

RESPECT YOURSELF, EXPRESS YOURSELF: A collaborative school wide project related to gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation.

Engaging elementary students in direct teaching about gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation is important, beneficial and necessary. Students need to be aware and accepting of similarities and differences between themselves and others and must learn to respect everyone for their own choices, even if those choices are different than their own. It is absolutely imperative that schools be safe and inclusive places for all students, especially for those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer/questioning and intersex (LGBTQQI). That is what the Sloane Public School RESPECT YOURSELF, EXPRESS YOURSELF PROJECT aimed to do.

Learning Goals of Project

-create a library project that would engage students in discussions, critical analysis and a valuable and memorable hands-on experience about a current and relevant issue of social justice

-breakdown stereotypes related to but not exclusive to gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation (e.g. sports, toys, jobs)

-create a safe inclusive school for everyone and make a plan to prevent bullying based on gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation

-reduce/eliminate homophobia and transphobia

Inclusive education creates a culture of respect and acceptance which can lead to numerous benefits such as improvement in students' self esteem, a reduction in number and severity of bullying incidences and positive mental health.

Rationale of Project

Students are voracious consumers of the media and pop culture and are very much in tune with what is happening in their community, city, province and country. They are also more closely connected to world events than ever before. News, whether it is local or global, influences what children think, feel and do. Teacher-librarians help students navigate different forms of media and to be critical of what they see and hear. Media coverage of stories such as those related to the homophobic actions of a famous Toronto baseball athlete (1) and anti-gay legislation in Uganda (2) prompted the project at Sloane P.S. to take the direction that it did.

Positive Space

At the beginning, the project at Sloane P.S. was influenced by a new board initiative called *Positive Space*, a TDSB Program operating under the *Gender Based Violence Prevention Department*. The objective of that particular program was to develop a positive space within the school and to educate staff and students about what constitutes a positive space and how a positive space teacher representative could help students if there were questions or concerns about gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. To become a Positive Space Representative you have to go through a full day of training and you must be committed to helping kids if the need arises. The teacher-librarian volunteered to be a rep and trained accordingly. The school 'positive space', created in a room connected to the library, houses resources for students, posters and a rainbow flag.

Every school in the TDSB is to have a Positive Space and at least one Positive Space representative, under the initiative of the board's Gender Based Violence Prevention Office. (GBVP). The GBVP office is the first of its kind in Canada.



(Love Has No Gender and Safe and Positive Space sticker provided by *Toronto District School Board, Gender Based Violence Prevention Department*.^[3] "That's So Gay" poster provided by *Jer's Vision*. ^[4])

A lunch workshop for teachers was given to share learning from the *Positive Space* training. Subsequent to the lunch session, there was a half day of professional development given to teachers provided by the *Gender Based Violence Prevention Department*. This training was an opportunity for invaluable learning and wonderful collaboration. It allowed staff to become informed and more closely connected to this topic, as well as become better equipped to deal with any related situations that should arise.

An evening session for the parent community was also held in the library and helped to open minds. It was a great forum for discussion and offered an excellent opportunity for questions. This also was facilitated by the *TDSB GBVP Department*.

The conception and implementation of the LGBTTTQI Project for students was very unique to Sloane P.S. The school chose a creative and impactful direction to teach students about positive space. The staff embarked on an extensive project to share an accurate, clear and passionate message. Ultimately, the Sloane staff, in choosing this comprehensive teaching path, felt a deep sense of purpose and accomplishment.

District/Provincial Educational Policies and Plans

Teachers and teacher-librarians may have difficulty developing lessons related to controversial and sensitive issues. Perhaps, this is for fear they will be challenged by parents, administrators and other staff. It is helpful to know that there are government and school board laws and policies that clearly state that inclusive education in the area of gender equity is supported.

The **ONTARIO HUMAN RIGHTS CODE** was established in 1962 and prohibits discrimination on grounds such as age, disability, race, marital status, etc.[5] Sexual Orientation was added to the Human Rights Code in 1986 and Gender Identity and Gender Expression were added to the list in 2012. This Human Rights Code is significant because it serves as the public's legitimized, equitable framework, which drives accountability and instruction.

