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## Queer Education is Harm Reduction

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*“The forces of oppression aim at invisibility, and the strategy of resistance is to come out and make oneself visible.”*  
- Talia Mae Bettcher

Queerphobic rhetoric is on the rise in Western countries as the political right pushes messages of intolerance and even outright hatred for LGBTQIA+ people. Intolerance is often born out of misunderstanding or miseducation, which can lead to an anger inspired by fear. But we should not be afraid *of* LGBTQIA+ people, rather, we must be afraid *for* them. Members of the LGBTQIA+ community are constantly under threat, even in “progressive” societies such as ours.

The Trevor Project reports that LGBTQIA+ youth are more than four times as likely to fall victim to suicide than their cisnet peers <sup>1</sup>, with 45% of LGBQ+ youth having seriously considered suicide in the last year and 1 in 5 gender diverse youth having made a suicide attempt <sup>2</sup>. Hate crimes reported to Canadian police based on sexual orientation were up over 60% between 2020 and 2021 <sup>3</sup>, making it the highest number of hate crimes targeting LGBTQIA+ people on record since such data began being recorded in 2009 <sup>4</sup>. It is important to note as well that those who share the intersection of being a person of colour and a member of the LGBTQIA+ community are more likely to be victims of hate crimes and have higher

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<sup>1</sup> “Facts About LGBTQ Youth Suicide.” *The Trevor Project*, 2021

<sup>2</sup> “The Trevor Project’s Annual National Survey Reveals Upward Trend in Suicidal Thoughts Among LGBTQ Youth with Large Disparities for Transgender Youth and LGBTQ Youth of Color.” *The Trevor Project*, 2022

<sup>3</sup> Table 35-10-0066-01, “Police-reported hate crime, by type of motivation, Canada (selected police services)”, Statistics Canada, 2022

<sup>4</sup> “A Statistical Portrait of Canada's Diverse LGBTQ2+ Communities.” Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, 2021

rates of suicidality than their white peers. This data makes it abundantly clear that LGBTQIA+ people are suffering at an exponential rate because of the horrific intolerance of our society.

The best way to combat queerphobia and protect members of the LGBTQIA+ community is to educate ourselves as individuals as well as others. Our society is being fed lies about queer people that make them seem like dangerous predators, but there is nothing inherently wrong or predatory about being queer. Many people outside of the LGBTQIA+ community do not even know where to begin when it comes to discussing queer issues and identities, and so decide it is best not to try. It is the job of educators to protect those in their care, but it can be impossible to do so if they are unaware of the - often terrifying - reality of being queer. Educators are expected to create a safe learning environment for students, but it can be incredibly difficult for queer students to learn and participate in class when the fear of queerphobic bullying is taking up so much space in their minds or when they are reluctant to speak in class because they are afraid of being misgendered or called by the wrong name. One would hope that all staff employed in schools have the best interests of the students at heart, but we also must acknowledge that, despite their best efforts, some may be doing more harm than good.

I conducted an online informal survey of a Surrey high school to determine what supports are available for LGBTQIA+ students and what queer education is being provided <sup>5</sup>. My goal with this survey was not to vilify the school that agreed to participate, but rather to show how even those with good intentions often fall short in protecting queer youth because they do not have the resources or education to properly do so. The results of this survey will be highlighted throughout this paper where applicable to the larger discussion. I place no

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<sup>5</sup> 25 students voluntarily participated in my survey "LGBTQIA+ Education and Support at [the school]". The principal of said school approved my request to run the survey on the condition that I omit the name of the school from my final paper.

blame on any individual staff or educator, but rather on the school system as a whole for failing LGBTQIA+ students.

### **So, what does queer education look like?**

Queer education is about breaking down cis/heteronormative narratives and including LGBTQIA+ people and identities in class discussions. This *could* look like a class or workshop dedicated to this content, but it does not have to be. Although such in depth education is incredibly important, it is necessary to include LGBTQIA+ content within nearly every class.

