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**Policy or Pathologization?:
Questions into the Rhetoric of Inclusion and Acceptance in Schools**

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Abstract

In the wake of a study released by the Public Health Agency of Canada in 2012 that focused on student belonging, safety, and inclusion in schools, the Ontario government introduced the Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13), which was successively passed into law that year. As an amendment to the longstanding Education Act, Bill 13 was a turning point for discourse surrounding safe and accepting schools, due to a specific focus on bullying, discrimination, and inclusion in fostering positive school climates. Following the recurrent rhetoric of inclusion, however, Bill 13 – as both policy and practice – failed to locate and identify discrimination and exclusion as both systemic and structural problems. In doing so, Bill 13, and similar inclusive policies to follow, merely advocated for the inclusion of marginalized and “at-risk” students, while continuing to cite and valorize heteronormative, ableist, and colonial values as the benchmark of inclusion and belonging. Using the insights of critical pedagogy, queer studies, and critical disability studies, this paper aims to extend the dialogue of inclusion beyond the student “at-risk,” and instead, examine the ways that policy rhetoric upholds hostile and oppressive school climates. Thus, this paper argues for a critical reexamination of the ways in which colonial, ableist, and heterosexist standards of normality manifest in inclusive discourse and practice. In doing so, schools, policy-makers, students, and staff can move beyond damaging discourses that hinder the positive development of queer, two-spirit, trans, and questioning students, and in particular, students whose queerness intersects with their race, class, and/or disability.

Keywords: Inclusion, Accepting Schools Act, Bill 13, normalcy, at-risk, education policy, pathologization, heteronormativity, marginalization, exclusion.

**Policy or Pathologization?:
Questions into the Rhetoric of Inclusion and Acceptance in Schools**

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“As we live within a social context, change often involves recognizing connections between individual problems and experiences and the social contexts in which they are embedded.”

Anat Greenstein, *Is this inclusion? Lessons from a very ‘special’ unit*

Introduction

In 2012, the Public Health Agency of Canada released a critical study focusing on how students experience a sense of belonging, safety, and inclusion in schools¹. The data from this study reflected a growing rate of harassment, violence, and exclusion, citing that “nearly 20% of students report being bullied, while 40% of students report being both victims and bullies” (Dearden, 2012). In the wake of this study, the Ontario government introduced the Accepting Schools Act, also known as Bill 13, which was successively passed into law that year. As an amendment to the longstanding Education Act, this new law amplified discussions surrounding bullying, discrimination, equity, and inclusion to ensure that all students were immersed in safe and accepting schools. In a detailed report outlining several of the amendments to the original Education Act, the document asserts 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” (*Legislative Assembly of Ontario*)².

¹ More on the Public Health Agency of Canada’s publications can be found here:
<https://www.canada.ca/en/services/health/publications.html>

² The full policy document was implemented in 2009: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.pdf

Primarily focused on anti-bullying rhetoric and reactive interventions, such as zero-tolerance, student and staff-initiated accommodations, and the identification and isolation of students most "at-risk," Bill 13 upheld a reductive framework that continued to characterize growing rates of bullying, exclusion, student harassment, assault, and suicide as individual incidents. Yet, this new legislation emanated as an ambitious move towards more equitable and inclusive education. In being heralded as progressive and ambitious, Bill 13 also set the rhetorical tone for future discourses on the inclusion and acceptance of queer and trans students in schools (notably absent were discussions surrounding the impacts of exclusion and discrimination on students who identify as two-spirit and/or whose queerness intersects with other identity markers such as race, class, and disability). Of particular interest, are two significant policies that followed Bill 13: The *Guidelines for the Accommodation of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students and Staff* (2013) and *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (which was last modified online in 2016)³. Within these documents more specifically, and anti-bullying and inclusive rhetoric more broadly, existed a persistent framing of bullying, exclusion, and harassment as existing on the individual level (i.e., student or staff) and their anticipated level of risk based on non-normative and/or non-conforming identities and expressions.

As a queer researcher, writer, and activist, who remains critical and concerned about the direction of queer, two-spirit, and trans inclusion in schools (especially queer and/or trans disabled, racialized, and/or low-income students), my focus on policy rhetoric broadly, and policies put forth by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the Ministry of Education more locally, is to illuminate the various ways in which colonial, ableist, and heterosexist standards of normality manifest in inclusive discourse and practice. While it is evident that the policies put forth by the TDSB are at the forefront of various inclusive efforts in education, and are setting an example for other provinces, the prevalent discourse surrounding student harassment, exclusion, bullying, and assault remains reduced to discriminatory instances and behaviors. In other words, such a focus on the individual fails to consider the broader

³ The most recent online fact sheet from 2016: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity_quick_facts.html

implications of discourses and practices that continue to cite and valorize heteronormative, ableist, and colonial standards of acceptance and belonging.