BILL 13: ACCEPTING SCHOOLS ACT.[6] This law states that: "All students should feel safe at school and deserve a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting, regardless of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, marital status, family status or disability." (*Education Act: subsection 169.1*)

Bill 157: EDUCATION AMENDMENT ACT has a major impact on educators and how they plan their programs. "On a provincial level, the Ontario Human Rights Code, the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy of the Ministry of Education, and Bill 157, also known as the Education Amendment Act (Keeping Our Kids Safe At School) 2009, seek

to ensure that all students, including LGBTQ students, find a safe, caring, and inclusive environment in our schools, are welcomed and treated with respect, and do not have to fear harassment or discrimination.” *Challenging Homophobia and Heterosexism: A K-12 Resource Guide, TDSB, 2011.*[7]

Currently, most new curriculum documents have a clause about inclusive and equitable education. *Growing Success, Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools* states that, “Inclusive education is central to the achievement of high-quality education for all learners and the development of more inclusive societies.” (Growing Success, Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools 2010)[8] *The Ontario Curriculum: The Full Day Learning Kindergarten Program* has a similar statement. “Respect for diversity, equity, and inclusion are prerequisites for honouring children’s rights, optimal development, and learning.” *The Ontario Curriculum: The Full Day Learning Kindergarten Program 2010-2011*[9]

Prior educational policies also attempted to bring about positive changes in equity. “In order to promote a positive school climate, school boards must provide opportunities for all members of the school community to increase their knowledge and understanding of bullying.” They must respond to incidents of homophobia, gender-based violence and sexual harassment. *Ontario Ministry of Education Policy Memorandum 145: Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behavior, 2009.*[10] *Realizing the Promise of Diversity, Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools-Guidelines For Policy Development and Implementation 2009* included a statement that reads, “Equity and inclusive education aims to understand, identify, address and eliminate the biases, barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ prospects for learning.” *Realizing the Promise of Diversity, Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines For Policy Development and Implementation 2009.*[11]

Statistics that provided further impetus for the Respect Yourself, Express Yourself Project

- 21.2% of all same-sex couples in Canada resided in Toronto

STATISTICS CANADA 2011[12]

- 20% of hate crimes were in the LGBT(TQI) community
- 74% of these hate crimes were more violent than in previous years

POLICE SERVICES 2011[13]

- 64% of LGBT students report feeling unsafe at school
- 61% of students with LGBT(TQI) parents report feeling unsafe as school

EGALE CANADA 2011 (Equity for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere)[14]

Consulting such laws, policies and guidelines were very beneficial in the design and delivery of Sloane's RESPECT YOURSELF, EXPRESS YOURSELF PROJECT, especially when obstacles were encountered.

Critical Literacy Warm Up

The Sloane P.S. Respect Yourself, Express Yourself journey actually started in the spring of 2011. An opportunity for professional development for all teacher-librarians within Sloane P.S.'s cluster of schools presented itself. The Library and Learning Resources Department collaborated with the Literacy Department to deliver a half day workshop on Critical Literacy. One section of that training was the presentation of how a fiction choice could be used effectively to promote critical literacy. Sloane's teacher-librarian was asked to share highlights of his school's use of non traditional texts to support an important social justice topic. In Our Mothers' House, by Patricia Polacco was the featured picture book.[15] This story was successfully used with all of the classes at Sloane and a variety of follow-up activities were done. The book told the poignant story of two lesbian moms who decided to adopt children. Since the children were from different racial backgrounds there were many points to ponder and discuss. The book centered on the neighbour's reactions to the couple and their children, both positive and negative. Polacco herself is a gifted storyteller and through her story, the teacher-librarian was able to take a formative step into examining the underlying messages of text, beliefs, equity, bias, stereotypes, and perspectives with the entire student body at Sloane.

