

**“MUDDLING THROUGH TOGETHER”:  
EDUCATORS NAVIGATING CISNORMATIVITY WHILE WORKING  
WITH TRANS AND GENDER-NONCONFORMING STUDENTS**

by

Hélène Frohard-Dourlent

B.A., Université Paris 3 Sorbonne-Nouvelle, 2007

M.A., The University of British Columbia, 2010

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES  
(Sociology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
(Vancouver)

April 2016

© Hélène Frohard-Dourlent, 2016

## **Abstract**

There has been increased attention on transgender and gender-nonconforming youth and the obstacles that they face in schools, especially in terms of peer harassment and access to washrooms. Yet little is known about those who can potentially help create more hospitable school cultures for these students, including teachers, administrators, and counsellors. This dissertation fills this gap by exploring the meanings that educators produce about their experiences working with trans and gender-nonconforming students. I draw on 62 interviews conducted with school staff who have worked with trans and gender-nonconforming students in four school districts in British Columbia. By focusing on discursive practices, this dissertation illuminates the role that cisnormativity, or the belief that the fixed and binary nature of gender is an unchangeable fact, plays in shaping the way that educators respond to the presence of trans and gender-nonconforming students and make sense of their experiences.

Although the educators in this study endeavor to be supportive of these students, their efforts are constrained by cisnormative modes of thinking and by dominant discourses of diversity, safety, bullying, heteronormativity as well as what it means to be a good teacher or a young person. An analysis of educators' talk also makes clear that they have to contend with institutional patterns and practices that can limit their capacity to imagine and enact change. In particular, dominant discursive frameworks and institutional constraints often work to enable understandings of change that focus on accommodating individual students without disrupting the normative status quo of schools. Given that this normative status quo creates inequities and exclusions in educational spaces, it is crucial to think about possibilities for intervening into dominant discourses in order to address the norms and institutional practices they help constitute. To this effect, I highlight moments in the stories of educators that offer some potential for disruption and

resistance of discourses and their material effects. These moments are an invitation to consider what it could look like to move beyond accommodating individuals to consider instead how to shift school cultures to make them more hospitable to students in all of the complexities of their gendered embodiments.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is the sole intellectual work of the author and all research was conducted independently. This research is covered by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board Certificate number H12-02591 and has been approved by the research committees of the relevant school districts in British Columbia.

Part of the analysis offered in Chapter 5 has been published in the following publication:

Frohard-Dourlent, H. (2016). “I don’t care what’s under your clothes’: the discursive positioning of educators working with trans and gender-nonconforming students [Special issue: Gender and Sexuality: Taking Up Space in Schooling]. *Sex Education*, 16(1), 63-76.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>List of Tables .....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1    Study overview .....	6
1.1.1    Note on vocabulary: Trans and gender-nonconforming .....	7
1.2    Review of the literature.....	10
1.2.1    Transphobia, trans repudiation, and cisnormativity in Canadian society .....	10
1.1.1    Schools as sites of hetero- and cisnormativity .....	16
1.2    Research questions.....	21
1.3    Theoretical frameworks .....	23
1.3.1    Gender.....	24
1.3.2    Power .....	25
1.3.3    Experience.....	27
1.3.4    Discourse.....	28
1.4    Goal and outline of dissertation .....	29
<b>Chapter 2: Methodologies &amp; methods .....</b>	<b>32</b>
2.1    Introduction.....	32
2.2    Ontological and epistemological foundations.....	34

2.3	Setting up the project .....	36
2.3.1	On deciding not to interview youth and families.....	36
2.4	District and participant selection .....	41
2.4.1	District selection .....	41
2.4.2	Note on comparisons within the data.....	43
2.4.3	Participant selection .....	43
2.4.4	Description of participants.....	48
2.5	Reflexivity.....	52
2.6	Generating data: Interview as a method.....	59
2.6.1	Silences, contradictions, and the limitations of language .....	62
2.6.2	Brief note on transcription .....	65
2.7	Analyzing discursive data .....	66
2.8	Conclusion .....	71
<b>Chapter 3: Cisnormativity at the intersection of diversity discourses.....</b>		<b>73</b>
3.1	Introduction.....	73
3.2	Diversity as safety.....	76
3.2.1	Understanding gender and sexuality together.....	79
3.2.2	GSA and gender diversity.....	90
3.2.3	GSAs as spaces of “valuing diversity” .....	94
3.3	Diversity and racialized bodies .....	99
3.3.1	Homo/transphobia as a racialized phenomenon .....	100
3.3.2	Racialized diversity as a potential obstacle .....	105
3.3.3	Attempts to resist racist narratives .....	109

3.4	Conclusion .....	115
<b>Chapter 4: Making room for trans and gender-nonconforming students in decision-making processes..... 119</b>		
4.1	Introduction.....	119
4.2	The student “drives the car”: positioning students as empowered subjects.....	124
4.3	At the limits of the ‘student in charge’ narrative .....	130
4.3.1	The fear of ‘encouraging’ students .....	130
4.3.2	Making ‘safe’ choices .....	138
4.3.3	Concerns over age.....	152
4.4	The effects of putting students “in charge”.....	159
4.4.1	Students expected to advocate for themselves.....	160
4.4.2	Student choice: Individualizing the transition process .....	166
4.5	Conclusion .....	175
<b>Chapter 5: Imagining change in schools..... 179</b>		
5.1	Introduction.....	179
5.2	Navigating gendered spaces & practices .....	182
5.2.1	Washrooms and change rooms: anxieties and solutions.....	183
5.2.2	The everyday and administrative work of gendered practices.....	189
5.2.3	Youth in transition, gender fluidity and non-binary identities.....	200
5.3	Facing constraints .....	210
5.3.1	Transphobia v. cisnormativity: talking about systems and structures.....	211
5.3.2	Self-perception: open-minded and caring adults .....	216
5.3.3	(Cis)normative systems.....	225

5.3.3.1	Administrative hurdles.....	226
5.3.3.2	The risk of unsupportive local communities.....	231
5.4	Reactive accommodation versus cultural change .....	235
5.4.1	The limits of reactive responses.....	237
5.4.2	Questioning and changing practices .....	247
5.5	Conclusion .....	261
<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion.....</b>		<b>264</b>
6.1	Thinking trans inclusion through cisnormativity: Research findings, significance and contribution to research.....	268
6.2	Strengths and limitations of the research .....	273
6.3	Directions for future research .....	277
6.4	Final thoughts.....	278
<b>References.....</b>		<b>282</b>
<b>Appendices.....</b>		<b>331</b>
	Appendix A - Interview guide .....	331
	Appendix B - Recruitment letter.....	334
	Appendix C - Letter of information to youth.....	336



## List of Tables

Table 2.1 Demographics of school staff participants.....	52
--	----

## Acknowledgements

This dissertation was written on the unceded traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples, including the *sk̓wx̓wú7mesh* (Squamish), *sel̓íl̓wítulh* (Tsleil-Waututh), and *x̓m̓əθk̓w̓əy̓əm* (Musqueam) nations. This beautiful land has sustained me through this program and I am grateful to have the opportunity to live here as I try and practice decolonization.

I want to acknowledge the generosity of the study participants, who shared their time and knowledge with me. In an age of neoliberal education that constantly requires doing more with less, I am humbled by the willingness of educators to make time for me, and by the commitments that so many of them make to learning and changing so that they can better support their students. They are the reason I still hope for schools as sites of social change.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the guidance, insights and steady encouragement of my doctoral committee, Dr. Becki Ross, Dr. