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The Impact of Homophobia and Homophobic Violence on School Persistence and Academic Success in Québec

Key Findings

This document presents the key findings of the research study *The Impact of Homophobia and Homophobic Violence on School Persistence and Academic Success*, financed by the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport du Québec (MELS) through the Action concertée program of the Fonds québécois de recherche sur la société et la culture (FQRSC) (Québec fund for research on society and culture) on school persistence and success. The qualitative portion of the study also benefited from a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

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- Table nationale de lutte contre l'homophobie du réseau collégial
- Table nationale de lutte contre l'homophobie du réseau scolaire
- Institut de recherches et d'études féministes (IREF), UQAM
- GRIS Montréal, GRIS Québec, GRIS Chaudière-Appalaches
- Collège de Maisonneuve
- Centre for Research on Human Development (CRDH), Concordia University
- Université du Québec à Montréal

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We would particularly like to thank all the gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans young people who agreed to talk about their often difficult life experiences. Their words are essential for understanding the impacts of homophobia, but also for learning what helps them to regain confidence in themselves and build a better future.

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KEY FINDINGS



The presentation of the key findings of this study is divided into four sections that correspond with the four research reports:

1. Homophobia in high schools in Québec: snapshot of the situation, impacts and possible solutions
2. Homophobia in colleges in Québec: snapshot of the situation, impacts and possible solutions
3. Transphobia in schools in Québec
4. Guides for working to fight homophobia in schools

The research reports are available in French at: <http://www.homophobie2011.org>

HOMOPHOBIA IN HIGH SCHOOLS IN QUÉBEC: SNAPSHOT OF THE SITUATION, IMPACTS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS



- 2,747 students (Secondary 3 and 5) from 30 public high schools located in all parts of Québec completed a questionnaire between February and June 2009. 8% identified themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer or questioning themselves about their sexual orientation (LGBQ). In other words, in every classroom of 25 students, 2 of them do not define themselves as heterosexual.
- Homophobic violence is very present in Québec high schools. It affects nearly four out of ten high school students (38.6%), regardless of their sexual orientation, sex, language, place of birth or of schooling, or school grade level.
- Among students who identify as LGBQ, 69% report at least one incident of homophobic violence since the beginning of the school year, mostly teasing and bullying, rumours aiming to harm the reputation, social exclusion and cyber bullying. Between 10% and 18% declare having been the target of physical attacks, vandalism, sexual harassment or sexual assault at least once, or having been threatened or forced to do something against their will.

- The school climate is also affected by the “echoes” of such homophobic incidents. Nearly three out of four students directly witnessed or heard about violent homophobic incidents at least once during the school year and one out of three students reports that homophobic insults are frequently used in the school. When no one intervenes to prevent or counter homophobic violence, the message is that homophobia is acceptable, inconsequential, and even legitimate.
- Especially when it is experienced repeatedly, homophobia brings with it serious consequences, particularly on the school success and persistence of the young victims. Many students who are the victims of homophobia report that they have difficulty concentrating in the classroom, they miss classes or days of school because they don’t feel safe, or that they have changed schools or wanted to do so because they were teased, discriminated against or harassed. They also report a poor sense of belonging at school and experience psychological difficulties (stress, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideas...) which in turn hinder their school progress.
- More than three quarters (77.8%) of high school students who have experienced homophobia say that they did not report the incidents in which they were victimized. The main reasons they list are the fear of negative repercussions, fear of being seen as a tattler, the impression that nothing would be done to correct the situation, or the belief that the event in question was not serious enough to justify telling anyone about it.
- The majority of high school respondents say they do not know if their high school has an anti-violence policy, rule or code of conduct that explicitly mentions sexual orientation.
- More than half of high school students (55.8%) report that their teachers have never discussed subjects related to sexual diversity in class. More than three quarters have noticed signs of openness towards sexual diversity in their school, such as information about resources in the school agenda (e.g. Gay Line) or awareness-raising posters. Nevertheless, less than a third of students has heard about any outreach activities regarding homosexuality or sexual diversity since the beginning of the school year – and even hearing about such activities doesn’t mean that they took part in it.
- The interviews (65 LGBTQ met individually or in group interview) helped identify three types of factors that could be considered as helpful to young gay, lesbian and bisexual (LGB) victims of homophobia at school:
 - 1) Intrapersonal factors: accepting one’s own sexual orientation, coming out.
 - 2) Interpersonal factors: the presence of openly LGB individuals who are well integrated into the school milieu, the visibility of homosexuality in class or in the school environment, explicit support from peers and school staff members (action taken against homophobia, positive reactions to coming out), the existence of an LGB student support group, denunciation of or self-defence in homophobic incidents.
 - 3) Community factors: getting involved in fighting against homophobia, offering support to non-heterosexual peers by being visible as an LGB youth in the school milieu.

