

Gay Straight Alliances: Researching the Research

Policy paper by *Parents for Choice in Education*

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Executive Summary

Parents for Choice in Education (PCE) questions the quantity, quality, and nature of research currently being used to support the effective imposition, through legislation, of Gay-Straight Alliances on Alberta's schools.

PCE supports the right of parents to send their children to schools which have a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). In keeping with our philosophy of meaningful parental choice, PCE also supports the right of parents to send their children to schools which do not see a GSA as the best way to achieve a welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environment.

New legislation passed on March 10, 2015, requires all schools in Alberta to establish a GSA if one or more students request such a club. The school principal is legally prohibited from refusing a student request. This new legislation excludes the concerns and interests of parents entirely. When it comes to GSAs, parents in Alberta no longer have the right to choose the kind of education that will be given to their children.

While fully respecting the rights of parents to choose whether or not the school which their children attend will have a GSA, PCE is concerned that insufficient research has been conducted to demonstrate whether GSAs would help, or harm, certain students. The effective imposition of GSAs on every school in Alberta through legislation, without regard for cultural sensitivities and religious affiliations, ignores the legal rights of parents. The new legislation potentially creates a learning environment that is less supportive than the present one. PCE stands with all students, parents, educators and schools who fall into educational settings where GSAs are being imposed.

PCE calls on the Alberta Government to recognize and respect the rights of parents to provide the kind of education which parents believe is best for their own children.

GSAs may have an appropriate place in some schools where parents invite and support them. Whether or not GSAs exist in schools should be left to the discretion of parents. Parents must be permitted to offer support for their children in a way that take into account the needs of their individual child and family situations. Moreover, imposing mandatory GSAs in all schools neglects to address the root cause or causes of bullying experienced by many students. The *Guide* for teachers¹ prepared by Kristopher Wells is one of the principal documents used to support GSAs. The guide itself states:

Addressing the root causes of violence in schools requires a collaborative school and community approach that involves students, teachers, administrators, parents, community-based agencies and youth outreach programs. (Wells 10)

PCE believes the involvement of parents and a wide range of stakeholders has been insufficient to date. Furthermore, where parents decide to address bullying in ways different than that which is advocated by GSAs, the right of parents to do so should be respected.

Accordingly, Parents for Choice in Education proposes:

¹ <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/Gay%E2%80%93Straight%20Student%20Alliances%20in%20Alberta%20Schools%20A%20Guide%20for%20Teachers.pdf>

1. A moratorium on the mandatory introduction of GSAs;
2. An acceptable standard of research related to GSAs;
3. More research into the impact of GSAs;
4. The inclusion of all stakeholders; and
5. Researching the wide range of alternative approaches to address bullying in schools.

Introduction

Until issues central to the debate surrounding Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs)² in Alberta are carefully examined and fully understood, the safety and security of LGBTQ students is potentially and unnecessarily placed at risk.

Citizens have an obligation to hold the Alberta Government accountable for decisions made relating to the imposition of GSAs on schools, in order to ensure that all students are protected.

Attempts to silence debate over relevant issues, to exclude the needs of primary stakeholders, or to rely on hearsay rather than scientific research, represent a gross neglect of the government's duty. The needs of Canada's multicultural and pluralistic society ought to be taken into consideration when deciding on school policies. More importantly, Canada's democratic society depends upon respect for the differing (and even conflicting) individual world views of parents. This courtesy begins with honouring the sanctity of private homes, and with offering regard for the values of families and parental choice as it relates to the policies which govern the school to which parents send their children. This paper seeks to outline the major issues surrounding the imposition of GSAs on Alberta schools.

The underlying goals of this paper are:

1. to safeguard the rights, dignity, and physical and psychological well-being of all students, regardless of their sexual orientation; and
2. to suggest areas where further research³, sound reasoning, and community input are still required before the recently-passed legislation imposing GSAs can be justified.

While Bill 10 (passed very quickly on March 10, 2015) has intensified public controversy over how best to address the issue of GSAs in Alberta schools, it is worth noting that the controversy

² GSAs are defined as "A school-based gay-straight student alliance found in some high schools across North America." <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/Gay%20%80%93Straight%20Student%20Alliances%20in%20Alberta%20Schools%20A%20Guide%20for%20Teachers.pdf> (p.5)

"Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are official student clubs with LGBTQ and heterosexual student membership and typically one or two teachers who serve as faculty advisors. Students in a school with a GSA know that they have at least one or two adults they can talk to about LGBTQ matters." <http://egale.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/EgaleFinalReport-web.pdf> (2/22/2015) (p.127).

³ http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/high_school_journal/v085/85.3lee.pdf

As an example of the limitation of some studies, the abstract for the above journal article indicates the research is based on a study of only seven students. This is hardly an acceptable sample size for any research. The research took place over two years which is not a sufficient length of time to study the impact of GSAs, especially since the period of adolescence extends longer than two years, for most individuals. It also claims the seven were "gay, lesbian, bisexual and straight students" making the sample size of any of these orientations at most three individuals.

did not begin with this bill, nor will it end with it. Fundamental to the problem of how to arrive at a respectful, inclusive resolution is the need to ensure that the relevant issues surrounding the debate have been properly studied, rationally considered, and effectively understood. The current sources of information upon which the Alberta Government is relying do not appear to meet these criteria.

