Safe Schools: The Threat From Within?

Donn Short

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DONN SHORT

In Ontario, the first steps toward implementing safe school legislation and policies began in the early 1990s, with public demands for more surveillance and safety measures in schools following several violent incidents. In many urban schools, principals began putting security guards in their schools, installing electronic surveillance, and demanding that students wear identification tags. The emphasis was on discipline and zero tolerance, with the brunt of those efforts aimed squarely at a school’s own student population. In June, 2000, the Ontario Ministry of Education passed the Safe Schools Act, which set out a list of offences that could trigger expulsion, suspension, and other disciplinary responses. Interestingly, it did not define safety.

At the same time a parallel effort was playing out in Toronto public schools, culminating in 1999 when the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) adopted The Equity Foundation Statement – a comprehensive commitment to equity and a rally against racism, homophobia, sexism, and oppression based on class.
Les gardes de sécurité, la surveillance électronique, les insignes d'identification d'élèves, la discipline et la tolérance zéro caractérisent les politiques de sécurité scolaire de nombreuses écoles urbaines en Ontario. En 2000, le ministère de l’Éducation de l’Ontario a adopté la Loi sur la sécurité dans les écoles, qui énumère les infractions susceptibles de provoquer le renvoi, la suspension et d’autres mesures disciplinaires, sans définir, toutefois, la sécurité. Parallèlement, le Conseil scolaire de Toronto a adopté The Equity Foundation Statement en 1999 – un engagement global à réaliser l'équité et à lutter contre le racisme, l'homophobie, le sexisme et l'oppression fondée sur la classe sociale. Cet article contraste les conceptualisations de la sécurité et de l'équité des élèves et du personnel enseignant, ainsi que la façon dont ces aspects sont vécus au jour le jour.
STANDING UP FOR EQUITY: TWO TEACHERS SPEAK OUT

Sharon Dominick teaches English and Media Studies at Burton School – not its real name – a high school of over 1,200 students in metropolitan Toronto. One student described Burton School as a school for “rejects” and that anyone with academic ability – and means – transfers out. A large number of the students are Black, although their numbers are dwindling.

While the students view Sharon as a person of some leadership, because she is White, both she and Melanie Rangan – another teacher in Sharon’s department – believe the real power in the school is held by the male physical education department and the “tech” department, who dominate Burton School’s Safe Schools Committee and Dress Code Committee. In Sharon and Melanie’s view, these two committees use their power to control students, not to make school space safer. Melanie attributes the undisguised and widespread use of this controlling power to the Safe Schools Act, which allows schools to dictate student behaviour and remove students from school in the name of safety.

Now, this is a very heavy thing, to get rid of students, but they do it under this whole umbrella of making the school safer for students. [These two committees] are very powerful groups because they really do make the rules.

Melanie offers a calm assessment of her own role in the school, describing herself as “a colonized person”.

The students see that I am one of the unimportant visible minority teachers in the school. They know that if they need help, they have to look to the White teachers who are either in the Tech Department or who are closer to the administration. And that’s the only way they can get help.

When a Black male principal replaced the White principal two years ago, membership on the two committees opened up, and Melanie joined both. But even with the new principal, she saw these committees ignoring equity issues and trying to “shape the identity of our students.” The rules seemed aimed solely at Black students and “most of what the school was concerned with was controlling who they were.”

Under the Safe Schools Act, one of the first things the school did was to implement a hat policy. According to Melanie, “students were not allowed to cover their heads – no hats or head coverings of any kind.” Both Sharon and Melanie understood this rule to be directed at keeping students’ faces visible for the two security guards who patrolled the school, as well as for the cameras. And yet, girls were told they could not use scarves or barrettes to manage their hair. Melanie talked about the policy.

