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Queering the Curriculum: Why Early Queer Education is Necessary for the Survival of Queer Children in Ontario Catholic Schools

Abstract

In light of Premier Doug Ford's 2019 reconstruction of Ontario's sex-ed curriculum, which has scrapped/limited conversations regarding masturbation, consent, gender identity and sexual orientation in elementary classrooms, conversations around 2SLGBTQIA+ youth's safety and visibility in Ontario schools are poignant and necessary. Ford's changes calmed the moral panic of Ontario parents sparked by Kathleen Wynne's 2015 curriculum, which prioritized the normalization of consent and 2SLGBTQIA+ identities. Many claimed that Wynne's curriculum sexualized children and was inappropriate for students whom adults have positioned as straight and homophobic in the classroom (Bruhm & Hurley, 2004). Most of the backlash Wynne faced—and most of the support Ford received—came from parents and educators in Ontario's Catholic schools who claimed Wynne's curriculum went against their constitutional right to teach the values of their faith (Pierre, 2019). When internalized shame and outward hate combine in the Catholic school system, which already lacks diversity and empathy, the classroom can become a scary place for queer children. I argue that incorporating queer stories into classroom libraries and supporting student-led Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) can provide queer children with a safe space in an institution that otherwise works to deny and mystify their existence. Children's books like Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings' *I Am Jazz*, and Miriam B. Schiffer's *Stella Brings the Family* can work to foster empathy, deconstruct harmful heteronormative structures and normalize queerness in the classroom to make room for Queer joy and viability in Ontario schools.

Keywords: Queer children, 2SLGBTQIA+, Catholic schools, education curriculum

Introduction

Though the existence of the queer child has been well-documented throughout twenty-first-century children's literature, many educators remain reluctant to introduce the concept of queerness into the classroom. With the rise of homophobic violence in the United States, as well as blatant displays of both homophobia and transphobia in York Region—a school district in Southern Ontario, Canada—where parents and educators rallied against Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs), as well as the raising of the progress Pride flag, supporting queer youth is more necessary than ever before (Lavoie, 2023). According to Kingsbury et al. (2022), queer youth are significantly more likely to attempt suicide than their cisgender heterosexual peers: transgender youth are five times more likely to experience suicidal ideation and seven times more likely to attempt suicide, and questioning youth are two times more likely to attempt suicide in their lifetime (p. E767). Though it is not the intention to frame the lives of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth solely through suicidality, as Wozolek et al. (2017) suggest much of queer scholarship does, the material reality of higher suicide rates of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth is paramount to contend. These numbers will only continue to rise without adequate and accessible youth mental health support for queer youth in and out of school. However, how might queer youth find such support in intolerant spaces? By examining a brief history of homophobia within Roman Catholicism and analyzing queer picture books such as Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings' (2014) *I Am Jazz* and Miriam B. Schiffer's (2015) *Stella Brings the Family*, it will be argued that practicing transformative Social Emotional Learning (tSEL) techniques, through incorporating positive queer stories into classroom libraries may encourage a cultural shift towards tolerance by validating queer existence in Roman Catholic schools as well as supporting the development of cultural awareness and empathy in cisgender heterosexual classmates.

Heteronormativity and Roman Catholic Homophobia

To understand how queer picture books may encourage a child's tSEL development, one must first understand the systemic barriers that bar youth from accessing representations of queer joy. The queer run blog "The Queer

Dictionary" defines *heteronormativity* as "the belief or assumption that all people are heterosexual, or that heterosexuality is the default or 'normal' state of [a] human being" (Russo, 2014, para 1). Heteronormative ways of being, knowing, and doing are often generational, passed down through habitus by societies most privileged. Cregan and Cuthbert (2014) define habitus as "the interpretation of our social, cultural, and physical environment ... through which [people know themselves] and by which others identify [them]" (p. 78). The habitus is where children learn what society perceives as normal or abnormal; if one grows up only around white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, and religious family/peers, they will come to accept these faces, ways of being, and subsequent ideologies as *normal*, thereby leaving other identities and lived experiences open to mockery. For queer children raised in Catholic households, ways of knowing are often formed by heteronormative understandings of who is and is not valid in the eyes of God.