The citizens and taxpayers of Alberta, including parents, would be well advised to read and understand some of the sources which are currently substituting for comprehensive research. Much of the research appears to neglect the nuanced and complicated fabric of Canadian society. Men and women who understand the issues currently ignored would be well advised to join the debate respectfully, and with the intention of exercising those responsibilities inherently imposed on adult members of a democratic society. More scientific research into how best to safeguard all students, regardless of their sexual orientation, will help to counter the biases which any one group or individual may impose on society, or its elected representatives. Furthermore, it will help to add to the body of knowledge available to create safe and welcoming schools for everyone. Once the body of research related to GSAs is expanded to the point where it can be deemed statistically and culturally relevant, personal biases will have less impact, allowing room for rational, scientific reasoning to lead to sound legislation and public policy. It is toward that end that this paper is aimed.

According to a December 4, 2014, *Globe and Mail* article written by Justin Giovannetti:

Mr. Prentice admitted...that Bill 10 added to the divisions and did not solve any. He has delayed the final vote on the bill indefinitely. It will stay dormant until 2015, and the Tories say they will conduct consultations on the constitutionality of mandating gay support clubs and gauge public support for abolishing parental rights. (*Globe and Mail* on-line, December 4th, 2014)

For public consultations to be effective, those who have a vested interest in the protection of all children, regardless of their sexual orientation, should have been welcomed to participate in the dialogue. Additionally, there must be the guarantee of respect for all voices, not just some. If such a guarantee cannot be provided by the Alberta Government, the very foundation of democracy is at stake.

Three issues central to the debate surrounding Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) in Alberta schools are:

1. the desire to create safe places for students;
2. the desire to stem the harmful influence that name-calling can have on students' psychological well-being;
3. the desire for students to make personal choices that reflect their values;

Considering each of these points will demonstrate how the recent tactics used by the Alberta Government, in the months preceding the passage of Bill 10 in March of 2015, have failed to address these desired outcomes, and in fact have created a climate where students are potentially placed at greater risk. More research is required to know how GSAs will impact students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Acknowledging the variety and diversity of stakeholders who are impacted by this issue will help to illustrate the complexity of this situation, and will very likely

demonstrate why a simplistic initiative and poorly written legislation cannot reasonably address this complex situation.

Stakeholders who should be consulted about GSAs

The principal stakeholders related to GSAs are:

1. Students
2. Parents
3. Teachers
4. Administrators
5. Society at large
6. Alberta Government

Within each of these groups, subgroups also exist. Students could be classified as LGBTQ students, straight students, or students who are undecided or as yet unaware of their sexual preference. The group called “parents” can be divided into parents of LGBTQ students and parents of straight students; parents who parent both LGBTQ and straight students; and parents who are unaware of their child's sexual orientation. For each of these groups falling under the heading “parent”, there are many other people who are filling the role of parents, such as foster parents, and family members or friends acting as guardians to minors who fall into any of the categories mentioned. Additionally, each of these groups may be influenced by a variety of cultural, socio-economic, religious, and linguistic influences that alter their preferred approach to many issues. With so many stakeholders and their various subgroups, it is easy to understand the number of solutions and permutations that will inevitably arise when their various voices are heard.

Each group has its view on how best to care for students and create an environment where students can flourish safe from harmful influences. However, some common ground between them can surely be found. After thoughtful dialogue with these groups and sub-groups, and after considerable effort to listen to their concerns, a skilled researcher could articulate the ideas of each group, and an experienced facilitator could work toward finding that common ground. It is unclear why what could have happened did not. It is unclear why, instead of considering the opinions and proposed solutions of all the stakeholders, or even of most stakeholders, the Alberta Government has elected to allow the voice of one group to speak for all groups. Instead of consulting all stakeholders, the Alberta Government has quickly passed Bill 10, which satisfies one small group (without concrete evidence that it will be beneficial for LGBTQ students), while expressly removing the rights of all remaining stakeholders.

The thesis that stakeholders have been left out of the conversation is supported by looking at the key documents the Alberta Government provides to support the introduction of GSAs. An Alberta Government document entitled *Creating Welcoming, Caring, Respectful, & Safe Learning Environments-Gay-Straight Alliances in Schools* describes itself as “a fact sheet”.⁴ It was published in November of 2013.

In calling the document a *fact sheet* the Alberta Government sets up the expectation that the details contained within in it are indeed *facts*. The Oxford dictionary defines a fact as “a thing

⁴ <http://education.alberta.ca/media/7869893/gay-straight%20alliances%20in%20schools.pdf> 2/21/2015

that is known or proved to be true”⁵. It stands to reason that the points contained within this document should be founded on some research that has proven the arguments presented. Where did the information for this document come from? A footnote in the document says:

The information in this fact sheet has been adapted with permission from: Wells, K. (2006). *Gay-straight student alliances in Alberta schools*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Teachers Association and The Society for Safe and Caring Schools & Communities.⁶

According to this Alberta Teachers Association document:

[Kristopher Wells'] research, teaching and service work centre on creating safe, caring and inclusive schools and communities for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, two-spirited, and queer (LGBTQ) students and teachers.” (Wells, title page)

This same document claims to provide:

[p]ractical strategies, suggestions and a list of frequently asked questions...to help school administrators, counsellors, teachers and students anticipate and overcome potential barriers and challenges to this important social justice and human rights work. (Wells, 4)