When I went to the Safe School Committee, I brought up the point that Black people have different texture of hair. It’s very wiry, very curly, and it stands up...And maybe the students tie their hair in scarves or whatever they do, to hold their hair back. If they don’t do this, they either have to straighten it, they have to tie it up. They have to spend money to fix their hair if it’s not shaved off or cut off short.

Later, a committee member said in a staff meeting, “Well that might teach the Black kids to wash their hair before they come to school, and maybe then it would lie down.”

In Melanie’s view, the “crackdown” on hair, and the implementation of other security measures in the name of school safety, was really a “crackdown” on the identities of visible minority students, particularly Black students, primarily Black male students. The Safe Schools Act was being used to materially and symbolically reconfigure the composition of students at Burton School – and at other schools. The rules restructured the school in one of two ways, either by eliminating Black students from the school’s population or by reconstructing the pupils who remain as “White”. In this sense, the dress code, for example, could be read as a cultural device reinforcing dominant social relations and restricting cultural identities.

SAFETY, EQUITY, AND SEXUAL MINORITIES

Targeting visible minority students has had a corresponding and inevitable chilling effect on the environment of the school for sexual minority students. Both Sharon and Melanie told me that sexual minority students would not come out at Burton School.

“Sexual minority students are not on the administration’s radar and they know it,” Melanie told me. “I am aware of one girl who tried to come out. I think when they do want to come out, they get bullied and picked on. They transfer as soon as they are in Grade 11. I think they’re afraid to come out if they’re gay and lesbian because nobody respects anybody here. It’s a whole cycle of control of some, neglect of others.”

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The TDSB’s Equity Foundation Statement calls for significant content of queer issues in curricula and is thorough and specific in championing the equality rights of these students. It also provides the means of recognizing, accommodating, and allowing safe and welcoming spaces for minority students – particularly sexual minority youth.

For most sexual minority students, the emphasis on safety, security, surveillance, and punishment found in the Safe Schools Act does not translate into safe schools, even where incidents of physical violence are low or subject to a quick response. So what is the potential of safe school legislation and equity policies to combat the bullying and oppression of sexual minority students in high schools? I spent three months in ten Toronto high schools (including Burton), interviewing approximately 25 sexual minority students, to find out how they define safety – particularly in the absence of legal guidance – and how they perceive ways in which safety is pursued at their schools.

Most of the students I interviewed indicated that safety policies should incorporate equity, but most also reported that their own schools pursued safety in terms of security rather than equity, with an emphasis on responding to physical violence.

I asked Sarah, a sixteen year old, White lesbian, if she thought her school was a safe place.

At this school, safety is framed as an issue of control, not equity. Security guards, surveillance cameras, always talking about crime and the dress code. The dress code forbids hats so that our faces are not obscured for the security cameras. Baggy pants and anything to do with hip hop culture is out. There’s a toxic environment at this school. It’s not safe for students because we don’t see safety in the same way the school does. Queer students don’t even register. Noth-

A FAILED POLICY

According to Melanie and Sharon, the school’s refusal to conceptualize safety in terms of equity is contributing to the very problems the Safe School Committee had intended to eliminate. They insist that such a re-conceptualization is the only way to create safe schools for visible minority students and queer students. Students who were targeted victims of “safety as control” and “safety as security” have rebelled against it – and were consequently removed from the school.

Most of the control issues revolve around the dress code, which strikes at the heart of student identity. In the name of security, the Burton School Dress Code Committee first banned coats, and then backpacks, from the classroom, on the grounds that they could be used to hide drugs or weapons. Then they decided that if students were going to house their belongings in lockers, the Committee should have access to the lockers, and so imposed an additional rule that required students to purchase locks from the school. Failing to comply with any of these rules resulted in suspension from the school or other disciplinary action.

When I was visiting Burton School, the Dress Code Committee was discussing whether or not to introduce a school uniform – white shirt and dark, tight pants for boys, dark pants or skirt for girls. According to Melanie, this is a direct affront to student identity.

