

"DON'T BE SO GAY!"

QUEERS, BULLYING, AND
MAKING SCHOOLS SAFE

Donn Short



UBC Press · Vancouver · Toronto

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I was such an object of ridicule that they sent my brother to talk to me. I guess that was a last resort. And my brother, who was disgusted with me – his loyalty was clearly to the other students, not to his brother, not to his family – he asked me to stop acting the way I was acting, whatever that was. I really wasn't aware that I was acting in any way, but he said to me, "Why do you have to be like that?" which is a very cutting question and a very profound question for a kid to hear and very upsetting because you're not really sure that you're gay – you're not really aware. I wasn't aware that I was being any "way." I was just being me and, apparently, being me was not acceptable to anybody else and they were letting me know. I knew what my brother meant ... Yeah.

— GREG

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Participants

Schools, Students, and Teachers

This book contains interviews with some people whose real names are used with their permission. Their work promoting equity and social justice in schools is a matter of public record. They are Murray Corren, Peter Corren, Jaime, Azmi Jubran, Tim McCaskell, Ellen Chambers Picard, Gabriel Picard, and Jeffrey White. I am grateful to each of them. Except for in the discussion of matters of public record, the names of the schools are fictitious, and the names of the students, teachers, and other allies below are pseudonyms. There would be no book without any of these generous people. I prefer not to describe them in detail here but to let their words speak for them; nonetheless, I hope this list will help readers to remember who is at which school. Of course, I spoke with more students and teachers than those who appear in this book. If I have not included them, it is mainly because their perspectives, stories, and ideas duplicated those I did include. However, my thanks go to everyone who permitted me to spend time with them.

Sylvia Avenue Collegiate and Vocational School

Sharon Dominick – teacher

Melanie Bhatia – teacher

Ian – teacher who walked into Sharon’s classroom and was ridiculed behind his back

Barry – student who looked up to Jack McFarland on *Will and Grace*

Louise – student

Douglas Allington – student who wrote a letter of thanks to Sharon
Wayne – student who mocked Ian, a teacher, behind Ian’s back

Burton School

Delores – teacher
Lazy Daisy – student who made art for me and created her own “alias”
Benjamin – student
Alex – student
Brent – student

Elizabeth Coyt Alternative School

Carla – student, girlfriend of Emma
Emma – student, girlfriend of Carla
Cal – best friend of Emma and Carla

Trimble Collegiate Institute

Lorna Gillespie – teacher who encouraged students to write on the walls
Len – student
Katie – student
Anna – student
Mike – student

Crestwood Collegiate and Vocational School

Diana Goundrey – guidance counsellor
Joey – student who wrote poem
Sian – student
Jerry – student who had graduated from Crestwood two years before I
interviewed him
Larson – student
Kyle – student
Dalton – student who was very involved in queer politics in Toronto while
in high school

Earl Grey Secondary School

Terrence – student
Sam – student
Greg – student
Mr. Taylor – teacher

Triangle

Ryan – student

James – student

Noel – student

Trista – student

Silver – student

Brian – student

High School Students

Jaime – male-to-female transgendered high school student, white, Grade 12

Michael – Grade 12 student I met at an anti-bullying conference

I sat in classes for days wondering what there was to
“observe” ... What should I write down in my empty
notebook?

— GEORGE SPINDLER, *DOING THE
ETHNOGRAPHY OF SCHOOLING*

1

Introduction

Navigating Safe and Equitable Schools

It's just, when you're walking down the hall, you hear, "Oh, that's so gay, dude" or "He's such a fag." My friend Robert is the only one in the school who's really out, and so if he walks by, you might hear some people say, "Oh yeah, that guy's such a fag." No one ever says anything to his face. No one says anything about him being gay to his face. You know – what you can get away with and what you can't. I mean, not officially, not what the school says, but you can. It's more complex than that. Yeah. It's a greater complexity, you know? You gotta change everything.