HOMOPHOBIA IN COLLEGES IN QUÉBEC: SNAPSHOT OF THE SITUATION, IMPACTS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS



- 1,844 students from 26 CEGEPs located in all parts of Québec completed a questionnaire between February and April 2008. 5.7% identified themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer or questioning themselves about their sexual orientation (LGBQ).
- While it is present in the college environment, homophobic violence is nevertheless less generalized than in high schools. As such, 4.5% of CEGEP students surveyed report that they have personally experienced at least one homophobic incident because they are lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) or because they were thought to be. In comparison, the same is true for 38.6% of respondents in high school. Nevertheless, among respondents who identified as LGBQ in the questionnaire, the percentage is higher: almost a quarter (24.4%) report at least one homophobic incident since the beginning of the school year (mostly teasing and social exclusion).
- Only a minority (5.1%) of students have reported these incidents to an authority. The main reasons listed for not doing so are the feeling that the event was not significant enough to be denounced, the problem resolving on its own, and the impression that nothing would be done to correct the situation.
- The school environment, in relation to homophobia, seems more problematic in male-dominated programs. A higher number of students in these programs state that they have committed a homophobic act. Also, attitudes toward sexual diversity among these students are more negative than those of students enrolled in mixed or female-dominated programs.
- About 7 out of 10 students (68.8%) say they often or occasionally hear derogatory comments such as “that’s so gay” at their college.
- The majority of students (82.9%) say they have seen a sign of their college’s openness to sexual diversity. More than one out of four students (28.5%) say there is a sexual diversity support group at their college, although they do not necessarily have any information on that group’s activities.
- Two thirds (66.8%) of respondents say they have heard their professors make comments about subjects related to homosexuality, generally in a neutral or positive way.
- Among students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning, their perception of a college environment as being open-minded, the desire to meet new people and the desire for anonymity seem to be influential factors in their choice of CEGEP.

- When they arrive at CEGEP, many LGBTQ students are still negatively impacted by the intense homophobic climate they have suffered within or witnessed in high school.
- The interviews (65 LGBTQ met individually or in group interview) helped identify three types of factors that could be considered as helpful to young gay, lesbian and bisexual (LGB) victims of homophobia at school:
 - 1) Intrapersonal factors: accepting one's own sexual orientation, coming out.
 - 2) Interpersonal factors: the presence of openly LGB individuals who are well integrated into the CEGEP milieu, the visibility of homosexuality in class or in the school environment, explicit support from peers and school staff members (action taken against homophobia, positive reactions to coming out), the existence of an LGB student support group, denunciation of or self-defence in homophobic incidents.
 - 3) Community factors: getting involved in fighting against homophobia, offering support to non-heterosexual peers by being visible as an LGB youth in the school milieu.

TRANSPHOBIA IN SCHOOLS IN QUÉBEC



- This exploratory study is based on the analysis of semi-directed interviews carried out with eight young adults (aged 16 to 23 years) who identify as trans (transsexual, transgender) or as questioning their gender identity, as well as six key informants, mostly trans themselves, who work with youth.
- The majority of the participants interviewed actively questioned their gender identity while they were attending high school. Many of them began a sex or gender transition between high school and CEGEP, or over the course of their college studies.
- Young trans people experience both homophobia and transphobia at school. They are often labelled as gay or lesbian because of their atypical gender, and as a result they suffer the homophobic attitudes and behaviours of their peers, and sometimes of school staff. They also face difficulties specific to their situation (ex.: changing their first name at school, using bathrooms, using locker rooms).
- Young trans people experience many forms of discrimination in school, particularly in high school. Our participants reported, among other things, being excluded or rejected, being subjected to harassment and verbal attacks (insults, threats, use of the wrong name and pronouns), and being subjected to harassment and physical attacks (being followed, being locked into lockers, being beaten up).
- The violence these young people experience often takes place in locations where adult supervision is reduced, such as hallways or school buses.
- Attacker profiles were not established in our interviews. While peers seem to be mainly responsible for violent acts targeting young trans people, the participants nevertheless emphasized that teachers, supervisors, youth workers and principals sometimes have transphobic or homophobic attitudes toward them, or simply do not provide the necessary support relative to these situations.
- Sex-segregated activities and spaces (locker rooms, bathrooms, physical education classes) are a source of many problems for young trans people. For example, a young trans person may feel anxious when he or she needs to use the bathroom or locker room at school, because they are non-mixed-gender spaces and access to them is reserved to one sex or the other.
- In the absence of clear policies in schools, young trans people rely on the school staff to accommodate them in their new identity. As such, some will take more formal approaches to their school principals, while others will informally ask teachers to use their chosen names and pronouns, and still others will only ask their friends and family to change. It falls to the young trans person to tell their personal life story to many people and to count on their goodwill, which can sometimes be problematic if these people do not have open minds toward trans identities.
- Young trans people report that they do not feel safe at school, which has major impacts on, among other things, their school progress (absenteeism, concentration, success). They generally report feeling safer at the college level than in high school.

