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VALIDATING LGBTQ IDENTITIES IN INTERNATIONAL CLASSROOMS

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A context of debate in much of the international teaching literature is the extent to which issues of diversity can be meaningfully addressed in classroom contexts where expectations and roles of teachers and students, human rights legislation, and social attitudes towards various identities differ substantively. Integrating lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) perspectives in international classrooms can be fraught with particular complexity when considering that 73 countries around the globe outlaw homosexuality, and many more socially marginalize sexuality and gender diversity. The legal and social challenges may cause LGBTQ international educators to become isolated, and lead to further alienation of students with gender and sexual diverse backgrounds. We adopt the stance that validating diverse identities is an important and vital component of the work that international educators undertake around the world. Recruiters of international educators and leaders of international schools may wish to give serious thought as to how to support new and current teachers who in their overseas positions may be navigating contexts and situations where being LGBTQ presents different challenges than in their home countries.

Here, we share three possible avenues stemming from work undertaken in the Canadian context that we hope will meaningfully inform international conversations on integrating LGBTQ perspectives in global classrooms and validating LGBTQ identities.

1) STARTING WITH TERMINOLOGY

Understanding the rich complexity of sexual and gender diversity, and particularly, differences that go beyond the LGBTQ identity-category, is still a work in progress, and one that can and should involve the understanding, input, and contributions of students and teachers in international schooling contexts. Reasons for not identifying as LGBTQ initially vary, and include issues relating to safety and acceptance. Moreover, this identification assumes a certain degree of disclosure (or being *out*), which sustains a Western practice that prioritizes a sexual and gender identity over expression, and constrains people who find these terms not relatable to their cultural backgrounds. There are several situations that can conceivably arise in international schools where advocating for an LGBTQ rights approach might not have as strong effect, and indeed can be problematic. Immigrant, refugee, and other minoritized populations, international students, and Indigenous peoples contribute multiple perspectives on sexual and gender diversity and ways of expressing diverse backgrounds. Mizzi (2014) suggests that including sexual and gender diversity perspectives in pre-departure orientations provides an opportunity for greater exploration of human diversity. For example, people may not identify as LGBTQ but consider themselves a sexual or gender minority or someone with a same-sex sexuality, or engage in terminologies that are more culturally and linguistically appropriate (e.g., hijira people in India).

Moving forward in educational spaces involves exploring and understanding how school personnel and students perceive sexual and gender diversity (e.g., Airton, 2016).

2) COMPARATIVELY DISCUSSING POLICY

Another avenue in which meaningful discussions about diverse identities can happen in international classrooms is through comparative discussions of policies in different settings. It is helpful to provide examples of progressive legislation in various contexts, and explore what local adaptations of relevant policies might entail. Canadian education as but one global example is turning a historic page when it comes to understanding and supporting sexual and gender diversity in schools. Given the growth of school-based gay-straight alliances and education diversity policies, there is indeed interest and momentum to advance a discussion around being inclusive of sexual and gender minorities. International schools may wish to signal inclusion through similar developments, or, more broadly, forming human rights or social diversity clubs. Engaging students and staff alike with research into LGBTQ-inclusive policy developments can afford possibilities for shaping international learning contexts in ways that are more inclusive (e.g., Manitoba Education, 2017).

3) VALIDATING VOICES

An important aspect of creating inclusive international schools is to validate and support an array of voices in the classroom. It is well-established that there are sexual and gender diverse educators and students working and learning in international schools, and we hope to more deeply understand their experiences. A research project entitled *Out There: A Study of LGBTQ Educators Working Overseas*, is currently underway by a team at the University of Manitoba. The project opens up a necessary discussion around the growing diversity within the education community with a particular focus on Western LGBTQ educators who work overseas in Asian, African, Caribbean, Middle Eastern, or Latin American countries. International education can benefit tremendously from the experiences of LGBTQ educators by way of enhancing knowledge on global sexuality and gender politics in the teaching profession worldwide. LGBTQ educators and allies alike can better connect with students and colleagues who do not identify as LGBTQ but may consider themselves non-heterosexual or gender fluid, and provide some leadership into how policies, curricula, and teaching practice can be more responsive to growing aspects of sexual and gender diversity.

The study is in the recruitment and data collection phases. Study participants (LGBTQ International Educators) first experience an in-depth interview that focuses on their current and future work contexts, how they negotiate their identity, and how they anticipate the destination country and workplace influencing their knowledge, aims, practices, perceptions, and assumptions. Second, study participants take photographs of public objects to visually represent and narrate their experiences. Please see an example below from a recent photovoice project in Shanghai. The photo is of bicycles to remind LGBTQ educators to exercise to help manage stress. Study participants then share and reflect on their photographs with the research team. Through this project, Canadian education can be informed by the experiences of teachers, and

then consider how to navigate broader conversations around human diversity. For more information about this project, or to become a participant, please visit www.outthereresearch.ca.

References

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