

Book Review: DONN SHORT. Am I Safe Here? LGBTQ Teens and Bullying in Schools. 2017

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Volume 55, Number 1, Winter 2020

Regards croisés de la recherche sur l'accompagnement professionnel
en milieux scolaire et universitaire
Research on Professional Development in School and University
Settings: Intersecting View

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075729ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075729ar>

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Publisher(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

1916-0666 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Chan, W. (2020). Review of [Book Review: DONN SHORT. Am I Safe Here? LGBTQ Teens and Bullying in Schools. 2017]. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 55(1), 258–261.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1075729ar>

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SHORT, DONN. *Am I safe here? LGBTQ teens and bullying in schools*. UBC Press. Vancouver. (2017). 166 pp. \$22.95. Paperback (ISBN 9780774890212).

A 2017 study found that approximately 54% of LGBTQ Canadians did not come out to their colleagues and 45% did not come out to their classmates due to a fear of rejection and bullying¹. As a trained lawyer first learning about the Ontario's Safe Schools Act (2000) to enforce a zero-tolerance policy to bullying, Donn Short wondered "What did safety mean to LGBTQ students? How did they define safety, and how did that compare with what their schools were doing?" (p. xi). In five concise chapters, Short documents the perceptions, experiences, challenges, and recommendations that he gathered from students and teachers across seven schools. Their anecdotes about their high school and society in Edmonton, Thunder Bay, the Toronto area, and Vancouver guide the conversations in this book, and thereby offer a specifically Canadian perspective to the conversation about LGBTQ bullying. This Canadian focus coloured with various narratives includes quotes from the youth and teacher participants to highlight their voices, distinguishing the book greatly from others on this topic.

The book is reader friendly in its language, structure, and intent as it aims to inform teachers, guidance counsellors, social workers, principals, vice-principals, trustees, and interested readers about the need to change school culture. Each chapter is practical and ends with a bulleted list of recommendations. Based on his findings, Short argues that educators must look beyond specific harassment or bullying incidents between individual students to understand the cultural context that promote or maintain such occurrences instead. The strong emphasis for a cultural shift makes this contribution stand out even further in bullying discourse.

The LGBTQ students in this book consistently make the point that there is no such thing as an isolated homophobic moment of harassment or bullying, only the inevitable consequences of being queer in a culture, or a school, that makes no space for it.

This book offers concrete recommendations on how to create this space, specifically from the voices of the student and teacher participants. Three themes from the book that elaborate on this argument are: 1) The need to shift the societal and school culture, that 2) A focus to protect students via school policies is insufficient, and that 3) A lack of support exists for teachers in response to parental discrimination.

A NEED TO SHIFT SCHOOL AND SOCIETAL CULTURE

Across the chapters, the student and teacher participants share their clear understanding and ability to discern the different cultures between schools. Students shared that, “We’re bullied by just the culture we’re in” (p. 14). Students and teachers recognized that an exclusive culture in the school towards one group often meant that other groups were being excluded too. Moreover, students and teachers understood that exclusion towards certain groups in school was influenced by the exclusion towards the same group in the larger society. In describing her school, Melanie, a teacher, reflected that, “nobody respects anybody here” (p. 30), enforcing what Short considered a “cultural license to bully” (p. 30). As a visible-minority teacher, Melanie felt unable to help her students:

They know that if they need help, they have to look to the white teachers who are either in the tech department or who are closer to the administration...So the kids know that there’s a difference of power. And when you’re white, you’re empowered; when you are of colour, you have no power.” (p. 28)

In order to come out, she noted that students often transferred to another school. Through countless quotes from teachers and especially, students, Short emphasizes the need to shift school and social norms, specifically the “negative attitudes and bias – in classrooms, extracurricular activities, cafeteria discussions, and hallway gossip – as more immediately threatening to their personal identities and safety than any fear of physical or verbal harassment or violence” (p. 4). Moreover, Short cautioned that “ignoring what is happening (or not happening) in the curriculum, in the schoolyards, and in the hallways and cafeterias is like looking at schools through a straw” (p. 6).