In my survey, I asked students what suggestions they had for the school in terms of including LGBTQIA+ people and issues in education. One student said that they would like to see “units/lessons/projects about LGBTQIA+ identities, history, and issues during pride month, write/read stories with pronouns other than he/she, recognize important historical figures or contributions by LGBTQIA+ people.” Using their suggestions, it would not be difficult to incorporate LGBTQIA+ people and their contributions to subjects such as social studies, English, history, and arts. Normalising queer identities by including LGBTQIA+ people in day-to-day curriculum will help queer students feel less alone and may help non-queer students recognise that LGBTQIA+ people are nothing new or odd.

That being said, several other students also asked for more specific education, reporting that although LGBTQIA+ identities had been briefly discussed it was hardly ever in depth. Teaching students about the spectrums that are romantic and sexual attraction and gender identity will help them understand themselves and each other better. Bringing in members of the LGBTQIA+ community to talk to students and do presentations explaining different identities can help queer and questioning students feel less alone and/or discover an identity that they relate to.

The comment on the usage of pronouns outside the he/she binary is particularly important. The rigid gender binary that is now largely a global norm is a product of colonisation as many cultures embraced the idea of a gender spectrum and/or multiple genders that were not necessarily tied to sex. We should all be working to decolonise and degender our language, and the best way to do so is to start in the schools with youth who are typically the most open to change and learning new ideas.

### Degendering language:

Because of the strict gendered stereotypes our society is built on, degendering language may seem like a daunting task. But with patience, and time, it is possible to create this necessary change.

When I went to this Surrey high school to meet with the principal and discuss my project, I first had to sign in as a visitor at the office. Here I was repeatedly called “miss” and referred to with “she/her” pronouns even though I was wearing several trans pride pins, including one with my correct pronouns. I do not harbour any ill feelings towards these people and chalked it up to them potentially being unable to see my pins. I bring this up to highlight the problems that can arise from assuming someone’s gender.

In Talia Mae Bettcher’s piece *Trans Women and the Meaning of “Woman”*<sup>6</sup>, she points out that “it is better to let people self-identify rather than pick a gendered term for them.” (Bettcher, 237) When interacting with someone who has not expressed their preferred pronouns, it is always best to default to neutral pronouns such as “they/them” or even to just ask.

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<sup>6</sup> Bettcher, Talia Mae. "Trans Women and the Meaning of 'Woman'", *The Philosophy of Sex*, 2013

Several students responded to my asking for suggestions with a call for more inclusive and gender-neutral language. When referring to a group of students, always avoid things like “boys and girls”, “ladies and gentlemen”, etc. Instead, Keygan Miller (they/them) (former educator turned Public Training Manager at The Trevor Project) suggests terms such as “students”, “class”, “friends”, “scholars”, or other gender-neutral terms<sup>7</sup>.

Trans people are constantly subject to situations in which they are marginalised and misgendered which can lead to feeling unsafe, or at the very least, extremely uncomfortable. When the wrong pronouns are used for a trans person, even accidentally, it shows that the speaker does not respect or validate the gender identity of the trans person and therefore, their very existence. Bettcher explains that “this kind of identity reinforcement (particularly through pronoun use) occurs repeatedly and runs against the trans person’s own frequent requests to be treated otherwise” (Bettcher, 235) As students in subordinate positions, it can be intimidating to frequently correct teachers and other school staff, so it is the duty of the adults in these situations to do their best in using the correct pronouns.

Switching to using new pronouns for someone can be difficult and mistakes are bound to happen, but it is possible to limit the frequency of such mistakes by practising using the correct pronouns and putting in the effort to view them as their gender identity. The same can be said for name changes. Not all trans people choose to go by a different name after coming out, but those who do can become distressed at being called their old names. Switching students' names to their new ones on attendance sheets and including their preferred pronouns beside their names can work as a memory aid to prevent mistakes from happening which in turn will help trans students feel safer and more comfortable in the classroom.

