

# WHAT WORKS?

## *Research into Practice*

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Research Monograph # 30

Homophobia threatens students' educational achievement. How can we address this issue?

## Forging Safer Learning Environments

### Addressing Homophobic Bullying in Schools

By Dr. Gerald Walton  
Faculty of Education, Lakehead University

#### A Backgrounder on Bullying

Students are more apt to achieve academically in schools where they feel safe and supported.<sup>1</sup> The Ontario Ministry of Education recognizes that “safe schools are a prerequisite for student success and academic achievement” and is “committed to providing all students with the supports they need to learn, grow and achieve.”<sup>2</sup> Bullying is a problem that undermines this commitment and erodes the potential for all students to prosper.

Students who are perceived as “different” are the ones who are most likely to be bullied, to the possible detriment of their educational achievement. Difference comes in many forms, such as race, religion, physical and mental ability, and class-based attributions (such as clothing and personal interests). These differences define the social categories that provide people with a sense of themselves and how they fit into society. In short, social categories shape and constitute the social world.

Issues concerning gender and sexuality are rich fodder for bullying. For students who identify or are perceived as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT), school can be especially harrowing, as these students are frequently targeted for bullying. But all students are adversely affected, not just LGBT ones; words such as *faggot* and *queer* are slurs that any student may face, and the expression “that’s so gay” has come to characterize anything considered to be inferior. Terminology, then, contributes to hostile climates for all students. Yet, despite its prevalence in schools, homophobia is rarely acknowledged in curriculum or policy, even as students’ educational achievement is threatened. The question is: Why not?

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#### Research Tells Us

- Students are more apt to achieve academically in schools where they feel safe and supported.
- Students who are perceived as “different” are the ones who are most likely to be bullied, to the possible detriment of their educational achievement.
- Homophobic bullying may be intertwined with bullying based on other forms of social difference.
- Homophobic bullying is more prevalent among boys and young men.

**GERALD WALTON** is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University. His research focuses on social difference, bullying, identity representation in schools, educational policy and equity for marginalized students. He has published widely in education journals and has contributed to anthologies such as *Canadian Perspectives on the Sociology of Education* (2008) and *Diversity and Multiculturalism: A Reader* (2009).

## What Research Tells Us

### Some Resources for Teachers

- Kissen, R. (Ed.) (2002). *Getting ready for Benjamin. Preparing teachers for sexual diversity in the classroom.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Van Dijk, L., & Van Driel, B. (Eds.) (2007). Forward by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. (2007). *Challenging homophobia: Teaching about sexual diversity.* New York: Jossey-Bass Inc.

### Some Books for Children

- Newman, L. (2009). *Daddy, poppa and me.* Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.
- Newman, L. (2009). *Momma, mommy and me.* Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.
- Skutch, R. (1997). *Who's in a family?* Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press.

### Some Film Resources

- *Ma vie en rose* (1997) directed by Alain Berliner and winner of the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language.
- *Breakfast with Scott* (Capri Films, 2008). <http://www.caprifilms.com/breakfastwithscot/index.html>
- *It's Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in School* (Groundspark, 1996) <http://groundspark.org/our-films-and-campaigns/elementary>
- *That's a Family!* (Groundspark, 2000). <http://groundspark.org/our-films-and-campaigns/thatfamily>
- *Tomboy* by Pendleton-Jimenez, K. (Coyle Productions, 2009). Animated film.
- *Trevor* (1994) writer James Lecesne, director/producer Peggy Rajski and producer Randy Stone. <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/film.aspx>

### Defining Bullying as a Research Problem

One possible explanation that addresses the “Why not?” question is that researchers tend to define bullying as a problem of behaviour. Dan Olweus,<sup>3</sup> arguably the world’s most influential researcher on bullying, claims that bullying comprises three components: power differential, negative intent and repetition. His definition of bullying has been and continues to be highly influential in education policy and anti-bullying programs. Barbara Coloroso<sup>4</sup> notes, in addition, that bullying situations often involve not only victim and bully, but bystanders as well. Bystanders can exacerbate bullying situations by cheering on the bully or simply by not intervening. If bystanders are not made aware of the role they may play in this problem, bullying will remain an issue in schools.

