defines bullying behaviour to include ‘physical, verbal, electronic, written or other means’ (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2012). There is both government and school board recognition of the prevalence of homophobia in schools and a mandate to support the promotion of equitable cultures in relation to these (and other) social justice issues. The remainder of this document explores the operations of this policy and its attendant mandates in what are perceived to be proactive high schools addressing LGBTQ equity in the TDSB.

Methodology

It should be noted that this research was undertaken with the assistance of the government of Canada, specifically the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), as a Faculty Research Award.

The fieldwork was completed over a four week period during November/December, 2012. A number of schools in the TDSB were identified by TDSB stakeholders as actively endeavouring to implement the Equity Foundation Statement in terms of anti-homophobia and/or sexual orientation equity education. These schools were informed by email about the research and invited to participate.

Two high schools volunteered to be involved. Both schools had long-standing histories of academic and extracurricular excellence and were well equipped, offering a wide range of educational and leadership programs and sporting and special interest clubs. Students in both high schools were highly likely to proceed to tertiary education upon completion of their secondary studies. The school populations were described as ‘not representative of the socio-cultural diversity found in down-town Toronto’, with one school being described as ‘90% Caucasian’, and the other as having a ‘majority of students whose primary language is English’. One participant described the area of their school as ‘traditional … very white … very high class … It’s like a bubble’. Students from both schools were described as coming predominantly from middle to upper-middle class households where homes were ‘passed down from one generation to another’. Parent participation in the schools was perceived to be high compared to many other schools, with ‘a very strong community spirit’ and ‘strong parent council’. Both sites demonstrated teacher employment stability with one participant saying, ‘Teachers have been here for years and years and years, some for twenty-plus years’. Across both high schools, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted. Semi-structured interviews were selected as a means of data collection as they lend themselves to a more natural dialogue between researcher and participant allowing for the exploration of emerging ideas whilst maintaining a focus on the questions under research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Richards, 2009). This form of data collection was undertaken with school-based executive staff (2), teachers (4), and parents (6) as well as two TDSB stakeholders who had been involved in equity work for the Board. Five focus group interviews were conducted with students from years 9-12 (approximately 14-18 years of age), involving 23 students, 16 of whom identified as female and 7 as male. Focus groups were selected for the young people as they may be less intimidating than one-on-one interviews, and provide ‘concentrated and detailed information on an area of group life’ (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001, p. 6). The research focus, as outlined above, aimed to understand how LGBTQ issues were perceived and enacted in TDSB schools that were considered to be actively pursuing equity in relation to this social justice area and importantly, how this implementation was occurring. Thus, participants were asked questions that broadly related to: the school culture in relation to LGBTQ subjects; the prevalence and enactment of homophobia; the degree and manner of inclusion of anti-homophobia education or education addressing sexual diversity in young people’s education; and its perceived importance.
The 37 participants provided a variety of perspectives on the issue under investigation; these perspectives are dynamic depending on how the individuals construct their experiences at that moment but when combined act as a crystal that draws together and reflects their understandings. As Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 6) state, ‘Each telling, like light hitting a crystal, reflects a different perspective...’. It should be noted, however, that all of the participants who volunteered to participate in the research were in some way active in terms of equity in their respective schools. For example, the school administrators were personally passionate about equity issues; students who volunteered to participate in the focus groups were predominantly (but not only) members of the school’s Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) or in Equity Clubs or had friends and allies in these clubs; the teachers and TDSB equity employees had an interest in, or commitment to, equity particularly in relation to sexuality and gender identity expression. Even the parent participants were active within the school, partaking in events and committees, and some had children who were LGBTQ identified. Although it could be argued that the homogeneity of these participants in terms of their investment in equity and sexual diversity created ‘bias’, their connection to, and awareness of, school practices and dynamics in relation to these issues produced rich and informative data that may not have been available from less informed individuals.

The data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Saldana, 2009). It is important to note that this analysis is interpretative and does not endeavor to identify a ‘right’ or ‘correct’ response, or even the most commonly articulated position among the interviewees; but rather, provides a range of responses raised in the data collection. Consequently, participant voices are used frequently in this report.

As this is a small but public research project, it has been critical to ensure the confidentiality of participants. As a result, participant or school names are not used, nor are pseudonyms applied. Additionally, the individual schools in terms of responses have not been distinguished from each other. These decisions have been made strategically to reduce narrative continuity, a strategy often used in research of a sensitive nature (Khayatt, 1992), and to protect the identity of those who volunteered their involvement.

