

Privileging Heteronormativity in Alberta's Comprehensive Health and Sanctioned Religious Curriculum: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Tanya E. Surette

University of Calgary

Although recently the Alberta Government has made many efforts and initiatives to promote support for gender and sexual minority students in schools, ongoing disparities exist between the aspirations for safe and inclusive school environments and the hostile reality of life in schools for this population. This article summarizes the results of a critical analysis of provincial core health literacy curricula along with school-sanctioned religious curricula. The article then highlights probable reasons for the ongoing lack of education and support for gender and sexual diversity in schools and suggests possible contributors to the oppressive environment for these students in rural Southern Alberta.

Alors que le gouvernement albertain a récemment déployé beaucoup d'efforts et créé plusieurs initiatives pour appuyer les élèves ayant une orientation ou une identité sexuelle minoritaires dans les écoles, des disparités perdurent entre les aspirations visant des milieux scolaires sécuritaires et inclusifs et la réalité hostile que vit cette population dans les écoles. Cet article résume les résultats d'une analyse critique des programmes d'enseignement sur la santé et des programmes d'études religieuses approuvés par les écoles. Par la suite, l'article souligne les raisons qui pourraient expliquer le manque constant d'éducation et d'appui pour la diversité sexuelle et de genre dans les écoles, et propose des facteurs pouvant contribuer à l'environnement oppressant qui existe pour ces élèves dans le sud de l'Alberta.

I figured a way out, a way to get rid of all the lesbians and queers but I couldn't get it past the Congress: build a great big large fence, fifty or a hundred miles long. Put all the lesbians in there, fly over and drop some food. Do the same thing with the queers and the homosexuals. And have that fence electrified so they can't get out. And you know what? In a few years they will die out. You know why? They can't reproduce. (Whitlock, 2014, p. 85).

This statement, made in response to President Obama's declaration of support for marriage equality in May 2012 by Charles Worley, pastor of North Carolina's Providence Road Baptist Church, went viral. This notion of fences and the marginalization of individuals who identify as anything other than heterosexual continues to be a dominant societal and institutional discourse, supported, at least in part, by non-affirming religious doctrine (Whitlock, 2014). In Whitlock's (2014) paper on her research pertaining to gender and sexual minority (i.e., lesbian,

gay, transgender, queer, bisexual, two-spirit, and intersex) families in southern schools, she pointed out the discouraging reality that “no matter how proper gays and lesbians and transgender folk behave (i.e., strive to stay invisible), no matter how we might attempt to assimilate into mainstream society by the ‘same-except-for-one-difference’ argument, fundamentalist Christians will want to put us in fences until we die out” (p. 85). This stance is not isolated to the Southern schools in the United States where Whitlock (2014) documented such strong heteronormative attitudes and biases. Some 2000 kilometers away, similar views and institutional fences can be found in the rural communities of Southern Alberta.

Alberta, and specifically Southern Alberta, is sometimes referred to as the “Bible Belt” of Canada and is known for the predominant conservative values and beliefs held by many residents in the area. These strong traditional beliefs have been captured through media coverage of local community events. For instance, in 2017, a rural southern Alberta town caught the attention of local and national news with the repeated vandalism of the rainbow pride flag, a symbol of support for equal rights for gender and sexually diverse individuals, raised for the first time at the local community center. Six days after it was raised, vandals shredded the flag and tied the pieces to tree branches (“We’ll raise it every day,” 2017). The flag was raised a second time and, days later, an accelerant was applied to the flag pole and the flag was lit on fire (“We’ll raise it every day,” 2017). Fifty kilometers away, another southern Alberta town experienced similar vandalism to the painted pride and transgender flag crosswalks, where visible skid marks and black paint were left in an attempt to demark the symbols of support (Fortney, 2017). These individual or group acts of homophobia and transphobia highlight the continued hatred toward gender and sexual minority individuals and illustrate the ongoing resistance to diversity in Southern Alberta.

The conservative attitudes of many Southern Albertans came to the forefront during the heated debate that ensued in 2016 after Alberta Education passed new legislature titled *Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender identities, and Gender Expressions*. The guidelines endorsed a comprehensive, whole-school approach to promoting healthy relationships and preventing bullying by ensuring understanding, skills, and opportunities to contribute to a welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environment that respects diversity and nurtures a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self (Alberta Education, 2016). The reaction in rural Southern Alberta, captured by the media, underscored the ongoing homophobic and transphobic sentiments strongly held in these communities. One Southern Alberta school board made the news when they decided to ignore the guidelines, arguing they were not legally binding and referring to them as a document, not legislation (Tumilty, 2016). The introduction of the guidelines erupted controversy in other communities as well: groups of parents signed petitions and formed committees to make recommendations against the proposed Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression policy (French, 2016). As a result, the only school board in the province that failed to meet the Alberta Education deadline for a draft of their LGBTQ policies was in Southern Alberta (Fletcher, 2016).

