

KRISTOPHER WELLS



GENERATION QUEER: SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH AND CANADIAN SCHOOLS

Marc Hall just wanted to be “treated like a normal human being.”¹ In 2002, he launched a lawsuit against his Roman Catholic school board in a fight to win the right to take his boyfriend to his grade twelve prom. When asked why he took the school board to court, he answered, “Don’t you see that I’m not fighting for this just because it’s my prom? It’s my whole life and the lives of other gay people. I’m fighting for what so many people don’t understand. I’m trying to speed up the process of equality because I am sick of being treated like someone absent of feeling and emotion.”²

On May 10, 2002 – the day of Marc’s Prom – Justice MacKinnon ruled in Marc’s favour, upholding the equality provisions in Section 15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and granted Marc an interlocutory injunction allowing him to attend the prom with his boyfriend.

Marc Hall and the politicization surrounding his case brought a newfound voice and visibility to queer youth issues in Canada. His brave stand galvanized a generation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, and queer (LGBTQ) youth who would no longer be forced to remain silent and invisible in their schools. Marc’s struggle for basic

human rights and recognition was their struggle. His prom fight represented a significant “tipping point” in Canadian education. Buoyed by Marc’s courage and determination to say no to the forces of oppression, other LGBTQ youth began to file human rights complaints against their schools. Often with the support of their families, these youth challenged the pedagogy of negation they had experienced in their schools. This was a new generation of queer youth who had developed the confidence and support to speak out and demand that their human and civil rights be respected. No longer would they remain in the classroom closet.

In order to understand this trend towards resilience and the emergence of “Generation Queer” in Canadian schools, we need to examine the research that has shaped our understandings of the health and safety needs and experiences of these vulnerable youth. Correspondingly, we also need to examine the opinions and experiences of Canadian LGBTQ youth, themselves. These understandings are necessary if we are to fulfill our responsibilities as educators and help sexual minority youth move from feeling at risk to becoming resilient in their schools and communities.

RESEARCH TRENDS

In his typology of the emergence of LGBTQ youth-related research, Ritch Savin-Williams identifies four stages in the evolution of our understanding of the needs and experiences of sexual minority youth.³

- **First stage response: 1970s & 80s.** During this stage, the experiences of LGBTQ youth were positioned as “a distinct category from ‘normal’ adolescence.”⁴ LGBTQ

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SEXUALITY AS MUCH MORE FLUID, SITUATIONAL, AND RELATIONAL

THAN PREVIOUS GENERATIONS.



EN BREF Dans les écoles canadiennes, les attitudes et réactions aux jeunes de minorités sexuelles évoluent rapidement depuis quelques années. Les jeunes du pays acceptent mieux les minorités sexuelles que leurs parents et enseignants. Néanmoins, les jeunes de minorités sexuelles demeurent plus à risque que leurs pairs hétérosexuels d'être les cibles de violence et de persécution, d'éprouver des difficultés d'adaptation et de manquer de soutien social. D'après une étude, 23,8 pour cent des élèves sondés avaient été témoins d'un acte de violence physique ou verbale contre une personne de minorité sexuelle de leur âge. Alors que l'âge auquel on « sort du placard » baisse continuellement, les jeunes de minorités sexuelles éprouvent des problèmes dans les écoles. Des études démontrent que les écoles peuvent procurer d'importants facteurs de protection contribuant à la résilience de ces élèves : une représentation positive dans le matériel pédagogique, des groupes de soutien, l'acceptation des familles, les politiques scolaires et l'éducation à la santé qui ne porte pas de jugement.

youth in this stage were constructed as deviant, pathological, and in need of specialized medical intervention. For example, before 1973 homosexuality was considered a mental illness. After the American Psychological Association de-classified homosexuality as a pathology, research began to move beyond attempts to cure adolescents of homosexuality to a focus on helping them learn how to develop mastery over stigma and shame.

