



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

The Journal of Social Studies Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jssr



Considering perspectives on transgender inclusion in Canadian Catholic elementary schools: Perspectives, challenges, and opportunities



Cory Wright-Maley^{a,*}, Trent Davis^a, Eileen M. Gonzalez^b, Ryan Colwell^c

^a St. Mary's University College, Calgary, AB, Canada

^b University of St. Joseph, West Connecticut, CT, USA

^c Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Accepted 30 December 2015

Available online 21 January 2016

ABSTRACT

There is a growing recognition in society that more needs to be done to support LGBTQ youth in schools. In particular, school climate reports reveal that this need is particularly pressing for transgender individuals who are little understood and often rendered invisible or made to conform to gender-normative social standards. This mixed methods study surveyed and interviewed preservice teachers at three Catholic institutions. In particular, we focus on the shifting landscape of Catholic education in Canada as it relates to the support of transgender youth. The content of the study is framed by a common first grade social studies theme: family diversity, and takes its lead from the recent papal urging to pursue topics of discomfort at the peripheries of Catholic thinking. We explore how Catholic preservice teachers respond to the idea of teaching about transgender-parent families. The findings show there is dissonance between the personal and professional beliefs of new Catholic teachers. This dissonance is reflective of the beliefs held by North American Catholics at large, thus further illuminating the challenges and opportunities that are present in the emerging discussion about how to best support transgender students in Catholic school contexts.

Copyright © 2016, The International Society for the Social Studies. Published by Elsevier, Inc.

Introduction

Social studies education has always been impacted by broad societal changes, and at key junctures in its history has even been transformed by them. The election of Pope Francis to the papacy has been a genuine catalyst for discussion about the societal role of the Catholic Church in the twenty-first century. One prominent theme in Francis's papacy so far has been the necessity for Catholics to change their customary ways of living their faith. In *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*, Francis (2013) even asks Catholics "to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the "peripheries" in need of the light of the Gospel" (p. 24), with "peripheries" here understood as any place where the love of Christ is currently absent. It is revealing that this message has been taken up in diverse contexts. For example, in his management book on Pope Francis entitled *Lead with Humility: 12 Leadership Lessons from Pope Francis*, Krames (2015) has one chapter called "Make

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: cory.wrightmaley@stmu.ca (C. Wright-Maley).

Inclusion a Top Priority,” and another “Live on the Frontier.” He argued that we are encouraged by Pope Francis's example to lead life with “a positive and broad-minded attitude coupled with courage and audacity” (p. 82).

Pope Francis is currently working through the synod on the family with the Cardinals at the Vatican. Clearly how the Church regards the family is a topic of urgent discussion. In this paper we seek to contribute to an understanding of how Catholic preservice teachers see their options in teaching about the family in today's diverse social world in a way that explores the “periphery” or “frontier” of transgender families with all the “courage” and “audacity” that Pope Francis asks of them. The purpose of this study is, therefore, twofold: to understand the knowledge and dispositions of elementary preservice teachers at a Catholic university on the topic of non-traditional families, and to identify their level of comfort in teaching about these families in elementary classrooms, including which factors would encourage or discourage such practices. The study attended to a wide variety of families, including those in which single, divorced, widowed, LGBT, and families with grandparent guardians were considered. Here, we attend specifically to how Catholic preservice teachers think about the prospect of teaching about transgender students and families in their classrooms. By extension, we seek to reveal how they attempt to reconcile religious and societal demands that can be at odds on this issue.

Diversity and elementary teaching

In pluralistic societies, it is incumbent upon educators to prepare their students for the diversity of people they will encounter by helping them to understand both the kinds of diversity that exist, and how to ethically accept and include those who are different. Too often, though, elementary teachers defer this responsibility to later years, assuming either that children are not yet old enough for such content (e.g., Dedeoglu, Ulusoy, & Lamme, 2012), or that a generic treatment of individual differences (e.g., everyone is equal, we're all the same in God's eyes, etc.) will suffice (e.g., Garrahy, 2001). These two positions are complicit since they conspire to silence discussion of childhood identity and reinforce gender-normative ideals (Sears, 1999; Gerouki, 2010), as well as leave children to develop their own ideas of in-/out-groupings, which have been shown to be discriminatory in nature (Vittrup & Holden, 2011).

Researchers have pointed out that avoiding sensitive issues in elementary schools is more likely to spare adults the pain of embarrassment or discomfort, while leading children to draw conclusions based upon information derived from peers and the media that may be inaccurate or even discriminatory (Bickmore, 1999; Sears, 2005). This subjects all children to a greater risk of bullying and other dehumanizing behaviors (Sears, 1999), particularly as they move from primary to secondary environments (Gerouki, 2010). This dynamic is especially problematic for transgender children since gender and sexual identities begin to emerge in elementary years, and may be recognized even earlier by transgender students (Hellen, 2009; Owens, 1998). These students need adults who can competently and comfortably help them to safely navigate the turbulent waters of K-12 schooling. Doing so requires that teachers intervene to stem gender policing of students who transgress gender norms and foster a sense of inclusivity among their students in order to interrupt dynamics that lead students to hide or repress their authentic gender identities (Mayo, 2011). Despite the need for this intervention, teachers frequently lack knowledge about how to address transgender issues in age appropriate ways.

Despite the central role teachers might play in supporting transgender children or parents, teachers are not prepared to meet this challenge (Clark, 2010). This lack of preparation is impeded by a relative lack of knowledge of the topic (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003), teachers' own discomfort with transgender identities (e.g., Turnbull & Hilton, 2010), and preservice teachers' resistance to learning about trans*¹ concerns and curriculum (Jennings & Sherwin, 2008; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2002). The limited preparation that preservice teachers receive on the topic is insufficient for supporting their efforts to address and include gender diversity in an age appropriate manner (Bickmore, 1999; Steele, 2002). It was this problem that led to this study. In order to better address this need, we believe it is necessary to recognize the challenges specific to Catholic teachers-in-training, and in particular for those who see themselves teaching in Catholic elementary schools.

In this paper we sought to answer two questions:

1. If preservice teachers indicate that they are supportive of transgender individuals as parents in committed relationships, how likely are they to say that they would teach about this family structure in the context of a first grade unit on family diversity?
2. What issues do teachers identify that would encourage or discourage their teaching about transgender-parent families?

Transgender persons in the social studies

The context of this study centers on the content standards of the grade one social studies curriculum, in which students are asked to link self, family, and community identities. This curricular goal is common in grade one in many jurisdictions in North America. Although there have been a number of studies that have focused on LGBTQ content and practices, with few

¹ The asterisk is a reminder of the complicated and multifaceted make-up of non-normative gender identities along the gender spectrum. See <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/05/what-does-the-asterisk-in-trans-stand-for/>.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/108307>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/108307>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)