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# Beyond the Dialectics and Polemics: Canadian Catholic Schools Addressing LGBT Youth Issues

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## Beyond the Dialectics and Polemics: Canadian Catholic Schools Addressing LGBT Youth Issues

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*In 2012, Canadian media coverage on Bill 13—an Ontario legislative proposal to require all publicly funded schools to support Gay-Straight Alliances as a means of addressing issues concerning bullied lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students—instigated a divisive exchange among representatives of the Ontario Catholic school sector. Beyond these dialectics and polemics, a proactive mix of advocates from schools in the Waterloo Catholic District School Board (WCDSB) of Ontario took steady steps to address the circumstances of their LGBT students. This study included semi-structured interviews with ten stakeholders from the WCDSB to determine if strategies and programs deemed successful for supporting LGBT students in public, secular schools in the United States could also be successful in supporting LGBT students in publicly funded Canadian Catholic schools. The study findings revealed that the strategies and programs could indeed be successful in supporting LGBT students in Canadian Catholic schools. We further found that the success of strategies and programs was influenced by factors such as acknowledging the priority of LGBT youth's needs over ongoing disputes, realizing the significant influence of Catholic values, and recognizing the necessity for school boards to maintain legitimacy as publicly funded institutions.*

Keywords: Canadian, Catholic, high schools, Gay-Straight Alliances, LGBT youth

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The challenges that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students face in North American high schools, particularly in the United States public school system, have been well documented in several research studies (Hansen, 2007; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). Not surprisingly, the recognition of these challenges has led to the development and evaluation of different strategies and programs to offset risks, establish school-based support, and promote school success for LGBT students (Fisher et al., 2008; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Hansen, 2007; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz,

2010). Although numerous peer-reviewed articles have documented the benefits and limitations of implementing certain strategies and programs in public schools in the US to support LGBT youth (Doppler, 2000; Hackford-Peer, 2010; Lee, 2002; Mayberry, 2007; McCready, 2003; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010), only a few researchers have looked into the success of these strategies and programs in Canada (Goldstein, Collins, & Halder, 2005, 2008; St. John, et al., 2014). Additionally, few studies have examined support for LGBT youth in North American faith-based or religious schools (Bayly, 2007; Maher, 2004). Although the differences between the educational systems of the US and Canada need to be considered and appropriately contextualized, this study was conducted to determine if empirically established strategies and programs that have been found to be successful in supporting LGBT students in public schools in the US could also be successful in supporting LGBT students in publicly funded Canadian Catholic schools.

## **Literature Review**

### *Challenges and Risks for LGBT Youth in High Schools*

LGBT students face challenges in high school due to longstanding prejudices and discrimination. Studies verify that they are often at greater risk for harassment, prejudice, and the potential development of a number of emotional, behavioral, and social problems including depression, suicide, dropping out, truancy, homelessness, and problematic substance use (Fisher et al., 2008; Russell, 2003; Van Wormer & McKinney, 2003). Due to homophobic harassment, LGBT students tend to have lower academic outcomes and lower self-esteem that make them more susceptible to negative social influences compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013). Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006) noted that effects of school harassment on LGBT students also spill over into life outside of school. In addition to the effects of harassment LGBT students report in schools, many of them experience stress at home, conflict with their families, internalized homonegativity, and sexual risk-taking (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011). These often lead to greater isolation and marginalization. Research indicates that reactions to LGBT youth's sexual orientation may be a key factor in identifying elevated risks (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009; Ryan, Huebner, Diaz & Sanchez, 2009). LGBT students who experience peer, teacher, or parental rejection upon disclosure of their sexual orientation or gender identity appear to be at a greater risk for depression, suicide, and problematic substance use (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001). In response to these research findings, the past two decades have seen a dramatic increase in both public attention to school-based strategies and programs to support LGBT students, as well as academic research on the success of these strategies and programs.

### *Strategies and Programs for Supporting LGBT Youth in US Public Schools*

Among the various strategies carried out and found to be successful in supporting LGBT youth in US public schools, four were most commonly implemented. These strategies included: (a) creating safe spaces for LGBT students where they could congregate and receive counselling and support, (b) fostering school climates that value and promote tolerance and respect for LGBT individuals, (c) involving everyone within the school community in the process of supporting LGBT students, and (d) providing LGBT youth with more resources outside of their schools to meet their specific needs.

**Creating safe spaces for LGBT students.** Many advocates found that one of the best ways to support LGBT students was to create safe spaces where they could

congregate, socialize, and talk about issues that were important to them without feeling threatened or ridiculed. These safe spaces could also be places where LGBT youth could seek counselling from individuals who could provide guidance, or where they could obtain support from other students who understood what they were experiencing. By far, the most popular program for this strategy in the last two decades was school-based Gay Straight Alliances (GSA) or similar clubs. GSAs are typically student-run, non-curricular, after-school clubs that are open to all students, regardless of their sexual orientation, and established for the purposes of providing a safe space for addressing LGBT youth issues such as bullying, harassment, and marginalization (Fisher et al., 2008; Lugg, 2003). As safety had been a growing issue among educators and policymakers since the late 1980s (Lugg, 2003), part of the political appeal of GSAs was the attempt to provide LGBT students with protected spaces. In the 1990s, national organizations such as the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and Gay Straight Alliance Network (GSA Network) emerged in response to resistance of the establishment of GSAs and to help form GSAs in public schools across the US through the use of education and advocacy (Fetner & Kush, 2007).

In the past twenty years, there has been an upsurge of literature on institutional initiatives implemented to address the plight of LGBT students, particularly the creation of GSAs in schools to support LGBT youth who experienced homophobic or transphobic bullying. A growing body of research has emerged investigating the success of GSAs and other LGBT-affirming strategies and programs in supporting LGBT students' mental health and well-being. Resulting from this interest, a dialectic has been created between the espoused merits of their establishment in schools and the hidden drawbacks of organizing them. According to several journal articles favoring their utility, GSAs not only enhance LGBT students' level of safety and comfort, they also provide them with opportunities to develop healthy relationships with peers and school staff, increase visibility on campus, and promote awareness of LGBT rights and issues (Doppler, 2000; Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Szalacha, 2003). Other studies indicate that GSAs are safe spaces that help LGBT youth improve academic performance and class attendance (Lee, 2002; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010), develop positive personal identities (Garcia-Alonso, 2004; Mayberry, 2007), and decrease experiences of psychological distress, problematic substance use, and depression (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011). However, a few studies have contended that the specific focus of GSAs can overshadow the advancement of issues concerning racial minority students or youth from other marginalized populations (McCready, 2003), as well as draw attention away from the greater need for entire school systems, as opposed to just GSAs, to challenge persistent cultural norms and become more LGBT-affirming for students (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Hackford-Peer, 2010). Conservatives, citing abstinence-only policies, have referred to GSAs' use of public school space as obscene (Mayo, 2008).

