

The Policy Polka and the Curriculum Cotillion:
How Catholic Schools Dance Away From Their Obligations Regarding Sexual Diversity

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Abstract

Advances in the legal rights of sexual minority groups in Canada over the past 20 years have led to an increased understanding of sexual diversity as a human rights issue. Public education has attempted to reflect this change through policy and curriculum. However, such progressive reforms are weakened by the fact that Canadian Catholic schools often sidestep them due to perceived conflicts with religious beliefs. Paying particular attention to the evasive practices of Catholic schools, this paper explores opportunities to address diversity and inclusion issues available through curriculum, as well as through the individual agency of teachers and students.

Since the gay liberation movement that began in the latter half of the 20th century, citizens of the western part of the world have come to understand sexual diversity as a human rights issue. Canada, for example, is respected the world over for its *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, which is the basis of several key judicial decisions that advanced the legal rights of sexual minority groups over the past 20 years (Hurley, 2005). Such legal advances have subsequently influenced Canadian educational policy development, which has been written to protect teachers and students against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Grace, 2005). While extremely important, these policy changes are somewhat weakened by their frequent non-observance in schools, especially in Canadian Catholic schools where one can easily see progressive policies related to sexual orientation or gender identity regularly being sidestepped due to perceived conflicts with religious beliefs. This evasive dance, or *policy polka*, is discussed in more detail below.

If policies designed to make schools more respectful and embracing of sexual and gender diversity can be *danced away* from and otherwise circumvented, then what are some other strategies that can be used to supplement and strengthen educational policy development and thereby safeguard against further violation of equality rights? The answer may lie in curriculum development. It is one matter to change the laws and policies of any given culture or organization, but it is another matter entirely to change the hearts and minds of people. Changing deep-rooted convictions or prejudices requires sustained discussion and intellectual probing, activities that are usually available in classroom settings, especially in English language arts, social studies, and religion classes. Making small changes in curriculum content so that it addresses sexual diversity has the potential to reduce the ignorance about sexual minority groups that is often the root cause of homophobic discrimination and violence in Canadian schools. Accordingly, this paper explores curricular avenues, including both supplementary and government-approved, that may lead to a better understanding of sexual diversity. Like educational policy, curricular changes can be deftly dodged, especially by Canadian Catholic schools who rewrite provincial curriculum they regard to be at odds with Catholic doctrine. Therefore, this paper examines teacher and student agency in terms of their readiness to embrace controversial social issues and thereby impact classroom curriculum.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory

Just because Catholic schools tend to *dance away* from progressive policy that clashes with their discriminatory practices regarding sexual minorities (e.g., Henry, 2001; Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops [OCCB], 2003), it does not have to continue to be this way. Teachers, parents, and students may start to ask pointed policy questions or agitate for curriculum reform. There is great potential in the power of human agency to change oppressive regimes into productive systems that thrive on diversity and difference (Buechler, 2008). A desire for this type of change can be located in the emancipatory goals of the critical theory tradition (Buechler, 2008). Advocating for educational policy and curriculum that acknowledge sexual diversity is about working towards freeing members of sexual minority groups from heterosexist oppression – a goal that is connected not only to critical theory, but also to the traditions of critical pedagogy and anti-oppressive research (Kanpol, 1994; Kincheloe, 2007; Kumashiro, 2002). Critical theorists of education are known for tracing injustices to their source by revealing the institutional structures and processes that perpetuate inequality in educational practice (Young, 1990). Not content to merely observe and describe discriminatory practices within education, critical theorists seek to revolutionize the process of education by proposing recommendations to make it more egalitarian (Gibson, 1986). A critical perspective and theoretical orientation guides this paper’s analysis of the utility of curriculum reform as another tool, alongside policy development, that can be employed to ensure Canadian public schools – including publicly funded Canadian Catholic schools – are truly embracing diversity.

