Title: Building LGBTQ Awareness and Allies in our Teacher Education Community

Abstract:

This research describes the impact of a training program (Positive Space I and Positive Space II) on pre-service teachers’ understandings of and abilities to create safe spaces for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgendered, Two-Spirited, Queering and/or Questioning (LGBTQ) youth and allies in schools. Our Bachelor of Education program integrates these workshops as part of Sociology of Education and Inclusion Classes that are mandatory courses for all pre-service teachers. The importance of this work cannot be underscored as “three-quarters of LGBTQ students and 95% of transgendered students felt unsafe at school” (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 5).

Here we share our story.

Keywords:

Pre-service teacher education, Queer youth, anti-oppressive pedagogy

Introduction

One critical challenge facing Canadian teacher educators is how to prepare teacher candidates to go into educational environments and create and maintain safe spaces for LGBTQ youth and allies. Anti-oppressive work— particularly that which aims to meet the needs of LGBTQ youth— “remains a constant challenge in teacher education, worldwide” (Clark, 2010, p. 704). Because of the work they do, faculties of education can be ideal spaces to foster awareness, understanding, and support for LGBTQ youth in schools (Goldstein, Russell, & Daley, 2007). Aligning with recommendations made by Taylor et al. (2011) in *Every Class in Every School: The First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools*, the underlying intent of our research is to support “the integration of LGBTQ-inclusive teaching and intersectionality into compulsory courses in [our] Bachelor of Education programs so that teachers have adequate opportunities to develop competencies before entering the field” (p. 21).

According to the Egale Canada Human Rights Trust (Taylor et al., 2009), and as outlined in their *First National Climate Survey on Homophobia in Canadian Schools Phase One Report*,

lack of a solid Canadian evidence base has been a major impediment faced by educators who need to understand the situation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) students in order to respond appropriately and to assure the school community that homophonic and transphobic bullying are neither rare nor harmless but major problems that schools needs to address (p. 2).

In this paper, we share the story of our training program (Positive Space I and Positive Space II) and the experiences of pre-service teacher candidates who participate in the training and their understandings of and abilities to create safe spaces for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgendered, Two-Spirited and Queering/Questions (LGBTQ) youth and allies in schools.

Broader Context of Study

Schools, like other social institutions and society, can be oppressive. Connell (1996) found two problematic forms of injustice in schools: “oppression, which restricts the capacity for self-expression; and domination, which restricts participation in social decision-making…Harassment, homophobic abuse, the hierarchy of masculinities, bullying, racial vilification are examples” (pp. 223–224). Oppression and domination are premised on the exclusion of others, and LGBTQ youth are often the subjects of such attacks, which impinge their self-expression and full participation in school. In a recent Canadian survey designed to understand how LGBTQ youth experienced school climates, over 3,700 youth from coast to coast were asked about their experiences of verbal and/or physical and/or sexual harassment (Taylor et al., 2009). According to Taylor et al., “three-quarters of LGBTQ students and 95% of transgendered students felt unsafe at school, compared to one-fifth of straight students” (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 5) with “six out of ten LGBTQ students reported being verbally harassed about their sexual orientation … [and] nine out of 10 transgender students … were verbally harassed because of their expression of gender” (Taylor et al., p. 4). Additionally students whose parents are LGBTQ are frequently victimized as “64% of LGBTQ students and 61% of students with LGBTQ parents reported that they feel unsafe at school” (Taylor et al., p. 17). These Canadian findings reflect a number of American and international findings. For instance, eight quantitative studies, which surveyed a total of 83,042 middle and high school students in the United States, showed that LGBTQ students experience fear of assault and unsafe activities (Reis & Saewyc, 1999). The researchers concluded that anti-gay harassment is the least understood form of harassment and that educational efforts and supports are needed. Eichler (2010) reminds us not only of the discrimination that LGBTQ youth (and educators) face in schools, but that the lives of LGBTQ people in a number of countries are not affirmed through norms, words, harassment and intimidation, and many LGBTQ people worldwide face physical punishment, imprisonment and death (p.90). However, transformation and change is possible. As Holmes and Cahill (2003) found, although LGBTQ youth and parents “can experience intense harassment and violence, but even with little support, they often display amazing strength, resiliency, and self-advocacy” (p.54). Hence, the need and importance of creating awareness of LGBTQ realities and experiences and building capacity among educators in schools cannot be underscored enough.