Drawing upon Liasidou's (2012) notion of "reductionist discourses of inclusion" (p. 176) and the insights from critical pedagogy, queer studies, and critical disability studies, the following paper aims to extend the dialogue of inclusion beyond individual pathologization, and instead, examine the ways in which "inclusion" as both policy and practice, purposefully fails to locate and identify violence and exclusion as both systemic and structural problems in the interest of maintaining the status quo. Through the continued reproduction of discourses and ideologies that further pathologize and ultimately hinder the positive development of queer, two-spirit, trans, and questioning students, the public education system is able to simultaneously *advocate* for equity and inclusion, while *maintaining* a normative culture that both perpetuates and permits the discrimination of students based on race, gender and sexual diversity, disability, and socio-economic status.

As Eve Tuck (2009), Unangax writer, researcher, and educator, urged over a decade ago... researchers, scholars, policy-makers, and the like, need to reevaluate the ways in which over-researched (yet underrepresented, undervalued, and under-resourced) communities are consistently positioned within "damage-centered research," which can only ever yield "damage-centered narratives" (p. 409). Such narratives are thus unable to exceed historical and contemporary understandings of dispossessed and disenfranchised individuals as anything more than damaged and broken, and "entire communities as depleted" (p. 409). Such narratives, Tuck (2009) warns, carry long-term repercussions for individuals and communities, and thus a careful reconsideration and reframing of research, and the portrayal of those historically and currently relegated to the margins, needs to inform future research, policy, and practice. In looking towards such critical insights, which are as urgently needed now as they were then, I will analyze the rhetoric of inclusion and acceptance within the Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13), as well as several policies that followed this crucial part of Ontario's Comprehensive Action Plan for Accepting Schools. It is my hope that the following discussion illuminates the ways in which the prevailing framework of inclusive, equitable, and accepting education has been dominated by a reductionist discourse of inclusion that strives to accommodate difference, while perpetuating

"damage-centered narratives" that both limit and hinder the broader ways in which non-normative and/or non-conforming students could access belonging and acceptance in schools.

In an attempt to better rectify exclusion and discrimination in school policy and practice, I will employ an intersectional lens to generate a critical entry point into reconsiderations of bullying and exclusion as beyond singular and isolated moments, but rather, intrinsically linked to "relationship[s] between people and history, people in communities, people in institutions...[and] the histories that have brought us to [these] particular moment[s]" (Crenshaw, 2018). As such, an intersectional (as well as interdisciplinary) approach to school policies and practices can deepen conventional understandings of the various ways in which non-normative and/or non-conforming students are impacted by heterosexist, ableist, and colonial perceptions of acceptance and belonging. That said, this paper will emphasize the importance of moving away from discourses that conceptualize non-normality as "risk" and anomaly, and instead, move towards policies and practices that locate and identify discrimination and exclusion as both systemic and structural problems. In doing so, school administrators, staff, policy-makers, and students, can look towards narratives that illuminate an array of lived experiences and expressions that exceed notions of risk, isolation, and ambiguity.

As an entry point into this discussion, I will focus on the following questions: How are inclusive policies and practices conceptualizing safety and belonging in school? Who is named and positioned as "at-risk" in inclusive discourse and practice? How do at-risk and damage-centered narratives reflect the normative ideals underpinning contemporary schooling, and moreover, the limitations surrounding conceptions of diversity and difference? Lastly, as remarked by Parekh, Flessa, and Smaller (2016): "can a system that has produced the stratification of educational opportunity, for generations, fix that same problem?" (p. 78).

Inappropriate, Disorderly, and At-risk

In a national report entitled "Toward an Equitable Education: Poverty, Diversity, and Students at Risk," Portelli, Shields, and Vibert (2007) suggest that those engaged in current educational theory and practice should direct their critical gaze towards the "popular catch-phrases" (p. i) endorsed in educational policy discourse. The authors draw particular attention to the following catch-phrases: "[e]quitable education,' 'inclusive education,' and 'students at

risk” to highlight how these popular approaches to educational reform “run the risk of becoming slogans, in other words, rhetorical positions automatically endorsed without due critical attention to the purpose and consequences of our actions or the possible inconsistencies between our beliefs and values, on the one hand, and our practices, on the other” (Portelli et al., p. i). Not only is the perfunctory application of inclusion concerning, in regards to predisposed perceptions of belonging, acceptance, well-being, and the ensuing impact on students, but also for those critically invested in educational reform.

While the practice of inclusion has garnered a celebrated, as well as controversial, presence over the last decade, specifically in Ontario, “inclusion” as a term (or catch-phrase) remains at the forefront of educational efforts advocating for positive change. That said, Parekh et al. (2016) remain critical of how action transpires behind discourses of inclusion and equity, stating that, while “inclusion initiatives [are] being driven by hopes of improving the educational outcomes for students being moved to inclusive settings, and also the goal of bringing about greater equity and reducing the historical and current stratification of student opportunity along the lines of race, language, class, gender, and immigration status” (p. 76) all those involved in this process should be aware of how support systems further classify and pathologize “all those students whom schools have historically not served well” (Portelli et al., 2007, p. 2). Thus, what continues to evade inclusive rhetoric are the ways in which students experience physical, emotional, and spiritual distress from perfunctory policies and practices that reassert heteronormative, ableist, and colonial frameworks of belonging.