### **Fostering school climates that promote tolerance and respect for LGBT individuals.**

Another strategy used to support LGBT youth in high schools has been the fostering of school climates that value and promote tolerance and respect for LGBT individuals, as well as raise awareness on LGBT issues among members of the different school communities. In order to implement this strategy, programs were launched to educate people about LGBT rights and to rally against adverse reactions and hostile attitudes towards diversity and inclusion. These programs were mostly created to prepare for and reinforce day-long LGBT-positive events in high schools such as Anti-Bullying Day, International Day Against Homophobia, and Day of Silence, as well as media campaigns like "Gener8tion NoH8" and the "It Gets Better" project

(NoH8 Campaign, 2011; Tossel, 2010). Although some have criticized these annual “visibility” programs as token symbols of improved school climate (Payne & Smith, 2012), the programs still managed to provide much-needed encouragement and hope to LGBT students.

**Involving everyone in the process of supporting LGBT students.** The strategy of getting everyone in the school community involved in the process of creating LGBT-positive substantive change (Griffin & Ouellett, 2002) is presumably the most sensible to implement among the four strategies. Since there are members at different levels of the school communities that need to be reached, various programs such as staff training and professional development, curricular changes, and LGBT-affirming school policies have been carried out in order to get as many members as possible from different levels of the school communities involved in supporting LGBT students (Doppler, 2000; Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Horowitz & Hansen, 2008; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Szalacha, 2003). Apart from getting both LGBT students and their straight allies involved, the establishment of GSAs in schools also provided youth significant opportunities for developing student agency, activism, and leadership (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). Staff training and professional development activities in public schools got teachers, counsellors, office personnel, and even representatives at the administrative level more involved in addressing LGBT issues (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013; Horowitz & Hansen, 2008; Payne & Smith, 2010, 2011, 2012). The implementation of high school staff training on LGBT concerns has been associated with lower rates of homophobic harassment and higher rates of students reporting that teachers and personnel intervened during episodes of homophobic bullying and the making of derogatory statements (Hansen, 2007; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). The majority of researchers attributed these encouraging rates to an increase in awareness of LGBT perspectives and rights, as well as an increase in confidence in managing LGBT issues, among staff who underwent LGBT-affirming training. Likewise, programs that encouraged curricular changes to incorporate more LGBT-inclusive material resulted in greater LGBT student support among teachers, curriculum consultants, administrators, superintendents, and trustees of the school boards. In an article using the 2009 National School Climate Survey experiences in US public schools, Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, and Bartkiewicz (2010) stressed the importance of incorporating positive representations of LGBT people, history, and events in school curricula in order to improve the experiences of LGBT students during their four years of secondary school. Lastly, school-based programs such as staff retreats have also involved school community members in the design and creation of LGBT-affirming school board policies (Griffin & Ouellett, 2002). These programs were found to positively influence the organizational settings of most of the schools that implemented them, and the policies created from these programs were able to help inform statewide legislation.

**Providing LGBT youth with resources outside of their schools.** The fourth strategy that some schools employed was providing their LGBT students with more resources they could easily access, particularly resources that were beyond their own schools’ capacities to provide. This strategy was carried out by initiating and maintaining programs that connected their LGBT students with community-based resources created through inter-agency networks. By establishing alliances with LGBT-positive agencies from their immediate outside community, schools were able to provide access to resources to their LGBT students such as external funding, technical expertise, social networking, and materials such as books and videos that catered to their interests and needs (St. John et al., 2014). These extra resources were especially important for LGBT students who were studying in schools located in rural

communities (Snively, 2003). According to Griffin and Ouellett (2002), providing LGBT youth access to more resources from community partner agencies is an important step to going beyond simply creating safe spaces and offering socialization to these marginalized students.

*The Importance of Legislation Backing LGBT-Affirming Strategies and Programs*

It is imperative to note that among the relevant studies that examined the value of carrying out concurrent multiple strategies and programs to support LGBT youth in high schools, researchers agreed on the importance of having state and federal legislation backing the implementation of these strategies and programs (Fetner & Kush, 2007; Griffin & Ouellett, 2002; Szalacha, 2003). Griffin and Ouellett (2002) emphasized that statewide legal mandates, especially ones that provided technical, legal, and financial resources to advocates for LGBT issues, encouraged the creation of policies at the public school board level, which in turn facilitated the implementation of strategies and programs in schools that directly supported LGBT students. Fetner and Kush (2007) pointed out that legislation that specifically targeted LGBT students' issues not only generally provided policy support for advocates but also represented an important cultural message of support for LGBT rights.

*The Canadian Catholic School System Context*

Although a large body of research conducted worldwide over the last two decades has brought scientific attention to homophobia in schools and the relationship between adolescent sexual orientation development, health issues, and risk behaviours (Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998; Marshal et al., 2008; Russell, 2011; Russell & Joyner, 2001; Saewyc, 2011), the majority of research on strategies to address issues affecting LGBT students has been within the context of the US public school system. In the US, where education is provided either by public schools that are funded and controlled by the government, or by private schools that receive no government-funding and are operated mostly by religious institutions, very few strategies and programs to support LGBT students have existed in the religiously affiliated private schools (Getz & Kirkley, 2006). Apart from a few publications that have looked into the success of GSAs and promoted the creation of safe staff through professional development in US Catholic high schools (Bayly, 2007; Maher, 2004), most of the research involving U.S. faith-based or private schools has focused on examining the attitudes, perspectives, and experiences of students and teachers on homosexuality (Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Kirby & Michaelson, 2008; Maher & Sever, 2007).

In Canada, the educational system differs in the sense that public funding from the government is not only provided to public secular schools but also to Catholic separate schools in certain provinces such as Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. In this context there have been only a few studies on the success of GSAs and other strategies and programs that support LGBT youth in high schools (Goldstein, Collins, & Halder, 2005, 2008; St. John et al., 2014). Moreover, there have been even fewer studies specifically acknowledging faith-related homophobia in publicly funded Canadian Catholic separate schools (Callaghan, 2009). For the most part, research in the Canadian school system context has solely focused on the bullying of LGBT students and the need to challenge the homophobia and transphobia responsible for these students' marginalization (McCaskell, 2005; McCaskell & Russell, 2000; Short, 2008; Walton, 2004).

Outside academic discourse, LGBT student issues and the institutional strategies and programs created to address them in Canada have been increasingly investigated in the last few years. Media coverage has closely documented developments that highlight indicators of public support for addressing these issues, such as the

successful, transnational “It Gets Better” web campaign to lessen the adverse impacts of LGBT youth harassment (Tossel, 2010), the overturning of the Halton (Ontario) Catholic District School Board ban on GSAs after a barrage of international criticism (Wallace, 2011), and the outrage and outpouring of sympathy for the tragic suicide of bullied Ottawa gay teenager, Jamie Hubley (Burke, 2011). Even greater media attention was drawn to the issue of homophobic and transphobic bullying when then-Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty announced in December 2011 that the provincial government was proposing a new amendment to the Education Act, Bill 13, or the “Accepting Schools Act” (Lewis, 2011). According to this press release, Bill 13 would require all publicly funded school boards (both secular and Catholic separate) to implement programs and policies that combat bullying and “promote a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting of all pupils, including pupils of any race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnicity, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status, or disability...” (Lewis, 2011; Ontario Legislative Assembly, 2012) It would also call for “activities or organizations that promote the awareness and understanding of, and respect for, people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, including organizations with the name Gay-Straight Alliances or another name” (Ontario Legislative Assembly, 2012). This announcement sparked a contentious debate between the Ontario government and some representatives of the Catholic school system, as well as among many of the representatives of the Ontario Catholic school system themselves. The debate would last for over half a year (Lewis, 2012; Nonato, 2012; Perkel, 2012). The subsequent polemics surrounding the implementation of GSAs and other LGBT-affirming strategies and programs in publicly funded high schools from January to June of 2012 were thoroughly documented by the Canadian news media, both in print and online.