The uncertain foundations of Bill 10

At least six major groups of stakeholders are identified as important to this debate. *Gay-straight Alliances in Alberta Schools – A Guide for Teachers* provides “practical strategies” (Wells 4) which address the needs of only some of those stakeholders, while failing entirely to consider the complex subgroups mentioned earlier in this paper. One of the stated purposes of GSAs is to create a more inclusive environment. But the Alberta Government has thus far failed to exhibit behaviours that are at all inclusive. One has reason to inquire about the history that led up to the writing of the Alberta Government’s *fact sheet* and the *Guide*, on which Bill 10 was based. The *Guide* appears to be exclusively aimed at helping administrators, counsellors, teachers and students. While lip service is paid to including parents in the discussion, neither the *fact sheet* nor the *Guide* appear to respect or recognize that some parents will choose alternative way to address the issue of bullying in schools.

The *fact sheet* and *Guide* leave the following questions unanswered:

1. Were a wide range of stakeholders invited to participate in the research, writing, and editing of the *Guide*?
2. If not, what decision-making process led to placing the weight of this responsibility on the shoulders of one person (Wells)?

⁵<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/fact> (2/21/2015)

⁶ A copy of this document is available for download at <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/Gay%E2%80%93Straight%20Student%20Alliances%20in%20Alberta%20Schools%20A%20Guide%20for%20Teachers.pdf>

3. What selection criteria were used to determine who would author a paper as important and influential as this *Guide*?
4. What research method did Wells employ?
5. Did that method include consultation with all parents, including parents who believe that GSAs are not the most effective ways of addressing bullying? With students? With teachers? With school counsellors? With elected government officials at either the local school board or provincial level?
6. If Wells did consult these stakeholders, where in his paper is the evidence of that consultation?
7. Which Alberta Government official was responsible for ensuring the quality, accuracy, and competency of a report that served as a foundational document for Bill 10, and so greatly influences the direction of public policy?
8. Has the Alberta Government produced an equivalent *Guide* for parents? If so, where is it?
9. If a parent *Guide* is available, was it written by parents only, or did it take into consideration all of the stakeholders?
10. Does the Alberta Government have plans to produce a comprehensive *Guide* addressing the needs of all stakeholders?
11. If so, what selection criteria will be used to decide on the author and the research method?
12. Which Alberta citizens are responsible for holding the government accountable to ensure the protection of all children regardless of their sexual orientation?

In answer to this last question, all Alberta citizens of majority age are responsible, regardless of whether their opinion may or may not be in direct alignment with the opinion of Wells, whose personal beliefs appear to have been directing government policy to date. A closer look at the *fact sheet* and *Guide*, which have been guiding public policy, illustrates the need for sound research which would reflect the mosaic of Canada's diverse cultures. If additional research reflecting the needs of all stakeholders has been undertaken, and is still in existence, the Alberta Government would be well advised to refer to it, and not exclusively to the work of one individual.

Apart from questions about the quality of the research, the government's approach also raises the following questions:

1. If the Alberta Government did have access to more inclusive research, what role (if any) did that more inclusive research play in the formulation of Bill 10?
2. If the Alberta Government has not yet commissioned or accessed research reflecting the nuanced needs of all stakeholders, what impact will that have on the outcome of imposing GSAs on all Alberta schools, and the negative ideological battles that will ensue?
3. If a joint research committee reflecting the diverse opinions of Albertans has not been considered, or could not function in order to reach a common goal, what does that say about the Alberta Government's ability to foster an inclusive environment?
4. What is the definition of "inclusive" according to the Alberta Government if such "exclusive" documents are at the heart of Bill 10?

The "frequently asked questions"

The *Guide*'s "frequently asked questions" are written selectively, in a way that neglects the

frequently asked questions of students, parents, teachers and citizens who seek alternative options to a complex social issue. In particular, the “frequently asked questions” do not raise the questions that stakeholders who disagree with GSAs as the best option for combatting bullying would have asked. Any government solution which deliberately ignores, silences, or excludes legitimate questions from a significant portion of citizens is doomed to fail. GSAs are a possible solution where parents feel that such school clubs respect their cultural values, however GSAs are only one of several options to be considered after careful reflection, diligent research, and thoughtful discussion. The primary document which the Alberta Government appears to offer as an explanation for the hasty passage of Bill 10 does serve some purpose, and its author's opinion on child-rearing may be an important one to consider. However, it must be acknowledged that he understands these issues from a particular context that is different than the context of many other Canadians. Wells' voice should indeed be heard, but so should the voice of all stakeholders, whose opinions also count in a democratic society. If the Alberta Government is amplifying one voice over the rest, what motive does it have in doing so? At what point do such tactics cease to be mere “political bias” and cross into dangerous propaganda?