This research ascribes to the work of Ball et al (2012) who position policy as never straightforward or linear, but rather, as a complex site/s of “contestation or struggle” (Ball, et al 2012, p.2), negotiation and collaboration in both its development and ‘enactment’ (Ball et al, 2012, p. 2). While policy, in some ways, may be relatively ‘easy’ to write, the reality of its enactment in schools is that it is a messy, interpretive, contextual, multifaceted, and uneven endeavour (Ball et al, 2012). Despite this, policy is crucial as a guide for change, to enhance parity, to clarify expectations, and to address concerns. Policy can validate and enable the undertaking of such historically contentious work in schools, such as addressing and/or promoting equity for LGBTQ subjects, which may otherwise face more material and philosophical resistance from certain administrative, parental, religious or other parties (Ferfolja, 2012). In-keeping with this, it is critical to note that as sexual diversity is considered a human right, student participation in anti-homophobia education within schools under the TDSB jurisdiction, is mandatory; technically, the TDSB does not permit the removal of students by parents from anti-homophobia education (Goldstein et al, 2008). This was reinforced by a TDSB stakeholder in this research who stated:

> No student can be exempt from human rights education and that’s important how it’s framed too right? Anti-homophobia work is the same as fighting stereotypes against gender or race or class. So yeah legally, policy-wise, they [Principals] are not allowed to exempt students. That doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen.

Additionally, the policy alone cannot be considered responsible for all LGBTQ equity work undertaken in the schools in this research. As indicated above, other factors such as legislative change influenced the approaches assumed by schools, and it is difficult, impossible, to ascertain the range of drivers that influence policy work in schools (Ball et al, 2012). As Ball (1993, p. 15) states:

> A neglect of the general is most common in single-focus studies which take one change or one policy text and attempt to determine its impact on practice. Taken in this way the effects of a specific policy may be limited but the general effects of ensembles of policies of different kinds may be different.

**Findings**

**School site micro-cultures**

The participants who had been employed by the schools were able to provide a historical perspective on the school’s ‘micro-culture’ (Connell 2009) in relation to LGBTQ ‘acceptance’ and/or discrimination. Both schools, in the past, had variously displayed cultures of intolerance in relation to difference with LGBTQ teacher
participants claiming that they did not feel safe or comfortable in the early years of their employment at the schools due to the prevailing heteronormative and heterosexist climate, although one school’s staff was described as having ‘always been inclusive and welcoming’. This teacher recalled how he had witnessed a student relay his experiences of homophobia at a LGBTQ conference, and who as a result, felt compelled to transfer to the Triangle Program\(^2\). The teacher stated:

> So this student got up and was talking about all of these horrific things, bullying, cyber bullying, ... harassment, name-calling - that he went through and at the end a participant asked the student where he was from and he was from [our school]. Kids are out now [in the school], whereas in the past they would have left the school and gone to Triangle because they didn’t feel safe. I’m talking 6, 7 years ago. I wouldn’t say it’s necessarily worse than other schools, but at the same time we were designated a school where you would get safe school transfers to go into this program as our climate wasn’t safe enough for [LGBTQ] students. (Teacher)

Another LGBTQ-identified participant who considered leaving the school early on in her employment reportedly explained to her senior graduating class, ‘that [the school] was too homophobic’ and that ‘I just don’t think … if I actually came out that the school can handle it.’ However, this teacher had over the years, noted ‘a big shift. People are very accepting’. Similarly, as other participants pointed out:

> I think the biggest difference that I’m seeing is that people are ‘out’, they know that the school is supposed to be there for them. They’ve been educated on it through workshops about their rights, and they’ll call us on it, which is good. (Teacher)

> And [students] have really come out. And they’re open. And they’re accepted. (Administrator)

> I think the tone has just gone completely upside-down. It’s been a fantastic change. We very rarely have any form of graffiti; we still have graffiti but it’s not homophobic. And actually we have a lot less graffiti. [The school had not had the need to paint over graffiti in a number of years]. (Teacher)

This perception of increased acceptance and awareness was reinforced by a parent/guardian of a lesbian-identified student who, despite fears prior to her beginning high school, felt that, ‘it’s more positive than I thought as in if she wants to walk down the hallway holding a girl’s hand there’s no issue’. This was reinforced by another parent/caregiver perspective that asserted: ‘There is a move to increase tolerance towards others and decrease tolerance towards homophobic behavior’.

It is impossible to ascertain to what degree policy enactments invoked this shift in the schools’ micro-cultures; other factors undoubtedly have had some influence and as Ball et al (2012 p. 72) point out, ‘policies don’t get enacted in isolation’. For example, over the last decade or so broader societal attitudes have become increasingly liberal in relation to LGBTQ communities, although discrimination still exists (Bellini, 2012; Berman & Robinson, 2010); many celebrities have ‘come out’; individuals can marry a person of the same sex in Canada and in some other countries; and popular culture portrays sexual and gender diversity across the media spectrum (Ferfolja, 2012 in press). All school populations within the TDSB and indeed beyond would experience these same influences, yet many schools are not safe spaces for LGBTQ individuals (Bellini, 2012). This suggests that where there has been a reported change in the micro-climate, the equity work undertaken in these schools has in all probability contributed to that change. However, the degree of change and awareness is relative. As one participant stated of the school culture, ‘I think as much as people like to think of themselves as being socially minded, equitable in terms of their thinking, I don’t think they are from a downtown Toronto point of view’.