Previous research suggests that individuals living in rural communities endorse a more negative stance toward gender and sexual diversity (Herek, 1994; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009). Contributing to the conservative environment and negativity towards gender and sexual diversity in Southern Alberta is the strong religious presence, particularly within rural areas. Rural Southern Alberta is home to many of the province’s 81,000 members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), which is nearly half of the country’s total membership

(Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, [CJCLDS], 2016a). Like some other Christian denominations, the LDS continues to be intolerant of same-sex attractions and sexual behaviours and guides members who find themselves attracted to the same-sex to remain celibate if they are unable to “repair” their same-sex attractions to fit the heterosexual norm (Dahl & Gallaher, 2012).

With the high levels of religiosity in rural Southern Alberta, Christian doctrine and influence can be seen infiltrating beyond the church walls into school spaces. For instance, a town in rural Southern Alberta made national headlines in November 2013 when the *National Post* covered the story of an elementary school facing backlash after banning the Lord’s Prayer from their morning classroom ritual (Gerson, 2013). This school was one of the last in Canada to include the Lord’s Prayer as part of the school curriculum, a practice removed from public schools across the country due to its perception as a symbol of Christian privilege contradicting the role of public schools’ to maintain religiously neutral environments (Gerson, 2013). What did not make national headlines was the decision of the same school board to reinstate the Lord’s Prayer into their morning announcements in April 2015 (Schnarr, 2015). Moreover, many public schools in this same area continue to permit the LDS to offer a seminary class as a credited, publicly funded, elective course made available to all high school students. The inclusion of non-affirming messages within the public high school curriculum may contribute to the support of the dominant discourse of heteronormativity within schools, perpetuating the justification and normalization of bullying against, and oppression of, sexual and gender minority youth.

Literature Review

As curriculum scholar Tyler (1949) asserted, schools are social institutions whose purpose is to help children obtain a life philosophy that supports socially significant behaviour patterns. He went on to explain that a primary function of education is to act as a process to change people’s behavioural patterns, including their ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving (Tyler, 1949). Likewise, Flinders, Nodding, and Thornton (1986) contended that school curricula are intimately concerned not only with the nature of learning, but also with the nature of valuing and schooling. Aoki (2004) described the *curriculum-as-planned* as that which is created by curriculum developers and designed for faceless children under the false pretense of homogeneity. As with any human creation, the planned curriculum is imbued with the orientations to the world and the beliefs and values of the planners (Aoki, 2004). As a result, curriculum materials tend to favor normative and privileged topics, individuals, and perspectives.

Schools participate in the process of *normalization*, which is the process of constructing, establishing, producing, and reproducing a taken-for-granted and all-encompassing standard used to measure goodness, desirability, morality, rationality, superiority, and a host of other dominant cultural values (Yep, 2003). Yep (2003) contended that one of the most powerful forms of normalization in Western social systems is heteronormativity. *Heteronormativity* refers to the belief that heterosexuality is natural, normal, and the ideal form of sexuality, with all other forms of sexuality being subordinate or devalued (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009). Heteronormativity also fosters a belief that there is one ideal form of male and female, thus supporting a gender binary and privileging the expression of so-called true masculinity and femininity. Heteronormativity fosters systemic disadvantages for gender and sexual minorities because it confers all social and cultural advantages to heterosexuals and gender-conforming

individuals (Nunn & Bolt, 2015). Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds (2002) referred to the classroom as “the most homophobic of all social institutions” (p. 53), highlighting the pervasive oppression of students who represent non-normative gender identities or sexual orientations. Clark and Blackburn (2009) asserted heteronormativity in schools aligns with the gender binaries in the curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture. As Dinkins and Englert (2015) point out, some educators perpetuate a heteronormative environment that diminishes the possibility for gender and sexual minority students to explore and express their identity and thus experience an inclusive and safe learning environment.

It has been well documented that the inclusion of curriculum texts reflective of sexual and gender minorities is exceptionally lacking (Banks, 2009; Blackburn & Smith, 2010; Kedley, 2015). Unfortunately, when books are included representing characters outside the heterosexual norm, they tend to center on the character’s struggle to deal with their sexuality, reinforcing the idea that non-heterosexual identities are inherently controversial and conflicted (Banks, 2009; Kedley, 2015). In discussions pertaining to sexual health, homosexuality remains taboo (Zimmerman, 2015) and when it is covered it is generally related to risk-taking behaviours in the context of AIDS and pathology, thus perpetuating damaging stereotypes (Friend, 1993; Macgillivray, 2000; Meyer, 2009; Puchner & Klein, 2011). The result is that students are left uneducated or mis-educated on topics related to gender and sexual diversity, which impacts not only gender and sexual minority youth but all students in their developing identity and beliefs. Ghiso, Campano, and Hall (2012) highlighted the integration of texts that are inclusive of gender and sexual diversity offers windows and mirrors for students to explore the world and themselves, by connecting complexities of diversity to their own lives and the lives of their peers. The inclusion of these topics better prepares students to engage in a democratic society, where diversity is understood as normal and worthy of celebrating.