— KATIE

Successful strategies to resolve the problem of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students being bullied in Canadian high schools remain elusive, and the bullying of sexual-minority youth remains routine behaviour in schools. In schools where no anti-bullying policies exist, scholars, activists, students, and their allies, who are committed to safe and equal access to education for queer students, ask that inclusive safe-school policies be written to include sexual-minority youth. They argue that policies intended to make schools safer for queer students must specifically mention this particular "at risk" group. However, notwithstanding that more and more

schools are governed by anti-bullying or safe-school policies that, in some cases, specifically mention sexual-minority youth as an “at risk” group, bullying is familiar behaviour in schools.

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in Ontario has some of the best-written and most comprehensive safe-school, anti-harassment, and equity policies in North America, if not the world. The TDSB’s *Equity Foundation Statement* specifically mentions sexual orientation and is thorough and specific.¹ In addition to the *Equity Foundation Statement*, a series of five supporting documents articulate in greater detail the general principles of equity set out in the *Equity Foundation Statement*. These documents call for more than “inclusion” or recognition of diversity. As a whole, on paper, they provide the means of recognizing, accommodating, and allowing safe and welcoming space for difference, in which safety and equity for students, particularly queer youth, can be achieved. One of the fundamental aims of this book is to interrogate to what extent this goal has been met. Evidence presented in this book suggests that it has not. The gap between policy, practice, and experience occurs for many reasons – some knowable, some not. With respect to creating safe and equitable schools, this book indicates that the gap between policy and practice often occurs because the policies fail to address the nature and causes of oppression, focusing instead on responses to victimization.

Since the early 1980s, there has been significant academic attention to bullying. In contemporary literature, bullying is no longer viewed as unassailable – an inevitable if unpleasant part of “growing up” with which all students must learn to “cope.” This traditional view has let parents, educators, and policy makers “off the hook.” Bullying is now commonly regarded as a damaging experience in the lives of students – with ongoing repercussions. To the extent that bullying was addressed in schools, students were often told to “stand up” for themselves because “bullies” were really just “cowards.” One of the first and most significant scholars to investigate bullying was Dan Olweus, who has studied bullying for over thirty years. The impact of his work on academic conversations surrounding bullying cannot be overstated. Olweus’s research has been largely responsible for focusing a worldwide spotlight on what scholars refer to as “bullying.” According to Olweus, “a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one, or more, other students.”² The model of bullying that Olweus has developed is one that takes the consequences of bullying seriously and seeks to critique and to eliminate bullying as a social practice; however, in the

postmodern academic world that has unfolded alongside the increasing examination of bullying by the academy, bullying as a cultural experience has not been sufficiently contextualized. Instead, the Olweus model of bullying has been too readily accepted. Gerald Walton has described this conception of bullying as “generic,” arguing that the Olweus understanding of bullying must be continuously interrogated.³ Of course, he is right. The notion of bullying requires additional adjectives – homophobic bullying, racial bullying, classist bullying, gender-based bullying, and so on. Instead, the literature constructed around bullying has, with few exceptions, failed to regard sufficiently the numerous cultural bases of bullying.⁴ These ideological aspects of bullying, in turn, have not been adequately considered when the issue of making schools safe has been addressed. Lacking this context, conceptions of school safety, not surprisingly, often have been primarily responsive rather than preventative.

For the most part, Canadian researchers, such as Debra Pepler and Wendy Craig, have endorsed the Olweus approach, investigating bullying at the psychological level and often linking it to the aggression and power imbalance between specific individuals. As Walton has noted, this approach presents bullying as “empirically measurable as specific acts” and, most critically, suggests “that solutions to bullying are found at the level of the individual – which is to say, by addressing issues of bullying and victimization to specific implicated students – even while it is perhaps also framed as a school problem.”⁵ No matter how severe and quick responses may be, incident-based policies – designed to come into force “after the fact” or to develop “empathy” prior to bullying “incidents” – are inadequate. As Walton puts it,

The dominant notion about bullying is an individualist one, that it is a problem of some children who often behave aggressively ... Power is acknowledged but limited to immediate interactions between or among particular students ... Anti-violence education renders invisible the power and privilege imbued within the social dynamics on the playground. Conceptualizing such interactions only as individual behaviour that potentially has effects upon other members of the school community leads to the application of anti-violence education as a rational response ... supposedly making the school community and society as a whole a safer place ...