LGBTQ awareness and teacher education.

In teacher education, many future teachers are not prepared to address “issues of homophobia and heterosexism in the classroom” (Stiegler, 2008, p. 117); and significantly, if the issues are addressed in teacher education, some pre-service teachers “respond to calls for anti-oppressive education with resistance, defensiveness, and fear” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 9). By honouring our students and helping them become “activists” who may help advance “academics and social justice” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 13), we hope to better inform not only our own practice but also that of the field of teacher education. As Robinson and Ferfolja (2008) found, “little has been published in relation to pre-service teacher educators’ perceptions about anti-homophobia education in teacher preparation courses” (p. 287). Doing social justice work with teacher candidates is important, as “good teaching” is often seen as “being a value neutral and apolitical activity” (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008, p. 852). In their work, Robinson and Ferfolja (2008) found that “a personal commitment is often the catalyst for undertaking social justice work, and often the commitment stems from one’s own experiences and witnessing discrimination and marginalization” (p. 852). Informal anecdotal comments from high school students indicate that the comfort level of teachers around LGBTQ issues influences whether, and the extent to which, they will engage with these issues and how comfortable LGBTQ students feel approaching these teachers (Personal communication, [name withheld for blind review] Symposium, October 7, 2010).

Greater awareness and training are essential parts of efforts to systemically challenge heterosexual privilege and address homophobic harassment and bullying in school spaces (Adams, Cox & Dunstan, 2004; Chaub, Laub & Wall, 2004; Kitchen & Bellini, 2012). With regard to homophonic bullying, Walton (2004) wrote that interventions must be seen as not only drawing attention to specific youth, but must also focus on the systemic causes of bullying, which requires an ideological shift in what is taught as normal through attitudes and behaviors and “fostering respect for sexual diversity” (p.29). Clark (2010) found that preparing pre-service teachers to work with diverse learners, including LGBTQ learners, remains a real challenge. Clark’s study recognizes that anti-oppression work takes different forms and that educators must be aware of their role and the realities of LGBTQ matters in order to be effective agents of change. When this study was completed the authors found that LGBTQ matters are not often addressed in anti-oppression work and that pre-service teachers must be trained as allies. LGBTQ training in our pre-service teacher education program.

Positive Space I and Positive Space II are training programs offered to pre-service teachers in the first year of our two-year Bachelor of Education (B Ed) program. Positive Space I is a 2.5 hour workshop entitled “Awareness and Terminology” that invites pre-service educators to explore LGBTQ realities and examine terminology, marginalization, and consider ways to be responsive and responsible in schools. Positive Space II is a 2.5 hour workshop entitled “LGBTQ Oppression and Becoming an Ally” which deepens understanding of LGBTQ oppression and focuses on teaching people how to interrupt stereotypes, consider LGBTQ representation in curricula, and intervene when they witness homophobia and transphobia in their workplace or community. These workshops are integrated into our B Ed program, aligning with the recommendations from *Every Class in Every School* (Taylor et al., 2009), and to our knowledge, we are the only faculty of education in Canada that has done this to date[[1]](#footnote-1). In the same way that all of our pre-service teachers are required to complete a number of modules in their Bachelor of Education program, from courses on their teachable subjects to standard first aid training to enlarge their competencies, so too we view the need for them to have participated in Positive Space Training. This paper provides a context for the work that we do, describes the emergence of the Positive Space training program and its relationship to our teacher education program, highlights findings from workshop evaluations of Positive Space I and II provided by participants from 2010 to 2012, and incorporates findings from pre and post training on-line surveys in 2011-2012. The results described in this paper are part of an ongoing longitudinal study into the impact of LGBTQ training and awareness program on pre-service teachers.

