Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) in Schools

Project Summary
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Sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) in schools

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Two Spirit and Queer/Questioning (LGBT2SQ) children and youth face systemic inequalities both within, and external to, the education system in North America (1-8). Victimization and harassment related to SOGI negatively impact students’ educational and health outcomes with long term consequences lasting into adolescence and adulthood (9-18).

Educators, health professionals and administrators have the opportunity to support LGBT2SQ children and youth by improving school environments and reducing hostile school climates. Positive outcomes such as lower levels of victimization (14), less absenteeism (17) and greater feelings of school connectedness (19) are repeatedly reported where LGBT2SQ students are supported by school staff.

SOGI 1 2 3

SOGI 1 2 3 is a program that recognizes and is premised on the importance of supportive school staff for LGBT2SQ students. The organizational structure of the program is such that each school has a faculty or staff member who takes on the role of SOGI School Lead, supported by a District SOGI Lead. The District SOGI Lead is mentored by the Provincial SOGI Lead, a Ministry of Education and ARC Foundation funded position.

SOGI 1 2 3 provides professional development resources and leads a network of dedicated SOGI leads at the district and school level. It also provides resources and tools for educators who want to better understand SOGI issues. SOGI 1 2 3 was developed and piloted in nine school districts—Vancouver, North Vancouver, West Vancouver, Burnaby, Langley, Delta, Sea to Sky, Nanaimo-Ladysmith, and Kamloops/Thompson—across B.C. in the 2016-2017 school year.

The context in British Columbia

In the last two years (2016-2018), British Columbia has seen a significant change in law and policy in relation to LGBT2SQ rights for children, youth and adults. In July 2016, the Legislature introduced Bill C-16, which added “gender identity and gender expression” to the BC Human Rights Code’s list of areas protected from discrimination. The bill passed with Royal Assent on June 19, 2017 (Bill C-16: An act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Code, 2017). After the passage of Bill C-16, then Minister of Education Mike Bernier signed ministerial orders requiring that all boards of education and independent school authorities make explicit references to sexual orientation and gender identity, in school district codes of conduct and school harassment and bullying prevention policies respectively, by the end of 2016.
This Project

In the fall of 2017, the Population and Public Health Program, BC Centre for Disease Control, Provincial Health Services Authority, on behalf of the provincial Healthy Schools BC Working Group, commissioned an academic team to complete a study of the pilot year of the SOGI 1 2 3 program. This work is the first step in a larger ask by the Prevention and Health Promotion Policy Advisory Committee at the Ministry of Health to develop a plan that addresses the social and emotional health needs of children and youth in schools, in particular LGBT2SQ students.

What can we learn from SOGI 1 2 3?

A mixed method study was conducted, which included a survey and semi-structured interviews with District and School Leads who took part in the 2016-2017 pilot program and also examined respondents’ experiences with SOGI.

The pilot year of the SOGI 1 2 3 program showed promising findings, such that after the implementation of SOGI 1 2 3:

- The number of instances of discrimination and harassment witnessed by respondents decreased by 5-10%.
- Positive shifts were observed in almost all school climate-related survey questions, including about having adequate social and emotional support in school, perceptions of fair policies for LGBT2SQ staff, feeling comfortable to attend LGBT2SQ events, and being comfortable to report acts of discriminations either witnessed or experienced.
- There was a clear shift towards having increasingly inclusive and supportive spaces in schools, and a higher degree of staff confidence to support LGBT2SQ students.
- Most respondents indicated that they obtained information from SOGI 1 2 3 sources to support LGBT2SQ students (nearly 80%) and had seen an increase in SOGI discussions in staff meetings, professional development days and in classrooms.

In general, respondents indicated that support for staff and students was increasing, and that students were receiving messages about support, safety, inclusivity and acceptance. While it is difficult to suggest that SOGI 1 2 3 alone contributed to a significant degree, most respondents considered the program to be a valuable resource for district and school staff in supporting LGBT2SQ students.

Despite progress being made in relation to SOGI, most respondents stated a need for more training and support. There were a number of priority areas identified for further support, including:

- Continued training and professional development for administrators, teachers, health professionals, educational assistants and other staff involved with SOGI - not only basic training for those new to SOGI, but also continuing training for those already engaged in SOGI work.
- Inclusion of student voices by actively engaging students and asking them what they need regarding support concerning SOGI.
- **Addressing the unique needs** of non-binary/gender non-conforming, transgender, Two Spirit students, and their families, including considerations of pronoun use, and transitions.

- **Acknowledging and addressing added layers of discrimination** experienced by Indigenous/Two-Spirit students.

In addition, **an intersectional lens**, which takes into consideration the multiple and intersecting identities (including regarding race, ethnicity, Indigenous viewpoints) alongside sexual orientation and gender identity was highlighted as key in providing the appropriate supports to students. This was seen as a “bigger topic” than SOGI 1 2 3 and one that education needs to tackle:

> “...[Y]ou’re going to be a teacher who sees that students aren’t just gay; they are also maybe people of colour, maybe poor... so many different things, female, you know, all these different things right?... [E]ducation programs need to be very specific about ‘hey, you teach all of this stuff because all of your students live with all of this stuff’, right?”

Overall, there seems to be a critical opportunity for cross-sector collaborations, both to review current SOGI-related supports and to provide additional ones. During the SOGI 1 2 3 pilot, collaboration and joint training amongst District Leads offered a diversity of viewpoints and approaches to the implementation of SOGI education. Community involvement and collaboration between school boards, community partners and between school boards and District Leads are key, as are cross-sector collaboration with relevant ministries, health authorities, community groups and health professionals who work in school settings.
References