- **Second stage response: 1980s & 90s.** In this period, distinctive LGBTQ youth realities were recognized, although primarily through a clinical lens, as being at risk for increased drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, violence, suicide, and school-related problems. The research literature from this time period is dense with narratives of victimization, or what Rofes identifies as the "martyr-target-victim" paradigm.⁵ The key outcomes of this early research led to the widespread recognition of formal schooling as an exclusionary heteronormative site with tremendous consequences for the health and safety of sexual minority youth. Quantitative research studies on the risk factors associated with being or being perceived as a sexual minority youth became critical catalysts in advocating for educational interventions and political responses to the health and safety needs of LGBTQ students. Anti-gay violence and abuse in symbolic and physical forms became a serious source of concern.
- **Third stage response: Late 1990s and early 2000's.** This progressive stage is characterized by education for social change to ameliorate the social, cultural, and political marginalization of sexual minorities. Educational

interventions focus on the creation of safe spaces, LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, and anti-harassment policy development. Advocacy is based in identity politics and liberal human-rights discourses that call for a "space at the table." Rapid and significant gains are being made in law and legislation at the federal and provincial levels. For example, in 1998, the Supreme Court of Canada read sexual orientation into the Alberta human-rights statute, and in 2005 same-sex marriage was legalized in Canada. However, these gains are largely assimilationist in nature and the (hetero)normalizing structures of schooling have been left largely intact. During this time period, research on LGBTQ youth has begun to shift its emphasis and concentrate on a resiliency or developmental assets-based approach. The protective factors that enable LGBTQ youth to overcome discrimination and thrive as leading change agents in their schools are becoming an increasingly key focus for educational interventions and research investigations.

- **Fourth stage: Future response.** With increasing gains in the legal recognition and protection of LGBTQ individuals, Savin-Williams argues that "banality" may be the wave of the future. He posits that youth are increasingly adopting a "post-gay" identity where sexuality is no longer considered the defining characteristic of their personhood. Savin-Williams maintains that the everyday ordinariness of same-sex attractions may well become the defining feature for the future of LGBTQ youth. Because of these controversial claims, this fourth stage, banality, is currently one of the most contested issues in the field of LGBTQ educational studies. Many researchers argue that our society will reach a post-gay world at the same time we emerge into a post-racist world, neither of which appears to be on the horizon anytime soon.

CANADIAN QUEER YOUTH TRENDS

Evidence from two large-scale Canadian surveys has reaffirmed earlier research, finding that sexual-minority youth reported more emotional and behavioral difficulties; higher symptoms of depression and externalizing behaviors; more hostile peer environments and victimization; greater rates of bullying and sexual harassment; and less social support in both their family and peer group contexts than their heterosexual peers. On the other hand, they also point to a slow, yet growing sense of LGBTQ acceptance among Canadian youth.



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TARGETS OF VIOLENCE AND VICTIMIZATION.

In 2004, I had the opportunity to work with Youthography, a division of Ping national marketing, to develop survey questions to explore the opinions and experiences of youth in relation to sexual minority issues in Canada. These questions were part of a large-scale survey of 1,358 youth between the ages of 13 and 29, from every province and territory in Canada, on a wide variety of “hot button” social issues.⁶ The survey highlighted the following youth trends as they relate to sexual minority issues:

- 3.5% of respondents self-identified as an LGBTQ person.
- Of the respondents who identified themselves as heterosexual, 7.5% acknowledged experimenting sexually with members of their own sex.
- 58% reported knowing an LGBTQ coworker or classmate.
- 62% agreed or completely agreed that they were very comfortable with the topic of LGBTQ issues.
- 23.8% reported witnessing an act of violence or verbal abuse directed toward an LGBTQ person their own age. In the 15-19 (high school) age group, this rate increased to 27.5%.

To date this survey represents the only national quantitative baseline data on the experiences of LGBTQ youth in Canada. Its results show a significant shift in attitudes and beliefs towards sexual minorities among today's youth. Increasingly, young people are more comfortable with LGBTQ issues than their parents and teachers, and they view sexuality as much more fluid, situational, and relational than previous generations. Perhaps, this is why so many youth prefer “queer” as an identity marker rather than lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

The word queer comes from the Latin *torquere*, which means to twist or traverse. Today's youth are not only challenging, but also twisting and re-deploying traditional understandings of sexuality and gender. Members of “Generation Queer” are increasingly reluctant to have their identities categorized into neat boxes. Many youth are actively embracing post-modern identities, which address the messiness and complexity of an increasingly diverse world.