When school-based violence is conceptualized as the result of the individualized pathology of only some students – the noxious weeds – it follows that educational administrators would treat it as such.⁶

Seeking protection from “the noxious weeds” leads to response-based approaches concerned with containing bullying but does not sufficiently address the “before the fact” cultural climate of schools that this book suggests better explains why homophobic bullying occurs. These cultural influences significantly impact the experiences of all students in schools and have specific meanings for sexual-minority youth, whose oppression can be better accounted for, and addressed by, policies and approaches that seek to intervene in order to transform the climate of schools. Obviously, such a safe-school strategy must first renovate current conceptions of bullying, as well as what it means to be “safe,” to accommodate such a broad strategy.

Students as Experts

Scholars have paid enormous attention to the issue of bullying in schools in the last thirty to thirty-five years worldwide, particularly in the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, the United States, and Canada. Most of the research in Canada has been carried out by researchers working in disciplines other than law. For example, educational scholars have contributed to research on bullying – most notably André Grace and Gerald Walton – and so have scholars in psychology, particularly Debra Pepler and Wendy Craig. Safe-school policies are coming under increasing critical scrutiny, but there is as yet very little published literature by socio-legal scholars on the topic. Some legal scholars in Canada, such as Eric Roher, have turned their attention to bullying primarily in dealing with school-liability issues and tort law.⁷ Socio-legal scholars in Canada have largely been silent.

This book is intended to take up the challenge of responding to this silence by drawing on the voices of sexual-minority students themselves. The starting and ending point of my research – and what carries the research throughout – is the governing philosophy that we must value the knowledge of on-the-ground actors. Peter McLaren asks us to consider why some knowledge is valued more than other knowledge.⁸ Why, he asks, is “high-status” knowledge – which includes the important traditional legal analysis that is usually presented by legal scholars – given such importance whereas the practical knowledge of ordinary people is often devalued?⁹ This was a guiding concern as I conducted my study, considered the results, and contemplated the possibility of presenting the voices of ordinary people in a less traditional form. I would have missed the knowledge reproduced in this book if I had chosen any other method of investigation. In the end, content dictated form (again) and the substance of the voices, the “stuff” of what was said, shaped this book’s ultimate structure. Therefore, this book has been

undertaken with the conviction that sexual-minority students are the best experts on their own experiences and lives and that they and their allies are best situated to address the fundamental research aims of this book.

There are few law schools in Canada where education law or school law is studied or researched. None of these schools, as far as I am aware, has produced any empirical work with students or teachers. Hopefully, this book will be something of an introduction to such an undertaking for legal scholars in Canada.

Method and Participants

In June 2000 the Ontario Ministry of Education passed the *Safe Schools Act*,¹⁰ which came into effect in September 2001. The *Safe Schools Act* did not define “safety.” The particular focus of my research has been to examine the potential of safe-school legislation and equity policies to combat the bullying and oppression of sexual-minority students in high schools of the Toronto District School Board. I wondered how bullying and safety were understood and defined by queer students and asked to what extent their conceptions might differ from their reports on how safety was pursued at their schools. To explore the issue in ways seldom realized by doctrinal or theoretical approaches, I asked sexual-minority students in Toronto-area schools how they defined and understood “safety,” particularly in the absence of legal guidance in the statute. I then inquired into how sexual-minority students reported that safety was pursued at their schools. Finally, I asked students, as well as teachers who identified as allies of queer students, to consider how these definitions and insights might be translated into law and policy reforms that reconceptualize current approaches to safety and bullying.

My research is based on information that was gathered over a period of three months and on interviews with twenty-five queer students, as well as fourteen of their advocates (e.g., teachers and guidance counsellors), from ten high schools in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The students I interviewed ranged in age from fifteen to eighteen and came from all grades, nine through twelve. Parental consent was obtained to interview students who were under the age of eighteen. With respect to the age of the student participants, I discovered over time that I was inclined to prefer students in the higher grades, simply because they had more experience in high school and tended to be more reflective, more articulate, and perhaps more open about discussing their sexuality and their school. There was also an enormous practical consideration: students in the upper years were very likely to be of age.