According to The Human Rights Campaign (n.d.), "...the [Roman Catholic] church names 'homosexual acts' as 'intrinsically immoral and contrary to the natural law,' and names 'homosexual tendencies' as 'objectively disordered.'" Notice the distinction the church makes between *homosexual acts* and *tendencies*. On the one hand, the church treats homosexual *acts* (same-sex intercourse) as a crime against natural law, positioning adult homosexuals as possessing *mens rea* (guilty mind) and *actus reus* (guilty act) (Crew, 2018). On the other hand, the church positions homosexual *tendencies* or "inclinations toward a particular characteristic or type of behaviour" (Oxford Language Dictionary, n.d.) as disordered thoughts, which—like other illnesses—can be treated if caught early. The Catholic *fear of the queer* is not so much a result of the identity itself but of the guilty act of homosexual sex and the worry that children would not be able to resist or understand potentially dangerous situations. Many Roman Catholics believe in hiding queer identities from children entirely to prevent them from developing guilty minds or intentions to commit a guilty act in their youth.

Bruhm and Hurley (2004) explain, "the initial policing of child sexuality enabled the

persecution of perversions that would eventually earn the societies his certified homosexuality” (p. XV). Here, the authors reference a historical context in which the Ancient Greeks had young boys shadow and lie with older men as a means of achieving upward social mobility. However, as society became more Westernized, the idea that boys could socially advance through sexual affairs—and the idea of children as sexual participants in any capacity—led to a major moral panic, and rightfully so. However, it is worth noting that many who align with this extreme understanding of Catholicism resort to similar discourses to justify anti-LGBT protest today: the need to protect the child from the sexual and moral other (Kehily, 2013). By constructing a narrative that 2SLGBTQ+ individuals are perverted sexual deviants who live to prey on children’s sexual immaturity and curiosity, The Roman Catholic Church attempts to justify parental and institutional protectionism that limits children’s access to accurate representations of queerness—which may result in either the perpetuation of homophobia or the loss of a child’s life (see Suicide and LGBTQIA+ Youth heading).

Parental Impact 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth’s Agency

The Catholic position against queerness also stems from a fear of perception. As mentioned, one’s habitus defines and reproduces acceptable ways of being based on cultural and religious backgrounds. One may be morally against the physical conventions of the 2SLGBTQ+ community but allow their child the right to playful queer expression such as cross-dressing within the closed comfort of the home. In her revolutionary picture book with Jessica Herthel, *I Am Jazz*, Jazz Jennings articulates her own parents’ fear of perception due to the clothing she wore, “[s]ometimes my parents let me wear my sister’s dresses around the house [b]ut whenever we went out, I had to put on my boys’ clothes again [t]his made me mad!” (Herthel et al., 2014, p.13). This quotation illustrates how adults deny children agency over how they present in public due to the ‘fear of the queer’ and internalized shame. Parents may deny their children’s truth for myriad reasons, but as Wozolek et al. (2017) explain, “encounters with cruelty for queer youth are firmly rooted in sociocultural values that allow homophobia to continue as an acceptable norm of bias and hatred in schools and communities”

(p. 392). When one is forced to grapple with such external intolerance of their identity in both primary and secondary spaces of socialization, the physical body can become a scary place.

Suicide and 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth

A study by The University of Texas at Austin found a staggering link between queer suicide and religion: suicide rates of LGBTQ+ adults who identified religion as “very important” to them were significantly higher than those of heterosexual or cisgender individuals (Harding, 2018). Queer folk were reported to be 16.4% more likely to experience suicidal ideation compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Harding, 2018). The Trevor Project (2020) conducted a similar study to identify the influence of generational religiosity on youth, identifying the differences between queer youth whose parents use religion to justify homophobia, and those whose do not. The Trevor Project (2020) found that the likelihood of suicide attempts among youth who considered religion important or unimportant was comparable yet concerning. For instance, 23-24% of youth who heard anti-LGBT rhetoric in the home attempted suicide compared to the 13-15% of youth who did not face outward religious hatred at home.

Wozolek et al. (2017) claim that queer suicide has become so normalized that teachers and administration often do not attempt to help. Callaghan (2019) found that Canadian publicly funded Catholic schools respond to queer, transgender, gender-fluid, or gender non-conforming students and teachers in “contradictory and inconsistent ways” (para. 17). Callaghan’s analysis supports Blackburn and Clark’s (2010) claim that many educators assume that their students are both straight and homophobic “[their] positioning suggests that homosexuality is a ‘sin...’, a second positioning suggests that...homophobic students are free to both view their gay and lesbian peers as sinners and to ‘hate’ their fundamental sexual orientations and identities” (p. 151). Blackburn and Clark (2010) go on to note that such an assumption positions students as inherently incapable of tolerance, so educators do not attempt to teach acceptance, thus, enabling systemic hatred. Jagers et al. (2019) suggest that tSEL attempts to combat this education inequity by creating a curriculum that not only implies, but actively supports the knowledge that

“every student has what she or he needs when they need it, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income” (p. 163). This notion is essential for the survival of queer children but especially queer children of colour who are further marginalized in the classroom due to the intersections of racism and homophobia.