Material requirements: Funding Support

Policy enactments require material support if they are to be effective. The TDSB has a history, albeit variable, of funding to support equity education (McCaskell, 2005). Funding, provided by the TDSB and in some instances the Ontario Ministry of Education, was used by the schools in this research to cultivate, organise and/or conduct their own equity work, from developing “a tool that we could take into schools about how we were doing with our equity lens” through to the support for release time for teachers to participate in activities such as GSA (Gay/Straight Alliance) conferences or professional development, through to the support

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\(^2\) The Triangle Program was established in 1995 by the TDSB as ‘a satellite program to the downtown Oasis Alternative School’ (McCaskell, 2005, p. 216). Its aim is to educate LGBTQ youth who are experiencing homophobia in the mainstream school system (see also Knight 2000).
of site-based resource development initiatives that addressed issues of bullying and homophobia. However, recent funding cut-backs had implications for the extent to which equity work could be carried out in the schools; that is, there was a greater onus on teachers and executive staff who were already overextended to organize or lead extra-curricular initiatives for students in relation to LGBTQ and other equity areas. As one participant reported:

Part of all the strife around negotiations now is that there’s been a cutting of funding so some of the equity resource funding, like human resource funding, has been cut back. Like [names person] went on hiatus this year and ... wasn’t replaced. And we really noticed that at the grassroots, because we don’t have that person who can come out and talk to the students and have the student voice.

The ‘negotiations’ alluded to in the above comment refer to a protracted teachers’ job action in response to a wage freeze and changes to teacher conditions among other issues, which was occurring at the time of the fieldwork for this research. Interestingly, in spite of the action which involved teachers generally refusing to participate in any extra-curricular activity, the two volunteer schools continued to support this research, with one participant stating that the ‘equity work is too important’.

Leadership
The importance of equity work was actively demonstrated by the commitment of its administrative leaders who endeavoured to implement a school-wide approach which included a focus on LGBTQ issues. School leaders had an interest in the promotion of equity generally which was apparent in interviews with them.

One thing that I’ve always tried to bring to education, that I bring to my school, is the equity piece, so I tried to do a lot of equity work with student voice, with staff they have professional training with the rest of the staff in the school around equity and we’ve sort of gone in ebbs and flows depending on the requirements with the Board. (Administrator)

Across both schools, the leaders’ passion for equity was mentioned by other participants and resulted in a feeling of support and trust.

That’s one of [names administrators] big pieces is bringing a sense of equity and awareness into this community. That’s one of their missions. (Teacher)

I mean ultimately in some ways it does come from the top. I mean if your administrators aren’t behind you and don’t take it seriously you’re not getting anywhere, cos they have the access to the resources. (Teacher)

The principal is really supportive. It’s a good thing though because he is the leader of our school ... it just shows that you shouldn’t be ashamed of being gay or being lesbian or anything. ... The fact that he supports everyone’s individuality is awesome. (Female student)

Critically, LGBTQ discrimination was addressed by administrators with students and parents/caregivers when necessary, when breaches of policy occurred.

Well we always have occasion to talk to students who don’t want to give up that’s so gay and don’t feel there’s anything wrong with that or who use homophobic language and it goes from a teacher, then to us having a conversation, to us having a conversation with their parent to explain that regardless of how the students feel or the family values, this is what the TDSB expects in our building around the appropriate language and there’s no budging. (Administrator)

Despite leader commitments to social justice, neither school presented a ‘top-down’ approach to LGBTQ equity work; there was latitude for teachers and students to undertake activities that they deemed important and useful in promoting understanding and awareness. Similarly, leaders looked at their own practices when resistance, seeming indifference, or teacher or policy fatigue occurred in order to garner interest and enthusiasm in their staff. To encourage others to participate at times, required careful consideration of the way the initiative was marketed.

And I think it’s how you phrase it or pitch it, because when we first put out a call at the beginning of the year about who wants to join an equity committee, the word equity seemed to have a bit of a stigma and we didn’t have staff coming out. But when we talked about the legislation that we needed to have a safe and caring school and ... we needed to do more about the five pillars of equity
which are part of the Board’s mandate, we recognized that people were much more interested. (Administrator)

Teachers
As mentioned above, although support from administrators was deemed as critical to undertake LGBTQ equity work, interest and enthusiasm from staff was essential to maintain energy and generate action. As a parent claimed of one site, “You have one very good [person] doing a lot”. Administrators also recognized that initiatives were driven by key players in the school.