Luke (1995) declared the discourse of institutional life, such as schools, as a means for the naturalization and disguise of power relations tied to inequalities. *Discourses* are the recurrent statements and wordings across texts that mark out systems of meaning and fields of knowledge, which in turn are tied to ways of knowing, believing, and categorizing the world and modes of action (Foucault, 1972; Gee, 1990; Luke, 1995). Luke (1995) considered all forms of discourse to represent forms of normativity. For the purpose of this study, I was interested in examining the discourse of targeted curriculum texts and documents to understand how they operate to normalize, interrupt, or disguise heterosexism and the oppression of gender and sexual minority students. Luke (1995) asserted that students use texts to make sense of their world and to construct social actions and relations while, simultaneously, texts construct individuals, making available different meanings, ideas, and versions of the world. It is through these texts that students learn socially sanctioned behaviours and where cultural categories are established and leveraged in the hierarchical social grid of what constitutes normal (Luke, 1995).

Methods

This study employed critical discourse analysis grounded in a social justice in education framework. Social justice education involves an ongoing effort to question school policies, curricula, and institutional practices that support inequalities (Lund, 2011; Tilly & Taylor, 2013). This article highlights the findings from one part of a multi-method qualitative study involving the analysis of Alberta curriculum texts and sanctioned religious curriculum documents in two ways. First, it does so to better understand how the provincial planned curriculum informs the

topics of gender and sexual diversity, and second, it takes into consideration the religious instruction included in the conservative context of rural Southern Alberta schools.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is frequently turned to in an effort to answer questions about the relationship between language and society (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005). Critical discourse analysis focuses on how language, as a cultural tool, mediates relationships of power and privilege in social interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge (Rogers et al., 2005). Luke (1995) reminded us that language is not neutral because it is caught up in political, social, racial, economic, religious, and cultural formations. By focusing on language in texts, critical discourse analysis is concerned with how power and identity become legitimated, negotiated, and contested, and attempts to establish how textual constructions of knowledge come to count in institutional contexts (Luke, 1995; Van Dijk, 1993).

Following Gee's (2010) model of CDA, curricula were analyzed by examining the language use within planned curricula texts, noted below, within the context of heteronormativity (Gee, 2010). I read these texts multiple times, first finding instances of heteronormative language within each individual text, and then connecting the findings across texts for common notions of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia. I considered the curricula within the cultural context of rural Southern Alberta and the sanctioning of specific denominational curricula supporting a non-affirming discourse pertaining to gender and sexual diversity. Through CDA, I focused not only on what was said but also what was left out (Gee, 2010; Rogers et al., 2005). Considering both the inclusions and omissions within these curricula documents provides a window into how gender and sexual minority students are included, excluded, or oppressed within the classroom spaces which take up these course documents. What makes the analysis of these curriculum documents critical is how the curricula analysis centers on an interest to speak to and ideally intervene in the social problems, issues, and controversies pertaining to heteronormativity (Gee, 2010).

Overview of Texts

The curriculum materials from three specific courses were selected for this study. Two of these were core health literacy courses chosen to contextualize the provincially-planned curriculum around gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity. Religiosity was another area of interest of this study and the influence of non-affirming religious doctrine on heteronormativity operating in schools. As already explored, rural Southern Alberta is home to a large Christian population and the influences of Christian privilege have been evidenced in media capturing non-secular practices in public schools, such as, the permission granted to the LDS church to offer their seminary class as a credited option course to secondary students. To contextualize what gets taught in this class and to facilitate a discussion of the possible influences of a non-affirming, religious discourse pertaining to gender and sexual diversity on the school climate, resources and teaching materials from the Seminary class make up the third portion of curriculum texts under analysis for this study.

Health and Life Skills (HLS) 9. HLS 9 is part of the HLS Kindergarten to Grade 9 curriculum—a comprehensive school health and life skills program provided to all Alberta students from kindergarten through grade 9 (Alberta Learning, 2002a). The overarching goal of the HLS Kindergarten to Grade 9 Program of Studies is to “enable students to make well-informed healthy choices and to develop behaviours that contribute to the well-being of self and others” (Alberta Learning, 2002a, p.1). The HLS program is made up of three general outcomes,

which serve as the foundation of the course: Wellness Choices (i.e., students will make responsible and informed choices to maintain health and to promote safety for self and others), Relationship Choices (i.e., students will develop effective interpersonal skills that demonstrate responsibility, respect, and caring in order to establish and maintain healthy interactions), and Life Learning Choices (i.e., students will use resources effectively to manage and explore life roles and career opportunities and challenges) (Alberta Learning, 2002a). Human Sexuality Education, offered in HLS in grades 4 through 9, is also identified as a mandatory component of the program of studies.

Career and Life Management Senior High. Career and Life Management (CALM) Senior High is the secondary school component of the Comprehensive School Health Education in Alberta (Alberta Learning, 2002b). Acting as a continuation of the HLS Program of Studies, CALM is considered the core of senior high school health literacy (Alberta Learning, 2002b) and is a required course for graduation with an Alberta High School Diploma. The aim of CALM is to “enable students to make well-informed, considered decisions and choices in all aspects of their lives and to develop behaviours and attitudes that contribute to the well-being and respect of self and others, now and in the future” (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 1). The general objectives of the CALM curriculum are Personal Choices (i.e., students will apply an understanding of health dimensions in managing personal well-being), Resource Choices (i.e., students will make responsible decisions in finances and other resources that reflect personal values and goals and demonstrate a commitment to self and others), and Career and Life Choices (i.e., students will develop and apply processes for managing personal, lifelong career development). Many sensitive topics and issues are dealt with in CALM, including personal relationships and sexuality.