Safe, Positive, and Queering Moments in Teacher Education

Our work draws on the research of Goldstein, Russell and Daley (2007) that advocates for an approach to anti-homophobic education that seeks change through the creation of “safe,” “positive,” and “queering” moments (p. 184). *Safe moments* are read through a tolerance[[2]](#footnote-2) discourse. A commitment to safe schools entails recognition that no youth should be discriminated against or harassed at school due to their race, religion, gender or sexual orientation. So those who have historically been deemed other or marginalized are to be “tolerated” but there is not a commitment to promote the acceptance of sexual diversity. Educators using this model may “redress homophobic slurs, stereotypes, and violence within school environments” but this model is prefaced on a discourse of deficits whereby queer youth are “victims of homophobia who are at risk of suicide, substance abuse, homelessness, prostitution and violence” (Goldstein et al., 2007, p.184-185). While awareness and recognition is important, a discourse of tolerance depoliticizes heterosexual privilege and conflates queer issues with private matters of sexuality. *Positive Moments* moves beyond safety and tolerance towards inclusion and affirmation. Positive approaches to anti-homophobia recognize that heterosexism is systemic and equity is needed not only for youth but also for all community members, including employees and parents. Changes in curriculum, policy, hiring and school-community relationships are integral. There are overt rules to enforce more equitable practices and address homophobic bullying, violence, and harassment. Yet, queer sexuality remains a private issue and “queer sexuality outside of the effects of heterosexism and homophobia…cannot be fully realized” (Goldstein et al., 2007, p. 186). Trying to articulate an anti-homophobic pedagogy that is queer within a heteronormative educational system and culture is challenging (Goldstein et al., 2007). For this reason Goldstein et al, shifted to the idea of moments, to signal various moments of resistance within a heteronormative space, that contributed to safe, positive and queering spaces or constellations. *Queer moments* and queer pedagogical practices may be categorized by recognition of interlocking forms of oppression that are constantly shifting and changing, and practices that challenge heteronormativity. Goldstein et al. (2007) suggest that ideally,

a queer school approach would not only aim to promote the acceptance, tolerance, and affirmation of queer students and educators, but also, seek to transform how we think about sexuality and desire…To this end, the deconstruction of heteronormativetity would not be seen as an independent and discreet project but rather one that necessarily implicates normative notions of sex/gender, race, class, and religion among other social locations. (p.187)

In reading and interpreting the work of our training program and the understandings of the pre-service teachers with whom we work, we recognize that safe, positive and queering anti-oppressive strategies are at play.

The Emergence of Positive Space Training: Community-University Partnership

The Positive Space program grew out of a partnership between the (names withheld for blind review) which recognized the need for LGBTQ awareness and ally building in the rural context. While such programs were being developed to create safe and positive spaces for LGBTQ individuals on larger Canadian campuses, few, if any, were available for universities and colleges set in rural contexts. What has subsequently been reported in the literature (GLSEN, 2007) is that attitudes in rural contexts tend to be more conservative and that LGBTQ individuals report higher rates of feeling unsafe as compared to their urban counterpoints. This is coupled with a corresponding lack of resources and supports for LGBTQ individuals (GLSEN, 2007). In the context of this study there was also a feeling that, because of the nature of a small community with long-established roots, “everyone knows everyone business and so LGBTQ individuals had to be discreet and often could not find each other, creating in them a further sense of being isolated” (name withheld for blind review).

These realizations led the (name withheld for blind review) to apply for and subsequently receive a grant from Rural Crime Prevention to develop what became the Positive Space Program. Leslie Marple and Nancy Peters, two local community educators and activists, were hired to write a comprehensive training program, modeled after the Positive Space Program program that was being used at the University of Toronto at the time but adapted it for the rural Atlantic Canadian context.

The Positive Space Program has for its aims to create an understanding of LGBTQ lives and realities, examine terminology related to LGBTQ individuals, examine oppression as it plays out in the lives of LGBTQ people, and challenge heteronormativity. The program focuses on developing allies who can name and interrupt homophobia and transphobia. It is infused with a feminist perspective and seeks to develop an analysis of the interlocking nature of oppressions. In addition to resources and information exploring the complexity of LGBTQ lives and realities, the manual is training tool outlining how to lead and facilitate Positive Space Workshops. The principles of adult and popular education ground the participatory learning activities found in the manual. On a regular basis the manual is reviewed and updated and, as use of the Internet has expanded, on-line resources in the forms of video and audio clips have been added.

