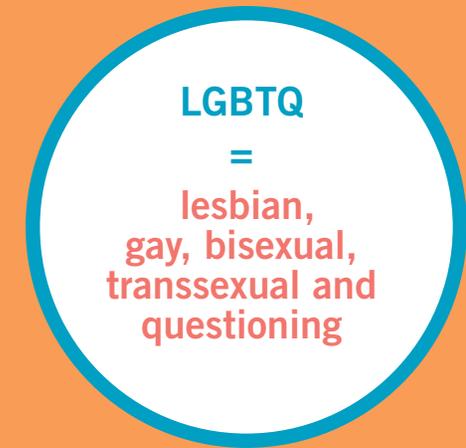


**HOMOPHOBIA**  
**IN QUÉBEC**  
**SCHOOLS**



CFH

# HOMOPHOBIA IN QUÉBEC SCHOOLS



## INTRODUCTION

Schools are a primary social structure for youth and social relationships with peers are a central part of students' lives. Research shows that schools, and the social interactions that take place in them, can play a stabilizing or destructive role for young people, particularly if they are experiencing emotional stress. School environment and school connectedness can be determining factors in a young person's educational experience. When students believe that adults in the school care about them, have high expectations for their education, and will provide the support essential to their success, they thrive.<sup>1</sup> A positive school environment is the result of a collective effort.

Unfortunately, a number of studies in the United States<sup>2</sup> and more recently in Canada<sup>3</sup> have raised the alarm about the prevalence of homophobic violence – be it verbal, physical or psychological – in schools, as well as the negative consequences that such violence can have on the youth who are its victims.

\* This summary was written by Mona Greenbaum, LGBT Family Coalition director (2012).

## INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

### Five main conclusions can be drawn from these studies:

- 1 **Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning (LGBTQ) youth are more at risk** than their non-LGBTQ peers to experience intimidation, threats, harassment and physical aggression at school.<sup>4</sup>
- 2 Although LGBTQ youth are commonly targeted for homophobic harassment, they are not the only ones suffering. **Non-LGBTQ youth are the victims of homophobic language and insults** as well. In fact, any student whose behaviour is perceived to be different in some way can be isolated and harassed using homophobic insults.<sup>5</sup> In addition, youth who have LGBT family members will experience stress (even if they are not directly the target of homophobia) if homophobic discrimination and victimization are present in their school environment.<sup>6</sup>
- 3 **Homophobia can manifest itself in a wide array of actions** including, name-calling, vandalism, labelling, cyber-bullying, rumours and social exclusion.<sup>7</sup> Although physical bullying is often the most obvious form that is acknowledged and addressed in schools, verbal bullying and daily acts of covert discrimination are extremely prevalent and often ignored even though they have been found to be quite damaging to youth. Studies have shown that persistent verbal harassment can be as much, or even more, damaging than isolated incidents of physical violence.<sup>8</sup>
- 4 According to a variety of studies (including large-scale surveys) **homophobia can have major consequences on the mental health and academic success** of its young victims. These youth are at higher risk for psychological problems (isolation, weaker integration with their peers, anxiety and emotional problems, low self esteem, suicide attempts) and high-risk behaviours (drug and alcohol abuse, risky sexual behaviours, etc). They are also more inclined than their peers to skip school, do less well academically and have limited academic aspirations.<sup>9</sup> Students' feelings of vulnerability and not belonging, and a difficulty to be able to imagine their future, have been identified as factors that can negatively influence academic success.<sup>10</sup>
- 5 **Students lack confidence in adults' ability to solve the problem of homophobia.** Many feel that schools are not doing enough and thus feel unsafe at school. They also feel that they are not valued or included at school. Gradually, they learn to feel afraid and ashamed in school because homophobic and transphobic behaviours are tolerated and sometimes even perpetuated by school personnel.<sup>11</sup>

# THE SITUATION IN QUÉBEC'S SCHOOLS

As a consequence of Québec's position as one of the most progressive jurisdictions in the world in terms of LGBT rights, it is often assumed that homophobia in schools is a minor phenomenon. To assess this situation, a large study was recently carried out to determine the extent and impact of homophobia in Québec high schools.<sup>12</sup> 2747 students from 30 high schools across the province were asked to fill out an anonymous questionnaire concerning their perceptions, their school climate and the academic repercussions surrounding issues of homophobia in their school environment.

