

## Book Review

# Homophobia in the Hallways: Heterosexism and Transphobia in Canadian Catholic Schools

Tonya D. Callaghan

Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2018

Reviewed by: Martin Woodside  
Philadelphia Unified School District

This monograph is a well-researched book from a committed expert in the field. Without a doubt, Tonya Callaghan knows her subject. During her 15-year teaching career, Callaghan worked in Alberta, Canada, Catholic high schools, where she has outlined systematic homophobia taking place on myriad levels. Callaghan has written extensively about this subject, publishing scores of articles plus the 2007 monograph, *That's so Gay: Homophobia in Canadian Catholic Schools*. A lesbian who described keeping her sexual identity secret while teaching in Catholic schools, Callaghan has made it clear up front that this book is both personal and political. Inspired by the death of a gay student who died by suicide at a school where she was teaching, Callaghan has aimed for this book to “engage in a form of radical democratic politics that examines the state of sexual diversity in Canadian Catholic schools” (p. 5). Unsurprisingly, then, *Homophobia in the Hallways: Heterosexism and Transphobia in Canadian Catholic Schools* has bristled with conviction, while demonstrating a firm grasp of educational practices and policies regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals in Canadian Catholic schools. In addition to Callaghan’s deep expertise in this area, the book was notable for its distinctive research design, including an admirably reflexive exercise and exploration of critical pedagogy. Researchers curious about applying critical theory with diverse qualitative methodologies will find much of interest in these pages.

Callaghan has clearly laid out her research questions up front and kept a clear focus on them throughout the book. Her main concern was the way that homophobic practices have been institutionalized in Catholic schools in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Ontario. While Canada has become increasingly progressive in the last two decades in regard to LGBTQ rights, Catholic schools in these provinces have remained strongly conservative. Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Ontario are the three provinces where Catholic schools receive public funding, and Callaghan was interested in how these schools negotiate their dual allegiances to Catholic orthodoxy and Canadian law. Readers who are unfamiliar with the history of public schooling in Canada may struggle to understand how Catholic schools operate within the Canadian educational system, and the author could have provided more contextual information up front in this regard. For instance, it was never made clear what percentage of children in these provinces attend Catholic schools. Tensions between the schools’ allegiance to the Vatican and the respective provincial government ministries of education came through clearly, and that is

the author's central concern. Should not these schools, she asked, "in receipt of public funding respect the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982)?" (p. 15). Much of *Homophobia in the Hallways* has explored how and why they do not.

In the five chapters that follow, Callaghan has provided a detailed examination of how homophobia is institutionalized in Canadian Catholic schools in Alberta and Ontario, and how that process has an impact on the LGBTQ populations there. Her analysis has considered a range of data points and sources, most notably official school documents, participant narratives from teachers and students, legal rulings, and media accounts; Callaghan has employed multiple methodological approaches, drawing notably on ethnography and critical theory. Throughout this study, and the disparate research strands that comprise it, Callaghan has come back to the central theme of power, how it becomes consolidated in different structures, and how it shapes and stifles the lives of individuals within those structures.

Considering her focus on institutions and power, it was not surprising that some of Callaghan's strongest writing has involved critical theory. The book's first chapter, "Critical Theory for Emancipation," included a lovely historical overview of key critical modes from the Frankfurt School, with a special focus on Marxist and post-Marxist theory. The book's fifth and final chapter, "Theorizing the Data," featured some of the book's strongest writing, with Callaghan using the work of Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, and Michel Foucault to revisit the qualitative data introduced in the previous chapters. Reviewing the qualitative data from previous chapters, she has described how Canadian Catholic schools reproduce the ideological agenda of Catholic orthodoxy, how this ideology works in conjunction with and against the ideological program of provincial government education ministries, how it represses the schools' LGBTQ subjects, and how these subjects navigate these power dynamics to express their agency and engage in acts of resistance. One of Callaghan's research questions probed whether resistance is possible in such forcefully repressive educational environments; it also constitutes one of the author's key takeaways. For most of the participants in this study, she concluded, "the repressive force of doctrinal disciplining is more powerful than its productive force." Nevertheless, one has found that "various acts of subversion and resistance are discernable in some of the narratives and media reports" (p. 194).

The impacts of Callaghan's findings were dampened somewhat by the book's organizational structure. The author used her first chapter to define the particular contours of problem area she is addressing, homophobia in Canadian Catholic schools, her research questions, and her research design. This chapter featured, as noted, useful summaries of the relevant critical theory alongside refreshing interrogations of the limits of critical pedagogy and the utility of the idea of validity in qualitative research studies. The chapters that followed were self-contained analyses of different types of data; chapter two consisted of the participant narratives, chapter three focused on media reporting and legal cases, and chapter four provided a close reading of two Catholic policy documents. Callaghan has sequenced her discrete analyses of these empirical data points to emphasize how they all work together to demonstrate the contradictory nature and damaging effects of Catholic school policies about homosexuality on teachers and students alike. On that point, her analysis was clear and persuasive.

Other argumentative strands were given less space to develop. By devoting a separate, concluding chapter to critical theory, Callaghan has missed several opportunities to develop the scope of the analysis beyond her central finding about the systematic repression of LGBTQ students in Canadian Catholic schools. For instance, there were a few examples where she touched on age differences and the role that they play in the disciplinary practices employed in

Canadian Catholic schools. As Callaghan argued in chapter five, “according to Catholic doctrine, being gay is not the problem” and it only becomes so when gay people begin engaging in sexual behavior (p. 187). As a result, she maintained, “students are relatively freer to be queer within Catholic school environments than are queer teachers and staff” (p. 187). This seems like a fairly important observation, one that could have broadened the scope of Callaghan’s central argument about how Canadian Catholic schools understand and react to their LGBTQ population. It suggested myriad connections to the author’s analysis in earlier chapters, but the book’s rigid structure prevented Callaghan from exploring those connections.

Ultimately, *Homophobia in the Hallways* had a narrow focus by design. Callaghan’s research was local and specialized, focusing on Catholic schools in two geographical regions in Canada. The book was designed to serve as “a call to arms” to confront these schools about their unjust policies and treatment of LGBTQ individuals, and it served in that capacity quite well. In the book’s introduction, Callaghan noted that Canadian Catholic schools have largely managed to avoid scrutiny from non-Catholic educators and activists. *Homophobia in the Hallways* is designed to explore how Catholic schools in Alberta and Ontario implement systems and policies that repress LGBTQ individuals, and it has accomplished that goal in meticulous detail. The book was also meant to instigate real change on several fronts, from how Canadian Catholic schools draft and apply policies to how education programs prepare new teachers to enter the field. Whether it accomplishes these goals remains to be seen, but Callaghan has certainly done her part.

### Reference

Callaghan, T. (2007). *That’s so gay: Homophobia in Canadian Catholic schools*. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller.

---

*Martin Woodside* earned his Ph.D. in Childhood Studies from the University of Rutgers-Camden. He also has a background in Children’s Literature and Creative Writing. His research interests include gender, children and childhood in literature and popular culture, and urban education. Currently, he is an Assistant Principal in the Philadelphia Unified School District.