The Canadian Stance on Gender Inclusivity in School Curriculum:

Realizing the Current Public Opinion on Gender Inclusive Content

By Brittany Ross

Recently, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) rights have become one of the most talked about social topics in Canada. Focus on the legalization of gay marriage, the rules for same-sex adoption and creating more openness in work environments have all been forefront in discussions and it is clear that Canada is trying to remain true to its roots of inclusiveness. In 2016, the public school board began to make changes to the rules that dictate how the school should be run and what should be taught (CBC, 2016). However, the extent to which Canada supports gay rights among adolescents is still a controversial issue.

As a member of the LGBTQ community myself, I feel it is extremely important to create safe space learning environments for students of any age so that all students receive the same care and attention, while also sensing an equal amount of value. Growing up in a Christian private school, there was no recognition or value placed on gender diversity. This left me feeling uncomfortable in my own skin which affected my sense of "fitting in" from an early age. Now I understand this also affected my mental health.

It is my position that Canada needs a broad shift in thinking related to creating equal learning environments and to that end, there needs to be more conversation around this topic generally. I argue that increasing the amount of LGBTQ inclusive changes to curriculum for adolescent age students specifically is the biggest issue facing Canadians from a political

perspective. The detrimental effects of isolation, rejection, confusion that result from the lack of inclusivity affects the mental health of kids for the rest of their lives.

Literature Review

This literature review is organized thematically in a way that lists the authors in the order they are mentioned in the paper. The articles featured in the review are the two pieces of literature that were referenced the most often and acted as the foundational research behind my selected topic of research.

The first article reviewed is a paper written by David Rayside in 2014, titled "The Inadequate Recognition of Sexual Diversity by Canadian Schools: LGBT Advocacy and Its Impact". In this paper, Rayside outlines that while Canada is making significant changes towards sexual diversity in human rights broadly, the changes for creating more inclusive schools have lagged significantly behind. Students still experience a large amount of harassment and bullying at school for sexual identities and even teachers experience this gap in understanding and acceptance.

Although some provinces have implemented policies and instruction on creating gender inclusive classrooms, the widespread implementation across Canada is inconsistent. Schools who are consciously making a transition to increase gender diversity; and all those who still need to consider it, have very limited resources available to them. Schools are choosing to implement specific safety policies based on circumstance, rather than taking a broader approach to the subject and this only contributes to the fact that more strides to inclusive policies need to be made at a provincial and territorial level. For the LGBTQ community, bringing about changes in policies resemble the struggle felt by minority groups in history such as aboriginals, students

with disabilities, religion and racial differences. Cultural norms will continue to impact and delay

implementation of inclusive policies whether institutional, political, social or cultural.

The next article that was used extensively throughout the paper as a basis for the research

conducted was written by Gerald Walton in 2004. Walton outlines how the language in Canadian

schools can sometimes lean towards slightly "homophobic". Within this article, the author

defines homophobia as a "pervasive form of bullying, absent from public discussion, anti-

bullying programs and school politics" (para. 1). The author states that his purpose for writing an

article of this kind was to urge educational leaders to change the language they use when

teaching potentially gender sensitive topics and to instead initiate conversations at school that

challenge the stereotypical way of speaking about the LGBTQ community. Walton also presents

that since there have been more outbreaks of violence in Canada, there has been increased

policies and instructions around creating safe schools. The current policies range in topics from

gun violence to student safety regulations, yet safety of LGBTQ students remain, for the most

part, untouched.

As bullying is viewed as a political issue, the analysis of the current policies for safety

begins in this context. The author also notes a specific topic, which he calls "heterosexual social

privilege" (p. 26). Heterosexual social privilege automatically assumes normative gender roles to

couples that are with the stereotypical mate, while at the same time ignoring how members of the

LGBTQ community deserve the same rights. Later in the article, there is a discussion related to

some of the adjectives used when addressing LGBTQ students, with no consideration for how

much it negatively affects their mental health. Throughout his paper, the author is able to put into

perspective just how negative the school environment is for students who associate with being

different. Walton also mentions the important role of public relations work to increase gender

inclusive language and programs and to promote ultimate safety within Canadian schools.

What Canada is Doing Now: An Investigation

Currently, Canadian LGBTQ families face the uphill battle of trying to be seen as equal

to the normative family structure which has long been the only version of familial structure

accepted across Canadian culture. In 2017, Manitoba schools faced a backlash from the LGBTQ

community, who voiced their opinion that the refusal to integrate more inclusive curriculum in

schools was a human rights violation (MacLean, 2017, para. 2). When The Alberta Teachers

Association performed initial research into the need for a resource for LGBTQ curriculum, they

discovered that the majority of students in Calgary, Alberta, reported that they "did not think

they could get any support from the school due to teachers who were homophobic and a school

system reluctant to educate others on these beliefs" (as cited in Lund, 2007, p. 2).