Donn Short (2008) similarly observes pervasive forms of violence in schools, and through interviews with students and teachers from various high schools in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), draws our attention to what he defines as “attitudinal violence,” which would include “dirty looks, refusing to acknowledge others, stares” (p. 42). In speaking to one student in particular about attitudinal violence, the student reflects upon this form of oppression as a byproduct of unaddressed social power in the school:

I think it was more of a situation in which they had social power. They had a certain prestige within the school and that comes about through, among other things, normative gender and sexual presentation. They exuded their sexuality. It was a very dominant kind of sexuality. I think being homophobic and sexist was part and parcel of it. And it goes on without most of them consciously thinking about it. (Short, 2008, p. 42)

Given this student's experience of a pervasive and hostile culture in the school – which they perceive as an unaddressed, and thus unchallenged prestige and power held by those who exhibit heteronormative behaviors – the limitations of contemporary discourses and practices of inclusion are quite telling. The above reflection is a powerful demonstration of the consequences of policies and practices that continue to cite heteronormative behaviors and expressions as the dominant standard of inclusion and belonging. Further, when attempts are made within schools to advocate for greater equity and inclusion, without also addressing what Smith and Payne (2016) refer to as "the social purposes of bullying" (p. 75), i.e., the battles for social power that contribute to hostile school cultures, the policies and practices that follow remain unable to create the attitudinal shifts necessary in which to envision change.

Following this sentiment, Short's (2008) research study "Queers, Bullying, and Schools: Am I Safe Here?" complicates the ways that formal law or state law – which he defines as societal laws, school policies and regulations – interact with other competing normative orders that dominate schooling environments. What is critical about Short's study is the observed dissonance between policy rhetoric that is *reactive* and potentially harmful, and policy rhetoric that is *proactive* and thus more affirming and positive in practice. As asserted by Short (2008):

State law addresses certain problems in schools, but is compromised by failing to account for the perpetuation of social norms within youth cultures. It is the hegemony of these norms that inculcates negative notions of difference, leading to homophobic bullying and other forms of violence. LGBT youth are, thus, easy targets despite state law or school policy. (p. 33)

In other words, students who are repeatedly placed at-risk, due to the competing normative orders existing in their schools, require more than reactive laws and guidelines that reproduce social norms and negative conceptualizations of difference. Moreover, while schools are repeatedly positioned in policy rhetoric as the subject of change, the responsibility remains on the student body to both assess and act on the needs of their schools in fostering positive spaces.

As presumed by Bill 13, all students have the ability and freedom to "form other types of groups based on the needs of their school" (2012, p. 2). However, as demonstrated below, this sentiment presents a dangerous generalization of student safety and well-being, and further disregards the needs of students based on their schooling environments. In addressing the question, "How does Bill 13 support students?" the Accepting Schools Act outlines the following:

Schools to provide support to students who have engaged in inappropriate behavior or been affected by inappropriate behavior; Schools to provide programs, interventions or other supports to both victims and bullies, and to those who witness the incident; Schools to provide ways for students to safely report incidents of bullying; Boards and schools to allow students to form groups at their school to raise awareness and understanding of all students on topics such as: anti-racism, people with disabilities, gender equity, sexual orientation and gender identity. These groups may include Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs). (2012, p. 2)

Within the Ministry's response, there is a conflicting impression between the role and responsibility of the school, and that of the student. This is particularly evident in the Ministry's final statement regarding the work of critical consciousness raising in schools. Within this statement lies the assumption that outside of student-led equity groups, there is little else happening with regards to the overall culture of the school. That said, when topics such as anti-racism, disability, equity, colonization, sexual orientation, and gender identity are not already built into school culture and practice, how does this lead to queer, two-spirit, and trans students being at-risk? How are schools fostering a sense of belonging and safety in order for all students to actively engage in student groups? Ultimately, what Bill 13 fails to address is how difficult it can be for students and staff to foster a sense of inclusion and belonging in environments that uphold reactive and reductive policies and practices, rather than those that are proactive and affirming towards differing bodies and experiences.

A recent study by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (2014), as well as Bidell's (2016) in-depth analysis of said study, further examined the ways that school staff, teachers, and students are "direct or passive contributors to engendering or maintaining a hostile environment for LGBTQ students" (Bidell, p. 109), and found that over 57% of students do not report harassment in schools due to "doubts that staff would effectively address the situation and fears that reporting would make the situation worse" (GLSEN, 2014, p. 27). Such a distressing reality for students is concerning. Most significant to my argument, is the correlation between student response, and the overall environment that makes the act of responding (im)possible. When schooling environments are upheld by discourses and practices that instill fear, silence, and doubts in particular students, the possibilities for understanding and responding to the needs of these students becomes unimaginable.