In February 2012, the National Post reported that the Ontario Catholic School Trustees’ Association (OCSTA), supported by the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario (ACBO), presented a new 15-page school counter-document that recommended stringent guidelines for the formation of more generic “Respecting Differences” clubs in place of GSAs, which they deemed too controversial and an affront to Catholic discipline and values (Nonato, 2012). By April 2012, despite rising tensions between the opposing sides, it was clear to the mass media that there was a split among the Ontario Roman Catholic school representatives over the acceptance of GSAs and other LGBT-affirming strategies and programs in their campuses. While the OCSTA and ACBO were against Bill 13, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association (OECTA), representing 44,000 Catholic school board teachers, supported it (Lewis, 2012). Before the end of May 2012, then-Education Minister Laurel Broten confirmed that there were going to be no further compromises with the Ontario Catholic school boards. She stated that once Bill 13 was passed, students and teachers would be able to form LGBT-affirming clubs in their schools if they desired, and call them by any name, even if they chose the name “Gay-Straight Alliance” (Perkel, 2012). After the Ontario Legislative Assembly (OLA) passed Bill 13 into law on June 5, 2012, the ACBO released a concession statement to the press attesting that Ontario Catholic high schools will abide by the Accepting Schools Act requiring them to allow GSA-type clubs and other LGBT-affirming programs in their campuses. They also emphasized that at no point was civil disobedience to the new law ever considered (Mann, 2012).

### **Research Focus and Purposes of the Study**

In Canada, full public funding in provinces such as Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, are not only provided to public secular schools, but also to Catholic separate schools based on previously established constitutional provisions (Canadian

Constitution Act, 1867). So despite their religious affiliation, these Canadian Catholic separate schools are under the mandates of local, provincial, and federal government. The main purpose of this study was to determine if empirically established strategies and programs known to be successful in supporting LGBT students in US public high schools could also be successful in supporting LGBT students in publicly funded Canadian Catholic high schools. An additional purpose was to identify factors that would be essential for the success of these strategies and programs in Canadian Catholic high schools. In pursuing the purposes of the study, we hope to fill a gap in existing research by determining if these previously researched strategies and programs can succeed in supporting LGBT youth outside of the US public school system context and identify factors essential for such success to occur.

## **Method**

### *Participants and Procedures*

The participants included in this study are part of a larger study examining the success of GSAs and other LGBT-affirming programs in supporting LGBT students in the Waterloo Region of Ontario, Canada. This larger study is being conducted by the Equity, Sexual Health, and HIV (ESH-HIV) Research Group of Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), in cooperation with the OK2BME program of KW Counselling Services<sup>1</sup>. OK2BME was a program established to provide counselling and support for Waterloo Region's LGBT youth, as well as education and professional development for the stakeholders of both the Waterloo Catholic District School Board (WCDSB) and the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB). Over the years, the ESH-HIV Research Group of WLU and OK2BME of KW Counselling have worked together as community partners to identify and address LGBT youth concerns and issues in the Waterloo Region. The study was reviewed and approved by the WLU Research Ethics Board (REB) prior to the commencement of recruitment strategies and participant interviews. An REB-approved interview guide was used by a single interviewer, the primary author, to maintain a degree of structure within and uniformity among the participant interviews.

The primary author of this study interviewed one former and two current students, two teachers, a school administrator, and two trustees from the WCDSB, as well as two service providers who were involved with supporting Waterloo Region LGBT students, within a period of ten months, between August 2012 and May 2013. The teachers had been teaching in high school for over five years, while the school administrator had over a decade of experience in an administrative capacity, at the time of their interviews. The two trustees had been with the Catholic school board for over a year when they were interviewed. Among the ten participants, the three students and one of the service providers self-identified as part of the region's LGBT community. The participants took part in confidential, semi-structured, 60–90 minute, audiotaped interviews.

The researchers recruited the informants using a variety of strategies, initially using purposive sampling methods, and later, through snowball sampling. The first round of recruitment was carried out in the summer of 2012 when the primary author posted flyers enlisting participation for the study at the premises of OK2BME and other agencies affiliated with KW Counselling Services. The primary author circulated recruitment emails through the OK2BME e-mail network with the help of the

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<sup>1</sup> KW Counselling Services is a multi-service agency located in Kitchener, Ontario, providing individual, family, group, parenting, and outreach supports to the communities of the Waterloo Region of Ontario, Canada.

program's facilitators and an advertisement was placed on their website. A second round of recruitment took place on October 2012 during the GSA conference sponsored by OK2BME, where advocate students, teachers, and administrators from both the WRDSB and WCDSB attended in full force. The researchers recruited certain interviewees through personal and professional networks established through the auspices of OK2BME. The researchers recruited some participants based on referrals from initial interviewees who suggested names of other key stakeholders. This led to a greater range of perspectives coming from various informants within the different levels of the region's Catholic school board and the service providers who closely worked with them. All participants provided informed consent prior to their interview and youth received a \$25 honorarium following their participation. The primary author conducted interviews either at WLU, KW Counselling Services, or at a private community location chosen by the participant.

### *Materials and Analysis*

The researchers transcribed interviews verbatim and then coded data using NVivo 10 software. They used a modified Grounded Theory approach, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994), for the analysis of the interview transcripts. As a modification to the conventional Grounded Theory approach, three members of the ESH-HIV Research Group developed a categorical coding framework based on the interview guide questions, transcript data, and research objectives, for the purposes of culling and categorizing data. Subsequently, the researchers developed codes inductively, through the use of open coding, while using the coding framework as a guide for sorting the data. The research team identified connections between codes and formulated potential theories from the developing themes. They established thematic codes with the help of the coding framework and applied appropriate changes as new information emerged from the data. At the last stage of coding, the researchers deductively recognized and established emerging themes, patterns, and relationships within and between participants' responses. A process of data triangulation (Denzin, 1989; Kimchi, Polivka, & Stevenson, 1991) involving the cross verification and validation of youth, teacher, administrator, board trustee, and service provider responses was used to enhance the credibility of the data. The researchers also appraised themes iteratively and reflexively (Alvesson & Skoldburg, 2000) so that alternate explanations could be explored and entertained. We kept in mind that the researchers and the objects of study affected each other mutually and continually during the research process.