- The interviews we carried out helped us identify seven possible vulnerability or resilience factors for young trans people.

- 1) The attitude of the school's principals. Our participants report that many school principals do not take a position regarding transphobia and homophobia. According to them, to better support young trans people, principals should take a more active role toward the integration and acceptance of young trans people (putting up awareness-raising posters about trans identities, including trans realities in institutional policies, ensuring that school staff receive basic information on the subject, etc.).
- 2) The role of teachers. According to the young trans people we interviewed, many teachers do not provide support to students who suffer transphobia in class. Some teachers themselves put forth transphobic statements.
- 3) Talking about trans identities in class. Our participants emphasize that teachers' statements about trans identities are important to their identity and school progress. For example, a well-informed teacher who has a good rapport with his or her group can raise awareness among his or her students about how to respect trans people.
- 4) The role of youth workers. The majority of our participants said they were not interested in consulting with school youth workers, because they felt that the workers were not strongly present at school and they doubted the workers' competencies in regard to trans identities.
- 5) The circle of friends. Friends are a very important resiliency factor for our participants. They offer support and acceptance, psychological and physical protection, and affirmation. Often, they come out to friends first about their trans identity.
- 6) The support of trans organizations. Young trans people highlight the importance of organizations for trans people, in terms of support and recognition of their experiences. These organizations help them to create ties to other trans people who may be able to serve as role models.
- 7) Family support. Our participants generally do not confide very much in their family when they are experiencing difficulties at school related to their gender expression.

GUIDES FOR FIGHTING HOMOPHOBIA IN HIGH SCHOOLS



- We carried out a descriptive evaluation of a total of 18 guides for fighting homophobia in high schools. These guides are addressed at people who work with youth in high schools and colleges, particularly teachers. We have listed the guides that are accessible in Québec and available, for the most part, in French, in both English and French, or in English only (5/18). These guides were created by various stakeholders: people working directly in the school environment (teachers' federations and associations, unions), community organizations, and governmental and para-governmental organizations.
- Many guides aim to inform and equip teachers and school staff to help students develop skills to reduce homophobic behaviours and improve LGBTQ students' living environments. The guides provide informative content with a view to identifying situations in which homophobic discrimination is taking place. They also contain pedagogical content that provides concrete measures for staff to apply in their everyday work at school to fight homophobia. This content includes three types of activities: advice for implementing gay-straight alliances to support LGBTQ students; pedagogical activities to raise awareness among students; and case studies and sample situations aimed at people working with youth.
- The question of sexual diversity is not addressed in the same way by anglophones and francophones. The anglophone tradition is more inclusive, with approaches that address bisexual and questioning people as well as transsexual and transgender people. The guides provide a systemic view of the structures of oppression, and they favour the term "heterosexism." For its part, the francophone tradition uses the term "homophobia" to refer to discrimination experienced by sexual minorities, leaving bi, trans and questioning people in the shadows along with heterosexual people whose gender expression deviates from the norm and children of same-sex parents. In general, guides would do well to be more inclusive, since the difficulties and discrimination faced by LGBTQ students vary significantly based on their sex, gender and sexual orientation.
- Less than one third of the guides make mention of cultural diversity, which is rather shocking considering the growing presence of cultural diversity in Québec and Canada. Only two guides address sexual diversity for a population that includes members of the First Nations. Sexual minority youth from cultural communities deal with specific situations that deserve to be taken into account.
- Endeavours to fight homophobia in schools should be implemented in an institutionalized fashion. We must encourage concerted, systematic action that mobilizes the various actors within schools and colleges as well as in the education sector (school boards, awareness activities for future teachers in the universities, etc.).
- The effectiveness of anti-homophobia measures and programs should be studied in terms of both their implementation and their impact in order to measure the changes in students' beliefs, attitudes and behaviours toward sexual diversity.

LIST OF ANTI-HOMOPHOBIA GUIDES¹

Alberta Teachers' Association and The Orlando Books Collective

Safe and Caring Schools for Lesbian and Gay Youth: A Guide for Teachers (2002)

Gay-Straight Student Alliances in Alberta Schools: A Guide for Teachers (2006)

The Alberta Teachers' Association.