For instance, in focusing on the experiences of homeless youth in schools, results from the GLSEN (2014) study found that: "80.9% reported they never talked to a teacher, 70.8% never talked to a school/mental health counselor, and 86.5% never talked to a school administrator about issues related to their sexual orientation or gender identity" (Bidell, 2016, p. 110). Aside from being alarming, these findings also demonstrate that school policies and practices that measure student belonging alongside climate data that assumes all students disclose will be unable to address the diverse needs and experiences of students most marginalized in schools. A more recent study by GLSEN (2016), focusing on the impacts of educational exclusion among LGBTQ youth, revealed that: "When LGBTQ students feel less safe, less comfortable, and less welcome in schools, they are less likely to attend and more likely to drop out. School policies that disproportionately affect LGBTQ students, such as gendered dress codes and rules about public displays of affection, also expose LGBTQ youth to greater rates of school discipline and sometimes, as a result, involvement in the justice system" (p. 33).⁴

Part of the issue is a lack of understanding and communication between school administrators, staff, students, guardian(s) and community members, which therefore, leaves students feeling like they have no voice in the conversation surrounding their existence in schools. Thus, in order for school policies and practices to foster a sense of inclusion and belonging in schools, equitable representation and inclusion needs to be observed and experienced at the structural, and systemic levels as well. It is important to note that while a focus on student input is crucial to influencing and supporting inclusive school design and practice, the actualization of inclusion and belonging cannot manifest from student voice alone. As demonstrated above, when inclusion and belonging is neither observed nor experienced on the structural and systemic levels, this absence directly impacts students and staff, and leaves the most marginalized unable to contribute to the conversation. Thus, while a diverse array of student voices and experiences remains necessary for equitable and inclusive education,

⁴ Further, given the local context of Ontario, and specifically within the TDSB: the use of zero-tolerance and School Resource Officers (SROs), which disproportionately target black, Indigenous, and racialized students; upholding gendered bathrooms, which contribute to hostile and inaccessible school climates and cultures for trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students; disregarding personal pronouns; non-inclusive curriculum; inaccessible spaces; "appropriate" dress policies, which again, disproportionately target black, Indigenous, and racialized students, as well as female identified/presenting students, to name a few biased policies and practices.

educational policy and practice continues to ignore the structures and systems that contribute to the silencing, exclusion, and isolation of particular students.

As observed by Reid and Knight (2006), "[s]ome see [policy] emphasis on self-determination as a form of student empowerment and the key to student success in postsecondary education. However, these documents do not affirm students' cultural contexts or use their racial and ethnic cultures in the development of institutional supports. In short, they fail to provide services that address the intersections of race, class, and disability" (p. 21). Similarly, Parekh et al. (2016) underline how within the TDSB, "First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, as well as parental engagement, policies assert provincial aspirations for inclusion but provide few inducements or mechanisms for ensuring commitment to the stated goals" (p. 70), thus "leaving the Ministry of Education (or, more locally, the TDSB) to serve as both engine for change and proponent of the status quo" (p. 78).

Titchkosky (2008) further examines "the interrelation of bodies, [their] environment, and knowledge" (p. 40) to problematize how structures reproduce the status quo through the narration of "nonviable" bodies as justifiably excludable; given historical, normative conceptions of difference, access, and belonging. In particular, how historically inaccessible institutions, to varying degrees, continue to gesture towards a "caring inclusion" by invoking both a sense of access by "placing an icon of access on a door, poster, or pamphlet..." while sustaining an environment complicit in "the work of dis-attending to disability" (p. 54), which consequently, maintains the status quo. In dis-attending to disability, a caring inclusion thus attends to the work of normalcy and maintaining "some sort of boundary at the edges of which resides the possibility of defining and shoring up belonging and not belonging, relevancy and irrelevancy, personhood and its Other" (Titchkosky, 2008, p. 55). Thus, when inclusive rhetoric continues to distance schooling environments from the oppression experienced by the student body, such discourses also maintain the possibility of a dominating status quo through the continued individualization and pathologization of difference.

Erevelles (2000) similarly observes how education's focus on the body has created a shift in educational theory and practice, asserting that "the body is no longer treated as an ahistorical, precultural, or natural object, but is instead conceived as 'the site on which meanings of identity, difference, desire, knowledge, social worth, and possibility are assimilated and contested'" (p.

33). For critical theorists, among others invested in school policy and practice, an increased focus on the body creates an interesting opportunity to examine the ways in which inclusive rhetoric inscribes certain meanings onto particular bodies. When examining the aforementioned policies, which advocate for the inclusion of historically marginalized students and staff, it is important to consider the power behind naming, and the continued positioning of non-white, disabled, and/or queer students within narratives of marginalization, risk, and exclusion.

Of particular interest to this claim is the concept of "enfleshment," which Erevelles (2000) describes as the process where "bodies are inscribed by the dominant cultural practices of schools [and are] marked by discourses that not only sit on the surface of the flesh but are, on the other hand, embedded in the flesh such that we learn 'a way of being in our bodies...that is we are taught to think about our bodies and how to experience our bodies'" (p. 33). The process of enfleshment, by which the body comes into being via the social determinants made available by the surrounding environment, is most poignant when bodies exist outside of a dominating norm. When reflecting on the education system, there is a particular desire to name and organize bodies based on colonial, ableist, and heterocentric norms, which consequently, constitute non-white, disabled, and queer students as at-risk or antithetical towards the dominant framework of education. Thus, while there are continuous attempts to foster safe and accepting schools through inclusive policies and practices, the discourses made available for which to envision change remain within conceptions of queerness and disability as educational problems.