Delivery of Positive Space I and II

The initial intent of the program was to create a group of volunteer facilitators who would respond to requests from both campus and the local community to lead Positive Space workshops. Initially a small core group of trainers responded to requests for Positive Space Training. The program was originally conceived as a 3-hour workshop format with a focus on LGBTQ awareness and ally building. However, the trainers realized that more time was needed to properly engage with these topics. The program was subsequently divided into Positive Space I – LGBTQ Awareness and Terminology, offered as a 2.5-hour workshop, and Positive Space II – LGBTQ Oppression and Ally Building, also offered as a 2.5-hour workshop. At the end of Positive Space II participants are invited to sign a contract stating that are willing to act as an ally to LGBTQ individuals. If they became an ally, they are given a rainbow triangle sticker and an ally button to be displayed at their workplace, on office door or in any other prominent place to signal both to LGBTQ individuals and others that they have completed Positive Space training.

Since its inception, the response to the program has been enthusiastic. It is estimated that over a 10-year period more than 1,000 people (faculty members, staff, students, community organizations and individuals) have participated in Positive Space I and II workshops (name withheld for blind review). Due to the program’s popularity, it soon became obvious that the small core team of facilitators would have to be enlarged to accommodate all of the training requests. A 5-hour Train the Trainer workshop was developed which allowed interested people who had completed Positive Space I and II to receive training as facilitators. Evaluation forms are completed at the end of each workshop and written comments and feedback are reviewed by each trainer as one tool of measuring both appropriateness of the content and the effectiveness of the facilitation. Twice a year a professional development session is held in which Positive Space Trainers aim to deepen their knowledge of LGBTQ issues and share facilitation tips. Trainers keep contact via social media and continually add and share new materials and resources for training. For example, the initial program developed in 2003 made little reference to transphobia and the experience of transgender individuals and no mention of asexuality. Efforts have been made to incorporate these topics more into the program.

Positive Space I & II in the (name withheld for blind review) Faculty of Education

The Positive Space program within the Faculty of Education follows the model for the generic trainings but is more tailored to the context of schools and the needs of pre-service teachers. The training program is regularly reviewed and members of the LGBTQ community and allies, students in particular, are consulted with regard to updating resources and the agenda. In Positive Space 1 there is considerable discussion about language. Invariably at every workshop there are a several pre-service teacher participants who are unaware of what the initials LGBTQ stands for or are unaware how to define each of these words. This speaks to the fact that education is required on this topic and that just because these young adults may have heard these words on the bus, written on bathroom walls, or in social media they are not necessarily educated about their use. Following this awareness raising, we examine the harmful, hateful words that are used to describe LGBTQ individuals and the effects these may on their identities. We examine how normalized these words are in classrooms, hallways, and the larger community. Recently in our workshops we have included a look at the Nohomophobes.com website which tracks, on an hourly basis, the number of homophobic and transphobic terms used in online entries. This shocking number of tweets gives visible representation to the prevalence and pervasiveness of the oppressive language commonly used against this community. An important element of this workshop is a discussion of sex, gender, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Few participants, in our experience, understand the fluid and complex nature of gender identity and how it is often erroneously connected to sexual orientation. Such discussions open up conversations around the limitations and restrictions imposed by the gender binary system. These conversations help our pre-service teachers sharpen their critical thinking skills as they examine the role mainstream media, and traditional school practices and discourse play in reinforcing the gender binary system. Finally, we use an activity that simulates the role of an LGBTQ person who comes out to his/her family, workplace and community and examines the individual, institutional and systemic oppression that LGBTQ individuals may face in this process. Video clips and the use of social media bring primary voice representation into the workshop. The workshop finishes with a talking circle, allowing the participants to share their learnings and lingering questions.