[Name of teacher] takes a really active role, whether it’s program delivery, infusing it in the curriculum, developing interest with the kids, or whether through self-advocacy or combining it with other equity issues, organizing conferences. ... [Name of teacher] is very much aligned and in touch with what is happening at the Board. (Administrator)

There had been a gay straight alliance in this school for quite a few years ... a number of teachers who felt it was important worked to support it and have student involvement. (Administrator)

Social justice initiatives such as those around LGBTQ concerns are driven by a handful of individuals who have passion about, or a personal interest in the issues (Robinson & Ferfolja 2008). This is particularly the case with LGBTQ equity platforms where historically dominant discourses of abnormality, deviance, immorality, perversion, mental illness and recruitment still linger. Many teachers have no or at best limited training in relation to these issues; additionally if they have little or no professional investment, and no personal desire to discursively shift their position (Hollway, 1984), then it can be reasonably conjectured that they may be less willing to be active in this equity endeavour. Thus, when key players move on, the initiative risks collapse. The approach used by both of these schools was to broaden their participant base by linking different equity areas to work on common projects. This increased the involvement of school and community members and strategically established a solid network of like-minded individuals who together could continue to create culture change even if a key player left.

It’s creating a structure so that every year, despite that turn over, you’ve got all those things happening and you can slowly get people on board; every single year it becomes a machine ... But it’s a heck of a lot of work and it’s a never ending story. (Teacher)

[The Principal’s] view is to try and get other people on board, power share, try and get staff who are interested. There are Board support systems in place to activate that so on a TDSB level they’ve created that every school has to have an equity staff representative, it has to be one of the teaching staff, every school must have a gender- based violence prevention staff representative, a member of the teaching staff. Every school must have a safe schools coordinator. (Teacher)

Student involvement
Student involvement was also a critical factor in implementing anti-homophobia and sexual diversity education in both of these schools. Lively GSAs (or their equivalent) that seemed to have a strong and growing profile were visible at each site, with students being the driving force behind much of the activity. These groups, initially created by teachers to provide a “safe zone” and “positive space” for LGBTQ students where they could “tell us what their needs are”, had over time with the support of administrators and committed teachers become integral to the equity work undertaken in the schools. During the fieldwork it was clear that both GSAs had progressed to a combination of social, activist and educative roles, helping to build a more “inclusive” school climate. As a teacher explained:

It depends a lot on the character of the students in the club that year. Are they activist driven? Are they more looking for that social kind of space? Are they trying to connect out to the broader society? ... The key thing though is they know the mission is really to focus in on the school ... the local is most important, but again it’s student driven. (Teacher)

In both schools the GSA had a high profile as they had the responsibility for running ‘a lot of major school events like pink day where it is very visible’, and these clubs made a significant contribution to focus events such as bullying prevention and awareness week and similar activities. They organised school-wide conferences and assemblies around social justice and LGBTQ equity, to which students from the broader school population were invited, and also organized inter-school events. What appeared critical was that the GSAs connected with other equity groups in the school. This not only heightened their visibility, mutual power...
base, and stability through the forging and strengthening of links, but simultaneously encouraged the sharing of knowledge about LGBTQ issues with peers.

Additionally, GSA members, along with other committed peers, had some responsibility for peer-education around these issues, particularly with students in the feeder schools and students new to the school. This was a strategic endeavor as many grade 9 students reportedly routinely use homophobic language and behaviours. Implementing this education early in students’ high school careers was an attempt to outline the school rules and ethos to curb such behaviour from the start and to nurture the foundation of a more positive and inclusive culture.

[The GSA members] present on their work and why they do it as volunteers and the clubs typically present it to grade 9 cos we want the younger students to get into this equity type headspace. We target the younger students. ...They’re setting what they think is the agenda on a social level ... and we support them with NGOs [non-government organisations] and experts and non-profit organisations. (Teacher)

Similarly,

We have quite a few different student leader groups that go into the grade 9 and 10 classes and talk to students about what to do if you’re being bullied and then the expectation that all students don’t stand by when they see this, that if they can’t support and help the student that is being bullied that they support and help them to report it. (Administrator)

The benefits of peer-education cannot be underestimated (Collins, 2004). Most of the students in this research agreed that learning from peers had a significant impact and was more effective than teachers’ or other adults’ endeavours to challenge stereotypes, misinformation and homophobic ways of thinking and behaving. Participating in the GSA activities gave these students language and understandings with which to discuss LGBTQ issues, and was reinforced through their attendance at the annual Unity Conference which was organized by the TDSB. In addition, several participants reported assuming the role as unofficial peer educators.

Male student: I've talked a lot to my guy friends, and they're starting to understand more, over the last couple of years, they've understood about what they say, like now, not to say those sorts of things [homophobic language]. Some of them say something and then realize I'm here, and then I go don’t do it because I’m here, just don’t say it at all cos it’s a bad thing to say at any time under any circumstance. So I think a lot of them are starting to understand that now.

TF: Do you think you’ve been part of their education?

Male student: Yeah. I think so. Yeah.

A female student expressed how she detested homophobic language and addressed it with peers.

