

Enhancing 2SLGBTQIA+ Student Support Through Practical Professional Development and Structured GSA Programming

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how school staff may enhance their capacity to support and affirm 2SLGBTQIA+ youth by meaningfully participating in hands-on professional development and implementing structured mental health promotion and healthy relationships programming in gender and sexuality alliances or other educational venues.

Keywords: 2SLGBTQIA+, gender and sexuality alliances (GSA), professional development, Mental Health Promotion Program, youth

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article étudie comment le personnel scolaire peut améliorer ses capacités à accompagner et reconnaître les jeunes 2ELGBTQI+ en participant véritablement au développement professionnel pratique et en mettant en œuvre une promotion structurée de la santé mentale ainsi qu'en programmant des liens de santé ou autres activités pédagogiques axés sur la diversité sexuelle et la pluralité des genres.

Mots clés : 2ELGBTQI+, diversité sexuelle et pluralité des genres, développement professionnel, programme de promotion de la santé mentale, jeune

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Research has consistently revealed that two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual (2SLGBTQIA+) youth across Turtle Island experience prejudice and discrimination in and through schooling (Peter et al., 2021). These equity considerations are compounded by a deficiency in pre/in-service training and resources to support rainbow youth (Campbell et al., 2021). In response to hetero/cisnormative learning environments (i.e., practices and pedagogies that privilege straight and cis-gender experiences), gender and sexuality alliances (GSA) have emerged as a key school-based protective factor for queer and trans youth. Beyond supporting the formation and functioning of these clubs in school communities, researchers have called for professional development to cultivate supportive school staff, and GSA interventions to promote well-being among 2SLGBTQIA+ students (Johns et al., 2019). Further, Johns et al. (2019) encouraged educational stakeholders to "...develop and evaluate tailored interventions to be delivered within GSAs to reduce health risks and promote wellbeing among GSA members" (p. 152). Considering these pedagogical, programming, and empirical gaps, Centre for School Mental Health, Western University, staff worked in partnership with educators, mental health practitioners, and youth to create a small group positive mental health promotion program, *The Healthy Relationships Program (HRP) for Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (2SLGBTQIA+) Youth* (3rd ed.), and associated GSA and/or program training. As a living document, it has been revised several times considering facilitator, participant, and community feedback.

INNOVATION

The HRP for 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth aims to build resiliency and promote well-being among 2SLGBTQIA+ and allied youth. It affirms, validates, and celebrates sexual, gender, romantic, and sex characteristic diversity, cultivates a caring and supportive community, and helps youth develop skills and strategies that promote positive mental health, well-being and healthy relationships. This trauma-informed, equity-infused, strengths-focused, and skill-building program empowers youth to identify and explore stressors, including identity and expression invalidation; stigma, prejudice, and discrimination; internalized oppression; coming out; safety planning; and microaggressions. *The HRP for 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth* is a modular program that includes 17 sessions, each lasting approximately 45 minutes, and it affords flexibility about which sessions may be delivered based on youth voice and choice. It may be implemented in GSAs or 2SLGBTQIA+ youth group settings or delivered in formal teaching and learning environments when it aligns with curricular expectations. Some school jurisdictions have also offered it outside of extracurricular GSA meetings as a sign-up program during regular class time. Focus group research indicates that youth enjoy the program, find it relevant, and benefit from the skills they learn and the connections they make with fellow participants (Lapointe & Crooks, 2018).

Training

The interactive, discussion-based professional development seeks to enhance attendees' knowledge of risk factors and resiliency among 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and bolster their capacity to support students. Training organizers can choose a one- or two-day training model to fit their individualized needs and timelines. The two-day model examines GSA roles, functions, and programming, and explores *The Healthy Relationships Program for 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth*, whereas the one-day workshop focuses primarily on the innovation.

Workshop attendees develop an understanding of the fundamental principles of the program and the focus of the individual sessions. Participants also experience a variety of program activities since a large portion of time is devoted to preparing for and engaging in practice facilitation.

Two-Day Training Agenda Items. Day One comprises introductions and co-constructed group guidelines, experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and protective factors, GSA roles and functions, barriers to GSA development and functioning, GSAs and structured programming, and a HRP for 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth overview. Day two includes session one exploration and modelling, small group session review and facilitation preparation, practice facilitation, program delivery debrief, GSA program planning, and shared learnings.