As students orient themselves around a normative social order within their schools, they may be unaware of how discourses of marginalization, risk, and exclusion affect their social positioning, and "may come to understand various forms of power or domination over them as 'natural,' or at least unchangeable, and therefore unquestioned" (Gaventa, Pettit, & Cornish, 2011, p. 13). Students and teachers may also internalize dominant narratives of marginalization and risk in ways that rationalize inequity and exclusion, rather than acknowledging oppression as systemic and structural issues. Consequently, as long as inclusive practices continue to draw upon narratives that reify damaging social norms and hierarchies, students will continue to be positioned within discriminatory and inequitable spaces.

Drawing upon Portelli et al. (2007), the authors further problematize the ways in which discourses and policies have historically conceptualized bodies as "at-risk" within educational

institutions, particularly racialized, low-income, and/or disabled bodies. Moreover, students whose educational risks are intensified due to their intersecting identities. Such discourses of "risk" are also reductive and lack critical consideration, resulting in the proliferation and normalization of discourses that perceive educational oppression as synonymous with individual deficit. Further, discourses of risk are intertwined with "reductionist discourses of inclusion" (Liasidou, 2012) and "deficit discourses" (Portelli et al., 2007) in the manner in which they "maintain white middle-class privilege by leaving unspoken the way in which schooling is organized around the norms of [the dominant] group, obscuring the fact that it is the values and beliefs of this class which construct the standard against which risk is measured" (Portelli et al., 2007, p. 9). Thus, as long as exclusion and harassment is perceived as individual and separate from the schooling environment, forms of intervention – such as inclusion and equity initiatives – will continue to leave unspoken, and thus unaddressed, the normative practices that uphold hostile schools.

Responding to the Extra-ordinary

In Short's (2008) research study, he was able to speak with a school teacher who had been engaged in equity focused work in schools for over two decades. During the interview, Short asked the teacher what she would like to see coming out of school policy and practice. In her response, she expressed that: "The educational response has to be there, as well, to combat all the other voices and influences telling the students how to be normal" (Short, 2008, p. 44). This teacher's reflection is crucial, as it reasserts the need for a systemic and structural response to the normative influences that hinder the well-being and sense of belonging of students. As Short (2008) further examines:

Formal law, policies, and codes of behavior are a necessary first step. Nonetheless, what schools must do to ensure the safety of queer students is to educate and to re-educate the actors in the setting. The curriculum must include courses that study gender and sexuality in order to implicate the heterosexual students. Otherwise, heterosexual students (and teachers) receive information about queer students and react to the response of the law to the harassment of queer students from their distanced, normative positions. (p. 45)

This normative positioning, which also evokes social distance, is best demonstrated in *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, which was last modified in 2016. In the section focusing on why Ontario needs such a strategy, the Ministry states:

Ontarians share a belief in the need to help students learn and to prepare them for their role in society as engaged, productive and responsible citizens. Yet, some groups of students, including recent immigrants, children from low-income families, Aboriginal students, boys and students with special education needs, among others, may be at risk of lower achievement. (2016, para. 3)

Given this explanation, it remains unclear as to why some students face challenges in Ontario schools over others. What can be deducted from this statement, however, is a rhetorical separation between Ontarians, or "the standard against which risk is measured" (Portelli et al., 2007, p. 9) and Others, i.e., those who are low-income, have special education needs, or simply exist "among others."

An unspoken, normative positioning is further demonstrated in the Ministry's response to the particular timing of the strategy, stating that:

Canadians embrace multiculturalism, human rights and diversity as fundamental values. However, there are ongoing incidents of discrimination in our society that require our continuing attention... Racism, religious intolerance, homophobia and gender-based violence are still evident in our communities and, unfortunately, in our schools. This can lead to students feeling rejected, excluded and isolated at school, which may result in behaviour problems in the classroom, decreased interest in school, lower levels of achievement and higher dropout rates. (2016, para. 6)

In addressing "ongoing incidents of discrimination," which could lead to a "decreased interest in school" the strategy is able to create distance between acts of discrimination, and the unspoken, as well as spoken, ways in which schools are organized around oppressive norms and ideologies. By continuing to frame discriminatory behaviors and beliefs as individually produced and experienced, equitable and inclusive frameworks dangerously obscure the systemic reproduction and reification of social hierarchies in school, which inevitably lead to hostile and inequitable learning environments.

Individual pathologization, Titchkosky (2008) warns, becomes normalized and reproduced in our daily practices and interactions that have been socially conditioned as

"ordinary" and "sensible" (p. 45). Reflecting on the exclusion of disability in educational spaces, Titchkosky (2008) examines how this exclusion becomes justified and made socially "sensible" due to the non-ordinariness of disability, arguing that: "[o]ur ordinary ways of talking about what is justifiable plays a significant role in making up the meaning of lives, and the doing of ordinary life supports the extraordinary activity of discrimination" (p. 56). In this sense, how are discourses and policies that advocate for positive school climates extending beyond the ordinary to address the extraordinary ways in which students experience discrimination and exclusion in schools? As initially proposed, how does this reflect the normative ideals underpinning contemporary schooling, and the limitations surrounding conceptions of disability and difference?

