

**“What won't I do today?”**

**Education's Calculations and Social Justice**

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I know that we're all on the same page here, all committed to anti-oppressive education, all working hard at it in our various spheres of action within the education system and beyond. I wouldn't dare walk into a room like this with a prescription for what should be done. Instead what I'd like to do is raise some questions that I think we need to address if we are going to create truly inclusive schools.

Steven Harper isn't the only one who knows something about recalibrating. When we plan a course, we juggle and rejig our 70 minute slots, our days and our weeks with students, we calculate and recalculate – how can I squeeze this in? Often in frustration we decide that it just can't be done – that there is no room for this amazing novel, that compelling guest speaker, this unanticipated event that deserves attention. I imagine that the Deans running our Faculties of Education must be frustrated too, when they try to recalibrate our B. Ed. degree programs to make room for new and obviously important courses, and find that other components of the program have already been squeezed to the max, and there is no room for more.

Oliver Twist to the workhouse warden: “Please sir, I want more.”

But there is no more. No more days or weeks to be found (unless authorities extend the school year), no more time. We have to make do with the time we have. So today I am thinking about that tipping point in every educator's professional life, the point at which something's got to give, the point at which either we decide to make room for the things that conscience and social consciousness tell us must be done, or conclude that we just can't do it. The point at which we answer the question, what won't I do today? Or this week or this semester or this year? Which too often, in the insidious pattern of deferred responsibilities, amounts to, what won't I do in this lifetime? I'd like to explore the calculations that go into those decisions, which amount to a kind of costs-benefits analysis of education. And because our theme here on this day is social justice, I am going to be thinking in terms of who is left out, more than in terms of what is left out, when we make those calculations.

For example, there's **the calculation of social factors** that affect children's wellbeing and school performance, that every caring teacher can recite:

“Race + Gender + Disability + Language + Religion + Poverty + FASD + War-

Affected + Sexual Orientation . . .”

How many of us decide to stop factoring these into our pedagogy or our curriculum after 4 or 5? How do we decide what not to do today? Is it first come first served?

The overpopulated curriculum, and the consequent competition for attention among factors, triggers the **calculation of relative importance**. Which of these factors is crucial? This calculation often takes the utilitarian form of “the greatest good for the greatest number”: “Which of these factors affects the most students?” . . . which surely leads us into a contradiction in terms: the teacher trying to respond to the needs of socially marginalized students who decides not to accommodate the most outnumbered among them, who are sometimes the most at risk. Socially conservative lobby groups recognize the role of this calculation of relative importance when they keep on claiming that only 2% of the population is gay, and therefore doesn't need to be reflected in the curriculum. Advocates of anti-homophobia education show they know the rule when they challenge right-wing math by naming books and videos and groups for gay and lesbian youth “One in Ten.”

Sometimes disguised within the calculation of relative importance is the **calculation of courage required**. If I do this, will parents complain? If so, will my principal back me up? (or my dean or superintendent or my ADM)? Will socially conservative Churches and lobby groups go after me? Will my job be threatened? My advancement derailed? Will my life be more difficult? If I can't do it all, the calculation of courage required leads me to drop the things that will cause problems for me.

A related calculation is the **calculation of cultural competence**. Do I know enough about war-affected children to handle class discussion sensitively? Might conflict flare up that I'm unable to resolve? Will I expose myself as ignorant, or say something wrong that makes matters worse for the children I'm trying to help?

More daunting still, is the **multifactorial calculation of intersecting oppressions**. I know something about poverty, and something about gender, and something about war, and something about ethnicity . . . but can I put it all together? Can I work out what that means for a little girl from a war-affected country, as opposed to a little boy? Or a Transgender Aboriginal student living in the war zone of the inner city, as opposed to a Transgender Phillipino student living there? We know that intersectionality analysis is crucial, because study after study shows us that where one fits in the Venn diagrams of intersecting oppressions makes a big difference to the risks one is exposed to, but it can feel like advanced calculus and it's hard to do.