SAFETY THROUGH EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE, NOT SECURITY

Short found that all his participants’ schools had a policy on bullying and the need to protect students. The schools had curriculum on equity and social justice as well, but the values in policy and curriculum were not put into practice. Students would discuss same-sex marriage and debate on it, and were familiar with the concerns. However, teacher Melanie shared that:

...the kids still, in practice, will go against it, with homosexuality, because politically, in their own lives, they know it's not the accepted thing. The same thing with equity. We study all kind of things on equity in the curriculum and in every subject. But there's no equity in the school or in the classroom. (Short, 2017, p. 35)

Although students were familiar with the need for equity, they did not practice it in their own lives because it is not practiced politically in the school or larger society, thereby reinforcing Short and his participants' call for a cultural shift.

At one school, Len (a student) stated that the school celebrates Black History Month and Asian Awareness Month but it is only because the school board forces the school to do so; there is no recognition or discussion of either identity group during the rest of the year. In another class discussion where students are asked to discuss and identify equity, students stated that there is no equity. They listed off the groups that are unjustly treated, but omitted mention of LGBTQ students, despite the presence of LGBTQ students in the class. Short takes note of this omission, silencing of, and self-censorship by the LGBTQ students, arguing that putting in place security policies for individual harassment or bullying incidents is insufficient. For many students "safety is conceptualized in terms of equity" (p. 37).

A LACK OF SUPPORT

In the early 2000s, a task force was called in British Columbia in response to the death of a student, Hamed Nastoh, who committed suicide due to homophobic bullying. Although the task force found that homophobic bullying was the most prevalent form of bullying in British Columbia, their recommendations did not mention LGBTQ bullying whatsoever. This omission reflects Short's findings at the school level through the lack of support shown by various stakeholders, an absence driven by various motivations, including perceived incompatible beliefs. For instance, Silver, a grade 11 queer student, remarked on the subject of discriminations held by parents that "It's not just their religion, it's how these parents think about what kind of kids they've given birth to or raised and what it says about them" (p. 108).

Regarding religious and ethno-cultural based concerns, Short argues that there is a need to articulate clearly and honestly the realistic effects of bullying to the larger community. As part of this, administrators need to support teachers who want to foster an equitable and safe culture for their students. This aligns with findings from the Every Teacher Project² which surveyed 3,400 K-12 Canadian educators from 2013-2015, as noted by Short. The Project found that teachers from religious and non-religious schools stated that inclusive education for LGBTQ students was needed. However, there was a lack of resources and training from administration to achieve a cultural shift.

CONCLUSION

This is a rich book for any educator or individual who aims to support LGBTQ youth and promote equity for all. The quotes that line each page offer an honest account of some Canadian school environments today. In a discussion of bullying in particular, the students' emphasis on the need for a cultural shift aligns with the current conversation in bullying research to offer a school-wide approach to address bullying, but the students' remarks regarding the greater society show that a school-wide approach is insufficient. Students easily revert to the homophobic or exclusionary social norms they observe in the larger society. Instead, the students, teachers, and author expand the notion of a school-wide approach to create a cultural shift that is mindful of the larger societal culture. Short explains that "...many policies opt instead to focus on safety and bullying as generic concepts, removed from culture" (p. 25). Alternatively, the students and teachers in this book call readers to include culture in the solution, and look beyond a generic focus on bullying.

As the number of hate crimes motivated by sexual orientation in Canada has increased from 141 incidents in 2015, to 176 in 2016, and 204 in 2017,³ Short's approach is timely, advocating for a need to look at cultural biases for all forms of bias-based bullying, whether based on race, ethnicity, gender, language, or religion. As a result, addressing bullying is "about changing the attitude, the root of the problem, not just doing something about an isolated incident," explained by Lazy Daisy, a student (Short, 2017, p. 127). On this basis, Short calls us all to consider: What is the underlying bias in our community and region, and how is it affecting our youth and their schooling today?

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NOTES

1. The report itself from Fondation Jasmin Roy is no longer available online, but a summary of its findings are available via <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/survey-suggests-many-people-in-the-lgbt-community-are-reluctant-to-come-out-1.3538575>.
2. Taylor, C., Peter, T., Campbell, C., Meyer, E., Ristock, J., & Short, D. (2015). *The Every Teacher Project on LGBTQ-inclusive education in Canada's K-12 schools: Final report*. Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Teachers' Society. <https://egale.ca/every-teacher-project/>
3. Statistics Canada, 2018. *Police-reported hate crimes, by detailed motivation, Canada, 2015, 2016 and 2017* <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/181129/t001a-eng.htm>