Canadian Catholic Schools and Policies Regarding Sexual Minorities

For those not familiar with Catholic doctrine related to the behaviour of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer (lgbtq) individuals – who are referred to as “persons with same-sex attraction” (OCCB, 2003, p. 3) in Catholic circles – the doctrine can be distilled down to two colloquial expressions: ‘It’s okay to be gay, just don’t act on it,’ or ‘Love the sinner, hate the sin.’ These two expressions highlight the contradictions that are the basis of policies Catholic school administrators develop in response to matters such as whether or not an *openly gay* grade 12 student can take his boyfriend to the prom dance, a group of students can start a Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA), or two persons of the same sex can unabashedly hold hands in the hallway (OCCB). For the majority of Canadian Catholic schools, the policy answer to these vexing questions is usually a resounding “no” (Henry, 2001; OCCB). At the policy level, then, many Canadian Catholic schools actively ignore their legal, professional and ethical responsibilities to protect *all* students and to maintain a safe, caring and inclusive learning environment for everyone, including lgbtq individuals. These responsibilities are clearly outlined in several education governance documents such as provincial school acts, teachers’ codes of professional conduct, and policies developed by teachers’ associations and federations across the country, that have been updated to reflect changes in provincial human rights codes and the *Charter* (Department of Justice Canada, n.d.) in terms of protecting against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (Canadian Teachers’ Federation, 2002). Yet, in Canadian Catholic schools, the *policy polka* persists at the expense of non-heterosexuals.

Supportive Supplementary Curriculum

Anti-Homophobia Education

Twentieth-century Canadian queer curriculum theorists called upon curriculum developers to produce a “queer pedagogy” (Bryson & De Castell, 1993, p. 285), “stop reading straight” (Britzman, 1995, p. 151), and “interrupt heteronormative thinking” (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 192). According to Berlant and Warner (1998), heteronormativity is “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality not only coherent – that is, organised as a sexuality – but also privileged” (p. 565, note 2). Operating in both overt and covert ways, it is a worldview that is encoded into the major cultural, economic, and educational institutions of western society (Dines & Humez, 2002). Some queer curriculum theories were similarly expressed in the activism of such groups as Students of Toronto Against Racism (STAR). This group evaluated the course outlines of history, social sciences, and English classes being taught in local secondary schools in 1994 and 1995 to

see how well they aligned with the inclusive curriculum mandate of the Toronto Board of Education (now the Toronto District School Board). Not surprisingly, STAR's final report card issued predominantly F's, D's, and C's for the Toronto Board's ability to address racism, sexism, and homophobia (McCaskell, 2005).

Shortly after STAR disbanded in 1995, another activist group of secondary students formed under the name Teens Educating and Challenging Homophobia (TEACH). Members of TEACH, most of whom self-identified as lgbtq, were invited into schools to lead classroom discussions about homophobia, usually starting with their own testimonials of personal experiences with homophobic prejudice (McCaskell, 2005). The teachers behind these student-led initiatives, who were also members of the Equity Studies Centre within the Toronto Board, developed *Safely Out*, Canada's first curriculum support document designed to help teachers integrate sexual diversity into the existing curriculum at the upper elementary and secondary levels (Toronto Board of Education, 1997).

Since the publication of *Safely Out*, there have been several subsequent curriculum guides and resources developed throughout Canada. These guides and resources aim to assist teachers who wish to redress the homophobia and heterosexism they witness regularly in their classrooms and schools. Some of these supplementary curricular materials are designed to directly correspond with goals and outcomes related to diversity and inclusivity outlined in official Canadian provincial curricula (for a list of available resources, see Schrader & Wells, 2007).

Teachers and Anti-Homophobia Curricula

It must be stressed that the aforementioned curricular resources are supplementary – teachers may or may not turn to them for assistance in designing their courses, units or lesson plans. Even though the educational policy and governance documents referred to earlier clearly outline teachers' legal and professional obligation to remedy homophobic prejudice that abounds in schools, the problem of teacher workload intensification (Apple & Jungck, 1993) suggests teachers may be too overwhelmed to adequately attend to the matter. Clearly, a great disparity exists between “curriculum-as-planned” and “curriculum-in-use” (Werner, 1991, p. 114).