How did I find queer students? Teachers, committed to making a difference at particular schools, opened their doors to me, allowed me to sit in on classes day after day, and most important, encouraged students they knew to be queer to speak with me. How did I find the teachers? I began by attending conferences and workshops in the Toronto area – held at high schools and other venues around Toronto – to meet teachers and administrators who were already committed to addressing the issue of homophobic bullying in schools. I met Jeffrey White from Oasis Alternative Secondary School’s Triangle program at a conference held at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. These teachers granted me access to their students and described their teaching experiences with me during recorded interviews, which were later transcribed. As I spent time in their classrooms, these conversations also included unstructured day-to-day conversations that unfolded over the days or weeks spent in their schools, which I digitally recorded. Interviews with students and administrators were also digitally recorded and later transcribed.

At each site, I relied upon teachers and guidance counsellors to introduce me to queer or questioning students. I also asked queer students to identify others. This technique is known as “chain sampling” or “snowballing.”¹¹ The purpose was to obtain a sample of participants with first-hand knowledge of the experiences I was investigating. Snowballing in the educational context was the most useful and practical way to gain access because it had two crucial effects. First, snowballing at one site allowed me to access students who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer, whom I would otherwise have had no way of identifying. Second, snowballing allowed me to access different sites, as I was introduced into different schools, usually through teachers at these sites who were informed about and involved with issues around homophobic and transphobic bullying or “queer issues” in general.

My interview with Tim McCaskell illustrates how snowballing was absolutely crucial to my investigations. As a former equity officer for the TDSB, formerly the Toronto Board of Education, McCaskell knew many of the teachers throughout the TDSB who were concerned about queer issues and queer students. Moreover, he was able to identify teachers who might be interested in talking with me and granting me access to their schools and students. McCaskell provided me with the names of three individuals – Sharon Dominick, Diana Goundrey, and Lorna Gillespie. Gillespie was no longer working as a teacher when I called her. Both Dominick and Goundrey invited

me into their schools. Sharon, in turn, introduced me to Gillespie and several other teachers. Sharon's generosity to me was critical to the success of this study.

Accordingly, I interviewed approximately three to five "out" students at each school. Limiting my interviews to students who identified as queer meant that I had a small pool from which to draw. I discovered that it was difficult for me to locate five students at any school who were "out" and willing to go on the record to discuss harassment with me. Not surprisingly, only at Triangle, a high school program for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer or questioning (GLBTQ) students, was it possible to find so many queer students willing to talk.

Student Interviews

I was particularly interested in student awareness of safety and equity legislation and policies, their assessment of the implementation of these policies, and the details of their day-to-day experiences at school. Some students, understandably, had more to say than others; as a result, the length of the interviews varied from one to two hours. I quickly learned that many queer students resist self-identifying through a simple male-female binary, choosing instead to place themselves somewhere along a male-female continuum. In addition, I interviewed several students who did not identify as queer but who were, nonetheless, subject to homophobic harassment by their peers. Such was the case of Azmi Jubran, a heterosexual male high school student, who was repeatedly assaulted verbally and physically throughout his five years at a high school in North Vancouver and who successfully prevailed in a human rights action against his school board.

There was an obvious trade-off between having a reliably representative sample (more likely with larger numbers of participants) and logistical limitations on the depth and quantity of interviews I could undertake. Nonetheless, I was interested in the richness of detail made possible by a smaller sampling. This book is concerned, primarily, with the standpoint of queer students and their allies at their high schools in the GTA. Their perceptions of homophobic and transphobic bullying, the presence of a heteronormative school culture and its impact on queer students, and the experiences of queer high school students provide a useful and reliable basis for a descriptive and critical-prescriptive analysis. Their observations can be confirmed as truthful renditions of experience in several ways. First, some of the stories related to me are remarkably similar to my own personal experiences in

high school. For instance, the story told to me by Ryan, a gay fifteen-year-old student at Triangle, about the “gendered” distribution of textbooks in his Grade 9 English class was startlingly similar to an experience I had when I was in Grade 10. Other researchers have produced data that confirm the experiences of these participants.¹² In May 2011 Egale Canada¹³ published its *Final Report*¹⁴ on its safe-school survey of queer students across Canada. The survey was funded by Egale Canada, the University of Winnipeg, and SVR/CIHR¹⁵ and included questions about sexual orientation, the language used by students in schools, bullying, the curriculum, and teacher advocacy for queer students.