Seminary Manuals for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has four Seminary Teacher Manuals, which reference many additional church documents and scriptures and constitute the planned curriculum for the Senior High Seminary courses. These materials are used as the teaching guides and structured lesson plans for Seminary teachers instructing this option course for credits in some non-denominational public high schools in rural Southern Alberta. My analysis of the seminary materials involved all four manuals: *The Book of Mormon Seminary Teacher Manual* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [CJCLDS], 2012), *Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Manual* (CJCLDS, 2013), *Old Testament Seminary Teacher Manual* (CJCLDS, 2015), and *New Testament Seminary Teacher Manual* (CJCLDS, 2016b). In addition, this analysis involved two primary church documents which were referenced repeatedly throughout the aforementioned manuals: *The Family: A Proclamation to the World* (CJCLDS, 1995) and *For the Strength of Youth* (CJCLDS, 2001). Each seminary manual outlined the purpose of the Seminary course, which was “to help youth and young adults understand and rely on the teachings and Atonement of Jesus Christ, qualify for the blessings of the temple, and prepare themselves, their families, and others for eternal life with their Father in Heaven” (CJCLDS, 2012, vi; 2013, vi; 2015, vi; 2016b, vi). All four seminary manuals are organized by lessons drawn from scripture, each of which offers a specific teaching related to the biblical text and how the lesson can be applied to everyday life. While human sexuality is not established as a distinct unit or specific lesson throughout the seminary manual as it is in the HLS and CALM curricula, topics pertaining to marriage, relationships, and sexuality are interspersed throughout the teaching materials.

Results

The curriculum texts were considered in light of the primary goals and objectives of the courses, as well as the responsibilities of schools to provide a safe and inclusive learning environment to all students, as mandated by the *School Act* (2012). The findings from this analysis are summarized into three themes. The first two themes deal primarily with the course content from the mandatory core health literacy courses, HLS and CALM, and chiefly focus on the discourse of heteronormativity and contradictions between aspirations of health promotion and the absence and obstacles to inclusion of topics pertaining to gender and sexual diversity. The third theme focuses on the connection between the planned curriculum and institutional heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia across all three curricula.

Theme 1: Course Objectives Necessitate the Inclusion of Diversity

The CALM and Health and Life Skills curricula include several general and specific objectives, which promote lesson planning and instruction consistent with the purposes of these school health literacy courses. Analysis of these documents reveals that to achieve many of these general and specific objectives, it is not only important but essential that topics and issues pertaining to gender and sexual diversity be taken up as key matters. For instance, at the beginning of the HLS curriculum, it is highlighted that a primary aim of this course is to support students in an “understanding of self as a basis for healthy interactions with others” (Alberta Learning, 2002a, p. 1). The CALM curriculum includes a similar statement and asserted that students “require an understanding of self as a basis for making healthy choices, having healthy interactions with others, and using resources wisely” (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 1). The HLS curriculum furthered the claim of the importance of self-knowledge by indicating an “awareness of the uniqueness of self and others is fundamental” (Alberta Learning, 2002a, p. 13) to the objectives of this course, which aims to help students to “recognize and appreciate uniqueness in themselves and others” (Alberta Learning, 2002a, p. 38). Given that gender and sexual identity are important aspects of the self, it would be necessary that students who do identify as a gender or sexual minority encounter curriculum content that supports their growing understanding of their developing self. Moreover, excluding this topic prohibits students who are not gender or sexual minorities to encounter a perspective different from their own, which would support an appreciation of uniqueness beyond themselves. Without the inclusion of these topics and discussions, gender and sexual minority students are left out of opportunities to become aware of and recognize their uniqueness, locate valuable resources, and navigate the development of healthy relationships with self and others.

Both the HLS and CALM curricula also promote the foundational purpose of these courses in supporting the developing well-being of students in a holistic and coherent way (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 1). In the HLS curriculum, there is a section that outlines the key characteristics of resilient students. One of the identifiers used to characterize a resilient student is “they have autonomy. They believe in their ability to influence life events around them and have a strong sense of their own identity, which does not waiver in the face of neglect or ridicule” (Alberta Learning, 2002a, p. 589). Along similar lines, the CALM curriculum identified well-being as stemming from “having the emotional/psychological, intellectual, social, spiritual, and physical dimensions of one’s life in harmony with each other” (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 2). By excluding content inclusive of gender and sexual identities, diverse students are not given

the same support as their peers towards developing a strong sense of identity; likewise, they are not offered the chance to create the type of harmony among all dimensions of themselves that the curriculum illustrates is a necessary component of well-being and resiliency. Moreover, the same curriculum identifies stressors pertaining to sexuality, which included “uncertainty, pressure to conform, and lack of information” (Alberta Learning, 2002a, p. 598) as one of the nine most common life stressors encountered by students. It would be impossible for educators of these courses to evade content inclusive of gender and sexual diversity while still managing to achieve the core objectives of developing the well-being and personal resiliency for all students.