More research is required about parents and homes

In its *fact sheet*, the Alberta Government states that:

Research tells us that students are more likely to feel safe and are more comfortable being open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in schools with GSAs⁷

There appears to be no mention of how safe students feel *at home* after joining a GSA. As evidence of the “research” conducted, the footnote cites a document called: *Every Class in Every School: Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools*⁸. In this document, there appears to be little if any specific consideration of students coming from Muslim families, Jewish families, or families where home life reflects the culture of a different country. A section of this document called *Religion & LGBTQ Matters*⁹ is limited to one page containing eight “speech bubbles” with statements from unverified sources. The comments reference Catholic and Christian experiences, but without context as to when, where, or by whom the statements were made. This paper neglects to explain if these are actual statements, or just a repetition of stereotypes directed against religious perspectives. The paper excludes other positive quotes which also come from the religions mentioned. For example, the group Courage quotes the Catechism of the Catholic Church on its website:

The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible... They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.¹⁰ (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2358)

This “*Final Report*” admits that its research excludes Catholic schools, and it specifically asks for

⁷ <http://education.alberta.ca/media/7869893/gay-straight%20alliances%20in%20schools.pdf> (2/21/2015)

⁸ <http://egale.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/EgaleFinalReport-web.pdf> (2/21/2015)

⁹ <http://egale.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/EgaleFinalReport-web.pdf> (2/22/2015)

¹⁰ <http://couragerc.org/courage/faqs/> (2/22/2015)

more research to be done which would include Catholic schools:

We deeply regret our inability to report further on the situation in Catholic school boards, and we hope that future research will fill this gap.¹¹

If the sources used by the Alberta Government to support GSA are limited in scope, limited in the number of stakeholders they represent, and are themselves calling for more research, perhaps the best thing to do is *more research*.

Alternative solutions to the problem of bullying in schools

Rather than address the complex responses our multicultural society offers to support LGBTQ students, the Alberta Government appears to be substituting a limited “one size fits all” approach that is based on unsubstantiated opinion. Wells himself argues:

GSA should not be understood as a one-size-fits-all approach that will provide a “magic cure” for homophobia and heterosexism in schools. Rather, GSAs can be more accurately understood as one vital part of a systematic approach to reducing bullying and improving student safety and acceptance of differences. Without the active support of the entire school community (including administrators and, in some cases, the school board) GSAs are likely to remain as isolated havens of safety for a small group of students. (Wells 15)

When GSAs are effectively imposed on schools where parents would prefer alternative solutions to bullying, GSAs may serve to ghettoize students, separating them from their primary support systems, namely: their family and extended community.

Although acknowledging the need for parent support, the *Guide* appears to welcome parent participation only if supportive of GSAs. Wells’ *Guide* identifies “potential barriers and challenges” to be “anticipated and overcome”. It therefore pits mandatory GSAs against alternative proposals to create safe places for students. It potentially pits students against their own parents.

The *Guide* ignores the wide variety of options available to combat bullying, which could address the nuanced needs of all stakeholders. Pitting groups against each other does not foster an inclusive environment. In a democratic society, diverse opinion is a sign of a healthy, well-functioning system. Decisions made after multiple points of view have been considered and evaluated, on the whole tend to be better than ones made in order to “overcome” a group or its opinion. Joining forces, establishing actual alliances, and working out differences could also be valuable ways to deal with the differences Wells anticipates. But he does not appear to make room for them in his vision of the future. If the desired outcome is to raise a generation with the skills to create an inclusive society, the Alberta Government could have elected to draw from a document that uses language which fosters greater dialogue and respect, and more divergent

¹¹<http://egale.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/EgaleFinalReport-web.pdf> (2/21/2015)

thinking. The future of Alberta schools could and should include harmonious relationships between parents and their children, regardless of anyone's sexual orientation. It is odd that the term “Gay-straight Alliances” is used when the government has neglected opportunities to create real alliances between all stakeholders, and the many subgroups within each group of stakeholders.

In the executive summary, the *Guide* states

This guide draws upon current legislation, law, educational policy and research to develop a critical framework for creating and sustaining gay–straight student alliances (GSAs) in Alberta schools. (Wells 4)

It is interesting that Wells uses the redundant terms “current legislation” and “law” in the same sentence. While it is odd that no editor picked up on this redundancy, it is even more curious that despite this redundancy, among the 17 sources cited in the references section, not one piece of legislation is included (Wells 36). Links to some websites with access to legislation are found in the body of the text, but not in the reference section. Not every piece of writing produced should be weighed with equal measure. One would not fault Wells if, for example, this *Guide* was just an opinion piece written for private reflection. Wells' voice should be welcomed in ongoing discussion with academics and Canadians of diverse backgrounds. His contribution is acknowledged as significant, and his ability to contribute more to the discussion is essential. He may be the best person to answer the following questions:

1. What scope was Wells given for this *Guide*, and why?
2. What were the expectations that the document adhere to acceptable research standards and academic practices?
3. What budget was provided for this document?
4. What selection criteria led to Wells being the author?
5. Who initiated the *Guide*, and based on what perceived need?
6. Who was responsible for editing, approving, and disseminating the *Guide* as an official document of the Alberta Teacher's Association?
7. Why was this document chosen as the basis for the government fact sheet?

We do know that in answer to the “Frequently Ask Questions” section, Wells himself states:

The answers and suggestions provided are not meant to offer a comprehensive analysis: rather, they are meant to stimulate dialogue, develop critical thinking and provide individuals with a broad range of possible responses to address many of the questions and concerns that arise as they begin to build an inclusive school environment (Wells 24).

If this *Guide* was never intended to be judged as a comprehensive analysis, then more questions arise, including:

1. What is the standard by which the *Guide* is to be judged?
2. If the *Guide* is not a comprehensive analysis, why is it being given so much weight by the Alberta Government?