One question I considered was whether to focus solely on a specific gender. However, it struck me as problematic to insist on focusing on subjects who were on either the male or the female side of an essentialized gender binary – the very binary queer students often seek to challenge (or fit within, or both). If I had focused solely, for example, on male students, presumably this would have meant interviewing only students who identified as male and leaving out students of various stripes, including Jaime. Jaime was male before he returned to his high school after Christmas break having decided to present as a female for the final six months of Grade 12.

I also interviewed Gabriel (Gabe) Picard, a high school student in Thunder Bay, Ontario, as well as Azmi Jubran, who had previously attended Handsworth Secondary School in North Vancouver and was twenty-five years old when I interviewed him in 2005. In addition to Gabriel Picard, I interviewed his mother, Ellen Chambers-Picard, a teacher at Gabe’s high school, who was instrumental in preparing his human rights complaint and in negotiating the settlement in his case. Both Gabriel Picard and Azmi Jubran filed human rights complaints against their high schools for failing in their duty to deliver a safe educational environment as required under provincial human rights legislation. Picard is gay, whereas Jubran is not. My interviews with Azmi Jubran and Gabriel Picard were substantially longer than most of the interviews conducted in this book.

In June 2007 I conducted an interview, also in Vancouver, with Peter Corren and Murray Corren, who filed a human rights complaint against their son’s school board in British Columbia. In addition, in December 2004 I interviewed Tim McCaskell, who was the student program worker for the Toronto Board of Education from 1983 to 2001. Except for Ellen Chambers-Picard, Murray Corren, Peter Corren, Azmi Jubran, Tim McCaskell, Gabriel Picard, and Jeffrey White, the names in this book of the students and teachers I interviewed are pseudonyms.

In the three-month period during which I conducted the interviews, I spent full days in the schools observing students, teachers, and administrators in classrooms, hallways, and other social spaces in and around the schools. I also engaged in informal conversations with, and observations of, many other students, teachers, and administrators at these sites, as well as at several conferences I attended before I began the interviews and once the interviews commenced. These conferences were held primarily in Toronto-area high schools and were in most cases organized by students for students. The conferences included informational as well as dramatic and other artistic presentations. I should note, however, that in addition to the three-month period of continuous time in schools, I spent time speaking with students and teachers (including Azmi Jubran, Gabriel Picard, Peter Corren and Murray Corren, Jeffrey White, and Tim McCaskell) over a period of approximately two years.

Overview of Results

I constructed three dominant themes from the data I collected through these interviews and my time in the field. The first theme deals with safety, focusing on conceptions of safety and bullying as they are understood by the participants but also as they have been socially constructed and pursued by schools as objects worthy of policy intervention. The second theme is barriers to implementation. The participants discuss what they perceive to be the barriers to implementing safety and equity policies intended to address problems arising from the heteronormativity that animates the cultural climate of schools. The third theme is barriers to the effectiveness of state-issued policies and legislation when these policies and legislation are implemented. This theme explores the socio-legal concept of legal pluralism and maps, according to the interviewees, the influences of other normative orders at work in youth culture in addition to formal law and policies.

Chapters 2 and 3 address the first theme, that of safety. My fieldwork indicated that schools approached safety in different ways. According to interviewees, the ways that schools pursued safety fell across a range of four possible conceptions – control, security, equity, and social justice. At the extreme ends of the range of possible conceptions of safety were, first, schools that viewed the task of keeping the students safe to be synonymous with controlling the students. This particular approach extended to controlling not only student behaviour but also student identity, and it had particular ramifications for black male students. On the other extreme end of the model were those schools (two in this book) that conceived and

implemented safety not as a matter of control or even as a matter of keeping the school secure but as a matter of creating a climate of “social justice.” The distinction between “social justice” and “equity” related to the degree that a school was proactive in pursuing equity.