The HLS curriculum highlighted that “there are opportunities for students to accept and appreciate diversity and the uniqueness of self and others in our global society” (Alberta Learning, 2002a, p. 2) within the course. The HLS resource also emphasized the importance of “the awareness students are not alone” (Alberta Learning, 2002a, p. 13), which was interwoven throughout the course. One of the justifications provided in the HLS curriculum for adopting a comprehensive school health approach, such as the Health and CALM courses, is that it results in “less student alienation” (Alberta Learning, 2002a, p. 32). Gender and sexual minority students routinely express feeling marginalized and alienated at school (Kosciw, Greytak, and Bartkiewicz, 2014; Leonardi & Saenz, 2014; Miller & Gilligan, 2014; Pearson, Miller, & Wilkinson, 2007; Peter, Taylor, and Chamberland, 2015; Taylor et al., 2011). For this demographic to feel included and to have an experience that they are not alone, lessons that directly discuss gender and sexual diversity would be fundamental.

Beyond the reasons already identified, there is further support for the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity topics and issues contained in these course objectives. Within both the CALM and HLS course manuals is the assertion that “the examination of controversial issues is an important part of the democratic process and has an important place in the classroom” (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 43; 2002b, p. 103). Controversial topics are defined in both curricula as “topics that are publicly sensitive and upon which there is no consensus of values or beliefs. They include topics on which reasonable people may sincerely disagree” (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 43; 2002b, p. 57). Both curriculum materials indicated the opportunity to deal with these issues as “integral parts of student education in Alberta” (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 43; 2002b, p. 57) and that by studying controversial topics students are more prepared for “responsible participation in a democratic and pluralistic society” (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p.43; 2002b, p. 57). The emphasis placed on the inclusion of controversial topics within both the HLS and CALM curricula clearly highlights the need to take up gender and sexual diversity within the context of these core health literacy courses aimed specifically at student well-being, the developing self, and appreciating and respecting unique and diverse individuals.

Theme 2: Barriers to Engaging Students in Topics about Gender and Sexual Diversity

Educators who see the value in engaging students in these types of critical discussions can find an abundance of support for the importance of doing so, as evidenced above. However, my analysis of the CALM and HLS curricula illuminates many barriers within these curriculum documents that complicate inclusion and possibly deter educators from bringing these topics into the classroom. For instance, in both the HLS and CALM manuals, educators are reminded of the importance of family interests and involvement. The HLS manual stated that “the family is the primary educator in the development of students’ attitudes and values” (Alberta Learning,

2002a, p. 2). Similarly, the CALM manual asserted “activities and processes in CALM encourage family interest and involvement” (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 1). Both documents also identified the school as playing a supportive and complementary role to the family in building on students’ attitudes and values. Inarguably, the family is a primary socializing agent of a child; however, to describe the role of the school as supportive and complementary to building upon the interests, values, and attitudes of the family unit is problematic. These statements make an assumption that all values and attitudes of the family should be supported equally and that the values of the family are always humanitarian and respect the rights and dignity of all individuals. The CALM curriculum also acknowledged that “much of what is learned is affected by influences outside of the classroom and the likelihood of students adopting and maintaining healthy behaviours increases when messages from multiple sources are consistent” (Alberta Education, 2002, p. 6). Missing from this discussion in the manual is the context for teachers when it would be inappropriate for them to provide consistent messages to students that mirror the attitudes and beliefs of the family unit or other outside influences. Without clear guidelines for teachers attempting to make these ethical decisions, educators are faced with the option of either supporting dominant family values or eliminating sensitive topics that may bring up values and beliefs that differ from what those students are taught outside of school.

Beyond encouraging teachers to provide education that is consistent and supportive of family values, the CALM and HLS manuals also highlighted the rights of parents to be heavily involved in these courses and to determine the extent to which their children may participate in them. For instance, the CALM and HLS manuals both clearly stipulated numerous times that parents retain the right to excuse or exempt their children from the human sexuality component of both courses. In the human sexuality component of CALM, teachers are required to communicate the specific outcomes, topics, and resources with parents prior to teaching them (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 20). Teachers are also told to encourage students to share their learning and progress in CALM with their parents so that their “families have the opportunity to offer input that reflects their cultural beliefs and values” (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 23). Furthermore, parents can request that students be exempt from the entire CALM curriculum for two primary reasons: they are out-of-province grade 12 students, or due to conflictual religious beliefs (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 3). These stipulations around the prioritization of parental interests places the rights of parents above the possible needs of students. This practice leads to questions around students’ rights to information and education around health and well-being. Since both courses assert their importance as the primary provider of a comprehensive school health education, to restrict students’ involvement in the course or limit their exposure to sensitive or controversial topics leaves them ill-prepared to engage in a democratic society, which is also identified as a fundamental goal of these courses. Throughout both documents, there is no description of how educators can protect the rights of students to obtain information that is critical to their well-being and the development of a healthy self when their needs conflict with the attitudes of their parents.