### **My study**

Lists, and lists, and more lists. My own study of the situation facing sexual and gender minority students in our schools is a case in point. The First National Climate Survey

on Homophobia in Canadian Schools is now in the final reporting stage after eighteen months of data collection and the participation of over 3700 high school students from across the country, approximately 1000 of them LGBTQ – “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Two Spirit, and Questioning youth.” That’s my first list, and most terms on it will be familiar to you, but the T and Q may not. T stands for Transgender, and refers to the small group of students whose gender identifications cross conventional gender lines: the very masculine girl, the boy who feels like a girl inside. Two Spirit is the identity term preferred by many Aboriginal LGBT people, especially Transgender people. Two Spirit refers to the traditional recognition of Transgender people in some First Nations as richly blessed by the creator with the spirits of both man and woman. . . . There are many Two Spirit youth in Winnipeg, though most drop out before they get to high school, so unless you teach K to 8, you may never meet them. Q is for questioning, which recognizes that adolescence is a time of sexual awakening, when youth may be aware of same-sex attractions, but haven’t yet identified as gay. For the record, 14.1% of the students surveyed in class in my study identified as LGBT or Q – more than 1 in 10, far more than 2%.<sup>1</sup>

At times I have felt that my life on this project is nothing but lists.

There’s the list of varieties of homophobic attack: verbal harassment, physical harassment, physical assault, sexual assault, property stolen and vandalized, mean rumours and lies spread through graffiti, texting, facebook . . . on and on it goes, the same miserable litany of ways to torment each other, updated with electronic innovations of the day . . .

There’s the list of places where harassment and assault occur. We asked students, are there any places in your school that are unsafe for LGBTQ students, and then gave them a check-box list: hallways, classrooms, washrooms, changerooms, gymnasiums, cafeteria, stairwells, schoolyard, buses, on the way to school, on the way home from school . . . all the everyday scenes of life at school. Straight and LGBTQ students across the country were consistent in their replies – hallways, washrooms, changerooms, in particular, are a battle zone for LGBTQ students, places where bullies indulge in the perverse pleasure system of homophobia by tormenting them. This geography forces students into **calculations of their own**: “How can I get from Math to Chemistry without getting shoved into a locker? Can I hold it till lunch and then run home to use the washroom? Which exit door will my tormentors be expecting me to use?” And these: “Is there anyone I can confide in about this harassment? Not my parents – they’d freak out if they knew I was gay. The Arts teacher maybe? She seems cool, but she’s never said anything about gay people one way or the other – better not.” Most students, thankfully, have a friend they can talk to, but not all: 26% said they could not talk to one person in their lives about LGBTQ

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<sup>1</sup> The percentage of LGBTQ students is higher in the final report, which includes not only the in-class survey sessions, but the Phase One participants.

issues, period, let alone confide that they were LGBTQ themselves.

In the words of a fifteen-year-old Lesbian participant, “School is not a safe place for anyone like me.”

Apart from the personal attack targeting particular LGBTQ students or students perceived to be LGBTQ, there's the generalized kind. We found what you might expect – students hear “that's gay” and “faggot” and “lezbo” every day at school, mostly from other students. It's the air they breathe, the sea of language they swim in. Most students go along with it – some of the LGBTQ students even use this language sometimes, and not in a fun way. The vast majority of LGBTQ students find it upsetting, as you might expect. It's not the one-shot, off-hand “that sweater's gay!” that produces this level of distress. It's the day-in, day-out saturation of school culture with such language that undermines the spirits of LGBTQ kids. It's hearing a word that applies to a core aspect of your identity used as a synonym for “Stupid” 50 times a day. Educators sometimes tell ourselves, it's not serious, kids don't even mean homosexual, they just mean stupid. “Just” stupid? How would we like hearing “teacher” used as a synonym for stupid 50 times a day? Being a “questioning” adolescent who is becoming aware of same-sex attractions can be terrifying for students who have been immersed in this microbial soup of homophobic language throughout their school lives, especially if they have heretofore fit comfortably into mainstream culture and are finding themselves facing down massive social marginalization for the first time.