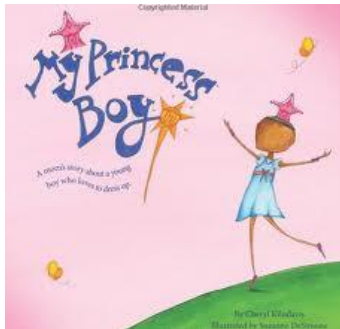
Breaking Stereotypes

The role of the teacher-librarian offers unique experiences and responsibilities. Teacher-librarians usually have opportunities to interact and educate many or all students in the school. At Sloane Public School, not only was this the case, the teacher-librarian also worked extensively on partner teaching each week. Since Sloane was a small school, all students had a weekly block of time in the library. This meant the possibilities were endless. In the autumn of 2012, the RESPECT YOURSELF, EXPRESS YOURSELF PROJECT officially began. It started with a close examination of preconceived ideas about what was right or 'normal'. An activity called the Gender Box was done with the students to think about and evaluate gender categories. Students used representative objects, pictures and words related to toys, sports and jobs and were asked to determine if these were for girls only, boys only, or for both girls and boys. A student was selected to pick an item and place it into one of the three boxes that were labelled accordingly. This was followed with a group discussion and then the item would be moved if necessary. This activated prior knowledge and the outcome was respectful discussion between all classmates and new learning for some. It was very positive for students to acknowledge facts and the opinions of others, such

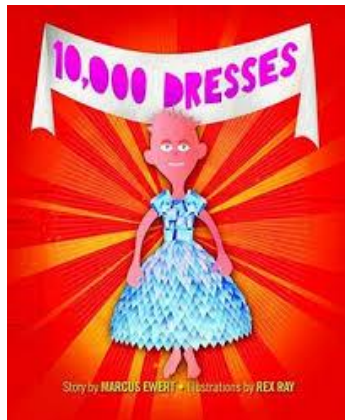
as the realization that Canada has an amazing female Olympic hockey team, girls like fishing and that boys can be nurses. These were seen as important shifts in attitude.

Rich Text

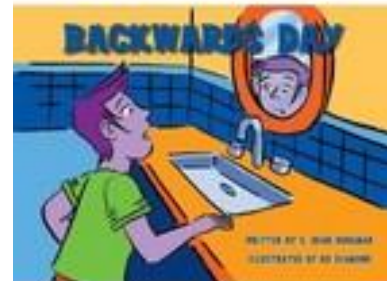
The discussions on stereotypes fueled the read-aloud selections that were to be used school-wide during teacher-librarian partnering sessions. Three books were chosen and highlighted different issues or perspectives. In My Princess Boy, a boy showed an interest in the colour pink, things that sparkled and dresses.[16] His family was supportive but he experienced negativity in the community in which he lived. 10 000 Dresses, was about a protagonist who felt more like a girl than a boy and imagined creating and wearing dresses.[17] His family was not supportive but he found an accepting friend who validated his feelings. Backwards Day, was about a girl who felt more like a boy.[18] She struggled with her identity and encountered both negative and positive reactions. Throughout the studies of all three stories, students across the grades generated rich conversations. The learning was quite profound. Students genuinely expressed the idea that being different was acceptable and that everyone should be respected.



MY PRINCESS BOY
CHERYL KILODAVIS



10 000 DRESSES
MARCUS EWERT



BACKWARDS DAY
S. BEAR BORGMAN

Follow Up Art Activity/ Hands on Learning

The powerful read-alouds and honest discussions related to the key issues in gender stereotypes and inequities were the starting points of our inclusive education project. Momentum was established to think outside the box and beyond one perspective.

Along the way, students had decided that sewing and fashion design were gender neutral. Inspiration about clothing design had come from the second book we had read, 10 000 Dresses: Anyone can become a fashion designers and create outfits inspired by their imagination. The students chose a clothing template (a dress, a tunic or shorts and a vest) and proceeded to create their own unique design. Different classes used different materials to bring their fashion designs to life. A variety of mediums were used such as crayon, pastel, felt, plasticine, paint and paper.