Since policies and procedures of the WCDSB regarding support for LGBT students were discussed in the interviews, the authors conducted a thorough review of all the relevant Administrative Procedures Memoranda that were available to the public on the WCDSB's website ([http://www.wcdsb.ca/ap\\_memos.html](http://www.wcdsb.ca/ap_memos.html)) to verify the accuracy of the participants' comments regarding the policies and procedures.

### **Findings**

During the data gathering stages of the study, certain facts became more apparent with each participant interview. One of the first facts that came to light was the recognition that within the context of some of the high schools under the WCDSB, LGBT students were struggling and experiencing challenges and risks that necessitated a response from their school communities. As more information and perspectives were provided by the interviewees, it became evident that certain advocates in the WCDSB high schools eventually stepped up in support of their LGBT students and began to carry out strategies and programs that have been known to support LGBT youth in US public schools even before Bill 13 was passed by the Ontario Legislative Assembly.

*Challenges and Risks for LGBT Youth in WCDSB High Schools Prior to Bill 13*

According to the testimony of the majority of the participants, there was an apparent lack of acceptance and support for LGBT students in their Catholic high schools, particularly from their school board, before Bill 13 was legislated. One student hinted that the difficulties that LGBT youth experienced in their high school was related to the fact that it was not a public secular school by saying, “Being in a Catholic school, it’s a little tight on the acceptance thing.” A teacher was more forthcoming when she shared a confession from a gay, former pupil who told her “When we were here, we just felt lost.” An administrator recalled how bad things could get for LGBT youth several years back: “these kids were constantly coming off the rails, attempting suicide, dropping out, drugging out, numbing out, and no one was listening” Even as recently as two years prior to the legislation of Bill 13, when students attempted to form their own GSA-type clubs, they were thwarted by their school board. The former student recounted, “We ideally wanted to create a GSA, a straight out-of-the-box GSA. But obviously, because of the rules [of the school board], we weren’t allowed to . . . it’s because of the board’s opinions, the board’s viewpoint on it . . . [that’s why] we lacked the support.”

*Strategies and Programs for Supporting LGBT Youth in WCDSB High Schools*

In an effort to show solidarity and provide needed support, a group of straight ally students, teachers, and representatives from the school administration of one school under the WCDSB banded together with their LGBT students to carry out strategies proven to support LGBT students in US public schools. The promising outcomes of this effort gradually gained acknowledgement, recognition, and support for the LGBT-affirming strategies and programs from the rest of the WCDSB school communities, which led to the slow but steady implementation of the same strategies and programs in the other WCDSB high schools. Enough members of the WCDSB school communities recognized that in order for them to advocate for their LGBT students, the needs of the LGBT students needed to be prioritized over ongoing controversies surrounding the legislation of Bill 13. They also recognized that if they really aspired to be kind and accepting Catholics, then they had the obligation to support their schools’ LGBT youth.

**Creating safe spaces for LGBT students.** The first strategy carried out to support the LGBT students was the creation of safe spaces through the establishment of GSA-type clubs. The road to the establishment of their first GSA-type club was long and arduous, but the students, teachers, and administrators of St. Mary’s Catholic high school in Kitchener, Ontario persevered and succeeded in achieving their goal.

***The Nest, PRISM, and Us.*** Nearly two years before Bill 13 was proposed, representatives of the student body council at St. Mary’s Catholic high school of the WCDSB had already expressed interest to their administration to form a GSA. Because of the WCDSB’s stand on GSAs then, the school administration turned down the students at St. Mary’s and told them that a club so specific to the LGBT students could take away from the causes of other marginalized youth. Resigned to follow the direction provided to them, the council representatives formed a club called “the Nest”, which would be a space for youth from different marginalized communities to find refuge and safety. The school’s LGBT youth and their allies made the most of this new club by promoting awareness on the issues of marginalized youth.

One year later, with increased and better-organized support from their teachers and school administration, the WCDSB finally permitted the students to form a club that was more specific to their needs and intentions. The students called the second

club “Pride and Respect for Individuals of a Sexual Minority<sup>2</sup>” or “PRISM” (Monteiro, 2012a). As one of the students described it, the establishment of PRISM “gave them a place where they were accepted no matter what . . . and with the presence of allies who were also there, it showed that not everybody was against who we were.” A respectful compromise was established upon the club’s creation. The club was more specific to the students’ needs, and the board was content knowing that students were under the tutelage of faculty members who were capable of navigating the challenges of having such a club in a Catholic school.

Months after the government of Ontario passed Bill 13, the students who self-identified as LGBT formed their own smaller club within PRISM and named it “Us.” They encountered no restrictions. Believing that there would be an advantage to forming a smaller club whose members all had something they intrinsically shared as sexual minorities, the members of PRISM who identified as LGBT decided to form the Us group so that they could create a specific space where they would have even less inhibitions about being themselves. In PRISM, the LGBT-identified students were able to gain acceptance, understanding, and support from their straight allies. In Us, the LGBT-identified students were able to discuss certain issues more freely with other students who shared similar experiences based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. In less than three years, St. Mary’s became a trailblazing Catholic school with three different clubs that catered to the distinct needs of their marginalized youth. In 2013, a year after the formation of PRISM and Us, all other schools under the WCDSB followed suit by forming GSA-type clubs of their own to support their LGBT students.

***Substantiating the success of LGBT-affirming clubs.*** The success of these LGBT-affirming clubs in the Catholic high schools of Waterloo Region reflects the findings of prior research, which suggested that clubs like GSAs help LGBT youth find safe spaces to communicate their feelings, as well as inform others about what it’s like to be LGBT (Garcia-Alonso, 2004; Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Lee, 2002). One student said the club “gives students who identify a safe place to go, to have a safe place to be accepted no matter what” and that “it helps educate other people because people need to learn more about us.” Another student emphasized that GSAs were important because “students can express how they’re feeling, know they’re not alone, know they’re not the only ones feeling what they’re feeling . . . making those connections and educating the entire school community so even students who aren’t going through what they’re going through can understand”. According to one teacher, “I think some of these [LGBT] students have felt very lonely for a long time. I think, they thought they were the only ones going through the process of understanding themselves . . . and their group has provided a real support network for them.”

The observable changes in the LGBT students seemed remarkable to the adults. The school administrator commented, “We’ve definitely seen the benefits, even the physical differences. Kids who were slumped over with their hair over their eyes, got their hair cut, and they’re standing tall now.” One teacher mentioned, “The level of comfort they have in the school environment this year . . . I see such growth . . . with their increased attendance in classes . . . relaxed attitudes . . . and not feeling uptight as they walk through the halls.”

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<sup>2</sup> “sexual minority” is the term that many of the interview participants preferred to use over “LGBT” when referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, or individuals whose sexual orientation is anything other than exclusively heterosexual; for the purposes of this article, “sexual minority” and “LGBT” were used interchangeably.

**Fostering school climates that promote tolerance and respect for LGBT individuals.**

The second strategy previously discussed was also employed by the advocates for LGBT students at St. Mary's. In order to foster a school climate that would promote tolerance and respect for LGBT individuals, they instigated programs that would (a) promote a school-wide campaign reminding everyone of the value of being kind to others on a day-to-day basis, and (b) celebrate an event that stood for the elimination of homophobia and transphobia.

