

Creating Positive, Healthy and Accepting Learning Environments for LGBTQ Students and all Youth Vulnerable to Gender-Based Violence

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What you need to know

The rigid social construction of gender and sex role stereotyping negatively impacts almost every aspect of our society and must be challenged. Sexism and misogyny themselves are just one 'linked' component of a larger social fabric of oppression related to classism, racism, homophobia, transphobia and ableism, all of which share a commonality of being outside the dominant group, and having limited access to systems of power and privilege. When we begin to deconstruct these behaviors that we categorize as gender-based violence, we understand better how many of the pieces are linked together based on a 'hetero/cis-normative' social construction that has a foundation rooted in sexist and misogynist assumptions (*Gender Spectrum, 2012*).

What is the issue and why is it important?

The roots of gender-based violence (GBV) are deeply embedded in the social construction of gender within a predominantly patriarchal, cis-normative and hetero-normative cultural framework. This dominant framework imposes rigid gender roles, rules of behaviour, expression, attraction and relationships that perpetuate violence and discrimination (both individual and systemic) - manifested as misogyny, sexism, homophobia and transphobia. Its impact is so pervasive it affects the basic social determinants of our health - poisoning workplaces and education climates, limiting access in systems and institutions and most predominantly seen in acts of violence against women and girls, the LGBTQ community – and further magnified by the intersectionality of race/ ethnicity, disability, class and age.

The Chief Public Health Officer's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada 2016 found that 1/3 of Canadians over the age of 15 have experienced one or more forms of physical, sexual, emotional, financial abuse, as well as neglect before the age of 15 or 16. This violence disproportionately affected women and girls, indigenous people, people with disability and people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, non-binary and queer. This national crisis has prompted the federal government to develop a strategy on Gender-Based Violence meant to increase awareness, and coordinate local programs. (*Taylor, 2016*)

Prevention education aims to challenge gender-based violence by showing the common link between behaviours, ideas and systems of oppression that reinforce rigid gender roles and rules. We must learn about our own social identities and our relationships with power and privilege for us to recognize and disrupt inequity and oppression whenever we see it. By teaching about the diversity of gender identities, sexual orientations and the importance of healthy relationships that respect boundaries and mutual consent – climates can be transformed from unsafe and fearful to positive and accepting.

Gender assumptions and expectations that students have about one another can lead to negative behaviors –sometimes even extremely aggressive behaviours when peers don't behave within the narrow confines of sexual stereotypes or gender expectations. Whether this is due to social identity conformity, fear of reprisal, social isolation or threats to social privilege is unclear; however, the impact of behavior manifests as dating violence, pressure for sex, sexual assault, cyber-bullying (which adds the new power dynamics of permanence, anonymity, instant access to audience and the speed/spread of information), homophobia and routine humiliation and harassment of all things that push gender and sexual 'norms' (David A. Wolfe, 2009) Sexism, which assumes a male/female binary and gender/ biological sex congruency, is the notion that one gender/sex is inferior to the other (disproportionately but not exclusively seen as females and all things feminine represented as inferior). Historical impact has maintained this notion as a cultural fixture because it encompasses attitudes, procedures and pattern (economic, social and cultural) whose effect, though not necessarily whose conscious intention, is to create, maintain and extend the power, influence and privilege of males and/or masculinity over females and/or femininity (McGregor, 2008). This is a foundational building block for the social construction of gender roles, attitudes and expectations which lead to oppression (including, misogyny, misandry homophobia and transphobia) and negative and/or violent behaviors.

What does the evidence tell us?

Given that we now know the origins and causal factors of GBV and the dangerous impact these behaviors have on students and society the greater challenge becomes creating successful prevention and intervention strategies. Research indicates that a clearly articulated school-wide bullying prevention policy is the foundation of effective bullying prevention programming. If students who cause harm, who are harmed, or who are witness to it receive the necessary support, they can learn effective strategies for interacting positively with others and for promoting positive peer dynamics. This same research shows that administrators and teachers need to be provided with opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to address bullying through school-level bullying prevention and intervention strategies. (Pagia-Book, 2012) An effective school is more than the achievement of academic markers: it involves the development of relationships among staff, among students, and between staff and students to promote a safe and positive school climate (*Ontario Ministry of Education: Safe Schools Action Team , 2008*).

School climate has a great influence not only on students' academic performance but all their skill development, social behavior and emotional well-being. (*Pagia-Book, 2012*) A positive climate exists when all members of the school community feel safe, comfortable, and accepted, because all interact with respect, fairness, equity, inclusion and compassion. Therefore, the focus of effective prevention strategy, programming, staff development, intervention supports and discipline must be building positive school climates. At the center, schools have an obligation to actively educate students about the social construction of gender and the diversity of gender and sexual identities; about consent, boundaries and healthy relationships and to challenge bullying, harassment and discrimination. Building system capacity should be the primary focus for any organizational change outcomes focused on improving equity and

removing barriers – this focus creates both professional learning opportunities for staff to develop tools and prevention strategies and ensures professional supports are provided to students and youth who may be victims, witnesses or aggressors.

Tips for effective practice

Schools and youth agencies cannot simply wait until a violent incident happens, a human rights accommodation is requested or a complaint is made. Education policy that aims to shift these power imbalances should also include requirements for reporting, notification and investigation, ensuring compliance and accountability in prevention strategies.

Ensuring student engagement with both boys and girls on issues of gender and violence prevention is largely devoted to educating about healthy relationships and the impact of sexism on boys and girls through rigid gender roles and expectations. Girls often experience this oppression as relational aggression, undue focus on body image, pressure for sex and dating violence. The effects of sexist stereotyping on boys greatly limits their emotional range leading to increased aggression and violence that is often promoted as one of the few acceptable forms of emotional response allowed for "real men" thus creating a dangerous cycle (*Jackson, 2006*). Therefore, engaging boys and men through education about healthy relationships and gender roles is key to success in overcoming GBV.

Engaged students become leaders among their peer groups and help educate their peers about how to challenge a social construction of gender that leads to these negative behaviors as well as how to challenge the system in a way that is supported by the policy, thus ensuring consistent implementation and delivery. This means actively engaging in regular communication with staff, students, community partners and parents to ensure greater awareness, support and evaluation of successful programs so best practices can be replicated and unsuccessful programs discontinued.

Successful prevention programming is fundamentally tied to understanding the roots of GBV and the social construction of gender, creating a foundation embedded in policy that allows one to shift system power, impact school climate change and wider school board culture – and most importantly - engage with students, staff, parents and community, creating capacity and co-constructing local school plans that reflect the identities and needs of everyone in a school.

Additional Resources

www.tdsb.on.ca/gbvp

<http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/violence/strategy-strategie/gbv-vfs-en.html>

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/inclusiveguide.pdf>

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Key Words

- Gender identity, sexuality, violence prevention, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, transgender, queer, non-binary, LGBTQ, bullying, harrasment, education policy