## HOMOPHOBIC LANGUAGE

« *“You’re so gay!” It’s really part of everyday language. I work in a youth centre and that’s what they call each other all the time. In high school, ‘faggot’, ‘homo’, ‘gay’, is connected with everything. “Hey! Did you see Ovechkin’s goal yesterday? What a gay goal!” “Yuck! That pencil is so gay!” Anything and everything. Sometimes the word ‘gay’ isn’t even connected with being gay. It just means something weak or no good.*<sup>13</sup> »

JOSIANE, 19 YEARS OLD

« *I find it sad that the word ‘gay’ has really become a common insult. You can even say that a dictionary is gay, an object, whatever. If someone said, “That’s really n-word,” someone would have to say, “Stop your racist jokes.” Well it’s the same thing!* »

LAURENCE, TEENAGER

## HOMOPHOBIC LANGUAGE (CONTINUED)

Expressions like “That song is gay” or “Those shoes are gay” are so often used in school settings that they are trivialized. People who use them don’t even realize that they are derogatory to LGBT people. Those in authority often ignore these remarks. The Québec study brings to light the fact that these kinds of remarks are commonly used in Québec high schools. In fact, almost 9 out of 10 respondents (86.5%) affirm hearing these words often or occasionally at school, as opposed to rarely or never. 62.9% said they heard these words on a daily basis.

**Q** Since you began high school, how often do you hear students making remarks like “That’s so gay”?

GENDER OF THOSE WHO HEAR COMMENTS			
Frequency	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Often	68.4	57.9	62.9
Occasionally	20	26.9	23.6
Rarely	7.6	10.9	9.3
Never	4	4.3	4.2
Total	100	100	100

These expressions are used to denigrate objects or styles. 74.3% of students who have heard them say that these comments are made by a good number of students.

**Q** Would you say that these remarks are made by almost all the students, by many students, or just by a few?

Proportion of students	Percentage
Almost all	26
Many	48.3
Just a few	25.6
Total	100

These results correspond to those found in a pan-Canadian study carried out by the organisation EGALE Canada.<sup>14</sup> They found that 70% of all participating students, LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ, reported hearing expressions such as “That’s so gay” every day at school.

## HOMOPHOBIC INSULTS

« *I'd like to pass the pain onto the people who said those things. Sometimes people don't realize that three or four little words... "Stupid damn faggot," you say it; it comes out just like that. But the person who's the target feels the insult and the hatred. It gets to you right away. You don't deserve it. People don't realize how much words can really hurt. There are things that people said to me in the past that still hurt. You never forget. It's like a trace left in your brain. I'd like to be able to bounce that feeling back, like a mirror, to the people who said those things to me and say, "You see how that feels?"*

MARTIN, 21 YEARS OLD

« *It's pretty much since the beginning of the year that I started to get those negative comments...especially in Phys. Ed...in the lockers...it's probably my worst moment of the day. For them, it's a lot of fun calling others 'faggot, homo'. They're never shy about calling me 'gay-boy', 'faggot', 'cock-sucker', "Look out after school, you're gonna get your face smashed," and then to push me in the hallways. It seems like they can get away with anything because they're the cool ones at school.*

JOEY, 14 YEARS OLD

« *Right now in my high school 'gay' is the universal word. "That's gay. He's gay. She's gay. That teacher is gay. This homework assignment is gay. That pencil is gay. That pen is gay." You know you can use it for anything. Sometimes literally people do mean gay, sometimes people mean gay as in stupid or not cool. And you know your friends are like, "Dude, I was just joking," but in my opinion there are some things that you just don't joke about.*

PHILIPPE, TEENAGER

As for personal insults almost 7 respondents out of 10 (67.2%) have heard one student calling another 'faggot', 'homo', 'dyke', 'gay' or 'lesbian' often or occasionally. Again, underscoring the prevalence of this type of insult: 65.3% of respondents said that many students used these insults.

## INSULTES HOMOPHOBES (SUITE)

Q

Since you began high school, how often have you heard one student insulting or dealing with another student in a negative way using words like ‘faggot’, ‘homo’, ‘dyke’, ‘gay’ or ‘lezbo’?