Chapters 4 and 5 address the implementation of safe-school policies, with an emphasis on equity. Participants identified a series of factors or circumstances affecting implementation that can be expressed as follows:

- 1 Participants indicated that legislation and policies were not implemented or were less likely to be implemented as a result of the following barriers:
 - i insufficient or no funding;
 - ii the political nature of the vice-principal’s office (vice-principals were identified as among the most conservative of citizens occupying space in schools and as being a point of significant obstruction to policy implementation);
 - iii teacher homophobia;
 - iv teachers’ failure to regard the pursuit of safety, equity, and social justice as part of the work they were hired to do (here, teachers viewed their task as disseminating information, not changing culture);
 - v teachers’ fear of lack of support from other teachers.
- 2 Participants indicated that current legislation and policies were more likely to be implemented in circumstances where the following factors were present:
 - i teachers worked to support GLBTQ students despite administration indifference or opposition;
 - ii Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) were present in school;
 - iii policies suggested or mandated GLBTQ curriculum content;
 - iv life experiences of queer students were reflected in school social spaces (e.g., posters promoting school dances);
 - v students held conferences at schools on the bullying of GLBTQ students and life experiences of queer students;
 - vi queer realities were reflected in school culture (e.g., drama, art, music);
 - vii heterosexual students were implicated in curriculum regarding the social construction of gender and sexuality.

- 3 Although participants focused primarily on barriers to implementation of law and policies, they also found it difficult not to address issues of effectiveness in situations where they were implemented. When legislation and policies were conceptualized and put forward as an attempt to transform school culture, the effectiveness of their implementation was greater, and the participants were more likely to believe in the possibility that the larger school culture could change. Issues here included:
- i participants indicated that when law and policies were conceived narrowly, the policies had a limited reach and were likely not to be implemented at all as a result of a lack of belief in their ability to bring about change;
 - ii participants favoured a robust understanding of bullying and safety to inspire faith that the policies and legislation were “worth the effort” to implement;
 - iii even with well-defined and published policies intended to punish victimizers, participants indicated that the larger school culture was not likely to change when policies were conceptualized as incident-bound – responsive to isolated incidents – no matter how wholeheartedly punitive-based measures were brought to bear on victimizers.

Chapters 6 and 7 address the third theme, with a focus on how the reach and effectiveness of current legislation and formal policies are complicated by the influence of other normative orders at work in the educational context. It is not a sufficient answer to the problem of homophobic bullying for school boards to point to policies “on the books” no matter how well written. Policies must be implemented; however, the results of my research indicate that even when policies are followed, there is an additional factor that must be taken into account: law and policies must originate at the ministerial level to have significant opportunity for purchase on the ground. Other normative orders such as religious beliefs, family beliefs, and informal codes of behaviour among youth (what one informant referred to as “street code” or what was generally discussed as the “anti-snitch,” “anti-rat,” or “street” culture) come into play and interact with official law. Which code of behaviour do students follow – the official code of the school or more informal orders that also attempt to regularize responses, even educative ones? The possible outright impermeability of youth culture, in general, was identified

in this thematic cluster. However, all culture is subject to change, and my optimism suggests there are answers. These are discussed more fully in Chapter 8, which concludes this book.

In sum, a series of factors affect and shape the implementation, reach, and effectiveness of written policies, and these policies may thus be fundamentally limited, at least presently at the current sites of study, in their ability to resolve the hostile reception and treatment of queer students and the threats to their safety in high schools. My research suggests that the rule of law currently may have only a tenuous foothold in the high school environment. Law and policies responding to specific incidents of violence – rather than educative practices aimed at transforming the larger heteronormative climate of schools – are insufficient no matter how vigorously they are pursued. Legal responses that specifically target the culture of schools may be more promising.

