

H-Cubed: A Primer on Bullying and Sexuality Diversity for Educators

by Gerald Walton

Context and problem

Prior to the 1980s, the notion of bullying was largely considered to be a regular and expected part of growing up. Parents and teachers usually explained bullying as “character-building” or as “boys just being boys”. These clichés continue to be used to invalidate the detrimental effects of bullying, though perhaps with less frequency.

Research in Scandinavian countries, however, has slowly brought bullying into a more serious light, specifically in response to a triple suicide in 1982 of students who had been bullied in Norwegian schools. In particular, Dan Olweus (1993) has become highly influential in the field, paving the way for other researchers to conduct systematic, empirical, and rigorous research programs on bullying. A new genre of experts had emerged, as did a thriving marketplace in which programs and products purporting to be effective at reducing bullying are produced for, and sold to, educators, parents, and students.

Bullying is typically portrayed in a generic manner, as repeated physical or verbal violence of one student or a small group of students towards one of their peers. The inter-relational dynamics are such that the bully wields power over the victim.

However, such a perspective does not address specific forms of difference, or perceived difference, evident in incidents of bullying. Difference comes in a variety of forms such as race, ethnicity, and physical and mental ability, to name only a few. Sexuality is one of the central ways in which social difference is stigmatized. It is widely known, for instance, that the teenage killers

in Littleton, Colorado, had been taunted as being “faggots” by their peers (Newman, 2004). In addition, the suicides of Hamed Nastoh in Surrey, B.C. (Keating, 2002) and Jamie Lazarre in Prince George, B.C. (Perelle, 2002) were the result of ongoing homophobic bullying.

Research reveals that the rates of suicides among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth are consistently higher than those of their straight counterparts (Bagley & Tremblay, 1996). Homophobic epithets such as “faggot”, “dyke”, and “queer” are routine put-downs in hallways and on playgrounds. “Gay” is commonly used by youth to generally describe anything abnormal, inferior, or worthless. Even

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though homophobia is a prominent feature of schoolyard bullying, it is also one of the most unchallenged forms of bullying (O’Conor, 1995). With few exceptions, policies and programming on safe schools rarely even mention homophobic violence (Macgilivray, 2004).¹

Teachers, administrators, and trustees are ill-equipped to work towards developing school environments that challenge homophobic violence and educate on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth and family issues. Discomfort about discussing diversity of human sexuality and family configurations prevails among educators because of personal bias and/or fear of antagonism from administrators and parents.

Even supportive heterosexual teachers might fear being labeled as gay or lesbian if they initiate LGBT-positive educational programs in their schools.

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An understanding of three separate but related concepts – namely, homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity – might serve to address these ongoing deficits and failures. Collectively, I refer to these concepts as *H-cubed*. Offering effective strategies for facilitating social justice in schools for LGBT students is not the goal of this paper; these are plentifully offered elsewhere, such as through Gay and Lesbian Educators (GALE) of B.C. (2004) and the Alberta Teachers' Association (2003), to name only two.

Instead, this paper highlights how privilege and disadvantage, based on sexuality and gender, shape the lives of students and organize social relations in schools.

Homophobia

Usually thought of as an irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals and homosexuality, homophobia is perhaps the most widely known of the three concepts highlighted here. The word derives from the Greek “phobia” meaning fear, and “homo” meaning same. *Homophobe* is often used to describe someone who is thought to be homophobic. According to Debbie Epstein and Richard Johnson (1994), homophobia refers to “active and explicit attacks on lesbians and gays, often fuelled by unacknowledged motives and/or panic” (p. 197). Some psychologists argue that overt homophobia masks repressed homosexual desires.

It is doubtful that fear motivates all behaviours and attitudes branded as homophobic. A “homophobe” may rightfully argue that she or he is actually not afraid of homosexuals or homosexuality, but rather

compelled by moral conviction to work against social equality for gays and lesbians with heterosexuals. In 1997, for example, members of the Surrey School Board in B.C. banned from classrooms three picture books that feature families with same-sex parents on grounds that they offended the religious sensibilities of parents. Similarly, politicians who oppose various measures of civic equality for gays and lesbians often turn to their religious beliefs about morality to justify their position. Furthermore, the word *homophobia* suggests an individualized pathology, how we might think of a person having other irrational “phobias”, but ignores the effects of widespread social prejudice.

The word *homophobia* nevertheless remains dominant in public discourse. In schools, homophobic comments by students and sometimes even staff are commonplace. Physical violence and the pervasive threat of violence, such as homophobic graffiti, contribute to school environments that are hostile towards sexuality diversity. All students, rather than only LGBT students, are therefore adversely affected by homophobia in schools.

Homophobia might be more accurately described as *anti-gay bias*. Both of these terms imply specific actions, attitudes, or choices. Human rights codes and even hate-crime laws are important measures for curbing the acute effects of discrimination. However, they do not adequately address social prejudice expressed as bullying in schools.