GENDER OF WITNESS HEARING HOMOPHOBIC INSULTS			
Frequency	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Often	40.5	28.4	34.1
Occasionally	31	35	33.1
Rarely	22	26.4	24.3
Never	6.5	10.2	8.5
Total	100	100	100

In the Canadian study, almost half (48%) reported hearing students insulting each other with words such as ‘faggot’, ‘lezbo’, and ‘dyke’ every day in school.

## UNSAFE SPACES

*I would change my clothes in the bathroom, not in the lockers. I was already bullied everywhere, so I wasn't going to let it happen in the lockers too. Because there you're all alone. I'd never take that risk.*

NICO, 18 YEARS OLD

*Insults happened in certain places or times of the day where we all had to assemble. Like the lockers at noon, or during the breaks. In the classroom they could get you too, before the teacher arrived. It didn't happen in the classes very often. The cafeteria was another place, where we had to line up for a long time to eat. I was stuck there. That was one of their favourite places to get me.*

PAUL, 21 YEARS OLD

As a general rule, negative remarks of a homophobic nature, whether directed toward an individual or not, are usually made in places with little adult supervision. For example, 73.3% of respondents frequently heard these remarks in the hallways or next to lockers, 60.5% in the

## UNSAFE SPACES (CONTINUED)

schoolyard and 56.3% in the school cafeteria. However, no less than 46.7% of students were also aware of these remarks being made, very often or occasionally, in the classroom and 37.7% in the gym, at the school swimming pool or on sports fields. These places are usually under adult supervision.<sup>15</sup>

Across Canada, the two school spaces most commonly experienced as unsafe by LGBTQ youth and youth with LGBT parents are places that are almost invariably gender-segregated: Phys. Ed. change rooms and washrooms. More than 40% of LGBTQ youth and youth with LGBT parents identified their Phys. Ed. change rooms as being unsafe; almost a third of non-LGBTQ youth agreed.

## STRAIGHT VS. LGBTQ

« *In high school, even though I hadn't yet admitted to myself that I was gay, there were some who found it obvious. Some of the people in my high school made me live through hell. Insults, I had them. I was spit on. And it wasn't because I was gay. They didn't know it and I hadn't accepted it either. So it was really more the fact that I wasn't super-masculine.* »

FÉLIX, 21 YEARS OLD

« *A lot of people say I should dress more feminine, dress the way girls are 'supposed to dress,' but I'm the kind of person, I do what I want. What I feel is right. Once I tell them I'm a girl they think, "She must be gay" and I'm straight too! I dress like that 'cause this is how I want to dress.* »

JADE, TEENAGER

« *In elementary school I participated in a choir. I was sort of only one of three guys. So people were like, "Oh he's gay. He's a pussy. He sings." So I stopped. At a young age when people make fun of you, it really gets to you. But, I would have liked to continue with the choir. It was fun.* »

SIMON, TEENAGER

In terms of homophobic victimization it is no surprise that LGBTQ students, or those who are still questioning their sexual orientation, are proportionately more likely than heterosexual students to state that they were personally the victim of at least one homophobic incident, respectively 69% (LGBTQ) vs. 35.4% (heterosexual).

## STRAIGHT VS. LGBTQ (CONTINUED)

Q

Since the beginning of the school year, have you been the victim of at least one homophobic situation or incident?

ACCORDING TO SELF-IDENTIFICATION			
	Heterosexual (%)	LGBQ (%)	Total (%)
Yes	35.4	69	38.1
No	64.6	31	61.9
Total	100	100	100

The sexual orientation declared by students in the above question corresponds to their own self-identification and not to any public affirmation made in the school setting. Whether out or in the closet, LGBQ students are at greater risk for homophobic bullying. **It should be noted however that heterosexual students are also vulnerable to homophobic harassment by their peers. Often this is due to what is perceived as their non-conformity to rigid gender roles: A boy who is judged to be too feminine or a girl seen as too masculine.** These perceptions can be sparked by something as mundane as what sports or hobbies they participate in, what clothes they wear, what music they listen to or who are their circle of friends.