3. If Wells was not required to produce a comprehensive and academically acceptable paper, was anyone else asked to do so?
4. If someone did produce a comprehensive and academically acceptable paper, who was that person, and what were his or her findings?
5. If no one was commissioned to produce sound and comprehensive research on how best to address the issue of GSAs in Alberta, why not?
6. If the Alberta Government were to recognize the apparent lack of research on this issue, will all stakeholders be invited to participate in future research?

The *Guide* describes itself as providing a “critical framework for creating and sustaining gay–straight student alliances (GSAs) in Alberta schools” (Wells 4). It does not claim to be a framework for any other proposed methods of creating safe schools. For example, it neglects to offer suggestions for how increased parent participation might also improve the well-being of students, and create a safer culture than currently exists. In fact, according to Wells, although parent participation in schools is important, it falls well below other key indicators found in a healthy school for LGBTQ students. According to the *Guide*:

...the three most significant factors in building healthy and resilient school communities for LGBTQ students are identified as (1) development of school policies on inclusion, (2) professional development training and awareness building, and (3) the active and visible presence of GSAs or associated LGBTQ support groups in schools. (Wells 4).

Parents as a stumbling block, rather than as allies

In addition to ranking parent involvement lower than the three factors set out here above, the *Guide* suggests parents may be a stumbling block to the success of GSAs:

In other situations, parents might be a significant source of resistance and object to GSAs on personal, moral or religious grounds. Because of these very real concerns, teachers who are interested in supporting GSAs should work very closely with their school administrators and parent councils. In many cases these two key educational stakeholders will have common misconceptions or unfounded concerns about the nature and role of GSAs in schools.

Teachers, administrators, counsellors, support staff, parents and students all play an important part in creating safe, welcoming and inclusive schools. (Wells 33)

This raises the following questions:

1. If parents play an important role in creating safe, welcoming and inclusive schools, would Wells and the Alberta Government acknowledge that parents may do so in ways other than supporting mandatory GSAs for every Alberta school?
2. If the voice of parents is excluded from the “critical framework” proposed by Wells,

where can their voice be heard?

3. If parents have no framework to participate in the creation of safe schools, what problems can be anticipated as a result of their absence from the discussion?
4. Why would the Alberta Government choose to see parents as “a barrier to be overcome” rather than as valuable allies in working toward real solutions to real problems?

It is unclear why Wells' indicators of what makes healthy and resilient school communities for LGBTQ are so markedly different than what he says are necessary to build educational capacity and resiliency in LGBTQ youth *themselves*. In what seems to contradict his earlier statements he says:

In their international study, Fenaughty and Harré (2003) identify several important factors that can help to build educational capacity and resiliency in LGBTQ youth: (1) Positive representations (2) Family and community acceptance (3) Positive peer and school relationships (4) LGBTQ support networks, and (5) Access to a variety of coping strategies, which can increase students' self-esteem and sense of belonging. Fenaughty and Harré also suggest that “positive social acceptance may be the most influential resiliency factor” available to LGBTQ youth (p. 16). This acceptance helps to minimize the effects of heterosexism and homophobia and thus can help reduce the stresses associated with the coming-out and coming-to-terms processes. (Wells 32)

If parents worked on the second-ranked item in Fenaughty and Harré list (family and community acceptance) rather than the fourth-ranked one (LGBTQ support networks), it seems the net result would be better for their children. In other words, building alliances in their own family and their own community that help their own children would be a better alternative for those individuals. Are parents not the best natural allies of their own children?

Perhaps the answer to this last question can be found by understanding Wells' definition of the word “ally” itself. This word is one of the 15 words defined, or more accurately redefined by Wells in the section of his guide called “*LGBTQ Terms & Definitions*”¹²

Ally: A person, regardless of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, who supports and stands up for the human and civil rights of LGBTQ people (Wells 5).

The definition of “ally” from Merriam-Webster neglects to include Wells phrase “LGBTQ people” and instead reads “a person or group that gives help to another person or group” (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ally>). It is possible to create a safe school for people of all sexual orientations, and create alliances between various groups and individuals, without using legislation to impose a student-run club in every school.

¹² A foot note to this section of Wells guide states “Some terms and definitions have been adapted from the guidebook *Safe and Caring Schools for Lesbian and Gay Youth: A Teacher's Guide*, published by the Alberta Teachers' Association. More terms and expanded definitions are available on the ATA's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity webpage.” (Wells 5)

Homophobia redefined

Ally is not the only word Wells redefines. Another is “homophobia,” which Wells defines in the following way:

Homophobia: Fear and/or hatred of homosexuality in others, often exhibited by prejudice, discrimination, bullying or acts of violence.
(Wells 5)

The term “homophobia” originates with the psychologist George Weinberg. Weinberg was the psychologist who is widely acclaimed as being one of the authorities whose work led to the term “homosexual” being removed from the DSM¹³. As a heterosexual himself, Weinberg is also an example and role model for the cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships that can exist between people of different sexual orientations. The term “*homophobia*” is found in several of his works including his book published in 1972, called Society and the Healthy Homosexual.