In 2017, the Alberta Teacher's Association revised their 'LGBTQ School Toolkit'.

However, despite the fact that the toolkit exists for all the right reasons, great controversy

emerged after the toolkit started being utilized for education. One of the most controversial

elements is The Gender Unicorn, which was one of the most talked about elements of the 150-

page toolkit.

Table 1: The Gender Unicorn (Bonokoski, 2016)
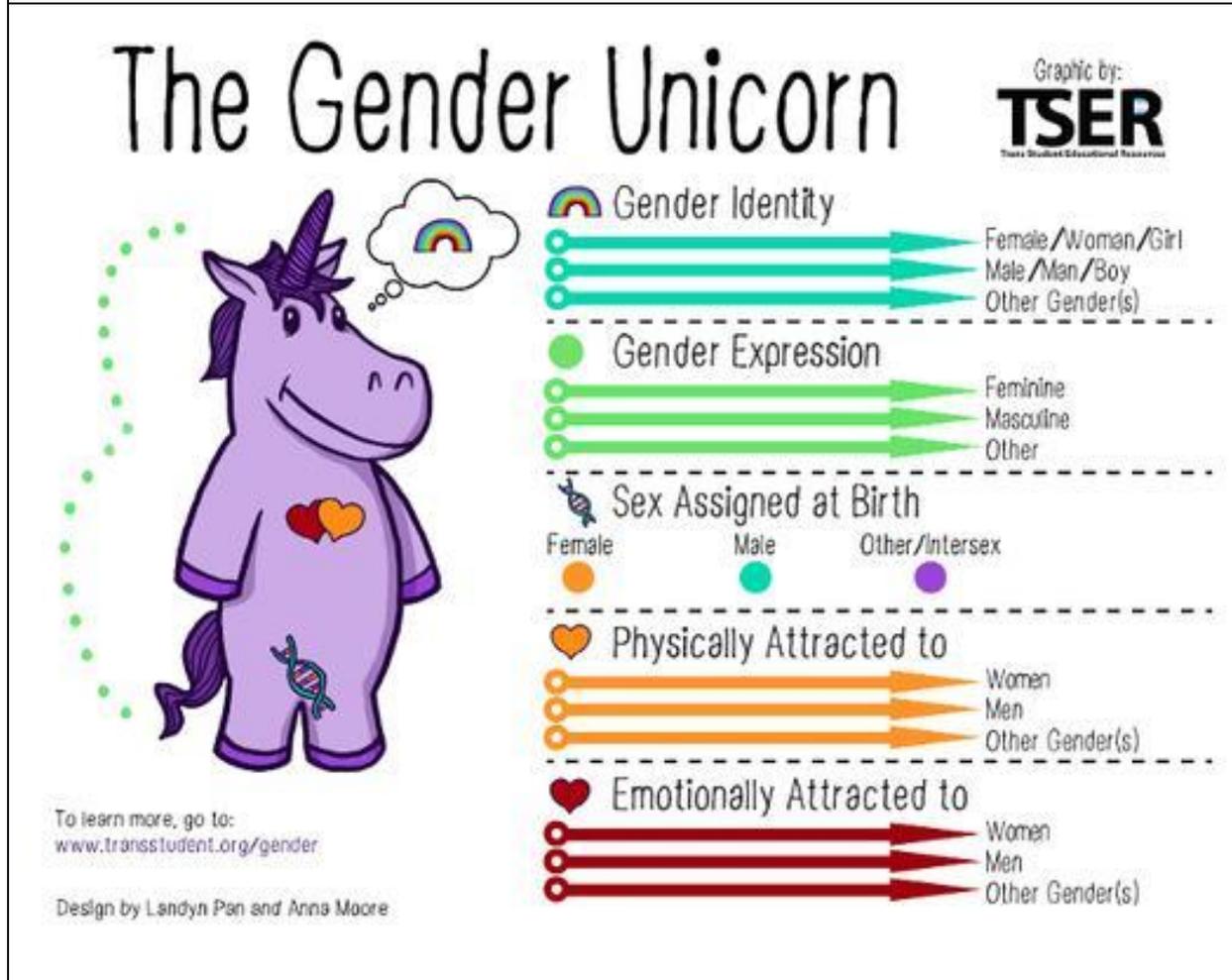
As a result of this, the Alberta's Teacher Association produced the toolkit as a way to help students who associate with the LGBTQ community feel more included. Other elements of the toolkit include direction on addressing parents as caretakers or guardians. Expanding on this, the students were directed to replace the common term "boys" or "girls" with "comrades, friends, or folks" (Bonokoski, 2016).