But 58% of Straight students in our survey – roughly 1400 of the 2400 heterosexual students who filled out the survey, said that they too found it upsetting to hear homophobic comments. Why? Why are all those Straight kids upset by homophobic comments?

- Some because they're the targets. There are perhaps ten times as many straight kids as LGBTQ kids, and some of them are homophobically harassed because they are seen as gay. Statistically, more straight kids than LGBTQ kids are homophobically harassed.
- Some because they have an LGBTQ family member or friend. (Here's another calculation: Students affected by homophobia = LGBTQ students + students with LGBTQ family + students with LGBTQ friend = the majority of students.)
- Some because they are kind. They feel empathy for the victims.
- Some because they're ashamed of themselves for participating in it, or for remaining silent when it was going on.
- Some because it is depressing to the spirit to be involved in a community that continually abuses people who have done nothing to deserve it – what the poet S.T. Coleridge called “the sheer malice of motiveless malignancy.”

That 58% suggests to me that there is a great deal of untapped solidarity out there, an unawakened passion for social justice. (In many ways, youth are leading the way on this issue: in Gallop polls, young people are the least homophobic in Canada; they led

the way in Winnipeg School Division; they approach teachers across the country to start GSAs.)

Still, 58% of straight students say they find homophobic and transphobic language upsetting, but the vast majority will not intervene when such language is being used. Many of them have performed a quick calculation of their own: “What will happen to me if I speak up? Will they think I’m gay? Will I find “Lezbo” scrawled on my locker? Will rumours start? Will no one hang out with me?” and decided that the costs of speaking up outweigh the benefits.

Many adults in young people’s lives, both parents and educators, are aware that fear often makes young people go against their own sense of right and wrong to follow the crowd. The silence of teachers not only helps to validate homophobia, it helps to ensure the recirculation of fear by teaching students that they’re on their own on this issue and that adults won’t help them. I believe the Ontario Conference of Catholic Bishops are acting out of this knowledge when they forbid teachers to have LGBTQ-positive discussions with their students. Some parents also tacitly approve of homophobia as an efficient technology for making their children turn out heterosexual:  $\text{Gay} + \text{Fear} = \text{Straight}$ . (This is bad math. Homophobia scares some LGBTQ kids into pretending they are heterosexual, and getting into heterosexual marriages, but homophobia does not make them straight; it only makes them and their partners miserable:  $\text{Gay} + \text{Fear} = \text{the Closet}$ . Some parents are so terrified of their kids turning out gay that they would rather see them unhappy than see them unheterosexual.)

Every class in every school has LGBTQ students, and the majority of Straight students are silently upset by homophobic comments. If teachers were to lead the way by speaking respectfully of LGBTQ people, the silent majority of students – the 58% of Straight students and the 10-14% of students who are LGBTQ – would have more reason for courage. They might figure out that most of their peers aren’t homophobic either. They might stop using homophobic language to fit in, and they might start intervening when LGBTQ students are being harassed. LGBTQ students might start to think, gay life isn’t just possible on TV; it’s possible in my world as well, with my teachers and my friends, and my employers, and maybe with my family.

Let me return to the calculation theme. Is there an alternative to ever-elongating lists of significantly different lives that demand attention? What else can we do? How can we get out of the calculation game that inevitably drops people off the list and live up to the old union principle that “an injury to one of us is an injury to all”? In this talk, one of the pressures on my conscience was not to leave Transgender students out, because my own research shows that they are at higher risk even than other LGBTQ students, and Winnipeg’s high Aboriginal population makes it certain that most teachers in K-8 will encounter Two Spirit Transgender children. Have I done this adequately today? I don’t think so.