The likelihood of teachers actually consulting secondary curricular sources diminishes even further when one considers Catholic schools because teachers in these schools may experience reprimands for consulting teaching materials that have not been officially approved by their local Catholic school board (Callaghan, 2007b; Ferfolja, 2005; Litton, 2001; Love, 1997; Maher, 2003; Maher & Sever, 2007). Catholic school boards generally do not approve of supplementary curricular materials that present the “homosexual condition” (Ratzinger & Bovone, 1986, item 3) in a positive light because they are deemed to be contrary to “Catholicity” and therefore have no place in a Catholic school. Michael Bayly (2007), the author of a supplementary curricular guidebook written specifically to help make Catholic schools safe for lgbt students, concedes that implementing the ideas contained in his book may not be possible in many dioceses or communities due to a Catholic backlash against anti-homophobia education that is gaining momentum under the current conservative papacy. This attempt on the part of Catholic schools to shelter students from difficult conversations on controversial subjects is untenable given that the best protection against human rights abuses is human rights education. As critical pedagogue Kathy Bickmore (1999) makes clear, homophobic violence can only be alleviated by expanding rather than restricting the knowledge and experiences made available to students.

Government-Approved Curriculum and Sexual Diversity

The Absence of Sexual Diversity in Official Curriculum

Occasionally, the topic of sexual diversity may appear sparingly in government-approved curriculum for the core subject areas of social studies or English, such as the newly revised Ontario Grades 9-12 English Curriculum Guidelines that invite a critical examination of commonly-held assumptions regarding sexual orientation (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). More commonly, however, government-developed curriculum about human sexuality is relegated to physical or health education classes where it is typically presented in an abstract or clinical manner (Bickmore, 2002). This practice misses an important opportunity to address all forms of healthy human sexuality,

including LGBTQ sexualities, from within a framework of human diversity, social justice, and democratic principles often available through aspects of the social studies or English curricula. This marked absence is an example of the “null curriculum;” it shows that what is actively not taught is just as important and revealing about a culture as what is overtly taught (Eisner, 2002; Flinders, Noddings, & Thornton, 1986; Posner, 1995).

Human Sexuality Curriculum in Canadian Catholic Schools

Although publicly funded Canadian Catholic schools are mandated to deliver the provincially approved curriculum, they opt out of the human sexuality component of physical education or life management curricula due to perceived conflicts with religious doctrine (Callaghan, 2007a). Canadian Catholic school boards develop their own guidelines for teaching human sexuality, which is taught in a family life unit comprising approximately 20% of a course simply called “religion,” where it can be presented within the confines of Catholic doctrine. For example, in 2006, the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops (OCCB) revamped their family life education program called “Fully Alive” for grades 1 through 8, and currently use two resources for the high school levels called *Turning Points* for grades 9 and 10 and *Reaching Out* for grades 11-12 (Durocher, 2007; OCCB, 2006). The development of the human sexuality curriculum for the “religion” classes taught in Canadian Catholic schools relies heavily upon the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CC, 1999), which teaches that sexuality is solely for procreative purposes between male and female spouses (paragraph 2361), that any type of contraception other than the rhythm method is “intrinsically evil” (paragraph 2370), and that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered” (paragraph 2357). In this way, students in Catholic schools receive a great deal of damaging misinformation about sexuality.

Other Opportunities to Address Sexual Diversity Issues

If students in Canadian Catholic schools receive a special version of the human sexuality curriculum that presents “homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity” (CC, 1999, paragraph 2357), and if there is very little affirmation of sexual minorities and diversity in other government-approved core curricula, does this mean that there is no opportunity to address LGBTQ matters in Canadian Catholic schools? According to Bickmore (2006), there are small pockets of opportunity within various Canadian curricula to address the types of social conflict, justice and diversity issues that may provide space for a discussion of sexual minorities. Although Bickmore found the curricula generally emphasize harmony and marginalize conflict, there was considerable evidence of attention to citizenship education through the development of conflict resolution skills such as interpersonal communication and getting along with others. Whether or not these conflict management elements in Canadian curricula would be taken up to address diversity, inclusivity and sexual minority issues would depend entirely on the willingness of individual teachers.