In 2005, researchers Williams, Connolly, Pepler, and Craig studied a sample of 97 gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning high school students from a large south central Canadian city.⁷ This data was collected from a



large-scale survey of 1,598 adolescents from five high schools. Six percent of the students surveyed self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning (45 males and 52 females). Notably, 53 of the 97 participants described their identity as questioning. These questioning youth, according to the study, experience similar rates of victimization, adjust-

ment difficulties, and perceived social-support experiences as their LGBTQ peers. More research is needed to investigate their school experiences, as well as those of heterosexual youth who come from same-gender parented families.

Overall, the results from this study suggest that the depression and externalizing behaviours reported by sexual-minority and questioning youth are largely a result of their experiences with victimization and a lack of social support. Importantly, these risk factors are not increased by a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity alone, but are exacerbated by the lack of a supportive and understanding social and educational environment.

The results also point to an emerging trend: LGBTQ youth are coming out at younger and younger ages. Whereas the “coming out” age used to be in the early to mid twenties, research now indicates that the average LGBTQ youth comes out at age 15 or 16, which squarely places sexual minority issues in today's classrooms.⁸ However, many LGBTQ youth find themselves caught in a double bind; they often need to come out to access supports and services (particularly in rural communities), yet by coming out they also become more likely targets of violence and victimization.

Violence and safety are ever-present concerns in the lives of all sexual minority youth. Sexual minorities are among the most frequently targeted groups for hate and bias crimes in Canada. In 2005, criminologist Douglas Janoff released a groundbreaking study on homophobic violence in Canada.⁹ His book begins with a necrology detailing the more than 100 homicides of LGBTQ persons in Canada from 1990-2004. More than 40% of the perpetrators of these hate crimes were homophobic teenagers. Correspondingly, the Public Health Agency of Canada identifies the most common perpetrators of youth violence as young, heterosexual males. The most common victims of youth violence are: “peers, including girlfriends, boyfriends and other young people; family members, including siblings and parents; and members of ethnocultural groups or sexual minorities.”¹⁰

MOVING FROM RISK TO RESILIENCE

Given what we know about the educational experiences, health, and safety needs of sexual minorities, how can we, as inclusive educators, help sexual minority youth move from risk to resilience in their schools? Perhaps more pointedly, what conditions enable some youth to overcome tremendous obstacles and still thrive in hostile school environments? How can we, as educators and researchers, learn from these examples to help other youth develop what Goldstein and Brooks identify as a “resilient mindset”?¹¹

Contemporary researchers have identified the following protective factors as critical ingredients in helping to build the resiliency of sexual minority youth.



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- **Positive representations:** Affirming representations that move beyond stereotypical portrayals of LGBTQ persons in the classroom curriculum, on television, in magazines, and on the radio, build the self-esteem and foster the healthy development of sexual minority youth. Ask yourself, are the images on the walls of my classroom and in the books in my school library inclusive of sexual minorities?¹²
- **Family acceptance:** Welcoming and affirming family relationships are arguably the most important resiliency factors in the lives of sexual-minority youth, helping them develop a positive sense of self and reducing the stresses associated with coming out and coming to terms with a non-heterosexual identity. Ask yourself, is my school a welcoming and supportive place for same-gender parented families?
- **School and peer support:** Teacher training on LGBTQ issues is associated with the development of positive school outcomes and can help decrease the stress associated with homophobic bullying and harassment. Gay-straight student alliances (GSAs) are one powerful example of school-based supports that can help to foster resiliency. For example, research indicates that schools with GSAs have a “significantly less hostile, more supportive psychosocial climate for LGB [lesbian, gay, bisexual] students” than those without.¹³ Ask yourself, does my school have a GSA or similar support groups for LGBTQ students?
- **School-based policies:** Schools with policies that explicitly prohibit discrimination on the grounds of sexual

orientation and gender identity are also considered a significant resiliency factor in the lives of sexual-minority youth. Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer found that schools with support groups for sexual minority students were more likely than other schools to have written policies on sexual orientation and were more likely to have provided staff training to support those policies. Clearly, the school environment is a major influence in suicidal tendencies and other risk factors that sexual minority youth experience. As Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer state:

