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Journal of Catholic Education

Volume 22
Issue 3 *The Challenges and Opportunities of
Including the LGBTQ Community in Catholic
Education*

Article 1

2019

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Recommended Citation

Huchting, K., & Fisher, E. (2019). Introduction to the Special Issue: The Challenges and Opportunities of Including the LGBTQ Community in Catholic Education. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 22 (3).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2203012019>

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Introduction to the Special Issue: The Challenges and Opportunities of Including the LGBTQ Community in Catholic Education

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This special issue is dedicated to disseminating recent research about the opportunities and challenges of including the LGBTQ community in Catholic education. The relationship between Catholic educational institutions and people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) can be complicated. As Catholic organizations, Catholic schools are governed by the rules of the church, and as educational institutions, Catholic schools must be responsive to the needs of students, families, and communities, as well as to changes in the larger sociopolitical landscape. LGBTQ people, whether students, parents, teachers, or administrators, exist in Catholic educational institutions, yet there has been a dearth of research on this topic to help guide Catholic educators. This special issue is a big step forward in beginning to fill the gap in our knowledge about the experiences happening within Catholic schools for the LGBTQ community, thus informing practice. Based on this issue, we encourage more research about human sexuality and gender identity to inform practices by Catholic educators, responsive to the needs of all.

Keywords

LGBTQ, inclusion, dialogue, social justice

As is the case in society at large, the relationship between Catholic educational institutions and people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) can be complicated.¹ As Catholic organizations, Catholic schools are governed by the rules of the Church, and as educational institutions, Catholic schools must be responsive to the needs of students, families, and communities, as well as to changes in the larger sociopolitical landscape. LGBTQ people, whether students, parents, teachers, or administrators, exist in Catholic educational institutions, yet there has been a

¹ The acronym LGBTQ is used throughout this article as a term that is inclusive of any person who is a sexual or gender minority. These terms are further defined in the section, The Basics of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

dearth of research on this topic to help guide Catholic educators. This special issue is dedicated to disseminating recent research about the opportunities and challenges of including the LGBTQ community in Catholic education.

Over the past 30 years, there has been an abundance of research on LGBTQ issues in public education, yet a search of the *Journal of Catholic Education* archives during this timeframe indicates that only five studies directly addressed LGBTQ issues. The importance of this topic is both timely and relevant. In 2016, an entire roundtable session was dedicated to the topic of the LGBTQ community and Catholic education at the American Education Research Association (AERA) annual conference. In 2017, Fr. James Martin, S.J. published a popular book dedicated to discussing how a respectful relationship might be established between the Catholic Church and the LGBT community (see book review, this issue). Meanwhile, author Dr. Tonya Callaghan published a book in 2018 examining homophobia in Canadian Catholic schools (see book review, this issue), and the 2019 AERA annual conference showcased a symposium, organized by the Catholic Education Special Interest Group, dedicated to understanding queerness and the Catholic education mission. While only a few examples, these recent conferences and books indicate a growing desire for the dissemination of scholarly work on this topic to inform Catholic educators, who have had to balance the doctrine of the Catholic Church and the needs of those in their school community. The purpose of this special issue is to provide a forum for academic research that has undergone the scholarly inquiry process and to stimulate dialogue among Catholic educators and researchers.

According to the National Research Council (2002), the inquiry process includes: significant questions that can be addressed empirically; rigorous and systematic methods to investigate research questions; the application of relevant theory to empirical data; logical and explicit reasoning for conclusions; and dissemination for scrutiny and critique. It is this last step of the scholarly inquiry process—dissemination—where academics share their work for public scrutiny and consumption. This last step of the research process indicates a commitment to the inherent critical nature of the scientific approach to knowledge by inviting skepticism and encouraging future research to continue academic dialogue that can improve educational settings.

Research stimulates and enhances dialogue and this process is reciprocal in that dialogue stimulates and enhances future research. “Dialogue is a democratic process that acknowledges and respects all parties” (Dessel, Rogge, & Garlington, 2006, p. 304). It is a unique form of conversation; at its essence

exists a willingness to engage with others who may hold different views and opinions. It involves a willingness to listen. Dialogue does not mean inherent agreement, consensus, or standardized action, yet it has “the potential to improve collective inquiry processes, to produce coordinated action among collectives, and to bring about genuine social change” (Isaacs, 1996, p. 20). Thus, dialogue can generate more informed research, inform practice, and improve conditions for all involved. For controversial topics in Catholic education, especially those that seem to perpetuate social injustice, there is an immediate need for both dialogue and research to begin to document and to understand the real impact on individuals. “Dialogue creates a context that reinforces the notion that change is possible, and transforms relationships toward positive social change” (Dessel et al., 2006, p. 304). For controversial topics, dialogue brings into focus the possibilities for genuine openness, listening, and transforming. Through the process of dialogue individuals and institutions can grow and better understand each other. Even when disagreement exists, the process of dialogue builds trust and greater connection.

