

Teaching Elementary Sexual Health Education: The Importance of Keeping It Current

Shannon Dube

Abstract

At the rapid rate that language, content, and preferences are changing around topics related to sexual health education, it is no wonder that curriculum in Canada is lagging behind. With a focus on the elementary classroom, this paper analyzes the problems associated with sexual health education in elementary classrooms and also takes a close look at some solutions for these issues. The purpose was to look at how outdated curriculum, heteronormative bias, and the negative messaging or outdated language have adverse consequences for LGBTQ+ students and the school space. Solutions include creating explicit policies within the school division that support inclusivity, continuous professional development opportunities for staff, and having active Gay-Straight Alliances that support safe spaces.

Sexual health education in elementary school is a hot topic issue in Canada. There are many different views about what is considered appropriate content at varying grade levels. Parents, teachers, trustees, and government all have opinions about what children should and should not be taught. One of the difficulties is that there is no standardized Canadian curriculum; each province is left to create their own. Often, these curricula are long outdated and school divisions are then left to fill in gaps to create policy that supports inclusivity. To solve the problem, updated curriculum and more professional development can be game changers. With ongoing training, teachers become aware of their own “heteronormative bias” (Bryan, 2012, p. 44), and this alone can create very meaningful change. As more educators understand how crucial it is for them to create safe spaces for all students through supporting Gay-Straight Alliances, stating pronouns, and using picture books to create opportunities for explicit conversation about diversity, the more students are going to be positively affected.

The Issues With Current Practices

Canadian students deserve the most up-to-date sexual health education curriculum. When current information is taught in the classroom, this alone can lead to safer and more responsible student sexual decision-making (Alberta Health Services, n.d.) throughout their lives. In many curricula across the country, even when outcomes were reviewed by education ministries in the past, they were drafted with no requirements for review or rewrite (Robinson et al., 2019). This leaves students behind in areas such as current social practices, vocabulary, and information. This also means that existing curricular resources can be limited (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018). In my own first years of teaching, I struggled to reconcile what I knew was current and inclusive, versus what I was reading in the sexual health outcomes of the grade I was teaching. This lack of current curriculum can affect the very important formative years as students learn about who they are on the sexual and gender spectrum and their role within the classroom, school, and even society. Students will have a hard time to begin on equal ground when, for many, sexual health education in early elementary school is usually the first school-based curricular introduction that they receive (Slovin, 2016), and is potentially being taught with a biased perspective or not taught to the depth it was intended.

When left unreviewed, the way the curriculum is taught is left open to heteronormative bias. Canadian elementary students are not being given explicit opportunity to analyze, discuss, or be aware of how the society in which they live is influencing their beliefs about their sexual health

or gender identity (Robinson et al., 2019). Because heteronormativity continues to be the prevalent model for society, it remains difficult, even impossible, to ensure that sexual health education curriculum and outcomes are being taught explicitly, in full and free of bias. Teachers will lean toward teaching topics that are within their comfort zone, and there becomes a difference between what the actual outcomes in the curriculum are and what is being delivered (Robinson et al., 2019). Sometimes unintentionally, educators assume bias in both what they teach and what they do not teach. This influences the messaging that students receive about what is considered by society to be normal or accepted (Slovin, 2016). All one has to do is look around and see that gender norms themselves define educational institutions, between gendered washrooms, lack of widespread pronoun use by educators, and forms and reports requiring an identification of the students' sexual biology (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018). With all of these things that get in the way of students receiving objective sexual health education, it is undoubtedly going to have an effect on them. It is simply a reality that gender norms continue to play a dominating role in the society in which we live.