Reid and Knight (2006) are also critical of the insidious and persistent ideologies that inform conceptions of disability and difference, and claim that "[w]hat needs to be marked and narrated is what people think of as outside the norm, that is, the person of color, the disabled body or mind, the person living in poverty" (p. 19). What is particularly telling about the placement of certain bodies in schools, is the continued practice of naming and categorizing those who exist outside of normative boundaries based on what a heteronormative, Eurocentric society has deemed inappropriate, disorderly, and at-risk. Drawing upon the intersections of critical pedagogy and critical disability studies, therefore, exposes the ordinary ways in which exclusion is both narrated and justified, and provides a powerful critique on the endurance and prevalence of "belief systems rooted in the ideology of normalcy" (Reid & Knight, 2006, p. 19). As educators and critical thinkers, it remains crucial to question how educational spaces – as institutions that form the basis of economic and social capital – continue to reproduce practices and ideologies that obscure a person's sense of belonging and self-worth on individual, community, and societal levels. Moreover, when our education systems seek to accommodate disability and difference, rather than creating systems that expect, affirm, and value differing identities and experiences, we also need to question: How are we "work[ing] across differences toward social justice" (Blackburn, 2014, p. 52)?

Questioning the Rhetoric of Inclusion: Included into What?

In their article, "Is this inclusion? Lessons from a very 'special' unit," Anat Greenstein (2014) similarly questions how school practices and policies narrate and position students based on their relation to power and privilege. In particular, Greenstein (2014) examines a school setting in the United Kingdom that provides a separate school, known as the "special unit," for students experiencing discrimination and learning difficulties within the more "mainstream" schooling environment. In troubling the special unit's inclusive framework, Greenstein (2014) highlights how "the imperative to change the environment here carries a double meaning – while the unit's environment is made more accessible, it is the individual students who are removed from the main school environment to be placed in a separate unit" (p. 385). In addition to the physical removal of particular bodies from mainstream spaces, Greenstein (2014) also draws attention to the fact that the special unit "did not encourage transformative knowledge that could be brought to use in fighting oppression" (p. 386). Therefore, while school policy implemented a "special unit" to facilitate an inclusive practice, the normative and hostile culture within the mainstream school remained unaffected.

Another contradiction that arose was how students themselves interpreted the special unit and experienced a sense of belonging. Remarking upon several tensions that arose from the space, Greenstein (2014) describes how one student, "[u]nlike the other students who saw the unit as a solution to bullying and a place to make friends...understood it as the very reason for bullying. Also, unlike the other students, who experienced the main school as the site of their exclusion, this boy had friends outside of the unit, in the main school and in the neighborhood" (p. 387). Thus, when certain students were removed from the main schooling environment – whether this removal be physical through separation and isolation or discursive through curricula and school practice – it created a negative affect that upheld a culture of hostility and dissonance in the school.

As noted by Short (2008), the violence that students often remarked upon was due to a "certain prestige within the school" that some students felt they held over others, which remained unchallenged and thus normalized (p. 42). Students that reflected dominant expressions of masculinity or femininity, through "normative gender and sexual presentation," experienced tangible superiority, which was permitted through school policies and practices that both valued

and encouraged social norms (Short, 2008, p. 42). Subsequently, in addressing the reproduction of social norms within educational spaces, school policies and practices play a crucial role in fostering safe and affirming schools. As demonstrated by the TDSB's *Guidelines for the Accommodation of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students and Staff* (2013) students and staff are encouraged to be mindful of gendered language, binary activities, stereotypes, and biases that could be harmful and isolating towards those who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming (p. 20). However, in the section focusing on "Job-Related Planning for a Gender Transition" (p. 18), a disproportionate amount of emotional work and responsibility is placed on the individual transitioning. Not only does this place the staff member or student transitioning at potential risk, but such approaches characterize diverse expressions of gender as isolated incidences or educational issues.

This is further demonstrated in the section focusing on planning and communicating one's transition. In the *Guidelines* (2013), it is suggested that the manager of the educational workplace should: "Make it clear that the transition is 'no big deal' and that work will continue as before" and "Announce the timing of a mandatory 'Transgender 101' [workshop] to take place before the transition" (p. 19). However, as previously asserted, what remains problematic about this approach is the reactive nature of the inclusive practice. Meaning, it is extremely difficult to express and ensure that this process will be "no big deal" in an environment that has yet to encounter this subject matter. Due to the absence of gender and sexual diversity in the culture of the institution, one's transition will be a big deal for most. Thus, when institutional spaces are not proactively considering and expecting a diverse array of experiences and identity expressions, levels of risk and hostility are heightened, and exclusion easily becomes normalized.

While the actions of students and staff are imperative in fostering inclusive and equitable schools, the ways in which students experience and internalize physical, emotional, and attitudinal violence from normative discourses and practices remains unacknowledged, and thus unchanged. In an effort to better recognize and disrupt normalizing discourses in schools – a practice that could be liberating for *all* students – inclusive and anti-bullying discourses need to discard traditional narratives that perceive students and staff as inherently at-risk and marginal due to their gender expression, sexuality, race, and/or ability. Instead, drawing upon narratives

that affirm and anticipate difference in schools could bring about new discourses and directions for which to envision a cultural change.