Through this scientific process of dialogue and questioning, our collective knowledge improves, creating the potential for educational practices to change. Given the understudied nature of this topic and the complex relationship that exists between the Catholic Church and the LGBTQ community, this special issue is a big step forward in beginning to fill the gap in our knowledge about the experiences happening within Catholic schools for the LGBTQ community, thus informing practice. Catholic school educators may therefore benefit from the work showcased in this issue.

The Need for Research on the LGBTQ Community

When communities are not represented in research, when experiences are not identified and documented through a systematic approach to inquiry, a message of exclusion—not inclusion—is sent. This is a social justice issue and more research is needed to better understand the experiences of the LGBTQ community in Catholic education. LGBTQ people experience high levels of discrimination and oppression in society. In the United States, for example, the civil rights of this highly marginalized group continue to be the subject of debate, and federal laws fail to provide basic protections, such as those against housing and employment discrimination, as documented by a national report (National Public Radio, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, & Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, 2017). Schools are a microcosm of society and national research has investigated the school climate for LGBTQ students

(Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018; Olsen, Kann, Vivolo-Kantor, Kinchen, & McManus, 2014). Findings are unequivocal: schools reproduce hostile conditions for LGBTQ youth. LGBTQ students reported significantly high levels of verbal and physical harassment and discriminatory policies at school, which led them to miss more school, have lower grades, and be more likely to drop out (Kosciw et al., 2018). In addition to harassment and physical assault, LGBTQ youth also experience higher levels of depression, substance abuse, and suicide attempts (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Kosciw et al., 2018; Olsen et al., 2014).

While such research is more extensive in public schools, this may be a particularly important social justice issue for Catholic educators, as LGBTQ students attending religious schools reported the highest levels of anti-LGBTQ discrimination compared to students attending secular schools (Kosciw et al., 2018). The opportunities to include the LGBTQ community in Catholic education aligns with tenets of Catholic Social Teaching (CST).² Three tenets of CST (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1990; 2005)—the life and dignity of the human person, the preferential option for the vulnerable, and solidarity and the common good—are essential for creating a socially just and inclusive educational experience for all. These tenets of CST align with the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools, which encourage Catholic school educators to act “in service of social justice” (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012, p. 5). Taking into account the experiences of LGBTQ people in Catholic schools, Catholic educators are therefore called to consider the dignity of each human person, to protect the vulnerable, and to walk in solidarity with the oppressed. For those committed to the notion of inclusion of all—that all are welcome—this special issue may provide context, relevant literature, and transferable knowledge to inform Catholic schools. The purpose of this special issue is to better understand the challenges and opportunities within Catholic education to address the rights and needs of those who are LGBTQ.

2 CST is a series of seven principles informed by the Catechism of the Catholic Church, as well as encyclicals and letters written by popes to guide individuals committed to bringing about justice in an unjust modern world (Bradley-Levine & Carr, 2015; Massaro, 2011). The seven principles include: (a) life and dignity of the human person; (b) call to family, community, and participation; (c) rights and responsibilities; (d) option for the poor and vulnerable; (e) the dignity of work and the rights of workers; (f) solidarity and the common good; (g) care for God’s creation.

The Basics of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

To situate research dedicated to the inclusion of the LGBTQ community, we reviewed medical and mental health sources to provide an overview of terminology. First, sexual orientation and gender identity are distinct but related aspects of an individual's identity. *Sexual orientation* refers to an individual's enduring romantic and physical attractions, while *gender identity* refers to an individual's internal feeling of maleness or femaleness. Major medical and mental health associations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Psychological Association (APA), are unequivocal in recognizing that sexual orientation and gender identity are part of the spectrum of typical development, are not a choice, and cannot be changed (APA, 2012; APA, 2015; Just the Facts Coalition, 2008). Second, any discussion of LGBTQ individuals needs to begin with a shared understanding of terminology and respectful language. What follows are commonly accepted definitions, however, many individuals define their sexual orientation or gender identity using other terms. Several sources provide more detailed and up to date terminology.³

- Heterosexual – refers to an individual who is romantically and physically attracted to someone of the opposite gender. *Straight* is often used synonymously with heterosexual.
- Lesbian (L) – refers to a girl/woman who is romantically and physically attracted to girls/women.
- Gay (G) – refers to a boy/man who is romantically and physically attracted to boys/men. Gay is also used as an all-encompassing term for anyone with a non-heterosexual orientation.
- Bisexual (B) – refers to an individual who is romantically and physically attracted to both girls/women and boys/men.
- Cisgender – refers to an individual whose gender identity aligns with their biological sex.
- Transgender (T) – refers to an individual whose gender identity does not align with their biological sex.
- Gender expression – refers to how different individuals express their gender identity, such as through clothing, hair style, and name.