Threats, harassment, and intimidation at school may be especially critical for sexual minority youth.... Anti-gay victimization has been found to occur often in the presence of others, and is sometimes even encouraged and applauded by peers.... [As a result,] LGB adolescents may be reluctant to report even the most severe victimization if they perceive school authorities as unsympathetic, unapproachable, and unwilling to intervene on their behalf.¹⁴

Ask yourself, does my school have anti-homophobia policies in place? Are these policies clearly articulated to staff, students, and parents at the beginning of the school year/term?

- **Support networks:** LGBTQ youth are often the most important sources of support for one another. The shared experience of coming out in a heteronormative world can help to foster a sense of connection, which, in turn, reduces feelings of isolation, alienation, and despair. For example, community-based support groups offer a critical source of resilience by providing a place where sexual minority youth can openly discuss their feelings without fear of stigmatization or violence. These groups provide an opportunity for peer-to-peer and intergenerational mentoring, where “everyday” role models can help youth develop real-life strategies for overcoming adversity within their local communities. Ask yourself, do I know where to refer LGBTQ youth for support in my community?
- **Sexual health education:** Fears and inaccurate information related to sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS can lead to increased risk-taking behaviours and suicidal thoughts for sexual-minority youth. It is important for educators to challenge stereotypes and misinformation that conflate sexual practices with specific sexual identities. HIV/AIDS does not discriminate based on sexual identity. Correspondingly, accurate and LGBTQ-inclusive information, provided in a non-judgmental manner, is strongly correlated with a reduction in sexual risk-taking behaviors. Unfortunately, many sexual-minority youth continue to be denied access to non-judgmental sexual health information in their schools, families, libraries, and communities, placing them at increased risk for physical, emotional, and mental health problems. Ask yourself, are the units taught on sexual health and healthy relationships in my school inclusive of the health needs of LGBTQ youth?

Collectively, these protective factors can help sexual minority youth to develop a resilient mindset. However, we should be mindful “that resilience is not absolute. Virtually every youth has a breaking point.”¹⁵ With a variety of

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supports in place, youth can be encouraged to develop a "resiliency toolbox" from which they can select the right tool or strategy to help them address a particular problem or challenge in their lives. By having the right tool for the right challenge, youth are better able to cope with adversity and the complex challenges of personal growth and development in a heteronormalizing world. |

KRISTOPHER WELLS is a Killam Fellow and SSHRC Canada Graduate Doctoral Scholar in the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta. He is also an Associate Editor for the Journal of LGBT Youth and is the author of *The Gay-Straight Student Alliance Handbook* (2006), co-author of *Challenging Silence, Challenging Censorship* (2007) both of which are published by the Canadian Teachers' Federation, and co-founder of Camp fyrefly (www.fyrefly.ualberta.ca), an annual summer leadership retreat for sexual minority youth. Comments are invited at kristopher.wells@ualberta.ca

Notes

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- 5 E. Rofes, "Martyr-target-Victim: Interrogating Narratives of Persecution and Suffering Among Queer Youth," in *Youth and Sexualities: Pleasure, Subversion, and Insubordination In and Out of Schools*, eds. M.L. Rasmussen, E. Rofes, and S. Talburt (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004): 41-62.
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- 12 See my co-authored book for suggestions on how to build and inclusive library collection. A. M. Schrader and K. Wells, *Challenging Silence, Challenging Censorship: Inclusive Resources, Strategies and Policy Directives for Addressing BGLTT Realities in School and Public Libraries* (Ottawa, ON: Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2007). Also available in French.
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