Although the above percentages include all students who have been victimized at least once since the beginning of the school year, it should be noted that some students are victimized much more frequently and in more ways, than others. For example, a student might endure a combination of verbal harassment, rumours and gossip, physical violence and cyber-bullying in any given week. Obviously, students who suffer from this type of persistent harassment are more at risk than those who have endured only isolated incidents.

In addition to being more vulnerable to homophobic victimisation than their heterosexual counterparts, LGBQ students are also more likely to be severely victimized (i.e. more frequently and in more ways). While 10% of LGBQ students were severely victimized, this was true for only 3% of heterosexual students. **Although it is clear that LGBQ students are more at risk, in terms of absolute numbers, a greater total of heterosexual students are persistently the victims of homophobia..**

## YOUTH WITH LGB PARENTS AND FAMILY MEMBERS

« *I know there's nothing wrong with being gay. But other kids don't even know what it means. They just think it's bad. When I hear them using it as an insult, it's like they're insulting my family.* »

MONIQUE, 11 YEARS OLD

« *One day I was at my friend Eric's house, and we decided to hang out at the park. Eric's whole family knew about my family and there was no problem. But at the park, one of Eric's friends asked me if it was true that I had two mothers. I just ignored the question and changed the subject. I didn't feel like explaining it all over again, with nobody believing me at first and then everyone making fun of my family.* »

STEVE, 13 YEARS OLD

In the Québec study, youth with LGB parents or siblings were proportionally more numerous to report having been the subject of rumours or gossip. Aside from this, however, they were no more likely than other youth to be the victims of homophobia. These youth, however, were proportionally more numerous than those who didn't have a close LGB family member, to report often hearing remarks like "That's so gay," (77% vs. 63.8%) and hearing homophobic insults directed at their peers (45.9% with LGB parents or siblings vs. 33.7% without), in comparison with those who didn't have a close LGB family member. **The data therefore indicates that although youth with LGB family members are not more likely to be victimized, they are significantly more aware of homophobia in their surroundings. This awareness can lead to greater stress for these youth.**

## TYPES OF INCIDENTS

« *They started to bully me in elementary and it continued in high school. I found it really hard. There were some that would be on my case non-stop for a certain period of time. Others would bother me only occasionally. At one point there was one guy who every time I saw him he'd give it to me. He called me 'faggot', 'homo'. Each time he saw me I'd get every hurtful name. It really pissed me off. I'd lost all my motivation by the time I arrived at my class. I was sad too. I wasn't strong enough to say: "Look, just leave me alone." I didn't know how to defend myself. He was more popular than me. I was a nothing compared to him. I had no self-esteem. When someone says to you all the time, "You're stupid. You're ugly. I want to kill you," you end up believing them and you start to hate yourself. It's serious. When you don't like yourself you don't feel like doing anything with your life. Your life doesn't make any sense. It happened so many times that I would go to bed and I just didn't want to get up in the morning.*

BRENDAN, 19 YEARS OLD

In Québec, the most frequent kinds of incidents reported by victims of homophobia are insults, teasing, mockery and humiliation (24%), followed closely by gossip and rumours with the intent to harm a student's reputation (23.2%), exclusion, rejection or ignoring (16.8%) and intimidation, threats and cyber-bullying (10.9%).

Incidents involving physical violence (pushing, hitting, kicking, vandalism, sexual aggression) are less frequent. However, these incidents are serious and can have grave consequences and repercussions for students. In total, 8.5% of students claim to have been subjected to physical violence at least once (were pushed, hit, kicked, spit on or had objects thrown at them), 6.4% have been threatened (were forced to do something against their will), 7% have been sexually harassed (were followed, had passes made at them, were touched, pinched or kissed against their will), 5.6% have been the target of vandalism (personal objects were stolen or destroyed) and 3.9% have been the victim of sexual aggression (were forced to carry out sexual gestures, were assaulted or were the target of voyeurism or exhibitionism).

While overt acts of discrimination and violence are difficult for schools to ignore, daily acts of covert discrimination persist and impact students' lives in ways that many teachers and administrators fail to acknowledge.<sup>16</sup> Verbal bullying and harassment have been found to be quite damaging to students as well. Other studies on bullying have shown that repeated verbal attacks by peers are as devastating as infrequent cases of physical violence.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, most bullying policies and interventions are not designed to target these more persistent and insidious forms of harassment that hurt so many students.