Not only are parental interests and rights at the center of the CALM and HLS curricula, teachers are also required to consider the larger community within which the school is embedded when planning and preparing the content of these courses. In the HLS curriculum, teachers are reminded when planning lessons that discuss controversial issues to “consider the neighborhood and community in which the school is located” (Alberta Learning, 2002a, p. 38). The CALM curriculum also identified the necessity to consider the “strengths and needs of the community in which students live in order to address relevant topics in the CALM classroom”

(Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 28) and to “be sensitive to the social and political realities of the community” (p. 65). This arrangement is problematic for two reasons. First, the requirement to manage the needs, values, and attitudes of families, as well as the larger community may be a source of distraction from the needs of students. Second, fulfilling the requirements of these important courses to promote the development of attitudes and behaviours that contribute to the well-being of self and others may not be taken up. In the context of gender and sexual diversity topics and issues, where do these guidelines leave educators within conservative communities, such as many of those in Southern Alberta, where children are taught within the family and larger community that marriage between a man and a woman is the only acceptable expression of sexuality? While the CALM and HLS curricula clearly stipulate the importance of including topics and issues that are sensitive and controversial, the language in these manuals ultimately limits teachers to the inclusion of such topics.

Even for teachers working in less conservative communities, there are obstacles to overcome in the language of the CALM and HLS curricula to include gender and sexual diversity topics in the classroom. Both curricula advised educators that, when discussing controversial issues, they must present alternative points of view and a balanced approach unless information is restricted by federal or provincial law (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 18; Alberta Learning, 2002a, p. 38). The CALM curriculum furthered this assertion by stating “presentations and course content that are limited to a singular or narrow view are not consistent with learning outcomes and should not be part of the school program” (Alberta Learning, 2002b, p. 22). Teachers must also ensure the CALM and HLS classrooms are safe and open spaces, so students can explore difficult topics and issues comfortably. If a teacher wants to bring in a guest presenter to talk about gender and sexual diversity and promote respect and understanding of this population, the language in the CALM and HLS curricula suggests the educator must also bring in a member of the community that opposes equal rights for gender and sexual minorities in an effort to offer a balanced perspective. Since this would be unethical because it would compromise the safety of individual students and the classroom, it is understandable, in this context, why teachers routinely evade topics and issues around gender and sexual diversity to protect themselves from the controversy that may emerge given that there are no clear guidelines on how to navigate these issues. Without specially addressing various forms of diversity, like gender and sexuality, and outlining important ethical considerations in engaging with these topics, teachers preparing these courses from planned curriculum documents are left ill prepared and unsupported in providing students with affirming resources and information pertaining to this topic.

Theme 3: Institutional Heterosexism

Heteronormative bias in the curriculum. Detailed reading and analysis of all three curriculum materials—HLS, CALM, and the LDS Seminars Manuals—shows how each text maintains a dominant heteronormative bias. For instance, the language across all three documents assumes the discussions around human sexuality and relationships pertains only to heterosexual and homogenous relationships, with no discussion or acknowledgement of the diversity which exists in human sexuality, gender expression, and identity. In the HLS curriculum, several statements can be found which presume heterosexuality in discussions around human sexuality and relationships. For instance, in a discussion around safer sex practices, the HLS manual provided the following list: “communicate with partner, maintain abstinence, limit partners, access/use condoms/contraceptives properly, identify and describe

the responsibilities and resources associated with pregnancy and parenting” (Alberta Learning, 2002a, p. 12). However, nowhere in this list, or elsewhere in this manual, is there a note to include resources or supports associated with sexual or gender diversity. The discussion assumes the reason sex is unsafe is because it could lead to pregnancy, which is not a universal issue for all partners in a sexual relationship. There is no acknowledgment that diverse sexualities and genders have different needs for safer sex practices. The entire human sexuality component of the HLS course is focused on the potentially negative consequences of a sexual relationship, which are sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy, with most of the attention being placed on unplanned pregnancy. One of the activities within this section of the course asked the reader to

Consider how the life of a grade 9 student would change with each of these events: an unplanned pregnancy, becoming a single parent, and leaving home to live on your own. Consider and report on the risks and health consequences of teenage pregnancy from three perspectives: the teen mother, the teen father, the newborn. (Alberta Learning, 2002a, p. 592)

Although discussions around teen pregnancy are an important component of a comprehensive school health program, the sole focus on this topic and exclusion of diverse forms of sexuality and gender sends a strong message of heteronormativity and marginalizes gender and sexual minority students. Additionally, by not acknowledging diversity in sexuality, gender identities, and relationships, these students are ill-equipped to engage in healthy relationships, safe sex practices, and protect against the harmful effects of unhealthy relationships.