On the surface, these ideas make sense. If problematic behaviours are observed, then they should be addressed. However, this definition does not acknowledge that social problems, such as homophobia, can precipitate bullying. Further, this definition does not consider the different ways that homophobic bullying affects boys and girls. (These are categories of *gender* rather than those of sex, which are male, female and intersex.)

Homophobic bullying is more prevalent among boys and young men: some researchers argue that it is practically a necessary mechanism that supports contemporary manhood,<sup>5</sup> whereby a demonstration of masculinity (through body language, vocal tone, interests, clothing and so on) is often required in order for boys and men to be accepted by male peers. Those who do not act in socially prescribed, masculine ways are often the targets of ostracism and homophobic violence. Thus, homophobia and homophobic bullying operate to shape and form a culture of gender presentation in which the masculinity of all boys and men is evaluated.

Although homophobia is less prevalent among girls and young women, it should not be ignored.<sup>6</sup> Those who are more masculine in their gender presentation and identity may be the target of homophobic slurs such as *lesbie* or *bull-dyke*.<sup>7</sup> The questioning of sexuality of women who do not meet socially prescribed norms is an undercurrent that was made globally explicit in the questioning of South African runner, Caster Semanya’s sexual identity in 2009. Even very young children – conditioned to view gender as two exclusive categories of “girl” and “boy” – may express confusion or dismay toward other children who do not seem clearly one or the other.<sup>8</sup>

For both male and female students, homophobic bullying mirrors gender norms and expectations in society. Those who measure up will be validated and widely presumed to be heterosexual; those who do not will likely be shamed and ostracized by having their sexual orientation called into question. Such demonstrations are shaped and learned through dominant norms and expectations of gender, and enforced, in part, by instilling fear and shame.

While all students are vulnerable to this form of bullying, it is LGBT youth who typically receive the brunt of such abuse. As one might expect, suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety, drug abuse, truancy, drop-out and homelessness rates all tend to be higher among LGBT youth than among their straight counterparts.<sup>1,9</sup> These are not new or surprising insights, yet efforts to address and mitigate the harmful effects of homophobic bullying have been scant.

### Additional Layers of Complexity

Social norms and political dimensions of policy indicate layers of complexity that a generic focus on bullying does not acknowledge. Further complications need to be considered, including the race, location and resiliency of the students who are bullied.

Homophobic bullying may be intertwined with bullying based on other forms of social difference. LGBT students of colour may be harassed and bullied because of their sexuality identity and/or gender expression combined with their racial

identity.<sup>10</sup> LGBT students of colour are more likely to feel unsafe in school environments than are students of colour who are not LGBT. Further, in upper elementary grades, school attendance – and thus educational achievement – tends to be more compromised for LGBT of colour than for others.<sup>11</sup>

LGBT students in rural areas, typically characterized by conservative community and family environments and lack of anonymity, tend to endure more hostile school climates than do those in suburban or urban areas. Rural LGBT youth are more apt to have fewer resources and to feel a greater sense of isolation than their urban counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

Resiliency should also be considered for a more complete understanding of homophobic bullying and those whom it most adversely affects. Some LGBT students have family members and friends who are supportive and who validate their identities. Further, the first Canadian national survey on homophobic and LGBT youth noted that, “[c]ourageous LGBTQ students across the country have decided not to let their fear or anyone else’s stop them.”<sup>1(p. 87)</sup> Being victimized by homophobic bullying does not have to mean that targeted students are powerless victims who lack any capacity for resistance and self-assuredness. Irrespective of resiliency, LGBT youth should not be left without resources in their schools in the form of policy, curriculum, and advocacy.