According to Weinberg, homophobia¹⁴ is:

“...-the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals- and in the case of homosexuals themselves self loathing...” (Weinberg 4)

It is interesting that Wells redefines homophobia, especially since other sources continue to cite the original definition. According an article by Thomas Kraemer¹⁵ in *Gay Today*,¹⁶

The importance of Weinberg's book is especially evident after examining the many research papers on homophobia. Virtually every paper either cites Weinberg's book directly or they cite references that cite his book

In the same article Kraemer also states:

Thirty-one¹⁷ years after *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* was published, I am impressed with how well it has withstood the test of time. Virtually every psychology book from this era is grossly out-of-date. This book remains valid due to Weinberg's reliance on common sense instead of the then fashionable psychotherapy dogmas. This is also a testimony to how revolutionary and forward-looking the book really was.¹⁸

Weinberg's definition of homophobia is consistent with other phobias. For example, Merriam-Webster defines “phobia” as:

¹³ <http://www.onthemedial.org/story/255877-defense-homophobia/transcript/> (2/22/2015)

¹⁴ http://www.amazon.com/reader/0901072168/ref=rdr_sb_li_hist_1&state=01111

¹⁵ “Oregon State University alumnus Thomas Kraemer helped to found the Gay Peoples Alliance, the first officially recognized gay student group at OSU, in 1976.” <http://ir.library.oregonstate.edu/xmlui/handle/1957/43449>
(2/14/2015)

¹⁶ <http://gaytoday.com/reviews/111003re.asp>

¹⁷ Note “31 years later” would make refers to 31 year after 1972 meaning this comment was made in 2003; Wells paper was produced only 3 years later. Weinberg's work continue to be cited today.

¹⁸ (<http://gaytoday.com/reviews/111003re.asp>)

an exaggerated and often disabling fear, usually inexplicable to the subject, and having sometimes a logical but usually an illogical or symbolic object, class of objects, or situation¹⁹

Wells' definition of homophobia is distinctly different from Weinberg's on several points. Not the least of these differences relates to who may exhibit homophobia. Thomas Kraemer, a writer for *Gay Today* and founder of Gay Peoples Alliance, the first officially recognized gay student group at Oregon State University, lauds Weinberg's contribution to the advancement of human rights for gay people and notes that the book containing the original definition is cited by virtually every work on the subject of homophobia. Kraemer agrees that gay people can be homophobic. In fact a wide body of work supports that gay people can and do experience homophobia as defined by Weinberg.

Wells' definition of homophobia, as something experienced by *others*, seems to suggest that homophobia is something only experienced by heterosexuals. If Wells' intention in redefining homophobia is to suggest that it is exclusively or predominantly an heterosexual issue, one wonders how much attention GSAs will give to homosexual students suffering from homophobia. Wells does use the term *internalized homophobia*, but does not include it in his definition section. What is clear is that the terms *homophobia* or *homophobic* on their own appear far more frequently than does Wells' undefined term "internalized homophobia". In fact, the ratio in the *Guide* is 6:1.²⁰

The significance of this point is important because measuring word usage appears to be a key method relied on by proponents of GSAs. The definition and frequency of words used considered by some as a means to measure social climate and as indication of inclusiveness. Will GSAs reflect a similar 6:1 ratio? In other words will six times more effort and attention be given to addressing homophobia *in others* or will equal attention be given to addressing homophobia *in LGBTQ students themselves*?

The *Guide* fails to include the term *internalized homophobia* in its terms and definition section, although in one paragraph the *Guide* uses this term three times:

Many LGBTQ youth often turn their feelings of hurt and despair inward, which manifests itself as a form of internalized homophobia. For many youth, the ultimate expression of internalized homophobia leads them to hate themselves for feeling different from the rest of society. (Wells 8)

In the absence of an official definition from Wells, it may be helpful to see how the term *internalized homophobia* is used elsewhere. Revel Riot is "a non-profit organization that promotes LGBTQ rights, awareness and equality through art, graphics, resources, [and] writing..."²¹. Their website states:

Internalized Homophobia is something that virtually all gays have to confront (or have yet to confront) in their lives.

¹⁹ (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/medical/phobia>)

²⁰ In the *Guide*, homophobia or homophobic is used 18 times in total (homophobia used 14 times, homophobic used 4 times). Internalized homophobia used only 3 times and only in one paragraph.

²¹ <http://www.revelandriot.com/> (2/22/2015)

The simple definition is that internalized homophobia refers to negative feelings that we have towards ourselves because of our homosexuality. The forms it may take can vary from outright shame, denial, or self-injury, to hating...other gay people and more unconscious behaviors as well.

Internalized homophobia happens for some of the same reasons that straight people are homophobic...The best way to overcome internalized homophobia is to first realize it's an issue worth dealing with.²²

Whether one uses the term *internalized homophobia* as described above, or a traditional definition of homophobia that allows the word to be applied to oneself, the self-loathing described by Weinberg and self-injury described by many others may be amongst the causes of depression in homosexuals. Addressing their own homophobia may do much to reduce the anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues experienced by LGBTQ people.

Although the history of the use and misuse of the word homophobia is worthy of its own paper, the redefinition of this word in the *Guide* raises some interesting questions, including:

1. Will GSAs provide an adequate opportunity to address the issue of homophobia in homosexuals?
2. Is the ratio of 6:1 (other people's homophobia to one's own) reflected in Wells' *Guide* indicative of the ratio we can expect to find in conversation in these legislated GSAs?
3. In other words, is the agenda of GSAs on "fixing" homophobia in others, or will students suffering from feelings of self-loathing be given adequate opportunities to address their own internalized feelings?
4. How does the Alberta Government define homophobia?