## VICTIM REPORTING

« *I am very discouraged when everyday I sit in class and hear mean, homophobic remarks, and the teachers just ignore it or perhaps even have a laugh along with the students who said it!! I have lost faith in the supposed 'teacher role model' crap. Yeah right. These people only conform to their own beliefs of religion and such, and rarely do I see a teacher stand up against homophobic remarks.*

ÉLOISE, TEENAGER

« *I was in my sex ed class and two male students started asking me sexual questions that I thought were extremely inappropriate. They didn't know what my sexual preferences were, they were just guessing and for the entire hour and 40 minutes the only thing the teacher said was 'stop'. She didn't remove the students from the class. She didn't talk to them about it. She didn't talk to the class about it. She just said 'stop' and went back to doing her work.*

MARK, TEENAGER

Only 22.2% of students said that they had reported the incidents they experienced to the adults in their school setting. Even amongst students who said that they had been *frequently* victimized, 58% said that they had never reported their experiences to someone in authority. The principle reasons for not reporting, chosen from a non-mutually exclusive list, were the following: they felt that the event was not sufficiently serious or important to tell anyone about it (51%), they resolved the problem themselves (35.5%) or they had the impression that nothing could be done to improve the situation (27.1%). Also, some responded that the situation was too desperate and that nothing would change anyway (11.6%) or they were too embarrassed, ashamed or uncomfortable to speak about it (13.1%).

## VICTIM REPORTING (CONTINUED)



Why didn't you report the incident or incidents that affected you?

Reasons	% having selected the choice
Impression that nothing could be done to change the situation.	27.1
Feeling that the event was not serious or important enough to report.	51
Fear of possible negative repercussions.	14.7
Resolved the problem on my own.	35.5
Fear about confidentiality; fear to be labelled a 'tattler'.	15.3
School staff seems against homosexuality.	2
Feeling embarrassed, ashamed or uncomfortable.	13.1
Desperate situation where nothing can be changed.	11.6
This incident only happened to me once.	29.7

Students lack confidence and express frustration in the ability of adults to help them escape from the homophobic harassment that they endure.<sup>18</sup> They also assimilate, through years of having seen homophobia ignored by those in authority, that when they are harassed in this manner it is not 'serious enough' to report, regardless of how this victimization makes them feel.

## WITNESS REPORTING

In terms of homophobic incidents, almost three-quarters of students (74.4%) witnessed or heard about another student being victimized because of his or her real or perceived sexual orientation. The types and frequency of witnessed incidents reflected those reported by the victims. This included witnessing violent behaviours as well: 32.7% saw or heard about a student being pushed, hit, kicked, spit on or having had objects thrown at him or her; 24.2% saw or heard about a student who had personal objects that were vandalized, stolen or destroyed and 18.8% saw or heard about a student who was forced to do something against his or her will.

Other types of homophobic incidents that are rare but nevertheless very troubling are those having to do with sexuality. In fact, 12.8% of respondents knew about a student who had been followed, forced to submit to persistent sexual advances or had been touched or kissed against his/her will and 7.5% knew about a student who had been the victim of sexual aggression (i.e. someone who was forced to carry out sexual gestures, was assaulted or was the target of voyeurism or exhibitionism) because of his or her real or presumed sexual orientation.

As was the case for the victims, the witnesses were not inclined to report these homophobic incidents, be it to a teacher, a school principal or another member of the school staff: only 9.1% had ever done so. **Is it possible that the persistent trivialization of homophobia by many adults in authority conveys to youth the message that homophobia, unlike other forms of discrimination, is socially acceptable, and sometimes even merited?**

Q

Why didn't you report a witnessed incident of homophobia?

Reasons	% having selected the choice
Impression that nothing could be done to change the situation.	22.5
Feeling that the event was not serious or important enough to report.	38.3
Fear of possible negative repercussions.	8.8
The student solved the problem on his or her own.	17
Fear about confidentiality; fear to be labelled a 'tattler'.	13.8
School staff seems against homosexuality.	2.6
I didn't know the student (who was victimized) well enough.	29.2
It wasn't my business. It had nothing to do with me.	38.7
I witnessed or heard about this incident only once.	17.1

## WITNESS REPORTING (CONTINUED)

The major reasons for not having reported a witnessed act of homophobia closely follow those reported by the victims. Granted, it can be difficult for a student to report an incident that he/she has only heard about, but didn't personally witness. However, given that many students do witness homophobic acts, the results tend to demonstrate that students view homophobia as banal or not important enough to respond to.