However, the toolkit spiked controversy across Canada. In particular, Jason Kenney, a well-known former cabinet minister to Stephen Harper, tweeted "Please keep your radical politics out of the classroom" (Bonokoski, 2016). Kenney further stated how he believed that the

true focus of curriculum should be increasing mathematical literacy, not changing the language

around LGBTQ community. He also mentioned how the opinions of some social groups were

impacting the degree to which students actually are being educated in school.

Due to attention like this coming from all sides of those involved with the toolkit

resource, in 2017 it faced a revision that reduced the amount of gender insensitive pronouns that

were supposed to be beneficial for change. It also removed the Gender Unicorn as a resource for

understanding the different terms associated with gender identity and orientation. While the

revisions were mostly for the better, the Alberta Teachers Association came forward saying that

they "wanted to focus on the content and to avoid the distractions" that came about after the

toolkit was exposed publicly (Huncar, 2017).

Of course, there are many aspects of the school environment that needs to shift towards

being more inclusive. In Winnipeg, an in-depth survey of the LGBTQ community's feelings was

recorded in 2009 by Catherine Taylor, a researcher who was curious about the safety of LGBTQ

students while at school. Through the research she leads, it was discovered that 75 per cent of the

participants felt there was at least one area of the school that was unsafe for LGBTQ students,

whether it was the bathroom, change rooms or hallways (Taylor et al., 2008). Additionally, 75

per cent of students felt as though they were being harassed by homophobic comments that the

other students in the school perceived as non-threatening, such as: "that's so gay!" (Taylor et al.,

2008). This statistic demonstrates the need for LGBTQ friendly curriculum and school

environments and for the overall protection and safety of all students equally, no matter their

family life, orientation, or identity.

An interesting perspective on the topic is presented by author David Rayside who

explores the disparity in how so few provinces and schools have realized the importance for

curriculum like this, although Canada boasts inclusivity in its reputation.

> The kind of equity envisaged here includes proactive responses to harassment based
> on sexual and gender non-conformity, recognition of sexual diversity among students
> in support services, acknowledgement of diversity in family forms, and the
> incorporation of sexual difference in a wide range of course offerings, including
> sexual education (Rayside, 2014, p. 191)

This excerpt outlines the extreme need for Canada to shift in a way that not only reflects its

desired reputation, but also how the current way of teaching is inadequate for students of diverse

backgrounds and associations. One of the other interesting facts that Rayside presents is how,

despite Alberta having established the toolkit, a rule that has been implemented which allows

parents to withdraw their children from a class if the teacher is a member of the LGBTQ

community for the simple reason that they are not normative heterosexuals (2014, p. 203).

Alberta is known historically for having a conservative approach to life and social issues.

This can act as a barrier to entry for change to curriculum of the kind that is needed most at a

time like this. Despite the fact that Canada was one of the first countries to legalize gay marriage,

specific provinces have difficulty promoting a truly equal and understanding environment in

schools (Rayside, 2014, p. 192). To compliment this, in an opinion poll in 1999, political

analysts confirmed that "the majority of Albertans are considerably more right-wing than their

fellow Canadians" (as cited in Lund, 2002, p. 182). This makes it considerably more difficult to

implement changes that promote the equality of those in groups such as the LGBTQ.

Understanding the Impact on LGBTQ Youth

The degree of homophobic bullying that is still occurring today makes it difficult to

understand how much change is needed. Students who are "in the LGBTQ spectrum face

stigmatization, marginalization, social invisibility and pervasive accusations…while discussions in schools about this issue are usually prohibited" (Walton, 2004, p. 92). This point further reinforces the extent to which students in school will go to harass and embarrass LGBTQ students on a daily basis. The students can face such a severe degree of alienation that it causes them to question if they even should be alive in the first place.

The Canadian Mental Health Association states that "queer youth are 14 times more at risk of suicide and substance abuse than their cisgender or heterosexual peers". Furthermore, a shocking 77 per cent of transgender respondents to a survey in Ontario mentioned that they had seriously considered suicide and of that, 45 per cent attempted suicide as an escape from the bullying harassment faced on a daily basis (Canadian Mental Health Association, n.d.). Suicide is not the only way that LGBTQ youth attempt to deal with the alienation and depression, they also "have shown higher rates of self-harm, substance abuse, anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive and phobic disorders and are at double the risk for post-traumatic stress disorder than heterosexual people" (Canadian Mental Health Association, n.d.).