Understanding homophobia and providing students and parents with the skill to address the issue may result in safer, more accepting homes as well as schools. Wells' definition of homophobia (as something found in *others*) does not appear to allow for the concept that homophobia is one of the many psychological conditions shared by gay and straight people alike. Wells' definition is limiting. In contrast, Weinberg's definition of this phobia could be used as an opportunity for discussion and growth. It could be a starting point for finding common ground that may lead to alliances forming naturally between individuals who have something in common, something they recognize in the other.

There is a danger when people use the same word with different meanings. Perhaps it is time to realize that the definitions of homophobia and homophobic have evolved over the years to the point where these words are used as indiscriminately as the term *gay* has been in the past. Applying the term *homophobic* without reason or without reference to its original definition shuts down the conversation immediately. If someone disagrees with a particular public policy proposal, calling their opinion *homophobic* virtually guarantees that no one will be allowed to hear the arguments, concerns or questions upon which that opinion is based. Shutting down entire groups through the misuse of language does not foster an inclusive environment.

Instead, Wells' guide redefines the term in a way that suggests homophobia is only experienced as "fear and/or hatred of homosexuality in *others*. It is unclear why Wells elected to stray from the

²² <http://www.revelandriot.com/resources/internalized-homophobia/> (2/22/2015)

commonly accepted definition of homophobia, the definition which both gay and straight psychologists agree to, previously used by laypeople and scholars alike, and the definition coined by a man who is credited with helping to remove homosexuality from the DSM. It is unclear which research the *Guide* uses to support Wells' drastically different definition. It is unclear what impact his new definition will have on the psychological well-being of gay and straight students who either experience homophobia themselves, or are subjected to it by others. What is clear is that new definitions need to be understood before being thrown around loosely, if for no other reason than to ensure that when used all groups understand what they and other people mean. Failure to understand words as they are used in policy and legislation can lead to damaging consequences, despite the best intentions from which they may spring.

Questions that arise from Wells' introducing his new definition of homophobia include:

1. Why did Wells redefine homophobia?
2. Was Wells aware of Weinberg's well-known and widely accepted definition of homophobia?
3. Does Wells disagree with Weinberg's definition? If so why? If not, why not just use it?
4. If Wells does disagree with Weinberg, does Wells also by extension disagree with scholars who still reference Weinberg, and popular writers like Kraemer, who accept and use the original definition comfortably?
5. Where does Wells' definition originate, what psychological research, or literature reviews of works about homophobia document and justify his redefinition?
6. What impact did Wells' new definition have on Bill 10?
7. What impact did Wells' use of homophobia have on Bill 10?
8. Did anyone in the Alberta government or Alberta Teachers' Association notice, explain, or articulate the reasons for the discrepancy between the Wells definition of homophobia and the definition widely accepted by scholars and lay people, including the psychologist who coined the phrase?
9. Does the change in definition lead to safer schools? If so, how and based on what principles or reasoning?

Is name-calling bad only when directed at a particular target?

Words and their definitions are important. A goal common to all stakeholders is the desire to stem the harmful effects of name-calling. Wells refers to name-calling as an act of violence²³ and the National Climate survey,²⁴ cited earlier, repeatedly mentions the harmful effect of name-calling, and measures the number of times that slurs such as “fagot” and “homo” are heard by students. The website www.gaystraightalliance.org claims to be:

...one of the most educational places on the web updated daily and dedicated to each person who strives for human rights.”

This site covers sexual orientation education and equality to help preserve the integrity of all human rights for all human beings and

²³ <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/Gay%E2%80%93Straight%20Student%20Alliances%20in%20Alberta%20Schools%20A%20Guide%20for%20Teachers.pdf> (2/22/2015) p.7

²⁴ <http://egale.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/EgaleFinalReport-web.pdf>

to protect current and future generations of family members.²⁵

The site also says:

Every gay and straight student has a right to a public education in an environment that is free from harassment, violence, namecalling and intimidation. All students deserve dignity and respect, regardless of their sex, sexual orientation, race, religion, disability, national or ethnic origin.²⁶

On the same page where this laudable statement on human rights is found, the word “fascist” is used five times to describe opponents of GSAs:

...rightwing fascists are trying to stop you from discussing marriage equality for gay couples with your friends in school...

...The fascists do not want you to talk about these important topics; they want to silence you just as they used lies, deception, and fearmongering to violate human rights in many states; the fascists did the same thing in Nazi Germany and they are doing it in the Russian Federation. They do not want you talking about your gay friends or family members. They do not want you standing up for human rights.

...When you form a student organization, you will immediately know you are dealing with abusive fascists if they try to limit what you call your student organization. This is the first sign that such trustees, administrators, and school systems are disingenuous about confronting homophobia and discrimination.²⁷

It is surprising that www.gaystraightalliance.org uses this kind of language when www.glsen.org asserts:

[b]iased language, such as racist, sexist, and homophobic remarks, can make school a hostile place for all members of a school community.²⁸

Even Wells' *Guide* claims:

GSAs can also help students and staff to learn about diversity, respect and human rights in positive and supportive ways that recognize Canada's multicultural and pluralistic society and values.²⁹

²⁵ <http://www.gaystraightalliance.org/> (2/22/2015)

²⁶ <http://www.gaystraightalliance.org/>

²⁷ <http://www.gaystraightalliance.org/>

²⁸ <http://glsen.org/sites/default/files/Gay-Straight%20Alliances.pdf> (2/22/2015) (p.1.)