Impact of Institutional Hate on Black Queer Youth in School

Though the classroom has long been regarded as a “safe space” where all children are free to express themselves without fear of judgment, queer children—especially those of colour—who live outside heteronormative expectations maintain that this is not the case in the Catholic classroom. The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) report by Truong et al. (2020) says that 51.6% of Black queer youth felt unsafe at school due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation, and over 65% of Black queer students were victims of verbal and physical assault because of sexual orientation (p. 13). The coalition found that queer Black youth were more likely to skip school “due to feeling unsafe, [experiencing] lower levels of school belonging, lower educational aspirations, and greater levels of depression” (p.15). It is essential that, as a collective, all people work towards making school a space where all children feel safe and welcome to explore and live their truths. However, to do so, non-Black individuals must put in the work to ensure Black children’s prosperity. Incorporating social awareness training through tSEL into early at-home socialization may aid in broader social change. While there is room for deeper analysis into the experiences of Black queer youth in the classroom, as a white author, no further comment or offer further analysis of Black queer youth’s lived experiences—especially without connecting with youth and conducting qualitative research will be shared. For this paper, *queerness* will take on unintentional universality to identify systemic Catholic cultural and curricular homophobia.

Hate is a learned behaviour, one that can be remedied through an increase in cultural knowledge and awareness (Esquivel et al., 2021). tSEL provides hope for future generations as its commitment to social awareness may crush what Wozolek et al.

(2017) coined the ‘school-coffin pipeline’. In a system that lacks diversity and empathy, one must begin with taking small, realistic steps. By incorporating transformative Social Emotional Learning (tSEL) techniques into children’s early socialization through queer picture books, there can begin the room to cultivate a generation of kind and culturally aware, empathetic heterosexual kids, along with a generation of proud, happy—and most importantly—*living* queer children.

What is transformative Social Emotional Learning (tSEL)?

According to CASEL (2023), tSEL is “a form of SEL where young people engage in co-learning. It facilitates critical examination of individual and contextual factors that contribute to inequities and collaborative solutions that lead to personal, community, and societal well-being” (para. 6). The goal of this learning style is to foster and encourage young people’s involvement in social justice, while ensuring they can safely and effectively self-regulate in the face of inequity. tSEL was born out of SEL, a multipronged approach towards self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2022). tSEL aims to go beyond traditional classroom focused SEL, which unintentionally universalizes the experience of a child by omitting the significance of one’s racial, cultural, and ethnic makeup on their lived experience. The idea is that modeling positive self-talk, calm redirection, and responsibility will allow a child to not only practice healthy coping mechanisms but also develop an empathetic worldview. Cultivating such a worldview—one built on kindness, empathy, and understanding for others—early in a child’s social development may lead to empathetic youth and young adults who can then become agents of change in Roman Catholic school systems through identifying, understanding, and breaking down structures that support systemic inequity in the classroom. One may understand the importance of such supportive work through the impact of GSAs.

GSAs and tSEL

Although a total cultural and curriculum shift is needed in the publicly funded education system to combat hate, institutions must practice empathetic education gradually through small

steps, such as the inclusion and support of GSAs which can make a significant difference in a child's school experience. However, Iskander and Shabtay (2018) note that Ontario's Catholic students lack access to such safe spaces at school due to the administration's religious convictions. Iskander and Shabtay (2018) define GSAs as "a type of student club...that is often youth-led, and which take on a variety of activist and educational roles within school communities with the purpose of making schools safer..." (p. 342). These clubs act as a space where LGBTQ youth can let down their guard and be authentically themselves; they can act as a home away from home. For many, the community in those spaces may be the closest thing to the "home" they experience. The push for GSAs is often led by the students who need them most, which, unfortunately, places targets on their backs (see Suicide and LGBTQIA+ Youth heading). Though things seem grim, incorporating queer children's literature can improve school conditions not only for LGBTQ+ youth but straight and cis youth, as they may be socialized out of systemic hate.