Positive Space II continues its examination of LGBTQ oppression by examining heteronormativity and heterosexual and cissexual privilege. The workshop also introduces the concept of becoming an ally to LGBTQ individuals. As such it moves beyond just creating *positive space* to creating what (Kumashiro, 2002) calls “queering moments”. When leading a Positive Space II session with pre-service teachers we show the film *It’s Elementary* (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1996). Although this documentary was produced more than 15 years ago, it is still an excellent teaching tool which highlights elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers and principals acting as allies for LGBTQ students and families and “interrupting oppression” (Fine et al, 1998) they are witness to in their classrooms and hallways. We introduce the concept of ally work using an anti-discrimination response training framework (A.R.T) based on active witnessing (Ishiyama, 2002, 2004). Through role-plays based on real world examples drawn from the trainers’ experiences participants practice ways to interrupt homophobic or transphobic moments in schools. Pre-service teachers also are exposed to curricular resources that can bring LGBTQ lives and realities into their classrooms and we encourage them to think about curricular connections they can make to LGBTQ experiences and realities. As with Positive Space 1, we create space at the end of the workshop for participants to talk and share with others their understandings and how they imagine this learning could impact their practice.

The Study: Exploring the Impact of Positive Space Training

The Egale report (Taylor et al., 2009/11) stressed the urgent need to address homophobia in schools and teacher education and so we were mindful to share our work in this area with others. As part of an ongoing longitudinal study, data was collected using mixed methods (Creswell, 2009). The exploratory nature of the proposed research objectives necessitated a mixed research method (quantitative and qualitative) in collecting and analysing data. According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2006), a “mixed method research provides more comprehensive evidence for studying a research problem than either qualitative or quantitative approaches alone” (p. 9). The quantitative methods have the advantage of collecting data in a short time, and the follow up can further elaborate on the participants’ perspectives. According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), qualitative methods are used extensively in educational research to collect information that is not directly observable. These data-collection methods typically inquire into “feelings, motivations, attitudes, accomplishments, and experience of individuals” (p. 288)[[3]](#footnote-3). In this paper we share data from pre-service teachers who completed surveys immediately after the Positive Space workshops, as well as pre and post surveys during their Bachelor of Education studies.

In addition to the after workshop evaluation, in the Fall term 2011 and prior to taking any Positive Space Training, we administered an optional, anonymous online survey to pre-service teacher education candidates to create a baseline regarding their understanding, awareness of, attitude, and comfort level with regard to supporting and teaching LGBTQ youth and allies. Potential participants were given and emailed an invitation to participate and an electronic link to the online questionnaire. In the Winter term 2012 the same survey was administered to provide a comparative analysis to determine initial and final pre-service teachers’ perceptions and attitudes toward teaching LGBTQ youth and allies. Following Positive Space I and II training workshops in November 2011 and February 2012, pre-service teachers were asked to provide immediate feedback to the workshops. The findings that are described in this paper offer a preliminary departure in our work as we begin to better understand the impact of Positive Space Training, and pre-service teacher’s experiences with LGBTQ individuals and communities prior to their entry into our program and their responsiveness to the Positive Space Training workshops they receive in our B Ed program. The data from the workshop surveys, which have open and closed questions, as well as from the on-line pre and post surveys have been thematically analyzed and coded. As Gusky (2000) pointed out in reviewing teacher perception of professional development what participants say immediately after a professional development activity may be different than what they report several months after the experience. Having data from different moments in time provides us with rich sources of information upon the effectiveness of the Positive Space Program.

Findings and Discussion

The feedback provided for both Positive Space I and II workshops for all trainers and sessions was consistently viewed as positive. On a scale of 1 to 5, most approaches, content, and trainers were judged as excellent or very well. Pre-service teachers reportedly liked the information, strategies, videos, and capacity building and described the training as “eye opening,” “helpful,” and “excellent” (in at least a few aspects), as well as found it “relevant,” and were “glad” to have received the training. Several themes surfaced when reviewing the evaluation forms for both the Positive Space I and II workshops and the pre and post workshop on-line surveys.