Teacher Agency in Addressing Controversial Social Issues

Bickmore (2005) shows that teacher agency is crucial to effectively encourage and guide students toward “difficult citizenship” (p. 2). By “difficult citizenship,” she is referring to citizens actively engaging in democratic disagreements to tackle injustices. Bickmore’s study shows that few teacher-training opportunities exist, either pre-service or in-service, that would enable teachers to learn how to prepare students for difficult citizenship. Other research into the actual practice of social justice education shows that raising controversial social issues is both difficult and complex, and therefore not common (Banks & Banks, 1995; Brandes & Kelly, 2000; Hess, 2005; Kelly & Brandes, 2001; Werner, 1998). Kelly and Brandes, in particular, point to an important caveat that societal inequalities reduce the possibilities for teaching democratic citizenship in public schools. The authors claim that effectively teaching democratic citizenship would be even more problematic in the authoritarian and hierarchical atmospheres that typify faith-based schools where powerful conservative social forces are at work. Teacher agency is therefore complexly part of both the solution and the problem.

Whether teachers are trained in handling controversial issues or not, they continue to be cautious with them in the classroom due to formidable disincentives such as teacher costs and school cultures (Werner, 1998). Curriculum theorist, Diana E. Hess (2005), points out that teachers’ political views influence what they regard as a controversial

topic, and whether or not it should be broached in the classroom. In the case of Canadian Catholic schools, the school culture is such that teachers are expected to uphold Catholic doctrine regardless of any opposing views they may personally hold. Therefore, few teachers in Canadian Catholic schools may be willing to discuss sexual or gender diversity, even if they had received appropriate training in how to approach such controversial topics.

Of course, there are always exceptions. Some teachers in Canadian Catholic schools may have an interest in human rights and social justice activism, and may be willing to address the controversial topic of sexual minorities in social studies, English, or religion classes. Indeed, because of extensive media coverage, many Canadians are now aware of the progressive advancement of same-sex legal rights in Canada made possible by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Department of Justice Canada, n.d.) and key Supreme Court of Canada decisions. Emboldened by a new awareness of their *Charter* rights, some lesbians and gay men who are teaching in Canadian Catholic schools may consider the option of legally and openly marrying their same-sex partners. This type of social change would heighten awareness of human rights issues related to sexuality that could lead to an increased willingness to address the controversial issue of sexual minority rights in Catholic classrooms.

Student Agency and Conscientization

Even though the majority of government-approved curricular materials are mute on the topic of sexual minorities and most teachers are reluctant to address controversial issues, this does not mean sexual diversity will never be raised in the classroom. Students may very well raise the subject. Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire points to the important role of student agency when he asks, “Who declares that the students know nothing?” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 108). For Freire (1990), involving students in the process of determining what will be studied is an important component of his educational practice for democracy and critical consciousness. One of the foundations of this idea can be traced to an earlier educational philosopher, John Dewey (1929/2004), who stresses the importance of the subjective experience of individual people in introducing revolutionary new ideas. Building on Freire’s notion of “conscientization” – arriving at a critical consciousness – (Freire, 2000, p. 19), critical educational theorist Kevin Kumashiro (2004) suggests that learning and teaching should involve a state of crisis for both the student and the teacher. By “crisis” Kumashiro (2004, p. 28) means “a state of emotional discomfort and disorientation that calls upon the student [or teacher] to make some change” (p. 28). Change is a key word for critical theorists of education who seek to emancipate oppressed groups from discriminatory educational practices.

Students in Canadian Catholic schools who have a fearless interest in justice may agitate for change or initiate a *learning crisis*. A case in point is Marc Hall who, at the age of 17, successfully challenged his Catholic secondary school in Oshawa, Ontario and won the right to take his boyfriend to his high school prom (Callaghan, 2007a; Grace & Wells, 2005). Additionally, some Canadian Catholic students are attempting to establish Gay-Straight Alliances in their schools, albeit under less provocative names such as “The Diversity Club” that was successfully set up in a Catholic high school in Edmonton, Alberta (Callaghan). Although these examples are from the sphere of school policy and practice, they can also be regarded as instances of a hidden curriculum, or anything other than the explicit curriculum that students learn in school (Apple, 1990; Giroux & Purpel, 1983). Since government curriculum tends to perpetuate particular forms of power, knowledge, and ignorance, these instances of student activism in Canadian Catholic schools, along with others similar to those initiated by STAR and TEACH referred to earlier, may be instrumental in generating curriculum crises that can ultimately influence the “curriculum-in-use” (Werner, 1991, p. 114) in Catholic classrooms.