It was like they weren’t allowing the kids to be Black. They had to try to be White, by dressing and straightening their hair and doing things that looked more like the White culture.

For Melanie, lanyards – which she compared to “dog tags” – were the most intrusive control mechanism used by the administration and an impediment to learning. Several students and teachers noted that students constantly lost their lanyards, and if they were caught without one by the security guards or in random classroom checks, they were suspended. “Sometimes it’s a day; sometimes they can’t come back unless they buy a new lanyard. So strictly speaking, without these ID cards, they can do nothing in the school. It’s policing, not a safety issue.”

STUDENTS SPEAK OUT

Sharon and I are sitting in her classroom nearing the end of lunch period. Lots of students came to Sharon’s class during lunch to use the computer and because they feel safer in her classroom than in the cafeteria or in the area outside the school. When class starts, Sharon introduces me to the class. “Everybody, I want you to meet Donn. Donn is interested in safe schools. Does anybody have any questions for Donn? Use your hands.”

Immediately, several hands wave in the air. “What do schools have to do with the law?” I am prepared for this question. I mention the Education Act and the Safe Schools Act; I talk about school boards and policies; and I explain how the laws and policies regulate schools. I also talk about informal laws – the ways in which students regulated themselves according to their own “laws”.

“Oh, okay,” says Sharon, “Let’s discuss school safety. What are we told will keep us safe? You don’t have to use hands.” One student shouts, “Lanyards.” Other answers produced a long list:

- lanyards
- security guards
- police
- cameras
- rules

“Okay, let’s make another list. What are we told about equity?”

There is absolute silence in the classroom. Sharon repeats the question. One student ventures, “Muslim prayer on Friday?” Sharon writes down the one response on the board and asks, “Anything else? Okay, then, what is equity policies do we have?”

A tall black male student, Wayne, says: “There is no equity. It’s garbage.”

This gets the ball rolling. and there are several answers are shouted at once: “Dress code...No hats...No nothin’...Black students are stopped more.” Sharon listens until there are no more suggestions. “And is that equity?”

Wayne answers again: “Here it is. Equity is shit.”
CONNECTING THE DOTS

At Burton, as at most of the schools I visited, there was a disconnect between students’ conceptualization of safety and equity and how they experienced them on a day-to-day basis. I did find two schools—just two—where the students felt that equity and social justice were integrated into the concept of safety.

At these two schools, the sexual minority students I interviewed indicated that safety was pursued in terms of equity, emphasizing equality and incorporating queer realities into the curriculum and in extracurricular events, such as school dances and assemblies. At one school, students characterized their school’s approach to safety in terms of a general climate concerned with social justice issues. The students at this school were aware of the TDSB’s Equity Foundation Statement, but felt it was just “a starting point”.

There is little doubt that the work being undertaken by students and teachers like Sharon and Melanie is complicated, political, and long-term. These stories—not just the stories of their students, but of their experience as well—are a diary of accomplishments and resistance on the ground. Sharon concluded, “The school fights everything I want to do. My goals don’t fit with their idea of what makes a safe school.”

The purpose of my research has been and will continue to be to listen to the voices of sexual minority students, grounded in their own experiences, and to attempt to understand how they perceive what most threatens their personal identities, as well as their physical safety, as one means to measure the effectiveness of constantly shifting conceptions of how to construct safe schools. Only with this knowledge can more effective reforms be imagined. Other researchers have produced data that confirms the legitimacy of the experiences of the students and teachers I interviewed.1

Since Ontario first introduced the Safe Schools Act in 2000, the legislation and policies have been amended significantly to deal with bullying as a specific threat to school safety, with a greater focus on homophobic bullying. We need more research to understand how successful those amendments have been and to what extent the needs of sexual and other minority students are being met.

DR. DONN SHORT is an Assistant Professor of Law at Robson Hall Faculty of Law at the University of Manitoba. He is the founding editor of the Canadian Journal of Human Rights.

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NOTE