Furthermore, staff accepted the invitation to participate alongside students to create a new individualistic fashion creation. This included the caretaking staff, the office administrator, educational assistants, special needs assistant, early childhood educators and principal. The creativity was phenomenal and the new wardrobe designs were amazing. Each design was proudly displayed around the school.

Working with Community Agency Arts For Children and Youth

Approximately forty students got to do an even greater follow-up and work with artists from the community-based agency *Arts For Children and Youth* [19]. Students worked with fabrics and materials to create wearable art in preparation for an upcoming fashion show which was to be held on May 17, 2013. *International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia* was to be celebrated on this day. Themes were established for different segments of the show, including a Canada Scene, a Rainbow Scene and an Award Winning Scene. Two-dimensional designs from each grade were selected to be transformed into actual garments and were worn by the designers themselves. There was even a staff winner. Students were taught basic hand sewing skills and were also taught how to use a sewing machine. In addition to the making of the wearable garments, there was an element of dance as students learned choreography, as well as runway techniques. Differentiated instruction was embedded throughout the entire project and students in the Special Education and English Language Learner Programme were included and successful. To round out the show, live music was provided by Glenn Marias [20], a talented and well respected singer who centres upon character traits as the principal themes in his songs. He opened the show with **O Canada** as well as one of his songs called **Say My Name**, its lyrics about identity and bullying, which were very appropriate to the aims of the project.

Engaging the Community

All parents and community members were invited to attend the fashion show, the first of its kind at the school. The gym was packed full for the morning and afternoon shows. A class from the neighbouring school was invited to share in our featured event. Donations were accepted and money was raised for a children's charity.

Honouring and Celebrating the Students' Work

It was exhilarating and humbling to hear the positive comments that came from both the children and adults after the fashion show. The struggles and hardships encountered along this journey of learning and teaching were significant and should not be forgotten. Yet courage, resilience and the belief in the values underpinning this project reaffirmed the importance and the need to teach critical thinking skills and tear down disrespectful and harmful societal stereotypes. All students, some staff and some community members wrote powerful reflections. It was especially delightful to read the positive feedback from the student's reflections and analysis of their learning throughout the entire project. The fashion show was certainly etched as the exciting highlight for many, but reflective art and words directly pointed to incredible personal growth and meaningful character building. The entire school was buzzing with positive energy. A free DVD documenting the project was made available to every student and staff.



It was terrific to be asked to share some of our work at the *Big Boom Bam Youth Led Arts Festival* at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) as well as at the *TDSB Equitable, Safe and Inclusive Schools* booth at *PRIDE*. Subsequent to that, and after much determined perseverance our work was finally posted on the TDSB website, as well as the external TDSB YouTube channel. Currently there are over 1700 views and 114 comments, most of which are highly positive. The project is well supported by educators and the public alike. The comments clearly speak of the advocacy and agency of the endeavour at the elementary level.

Moreover, it was a reaffirming experience to be selected to present at the *Ontario Library Association Super Conference 2013*. Our project at Sloane fit beautifully with the theme of the conference, *A Universe of Possibilities*. Luckily we will also have the chance to present in April at the *Language Diversity Conference* at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE).

Where Do We Go From Here

The quest for safe and inclusive schools across public education continues. Lessons related to gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation have continued at Sloane. Each subsequent year, additional wonderful texts are being written that help teacher-librarians develop lessons centred on these central themes.

We now have a borrowing bin at Sloane that has many great titles that can assist with further teaching. Of course, developing a current and inclusive collection is the mandate of every teacher-librarian. The positive space at Sloane P.S. is still available to all students and staff in need and will continue to evolve.

Equity and Social Justice Matter

Teaching equity and social justice matter and should definitely be a part of defining effective and responsible teaching. Teaching elementary students about gender, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation makes sense. We must realize that these elementary school years are foundational years for building character and critical to forming and celebrating a healthy self identity. Teaching respect and acceptance at all ages of schooling is imperative and the school library through its leadership, collaboration and facilitation has the privilege of doing just that.

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