**Kindness Matters.** The advocates for LGBT youth at St. Mary's realized that it takes more than GSA-type clubs to support LGBT students and other marginalized youth. In order to provide more support to LGBT students, they needed to improve the entire school climate by nurturing positive attitudes towards diversity, equity, and inclusion. They decided that there was no better way to carry out this strategy than by promoting a humane value that many Catholics espouse. Hence, they launched their "Kindness Matters" campaign. Even though they acknowledged that the official Catholic doctrine has historically not been kind to persons with same-sex attractions, they also recognized that more Catholics over time have made conscious efforts to be kind to LGBT individuals in their communities and that kindness is a value that many Catholics embrace. As one student described the initiative, "it involves kindness to everybody no matter what their religion, race, sexual orientation, etc." The administrator who spearheaded the campaign explained:

It's just not enough to be against something [like bullying]; you have to be *for* something. We started our campaign last year and we're continuing it this year. I would say that our community is pretty clear that it's not okay [to say homophobic statements] . . . it's embedded in them now. We just kept putting it out there and now we've got a growing consciousness that nothing that is mean and that excludes people is okay in this school.

Because kindness is a value that many Catholics embrace, the school used this appreciation of kindness as a foundation to help educate others in the school community about tolerance, respect, equity, and inclusion, as well as encourage restorative justice, an approach that focuses on the needs of both LGBT students and offenders such as bullies in the community (Braithwaite, 2004). This meant that homophobic and transphobic bullies who were repeat offenders no longer faced automatic suspensions as the progressive discipline board policy dictated, at least not without any attempt by teachers to convert their behavior into teaching moments. One teacher reported:

It's having an opportunity to sit down with any student that would be in a [bullying] situation like that and educate. Let's use these [incidents] as learning experiences. There may be discipline that has to go with it, but first and foremost, let's examine and correct the behavior.

**Anti-Homophobia Day.** A more specific way to raise awareness about the type of bullying that hurts LGBT youth repeatedly mentioned in the interviews is taking action on special days to educate more members of the school. Many public schools in the US assign one day in an academic year to have a Pink Shirt Day to draw attention to LGBT issues. The WCDSB was probably the first Catholic school board in Ontario, if not in Canada, to support a well-publicized, school-wide Anti-Homophobia Day panel discussion in one of its schools (Monteiro, 2012b). At that time, not only was the WCDSB one of the few Catholic boards in Ontario to support the creation of GSA-type clubs in its schools, it was the first one to support a program to address homophobia as a school issue on the very day commemorating the World Health

Organization's decision to remove homosexuality from its International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems [ICD-10] (1990, p.172).

**Involving everyone in the process of supporting LGBT students.** Practically every participant in the study mentioned the importance of getting everyone in the school system involved to ensure the success of programs designed to support LGBT youth and create the most conducive school environment for acceptance and learning for all. This meant that it was important to the majority of interviewees to implement programs that would carry out the strategy of involving students, teachers, administrators, and even board trustees in efforts to support LGBT students.

**Students and GSA-type clubs.** LGBT youth and their friends are frequently the first to look for and aspire to change. Although a few students require more support than others, a lot of LGBT youth show resilience and concern for others who are going through the same hardships as they are. As one student related:

I had been struggling with my sexuality the entire time through high school and for the first two years there was nothing said. There were no resources available...so there was nothing. . . . And luckily, because of who I am, I was confident. I had a great group of friends. But hearing stories in the news, and knowing people in my high school who did feel marginalized, who did feel alone, or did feel like, left on the outskirts . . . I realized, not everyone is going to be as lucky as me, not everyone is going to have as great friends, not everyone can have that confidence to say "You know what, this is who I am, deal with it." . . . They're going to be bullied. I wanted to create a space [a GSA] for them who weren't as lucky as me to have that good support system.

The students' tenacity and inner strength should not be ignored, but instead nurtured. A board trustee underscored the importance of bolstering the youth's confidence and agency:

If you let kids call their clubs with the name they want, it encourages them. Whatever language they find that's most affirming to them, and you give them the freedom to use it . . . I think if we should have said that from the beginning, GSA is a fine name. If they want to call it that, or if they want to call it something else, that's fine too.

**Teachers, staff training, and professional development.** Many of the study participants claimed that grassroots-level efforts to support LGBT students always gained greater momentum and stronger ground when teachers supported them from the beginning. Whether it involved including LGBT topics in their class lessons or mentoring youth during their clubs activities, the student interviewees were in agreement that the more confident and comfortable the teachers were in supporting them, the safer the LGBT youth felt. A student remarked, "I think that it's very important for teachers to take a very proactive role in counteracting homophobic bullying . . . when they roundly condemned bullying in general, it wasn't quite enough." One of the teachers explained that one of the main reasons why advocacy from the faculty did not always come as naturally was not so much because of their indifference but rather their lack of knowledge and low comfort level on how to provide advocacy. This was why most of the respondents believed that professional development and staff trainings are key tools for equipping Catholic school teachers with the necessary background to support LGBT students. A service provider who worked closely with the WCDSB explained:

I get calls from principals or teachers to go into classes or attend the professional development day. I will be invited to a school to do workshops. So I've done that

for teachers, either individually or as a group, and they don't have to be connected to GSAs at all. But then I also explain about GSAs and go through the LGBT language, terminology, and definitions. We talk about safe space, about inclusivity. . .

A teacher elaborated on the value of such capacity building:

As far as education of staff, we've put a real effort here at our school around doing a lot of communication with staff at staff meetings or in different professional development opportunities, just to educate around what PRISM is all about. What sort of framework of how we can support students who may turn to us, who are of a sexual minority . . . I think now there's a much clearer path. We've had situations where the teachers are taking the initiative, and introducing that student to the PRISM group directly. I've been really pleased with how the staff has bought into that, and really supported the students in a number of cases. We're big believers here that it needs to start with the staff first. There's no sense rolling this out to the student population if you don't have the staff doing the job correctly.

From all levels of the WCDSB, interviewees insisted that despite the great strides brought about by professional development, it was evident that one fact needed to change when it came to teachers working as supports and role models. As the former student revealed:

In my Catholic school, I didn't know of any gay teachers. There were no queer teachers in the Catholic stream or they were just so far in the closet because of the job . . . for me, personally, it's very detrimental. For the longest time, I've always wanted to be a teacher . . . so being in the [Catholic] school and realizing, I'm gay and I want to be a teacher. Not seeing anybody that was both, not seeing any gay teachers . . . How am I supposed to do that when there's no one there?