In addition, when homophobic incidents occur, it is very possible that the news rapidly spreads throughout the school. **With gossip and Facebook posts, incidents continue to reverberate for the humiliated victims, and can become known to a wider number of students.** The end result is an aggravated climate of homophobia where real or perceived homosexuality is equated with victimization.

## COMMITTING ACTS OF HOMOPHOBIA

Finally, students were asked what type of homophobic acts or gestures they had committed against students who are, or who are suspected of, being homosexual. Overall, 32.7% affirmed to have committed at least once, one of the following acts in a homophobic manner: 23.8% of students said they had insulted, meanly teased or humiliated another student, 13.7% excluded, rejected or ignored a student, 8% spread gossip or rumours with the goal of ruining a student's reputation, and 6.2% pushed, kicked, hit or threw objects at a student.

## VARIOUS FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION

The body of information presented above gives an idea of the prevalence of homophobia in Québec schools. This does not inform us however of the relative importance of sexual orientation and gender expression as motifs of discrimination compared to other forms of discrimination, intimidation and harassment that occur in our schools. A specific question was asked of students in order to analyze these differences. According to students' responses, the most common motive for discrimination was based on appearance or body size and 55% responded that this occurs at least once a week at school. Following closely, 44.3% of students declared having observed harassment based on gender expression at least once a week, while 39.2% observed harassment based on sexual orientation at least once a week. These two categories of harassment are closely related, **as it is not rare that, for example, a boy who is accused of acting like a girl is also presumed to be homosexual, or a girl who is more interested in sports than in boys is presumed to be lesbian.**

The other motives for teasing, harassment and intimidation, such as physical handicap, skin colour, religion and country of origin, follow far behind. Were students less harassed for these reasons because efforts have been made in Québec schools to counter discrimination based on race, ethnicity and ability or do the lower numbers simply reflect a lack of ethnically diverse and physically disabled students in the schools that were surveyed—notably in regions outside of the Montreal metropolitan area?

## VARIOUS FORMS OF **DISCRIMINATION** (CONTINUED)

Q

Since you began high school, to your knowledge, how frequently are students meanly teased, harassed, intimidated or insulted for the following reasons?

Motives	FREQUENCY					Total
	More than once a week	About once a week	Less than once a week	Less than once a month	Never	
Because of their appearance, their height, their body shape or their weight.	30	25	19.9	17.8	7.4	100
Because a boy is acting too feminine or a girl is acting too masculine	20.5	23.8	18.6	23.1	14	100
Because they are or they are thought to be gay, lesbian or bisexual	20	19.2	14.7	25.2	21	100
Because they have a physical handicap	7.4	9.1	14.3	26.5	42.6	100
Because they are part of a visible minority, because of their skin colour	3.6	4.8	9	24.1	58.4	100
Because they practice a certain religion or they show religious symbols	2.8	5	11	28	53.3	100
Because they come from somewhere outside of Québec	3.1	4.4	8.5	24.6	59.5	100
Because of their gender	1.2	2.2	5.1	11.9	79.5	100.0

## VARIOUS FORMS OF **DISCRIMINATION** (CONTINUED)

In the United States the forms of verbal harassment that students reported hearing the most were based on sexual orientation, race, body size, and gender expression. The type of discrimination and harassment that students reported teachers were *least* likely to interrupt were sexual orientation and gender expression.<sup>19</sup> There is no reason to believe that the situation would be any different in Québec. The intention of the Québec study was not, of course, to try to create a hierarchy of discrimination, but rather to point out that attention needs to be paid to the phenomenon of homophobia in schools.