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<sup>7</sup> Miller, Keygan. “Supporting LGBTQ Young People In The Classroom And Beyond”, *The Trevor Project*, 2022

Taking trans students seriously when they assert their gender identity is incredibly important. Failing to do so can not only directly harm that student, but also shows other students that invalidating trans people is acceptable. Rather than asking trans students about their identity it would be better to instead cultivate a safe environment so that they can feel comfortable approaching their teachers with such topics. “Non-trans people do not need to justify who they say they are in the same way” as trans people, so in order to foster equality we should never expect a trans person to justify their identity (Bettcher, 235). If a student comes out, the best thing to do is believe that they are who they say they are, as:

The demand for justification and the demand for illumination are not the same. We need new accounts... that don't begin with a *justification* for trans self-identity claims but that follow subcultural practice in taking the presumptive legitimacy of such claims for granted. (Bettcher, 247)

Degendering language and legitimising and validating queer people is also an essential part of sex education. One student who responded to my survey explicitly asked for more education on intersex anatomy, while another pointed out that the current content is “still very focused on hetero-normative sex-ed.”

It is important for students to know that sex does not always mean “p in v” penetrative intercourse, and that it is still possible to contract STIs from other forms of sexual interactions. Studies have shown that LGBTQIA+ people are more likely to get an STI, particularly MSM (men who have sex with men), than their cishet peers.<sup>8</sup> This is likely due to the lack of discussion and education on queer sex and overemphasis on forms of contraception to be used as birth control and less emphasis on forms of contraception that can prevent STIs even between same-sex individuals.

When talking about human bodies in general it is important to avoid gendered terms; this is especially true when discussing sexual health and reproductive organs. The fact that

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<sup>8</sup> Canada, House of Commons, The Standing Committee on Health, and Bill Casey (chair). “The Health of LGBTQIA2 Communities in Canada”, 28th report, 2019

there is a separation between gender and sex is also an extremely important discussion to have with students. Sex being the biological attributes of an individual such as chromosomes, hormone levels, and reproductive organs; while gender is a socially constructed phenomenon that can be linked to behaviours, expression, and identity. Although still highly contentious, this understanding of gender vs sex is not new and is backed by countless peer-reviewed studies. Healthline.com has an article titled “What’s the Difference Between Sex and Gender?”<sup>9</sup> that defines sex and gender as well as discussing the ways in which the two may be connected or disconnected. Much of our society, however, still believes that there is no difference between the two:

There is a genuine dispute concerning two competing visions of gender. And the taken-for-granted assumption that the dominant cultural view is the only valid one can be seen as a kind of cultural arrogance bolstered by institutional power... this conflict over meaning is deeply bound up with the distribution of power and the capacity to enforce a way of life, regardless of the emotional and physical damage done to the individual. (Bettcher, 242)

The bodies and identities of trans people come into conflict with this “dominant cultural view” of gender that asserts vagina = woman, and penis = man. So, when educating students on human reproductive systems it is necessary to avoid using gendered language. Sex-based language such as “female” or “male” is more appropriate but not necessarily always accurate.

Intersex bodies have a combination of biological attributes typically confined to one sex or another and can present in a number of ways with variations in chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs, and/or external genitalia<sup>10</sup>. Intersex anatomy is often left out of discussions on reproductive and sexual health which leads to further stigmatisation of this condition.

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<sup>9</sup> Clements, KC. Medically reviewed by Alana Biggers, MD. “What’s the Difference Between Sex and Gender?”, 2019

<sup>10</sup> Migala, Jessica. Medically reviewed by Anju Goel, MD. “Intersex: What the Term Means, and How It Can Appear”, 2022

Rather than attributing a specific gender or sex to various parts of human sexual and reproductive systems, it is best to just explain how these parts work and typically interact with the rest of the human body. This is because “the social meaning commonly associated with a body part [can be], in a subcultural context, completely changed.” (Bettcher, 240) Within LGBTQIA+ subculture, the fact that gender and sex are separate is an accepted fact and subcultural norm. In order to increase acceptance for queer people, it is necessary to integrate this aspect of the subculture into our dominant cultural idea of the human body.