The truth is, I think, that no one can do it all, no curriculum can be stretched to include literature by members of every marginalized group, no teacher can be equally expert in all oppressions and challenges facing all students. It is impossible. But I think everyone in this room agrees that doesn't let us off the hook. We all have to learn as much as we can about the challenges facing our diverse students in order to educate well. We know that it makes a huge difference to students to see their ethnic groups reflected in the curriculum and in the teaching staff, but we really can't always squeeze in a novel by a Sudanese refugee camp survivor, or hire a Transgender Two Spirit teacher to demonstrate to students that a rich and happy future is possible if you are a Transgender Two Spirit person. We know too that there really are better and worse ways to talk about LGBTQ issues, issues facing children affected by war and by poverty and by racism. As every caring and committed educator knows from harrowing personal experience, it is, unfortunately, possible to blunder and to make matters worse.

But I think more than they need our wisdom, or even our competence, marginalized students need us to have the courage of our convictions.

My own experience is that the smallest steps requiring only a little courage can be revolutionary. Saying "Happy Gay Pride Day" may not tell Straight students about the history of LGBTQ people, but it makes the absolute difference between Nothing and Something, between No Way and Possible, between believing there's no water at all in the Sahara Desert, and finding an oasis when you're almost dead from thirst. It tells LGBTQ and Str8 students that you're an ally, that LGBTQ lives are fit for polite discussion. The vast majority of LGBTQ students won't care if you're not up on the terms and issues of the day or the meaning of the letters in the acronym LGBTQ as long as you make it clear that you're on their side and are not treating their lives like a moral issue that's open to debate.

I don't say this naively; I teach Critical Pedagogy and I do understand the need to go beyond the Folklorama approach to student diversity; as Jane Elliot pointed out in "A Class Divided," if we're really serious about tackling bigotry, it's not *enough* to get the kids to make a teepee again this year, or to say Happy Gay Pride. But it's a start.

I know it meant the world to me, almost forty years ago in little Brockville, Ontario, population 13,700, when I was a shy kid whose family moved around a lot, and I had just gone back to school after dropping out of grade 12, and my English teacher dared to tell her class that the poet who wrote, "Lay your sleeping head, my love,/ Human on my faithless arm . . ." – that the man who wrote this was *gay*.

*W.H. Auden was gay.*

I remember even now every detail of that classroom scene, and my enormous excitement to find that the respectable adult world of teachers and poets was not

uniformly opposed to my existence. The world in that moment turned from black and white to colour, from impossible to possible, and I began to see a future. I approached my teacher after class, heart pounding, and she told me about Virginia Woolf and Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and lots of other gay and lesbian and bisexual geniuses. I went to university because of that teacher.

I only wish she'd dared to say "W.H. Auden was gay" back when she taught me in grade 9, before the next four years of skipping hundreds of days of school, and feeling like I absolutely didn't belong when I was there, and dropping out, and doing lots of drinking and lots of drugs.

I know we need to do more than say Happy Pride Day, but as I say, a little can open up a lot.

### **Conclusion**

I saw a wonderful Inuit painting years ago – "Making more room in the snow house" – it showed an igloo built for 5 that had to accommodate 10, which is about where we are in Canada now. We know we can't do it just by letting everyone in and trying to make them comfortable in the cracks of an untransformed society, doing consolation pedagogy, which is what "resilience" projects for at-risk youth sometimes seem to be about.

What I loved about the painting was that "making room in the snow house" was clearly about "making the snow house bigger." It can't be done from the outside – there's nothing to grab onto. It has to be done by pushing out from the inside, and it helps if everyone's pushing at the same time. That's why we need solidarity. It will take little acts of courage from a lot of us to activate that 58% who would push back against homophobia and racism in their schools if they knew how many allies they'd have. Lloyd Axworthy said on the occasion of same sex marriage being legalized in Canada, "This is a wonderful day for this country, a day of *exuberance* for anyone who loves human rights." Our challenge as educators is to tap into that potential for solidarity that I believe is slumbering in our students, in our colleagues, and in us.

I'm looking forward to talking with many of you today about how you are working to make that happen in your own spheres.

"Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another."