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B.C. educators expand on what it means to have SOGI-inclusive schools



The B.C. SOGI educator network now has participation from all 60 school districts. (Ji Ruan/Creative Commons)

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By Sian Shin*Medill Reports*

Four years after the ARC Foundation launched the SOGI 1 2 3 program in British Columbia to make schools more LGBTQ+ inclusive, educators in all 60 school districts are expanding on what it means for their schools.

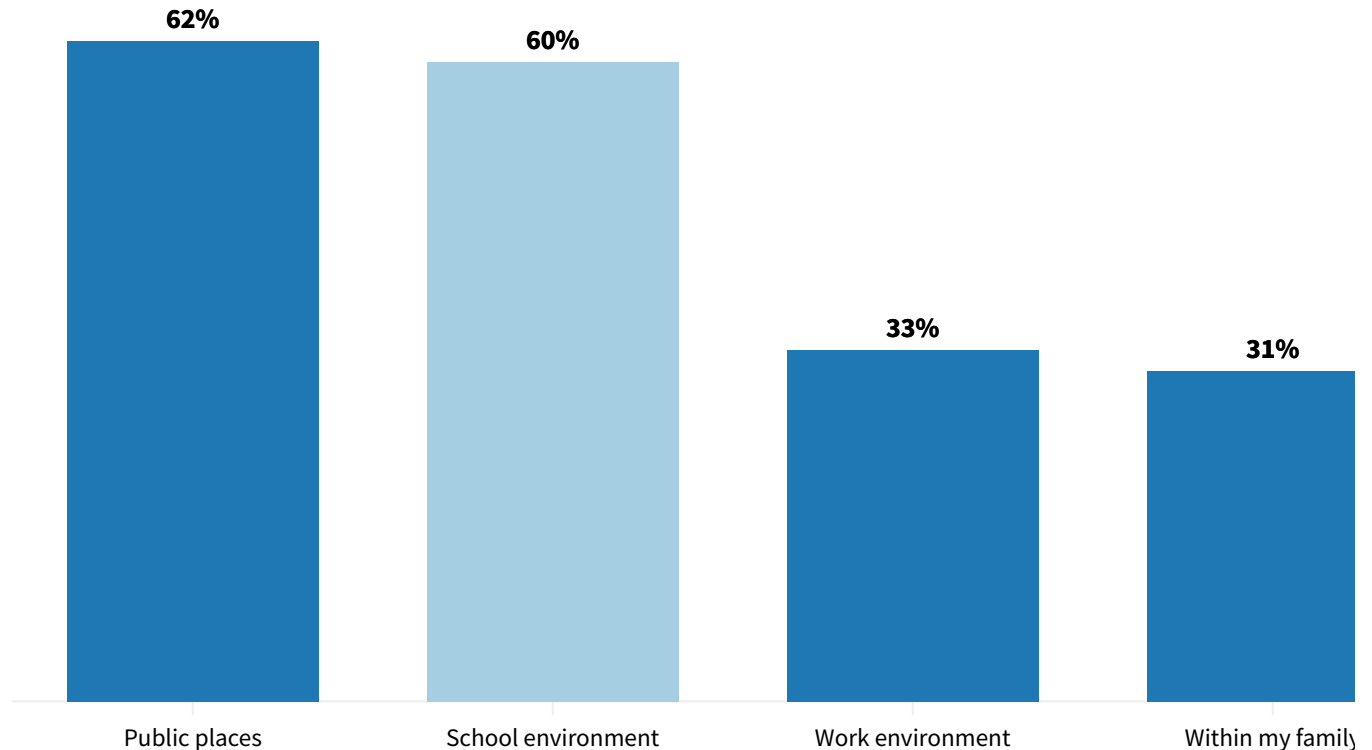
SOGI 1 2 3, which stands for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, is an online learning tool kit for educators. Scout Gray, the SOGI 1 2 3 program lead, said the program focuses on providing resources to make it as easy as possible for teachers to integrate SOGI content into their classrooms.

“We do know from research that the majority of educators want to be SOGI-inclusive, but don’t always feel they know how,” they said. “And that’s where we come in.”

Public places and schools are where students experienced the most bullying in connection with sexual orientation and gender identity, according to Jasmin Roy Foundation’s LGBTQ+ Realities Survey. Seventy-five percent of LGBTQ+ respondents were bullied and 45% of heterosexual cisgender respondents experienced bullying, the results show.

Environment where bullying was experienced in connection orientation/gender identity

Survey question: In what types of environments did you find yourself being a victim of bullying, threats or hurtf orientation/gender identity?



Source: Jasmin Roy Foundation. [LGBT+ Realities Survey \(2017\)](#).