Empathy

Several pre-service teachers commented on how important it was to have a safe learning space created for them as they explored LGBTQ realities and issues. An intentional part of diversity learning, and a thread embedded in the Positive Space Program is the creation of an atmosphere that allows participants to explore ideas, which are frequently only half-formed and rarely articulated, without feeling defensive or judged by others. Establishing ground rules with the participants and using strategies such as talking circles and small group interactions help ensure that discussion in the workshops is democratic and respectful, allowing for this openness to occur. Recognizing, naming, and challenging heteronormativity or the gender binary system, for example, is something that many pre-service teachers, particularly those who live with heterosexual privilege, have not engaged in before. It is an aim of the Positive Space Program to create, as Parker (1993) suggests a hospitable learning place in which a comfortable place can be created in which uncomfortable work might occur. Pre-services teachers noted how they appreciate the “empathy” present in the workshops (Positive Space I workshop survey respondent, 2011). One workshop participant noted how “this training was excellent for putting yourself in other people’s shoes” and even stated that “all teachers should have to take this training” (Positive Space I workshop survey respondent, 2011). In Positive Space II, pre-service educators continued to remark on the “open and comfortable space” created by facilitators (Positive Space II workshop survey respondent, 2012). Another added, “[the training] was very open and practical. I never felt as if there were any stupid questions” (Positive Space II workshop survey respondent, 2012). Another pre-service teacher, who self identified at LGBT, said, “I live it” and found the material “relevant,” “connected to real life” and the training “extremely practical” in terms of developing skills and knowledge to apply in your work environment and “loved the training” (Positive Space I workshop survey respondent, 2011). The on-line responses echoed these sentiments, and one participant said overall the training

“provides a great safe space for discussion of difficult issues and empowers us as future teachers” (Post-survey electronic response –Winter 2012).

On the need to create LGBTQ awareness

There is a broad range of awareness and understanding of LGBTQ realities among our pre-service teachers. On the workshop feedback forms some pre-service teachers stated that they have had little opportunity to engage with the LGBTQ community prior to the training and that their knowledge base is very weak while other pre-service teachers already self-identified as allies and wanted more critical discussions on these issues. The pre and post on-line surveys confirmed this, and gave us quite surprising data in terms of recognizing and knowing who we teach as teacher educators. In the online surveys, pre-service teachers were asked about their current perceptions and opinions concerning LGBTQ awareness and importance in teaching and learning. In their pre-survey at the very beginning of their B Ed in September 2011, in response to the question, “*Have you ever had any previous training in LGBTQ issues*?” 84% of respondents said “No”. Of the 16 % who said “Yes”, one B Ed explained that she had an MA in Sociology, though no specific training. Others said they had friends who identified as LGBTQ and one pre-service teacher said her mother has been openly gay since she was a teenager. A few participants had been involved with women’s studies programs and previously taken the Positive Space Training in their undergrad program (though not through the B Ed corridor). This gave us particular insight in recognizing the importance of explicit training in this area for pre-service teachers. Our findings point to the fact that most of our pre-service teachers, from elementary, secondary, math, science and arts backgrounds, have had no formal training relating to the lives and realities of LGBTQ individuals.

We also asked pre-service educators at the beginning of their B Ed program whether they had experiences with Gay Straight Alliances (GSA) and LGBTQ events. In response to the question, *“When you were in school, was there a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA)?”* 13% said “Yes”, 74% said “No”. In response to “*Have you ever had the experience of participating in any LGBTQ event?*” 24% said “Yes”, and 76% said “No” (Pre-training electronic responses, Fall 2011). For those who said “Yes”, the events listed, included: Pride Week Parades and events, attending same sex weddings, participating in special events such as a Day of Silence, and being an audience member in a Drag Show help annually on the campus. Given the age of our students, the majority of whom are in their early 20s, we found it surprising that a majority of pre-service educators would not have had the opportunity to engage with the LGBTQ community. All of this information is insightful, as it indicates that both formally and informally, pre-service teachers are quite similar to in-service educators, who are very much in need of support and explicit training to engage in anti-oppressive pedagogy as it relates to LGBTQ individuals and communities.