Smith and Payne (2016) specifically point to the ways in which anti-bullying rhetoric upholds traditional power dynamics by reproducing a rigid victim-perpetrator binary. Moreover, the authors assert that anti-bullying discourses often isolate aggressive behaviors on an individual level, which implies that "ending the behavior ends the problem... but this perspective fails to address *why* students use this language to target one another or express general displeasure, how this language cites gender stereotypes and heteronormative discourse, and how it reinforces social stigma around LGBTQ identities and gender transgressions" (p. 80). In other words, aggressive attitudes and actions do not exist and thrive in isolation, but instead, depend upon exterior influences, such as long-established power dynamics and normative frameworks, in order to persist and thrive in schools and society (Ware, 2017). In shifting the focus away from individual actions and behaviors, towards systemic practices of exclusion and discrimination, schools can better implement policies that expect and affirm diverse expressions and experiences, and move away from damaging discourses that reproduce inaccurate and isolating notions of gender and sexual diversity. Reexamining the negative implications of inclusive and anti-bullying rhetoric not only seeks to better include those who exist outside of so-called static notions of ability, gender, sexuality, and race, but also allows schools and students to interact with, and be socialized around, differing lived experiences and expressions that are both affirmed and expected.

Humanizing Discourse

Mollie V. Blackburn (2014) powerfully addresses how the process of humanization and dehumanization intersects with relations of power and privilege, given differing social contexts and locations. Humanization, she explains, is "the infinite process of becoming more fully human. But the process does not necessarily keep moving along unhindered or uninterrupted. It can get stalled out or stuck; it can even get derailed or unraveled" (Blackburn, 2014, p. 43). In the context of educational policies that encourage a maximization of human belonging and well-being in schools, such as the Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13) for example, it is important to note how the human body and the human experience is named and positioned within narratives of

equity, inclusion, safety, and acceptance. While certain bodies – the white, heterosexual, and able body – are always already made to feel welcome and included in schools, others are made to feel included and accepted “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” (*Legislative Assembly of Ontario*).

While inclusive rhetoric remains predominantly interested in naming all that exists outside dominant social norms, this process not only isolates certain students who are positioned outside of normative identity categories, but also limits how these students are able to navigate and exist within inclusive policies and practices. As asserted by Blackburn (2014), a certain level of caution needs to be taken when considering inclusive discourses and practices that often dehumanize students, which is “especially true for those marginalized by systems of inequality based on race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, or language, among other identity markers” (p. 43). When particular students are reduced to negative notions of difference or “popular catch-phrases” as asserted by Portelli et al. (2007), they are often “dehumanized, that is, made less human by having their individuality, creativity, and humanity taken away, as when one is treated like a number or an object” (Blackburn, 2014, p. 43). Thus, while marginalized students are primarily considered in the realm of inclusive rhetoric, schools continue to develop policies that merely promote school safety and belonging, while failing to provide the necessary support systems that are respectful and reflective of historically marginalized individuals, groups, and communities.

As observed by Blackburn (2014), “[c]onsider, for example, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. These young people are often forced, sometimes implicitly, other times explicitly, to hide who they are and to conform to their straight peers” (p. 43). Therefore, not only are queer, questioning, two-spirit, and trans students having to navigate environments that situate heteronormative students as the dominant measure of acceptance and belonging, but the pressure to adhere to dominant social norms can have devastating impacts on a student’s sense of worth and well-being. As Blackburn (2014) further puts forward, “[s]ometimes, when [marginalized students] fail to hide and conform, they are treated as less than human; sometimes this means being physically assaulted, at other times it means being verbally abused, and at still other times it means being ostracized and isolated” (p. 43). That said,

under whose terms and conditions are students experiencing inclusion and belonging? Who continues to be dehumanized by inclusive policies and practices? And moreover, how do we get to a place where our institutions "become more fully human and humanizing" (Blackburn, 2014, p. 44)?

Conclusion: "Telling a New Story About Who We Are"

In putting forward such questions, this paper aimed to expose the limits of inclusive policy and practice in order to reevaluate how *all* students access inclusion and acceptance in schools. Focusing specifically on the inclusive rhetoric that came out of the Accepting Schools Act (Bill 13), which further influenced other policies and guidelines, this paper sought to provoke a deeper understanding of the ways in which reductionist discourses of inclusion maintain hostile and oppressive school climates by continuing to cite and valorize heteronormative, ableist, and colonial standards of belonging. In problematizing the ways in which school policies and practices continue to pathologize and thus hinder the positive development of racialized, disabled, queer, and low-income students, the following questions remained at the crux of the discussion: Within inclusive rhetoric, who are the students deemed "at-risk" or "damaged" (Tuck, 2009)? What is at stake when schools fail to focus on the systemic and structural roots of inequity and discrimination, and instead, isolate and individualize school hostility? How are queer, two-spirit, trans, and questioning students affected by heteronormative and colonial ideologies of normalcy, which permeate educational discourse and practice?