Finally, then, I present nine conclusions drawn from the data that capture the concerns of sexual-minority students and their allies regarding the inadequacies of current approaches to safe schools and homophobic bullying. Together, the following suggestions point the way to the transformative culture that so many of the interviewees cited as the only way to achieve safe schools. These suggestions must be met if sexual-minority youth are to receive safe and equal access to education:

- 1 Current conceptions of safety are insufficiently robust and must be re-conceptualized so that safety comes to be viewed as incorporating a pursuit of equity and social justice.
- 2 Safe-school and equity policies must include an educative element and not be only punitive and responsive.
- 3 Endless calls for law and policies that are inclusive merely sustain oppression and threats to the safety of queer students, precluding an understanding of the day-to-day lives of queer students in schools. Inclusive policies do little to address systemic power imbalances and oppression.
- 4 The educative element of educative and safety law and policies must be widespread and mandatory and come from the ministerial level; otherwise, teachers will not implement transformative content in curriculum, nor will transformative possibilities in general be easily achievable.
- 5 The educative element must start early in the school curriculum and in the social spaces of schools (i.e., kindergarten or Grade 1).
- 6 The goal of making equitable and safe schools for sexual-minority youth is long-term.

- 7 Teachers must have the philosophical and financial support of the school board, the administration, and fellow teachers.
- 8 Queer realities must be reflected in course content and in school culture.
- 9 Heterosexual students must be implicated in schooling processes and the regimes of silence, invisibility, and oppression of the official and unofficial curricula and general school life. Curriculum content must not be merely a presentation of information about queer students received by heterosexual and nonqueer students in their normative positions. Inclusive education alone is inadequate. The general school life must include and celebrate queer youth and friendships between heterosexual and queer students.

Threats to the safety of queer students in an educational context were characterized by the students as “expected,” “inevitable,” and “encouraged” by a heteronormative school culture that promotes a hegemony of gender and sexuality in which students monitor their own behaviours and presentation and those of each other for signs of “difference” and “otherness.” In this way, the norms of both gender and sexuality are under surveillance, and transgressions may be enforced with looks, words, or physical force. A good deal of critical investigation has explored the social mechanisms through which difference and otherness are socially constructed. On a purely theoretical level, inquiries into “difference” and “otherness” have yielded valuable results, but in the absence of any sustained empirical research into what sexual-minority students – and particularly so-called straight students – are up to in their daily lives, these explorations remain flat instead of animated and careful as opposed to radical or rooted in transformative possibility. Policies that merely advocate inclusiveness in response to violent incidents are inadequate in two ways: first, they add to the oppression of queer youth because they do little to lessen threats to students’ personal safety or queer identities; second, they excuse those who call for policies of inclusiveness from investigating what is unfolding on the ground in the lives of students who experience the results of difference and “otherness” in a real way in schools as subjects of their own unreported investigations. Additionally, responses to the bullying of queer students (if there are any official responses) that promote acceptance of queer kids, labelling the bullying of queer kids as a problem associated only with “queer” sexuality, mischaracterize what needs to be done. This book demonstrates that what needs to be done is to introduce education in the schools about sexuality and gender that implicates the so-called straight kid and is nothing less than

transformative of the entire school culture. Neither “queer content” in the curriculum nor effective “legal” responses to incidents of queer bullying and violence will change the overall hostile environment queer students encounter or reduce queer violence until social justice for queers is pursued, heterosexual students are implicated in education about otherness and difference, and the notion of what it means to go to school in Canada is transformed. Nothing less should be pursued.

This book is offered as a means of entering into the debate surrounding bullying in Canadian schools, a conversation that has been limited by narrow conceptions of safety and bullying. By focusing on the TDSB, where policies grounded in equity are already “on the books,” I attempt to suggest that something else is needed beyond policies – no matter how well written. Solutions must include an understanding of the relationship between our education system and its purpose of fostering a normative order within a broader cultural landscape. We must begin by acknowledging that multiple, intersecting normative orders are, in fact, at play among youth culture in schools. By locating the book within this knotty cultural framework, I hope to present a better understanding of the complicated social order that gives rise to bullying and oppression and to bring greater intelligibility to the intersection between formal law and policy and the heteronormative day-to-day life of youth culture in schools. Intervention and transformative strategies must be mindful of the complexity of this site.