Safe and positive moments: The power to interrupt and affirm

Brain compatible research (Jensen, 2005; Wolfe, 2010) suggests a lack of emotional safety and exclusion is incompatible with the brain’s ability to learning. Simply stated, at the most fundamental level, creating safe spaces for LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ parents is a pedagogical task required of every educator if they are committed to having all students learn. Therefore the ability to interrupt overt incidents of homophobia and transphobia in classrooms and hallways is a key starting point in this anti-oppression pedagogy. We communicate to our pre-service teachers that when they witness a homophobic or transphobic moment they are silently involved, a bystander in a bullying situation. If educators do not interrupt incidents of homophobia or transphobia to which they witnesses, they become part of the oppression. We have tried to stress that even a clumsy intervention on the part of a teacher is better than watching oppression occur while doing or saying nothing. When asked whether the workshops strengthened their commitment to interrupt homophobia and transphobia incidents [*What was most helpful*?] one workshop participant said, “that even if you are unsure about what to say, still take action to make a difference” (Positive Space I workshop survey respondent, 2011). Another pre-service supported this saying “that it is not acceptable for adults to ignore LGBTQ “name-calling, physical bullying, rumors…that make the social aspect of school difficult and can also effect a person’s ability to learn” (Post-survey electronic response –Winter 2012). The active witnessing role-plays were felt to be effective in practicing possible interventions. Another pre-service teacher concurred. “It was useful to talk about scenarios and receive tips on how to intervene” (Positive Space II workshop survey respondent, 2012). An increase in confidence also occurred for some participants. One stated, “I feel confident that I could be an ally” (Positive Space II workshop survey respondent, 2012) while another said, “my awareness of LGBTQ issues and comfort intervening when I witness a homophobic act is much greater since taking these Positive Space Training sessions.” (Post-survey electronic response, Winter 2012).

As stated previously, safe spaces in schools are a beginning as they create safety and tolerance for LGBTQ people, which is an important initial step. Our aim, however, is to move further along the anti-oppressive continuum and create positive moments towards the inclusion and affirmation of the LGBTQ community. Positive approaches to anti-homophobia recognize that heterosexism is systemic and equity is needed not only for youth but also for all community members, including employees and parents. Changes in curriculum, policy, hiring and school-community relationships are integral. In the post-survey, many pre-service teachers noted that “resources” for changing curriculum were important in the training. Some even asked for “more resources” as they see themselves trying to build capacity in a proactive way (Post-survey electronic response, Winter 2012).

Queer moments: Challenging heteronormativity

Goldstein et al. (2007) speak of the need to move LGBTQ education to the place where it challenges heteronormativity. Kumashiro (2002) concurs that anti-oppressive pedagogy needs to do more than simply fill the heads of our pre-service teachers with knowledge about LGBTQ lives and realities. Both researchers echo Lee (1999) who urges educators, particularly those with race, sexual orientation, and gender identity privilege, “to revaluate their idea what ‘normal’ is in schools and realize it is quite limited” (p. 124). This is no easy task as schools are shaped by a culture and history of heteronormativity. Radical rethinking is required as a “queer school approach would not only aim to promote the acceptance, tolerance, and affirmation of queer students and educators, but also, seek to transform how we think about sexuality and desire” (Goldstein et al., p.187). It is the aim of both Positive Space I and II workshops to create a deeper awareness of the multiple ways that heteronormativity imposes itself on the formal and informal curriculum, the daily rituals, and the assumptions and beliefs in the day to day. Following a Positive Space I workshop, one pre-service teacher was already beginning to recognize heteronormativity. “I learned a lot about what heterosexuals take for granted” (Positive Space I workshop survey respondent, 2011).

It was in the post- surveys, however, that pre-service teachers indicated a greater awareness of heteronormativity. One participant described heteronormativity as the “textbooks, beliefs, teaching, individual viewpoints, religious viewpoints, social media and commentary and other avenues of information/socialization that says that heterosexuality and the values of the all-encompassing heterosexual people is truth and law” (Post-survey electronic response, Winter 2012). Another participant said, “Popular culture reproduces heteronormativity by mainly portraying heterosexual characters, and few, if any, non-heterosexual people” (Post-survey electronic response, Winter 2012). Participants also noted the ways in which schools reaffirm heteronormative assumptions as described by one participant as happening through “heteronormative teaching practices, bullying that is not directly addressed, heteronormative views and rules, dress codes, [and] specific beliefs brought into the school by individuals (students, teachers, staff)” (Post-survey electronic response, Winter 2012).