Heteronormativity is also present across the curriculum for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints seminary course. A church pamphlet titled *For the Strength of Youth* (CJCLDS, 2001) included discussions of topics that are considered relevant for young members of the church, such as dating. In the *For the Strength of Youth* booklet, dating is described as “a planned activity between a young man and a young woman” (CJCLDS, 2001, p. 4) and that young men generally take initiative in asking for and planning the dates (CJCLDS, 2001, p. 5). This booklet also asserted that “marriage between a man and a woman is essential to His eternal plan” (CJCLDS, 2001, p. 14), and that “God desires that all of his children come into the world as part of an eternal family with a mother and a father who love and care for each other and for their children” (CJCLDS, 2001, p. 14). In respect to sexual relationships, the *For the Strength of Youth* outlined “the sacred powers of procreation are to be employed only between man and woman, lawfully wedded as husband and wife” (CJCLDS, 2001, p. 35).

The seminary manuals have similar heteronormative messages interspersed across all four documents reviewed in this analysis. In one of the lesson plans in the *Book of Mormon Seminary Manual* the instructor is advised to display a picture of a married couple and their children and encouraged to use a picture of their own family to demonstrate the sanctity of marriage (CJCLDS, 2012, p. 36). *The Doctrines and Covenants Seminary Manual* covered in-depth the importance of the covenant of marriage (CJCLDS, 2013). In this manual, young people are reminded that, in order to obtain the highest degree of the celestial kingdom, they must enter into the new and everlasting covenant of marriage (p. 488). This document also outlined the reasons why eternal marriage is essential to the Father’s plan:

1. The natures of male and female spirits complete and perfect each other and therefore men and women are intended to progress together toward exaltation.

2. By divine design, both a man and a woman are needed to bring children into mortality and to provide the best setting for the rearing and nurturing of children. (CJCLDS, 2013, p. 488)

Furthermore, the *Doctrines and Covenants* manual also asserted that “gender is an essential characteristic of individual pre-mortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose” (CJCLDS, 2013, p. 567) and that “the Lord will hold us accountable if we do not fulfill our responsibilities in our families” (CJCLDS, 2013, p. 567). Collectively, these messages clearly privilege heteronormative attitudes and beliefs and may be harmful to students who are gender or sexually diverse, or who have gender or sexual minority parents, as they come to understand their gender or sexual identities conflict with the teachings in the seminary manuals and church documents. They also support and endorse heterosexist beliefs for all students as they are justified in adopting a discourse that privileges heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships, thus promoting the justification for the continued marginalization and oppression of non-heterosexual identities and relationships.

Religiously-inspired homophobia. While the heteronormative messages noted above could be harmful to the well-being of gender and sexually diverse students, what is more concerning is the ways so-called sexual sin and sexual diversity were discussed in the seminary materials. *The Book of Mormon Seminary Manual* referred to a sexual sinner and a sexual sin as an “awful monster” (CJCLDS, 2012, p. 97), a “terrible disease” (p. 103), and an “abomination” (p. 333). *The Doctrines and Covenants Manual* labelled what they considered to be a sexual sinner as “unclean” (CJCLDS, 2013, p. 18), “an apostasy” (p. 26), “a whoremonger” (p. 236), and “someone who will remain in hell” (p. 293). The *For the Strength of Youth* booklet informs young people that “in God’s sight, sexual sins are extremely serious” (CJCLDS, 2001, p. 36). This document goes on to state that the

The prophet Alma taught that sexual sins are more serious than any other sin except murder or denying the Holy Ghost. Homosexual and lesbian behavior is a serious sin. If you find yourself struggling with same-gender attraction or you are being persuaded to participate in inappropriate behavior, seek counsel from your parents and bishop. They will help you. (CJCLDS, 2001, p. 36)

The use of such descriptive language in relation to sexual sins is harmful because it promotes internalized and externalized homophobia for individuals receiving these teachings. In light of the finding that gender and sexual minority youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2009), these messages are significant contributors to the hostile environment that suicidal gender and sexual minority students are trying to escape.

A number of lessons found within the seminary manuals encouraged seminary instructors to take up the topic of sexual sin and sexual diversity specifically with their class and reiterate the Church’s stance against sexual diversity. *The Old Testament Seminary Manual* included a lesson that speaks specifically about homosexuality as a sexual sin: “How does the Lord view homosexual behavior? (As a very grievous sin. All violations of the law of chastity or sexual sin are very serious. Write the following truth on the board: *Homosexual behavior is a serious sin* [emphasis in original]) (CJCLDS, 2015, p. 103). In another lesson in this same document, students were again reminded that “any sexual relations outside the bond of marriage between a man and a woman, including homosexual behaviour, violates the Lord’s law of chastity” (CJCLDS, 2015, p. 192).

These are but a few of the many lessons which promote the belief that sexual diversity is a

grave sin and individuals who are experiencing same-sex attraction are struggling and in need of repentance, prayer, help, and guidance. What is important to bear in mind is that these lessons are provided amidst the regular school day at the LDS Church, following which students return to their school and peers. The messages contained in these seminary lessons are in direct opposition to the mandate set out by the *School Act*, where every student is entitled to a “welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self” (2012, p. 281) and also directly contradicts the more recent initiatives by the Alberta Government to promote safety and inclusion of gender and sexual minority students in Alberta schools.

