

Growing Support for LGBTQ-inclusive Education in Canada

By Catherine Taylor, Faculty of Education, University of Winnipeg, and Tracey Peter, Sociology, University of Manitoba



LEFT: Members of the Manitoba Teachers' Society proudly marched in Steinbach's first Pride Parade in July.

The Every Teacher Project

Our partnership with the Manitoba Teachers' Society (MTS) enabled the research team to secure the active participation of every national, provincial and territorial teachers' organization in the publicly-funded school systems of Canada. Each organization actively recruited its membership to complete our lengthy survey in the 2012/2013 school year. Originally, we had hoped to involve 750 teachers and eight focus groups, judging that this would be a reasonable number for a survey on an issue that would not be top of mind for most. We ended with 3,400 participants and 24 focus groups, making this the largest study of its kind to date worldwide.

Overall, teachers reported that they were aware of harassment of LGBTQ students, ranging from daily exposure to demeaning language like "that's so gay" (67 per cent) to physical harassment (33 per cent), sexual harassment (23 per cent) and sexual humiliation (20 per cent). However, educators did not specifically link harassment to safety for LGB or trans students until specifically asked to do so. While 97 per cent rated their school as safe, far fewer (72 per cent) rated their school as safe for LGB students, and fewer still (53 per cent) for transgender students.

This offers insight into why generic approaches don't work to create safe schools for LGBTQ students. Further, teachers expressed strong approval for LGBTQ-inclusive education (85 per cent) and reported that it is personally important to them to address LGBTQ issues with students (86 per cent). Very few (two per cent) reported religious objections (one per cent

In the Fall 2012 issue of *The MASS Journal*, I wondered in these pages whether the age-old freeze on LGBTQ-inclusive education in Canada might have begun to thaw. We had just released the final report of the "First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia in Canadian Schools," and I had been moved by the empathic responses I encountered from educators and superintendents across the country, and heartened by the passage of LGBTQ-inclusive legislation in Ontario and policy in several Manitoba school divisions.

Four years later, I think we can say that the thaw is well and truly underway, and Manitobans' contributions have been instrumental in this regard. Nowhere was this more evident than on July 9, 2016, at Steinbach's first Pride march, where 4,000 people joyously gathered to express their commitment to safe and inclusive schools and communities for LGBTQ youth.

It is therefore in a spirit of high hope that we present the results of two recent national studies: the Every Teacher Project on LGBTQ-inclusive Education in Canadian Schools, conducted in partnership with the Manitoba Teachers' Society (MTS) and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; and the National Inventory of School System Interventions in Support of LGBTQ Youth Wellbeing, conducted in partnership with the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS) and funded by Canadian Institutes for Health Research.*

in secular schools, five per cent in Catholic schools).

While they are keenly aware of the need, educators also reported real barriers to engaging in LGBTQ-inclusive education practices. The most common reasons given were lack of training or teaching resources (33 per cent), a belief that “my students are too young” (31 per cent), fear of parental or religious community opposition (23 per cent), or that “it would jeopardize my job” (16 per cent in secular schools, 52 per cent in Catholic).

The National Inventory

Thanks to the support of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS), the National Inventory survey was endorsed by 41 national, provincial and territorial organizations of school system superintendents, teachers, school leaders and parents’ councils, all of which allowed us to name their endorsement in our recruitment letter to school district superintendents. The survey was conducted in the first half of 2014. We ended with a 36 per cent participation level (141 districts), comprising 48 per cent of Canada’s schools and 50 per cent of Canada’s teachers and students. Participation was proportionately representative of school districts in the categories of region including urban/rural/remote, secular/Catholic and French/English. That report was launched in July at the national conference of the Canadian Association of School System Administrators in Winnipeg.

The survey enabled us to create an inventory of interventions that had been implemented across the country in support of LGBTQ youth’s well-being, together with the motives for implementing them (for example, to increase resilience) or not implementing them (such as generic policy). The National Inventory data will be invaluable to the larger research team as we work to identify the types of interventions that are most effective in achieving desired outcomes.


Overall, superintendents were much less likely to associate generic policies than LGBTQ-inclusive policies with positive outcomes for LGBTQ students. Many were nevertheless not planning to develop specific policy. This is perhaps to avoid conflicts, or because they are unaware of the research showing that specific policies are more effective. A small number asserted that there was

no homophobic harassment in their district or that generic policy adequately addressed the problem. We do not know whether their confidence is actually reflected either in lower rates of homophobic harassment in their districts or in effective response to it.

Many districts had implemented LGBTQ-specific interventions for early and middle years, but at somewhat lower rates than for senior years. However, a fifth of participants indicated that they have LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum and, of those, most indicated they have it in kindergarten to Grade 8 schools. Very few (n=<5)

reported personal or community opposition on religious grounds as reasons for not implementing an LGBTQ-inclusive intervention.