Heterosexism

As an “ism”, heterosexism implies a position of entitlement to privilege based solely on claims of being, or publicly posing as, heterosexual. Gerald Unks (1995) and Gregory Herek (1992) each argue that heterosexism presumes that all people are, or should be, heterosexual. Non-heterosexual sexualities, relationships, identities, and communities – if acknowledged at all – are denigrated and stigmatized. Marriage Acts, for example, usually delineate matrimony as only between a man and a woman. Laws criminalizing homosexuality that continue to be enforced

in some jurisdictions of the world are justified by heterosexist beliefs about human sexuality and relationships.

Social regulation performs much the same function as legal controls. When heterosexual couples hold each other's hand in public, for instance, they are rarely accused of "flaunting" their sexuality. Yet, such an accusation is routinely levied against gay and lesbian couples who engage in identical public displays of affection. More acute forms of violence are also always possible.

Heterosexism also pervades schools, often manifesting as (but not limited to): validation of teenage heterosexual dating, restricted discussion of sexual mechanics and sexually-transmitted diseases to a heterosexual context, covert exclusion of gay and lesbian couples from school social functions such as dances, and lack of educational resources for gay and lesbian students (Epstein & Johnson, 1994). Sexuality diversity is sometimes discussed in health and family studies courses, but typically remains absent from other realms of curriculum (Wolfman, 1996).

Heterosexism in schools often functions as unwritten rules which become apparent in the hostile reactions towards children who do not conform to usual expectations of gender and sexuality. Occasionally, students directly challenge heterosexist policies in their schools, as Marc Hall did in 2002. In small-town Ontario, Marc attended a Catholic public school that did not allow him to attend his high school prom with his then boyfriend (Smith, 2002). Marc took legal action, and an Ontario Superior Court eventually ruled in his favour.

LGBT youth typically pay a high price in environments such as schools where peer influence is strong (O'Connor, 1995; Gibson, 1994). Peers often harass and bully LGBT students (Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1994), while teachers and administrators likewise marginalize, reject, or otherwise ignore them (McCreary Centre Society, 1999). It could be said, however, that heterosexism does not necessitate hostility, but that it merely fails

to acknowledge sexuality diversity in schools. Stigmatization of difference paves the way for hostility. Discrimination and/or violence typically follow.

Heteronormativity

Unlike homophobia, and perhaps even heterosexism, the term *heteronormativity* is neither a household word, nor a concept that often appears in research literature, popular culture, or even publications for LGBT communities. On initial glance, it seems overly academic and may therefore hastily be deemed irrelevant. It is an important concept, however, because it goes beyond homophobia and heterosexism to provide a framework from which to see the myriad of ways that heterosexuality is routinely *normalized*.

Coined in 1993 by Michael Warner, heteronormativity refers to the *norming* of heterosexuality, both for men and women through social, cultural, and institutional practices. Simply put, heterosexuality is assumed to be and expressed as natural and normal. Heteronormativity is arguably more insidious than homophobia and heterosexism because it is largely unseen and unquestioned.

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Heteronormativity is ideological in nature, providing a conceptual lens through which to perceive and view the world. It highlights the ways in which genders and sexualities that lie outside of the boundaries of the norm are taken as peculiar, abnormal, deviant, and even evil. Yep (2005) describes how heteronormativity is at once everywhere, yet hidden:

Heteronormativity . . . is always already present in our individual psyches (e.g., our thinking), collective consciousness (e.g., community values), social institutions (e.g.,

marriage), cultural practices (e.g., wedding rituals), and knowledge systems (e.g., education). In spite of its prevalence, heteronormativity remains largely invisible and elusive to most people by presenting heterosexuality as a natural state and a social “given” with a sense of rightness, moral rectitude, and a projected cultural ideal.

Heteronormativity is enforced and reinforced in everyday occurrences. Boys and girls are routinely taught, for example, that someday they will meet a nice girl or a nice boy, respectively. In schools, heterosexual couplings are valorized in social rites such as blind dates, dances, and proms. Schools are environments where heterosexuality is highly visible and socially valued. Students who are sexually attracted towards members of the same sex learn that their social lives depend upon keeping such feelings private or denying them altogether.

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Unwritten social rules of heterosexuality permeate school cultures and regulate the lives of all students. Those who fail to live up to the social expectations of heterosexuality are targets for rejection and ridicule. Boys, in particular, are continually pressured to prove their heterosexuality and manhoods to avoid being labeled as “faggots” or “sissies”.

Heteronormativity might best be understood as an ideology of sexuality that gives rise to homophobic and heterosexist behaviour, attitudes, and institutional regulations that delineate inclusion and privilege on one hand, and exclusion and disadvantage on the other. It is a presumption about the way the world is, namely, a world of supposed “real” men and women whose heterosexuality is at once unstated and required, yet everywhere displayed and validated. Media, pop culture, social mores, socialization, religious morality, institutional policy, and legal statutes on

marriage and family collectively create and maintain a culture of normalized heterosexuality. With few exceptions, schools also uphold the premise of heteronormativity.