Drawing upon critical perspectives of disability, queerness, and schooling, this paper attempted to shift popular notions of disability and difference as a *problem* inherent in the *individual*, and instead focused on the ways in which educational structures and systems are *themselves* disabling and oppressive. Inclusive policies that continue to locate risk, low-achievement, and exclusion as individual deficit will thus continue to disregard the powerful ways that educational policies and practices reinforce "the boundaries of typicality" that regulate and oppress all students (Baglieri et al., 2011, p. 2129). Thus, in order to acknowledge and effectively respond to the various ways that colonial and heterosexist standards of normality manifest in inclusive discourse and practice, it is crucial that schools, policy-makers, and students have access to narratives that expect and affirm the positive development of queer, two-

spirit, trans, and questioning students. In an effort to cultivate educational environments that are affirming and accepting of diverse student populations, anti-bullying and inclusive discourses need to be able to confront the insidious and powerful influence of the "normative student for whom public schools are designed – the mythical normal child" (Baglieri et al., 2011, p. 2129).

In respect to efforts put forth by the TDSB, it remains evident that students, staff, and community members lack access to discourses and practices required to shift long-established notions of social power and prestige. As I have put forward, the various inclusive policies and practices made available by the TDSB and the Ministry of Education remain limited in their ability to cultivate positive and affirming spaces for a diverse array of students and staff. In order foster environments that help, rather than hinder the well-being of *all* students in schools, inclusive discourses need to move beyond individualized and isolated perceptions of bullying, risk, and harassment, and instead, move towards an acknowledgement and disruption of the broader social purposes of bullying and exclusion in schools. Such a rhetorical shift would provide a crucial entry point into the normative standards that determine and define how "at-risk" students are perceived and positioned in schools.

By critically, and carefully, examining the effects of predisposed subject positions – such as marginal and at-risk – policy-makers, students, staff, and administrators can begin to question: How is acceptance, belonging, inclusion, and safety perceived in policy and practice? Who is benefiting from these perceptions? What consultations, if any, are being held at the student, staff, and community levels? What communities are being considered? Is this process an open and accessible opportunity for students, staff, and outside community members to build long-term and sustainable relationships of understanding, consent, and respect?

In speaking to the importance of telling trans stories that are whole, complex, challenging, and beautiful, Dominique Jackson (Tobagonian-American trans actress, author, and model) asserts that: "I don't look for acceptance in 2019 – I look for respect" (*CBC*, 2019). Indeed, as I continually look towards various communities to inform my own knowledge, research, and activism, so to should policy-makers, school staff, and administrators when

navigating and incorporating 2SLGBTQIA+ students⁵ into discourse and practice. It is my unwavering belief that queer, trans, two-spirit, disabled, and racialized youth and their surrounding community members hold powerful and integral knowledge regarding their own lived experiences, and the various arms of oppression that continually seek to undermine and disregard such ways of knowing and being in the world.

Ultimately, as long as our education systems continue to teach and learn within inclusive frameworks that reify heteronormative, ableist, and colonial standards of belonging, students who identify as queer, trans, two-spirit, or questioning will continue to be immersed in hostile school cultures. Providing access to discourses and practices that both anticipate and affirm students who exist outside dominant social norms would not only benefit the development of *all* students, but would create the cultural shift needed in order to "re-make that which has conditioned consciousness, by telling a new story about who we are" (Titchkosky, 2008, p. 56).

Author's Note

1. Since this article's initial submission, there have been several significant shifts felt across the political/educational landscape of Ontario. In June 2018, the Progressive Conservative Party came into power, grossly impacting the safety and well-being of those already in precarious positions. Most notably, were the Premier's (Doug Ford) and the Minister of Education's (Lisa Thompson) attacks upon 2SLGBTQIA+ students in Ontario schools. Upon coming into power, the Ford administration hastily eradicated the 2015 health and physical education curriculum, reverting back to a curriculum from 1998, which placed 2SLGBTQIA+ students at even greater risk due to the omission of crucial information pertaining to their positive sexual health and well-being.

⁵ A commonly used acronym when broadly speaking to the two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, etc., community.

This moment, among others, was a devastating testament to how quickly policies and practices can be implemented to delegitimize, dehumanize, and ultimately work to eradicate knowledges and experiences pertaining to: gender and sexual diversity; consent; Indigenous teachings; decolonization; anti-racism; gender-based violence; cyberbullying; and sexting, to name a few.

Notes

1. Similar to GLSEN's (2013) student climate survey, which focused on the ways in which school staff, teachers, administrators, and students are "direct or passive contributors to engendering or maintaining a hostile environment for LGBTQ students" (Bidell, p. 109), GLSEN's (2016) student climate survey showcases a nuanced understanding of student response and how responding to school climate and culture depends upon one's ability and belief in the process of speaking-up and speaking-out against prejudice in school.

2. In speaking to the 2SLGBTQ+ community, I have specifically chosen to use the language 'queer, two-spirit, trans, and questioning' throughout, in an effort to encompass a broad and diverse range of non-dominant experiences, expressions, and ways of being in the world.

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