INNOVATION TRAINING, IMPLEMENTATION, AND EMERGING RESULTS

Over the past four years (2018–2022), with the financial support of the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), we have delivered in-person and virtual training sessions to hundreds of school staff in the Northwest Territories, Alberta, Ontario, and New Brunswick (NB). This article highlights our research collaboration with a NB school board. This study was approved by the Western University Research Ethics Board and the partnering school board.

On May 7, 2021, we facilitated a one-day, virtual *HRP for 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth* training session with 24 high school GSA leads and board-level administrators. The acting director of Education Support Services at the school board randomly invited half of the schools in the district (i.e., seven) to participate in the training and implementation science project. Several school staff from each school site attended the session (i.e., 2–4 staff). We asked participants to identify the most significant learning that they gained from the professional development and how they would apply it in their role. Below are responses that signal the benefits of practice facilitation and session modelling, networking, and streamlined and structured GSA programming:

I thought this was a great opportunity to learn a little more about the resource and actually PRACTICE! I hope to make use of it in my role as a GSA facilitator and teacher for small group support. The discussion from participants was eye-opening and gave me more to think about, which I always appreciate!!

I appreciated getting to spend a day on this training. I feel like it is the best resource I have seen to deepen the structure of GSA meetings and can also see parts of it being implemented in the regular curriculum of classes.

Modelling the activities was very helpful in seeing how to move forward if using the program or just helping with a GSA in general.

A wonderful training. Something you can use as soon as you walk back into the school. It is outlined so you feel more comfortable with the topic no matter your level.

On October 7, 2021, 22 secondary educators and counsellors, as well as five success coaches and district administrators, gathered in-person to participate in a program booster and implementation and research plan session. GSA leads from six high schools agreed to facilitate at least eight program sessions over the 2021–2022 school year and provide feedback via (1) weekly GSA meeting surveys—asked club advisors if a meeting was held, number of youth who attended, meeting focus, and programming content; (2) end of year survey—probed about the club’s impact on members, GSA challenges, and resource and training suggestions; and (3) implementation survey—inquired about group characteristics and club format, participant

recruitment, logistics (time, space, scheduling), program impacts, implementation successes and challenges, delivery advice, and facilitator characteristics and demographics. Although six schools planned to deliver the *HRP for 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth*, strike action and Covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions hampered GSA functioning, which resulted in only three sites contributing to our intervention research. Findings were illuminated via thematic analysis and indicated that formalized programming promoted community and friendship development, exploration of challenges, supportive networks, information and resource sharing, strategy development, self-confidence, and coping ahead.

We did the Session One activity that will guide the focus moving forward. Students decided they wanted to do a mixture of structured settings and “just chill” days. I found they were highly engaged in this session...I found the structured session really brought the kids together as on the unstructured days, they tend to settle into groups of students they socialize with outside of the group. (weekly GSA meeting survey)

They seemed to become more comfortable talking to one another about issues that were important to them, it showed them that there was a community of support around them, they left with helpful resources to contact if they needed help or more information, they learned strategies for keeping themselves and their friends safe, and they made some new friends. I think some students, maybe, felt a little more confident in themselves too, which was great to see. (implementation survey)

Some of the sessions really engaged students in deep conversations and had them think about their future and scenarios that [they] may encounter. (end of year survey)

Implications and Future Directions

HRP for 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth training and program delivery findings are encouraging since they suggest that (1) school staff were empowered to expand their support of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth by enhancing their knowledge, engaging in practice facilitation, and developing equitable pedagogical skills; and (2) 2SLGBTQIA+ students were uplifted by participating in structured GSA programming, which cultivated community building and friendship development, promoted supportive peer-to-peer connections, and prompted issue sharing, scenario exploration, and strategy development. These findings echo prior preliminary data on youth's experiences with the program (see Lapointe & Crooks, 2018). Drawing on these limited, but promising, findings, future 2SLGBTQIA+ professional development should prioritize opportunities for practice facilitation to demystify equitable teaching and learning practices, and enhance school staff's comfort, confidence, and competence with supporting and affirming 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in and through schooling. This is a significant undertaking since enacting 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusive education is related to educators' perceived capacity (Taylor et al., 2016). Structured mental health promotion and healthy relationships programming can enhance GSA meetings and strengthen protective factors for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth; as such, the aforementioned innovation may be introduced, intermittently, depending on the needs and desires of club members. Since GSAs are for and by youth, it is important to promote student agency by encouraging student voice and choice, which is a tenet of the *HRP for 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth*.

As the creator of the training and a co-author of the *HRP for 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth*, I have an interest in the development and success of this mental health promotion initiative for youth.

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