²⁹ <http://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/Publications/Human-Rights-Issues/Gay%20Straight%20Student%20Alliances%20in%20Alberta%20Schools%20A%20Guide%20for%20Teachers.pdf> (p.11)

Amongst the many people who make up our diverse Canadian society are descendants of those who fled fascist persecution. These Canadians are bound to have differing opinions about GSAs. For a GSA website to describe people as “fascists” because they offer alternatives to GSAs is false, discriminatory, and counterproductive to creating an inclusive climate. A pluralistic society, upholds the right of parents to raise their own children according to the values they see fit. Where do those rights stand under Bill 10, with the mandatory imposition of GSAs on every school in Alberta?

Other questions that arise are:

1. Who decides which names are harmful, and which promote safe schools?
2. Will sites like www.gaystraightalliance.org be used as resources for GSAs in Alberta schools?
3. Why do names like “fascist” go unchallenged on this site?
4. If this site is one of the most educational places on the web for GSAs, what does that say about the quality of resources that stakeholders will have?
5. Is this the example the Alberta Government would like to follow?
6. Will there be “approved” online resources for GSAs, or will information from any GSA site be an acceptable resource for Alberta students?

Methodology

Research for this paper was restricted to online sources. Search terms included, but were not limited to: “GSA” Gay Straight Alliance (Alberta, Canada, Schools); GSA research; research against GSA; Studies on benefits of GSA. Etc.

An underlying aim of this research was to discover the nature, content, and substance of the research that claims to demonstrate that GSAs have been proven to be effective. Another aim was to discover academic discussions for and against GSAs, and to discover the assumptions of the pro and con sides.

Search engines used included: Google and Google Scholar. Additional information was gathered from the bibliographies, works cited and other references.

Conclusion

While the Alberta government presents a *fact sheet* to support the establishment of GSAs in every Alberta school, much of what is being passed off as *fact* is more appropriately called *opinion*.

The content of the *fact sheet* relies heavily on the ideas and opinions of Kristopher Wells as they are presented in one document written in 2006. If the Alberta government is to introduce GSAs in schools, it has the obligation to prove that this means of addressing the needs of students has been thoroughly researched and proven through methods that are academically sound. In the absence of this research, the Alberta Government should acknowledge that its plans for imposing mandatory GSAs on every Alberta school were ill-formed and risky. The government has the duty to acknowledge respectfully the diverse cultural and religious makeup of Canadian society.

Our diverse culture contains rich and multifaceted responses to questions faced by today's parents. If respect for culture, and the rights of parents to raise their own children according to the values cherished by parents, are to be maintained, the Alberta Government must offer more options than a poorly researched, one-size-fits-all approach. The Alberta Government should acknowledge that its present explanation of why GSAs are to be imposed on every school through legislation neglects many valid points of view based on sound reasoning. The questions raised in this paper are only a few of the countless questions being posed by people whose rights as parents have been ignored in the process of imposing GSAs on Alberta schools.

About Parents for Choice in Education

Parents for Choice in Education (PCE) is an Alberta-based, non-profit, non-partisan advocacy organization that supports excellence in education through maximum parental choice.

PCE strongly supports a high-quality public education system in Alberta. To this end, we believe that parents should have maximum choice in the kind of education that shall be given to their children. Examples of alternatives that should be available to parents include Catholic schools, private schools, virtual schools, publicly funded alternative programs such as charter schools, fully independent traditional home schooling, and fully independent alternative schools, which do not follow the Alberta Program of Studies. Sometimes parents just want the freedom to enroll their child at a public school outside of their local neighborhood. We believe that parents are the experts in their own children, and that they should be free to choose the method of schooling that best meets the needs of their families.

Children don't come one-size-fits-all. Education shouldn't either.

PCE believes that the authority over the education of a child rightly belongs to the parent(s) (or legal guardians) of that child. We affirm the importance of Article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which states that "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." Parents may, and often do, delegate the delivery of education to government entities, but the nature and degree of that delegation is *theirs* to determine.

PCE believes that most parents make choices about their children's education based on serious thought and sound analysis of the pros and cons of the options that are available. Parents are generally better positioned to understand their child's best interest than politicians, bureaucrats, or special interest groups.

PCE believes that parents are drivers of quality in education. Because of the natural and permanent tie that parents have with their own children, parents have a greater interest in ensuring the quality of their children's education than anyone else (save for the children themselves). Parent involvement and parent choice will continue to ensure excellence and quality in education.

PCE believes that choice itself is a driver of quality, because people with choice will choose the options they perceive to be better. That competition to be ‘chosen’ will drive improvements in quality.

PCE believes that good quality programming is typically available within traditional public schools in Alberta, and that enhanced choice within the public system as well as between the traditional public system and other education systems will improve quality, across the educational landscape.

About the Author:

Katrina Boguski received her M.A. in Religious Studies from The University of British Columbia in 1997 and her B.A. in English Literature and Religious Studies also from UBC in 1993. She works as a consultant to organizations in several different industries. She has co-authored textbooks, spoken at conferences and trade shows, and ran a private tutoring company. She was the former Vice-Chair of the Board of Governors of Corpus Christi College at UBC; she also chaired the Curriculum Committee on this same board.. Katrina has taught a variety of subjects at the college level including: Selection and Recruitment, Training and Development, Consumer Behavior, Introduction to Psychology, International HR Development Business Society and Ethics.

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