³ For a Glossary of Terminology see Human Rights Campaign: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>; or Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network: <https://www.glsen.org/article/gender-terminology-discussion-guide>

- Gender diversity/gender fluidity – refers to the spectrum of gender identity and expression.
- Questioning (Q) – refers to an individual who is exploring their sexual orientation and/or gender identity but is not yet certain of how they identify. Q can also refer to *queer*, which can be used to describe anyone who is not heterosexual or cisgender, but only should be used by those who are part of the LGBTQ community.
- Intersex (I) – refers to an individual who is born with one of multiple conditions that leads to atypical development of physical sex characteristic. Sometimes the acronym LGBTQ includes “I” at the end to be inclusive of those who are intersex.
- Sexual and gender minority (SGM) – refers to any individual who is non-heterosexual or non-cisgender.

Similarly, there are terms that should be avoided as they may be considered inaccurate, reductionist, or disrespectful. These include:

- Sexual preference – this term implies that sexual orientation, including being heterosexual, is a choice.
- Gay lifestyle – this term suggests that there is one lifestyle assumed by those in the LGBTQ community rather than recognizing the vast diversity that exists among members of the community.
- Queer – historically, this has been a derogatory term that more recently has been reclaimed as a term of empowerment for those who are not heterosexual or cisgender. As previously mentioned, this term should only be used by those within the LGBTQ community.
- The homosexuals or the transgenders – these phrases are often used to create a separation between “us” and “them” and demonstrate exclusion and intolerance.

Overall, respectful and first-person language are always encouraged. When in doubt, asking individuals what they prefer to be called is a thoughtful approach.

Intersecting Identities and Experiences of LGBTQ Individuals in Catholic Education

Sexual orientation and gender identity represent two aspects of an individual's multiple, intersecting identities, which also may include race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, to name a few.⁴ Religion is another important aspect of identity; one that can often seem in direct conflict with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, a theme discussed in the book *Building a Bridge* by Fr. Martin (2017) (see book review, this issue). Yet to send the message that these aspects of self are incompatible or that an individual must deny one aspect of self to be accepted by others is to ask someone to live an inauthentic life and denies their lived experiences. These themes were highlighted by Maher (2007) in a retrospective study of 25 lesbian and gay Catholic high school alumni. Maher used the term *dis-integration* to capture the disconnect and forced compartmentalization of aspects of their identities experienced by these young people, which he finds contradictory to the purpose of Catholic education to integrate "faith, knowledge, experience, school, community, and family" (p. 468).

Overall, there is very little written about the experiences of LGBTQ students in K-12 Catholic schools, but research at the college level may offer a bit more insight. In general, college students who identify as Catholic display high levels of anti-homosexual attitudes (Finlay & Walther, 2003) but the news is not all bleak. While one 2016 study found that LGBTQ students attending Catholic universities reported more symptoms of depression than those attending non-specified Christian universities (Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller), other research suggests that LGBTQ students attending Catholic Institutions of Higher Education generally fare better than students at other religiously affiliated educational institutions (Maher, Sever, & Pichler, 2008). Catholic college students reported more accepting attitudes about gay and lesbian individuals when they had more personal experiences with them (Maher et al., 2008). This finding was similar to a study showing that exposure to diverse perspectives and worldviews led to "less authoritarian and more personal, socially conscious, socially compassionate" views of homosexuality among Catholic-educated university students (Callegher, 2010, p. 326).

Research examining how Catholic school personnel (including teachers, student affairs practitioners, and school leaders) engage the LGBTQ com-

⁴ Intersectionality is the interplay of multiple identities that simultaneously impact an individual's life experiences (Kirmayer, 2012; National Association of School Psychologists, 2017).

munity is also limited. Estanek (1998) highlighted recommendations for student affairs personnel working with gay and lesbian students at Catholic colleges and universities, including challenging discrimination and respecting and including the community in the life of the school. Recent research (Huchting, Bickett, & Fisher, 2017) examined a graduate school leadership preparation program at a Catholic University and found that LGBTQ graduates questioned whether they were welcome in the program given the Catholic nature of the University. Findings point to the need for more intentional and welcoming messaging by faculty and more representation in curriculum. Such research informs our collective understanding of the experiences of the LGBTQ community in Catholic educational contexts and begins to inform the dialogue about educational practice for inclusion. More research is definitely needed.

