

QUEER, CHRISTIAN, AND NO PLACE TO GO: THE LIMITATIONS OF THE GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE

Nathan Thompson

In the Fall of 2010, I began organizing a public forum to be held on February 10, 2011 at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. The forum, which consisted of five invited panelists and a question period, focused on religion, sexuality, and schooling. Initially, the want in organizing such an event was the result of a number of pre-service teacher education students at OISE who had expressed concerns that their Catholic Education teaching classes were affirming the Catholic Church's belief that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people live a "lifestyle" they consider to be morally unacceptable. The pre-service teachers were conflicted about what they could or could not do when students in their future classrooms approached them with questions about sexuality and sexual orientation. Understandably, this sort of conflict is not that uncommon in Ontario where Catholic Schools are still publicly funded and quite numerous.

However, the tension around Catholic Schooling and LGBT students was not contained to OISE. In January 2011, the Halton Catholic District School Board (HCDSB) decided to ban Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in all of their schools. Such a move came in direct conflict with the Ontario Ministry of Education's equity policies. Because the concerns of the pre-service teachers at OISE and the HCDSB's decision to ban GSAs occurred around the same time, those in attendance at the forum came prepared to discuss not only broad issues of religion and sexuality but more specifically the implementation of GSAs within Catholic District Schools in the province. What I found most interesting about the forum was not the passionate speeches or debates from both devout Catholics and GSA enthusiasts but rather the lack of attention paid to the students themselves, particularly those caught in the middle of the debate. The students caught in the middle are those who find themselves struggling with their religious beliefs and their sexual identity. For these individuals, this can be an extremely difficult negotiation, fraught with both emotional and even physical consequences (Yip, 1997, 2004; Mahaffy, 1996). The event ended up reproducing the same dyadic conversation I had hoped we would avoid: one that places religion on one side and sexuality (secularism) on the other. In this case it was about religious beliefs and the need to protect them versus the implementation of GSAs as a solution to religious discrimination. The conversations did not take into account students who may be struggling with same-sex desire while simultaneously coming from homes where homophobic spiritual or religious beliefs are practiced and salient. These students are caught between a system of faith tied to family and community and a sexual identity tied to their sense of self. So instead of tending to these nuances, the 'solution' to the problem of religious homophobia in schools is to implement GSAs – where *all* LGBT identified students can feel safe, respected, and affirmed.

I graduated from High School in New Brunswick back in 2000. As an NB student who navigated his way through the public school system while also coming from a religious home I can, with certainty, confirm that had their been a GSA at my High School I would not have attended. While I was struggling with my sexuality I was not in a place where I felt comfortable enough to concede to the notion that I could have actually been 'gay'. I was also a member of the school's Youth For Christ (YFC) club that met during the lunch hour once a week. What would they have said if they saw me walking into a GSA meeting? What would the GSA members say if they knew I attended YFC? The problem with GSAs is that they only create a safe space for *some* LGBT students (and mostly just lesbian and gay). Students who come from homophobic religious homes and who are struggling with their sexuality are not going to feel comfortable attending a GSA meeting when they are not even comfortable in their own skin, no matter how 'welcoming' we think we are making that space.

So why are we so obsessed with GSAs? Much research has shown the importance and productiveness of having GSAs in schools (Camille, 2002; Freidman-Nimz et al., 2006; Mayberry, 2006). I would not argue against this point. In fact, Egale Canada recently released the results of their National Climate Survey, which showed that issues of homophobia and transphobia are still rampant in most schools in Canada (Taylor & Peter, 2011). The value of having a GSA in a school is certainly palpable. However, as I witnessed at the OISE forum, while parents, teachers, students, and academics debated the 'ridiculousness' of the Halton Catholic Board's banning of GSAs and the need to enforce their implementation, no one had taken into account the students who continue to be left unaddressed. The GSA *cannot* be seen as the solution to a homophobic and heterosexist school culture. The forum, if not for anything else, confirmed for me a need for greater discussion around issues of religion, sexuality, and schooling -- a discussion that interrogates boundaries instead of reaffirming them and one that complicates our understanding of how to 'solve' the problem of 'homophobia' that takes us beyond the GSA. While some believe this conversation has already reached its conclusion ("Oh can't we just stop talking about gay issues already?") we still have students struggling with anxiety and depression, and even some who end up taking their life.

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Nathan Thompson is a PhD student and instructor at the University of Toronto. His research is interested in questions of belonging, acceptance, and community in relation to sexuality and religion. His email address is nathan.thompson@utoronto.ca .