One of the service providers pointed out what was painfully obvious to her, "I'll hear that teachers are out only to certain other teachers and some students, they're not out to administration. That means that these teachers don't feel safe themselves." On one hand, having heterosexual teachers advocating for GSA-type clubs proves that not everyone who supports the clubs identifies as LGBT. On the other hand, not having gay teachers come out as role models may unintentionally signal to LGBT youth that there is something to be ashamed of regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity. Both board trustees interviewed thought along the same lines, but one went further about encouraging teachers to be openly gay role models and expressed a need for advocacy for LGBT teachers as well:

I think it would be really useful if the Catholic school system were more accepting of their gay and lesbian teachers . . . if you ask me, having it "accepting" among the students is only half the process. We also have to be "accepting" among the people in the faculty and administration. If I was a gay teacher, and the students have [acceptance], great. But why am I not being accepted for it?

***School administrators and curricular changes.*** For many of the interviewees, the success of the schools was largely due to the support and progressive thinking of their principals and vice-principals. A teacher sponsor revealed, "it's been made very clear to us that our role here goes beyond just teaching in classrooms. We have been creative with our specific subject material and we're very fortunate we have an administration that would certainly back us up." The administration's role was highlighted not only in a supporting capacity, but more significantly, as a catalyst for small but positive changes in the curriculum and the inclusion of LGBT-specific initiatives.

Most study participants believed that explicit sanctions from the administration led to the increased incorporation of LGBT material into the curriculum. They also believed each opportunity the administration took to encourage school staff to implement this incorporation was paramount. An administrator shared how every opportunity should be taken to embolden teachers to take that direction:

Just today, I got called in by the head of one of the departments because he wants to put a number of frameworks and lenses to go through English literature . . . and he wants to put the gay-lesbian lens as one of the lenses to choose from. So if they want to, students can choose to discuss a tale through the lens of queer studies. So I said, “Absolutely, go for it” . . . We need to get much better at that. As I said to the teacher today, “These kids need to see their lives visible somewhere.”

Other participants noted the importance of having LGBT-affirming language in the curriculum, a concern school administrators must recognize as they communicate pedagogy to school personnel. One service provider said, “They need to have curriculums that reflect the [LGBT students’] needs . . . they need to start by having inclusive language”

Having the administration’s support for allowing LGBT-specific over generic initiatives was equally important to participants. For one student, this support meant multiple benefits:

I feel when it comes to LGBT bullying, you do need to be specific. Because I think when you say, “Bullying’s not okay,” it’s up for interpretation, and it often takes an interpretation that is compatible with the status quo. People will tailor it to their thinking and there will be no change on homophobic beliefs if those beliefs are not being specifically and explicitly challenged . . . It creates a dialogue rather than simply accepting that homophobia and transphobia should be embedded in school culture. I think sometimes situations look really nice and peaceful, but there’s actually unchallenged assumptions and prejudice that everybody’s just used to living with.

A teacher who communicates with administration frequently reiterated, “I think the more we do in terms of that specific message, the greater the chance of reaching these kids . . . It’s great to have something like a ‘Kindness Matters’ campaign, but there are times that we need to focus a bit more and say, ‘Here’s where we have a [specific] problem, we need to work on this area.’” The teacher provided an observation that points to the fact that, apart from promoting kindness towards LGBT individuals, the homophobic and transphobic doctrine taught in Catholic schools needs to be addressed by programs of the administration that implement LGBT-affirming changes in the school curriculum and the just treatment of sexual minorities in school campuses. A former student had a related comment on how to promote sensitivity and inclusivity in the school environment: “One important thing is the use of safe language . . . so in my final year, we got the administration’s support to run a [curricular] campaign to discourage the use of ‘that’s so gay’ and ‘no homo’ in our classes.”

***The school board, Ministry of Education, and their policies.*** Almost every time the WCDSB’s role was mentioned, the interview would lead to the board’s primary responsibility to create policies and procedures explicitly about the LGBT students’ circumstances and needs. It was apparent that the students, teachers, and trustees interviewed were not as aware of the WCDSB’s exact policies and procedures as the school administrator was, but most were aware that there were existing policies that addressed equity and inclusion, progressive discipline, and bullying in general terms. One thing almost all participants were certain of was that the board had no

policies and procedures that outlined pertinent details on how to specifically deal with LGBT-related issues, and more precisely, that the board had no express policy that specified support for LGBT students.

After a thorough review of all the Administrative Procedures Memoranda available on the WCDSB's website, we confirmed that these assumptions were accurate at the time participants were interviewed. There were no references to LGBT students at all in the Administrative Procedures Memoranda on *Bullying Prevention and Intervention* [APC034] (Waterloo Catholic District School Board, 2010a), *Suicide/Depression and Self-Harm* [APH019] (Waterloo Catholic District School Board, 2008), and *Suspected "Child in Need of Protection" Reporting* [APS020] (Waterloo Catholic District School Board, 2004). There were short references to "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" as part of a long list of characteristics that offenders may have biases on in the *Sexual Health Referral Protocol* [APC032] (Waterloo Catholic District School Board, 2005), *Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour* [APC035] (Waterloo Catholic District School Board, 2010c), and *Equity and Inclusive Education Policy* [APC037] (Waterloo Catholic District School Board, 2010b) memoranda. To be fair, the *Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour* [APC035] memorandum contained the categorical statement, "Homophobia, gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and inappropriate sexual behaviour must be addressed" (2010c, p.3), and indicated homophobia as a cause of behavior that may require progressive discipline.

One significant item that was notable during the review of the WCDSB's policies and procedures was the addition of a recent memorandum, issued on October 2012. Presumably as a genuine and timely response to the mandates of the Ministry of Education following the legislation of the Accepting Schools Act, the WCDSB released the *Supporting Students of a Sexual Minority: Criteria for Activities and Organizations that Promote a Safe and Inclusive Learning Environment* [APC041] (Waterloo Catholic District School Board, 2012) memorandum that took into account recommendations from both the "Respecting Differences" document of the Ontario Catholic school system and the provincial government's Bill 13. This new memorandum underscored the moral and legal responsibility of every member of the school system to eliminate homophobic and transphobic bullying. It also endorsed the value of student voice and leadership as a critical factor to realizing the safest and most inclusive learning environments. Made clear was the expectation for secondary schools to require LGBT-affirming groups with identified staff members that would continue from year to year, and the necessity for ready responses to student interests that would create consistency for LGBT support.

**Providing LGBT youth with resources outside of school.** For the students, teachers, and administrators of the WCDSB who advocated for addressing LGBT issues in their schools, the strategy of furnishing access to more resources outside of what their school board could provide needed to be prioritized as well. Participants expressed appreciation for community partnerships that were LGBT-affirming.

**Community allies and inter-agency networking.** The inherent value of strong connections with partners in the community was not forgotten during the interviews. In particular, the WCDSB's relationships with external programs and agencies such as KW Counselling Services' OK2BME, the regional chapter of the provincial Catholic teachers' union, and the WRDSB, were among the most mentioned. The participation of the students and teachers in the annual GSA conference and Pride Prom sponsored by KW Counselling Services' OK2BME were mentioned repeatedly as sources of networking, socialization, information, and sense of community for the

LGBT students. The Catholic teachers' union, OECTA, was considered a solid stronghold for the faculty who chose to advocate for the LGBT youth. The WRDSB and WCDSB have shared many forward-thinking policies related to equity and inclusion and have developed a healthy, professional affiliation over the years. It was a common perspective among the interviewees that resources can be obtained beyond the walls of the WCDSB's establishments, and that these resources were essential and pivotal in supporting the needs of LGBT students in the publicly funded Catholic schools of Waterloo Region.