#### Why it is up to the school system:

The primary goal of schooling is to teach young people about the world they live in and how to live up to their fullest potential. Failing to provide accurate information about LGBTQIA+ identities and issues is not only a major disservice to those in the community, but to all students as they are growing up in a world in which LGBTQIA+ people exist. The failure to include such information thus far is a product of ignorance.

In Nancy Tuana’s paper *The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women’s Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance*<sup>11</sup>, she explains that “ignorance, like knowledge, is situated. Understanding the various manifestations of ignorance and how they intersect with power requires attention to the permutations of ignorance in its different contexts.” (Tuana, 3) Although her paper is on ignorance in the context of women’s health, much of what she discusses is also relevant to the ignorance surrounding queer education as she outlines the ways in which ignorance is produced and reinforced. Tuana tells us that,

If we are to enrich our understanding of the production of knowledge in a particular field, then we must also examine the ways in which not knowing is sustained and sometimes even constructed. (Tuana, 3)

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<sup>11</sup> Tuana, Nancy. “The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women’s Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance”, 2006

The fact that we are ignorant about issues such as queer education is not necessarily our fault as individuals but is due to a history of systemic oppression and the suppression of such information. It is, however, the duty of individuals to work on undoing our ignorance so that we are not participating in its reproduction. Teachers and school staff have the most power over youth aside from their guardians and are responsible for helping them gain knowledge about our world, placing them in the perfect position to help educate youth on queer issues and identities. The lack of LGBTQIA+ education being provided - or rather, not provided - to students now reflects the ignorance of educators which may have been developed for several different reasons.

Tuana calls the first form of ignorance: “knowing that we do not know, but not caring to know” (Tuana, 4). This form of ignorance is not explicitly malicious but is instead, within the context of queer education, enforced by the government. This is to say that the failure to provide queer education “is a case of not being willing to engage in the research needed to know because such knowledge is not deemed important by those in the position to initiate (and fund) such research.” (Tuana, 5) Individual teachers may wish to teach their students about the LGBTQIA+ community but, without the proper access to funds and information, are unable to do so. Public school teachers are overworked and underpaid, which makes it difficult for them to obtain the resources necessary to provide adequate queer education. This is a reflection of the school systems, whose “decision that such knowledge is not valuable is linked to privilege and to oppression” (Tuana, 4-5) As a result, youth within the school system are being victimised by this oppression. By not prioritising queer education within the mandated curriculum, it is being oversimplified for the sake of time or left out completely as teachers struggle to educate students on the mandatory curriculum.

The second form of ignorance “involves topics that *we do not even know what we do not know* because our current interests, beliefs, and theories obscure them.” (Tuana, 6) This

form of ignorance is best explained by the hateful rhetoric currently being spread about queer people. Fear-mongering tactics are being used in an attempt to convince the public that LGBTQIA+ people are dangerous and that teaching kids about queer identities is wrong. The power and consistency of these voices has been increasing as of late, which has led to the further marginalisation of queer people in our society. Those who believe the misinformation to be true are often unwilling to hear the other side because their belief in the lies they are being fed is so strong. For some, it is strong enough to compel them to participate in anti-queer demonstrations. On November 25, 2022, a drag story time event took place at the Kitsilano Neighbourhood House and was met with a group of protestors accusing the drag queens of being groomers and pedophiles<sup>12</sup>. This protest turned an innocent performance into a potentially dangerous situation for both queer people and the children attending the event with their families. It can be incredibly difficult to undo the beliefs of these people, but it is possible through caring and careful education.