Most districts had job protections for LGBTQ staff, but fewer indicated teachers could be open with students about being LGBTQ. Superintendents were much less likely to associate such job protections with positive outcomes for students than they were to associate other interventions with such outcomes. This is notable given the acknowledged importance of role models for students with marginalized identities and



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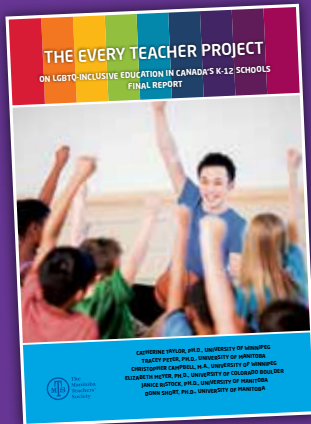
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the known damage to mental health from living a double life.

Where are we now?

The most positive finding of the First National Climate Survey in 2012 was that 58 per cent of cisgender (conventionally gendered) heterosexual students said they found it distressing to some degree, ranging from a little to deeply, when they heard homophobic comments—even though 73 per cent said they had made such comments themselves and only 23 per cent had ever intervened when they heard such comments.

This suggested there was substantial, largely untapped solidarity for their LGBTQ peers in the student body, and that they might welcome some help from educators in shifting their behaviour. As I survey the Canadian terrain in 2016, I see a much improved landscape where students in many schools now have that support. Following are some of the highlights:

- Four provinces (Ontario, Manitoba, Quebec and Alberta) have legislated some form of LGBTQ-inclusive provisions in their legislation. As a result, school divisions in the majority of the

country's population are now supported or compelled by law to establish gay-straight alliances (GSAs) on student request, and/or to develop and implement policy that works proactively to create safe and accepting school climates for LGBTQ students.

- Several Ministries of Education have worked with school districts to develop system capacity and provided LGBTQ-specific professional development for school system administrators and school leaders.
- In British Columbia, more than two-thirds of their 60 school districts now have LGBTQ-specific policy.
- School divisions, such as Vancouver, Winnipeg and River East Transcona, have developed excellent policy on transgender accommodation, covering aspects such as a student's preferred name, pronouns, sports teams, bathrooms and overnight field trips.
- The Manitoba High School Athletic Association has adopted this one-sentence policy: "Any transgender student athlete may participate fully and safely in sex-separated sports activities

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in accordance with his or her gender identity.” Go to www.mhsaa.ca/about/page-id-487/Policy-on-Transgender-Students.

- Public opinion continues to grow in support for LGBTQ rights, with 68 per cent of Canadians approving of same-sex marriage in 2015. Manitoba Premier, Brian Pallister, who had opposed same-sex marriage while an MP and Bill 18 as an MLA, has stated that his views on marriage have evolved and he will not re-open Bill 18.
- Most secular high schools and many elementary schools in urban areas have GSAs (or some equivalent LGBTQ-themed club). Students are generally allowed to name their own clubs and often adopt more inclusive names such as Queer-Straight Alliance (QSA); Gay, Lesbian or Whatever (GLOW); or Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA).
- Teacher organizations (including the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Organization representing 40,000 teachers) and school districts have a large presence at Pride celebrations across the country.

Conclusion

What stands out most for me in the findings of the Every Teacher Project and the National Inventory is that *nothing* stands out dramatically as a reason for not getting on with it. It is as if the system had just frozen up under the sheer weight of its own historical exclusion of LGBTQ people and we continued to exclude them from the dignity of participating in ordinary, everyday life at some schools simply because it has always been that way and we are balking at the starting gate.

Whatever our reasons for not moving forward in some schools at this late date, the result is that many students continue to learn from silent teachers that LGBTQ people still aren’t equal and no one will mind if they are abused and excluded at school or anywhere else. For these students, it is as though the Charter of Rights and Freedoms had never existed.

In many Manitoba schools, though, the “Don’t say gay” rule is a thing of the past. Their school system leaders embrace their legal responsibility to protect minorities from discrimination. Teachers in their schools are free to discuss LGBTQ topics

with students across the curriculum and LGBTQ students have a decent chance of experiencing a safe, respectful and inclusive education. No form of education can erase all negative experiences from the complicated life of children and adolescents, but LGBTQ-inclusive schools can eliminate a major source of marginalization and rejection that has been responsible for endless and completely unnecessary anxiety, fear, depression and even deaths.

As the Climate Survey found with students five years ago, both the Every Teacher Project and the National Inventory found tremendous goodwill for LGBTQ-inclusive education among educator and school system administrators. It was deeply moving to see you out in force at Steinbach Pride, and I know that your show of support has brought comfort and courage to LGBTQ staff, students and parents who are feeling shamed and isolated in their schools.

I look forward to continuing to work with school divisions and Manitoba Teachers’ Society as we strive to ensure that all of our school systems provide educators with the training and resources they want and need. ■

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their next venture involves working with colleagues across the country to develop effective approaches to integrating LGBTQ-inclusion into the admittedly crowded curricula of B.Ed. programs. Taylor can be reached at c.taylor@uwinnipeg.ca, and Peter at tracey.peter@umanitoba.ca.

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