

CAIS Paper: Sexual and Gender Minority Information Behaviour and Deficits: A Case for Increased Access in a Rural Context

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Abstract:

Presents results from qualitative focus groups with rural educators concerning information needs of sexual and gender minority (SGM) students. Observations on messaging in the physical environment, curricular materials, and internet filtering are provided. The findings document the importance of schools being responsive to, and accountable for, SGM students' information needs.

Résumé:

1. Introduction

There has been little research conducted in rural spaces investigating the unique needs of sexual and gender minority (SGM) ¹ youth (Kelly, 2012). To better understand the social and cultural conditions of SGM youth in rural areas, focus groups were conducted with K-12 educators in the Battle River School Division (Alberta, Canada). The research provides insights into how schools have made positive steps forward in recent years to be more inclusive of and welcoming to SGM youth. The process also highlighted considerable gaps in the informational needs of students. While there were positive and affirming social messaging in the physical environment (e.g., posters; pink and purple shirt days), information deficits were also identified (e.g., internet filtering; lack of appropriate curricular materials). What went unsaid is perhaps just as germane and telling as what the focus group did discuss; for example, at no point were library-based resources or the role of a school librarian brought up throughout the course of the discussions. The results highlight the information needs of SGM youth and how, in some cases, they were being unmet either through intentional blocking or institutionalized heteronormativity.

2. Literature Review

There is a considerable lack of focused study investigating youth library service use (Spielberger, Horton, & Michels, 2004) and even less dedicated to the unique needs of SGM youth. Mehra and Braquet (2006) contend that libraries must go beyond the traditional functions of a library to meet the information needs of SGM youth, that libraries must in fact, come out of the closet in support of this marginalized population. Curry (2005) posits “we must work toward championing public libraries as the ‘institutional allies [for SGM youth].’” In light of libraries not being mentioned by the participants in the course of the research reported here, a similar call to arms may be appropriate for school-based libraries.

In an education context many researchers have explored SGM youth in the context of schools. Emerging from this research is a growing consensus of the general steps that schools can take when looking to foster school environments inclusive to SGM youth, these include; policy implementation; curriculum inclusivity; staff training and

professional development; and inclusive language use (Besner & Spungin, 1998; Erlandson, 2002; Grace, 2007; Harbeck, 1992; Macgillivray, 2004; Monahan, 1997). Notably lacking is the call for readily accessible and reliable information for SGM youth within schools outside of the standardized curriculum.

3. Research Design

A focus group process (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005; Madriz, 2000; Mertens, 2005; Moss, 2007) was used with six K-12 educators from the Battle River School Division (BRSD). Participants were solicited via an advertisement sent by the superintendent to the school division listserv. The sample was drawn from individuals who self-identified as being interested in creating more inclusive schools for SGM students; five members identified as allies, and one identified as gay; three identified as male, and three identified as female; four members disclosed their ages which ranged from 31-55. The educators shared their experiences and perspectives on two occasions regarding SGM youth in their schools and communities. Primary and secondary analyses were conducted (Mertens, 2005; Silverman, 2000) followed by a two-level coding process (Hahn, 2008). The analysis reported here is drawn from the focus group transcripts and centres on the information behaviours and information needs of SGM youth in the BRSD.

4. Findings and Discussion

Various information sources in the education setting were mentioned during the discussions. While there was encouraging progress in several corners of the school division, most of the discussion around information needs and behaviour emerged from discussions of the local high school.

The Physical Space: What's Being Said Without Being Said

Elements in the physical space that communicated caring and acceptance of SGM students included posters, stickers, and pink and purple shirt days. One participant, who worked as both a counsellor and teacher, indicated that he had posted SGM-inclusive signs and posters around his office and classroom; however, aside from his comments, there was no mention made of safe space posters, pamphlets, or rainbow symbols, which have become synonymous for SGMs as denoting a safe and welcoming space for SGM people.