*The Importance of Ontario Legislation Backing LGBT-affirming Strategies and Programs*

Participants' responses about the legislation of Bill 13 centered on two main themes. First, despite some apprehensions about possible backlash, there was resounding positive feedback to it being passed as law. One trustee said, "The legislation's great. Bill 13 is well written. It's simple. It's straightforward. I don't have any issues with it . . . The reason why this legislation needed to be specific to the LGBT community is because that's where the work was needed, and that's what they focused the bill on." One student agreed with this notion and added, "[Bill 13] kind of forces the school boards' hands because it's really the trustees and the board that make the decisions and the schools will have to follow them. So it forces their hands, ...and it doesn't allow districts to be so disparate with their policies." Both teachers in the study felt that the new law was a great kick-start for the publicly funded schools, as well as a safety net for advocates who feared repercussions from schools that might resist. The second theme revolved around the idea that Bill 13 was purposely conceived by the provincial government to protect LGBT youth in Ontario Catholic high schools. One student suggested, "From what I've heard about public [secular] schools, they do try to be progressive about protecting [LGBT] students in this regard. I think the bill was created with Catholic high schools in mind." One of the trustees retorted, "I'm disappointed that the bill had to be legislated in the first place. I think it showed a real failing of the Catholic school boards. I think the reality is that that's where the legislation was targeted at, and we were the ones who pushed back on this."

*Identifying Factors Essential for the Success of LGBT-affirming Strategies and Programs in the Canadian Catholic School System Context*

**Rising above dialectics and polemics, and putting Catholic values into action.** In 2012, media coverage in Ontario spotlighted Bill 13 which proposed to, among many things, allow students and teachers in all publicly funded educational institutions in the province, including all Catholic high schools, to establish LGBT-affirming clubs, events, campaigns, and other programs to support their LGBT youth. With such high profile media attention, harsh exchanges involving parties for and against the advanced policy ensued. Rising above the dialectics within academe and the polemics captured in the news, certain WCDSB stakeholders felt that being Catholic and finding a way to successfully support the marginalized LGBT youth in their schools should not be mutually exclusive. As one teacher pointed out:

It's hard for me to get around the fact that some people are very rigid in their thinking and that they cannot get past the conflict between their religious beliefs and what they feel as law that is being imposed on them . . . part of being Catholic is embracing all people, expanding the idea of loving people for who they are . . . not putting up with intolerance, but instead, people starting to say, "because we're Catholic, we should be speaking out against intolerance even more."

Other participants from the WCDSB completely shared this perspective. One of the students expressed similar sentiments:

Teachers should be there for the students, and that should be their priority. Being in a Catholic school, they should use those Catholic values to, you know, be dependable resources. If students get kicked out of their house for being gay, the first step [for teachers] should be, “Let’s try to find you a place to stay,” not “Okay, let’s pray for you.” Like using those Catholic values to understand what their role is without having to shove ideas that students don’t believe in down their throats. I think within the Catholic school system, a big step is understanding that the majority of students now do not believe in what the Catholic faith is teaching [on this issue] . . . but still using those Catholic values to help students. I’ve never bashed the Catholic system because they gave me great values throughout school.

An administrator concurred, “If we’re people of the Gospel, [we must remember] Jesus sought out people from the margins, not the priests and high officials of that time period . . . that’s our calling . . . and we’re not doing any more, or any less, than what the Gospel tells us to.”

**Maintaining legitimacy as a publicly funded school.** Apart from prioritizing the needs of the marginalized LGBT youth, many participants pointed out the issue of Catholic high schools being publicly funded by the government of Ontario. At the board level, one trustee was emphatic:

As a Catholic school system, if we’re going to maintain our legitimacy, we have to be willing, in the province of Ontario, to be a little bit flexible on some of things around Catholic dogma. I’m not saying that we need to reject the church’s teaching, I think there’s an appropriate place for us to teach those teachings, I’m sure the classroom is fine. But I think, when we start getting pressure from the bishops that isn’t in the interest of our students, it’s going to make a less safe environment, and it’s going to put some students in a position where they don’t have all the supports they need. It’s going to put our school system in the light of saying “We’re pushing up against the Human Rights Code, we’re pushing up against the consensus of Ontario society about being a safe space for all.” And I [also] think, we as a Catholic school system, if we are serious about maintaining legitimacy and our Catholic funding, then we need to be able to say to the bishops, “This is Ontario, we need to go on a little bit different route.” . . . We need to recognize that the Catholic Church and the Catholic school system may not always line up perfectly, if we’re going to fit effectively as a [publicly] funded institution.

The teachers and students from the interviews shared the trustee’s sentiments. Many of the interviewees thought that if the Catholic school board was willing and happy to be the only non-secular school board to receive public funding from the provincial government, they should also be willing and happy to abide by the provincial government’s guidelines regarding specified support for LGBT youth attending all the publicly funded schools in Ontario. The participants felt strongly that in order for the WCDSB to maintain their legitimacy as a publicly funded school board, the WCDSB should adhere to the directives of the Ontario Ministry of Education just like the other school boards of the province.

### **Discussion**

The positive outcomes achieved by the advocates in the WCDSB strongly suggest that implementing successful strategies and programs from the US can support LGBT students in the publicly funded Canadian Catholic school system. Responses from

the participants support the position that such a success was achieved and that from this success it is plausible to posit that LGBT students in other publicly funded Catholic high schools in Ontario and across Canada, such as those in Saskatchewan and Alberta, can also be successfully supported by similar strategies and programs. Based on the testimony of the interviewees, not only has a considerable number of LGBT students of the WCDSB managed to overcome many of their struggles from previous experiences of marginalization because of the implementation of these strategies and programs, they have also begun to notice a significant change in the awareness of LGBT rights in their school community.

The students, teachers, and school administrators from the Catholic high schools of the WCDSB implemented strategies and programs that have been used by publicly funded secular schools in the US. They implemented strategies and programs that included: (a) creating positive spaces for LGBT students through the formation of GSA-type clubs that promote student agency, activism, and leadership (Blackburn, 2004; Callaghan, 2007; Doppler, 2000; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz & Bartkiewicz, 2010.), (b) fostering safer school climates by combining GSA-type clubs with other programs such as LGBT-affirming school-wide campaigns and significant events (Griffin & Ouellett, 2002; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Szalacha, 2003), (c) involving all members at the different levels of the school communities by implementing concurrent multiple programs, and (d) providing their LGBT students access to more resources by connecting them with LGBT-positive community partners. They carried out programs such as professional development, staff training, and curricular changes that maximized the potential of the WCDSB's students, teachers, administrators, and board trustees, which were instrumental to attaining the school system's achievements. Similar to experiences described in previous research, the professional development and staff training for faculty that the schools implemented were instrumental in increasing their teachers' comfort levels for advocacy and overall agency (Callaghan, 2007; Goldstein, Collins, & Halder, 2008). In the future, more creative professional development activities, as well as policies that prevent employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, may help encourage LGBT teachers to come out and become more visible and accessible role models for students.

