

## JUST SIX QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



### Key Details

#### KEY WORDS

Gay-Straight Alliances; Education Policy; LGBTQ Youth; Activism; Bill 13; Ontario

#### POPULATION GROUP

LGBTTQ Youth

#### STEPPING UP THEMES

Health & Wellness  
Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety  
Civic Engagement & Youth Leadership

#### RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario

#### SOURCE

Academic

**“Section 12, however, was influenced by youth activists who asserted their queerness and demanded more than broad-strokes anti-bullying initiatives: this section has the potential to allow marginalized students claim to space in their schools from which to imagine and enact more equitable futures” (p. 340).**

## Who runs the schools?:

### LGBTQ youth activism and Ontario’s Bill 13

#### 1. What is the research about?

This research explores “the interactions that led to the inclusion of protections for LGBTQ student organizations in Ontario’s Accepting Schools Act” (p. 340), known as Bill 13. This legislation, passed in 2012, amended the Education Act of Ontario to incorporate a directive that all publicly-funded schools in the province, secular and Catholic, support students who want to establish, name, and run gay-straight alliances (GSA). A GSA is a student club, often youth-led, that takes “on a variety of activist and educational roles within school communities with the purpose of making schools safer and more affirming for LGBTQ students” (p. 342).

The authors provide an analysis of the youth activism behind the legislation, and seek to “reinsert the voices of LGBTQ youth activists into the story” (p. 340), specifically with respect to Section 12 of Bill 13, which dictates that students must be allowed to lead and name student groups, including those that “push for justice around gender, sexuality, race, and disability” (p. 340).

The authors also situate themselves in the research as queer scholars in education – Shabtay as a researcher in child and youth studies, including youth-led advocacy, and Iskander as one of the young activists (age 16 at the time) who led the political mobilization to influence Bill 13 after they were denied permission to start a GSA at St. Joseph Catholic Secondary School in Mississauga, Ontario.

#### 2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in Canada and is focused on accounts of events that took place in Ontario.

#### 3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth activists, specifically those students who mobilized as the “unofficial organization and network” (p. 342) *Catholic Students for GSAs*, which included students from 11 different schools spanning three Ontario Catholic school boards.

#### 4. How was the research done?

The authors conducted a thematic analysis, using news media, student speeches, academic literature, and Iskander’s personal insights, to understand the role of youth activists in shaping Bill 13.

#### 5. What are the key findings?

The authors surfaced six themes that highlight the role of the youth activists:

##### a) Leading as agents of change.

Youth activists were active change agents, organizing meetings, strategizing tactics (including marching in the 2011 Toronto Pride Parade, speaking to media and coordinating press conferences, presenting to the public, deputing to the provincial

government's Standing Committee on Social Policy regarding Bill 13, and communicating through social media), and supporting one another in navigating backlash and opposition. Youth were motivated and emotionally-invested in these efforts, which the authors point out were "entirely youth-led" (p. 343).

#### **b) Navigating vulnerability.**

Although youth activists were empowered as change agents, they were also made vulnerable by their organizing work, navigating personal risk and lack of parental support. However, youth activists understood that this vulnerability was the result of "institutional and structural violence" (p. 343), exemplified by schools and school boards that "privileged Catholic doctrine over the requests of its LGBTQ students" (p. 344).

#### **c) Engaging as active citizens.**

Some opposition to Bill 13 reflected not wanting to empower youth to have rights within a system governed and run by adults (the authors quote Progressive Conservative MPP Tim Hudak, then leader of the official opposition, as stating, "principals run the school with the parents and the school boards, not students" (p. 344)). Youth activists asserted their agency as active participants in policy- and decision-making, beyond the influence of religion or of queer adults (the authors note that religion and queerness were positioned as oppositional in much of the media coverage).

#### **d) Using narratives of risk.**

Youth activists understood and deliberately used narratives of bullying and risk in their messaging, recognizing the ways in which the media and public were responding to stories of bullying and suicides of LGBTQ youth, and the popularity of the 'It Gets Better' movement, and understanding that "the alternative to being viewed as a victim was to be viewed as a threat" (p. 346).

#### **e) Making the invisible visible.**

Youth activists were forced to respond to common homophobic and transphobic arguments of 'gayness' being something to which one can be converted, resulting in the corruption of 'innocence' (p. 347). However, the very existence of GSAs "challenge constructions of youth as passive, innocent, and (hetero) asexual. GSAs allow LGBTQ youth to be a visible and recognized presence in schools, and take an active, participatory role in the development of a nondiscriminatory school climate" (p. 347).

#### **f) Fighting for recognition.**

Opposition to Bill 13 included a concern around the naming of GSAs – specifically, using the word 'gay' or any reference to LGBTQ sexuality or gender in the name of a student club at a Catholic school. Youth activists successfully fought for the inclusion of Section 12 so that LGBTQ sexualities and genders would be recognized within schools and reflect the identities of students.

### **6. Why does it matter for youth work?**

This research positions the youth activists at the centre and reflects the ways in which their efforts were critical to passing Bill 13. The authors note that this activism has enabled "LGBTQ and otherwise marginalized children and youth to run something in their schools, and in doing so provides space for youth to transform their own lives, the lives of others, and the life of their schools" (p. 350).

This story highlights the capacity and potential of youth-led organizing and movement-building. Youth workers can position the identities and experiences of young people at the centre of their work to ensure that young voices are heard, and that both the needs and aspirations of young people can be met.



Iskander, L., & Shabtay, A. (2018). Who runs the schools?: LGBTQ youth activism and Ontario's Bill 13. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 15(4), 339-352.