I’ll address it in the hallway, especially if I know the person. Like ... they were picking on this kid and I was like how could you say that? First of all you don’t know, secondly it’s not a thing to be ashamed of. It’s nothing bad but you’re making it a bad thing and it’s really not. (Female student)

Similarly, one student articulated how younger students looked up to older students who could therefore potentially create change.

I think that if we can get more of the older kids in our school to take part in something like [the GSA], I think a lot of the younger students look up to them. ... If we get the older students to understand it, the younger students will follow. (Male student)

The GSAs also were involved in other grassroots activities to enhance visibility and promote understanding about, and support for, LGBTQ communities. Activities involved ‘making buttons to sell’ and other merchandise that had positive LGBTQ messaging and raised awareness; painting other students’ ‘nails and faces for anti-bullying week’; creating posters that portrayed a range of diverse identities; organizing a planned ‘food fair to raise money’; and organizing and hosting film viewings (among other things). One teacher felt that to have an effect, the GSA needed direction.

We [GSA members] wanted to have results. So nothing we were going to do is going to be without a result. ... Let’s plan each week. Let’s make sure there’s a focus. Let’s get out there. Let’s get posters up. ... There’s lots of support from the administration. (Teacher)
As Collins (2004, p. 109) highlights, the “most successful GSAs ... appear to be those in which students themselves take on a significant organising and leadership role, creating their own spaces for dialogue and community-building, and directing projects of their own choosing”. It was clear that this was the philosophical approach of both GSAs and enabled the participating students to develop leadership skills and knowledge while directing their passion and commitment towards educating their friends and broader school population in relation to LGBTQ issues.

Parent/Caregiver Perspectives

Although parent/caregivers in the main declared that they were removed from the everyday detail of their child’s education in terms of curricula and pedagogical events, there was agreement across all parents interviewed that LGBTQ issues and anti-homophobia education should be included in young people’s education. Thus, they were supportive of the TDSB and aware of the importance of its content. The following statements were typical of the responses reported from parents:

If you include the idea of a variety of preferences in the curriculum then you open up a dialogue and young people see that it’s not necessarily a taboo topic, or that there’s taboo around difference. (Parent/Caregiver)

Everyone should learn tolerance. The more education you have is the key to a harmonious world. Education is the key.

And similarly, that there:

Should be room [for anti-homophobia education] in all schools, [there] should be education about tolerance as a whole, against intolerance. It is an appropriate part of what we teach kids to be acceptable. (Parent/Caregiver)

One parent felt that after grade 9, students are not obliged to do a health component (where she thought LGBTQ issues were raised), but their perceptions can change and they can “lose their education”. She thought that it “wouldn’t hurt to be throwing in regular workshops or interspersing it in the curriculum” (See Taylor, 2008). The fact that English is mandatory would make it a “good place to put it”.

Structural Approaches

Both schools undertook anti-homophobia work and sexual diversity education in relation to a broader equity agenda. Both worked to create multiple layers of knowledge and understanding, building LGBTQ perspectives into curriculum, pedagogy and practice. Both called on external support and expertise as needed. As one teacher explained:

It’s like an onion. It’s got a bunch of different layers. I mean the student level is like the center of it; they’ve got to be the drivers. But then you have to do it on the staff level - that training, and then you have that administration level because they’re your connection. ... [The TDSB] haul me out of school every once in a while [to] learn about things on a system level. ... The students, the teachers, the admin, the Board, and then the parents; your parents have to be on board too. ... And we sit around a table and we’ve got all of those layers around the table all at once. ... Like it’s up to each of those groups when we meet to go off and work with their different layers and their different communities. But ... the more layers that we can put together at that same table, the better the results will be. Cos what we find is there’s no one master solution to resolve it, it’s just the more pieces that you can stack on top of each other then that’s how you get a majority and that’s how you can culture shift. You can’t culture shift if the admin aren’t behind you or if the parents don’t know what you’re doing or if the Board has nothing to support you - it’s impossible. But if you can put all of those pieces together ... seemingly it can become the majority and that’s when you have a chance really to create a climate shift. (Teacher)

There was recognition that the implementation of equity work required deep learning and that superficial approaches did not really do ‘the tough questioning around the equity pieces’ (Administrator). Both schools, at various points, had provided very specific training of students and staff over the course of the last few years that drew on TDSB resources for support.