Gabriel Picard told me that he initiated a human rights action against his school “to change a culture.”¹⁶ His principal told him that changing a culture was “impossible.” The need to transform a culture emerged as a consistent theme in my interviews. Katie, a Grade 12 student, told me that “transforming the culture is what it’s all about. It’s the fucking map, the compass, and the moon, all in one. It’s everything queers need to find our way out of oppression and the only thing that will do it.”

The voices of the students – and their allies – are presented in this book as voices that articulate new knowledge. The students respond to questions, initiate discussions, and animate and inform the book in articulate and poetic ways. In an attempt to contribute to an increased awareness of the realities of sexual-minority youth in schools, all of the participants addressed the need for the radical, shared goal of transforming schools, even as they acknowledged the difficulty of transformation and the likelihood that the kind of change envisioned by so many of them could take years to achieve. They spoke in support of nothing less than changing the entire cultural experience of “going to school.”

Knowing Our World

Much of the challenge of critical inspection of culture lies in the questions historicism poses about “how we know what we know” about our world and in questions about what, therefore, constitutes data and explanation in a world that embraces multiple ways of knowing. As Kath M. Melia puts it, “At its simplest, postmodernism holds that there are no grand theories, overall explanations or generalized ways of explaining experience and that social life can be better understood as a series of discourses where none is privileged.”¹⁷ How did my choice of method assist in the analysis of data, the assembly of explanation, and perhaps, the ambition of producing new knowledge? First, I hoped to measure qualitatively the extent of the implementation of the current provincial legislation and TDSB policies on school conduct and their effectiveness in making schools safer places for queer students. Second, I aspired to build a critical analysis of the current policies and circumstances of their implementation. Finally, I have attempted to generate prescriptions for policy based upon these findings. I chose to undertake this work by speaking primarily to queer students themselves. They were asked to indicate their awareness of laws and policies, if any, that were intended to make schools safer. The responses included the *Charter*,¹⁸ the Ontario *Human Rights Code*,¹⁹ the *Safe Schools Act*, and specific policies of the TDSB, including the *Safe Schools Foundation Statement*²⁰ and, most notably, the *Equity Foundation Statement*. Respondents indicated that these laws and policies were well written and comprehensive. This book, therefore, was undertaken in a context in which laws and policies “on the books” were accepted as thorough, the product of many years of work by people like Tim McCaskell and others doing equity work in Toronto high schools. My focus was to interview GLBTQ students, and teachers who identified themselves as advocates of GLBTQ students, in order to measure the impact of formal law and policies in combating the bullying, discrimination, and harassment of this group. I should point out that teachers and guidance counsellors were very helpful in addressing how schools implemented the requirements of the *Safe Schools Act*, as well as in speaking about the extent to which a particular school tried to implement TDSB equity policies.

I employed a series of semistructured interviews – combined with observations in the field documenting and critically inquiring into the reach and effectiveness of these safety documents – to address a more focused pair of questions: How was safety conceptualized at a particular school? How did sexual-minority students conceptualize their position in schools? This led to

a series of specific inquiries: What is oppression? What is bullying? What is violence? How effective was the *Safe Schools Act* in making a particular school safe? How effective were TDSB safety and equity policies on the ground? What are the obstacles to effective implementation given that schools are unique cultural sites? What barriers could be identified to account for the fact that the effectiveness of even well-written policies is sometimes limited? When laws and policies were successful, why were they successful? What solutions could be proposed to overcome the barriers to successful implementation of policies?

This book is by subject matter and approach interdisciplinary, engaging with multiple, distinct approaches to the issue of bullying. In the end, what I hope it contributes to the ongoing conversations about bullying and school safety is a socio-legal corrective to any overly positivistic assumptions about the reach and effectiveness of formal law, both legislation and policies, as well as a reconsideration of what theorists and researchers of these issues mean by “safety” and “bullying.”