## What can be done?

Given the complexity of the issue, strategies to tackle homophobic bullying should aim for a combination of intervention (to address behaviour) and prevention (to identify and to educate about specific forms of bullying). Challenging social prejudice requires participation at all levels, including students, teachers, administrators, bureaucrats, parents and the broader community.<sup>1,2,8</sup>

- Policies must be developed at all levels. They provide a framework for building towards safer learning environments, and a foundation from which student-focused and student-led initiatives such as Gay-Straight Alliance groups (GSAs) can be developed.
- Staff and teachers should be trained to appropriately address homophobia.
- School boards should work with community organizations to build and implement such training. For instance, the Ottawa-Carlton District School Board has collaborated with community organizations to form the Rainbow Coalition, which provides “students with a safe space to socialize, support each other and discuss concerns.”<sup>12 (p. 16)</sup>
- Pre-service teachers should be trained in the prevention and management of homophobia and gender-based violence through courses on equity and social justice offered in Bachelor of Education programs.
- The Ontario College of Teachers should develop an additional qualification course on safe schools that includes education about bullying, including homophobic bullying.
- Students, who constitute the majority of the school population, should be consulted when drafting and implementing policy.<sup>1</sup>

## Intervention strategies

The preceding strategies are preventative in design. Intervention-oriented strategies that teachers can incorporate into their daily practice are also important. In addition to educating themselves about how homophobic violence operates in the lives of all students, teachers might also:

- include age-appropriate discussion that educates students on what words such as “gay” mean. The film *It’s Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in School* provides examples of teachers doing so with students of various ages.

## Implications for Practice

### The Need for Action

“Racism, religious intolerance, homophobia and gender-based violence are still evident in our communities and – unfortunately – in our schools,” write the authors of a 2006 Ministry of Education report outlining an Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy for the Ontario school system.

To learn more about the provincial action plan, visit:  
<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.html>

### Other agencies which provide resources...

- **Egale Canada**  
A national organization that advances equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-identified people and their families.  
*For more information:*  
<http://www.egale.ca/>
- **Pride Education Network**  
Information on Gay-Straight Alliances and anti-homophobia policies and education  
*For more information:*  
<http://www.pridenet.ca/main.htm>
- **Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network**  
*For more information:* [glsen.org](http://glsen.org)
- **Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation**  
*For more information:* [osstf.on.ca](http://osstf.on.ca)
- **Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario**  
*For more information:* [efto.ca](http://efto.ca)
- **Triangle Program**  
Canada’s only classroom for LGBTQ youth  
*For more information:*  
[triangleprogram.ca](http://triangleprogram.ca)
- **Alberta government**  
*For more information:*  
[b-free.ca/home.html](http://b-free.ca/home.html)

## Learn more about LNS resources ...

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/publications.html>

Call:  
416-325-2929  
1-800-387-5514

Email:  
LNS@ontario.ca

- use films to generate discussion, such as *Tomboy*, *Trevor*, and *Breakfast with Scott*
- sponsor a Gay-Straight Alliance and act as a mentor and resource for participants
- teach about family diversity by designing lesson plans on films such as *It's Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in School* and, especially for children in elementary grades, *That's A Family!*
- educate students about words that are used in a derogatory manner such as *fag*, *queer*, and *dyke*
- teach the use of more appropriate terms and acronyms, such as *questioning*, *two-spirit* and *LGBT*
- challenge students' use of homophobic language in the same way that one would challenge racial slurs, and identify its use specifically as homophobia; and structure a classroom discussion on homophobic language
- organize a workshop for teachers on homophobic bullying, to be held on a professional development day

## In Sum

These prevention and intervention strategies, though not exhaustive, collectively forge safer cultures of learning for LGBT students and others victimized by homophobic bullying. LGBT students are rightfully tired of teachers and administrators ignoring or being ill-equipped to address homophobic violence in schools.<sup>1</sup> Homophobic bullying is an all too common problem that has the potential to confound the educational achievement of those who are most adversely affected. Despite unsafe learning environments, many have demonstrated resilience by asserting their right to safe learning environments that are free of homophobic bullying. In doing so, such students also demonstrate and model leadership. Educational leaders who are genuinely concerned about safety and educational achievement, but who have yet to specifically address homophobia, might consider the question posed recently by Meyer: "If you can't even name the target, how can you expect to reach it?"<sup>13</sup> (p.74)

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