As mentioned earlier, the provincial legislation of the Accepting Schools Act reinforced the convictions of the Catholic school proponents for LGBT student advancement and stimulated the creation of a new WCDSB policy memorandum specifically devoted to supporting sexual minority students. There was no doubt that the passing of Bill 13 on June 2012 proved to be an enormous boost to the morale, confidence, and comfort levels of the advocates at the WCDSB, as their efforts were positively received and supported even more after its legislation. Subsequently, all four other schools of the WCDSB were implementing similar strategies and programs to support their own LGBT students.

An additional purpose of this study was to identify any factors that were essential for the success of the strategies and programs implemented to support LGBT students in the context of Canadian Catholic high schools. One such factor that was that in order to move forward from the basic desire to support LGBT youth in their high schools it was necessary for advocates to acknowledge that the needs and plight of the marginalized LGBT youth had to take precedence over the acrimonious dialectics and polemics between the competing groups within the Ontario Catholic school system. The recognition of this factor served as an impetus for many of the students, staff, and administrators of the WCDSB to advocate for their LGBT youth and exert efforts to implement empirically established strategies and

programs to support them. A second factor is the unifying influence of the values that many Catholics embrace, particularly kindness and acceptance. In the case of the communities within the schools of the WCDSB, some members of the communities who had different views and opposing beliefs from the advocates for the LGBT students became more inclined to provide support to the marginalized youth because of their shared appreciation of these values. What they could not reconcile in their heads they were able to reconcile with their hearts. The third factor that was identified as essential for the success of the strategies and programs discussed is the necessity for Catholic school boards in Ontario to recognize their need to maintain their legitimacy as publicly funded institutions. It is worth noting how political elements contributed to the success of the WCDSB's efforts, which was not often discussed but was addressed by several students and one of the board trustees in the interviews. In particular, it was important for the participants to admit that in order for Catholic school boards to maintain their legitimacy as publicly funded institutions, they should understand and accede to the fact that it would not be in their best interests to continue pushing against both the increasing consensus in Ontario society and the Ontario Human Rights Code (1962).

When the contributions of these three essential factors are taken into consideration, it would be reasonable to assert that the greatest accomplishment of the WCDSB advocates for LGBT youth in the last two years was not just the effective implementation and customization of the LGBT-affirming strategies and programs to their own Canadian Catholic school setting. As laudable as this achievement was, it was the skillful, responsible, and sagacious negotiation of the competing priorities and dictates of the Ontario Catholic school system representatives and the provincial government that was their most praiseworthy feat. Granting that there was always more work that could have been done, the advocates for the LGBT students at the WCDSB were able to dexterously maneuver strategies and execute programs that were not only acceptable to the Ontario Catholic bishops, trustees, administrators, teachers, and students, but more importantly, successful in supporting their LGBT youth.

It was encouraging to learn that through the perseverance of certain LGBT-affirming advocates of the WCDSB, strategies and programs to support LGBT youth that were never considered in Ontario Catholic high schools before were implemented and found to have positive impacts according to the interviewees of the study. By designating their marginalized LGBT students' needs as one of their priorities, the various members and opposing factions of the WCDSB were able to rise above conflicting opinions and establish the common ground that became the basis of fruitful compromise. It seemed that as long as the LGBT students could thrive in an environment where they no longer felt condemned and did not have to constantly hear colloquial expressions such as "It's okay to be gay, just don't act on it" and "Love the sinner, hate the sin" (Callaghan, 2007) on a day-to-day basis, the compromise still worked. Also, as long as the trustees or bishops did not receive complaints from parents about teachings against chastity or challenges against the "Natural Law," the compromise still worked. It is also interesting to note what was not said by the interviewees. It was curious that participants said very little in the interviews about not having topics such as adolescent sexual activity and same-sex marriage included in the GSAs, curricular changes, and other programs designed to support LGBT youth; the very issues that the Catholic bishops and board trustees were most concerned about, according to the press (Monteiro, 2012a; Simone, 2012; Stayshyn & Houston, 2011). It is likely that in order for advocates to further holistically meet the needs of LGBT students in the Catholic high schools, they would have to negotiate new ways of addressing these controversial issues in the future.

### *Limitations*

Because at the time of this study there were currently no other known success stories at the level that the WCDSB reached among the many Catholic school boards across Ontario, we investigated a phenomenon that is only in its beginning stages. Based on the study recruitment outcomes, it was difficult to determine whether data saturation was truly reached due to the limited number of individuals in various roles that were sampled as part of the investigation. As more Catholic school boards across the province are attempting to follow in the footsteps of the WCDSB to support their LGBT youth, particularly with the backing of new mandates resulting from the legislation of the Accepting Schools Act, the potential applicability of these findings are still indeterminable. Since there are other Canadian provinces that provide public funding to Catholic separate school boards apart from Ontario, such as Alberta and Saskatchewan, implications of successful programs and the contexts in which they can be implemented to support LGBT students in Catholic high schools across these provinces requires serious consideration.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The strengths of this study are grounded in the rich data gathered from key opinion leaders and stakeholders of the different levels of the WCDSB. As one of the benefits of purposive sampling in qualitative studies, the participants who were purposively selected for this research were able to share detailed descriptive information that provided clear contexts. Another benefit from the discriminate selection of participants was the fact that not only were they able to highlight the positive outcomes from the strategies and programs that were employed within their school board, but they were also able to emphasize weak areas that required further improvement and attention. Additionally, they were able to express specific suggestions based on their epistemic privilege (Narayan, 1988). These benefits could not have been derived from a quantitative study. The perspectives and experiences shared by the participants produced a rich amalgam of information that testified to the success of combining empirically established strategies and programs used in U.S. publicly funded secular schools with Catholic values, such as kindness and acceptance, for supporting LGBT youth in publicly funded Canadian Catholic high schools.

Although the WCDSB can be considered an exemplar of what other Catholic school boards can hope to emulate with regards to supporting LGBT students in the future, it must be remembered that compared to others, it is one of the smaller school boards in Ontario and that it services predominantly urban and suburban communities. It must be noted that its success in terms of what was presented in this paper may not necessarily easily translate to the context of a larger or a rural Catholic high school board in Ontario. With this in mind, future research can expand on the lessons learned from this study by utilizing larger or rural participation, and possibly concurrent, multiple sites, with quantitative or mixed methods. Future research can also investigate on more precise topics that were raised in this study such as the importance of the visibility and accessibility of LGBT school staff as role models, as well as the development of full school board policies and procedures specifically dedicated to the support of LGBT students in Catholic high schools. It is hoped that the erudition from this study will inspire educators, scholars, and researchers to continue addressing LGBT students' issues in their work, especially within the context of Catholic high school settings.

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