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As of December 2016, the Ministry of Education requires all B.C. school districts and independent schools to include specific references to SOGI in their anti-bullying policies. However, some SOGI educators emphasize that policies are not enough.

"It's the daily pieces that contribute to culture and will continually send a message to students on what's okay and what's not," said Tanya Boteju, the SOGI lead educator and senior English teacher at York House School. "What are the kids seeing when they walk down the hallways? What are they noticing about the adults in their lives? You can have a policy, but if the day-to-day culture of inclusion and equity isn't there, then that's going to be a message that's sent no matter what."

Boteju said one of the most important elements that SOGI educators must take into consideration is intersectionality, a term coined by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how people's social identities overlap and how various forms of inequality operate together.

“It is easy for us to fall into those silos of working with a specific group of marginalized folks,” said Boteju. “But where does that intersect also with kids of color, with disabled kids and mental health, etc.? We can’t ignore the varied identities of these kids.”

Interventions that should be reinforced to promote the wellbeing and integration of LGBT people in Canadian Society

Survey Question: In your opinion, what are the interventions that would be most useful to reinforce in the future in order to encourage the integration and wellbeing of LGBTQ individuals in Canadian society today?



Source: Jasmin Roy Foundation. [LGBT+ Realities Survey \(2017\)](#).

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Out In Schools is an education program that aims to make positive change to school culture. As one of the collaborators of SOGI 1 2 3, Out In Schools brings films into classrooms all across B.C. to engage students in promoting safe and inclusive learning environments. With Out In Schools, students as young as fourth grade engage in facilitated discussions on homophobia, transphobia and bullying.

“It’s really important that we start these conversations from a young age, because it’s never too early to start building empathy and understanding of people around us,” Program Manager Miranda Rutty said.

Back in 2004, Steve Mulligan was in his second year of teaching when he began his efforts to integrate SOGI-inclusive education at his school.

"I had a student in the class who stood out," Mulligan said. "He was spending all his time with the girls and he was being teased for that. I felt that I needed to address that. I also thought that there's no reason that I shouldn't be talking to these kids about being gay."

From that point, Mulligan worked with the school administration to normalize queerness and ensure that students could express themselves freely without being bullied. Now as the SOGI educator at The University of British Columbia, he focuses on educating teacher candidates.

Almost two-thirds of survey respondents who completed their B.Ed. degrees reported not having been prepared at all in their degree programs to teach LGBTQ+ content, according to "The Every Teacher Project" published by The Manitoba Teachers' Society. These educators reported that there were some forms of LGBTQ+ content incorporated into very few courses, and over half of the respondents reported that none of their courses included LGBTQ+ content.

Number of B.Ed. Courses with LGBTQ Content

None Only 1 course More than 1 course

Source: The Manitoba Teachers' Society. [The Every Teacher Project \(2015\)](#).

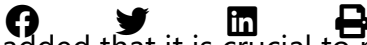
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Mulligan said he was motivated to get involved with creating the SOGI 1 2 3 website in order to help teachers become SOGI experts in their own school districts.

"Here in B.C., teachers have a lot of autonomy over how they teach and what they teach, which is a good thing," he said. "But also, sometimes with respect to human rights issues, it's not such a great thing because it means that teachers have the authority to leave things out."

Myriam Dumont, a parent and educator at Cleveland Elementary School, said SOGI education is about making different identities visible and accepted.

"Through not talking about SOGI, we're sending a really strong message to kids that it's not normal or it's strange or it's scary," she said. "Omitting things when we're educating kids sends them a really strong message."



Dumont added that it is crucial to normalize queerness both in and out of the classroom.

"If you think about my kids, they've had the benefit of growing up surrounded by queer families and their own queer family," she said. "So for them, it's not rocket science, it's not complicated, it's not challenging. It's just one of many family configurations."

For Gray, the work that they do is inspired by their belief that schools can easily be set up to be inclusive spaces. (<https://www.northwestern.edu/>)

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"Even if education like teaching tolerance won't fix everything, that doesn't mean that the schools themselves can't be places of inclusion," they said. "If educators and the education system have the tools that they need to create that inclusion, then that's a great place."

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The next step for SOGI 1 2 3 is to expand across Canada, according to Gray.

"There's so much we can build on and a lot that we can replicate in other provinces," they said. "We're definitely hearing a need. We are actively hearing from other provinces saying, 'Come here!' We just need to figure out how to do that."

Visit the SOGI 1 2 3 website. (<http://www.sogieducation.org/>)

Sian Shin is a social justice reporter at Medill, covering the LGBTQ+ community in Vancouver. You can follow her on Twitter at @sianshin. (<https://twitter.com/sianshin>)