

SCRIPT

Pink Shirts and Pariahs: Anti-Bullying Discourse in the CMHR

CMHR gallery noise

Who isn't against bullying? That was my first thought when I saw the installation "Leading a Colourful Campaign" in the *Canadian Museum for Human Rights*.

We're in the gallery "Actions Count," surrounded by seven large, colourful images lining the grey walls. Each image tells a different story of young people making a difference through their so-called "individual choices."

CMHR gallery noise fades in again

Let's take a look at the pink image in the corner, the one called "Leading a Colourful Campaign." It tells the story of Pink Shirt Day, an anti-bullying campaign that spread throughout Canadian schools starting in 2007. The prevalence of Pink Shirt Day and other anti-bullying campaigns across Canada shows that people care about inclusion, kindness, and empathy.

But what might we be missing when we use the language of bullying?

School bell ringing

The photo on the wall shows two young girls in a classroom wearing their official pink shirts. When you move to the side, a quotation from the campaign's co-founder, Travis Price, appears on the image, stating that "enough is enough" when it comes to bullying.

The adjacent text panel explains how Travis Price and David Shepherd heard a boy was bullied for wearing a pink shirt to school. So they organized 75 students to wear pink shirts the next day in solidarity. From there, Pink Shirt Day was born.

Oh, almost forgot—let's go back and read the text panel closely. It's easy to miss, and only briefly mentioned, but it says the boy who wore the pink shirt was taunted as gay.

Ambient sounds of children in classroom

The museum's accompanying mobile app does not mention that students were calling the boy gay for wearing a pink shirt. The Pink Shirt Day website also does not explain why the boy was bullied.

As kids, we all knew that blue was for boys and pink was for girls. To cross these divides too much meant you were gay or too feminine or a tomboy or confused. I remember having a short hair cut in Grade 9 and one day thinking—“will other kids think I’m a lesbian?” We are subject to these norms from the day we are born.

As shown in the text panel’s photo, even the campaign’s male co-founders appear to not wear their pink shirts too genuinely; instead, they sport pink tank tops *over* their black and white, more normatively masculine shirts. While this photo may pay homage to the 75 discount tank tops they bought for the first Pink Shirt Day, it also shows the strength of social norms.

Sound of chalk in a classroom

What are the consequences of representing bullying as an apolitical and individualized problem? What does Pink Shirt Day leave to be read only “between the lines?”

Jennifer Tyburczy argues that “the museum has always participated in the disciplining of sexuality that occurs in other sites [such as] the prison, the school [or] the asylum” (1). I have to agree with her—I think this exhibit disciplines non-normative sexuality or gender expression by saying so little about the core problem. In other words, the student’s experience of being bullied for his pink shirt seems enmeshed in broader issues, such as anti-queerness, trans-misogyny, or the gender binary.

I worry that bullying discourses can erase the roots of struggle. I wonder how a shift in focus from anti-bullying to anti-oppression could deepen the conversation. How would our classrooms change if we talked about the gender binary, or what homophobia is and why it hurts? If we discussed ideas of privilege and power?

It was only on my second visit to the gallery, with a volunteer’s assistance, that I found a media station near the gallery’s entrance. It included a video of Travis Price explaining how Pink Shirt Day was started. I think Pink Shirt Day’s potential lies in this story.

Video audio

I would love to see the museum focus less on the growth and corporatization of the campaign and more on how a group of young people mobilized to express solidarity with someone else’s struggle.

I envision the exhibit’s large photo on the wall showing kids wearing their own pink shirts from home, rather than Pink Shirt Day’s official sponsored shirts. Perhaps the adjacent text panel would describe how we must confront oppression in our every-day lives, which often manifests

in the form of bullying.

But in the meantime, we might argue that the museum places queerness on the edge, hiding difficult and honest conversations beneath a sponsored pink shirt.