We had an instructional leader from the Board who came out and worked with the adult committee and then we had a student equity worker who came out and worked with the students. ... She had a great structure to what she did, talking about all of the isms, and helping with education and moving
along students and challenging them, to challenge us, about the things we felt we needed to address. (Administrator)

We had had some very specific training of students and staff in the last few years. (Administrator)

In terms of sexuality and anti-homophobia education, it is critical that deeply held views are challenged and interrogated. This is a difficult area for some people due to their moral or religious convictions (Callaghan, 2009), their own personal prejudices, or their own beliefs about education and what is appropriate to teach and when; developing clearer understandings that question discrimination and power is crucial; on-going education of staff is essential to increase the likelihood that it is enacted in classrooms through curriculum and pedagogy. As Callaghan (2009) states:

> Changing deep-rooted convictions or prejudices requires sustained discussion and intellectual probing, activities that are usually available in classroom settings ... Making small changes in curriculum content so that it addresses sexual diversity has the potential to reduce the ignorance about sexual minority groups that is often the root cause of homophobic discrimination and violence in Canadian schools. (p.1)

Generally, staff may have fears around their own perceived inadequacies around knowledge which can prohibit implementation of this kind of work. As one TDSB stakeholder stated:

> I think staff sometimes worry that they have to have this huge encyclopedic knowledge, and I say no, you can use some of these books and you can use these examples, and you can tell the kids not to use gay as a put-down. Try it at least once a day in the hallway. (TDSB Equity Worker)

However, both schools had endeavoured to support staff to implement anti-homophobia and sexual orientation education. They detailed how LGBTQ content was incorporated into curriculum across numerous disciplines, that it was ‘quite strong’ and that it was not ‘just something that’s on the extra-curricular level’. In one of the schools it was perceived that ‘well over half’ of the teachers were doing something in their curriculum. One teacher articulated how there had been a shift by teachers in the school and that, ‘This year, in particular, there has been a difference. ... People like to tell me what they’re doing around this issue which is cute. ... They are more likely to challenge and I think we have a lot more support. Other teachers are doing something.’ One challenge however, is staff turn-over; hence, the need to ‘refresh’ – that is, revisit staff professional development - was seen as a necessity. One way to bring staff on board was well articulated by a teacher participant who was deeply invested in such a project:

> So in terms of creating more inclusive classrooms we have a program called the professional learning communities or professional learning teams and so that’s a year-long program that [the school] is given. Basically the students start late in the morning and instead of staff meetings we’re gathered as a staff to work on professional leadership. ... When this program first came out we then decided ... we’re going to instruct the staff to do it in terms of equity. ... We put a heavy emphasis in that year into our programing for staff on LGBTQ issues because we thought that was the most pressing one because we still had some students leaving the school because of [homophobia] so that was the primary focus – four years ago I believe. (Teacher)

A dialogic approach was used in the other school as well.

> It was the process, the process of working together every week, or every second week, to build our understanding to create a safe space for us to have a dialogue about the issues that were presenting at the time at the school and how could we address them, get them on the table for discussion and make them palatable. (Administrator)

Although there seemed to be progress in relation to LGBTQ equity issues in the schools in which this research was conducted, and the whole of school, broad-based approach appeared to be making a difference to the school cultures, on-going challenges were reported in relation to implementing policy. As one teacher participant eloquently stated:

> It’s actually about instead of the Board just saying we believe in all of these things, the question that the Board is now facing is more kind of how to. Like we all get it. There’s no more training that needs to be done about the importance of [LGBTQ] issues; now the focus of the Board is shifting to well how do we actually accomplish this? (Teacher)

This challenge of implementation was borne out in a parent/caregiver interview.
That’s the gap that we need the bridge to. Ok we need to have the polices and you are interested in following through but you don’t have the answers yet. So there’s this big huge void.

What these quotes highlight is the difficulty of enacting what may be deemed a strong policy on paper, into explicit practice and outcomes on a daily basis. Achieving this may be more difficult for some schools than others. There could be socio-cultural challenges or economic disadvantage or a school population where there is greater complexity around behaviour and learning; that is, multiple points of disadvantage that make the school climate difficult to negotiate for change. There may also be barriers to undertaking a whole of school initiative from the Principal as outlined in one interview.

This very committed teacher who took some risks and that kind of stuff, though when she contacted me this time last year, she said well we tried to do it, but then her principal wasn’t on board with this big school thing. (Stakeholder)

This illustrates the fact that even within schools that fail to take up whole of school approaches, there still may exist committed staff who feel compelled to do this work on a micro-level in their own classrooms. This highlights the important fact that they too may need either on-going or sporadic support from experts in the field from the TDSB in their quest to educate about, and provide support for, LGBTQ difference. As was pointed out by one employee who had involvement with equity, ‘I do get the need for the systematic stuff and I’m always saying … not every request is the same’. Conversely, there may be no teachers at a site who feel they have the knowledge, willpower, or commitment to support it; as discussed previously, anti-homophobia and sexual diversity education can be confronting work.

And I think part of it is that a lot of schools, I don’t know if they have staff who are in a position to do it or feel comfortable doing it, I mean it is a lot of work and you’re putting yourself out there a lot of the time you know. (Teacher)

Thus, it is critical that a range of support approaches continue to be offered by the TDSB to ensure that this progressive policy is enacted in meaningful ways in schools.