Walton (2004) labels the type of bullying that LGBTQ students face and lands on titling it as "heterosexual privilege". He continues to state how being "straight" is associated with normal through "gender socialization," and how being anything under the title of "other" is viewed as inferior (p. 92). This common social construct of the LGBTQ community lends itself to the natural hierarchy within schools. Bullies tend to pick on individuals who they view as less than themselves, so the social construct behind the LGBTQ is reason enough for the bullies to naturally prey on this group.

Going Forward: Understanding What Can Be Done to Create Change

In an article published by national news source, *Huffington Post*, multiple educators come together to create a case for change in even the youngest schoolchildren. Assistant professor and faculty director with the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services at the University of Alberta, Kristopher Wells, wrote to *Huffington Post* about how important it is to include "inclusive and diverse educational curriculum that supports and values human rights" (Coles, 2018, para. 4). In general, it is noted how multiple education professionals agree that lack of inclusive instruction provided to students affects their mental and physical health. Furthermore, the article outlines how the education provided regarding sex does not currently account for sexuality and gender to the full extent that it should.

One of the most challenging elements to implementing LGBTQ friendly content in schools is the mindset of the educator. If the teacher does not promote equality, their view on the subject is conveyed to their students. Despite this unfortunate barrier, teachers Jill Hermann-Wilmarth and Caitlyn Ryan say that "inclusive classrooms and institutions are no-brainer" (Coles, 2018, para. 5). In further support of this, educator Emily Clark states how "especially important it is for schools to embrace the wide spectrum of genders and sexualities that their students represent" (Coles, 2018, para. 9).

Some recommendations are provided in the article for how best to go about solving the problem of inequality and bullying towards LGBTQ youth. In a forward from Kristopher Wells, assistant professor and faculty director with the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services at the University of Alberta, it is stated that "hate is not something people are born with, it is a learned behaviour" (Coles, 2018, para. 3). It is his recommendation that:

> The earlier students are taught about diversity…the less they will grow to fear it, and hopefully less bullying and harassment will occur as students learn not to be afraid of

difference, but encouraged to support and embrace diversity and difference for the richness that it brings to our schools and society" (as mentioned in Coles, 2018).

This statement shows that most educators realize change is necessary, but they lack the support from school authorities to implement it in the classroom.

Conclusion

The extent to which Canada needs to make a change – and soon, is very evident after compiling all the information from the research. Alberta is not one of the most open provinces to social groups, but the effects on its youth is proving to be very serious and life threatening. The LGBTQ community faces constant judgement and disapproval from the mass public of Canada and this disapproval translates into the way classroom content is conducted and shared.

While Alberta has made a stride, with the LGBTQ Toolkit, to increase the amount of conversation that supports diverse families, backgrounds and student orientations and identities, it has done so in a way that caused outrageous backlash across the country. Not only this, but the proposed changes make it seem as motivation behind the changes were not legitimate. The type of conversation that is supported by the education curriculum changes may in fact have the opposite effect on the children exposed to it and result in further alienation.

As a first step, Albertans need to work together to create positive conversation and overall acceptance of the LGBTQ community. In turn, there needs to be a meaningful shift towards inclusivity in the way classes are conducted in schools. This shift is necessary not only for teenage students, but needs to be implemented in classrooms that have students who are young as well. One of the most effective and easiest ways to change the stigma and stereotypes that surround the LGBTQ community is to hold discussions around it. It is also important for teachers to not shut down questions about the community, but to welcome conversation

surrounding this topic. A genuine shift of this kind, in the way Albertans show support for the LGBTQ community, may even contribute to an overall increase in progressive beliefs in an historically conservative province, thereby helping to promote the reputation Canada holds for being equal, inclusive and inviting.

Albertans are ready for change. Not only LGBTQ families realize this, but the educators, school staff and researchers realize that a change needs to come soon. At this point, there needs to be more conversation on the topic of inclusivity in schools heard by politicians and government officials who are capable of implementing serious change like this. Overall, the decision to implement proper gender inclusive content in schools could be as life-changing and go as far as to actually save a life of an at risk LGBTQ youth.

In conclusion, the most pressing issue facing Canadians, and more specifically Albertans, is the extent we choose to accept the LGBTQ community combined with the way we educate children and youth regarding this subject. In order to best overcome the adversity and face the issue head on, we must integrate truthful, meaningful acceptance of the LGBTQ community into school curriculum, so that youth grow up to be understanding and accepting. Additionally, implementing a change such as this will increase the extent that Alberta LGBTQ students feel accepted and understood at school.

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