One of the unique pieces of social messaging within the physical environment was the district-wide Pink Shirt Day. Pink Shirt Day started in 2007 in Nova Scotia when a Grade 9 student was bullied based on his perceived sexuality because he wore a pink shirt to school. Two Grade 12 students came to his defense, purchasing 50 pink shirts and enlisting their friends to wear them the following day (C.B.C. News, 2007). This grassroots activism has been adopted in many districts across Canada, including BRSD. As a district-wide initiative, this project may suggest to students that, at some level, the district is supportive and is attempting to be inclusive of SGM youth.

Similarly, students at Camrose Composite High School (CCHS) engaged in grassroots activism by spearheading a Purple Shirt day to honour those who had taken their own lives as a result of homophobic and transphobic bullying. The focus group participants who work at CCHS indicated there was massive support and participation by the student body. A high concentration of students participating implicitly communicates a strong message of strength and acceptance for their SGM peers.

School-based Information Sources

A Sexual Health Coordinator with Alberta Health Services provided information on SGM issues during the district's Career and Life Management course. No other information sources concerning SGM issues or people were identified anywhere in the curriculum by the participants. Pinar (2004) posits that reconstructing school culture means revisiting the curriculum in all areas, especially those considered central, like the sciences. From a curricular perspective, students are only being exposed to SGM issues in the area of sexual health, while other SGM considerations are excluded.

Throughout the focus group process, the role of library or a librarian was never mentioned. This is not to say that libraries are not playing a role for SGM students in the BRSD, just that participants did not identify it. This "presence of an absence" (Fine, 2001) may be telling and point to informational needs of SGM youth being unmet in school settings. While librarians have traditionally been the gatekeepers of knowledge who have advocated for transparency and progress, they were absent in the research discussions. While one might assume that a library would be a highly valued information resource for SGM youth, participants did not report their usefulness as central to a safe and caring school environment for their SGM youth.

Internet Filtering and Censorship

As early as 2003, Joyce found that information needs of SGM had shifted from being met either primarily or secondarily by libraries, to at-home internet being the key information source for SGM youth. In this study, the participants identified internet filtering as a barrier that had prevented students from accessing resources. Participants shared their experiences of how web-based filtering prevented students from accessing information. Tim, for example, described how a female student was unable to access SGM information via the school computer or communicate electronically with staff about SGM issues. The student could not use library computers to research GSA (gay straight alliances) or QSA (queer straight alliances), as sites would be blocked; instead, she was required to complete her research from home. MT also provided an example, explaining that his son had attempted to show the website of a bed and breakfast his family had stayed at in Italy; the B&B was owned by a same-sex couple and was also blocked on school computers. Tim summarized the situation succinctly: "from our students' perspective, they're being excluded right off the top. Like they see a wall right there."

There is an essential relationship between knowledge and action; in order for action to take place, knowledge is required and, when rendered inaccessible, it makes it more difficult for action to transpire (Kumashiro 2002). Filtering and censorship of this type is a form of queer silencing which suggests to users that their search is of a deviant nature (Schrader and Wells, 2007).

5. Conclusion

The ability to organize and share information has been central to the gay movement and integral to subsequent improvements in quality of life for SGM individuals (Albin & Church-Duran, 2008). While the focus group discussion is limited in scope, it is clear that there is considerable work to be done to appropriately respond to the needs of SGM youth and increase access to reliable information. While the study sample is small, it provides a window into the lived experiences of rural SGM youth and their information requirements. Information singling in the physical information is a positive step forward,

but it must be coupled with access to print and web-based information that is inclusive, accurate and reliable. The rural space may be physically remote but with the proliferation of web-based technologies there is no reason why SGM youth should not have unfettered access to information, globally, coupled with appropriate guidance of and curating by information specialists.

In order to build safer and more caring inclusive classrooms and schools, education and information science must work across boundaries, intersecting in a joint project of access in the promotion of inclusivity.

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¹ The term “sexual and gender minorities” (SGM) is applied to be inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, two-spirited, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) individuals. While each group and subgroup is unique in its culture, struggles and successes, the common goal of equality and inclusion is universal.