Enactment Frustrations

Despite endeavours in both schools to encourage teachers to develop an inclusive curriculum and a LGBTQ supportive classroom culture, many of the student participants across both sites expressed the view that more teaching about homophobia and LGBTQ issues was required. This was particularly the view of students who had deeper understandings of the inequities around homophobia; that is, those who self-identified as LGBTQ, those who had LGBTQ friends or family, or those who were more active in learning about and promoting LGBTQ rights and equality. Students expressed disillusionment with curricular and pedagogic silences surrounding LGBTQ equity in their classrooms. This has implications for policy enactments; teachers need to be invested in an area to some degree, in order to feel compelled to address it. This was eloquently expressed by a female student who stated:

If we don’t talk about it, if we don’t touch it, it doesn’t exist. If we don’t address it, it doesn’t exist. If something is not important to you why would you talk about it? (Female student)

Hess (2005 cited in Callaghan, 2009 p. 5) states that teachers draw on their personal and political convictions in deciding whether difficult knowledges (Britzman, 1998) should be mentioned or addressed in the classroom. Continued LGBTQ education that includes education about and exposure to, the power differentials relating to difference and the discrimination arising from not understanding diversity is required.

In another interview, an administrator pointed to some of the challenges experienced when there was incongruence around student and staff knowledge in terms of LGBTQ education, and the frustration experienced by students who had learned about and taken up inclusive, anti-discriminatory practices and language ahead of staff.

I know that when the students did their equity training … last year, they would say, doesn’t this teacher understand? They’re not using the language appropriately. And I explained to them you’ve probably had more equity training than most of the teachers in this building … They said well how do we make them, teach them, and I think that is one of the biggest challenges in the work that we do is trying to make equity professional development palatable for teachers. Because when we bring in someone to talk about homophobia or any of the issues around equity – classism, racism - as
educators we’ll get our backs up. I’m not doing anything wrong; I’m not a bad person. But let’s just talk about our own biases, and we can’t get there easily so that’s a challenge. (Administrator)

One administrator expressed how teachers were more likely to acknowledge the reality of homophobic discrimination and address poor language that undermined LGBTQ individuals or communities or homophobic acts in their classroom when they were educated by the students rather than external or other adult providers.

One of the best things that happens is when the students themselves come into a staff meeting and do a little skit about what it’s like when someone says, “That’s so gay” and when staff don’t address it, how they feel. Those are so much more effective to have the voice of a student verses the voice of a colleague. (Administrator)

Most student participants claimed that LGBTQ content was largely omitted in lessons and were able to identify areas and disciplines in which it could be incorporated.

I don’t think it was mentioned [in health]. I think it’s like the teachers as well that are scared to start discussing it in a class of thirty grade 9 boys. (Female student)

We never learn anything about the homosexual or anything like that. It’s always about straight couples and straight sex. It’s never about gay. (Male student)

There’s a bit in grade 11 law, we’re talking about our charter of rights and freedoms. There is a bit, but there’s not much that we could actually have a full on discussion about. It’s just one of those things that a lot of people overlook, and there’s nothing that’s actually been assigned to why people are discriminated against and how their human rights are discriminated against. …It wasn’t really discussed to an extent that people really understood it; it was discussed to an extent just to pass over it. (Female student)

And in my parenting class, they talk about sperm donation and stuff but they never talk about the actual couple, like they never talk about whether they’re gay like it’s always assumed that they’re straight. (Female student)

One female student expressed during a health lesson,

When we were talking about relationships, they used a lot of … gender neutral names. So you could have made it up for yourself. So I guess that was sort of a step but it wasn’t a step the people saw, it didn’t explain either.

Students were able to articulate where they thought additional LGBTQ content could be included in the curriculum; for example, some felt that “it would be a good thing to put in grade 10 history because [history] is mandatory”. Yet these beliefs were to an extent, counteracted by teacher perceptions. For example, in one of the schools teachers had been given time to include anti-homophobia context into their lessons and according to teachers in both schools, anti-homophobia and sexually diverse content appeared in a range of subject disciplines. What the incongruence does suggest is that perhaps the inclusions are too subtle or too infrequent for students to register. Additionally, teachers who have lived the homophobic histories of these sites may well position the developments and achievements in this area of equity as substantial, compared with students who may not have this long-term perspective. It seemed that the students, in general, most of whom were ‘tuned in’ to LGBTQ issues and anti-homophobia education considered their schooling cultures fair in relation to LGBTQ concerns but with room for improvements, particularly in relation to homophobic language and put downs.

Although neither school reported parental or broader community resistance to the schools incorporating LGBTQ content or approaches, one student had a strong sense of the potential for community backlash.

I feel like the hard thing though is that if we really do bring this into school education there really will always be like homophobic people, and we’re going to get an uproar and we’re going to be like in limbo sort of. (Female student)

This young woman had taken up the fear with which LGBTQ communities are constantly faced; the precariousness of the LGBTQ ‘community’s’ hard-won rights and the reality that these are often challenged by political, religious and moral rhetoric. However, both schools had and were continuing to establish structures to reinforce the LGBTQ equity work and had TDSB policy on their side.
A small handful of students were concerned about the religious sensibilities of some fellow students, claiming that ‘this school is a public school, there’s Christians in this school, there’s Catholics in this school; we’re not trying to make them feel uncomfortable’. So despite education about homophobia being a human rights issue for all, religion provided a defense to limit exposure and by extension, understanding. In a sense, the perceived potential to offend religious sensibilities was used by some of the students as a regulatory technique (Foucault, 1978), that sought to contain, silence and hide LGBTQ visibility and education.