Canadian classrooms consist of a variety of students with varying ranges of ability academically, socially, emotionally, and physically. Students also vary on the spectrum of gender and sexual identity. The students we teach are unique and they do not always fit in the boxes that society wants them to. For example, for trans students, the underlying messaging of cisnormativity that is pervasive in the sexual health curriculum negatively impacts them (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018). It also creates classroom spaces that may not feel safe or welcoming for all. The reality is that children are already in a constant state of experimentation with gender roles when engaged in play (Bryan 2012). It is actually the adults who project their fear of the unknown about the "impermanence and uncertainty" (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018, p. 336) of the curriculum, its outcomes, and the ever-changing world and language of gender and sexual identity onto the day-to-day practices of the school space. I will never forget the time in 2017 when a brand new school in the school division I work for opened with gender neutral washrooms. However, due to parental fear and complaints, the gender neutral signs were covered over with printed paper that had male and female bathroom symbols on them. I felt disappointed, frustrated, and heartbroken. Students in elementary schools need not only the most up-to-date and comprehensive sexual health education but also inclusive spaces for gender diverse students because they are extremely important to students' personal health and how they grow and learn socially (Alberta Health Services, n.d.).

Finding Solutions to Outdated Practices

In order to practise healthy and positive personal sexual health, students need to acquire "sexual self-efficacy" (Grace, 2018, p. 491). This happens when they have access to accurate information, have had appropriate behavioural skills modelled, and have the confidence necessary to execute their learning within their own personal sexual health experiences. Vocabulary and content change very quickly within the realm of sexual health education, and there are simply not enough curriculum updates or reviews happening fast enough (Robinson et al., 2019). Gender and sexually diverse inclusive curriculum would support educators to have discussions with students around homophobia, transphobia, and the inequalities that are produced around gender and sexuality norms within North American culture (Meyer et al., 2015). Teachers support current curriculum content that removes the shame and stigma about sexuality, and teaches students to accept and respect others, regardless of the personal choices that they make (Bialystok, 2019). When curriculum is left outdated and the implicit message sent by ministries is that the subject is not important enough to update, school divisions are left to make policy decisions that ensure safety for all. Explicit policies that fight against harassment based on diverse gender and relationship styles create and protect school spaces, and are essential in the protection of LGBTQ students (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Policy also helps to make everyone in the school building clear on the rights of LGBTQ students

and the responsibility of the adults in the building to protect those rights. Once the policies are in place, there needs to be a continued effort to promote learning through professional development.

Ongoing professional development will help to light the way for many educators who wish to be current and who want to be supportive allies for all students. With dialogue and authentic learning opportunities about one's own beliefs and socialization, we can become aware of our own role in maintaining heteronormativity (Bryan, 2012) and cisnormativity. Educators need opportunities to struggle with where they stand, and time to reconcile this notion that there is going to be uncertainty between what they believe personally and what they are committed to do professionally (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). It is only with time, reflection, and training that greater strides will be made toward delivering effective sexual health education content with more confidence (Bialystok, 2019). Having professional guest speakers in to speak to staff about topics related to acquiring accurate information can also be really meaningful (Grace, 2018). Just a few years ago, the school leader whom I worked for brought in a guest speaker to share his professional expertise in order to deepen our understanding of a topic. It was one of the most relevant and effective learning opportunities that I have engaged in as a professional. When teachers are open to looking at their own cisgender and heteronormative belief systems, it creates a wonderful opportunity to start creating more purposeful safe spaces for sexual and gender diverse students and staff.

Being in a safe space can mean different things to different people. In an educational system where curriculum that represents diversity is lacking, creating spaces for all to feel safe and welcome is crucial. It can actually help to save someone's life. One way to do this is to support students in the creation of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). GSAs are school-based groups where LGBTQ students and their allies can go for support, for friendships, and for advocacy for social change (Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). The result of all students being able to participate in such a group is extremely positive: less anxiety to hide students' true identity, higher self-confidence, new relationships, and better school attendance (Government of Alberta, n.d.). Students deserve to feel like they have an equitable place in the world regardless of how they identify or whom they love, as well as a place to go to affirm their own identities (Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). Consistently using the personal pronouns that individual students prefer (he/him, she/her, they) is also a way to create an inclusive environment that helps others to feel safe and respected (Sakurai, 2017). It can be harmful to assume others' pronouns based on their names or on the way that they look. Sharing our pronouns first or including them in email signatures, for example, makes it more commonplace when identifying ourselves to others. There are even curated picture book lists for elementary classrooms about pronoun use and gender norms. This creates a safe way for students to see themselves and their world reflected (Elson & Nash, 2020). There is huge value in talking explicitly about pronouns as well as gender and relationship styles, not only to give students opportunities to see and experience many different gender expressions, but also to give them permission to be fully themselves.