Adding to the Research

Research is a critical way in which phenomena are identified and documented, and currently there is a decided lack of research on the LGBTQ community in Catholic education. With the framework of CST as its backdrop, this special issue provides an opportunity for researchers to begin to fill the gap on research dedicated to this topic with the ultimate goal of informing practice in Catholic schools. In this special issue, we curated three peer-reviewed manuscripts and three reviews of published books, all focused on the challenges and opportunities of inclusion for the LGBTQ community. Further, we find both US and international perspectives represented, documenting and identifying current issues occurring in Catholic educational settings. While these articles do not represent the full range of experiences for LGBTQ individuals in Catholic schools, they contribute to the field by starting the research conversation dedicated to opportunities and challenges of including this community in Catholic schools.

When considering LGBTQ people, Pope Francis publicly stated, “Who am I to judge them?” affirming for all Catholics the need to treat all individuals with respect. Yet, the debate continues over whether LGBTQ individuals can serve as ministers of the Catholic faith in schools—a theme found in the comparative international article by Callaghan and van Leent (this issue). In this study, authors compare the lived experiences of non-heterosexual Catholic school teachers and their allies in Australia and Canada. The public nature of Catholic schools in these contexts further complicates jurisdiction rights for employment that possibly prevent the inclusion of LGBTQ teach-

ers in Catholic schools. In the article by Herriot and Callaghan (this issue), the authors critically review the case of a transgender student in a Canadian Catholic school through the lens of queer and trans theology. Through their analysis, the authors assert that trans-affirming school policies can be created in ways that are compatible with Catholic teachings. The article by Hughes (this issue) captures the hostile climate that exists for LGBTQ college students at a Catholic university and how the very message of inclusion is contradicted when LGBTQ college students experience microaggressions. Recommendations are offered for promoting a more inclusive environment. Finally, book reviews include a discussion of how homophobia and transphobia in schools work to undermine inclusion (*Homophobia in the Hallways* by Dr. Tonya Callaghan; reviewed by Roy Quinto, this issue); how schools can do more than create safe spaces to include LGBTQ students (*Safe is not Enough* by Dr. Michael Sadowski; reviewed by Danielle Hernandez, this issue); and how the church and the LGBTQ community can respectfully work together to create a better and more inclusive relationship (*Building a Bridge* by Fr. James Martin, S.J.; reviewed by Lalo Moreno, this issue). Together, these publications highlight the current challenges for including the LGBTQ community in Catholic education but also the opportunities.

The articles in this special issue add to the limited research base and should serve as a call to action for researchers across the disciplines of LGBTQ studies and Catholic education. We recognize the challenges of doing this type of research given current church and international politics affecting K-12 and higher education, and commend the researchers for their willingness to engage with those political forces. In 2007, Maher and Sever identified three barriers faced by educators addressing sexuality issues in Catholic high schools: fear of community reaction, lack of administrative support, and a perception that “Catholic identity” could be compromised. Sadly, more than a decade later, those same issues seem to persist for educators and researchers alike.

Additionally, there are limits to the scope of this special issue. The focus of the three articles in this special issue largely remains about adults—college students or school personnel working in Catholic educational contexts. The study that examined the case of a transgender student utilized publicly available data (Herriot & Callaghan, this issue). Certainly, ethical concerns related to empirical research with youth may be part of the reason for the focus on adults. For this topic, especially, obtaining parental consent would be required under responsible conduct of research guidelines, but may pose the

ethical dilemma of breaching confidentiality if the minor is LGBTQ but is not “out” to parents. Finally, the context within which each study is situated matters in terms of the transferability and generalizability of knowledge. One article focuses on the context of a Jesuit, Catholic university setting; another compares the context of Canada to that of Australia; and the last reviews a case of a transgender student in Canada. The extent to which this collective information informs practice is contextually bound, furthering the call for more research to inform educational practice.

This call to action could not be more timely. While finalizing this special issue, CNN published news that the Archbishop of Indianapolis informed a Jesuit high school in Indiana that it could no longer call itself “Catholic” because the school refused to fire a teacher in a same-sex marriage (Burke, 2019). Just days later, under pressure to avoid a similar fate from the same Archbishop, a private Catholic high school in Indianapolis fired a gay teacher in a public, same-sex marriage, in what they called an “agonizing decision” (Adams, 2019). Additionally, while finalizing this special issue, the Vatican published a report on gender in education and human sexuality calling into question the ways in which gender research and views of identity have been defined via social science research (Donnini, 2019). The document, however, appears to advocate for dialogue, encouraging Catholic educators to consider these complicated matters with an open mind. In that way, we align with the notion of dialogue and encourage future research about human sexuality and gender identity to inform practices by Catholic educators, responsive to the needs of ALL. We should all support researchers who engage in this brave work, including the authors in this special issue, and we call for more research to contribute to respectful dialogue that promotes non-judgmental respect and inclusion of the LGBTQ community in Catholic educational spaces.

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