11010 142 Street NW, Edmonton, Alberta T5N 2R1

Tel.: (780) 447 9400

Website: www.teachers.ab.ca

Centrale des Syndicats du Québec

Silence SVP. Homosexualité: le pouvoir de la parole (2002)

Reconnaître l'homophobie, agir pour la contrer (2000)

CSQ/Comité pour la diversité sexuelle.

9405 Sherbrooke St. East, Montréal, Québec H1L 6P3

Tel.: (514) 356-8888

To order the publication: <http://promotions-livres.csq.qc.net/>

To order the video: <http://promotions-videos.csq.qc.net/>

The CSQ's sexual diversity committee also produces a CD with various studies and resources on homophobia in schools, with content that is continually updated.

Montreal Youth Coalition Against Homophobia

Orientation sexuelle et homophobie. Mieux intervenir auprès des jeunes. Guide de ressources et de sensibilisation. (2005)

Montreal Youth Coalition Against Homophobia

2075 Plessis St., Montréal, Québec H2L 2Y

Tel.: (514) 528 8424

Website: <http://www.coalitionjeunesse.org/>

Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse

Training for teachers:

L'homophobie, une peur qui va droit au cœur

Homophobie à l'école – Module en ligne pour le personnel

<http://www.cdpedj.qc.ca/fr/module-homophobie/accessibilite.php>

L'homophobie Situations d'apprentissage – Premier cycle du secondaire.

¹ Some guides have been updated or even completely rewritten since the survey we conducted. There are many more guides and educational resources available in English than in French.

<http://www.cdpedj.qc.ca/fr/boite-a-outils/situations/index.html>

Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse
360 Saint-Jacques St., 2nd floor, Montréal, Québec H2Y 1P5
Tel.: (514) 873 5331 or 1 800 361 6477
E-mail: shirley.sarna@cdpedj.qc.ca

Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario

Imagine a World That Is Free from Fear: A Kindergarten to Grade Eight Resource Addressing Issues Relating to Homophobia and Heterosexism. (2004)

Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario
Suite 1000 - 480 University Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5G 1V
Tel.: (416) 962 3836
Website: <http://www.etfo.ca/Pages/default.aspx>

Canadian Teachers' Federation

Seeing the Rainbow (2003)

Lessons Learned: A Collection of Stories and Articles about Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Issues (2005)

Gay-Straight Student Alliance Handbook (2006)

Challenging Silence, Challenging Censorship (2007)

Canadian Teachers' Federation
2490 Don Reid Drive, Ottawa, Ontario K1H 1E1
Tel.: (613) 232 1505
To order: <http://www.ctf-fce.ca/catalogue/default.aspx>

Fédération nationale des enseignantes et des enseignants du Québec

À propos des réalités gaies et lesbiennes. Guide d'intervention à l'usage des enseignantes et des enseignants. (2003)

Fédération nationale des enseignantes et enseignants du Québec
1601 De Lorimier Ave., Montréal, Québec H2K 4M5.
Tel.: (514) 598-2241
Website: www.fneeq.qc.ca

Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia (now Pride Education Network)

Creating and Supporting a Gay-Straight Alliance (2004, second edition. A third edition was published in 2010.)

Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia
c/o Joan Merrifield
831 Canso Road, Gabriola, British Columbia V0R 1X2
Tel.: (604) 688 9378 ext. 2004
Website: <http://www.pridenet.ca/main.htm>

GRIS-Montréal

Démystifier l'homosexualité, ça commence à l'école. Mieux comprendre l'homosexualité pour prévenir l'homophobie. (2003)

GRIS-Montréal
P.O. Box 476, Station C, Montréal, Québec H2L 4K4
Order form: http://gris.id-3.net/form/Commande_Guide.asp

GRIS-Québec

Comment créer votre comité allié! Un guide pédagogique à l'intention des milieux de la santé, des services sociaux, de l'éducation et des organismes communautaires. Volet 2: guide d'activités. (2007)

GRIS-Québec
363 De la Couronne, room 202, Québec City, Québec G1K 6E9
Tel.: (418) 523 5572
E-mail: info@grisquebec.org

Ministère de la santé et des services sociaux et Institut national de la santé publique

Pour une nouvelle vision de l'homosexualité: intervenir dans le respect de la diversité des orientations sexuelles. Guide du participant.

Ministère de la santé et des Services sociaux, Gouvernement du Québec.
Tel.: (514) 873-9890

People interested in taking this training must register with the regional health and social services agency in their region.

The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities

Safe and Caring Schools for Lesbian and Gay Youth: A Guide for Teachers

The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities
Barnett House
#42711010 142 Street, Edmonton, Alberta T5N 2R1
Tel.: (780) 447-9487
Website: <http://www.sacsc.ca>