All students, even those who were positioned in conservative discourses like those mentioned above, felt that homophobic slurs needed to be addressed more frequently by teachers to stop them. Although school administrators had an ‘expectation that teachers address homophobic language’, and that some teachers felt that it was variable as to whether all teachers did address it, all of the student focus groups identified this area as an under-addressed area in the school’s endeavours towards an anti-homophobia culture; and some parents/caregivers alluded to it not being consistently addressed.

I really think that it depends on the teacher, but I don’t think teachers do much about it unless they’re told and unless they know it’s bad. Like if I heard a student, you’d just say I don’t believe that I just heard that, take it back and apologize. (Female student)

I think we should make punishments for making homophobic slurs a lot more prominent. Like if you say that’s so gay you get a detention or like you pick on someone for being gay you should be suspended. Like it should be a lot more strict. (Female student)

She hears gay and faggot every single day of her life. Every day in the hallway. E-v-e-r-y day. (Parent/Caregiver)

Like you’ll see teachers with posters on the wall and the door, being like anti-homophobia [and] you hear [homophobic slurs] on the other side of the classroom, [the teacher] just continues on with their lesson. I don’t want to say they don’t care, they do, they just don’t want to address it and make it a big deal out of it in front of the class. (Male student)

When we did a speech to staff, when we talked about it with them, they all said that they stand up, but it needs to be enforced. You’d be suspended for harassing somebody on Facebook or something or by text message, but if you’re harassing them for LGBTQ then it’s not like a suspension it’s like a slap on the hand. … But like it needs to have more weight, yeah bullying is bad, but when you’re judging somebody on who they are, and who they love and stuff, it’s even worse. (Female student)

These comments suggest that homophobic slurs were normalized, and had become part of the everyday vernacular that is often accepted or ignored by others, including (some) teachers. Although rare, some students reported that a handful of teachers were known by students for their homophobic attitudes and commentary in class and of their own volition, identified teachers who they thought were homophobic.

I’ve been in a classroom where this boy walked in wearing a hat and he goes, “Yo guys, I’m so swag”, and the teacher was like, “No more like so fag”. And the guys thought it was really funny. (Female student)

I was just about to say one of my teachers said like Harry Potter’s a homo. (Female student)

Conclusion

Both schools demonstrated ways in which they were enacting the Equity Foundation Statement and Commitments to Equity Policy Implementation. These enactments involved all levels of the school, ranging from the administrators, through to the teachers and students, as well as TDSB support personnel. Both schools endeavoured to create an holistic and integrated approach in relation to the implementation of LGBTQ equity and anti-homophobia work, developing mechanisms for the incorporation of this form of diversity into aspects of the curriculum and into extra-curricular activities. There were also active measures to educate staff and students in order to create change. Funding, although reduced, had until recently been available to support professional and student development and the purchase and production of resource materials.

It appeared at both sites that LGBTQ equity initiatives were led by a small number of interested and committed staff in conjunction with students and alongside supportive and energetic administrators. This could potentially result in a sustainability issue for the LGBTQ work undertaken to date; the departure of a key stakeholder could result in the collapse of initiatives. However, the strategic approach to broaden the equity base at both sites, along with the tactic to encourage collaboration and power sharing among equity clubs and
groups aimed to strengthen this base. It simultaneously enhanced visibility and collegial and peer learning. It’s critical to note, however, that not all schools are in a position to take up a broader structural approach and that individual teachers endeavouring to undertake anti-homophobia work in schools also require support from the TDSB in order to build and/or maintain momentum.

Evidence from the data – particularly from teachers and parents - illustrated the climates of both sites had changed for the better in recent years and a solid culture of inclusion generally was developing. Education in relation to anti-homophobia and LGBTQ equity was supported by the parents who considered it fundamental to understanding about and living in a diverse culture. In terms of LGBTQ inclusion, issues related to homophobic slurs and put-downs prevailed; these could be more consistently and effectively addressed, according to reports from participants. It is impossible to instill a true culture of ‘acceptance’, celebration and safety when language that undermines and discriminates against one minority group remains in circulation. Additionally, increased incorporation in curriculum may be welcomed by some students and parents, although it was impossible to determine accurately from this research, to what degree individual teachers were actually incorporating these issues in their everyday classroom settings.

Overall, the participants’ belief in, and commitment to, LGBTQ equitable practice and sexuality education was palpable, and the approaches in both sites demonstrated a commitment to enacting the Equity Foundation Statement.

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