The third form of ignorance is titled “they do not want us to know,” which is to say that:

the ignorance of certain groups is systematically cultivated... epistemologies of ignorance also urge us to look at *types of knowledge* deemed dangerous, to identify to which groups of people they are so judged, and to examine institutional structures for rendering such individuals “ignorant.” (Tuana, 9)

This form of ignorance is closely linked with the previous one but focuses on the ways in which institutional powers keep us ignorant. Those in positions of political power can fall victim to the previous form of ignorance, believe the queerphobic narratives, and enforce ignorance on a large scale by attempting to introduce laws that prohibit the discussion of LGBTQIA+ issues and identities in schools. We have already seen this happen throughout the United States, and such legislation has only emboldened those with queerphobic beliefs

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<sup>12</sup> Marsten, Emily. “Emotions flare as protestors gather outside drag queen story time event in Kitsilano.” 2022

here in Canada; as seen with the new political party Parents Voice<sup>13</sup> who aim to completely rid British Columbian schools of any queer education. But by failing to educate people on the spectrums of gender identity and sexual orientation, we are not stopping people from being queer, we are just stopping them from accepting themselves. Without queer education, many queer people will live their lives in turmoil never understanding their feelings, leading them to be unable to be their true selves. I found myself there some years ago before I knew what it meant to be trans. I spent a long time trying to reconcile the feelings I was having and making desperate attempts to understand why I felt different than the other girls. It truly was killing me, until I became educated on gender-diverse identities and discovered that I was trans. If I had had access to that information earlier in my life, I could have avoided years of pain.

The fourth form of ignorance is “wilful ignorance,” which Tuana characterises as:

a systematic process of self-deception, a wilful embrace of ignorance that infects those who are in positions of privilege, an active ignoring of the oppression of others and one’s role in that exploitation. (Tuana, 11)

Based on many of the responses from students who participated in my survey I fear that this is where the school administrators find themselves. Staff at the school where I conducted my survey seem to believe that they have fostered a safe space for queer students. Although I do not doubt that they have tried, simply establishing a SOGI club and putting affirming posters on the walls is not enough. In the responses to my survey students voiced their hopelessness and anger at the school, and there are several testimonies I feel are necessary to share:

“I have no hope in this school”

“[this school’s] teachers do very little to stand up against gender based violence”

“The principal has talked about [the homophobic vandalism of the gender-neutral bathroom] once on the announcements, but the focus was on how it made him feel and how it damages the reputation of the

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<sup>13</sup> Walker, Chris. “New B.C. Party Pushing School Board Candidates with Anti-Vax and Conspiratorial Views.” 2022

school. No action is taken to educate homophobic students or protect LGBTQ students from bullying or harassments.”

“They don’t do SHIT!! They are like “oh ok we get it we’ll do something” and I mean the GSA club members or teachers part of it do something or try to but since majority of the school doesn’t care. They don’t try to deal with the bullying they let it slide and I’m so sick of it!!”

“There has been no action taken to protect students”

“homophobia is extremely rampant here and the teachers do nothing about it.”

“I do not trust the school to teach me [about queer identities and issues] I will be doing all research and learning independently from the school staff.”

“I’m certain [this school] will do nothing. They do not care about us. It’s clear they only care about their reputation.”

It seems that it is easier to ignore the issue of queerphobia in schools than it is to deal with it and so it is swept under the rug. Queer students see that their suffering is not being taken seriously and so they stop asking for help. Because it is no longer in their faces the school can pretend that it is no longer happening.

The fifth and final form of ignorance is “loving ignorance,” which is “accepting what we cannot know.” This form of ignorance “involves the realisation that although much experience can be shared there will always be experiences which cannot.” (Tuana, 15-16) This is what we are left with. Cisgender people can never truly understand what it means to be transgender, and heterosexual people can never truly understand what it is like to be homosexual. The best thing we can do is listen to LGBTQIA+ people when they speak about their experiences and identities and try to empathise with their situations.

## **Moving Forward**

So, what can we do now to help LGBTQIA+ students? As outlined in this paper, queer education is absolutely necessary; not just for students, but for the staff as well. Aside from this, there are several other ways to provide support for queer people in schools; both big and small.