Discussion and Conclusion

The critical discourse analysis of the CALM and HLS curricula highlights a gap in the provincial curriculum-as-planned pertaining to the adequate education of gender and sexually diverse students and their heterosexual peers when it comes to sexuality. McCall, McKay, and the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada (2004) identified schools as having an important and unique position to provide education that enables all young people to acquire appropriate knowledge and skills related to reproductive health, since they are the only formal institution to have meaningful contact with nearly every young person. *The Canadian Guidelines for Sexual Health Education* recommended that school-based sexual health education include a wide range of topics, such as puberty, STI prevention and awareness, contraceptives, relationships, communication, sexual orientation, and media literacy (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008). Unfortunately, the Alberta health and sexuality curriculum promotes parental rights and interests above students’ rights to access this essential information. When parental rights supersede student rights, this leaves questions about a student’s right to education and schools’ negligence in preparing all young people to engage in safe, healthy, and informed relationships and sexual behaviours. McRee, Madsen, and Eisenberg (2014) found teachers who involved guest speakers for sexual health education reported covering a greater number of sexuality topics in their classes, thus delivering more comprehensive education to their students. For teachers in rural conservative communities, like those of Southern Alberta, experiencing the stress and pressure to avoid controversy with parents and the community—who may or may not have their own biases and beliefs around heteronormativity or lack the education themselves to provide informed educational materials and information in a safe and appropriate way—guest speakers are a viable option to consider for sexual health education. An implication for teachers in these communities is to seek out community resources that have individuals who are educated and trained to discuss and address topics around gender and sexual diversity in a way that is respectful and informative.

In the context of rural Southern Alberta and the discussion of gender and sexual diversity, the language in the core health literacy curriculum makes it too ambiguous and risky for teachers to consider the inclusion of these topics, particularly as they are expected to consider the primary family values and beliefs of the larger community in which the school is embedded. Having no requirement to take up the topic of gender and sexual diversity from an anti-oppressive and social justice educational framework, the exclusion of these affirming messages not only perpetuates the beliefs that gender and sexual diversity is abnormal and inherently controversial, but also minimizes and oppresses the needs and rights of gender and sexual minority students. In the past number of years, there have been excellent additions to the

resources made available to teachers to find tools on how to engage their classes in these topics. The Alberta Teachers' Association (2017) created a toolkit called *Prism* that provides resources for teachers to promote safe and informed classroom discussions about gender and sexual diversity. The American Library Association (2017) provided an annually updated bibliography of books with content inclusive of gender and sexual diversity that teachers can draw upon to initiate conversations in the classroom. These represent a few of the growing list of resources made available to educators who are interested in inviting this conversation in their classroom. Unfortunately, without adequate support through the curriculum to engage in this topic, teachers are ill-equipped to appropriately utilize these resources in a pedagogical setting. Nunn and Bolt (2015) reminded educators that gender and sexual minority students are not the only ones who benefit from these inclusive curriculum and classroom practices, but that their majority heterosexual peers benefit as well by challenging their own biases and expanding their own understanding of gender and sexual minority individuals and their struggles against homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism.

The findings from this study pertaining to religiosity also draw important questions about the inclusion of non-affirming religious teachings about gender and sexual diversity in the planned curriculum and the privileging of religious rights over students' rights to a safe and inclusive learning environment. When these two rights conflict, the question that remains is what should be given priority? When provided with non-affirming lessons and lectures pertaining to gender and sexual diversity, freedom of religion begins to interfere with and is privileged above safe freedom of identity and expression for students. With the discriminatory nature of the LDS teachings, as evidenced through the critical discourse analysis, the inclusion of this type of curriculum material may be impeding the safety, support, and well-being for students who identify as a gender or sexual minority or are questioning their identity.

In 2016, the Alberta Government took an important stance on this issue through the release of the *Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities, and Gender Expressions*. This document, and residual call to all school divisions in the province to draft and provide copies of policies which specifically address safety and inclusion for gender and sexual minority youth, demonstrates an awareness of the ongoing hostility faced by gender and sexual minority students in schools and the need to take action to create school environments which uphold their ethical responsibilities to all students. While these guidelines provided many relevant and important guidelines for educators and policy makers working to create safe and inclusive school environments for gender and sexually diverse students, what remains absent is clear and explicit direction and support for how to addressing these important topics of diversity in mandatory courses, such as the comprehensive core health literacy courses. Additionally, the inclusion of non-affirming religious teachings, such as those of the LDS faith analyzed here, directly contradict these guidelines and their assertion that students have a right to a "welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that foster diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self (Alberta Government, 2016, p. 4). As Alberta Education works to redraft these core health and literacy curricula and continues to consider the direction of education in this province, significant adaptations to these documents and practices are necessary if the goal is for students of all gender identities and expressions and sexual orientations to attend school free of discrimination and prejudice.

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Tanya E. Surette is a Registered Psychologist with the College of Alberta Psychologists and works as an Educational and Clinical Psychologist in Southern Alberta. She is also a Sessional Instructor for the University of Calgary with the Werklund School of Education.