Summary

The findings suggest that for the pre-service teachers we teach the Positive Space Program is a needed part of their teacher education. The majority of our pre-service teachers are younger than 25 years old yet the majority indicated that prior to training they had not had the opportunity to engage with LGBTQ individuals or the opportunity to consider the realities and experiences LGBTQ individuals possibly face in a heteronormative school system and society. Arguably if pre-service teachers are to engage in creating the safe, positive or queering moments that Goldstein et al. (2007) and others espouse, they need explicit training as part of their teacher education programs. Importantly the findings also show that most of our pre-service teachers went to schools where no GSAs existed, which suggests that their experiences as learners in schools did not provide them with examples of anti-oppressive school spaces. The workshop evaluation results indicate that the program is meeting the goals of creating awareness of language and terminology and creating a deeper understanding of LGBTQ oppression.

The on-line post surveys indicate also indicate that, as a result of the training, pre-service teachers felt more knowledgeable about the concept of being an ally to LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ parents/guardians. However, we also know from our ongoing research that pre-service teachers are still unclear about what constitutes a heteronormative interruption (Authors, under review). Pre-service teachers point to the complex power relations that exist between their cooperating teacher and themselves as student interns in their field experiences in school which affects the ways that they intervene or not. Pre-service teachers have also expressed a desire to learn more about curricular connections that they can make to challenge heteronormativity in the form of more training. In addition, several pre-service teachers have indicated that they would like to become trained as Positive Space Trainers so that they could bring this work into the field.

Our lived experience in the Faculty of Education has convinced us of the worth of this program as an integral and mandated part of our program. Pre-service teachers are finding it helpful and worthwhile and are, in fact, asking for more. Nested within foundation courses, which have as a focus equity, social justice and inclusion, the Positive Space workshops provide focused training in anti-oppressive teaching in relation to the LGBTQ community. As teacher educators and researchers we are strengthened in our conviction to continue what we have started and expand upon it so as to honor what Taylor et al. (2011) asked of Bachelor of Education programs to help combat homophobia and transphobia, namely, the “the integration of LGBTQ-inclusive teaching and intersectionality into compulsory courses…so that teachers have adequate opportunities to develop competencies before entering the field” (p. 21).

Conclusion

Given these findings, we believe helping pre-service teachers reflect on their experiences, attitudes, and questions will strengthen their abilities to help LGBTQ youth and students with LGBTQ parents/guardians feel safe and included in school settings. The opportunity for pre-service teachers to understand how to engage in anti-oppressive teaching practices is a key component of school and education reform. It is critical for us to know if our objectives are being met, and if not, what might be done to improve pre-service teacher learning, so that they may help create better climates for LGBTQ youth and allies in schools. Policies and procedures to combat homophobia and transphobia are beginning to appear in many school settings, but unless new teachers have the opportunity to explore and apply their grounded knowledge gained from professional development of the nature of Positive Space I and II, these well-meaning policies will not likely be translated into action and schools will remain unsafe for many LBGTQ students and students with LGBTQ parents and guardians. The research we have done to date supports how important our work is towards the development of a pedagogy that does not oppress; one that truly embraces, celebrates, and honours all youth..

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1 Reference withheld for blind review.

1. We in no way suggest that efforts by passionate social justice educators are not taking place elsewhere. The positive space programs and our own teaching practices build on the work, ideas and spirit of many self-identified LGBTQ faculty, community and educational advocates who created spaces for us to become social justice allies. Tara Goldstein had been providing incredible professional development and even a course at OISE/UT, of which her “Snakes and Ladders” ethnographic play is a result. Further, Kitchen and Bellini (2012) recently wrote about a 2-hour workshop they provided in their faculty of education with great success and responsiveness. We only suggest that our program is aligning with recommendations made by Taylor et al. (2011) in *Every Class in Every School: The First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools*, as we have explicitly integrated and named the Positive Space training programs in our Sociology of Education and Inclusion mandatory B Ed courses. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more critical discussion on the discourse of tolerance, see Wendy Brown (2006) *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Focus group interviews conducted in the Fall 2012 were also used to gain information from a smaller number of participants on LGBTQ training and awareness, and informally inform and frame our study. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)