Why H-cubed should matter to educators

Educators have gay and lesbian students in their classes. These students may or may not appear to be stereotypical sissies and tomboys. Teachers may or may not be aware which students are, or will eventually identify as, gay or lesbian. To prepare future teachers for gender and sexuality diversity in their classrooms, teacher educators have the responsibility to include LGBT issues within Bachelor of Education curricula. In addition, subject areas such as art, history, and English are disciplines where gays and lesbians have made significant contributions.

H-cubed reveals and explains how social and institutional settings, such as schools, privilege heterosexuality explicitly and implicitly, overtly and covertly. Sexuality is therefore *organized*. More than abstract theory, H-cubed illuminates real, lived consequences of privilege and disadvantage for all individuals and all children in schools.

For educators, H-cubed is useful for seeing how students' lives are regulated by expectations and norms of gender and sexuality, reinforced by practices and attitudes of parents, educators, and even media celebrities. The script goes something like this: Boys should be masculine and being so requires heterosexual attractions, desires, and expressions. Girls should be feminine and physically attracted to boys, lest they be perceived as tomboys and lesbians. Though simplified here, these social scripts are illuminated and addressed through an understanding of H-cubed.

I began this paper by briefly describing bullying as a consequence of stigmatized difference. H-cubed describes and explains how bullying frequently involves homophobic slurs on one hand, and how, on the other hand, educational policy rarely addresses such incidents that occur in schools every day.

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Sexuality diversity is certainly not celebrated or even tolerated in most schools. Yet, all students have the right to learn in safe environments, which educators and administrators have the responsibility to foster.

Addressing homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity is an essential ingredient for promoting safe schools. For LGBT students in particular, supportive educators can be an oasis from the injuries of “compulsory heterosexuality”, to quote Adrienne Rich (1993). For current and future educators, this paper has aimed to enhance understandings of abject, pervasive, and continued social injustice in schools in the form of H-cubed.

Resources for educators

Educators have access to a rich collection of resources for addressing sexuality diversity in their schools. Books include: *Diverse Sexuality and Schools: A Reference Handbook* (Campos, 2003); *How Homophobia Hurts Children: Nurturing Diversity at Home, at School, and in the Community* (Baker, 2002); and *School's Out: The Impact of Gay and Lesbian Issues on America's Schools* (Woog, 1995).

Edited collections are also available, such as *Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Issues in Education: Programs, Policies, and Practices* (Sears, 2005); *Open Lives, Safe Schools: Addressing Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* (Walling, 1996); and *The Gay Teen: Educational Practice and Theory for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescents* (Unks, 1995). James Sears also edits a quarterly journal called *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* (<http://www.jtsears.com/jglie.htm>).

GALE BC's website (<http://www.galebc.org/main.htm>) provides a comprehensive and current list of website, book, and video resources for youth and educators.

With sponsorship from educators, peer support programs such as gay/straight alliances (GSAs) are effective tools for fostering LGBT-friendly environments in schools. The GALE website provides more informa-

tion on GSAs, including how to get one started.

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Endnote

¹ See, for example, policies and educational programs on LGBT issues in schools of the Toronto, Victoria, and Vancouver school districts.

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Gerald Walton defended his doctoral dissertation in the Faculty of Education at Queen's University in 2006. His dissertation is called "*No fags allowed*": *An examination of bullying as a problematic and implications for educational policy*.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE FROM CTF

Gay-Straight

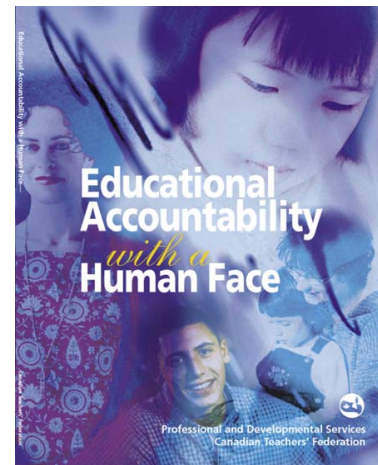
Student Alliance Handbook

A Comprehensive Resource for Canadian K-12 Teachers
Administrators and School Counsellors



This handbook is part of a series of bisexual, gay, lesbian, trans-identified and two-spirited (BGLTT) educational resources produced by the Canadian Teachers' Federation. It is designed to assist teachers, school administrators and counsellors in understanding the educational, health and safety needs of those students who are or are perceived as being BGLTT.

Educational Accountability with a Human Face



Educators remind us that the richness of human relationships and the development of the full range of human capacities are fundamental to the educational experience of students – elements which not only tend to defy standardization but can be eroded by it. In *Educational Accountability with a Human Face*, we attempt to recast accountability with this in mind. This publication highlights quality classroom assessment, broadly shared responsibility, teacher professionalism and autonomy, and the need to situate accountability within the multiple goals of a strong public education system as components of genuine accountability.

Order online at www.ctf-fce.ca