It must not be forgotten, either, that people may be discriminated against for multiple reasons and that **these different forms of discrimination may produce an effect that is greater than the sum of their parts**. For instance, the Canadian study noted that although there was little variation in the levels of gender or sexual orientation harassment based on a person's ethnicity, Caucasian youth were far less likely to be physically assaulted because of their ethnicity (8%, compared to 13% for aboriginal youth and 15% for youth of colour). Consequently, one can imagine that non-Caucasian youth who are also the victims of homophobic harassment will be especially vulnerable. Add to this the fact that youth of colour were far less likely to know of any LGBTQ students (67% compared to 81% of Caucasian and 87% of aboriginal youth) or to know of any teachers or school staff who were supportive of LGBTQ youth (48% knew of none, compared to 38% of aboriginal youth and 31% of Caucasian youth). Youth of colour also reported the lowest rates of being comfortable discussing LGBTQ matters with anyone at all, including their coaches, their teachers, their classmates, their parents or even with a close friend. One can only imagine the extreme isolation and vulnerability that these youth must be confronting.

## VISIBILITY OF **SEXUAL DIVERSITY** IN QUÉBEC'S HIGH SCHOOLS

Whether or not students discern that their school is open to sexual diversity depends on signs that they may pick up upon in their school settings. Slightly more than three-quarters of students (77.1%) noticed at least one 'gay-positive' sign. Amongst the most frequent was the phone number of telephone help lines for gay and lesbian students in their agenda or other school documents. Also frequently noted were posters or a sign identifying certain school staff as being open to sexual diversity (e.g. a rainbow sticker on a teachers office door). A significant percentage of students, 37.4%, said that a fellow student coming out about his or her homosexuality or bisexuality was another sign of openness.

When students were asked about sensitization activities regarding homosexuality and bisexuality that their school organized or promoted, 13% of youth said that they had had an LGB person give a testimony in their classroom. 12% noticed information booths, and 8.4% attended (or at least heard about) a theatre play on this subject. In total, less than one-third (31.1%) had noticed or taken part in at least one sensitization activity since the beginning of the school year.

**Q**

**What sensitization activity about homosexuality and/ or bisexuality has your school organized or promoted?**

Activity	% having selected the choice
Testimony of a lesbian woman or a gay man invited to the classroom	13.4
Theatre play on this subject	8.4
Information booth	11.7
Other	4.9
I've never heard about any type of activity like this	69

A bit more than half of the students, 55.8% said that their teachers never addressed the issue of sexual diversity in their classes. In general, when the subject was brought up, 27% said that it was the initiative of only one teacher.

## VISIBILITY OF **SEXUAL DIVERSITY** IN QUÉBEC'S HIGH SCHOOLS (CONTINUED)

Q

Since the beginning of the school year have your teachers talked about anything related to homosexuality or bisexuality during class time (e.g. gay marriage, the pride parade, same-sex couples having children, etc)?

	%
Yes more than one teacher spoke about this subject	16.7
Yes but only one teacher talked about this subject	27.6
No, never	55.8
Total	100,0

The majority of students (58.7%) questioned considered their teachers to have spoken about homosexuality in neutral terms, or in a positive manner (39.1%). Only a small percentage (2.1%) found the discussion to be in negative terms.

**These data indicate that although Québec's schools are showing positive signs of openness to issues surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity, there is still much work to be done.**

## THE IMPACT OF HOMOPHOBIA ON ACADEMIC PERSEVERANCE AND SUCCESS

« *When I broke up with my boyfriend, I said to him: “Listen, I’m interested in a girl these days.” He told everyone about that. It created a huge amount of rumours at school. And they became really exaggerated. People were saying that I had taken a girl to the woods to make out and that I was a lesbian. A lot of stuff. I was just a little 14-year-old girl with a fragile soul, who was having a hard time fitting in at school. I wasn’t happy. I didn’t want to go back to school.*

JENNI, 15 YEARS OLD

« *I prefer not to go to school. Anyway, if I do go, everything will go wrong. I know I’ll be bullied. I won’t be able to concentrate on what I’m supposed to be doing.*

MICHAEL, 17 YEARS OLD

« *It happens every day, all six, seven periods and I just can’t deal with it. If someone is just next to your ear going “Faggot. Faggot. Faggot,” through the entire day you just want to turn around and sock ’em. When all this stuff was going on I couldn’t pay attention to anything and I’d just be sitting there doing math and I’d keep on writing down “I hate this person. I hate the world. I hate life.” Or I felt that I just needed to ditch school every day or just kill myself or something. Just anything to get out of it. I just couldn’t take it anymore.*

