Reducing Stigma, Promoting Resilience: Population Health Interventions for LGBTQ Youth

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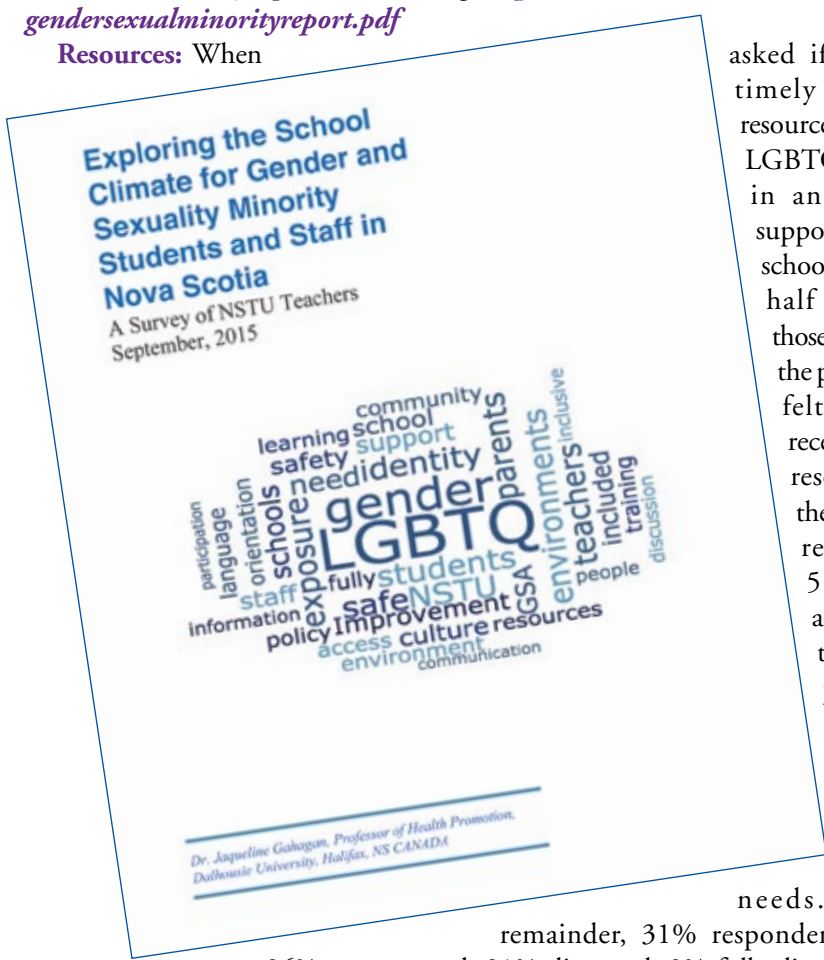
During the 2014/2015 school year, the NSTU agreed to participate in a research study titled *Reducing Stigma, Promoting Resilience: Population Health Interventions for LGBTQ Youth* in partnership with Dr. Jacqueline Gahagan, Professor of Health Promotion at Dalhousie University. The research is part of a Canadian Institutes of Health Research-funded multi-site, multi-year research project involving researchers from across Canada and United States. The aim of the research is to document the trends in health inequities, risk and protective factors among sexual orientation and gender identity minority youth, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or questioning youth. Support for this survey lends itself to the beliefs of the NSTU in building safe and healthy learning environments for all students and staff and in improving the quality of education across the province.

The survey, which was developed with NSTU professional development staff, was voluntary and did not include any identifying information. It was distributed to randomly selected members to assist in gaining a better understanding of the needs, concerns, and issues facing sexual orientation and gender identity minority students, teachers, and staff. Participants were asked to respond to questions relating to their perceptions of school and community environments, understanding policies, knowledge of professional development options, and use of resources. The survey, which included both closed and open-ended questions, was initially distributed in paper format and was mailed to randomly selected participants in late fall of 2014. This was followed by an electronic version to all NSTU account holders in early spring.

A total of 174 paper surveys and 319 online surveys were completed. Key findings of the survey results are outlined below. Please refer to this link on the NSTU website for the full summary report of the findings ***http://www.nstu.ca/data/documents/pdf/gendersexualminorityreport.pdf***

Resources: When asked if they had timely access to resources related to LGBTQ students in an effort to support them in school, less than half (43%) of those completing the paper survey felt they had received timely resources. Of the 319 online respondents 5% fully agreed that the materials provided to them were relevant to addressing LGBTQ students' needs. Of the remainder, 31% respondents agreed, 26% were neutral, 21% disagreed, 3% fully disagreed (15% missing). These results indicate that some respondents feel there is room to improve the quality of the resources provided to teachers, in order to support them in addressing the needs of LGBTQ students.



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Gender Neutral Washrooms & Policy Information: Online respondents were asked if gender neutral washrooms are a necessary resource to have in schools and if more LGBTQ policy information is required. A little less than half of respondents (45%) said that gender neutral washrooms are a necessary resource for schools, and slightly over half (51%) reported requiring additional LGBTQ policy information.

Policies and Procedures: When asked if there are policies and procedures in place within their schools, which ensure that LGBTQ teachers and school staff feel safe to be 'out' within the school setting, nearly half (44%) of the respondents fully agreed or agreed there are school policies in place to protect LGBTQ staff and students, 25% were neutral and 21% disagreed or fully disagreed (11% missing). This is a noteworthy finding in that policies addressing the rights of LGBTQ staff members vary by school and location, there is no set of policies applied across all Nova Scotia schools. Individual school policies vary with respect to how staff and students are expected to address LGBTQ issues, and some schools may not have LGBTQ specific policies at all.

Safety: Almost half (49%) of respondents agreed or fully agreed that their schools have a safe environment for teachers to discuss LGBTQ issues with students, free from repercussion. Respondents who disagreed or fully disagreed indicated that they expected negative repercussions for discussing LGBTQ issues, even though sexual orientation and gender identity is included in the Nova Scotia elementary curriculum.

Understanding Challenges: When asked if they understood the challenges faced by LGBTQ students in their schools, 69% fully agreed or agreed that they do understand these challenges. Of the remaining respondents, 13% were neutral, 7% disagreed, and 1% fully disagreed (11% missing).

Professional Development: When asked if they had attended professional development (PD) sessions, concerning sexual orientation and gender identity issues within the last five years, over half (56%) of respondents were confident that they have participated in LGBTQ PD sessions, and 5% said they believed they had participated, but were not completely sure.

Overall the findings suggest an eagerness to ensure that gender and sexuality minority students and staff in Nova Scotia have a safe and welcoming learning environment. Shifting the culture in any school cannot depend solely on 'out' students, teachers, or staff, but rather, on the entire school community working together collaboratively to ensure sustainable change occurs.

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