Conclusion

Many people are doing their best to honour their authentic selves. This includes students and staff. Educators have a unique opportunity to shine a mirror at students and show them who they are fully capable of becoming - with only pride and no shame. When sexual health education curriculum is lagging and professional development and training may be scarce, leaders have the ability to create change by creating inclusive policies and practices. Just the same, teachers can effect change simply by being a known supportive ally within the school, using inclusive language, and developing diverse classroom libraries. These may seem like easy ways to create safe and inclusive learning environments for all; however, it still remains a challenge to break the societal hold that remains on the majority of heteronormative and cisgender world views.

References

- Alberta Health Services. (n.d.). *Teaching sexual health*. Retrieved October 6, 2021, from <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page14354.aspx>
- Bialystok, L. (2019). Ontario teachers' perceptions of the controversial update to sexual health and human development. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 42(1), 1-41. <https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/3527>
- Bryan, J. (2012). *From the dress-up corner to the senior prom: Navigating gender and sexuality diversity in preK-12 schools*. Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Elson, K., & Nash, K. T. (2020). Taking a journey to the land of all: Using children's literature to explore gender identity and expression with young children. In G. Boldt (Ed.), *Facilitating conversations on difficult topics in the classroom: Teachers' stories of opening spaces using children's literature* (pp. 25-35). Bank Street College of Education. <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2020/iss44/4/>
- Frohard-Dourlent, H. (2018). The student drives the car, right?: Trans students and narratives of decision-making in schools. *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*, 18(4), 328-344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1393745>
- Government of Alberta. (n.d.). *Gay-straight alliances*. Retrieved November 6, 2021, from <https://www.alberta.ca/gay-straight-alliances.aspx>
- Grace, A. P. (2018). Alberta bounded: Comprehensive sexual health education, parentism, and gaps in provincial legislation and educational policy. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 41(2), 472-497. <https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/3153>
- Lapointe, A., & Crooks, C. (2018). GSA members' experiences with a structured program to promote well-being. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 15(4), 300-318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2018.1479672>
- Meyer, E. J., Taylor, C., & Peter T. (2015). Perspectives on gender and sexual diversity (GSD)-inclusive education: Comparisons between gay/lesbian/bisexual and straight educators. *Sex Education*, 15(3), 221-234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2014.979341>
- Robinson, D. B., MacLaughlin, V., & Poole, J. (2019). Sexual health education outcomes within Canada's elementary health education curricula: A summary and analysis. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 28(3), 243-256. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.2018-0036>
- Sakurai, S. (2017, January 22). *What are personal pronouns and why do they matter?* Resources on personal pronouns. Retrieved November 6, 2021, from <https://www.myprouns.org/>
- Slovin, L. J. (2016). Learning that "gay is okay": Educators and boys re/constituting heteronormativity through sexual health. *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*, 16(5), 520-533. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2015.1124257>
- Swanson, K., & Gettinger, M. (2016). Teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and supportive behaviors toward LGBT students: Relationship to gay-straight alliances, antibullying policy, and teacher training. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 13(4), 326-351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2016.1185765>

About the Author

Shannon Dube is an elementary numeracy coordinator in Fort McMurray, Alberta. She has worked in education for fourteen years. She also currently serves as President of the Alberta Teachers' Association Local 48 in Fort McMurray. Shannon is in her first year of pursuing a Master of Education with a focus on educational administration.