NICHOLAS, TEENAGER

Although it is difficult to directly evaluate the impact of homophobic harassment on academic performance and perseverance, we can look at certain variables that will give us an idea of how the victims of homophobia are affected. In the Québec study, Chamberland looked at school absenteeism due to feelings of being unsafe, changing schools or wanting to change schools, academic aspirations and the feeling of being included in one’s school community. These variables were looked at with respect to 4 types of students: non-victimized heterosexuals, victimized heterosexuals, non-victimized LGBTQ students and victimized LGBTQ students. As noted above, homophobia affects a large number of students and so it was especially important to look at its effects on a variety of different students and not only compare LGBTQ students to heterosexual students.

## THE IMPACT OF HOMOPHOBIA ON ACADEMIC PERSEVERANCE AND SUCCESS (CONTINUED)

The first clear observation in the Québec study is that it is the **victimized LGBQ students who are most negatively affected by homophobia when it comes to questions related to academic performance.** Closely behind them in terms of impact are the heterosexual victims of homophobia. For these two types the situation worsens when the frequency of homophobic harassment increases. For example, 7.7% of LGBQ students said that they had already missed school days because they didn't feel safe at school, with 52.4% of those who were frequently victimized (on average once a week or more) saying that they had missed school for this reason. For heterosexual victimized students, the results are 4.9% and 16.9%, respectively. The number of missed school days added up to an average of 5.3 days for non-victimized students vs. 11 days for those who had been victimized (whether LGBQ or heterosexual). The research also showed that 'belonging scores' dropped by about 10 points when students who were rarely victimized were compared to those who were frequently victimized.

## THE IMPACT OF HOMOPHOBIA ON ACADEMIC PERSEVERANCE AND SUCCESS (CONTINUED)

Q

Since the beginning of the school year, have you missed any days at school because you didn't feel safe? If yes, how many?

ACCORDING TO SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND VICTIMIZATION					
	Non-victimized heterosexual students (%)	Victimized heterosexual students (%)	Non-victimized LGBQ students (%)	Victimized LGBQ Students (%)	Total (%)
Yes, I missed some days	2.9	8.1	4.7	17.1	5.4
No, I've never missed any days	97.1	91.9	95.3	82.9	94.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100

In the pan-Canadian study, youth with LGBT parents were more than 3 times as likely to skip school than their peers because of feeling unsafe either at school (40% vs. 13%) or on the way to school (32% vs. 10%).

The findings are similar in terms of changing schools or wanting to change schools. When homophobic incidents are isolated, 28.8% of LGBQ students said that they had changed or wanted to change schools. When the incidents were more frequent, the percentage jumps to 76.2%. For heterosexual students, the percentages are 12.3% and 42.1% respectively.

## THE IMPACT OF HOMOPHOBIA ON ACADEMIC PERSEVERANCE AND SUCCESS (CONTINUED)

Q

Have you ever changed schools or wanted to change schools because you were meanly teased, insulted or harassed?

ACCORDING TO SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND VICTIMIZATION					
	Non-victimized heterosexual students (%)	Victimized heterosexual students (%)	Non-victimized LGBQ students (%)	Victimized LGBQ Students (%)	Total (%)
Yes, I have changed schools	1	2.4	3.1	8.3	1.9
Yes, I have considered changing schools	6.8	18.4	16.9	34.5	12.3
No	92.2	79.3	80	57.2	85.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Finally, for academic aspirations it was found that LGBQ students, whether victimized or not, were slightly more numerous than heterosexual students (victimized or not) to not want to pursue their studies after high school (7.7% and 7.9% vs. 4.5% et 2.9% respectively).

The results from the Québec study indicate that homophobic bullying and harassment are all too common in Québec schools and that this problem has the potential to undermine the educational achievement of those who are most adversely affected, whether they are homosexual or heterosexual. Homophobia in schools needs to be recognized and acknowledged. Educators who are genuinely concerned about the safety and academic achievement of their students have a key role to play in challenging homophobic attitudes within the schools and creating a safe environment for all students.



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