Stella Brings the Family: Supporting Children's Social Emotional Development

Stella Brings the Family and *I Am Jazz* confront heteronormative and outdated constructs of gender expression in the classroom realistically and healthily, and both books can contribute to a necessary cultural and curricular shift in the primary grades that will foster and value social and emotional learning (SEL). Firstly, Miriam B. Schiffer's (2015) *Stella Brings the Family* provides a clear example of the benefits of empathy in the classroom by not shying away from the discomfort that queer kids face in the traditionally heteronormative and hyper-regulatory classroom. Stella, a child with two fathers, struggles with the absence of a mother for the Mother's Day celebration at school. Though Stella loves both of her father's dearly, she could not help but feel othered as her classmates question her family dynamic: "No mother?" Asked Leon. 'But who packs your lunch like my mom does for me?'" (Schiffer, 2015, p. 8). By comparing his own experience to Stella's and vocalizing his confusion, Leon reproduces notions of family structure that align normalcy to nuclear heteronormativity wherein fathers earn money, and mothers nurture by packing lunch. Stella continues, 'The problem [is not] lunch [it is] that I have no mother to bring for

the Mother's Day party'" (Schiffer, 2015, p. 8). Though he did not mean to embarrass Stella or conform to the heteronormative expectations of the family, his words othered Stella and made her feel inadequate. Children like Leon are not to blame as there is a systemic lack of exposure to diverse experiences in the heterosexual white world that bar queer children's and family's voices from authentic expression. This is why teachers like Mrs. Abbott, who refuses to let systemic indifference position her students as straight and homophobic (Blackburn and Clark, 2010), are desperately needed in traditionally conservative schools.

Rather than exclude Stella from the Mother's Day celebrations, she chose to welcome Stella's family—her grandparents, fathers, and cousins—into the celebration genuinely and lovingly, as teachers should. Mrs. Abbot showed the children and readers that family is not always nuclear but rather a collection of those who make one feel loved and secure, thereby giving Stella a confidence boost that undoubtedly changed her perspective on her "abnormal" family for good. By including *Stella Brings the Family* in Catholic primary lessons, teachers can begin the process of unlearning the systemic hatred of queerness, which will lead to the necessary cultural shift toward empathetic social emotional learning. If provincial governments and their subsequent Catholic school boards can commit to tackling institutionalized bigotry from kindergarten through empathic books, youth may begin to phase homophobia and heteronormativity out of their worldview which may trigger larger social change.

I Am Jazz: Supporting Children's Social Emotional Expression

Another example of a book that greatly supports social emotional learning is Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings' *I Am Jazz* which also emphasizes the importance of students' having a safe, inclusive classroom. Jazz explains, "At the beginning of the year, they wanted me to use the boys' bathroom, and play on the boys' team in gym class, but that [did not] feel normal to me at ALL" (Herthel et al., 2014, p. 20). It is significant here that Jazz discerns the abnormal. This ability is a result of her parents' compassion and allowance of gender expression, and their support of her agency allowed her to know herself and advocate for her rights to safety and

comfort at school. However, her school's administration did not fully support her transition. Like her folks, the administration felt she could play the girl privately, but at school, she must conform to the heteronormative conventions of the gender binary to ensure the comfort of straight and homophobic teachers and students. Against the administration's expectations, Jazz's peers embraced her transition—the children understood and accepted Jazz because she treated them with love, respect, and compassion when explaining her identity. Jazz's unwavering commitment to authenticity and open communication between parent, child, and classmate led to her confidence and pride in and out of the classroom, "I [do not] mind being different. Different is special...And inside I am happy...I am proud!" (Herthel et al., 2014, p. 23). If the Catholic school system were to incorporate voices like Jazz's into early education—ones that exude pride over hate—children could grow into their agency and be kind, empathetic, and compassionate beings.

Conclusion

The Roman Catholic Church and its respective school system have a long way to go regarding acceptance and pride. However, empathetic teachers who listen to the needs of queer children can ignite lasting change to ensure that school is a genuinely safe space for ALL children, not just those who abide by heteronormative notions of what a child should be. Homophobia as part of habitus causes queer children to doubt their worth, and the Roman Catholic curricula has a history of conditioning students to believe that difference and diversity are not acceptable in the family or the classroom. It must start with small, realistic steps within ourselves and our communities before expecting the world to change. Introducing the concept of queerness through children's books such as *I Am Jazz* and *Stella Brings the Family* may initiate an institutional shift towards kindness and allow students to learn love rather than hate, a necessary step towards queer youth's prosperity in traditionally conservative spaces.

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