Recommendations for Improvement

Teacher self-censorship is the most powerful form of censorship that takes place in schools (Thornton, 2002; Bickmore, 2002). Fear of objections from students’ parents or reprisals from administration can force teachers in Canadian Catholic schools to avoid controversial topics or even democratic practices such as freedom of expression. Teachers who do have the courage to address homophobia and heterosexism in Canadian Catholic schools can protect themselves against negative repercussions by knowing their rights. Most Canadian provincial teacher

federations and associations have drafted and approved policies that protect teachers and students against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and, in some cases, gender identity. For example, The Canadian Teachers' Federation, a national union that represents teachers in Canada, approved a policy on anti-homophobia and anti-heterosexism at its July 2004 Annual General Meeting (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2004). Whether teachers in Canadian Catholic schools are aware of such progressive policies within their profession is another matter. Even if Catholic teachers know about the advancement of same-sex legal rights on a broader scale in Canadian culture, they would need to fortify themselves with ample personal assertiveness and prepare strong counter arguments in order to successfully defend themselves against any charges that their willingness to broach the topic of sexual diversity in class is contrary to *Catholicity*.

Given that teachers who end up teaching in Catholic schools receive similar teacher training as those who find work teaching for non-Catholic schools, it is clear that pre-service education in how to effectively teach for *difficult* democratic citizenship is of paramount importance. Teachers in Catholic schools need to know that they have a right to address sexual minority issues in the classroom but, more importantly, they need to receive appropriate knowledge and skill development in how to effectively address heterosexism and homophobia in schools. Pre-service teacher training in social justice education is especially important for those teachers who are eventually employed in Catholic schools because the authoritarian culture of Catholic schools is a powerful silencer of divergent views.

Considering students in most North American schools are generally presented with curriculum that serves to legitimate the existing social order (Giroux 2003; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2004), the inclusion of sexual minority issues such as homophobic bullying in the 2007 Secondary English Curriculum for Ontario is very encouraging. However, more attention needs to be paid to historical discrimination against sexual minority groups in the social justice and citizenship components of official social studies curricula throughout the Canadian provinces. Relegating discussion of lgbtq matters to a small segment of the human sexuality component of a life management or physical education curriculum is problematic as many times this material is presented on a disease model or through a clinical perspective (Lenskyj, 1994). Furthermore, if discussions of lgbtq topics are relegated to the human sexuality unit, Canadian Catholic school boards can simply refuse to teach this curriculum on religious grounds. Sexual orientation and gender identity are topics that are best addressed in a human rights, social justice, or critical literacy framework. The social studies and English curricula are therefore important sites for encouraging democratic thinking through discussions of controversial issues such as sexual and gender diversity.

Conclusion

Despite the increased media coverage of human rights issues related to sexual minorities, there is little affirmative representation of lgbtq people and concerns in officially mandated curriculum. Simply making small changes to the explicit social studies curriculum, for example, by including references to lgbtq activism in discussions about human rights and citizenship are important first steps to reducing homophobia and heterosexism in schools and eventually the larger community. It is important not to ghettoize this topic by relegating it to the human sexuality component of the physical education curriculum where the human rights element may not be addressed. Incorporating sexual minority matters into elements of the explicit curricula becomes especially important when Catholic schools are taken into consideration because these schools often blithely engage in a *policy polka* or a *curriculum cotillion*, where they metaphorically *dance away* from their obligations to address sexual diversity. For a variety of understandable reasons, many teachers avoid controversial topics such as sexual minority rights. Avoidance of sensitive subjects is especially common in Catholic schools where an authoritarian culture demands strict adherence to Catholic doctrine. Given the changing nature of popular discourse around lgbtq issues – the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada and the increasingly positive portrayal of lgbtq people in popular culture and the media, for example – this continued denial of lgbtq reality will only become more problematic in Canadian Catholic schools.

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Notes

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