### 1. Normalisation

When introducing yourself to new students, offer your pronouns as well as your name. This will help trans students feel safer and more comfortable sharing their pronouns and make them stand out less when they offer theirs. Along with this, if you suspect that a student might be trans but are unsure of how to ask for their pronouns without making them uncomfortable, suggest that everyone share their name and pronouns.

### 2. Gender-Neutral Washrooms

At the school where I conducted the survey, students reported that there are two gender-neutral washrooms but that they are often inaccessible. One of them is a single-stall, wheelchair accessible washroom that often has problems locking. One student explained that they have “had friends say that [people] walked in on them as they were gonna use the washroom or while they \*were\* using the washroom.” This is an incredibly unsafe environment and immediate action must be taken to fix this issue. The other gender-neutral washroom has multiple stalls but students report it as being “often closed because of students not taking it seriously and using the gender neutral bathrooms to hook up hang out or vape” and are “EXTREMELY often closed due to homophobic vandalism.” For the first issue, from my experience, students tend

to use the washrooms inappropriately regardless of what gender they are designated for. Closing the gender-neutral bathroom is thus not stopping the students from doing such activities but is merely forcing them to do it somewhere else, though I somewhat understand the rationale in making that space inaccessible for them. The second issue is more troubling, as it seems that having the gender-neutral washroom be accessible makes it a target for demonstrations of queerphobia, but closing it puts gender-diverse students at risk by taking away their most accessible washroom. Here I would suggest making it a priority to clean up any vandalism rather than closing the washroom. With an increase in queer education, there will likely be a decrease in such targeted vandalism.

### 3. Bullying

Many students shared that they feel that queerphobic bullying is not taken as seriously as other forms of bullying. One student suggested that the school needs to “hold students responsible for their actions and go in depth on why its harmful and can kill people. Just telling students who are homophobic that it is "mean" and creates a negative image for the school does nothing. Absolutely nothing.” Increasing the queer education available to students will certainly help with this problem, but so will implementing a zero-tolerance policy against any and all forms of queerphobia. Queer students need to feel that the staff at their schools are looking out for them, but as long as staff allow discriminatory comments and bullying to go unchecked, queer students will continue to feel unsafe at school.

#### 4. Resources

There are many resources out there to aid in providing queer education, but I would like to take a moment to outline a few of the best ones I have found.

Egale<sup>14</sup> is an organisation that provides education and legal advocacy for 2SLGBTQI people, as well as conducting research to help spread awareness. Their mission statement is the following:

To improve the lives of 2SLGBTQI people in Canada and to enhance the global response to 2SLGBTQI issues. Egale will achieve this by informing public policy, inspiring cultural change, and promoting human rights and inclusion through research, education, awareness and legal advocacy.

They have many articles on their website on various topics relevant for educators such as inclusive language, dealing with queerphobia, a glossary of terms, and how to be a good ally more broadly.

Trans Care BC<sup>15</sup> is part of the Provincial Health Services Authority that oversees medical transitions for transgender people in British Columbia. Their website includes a list of resources and support tools on inclusive language and on how to foster a safe and welcoming environment for LGBTQIA+ people.

Qmunity<sup>16</sup> is a Vancouver-based organisation that provides resources and help for queer youth, as well as educational resources and a training program called “Queer Competency Training” which provides workshops for both students and educators.

It is also important to centre queer voices on the topic of LGBTQIA+ education.

Personal accounts from queer educators may make it easier for students to relate or feel validated in their experiences. There are many queer activists and advocates who are available to run workshops or presentations for both students and educators; myself included.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://egale.ca/resources/#category=resources&topics=schools>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/gender-basics-education/education-resources/support-tools>

<sup>16</sup> <https://qmunity.ca/education-training/resources/>

It is not an exaggeration to say that queer education saves lives. By providing students with the terms and understanding needed to express their true selves you are dramatically increasing their quality of life. Teaching youth about LGBTQIA+ identities and issues helps to foster acceptance and equality not just within the schools but within society at large. I hope my suggestions will be seriously considered because queer education is absolutely necessary.

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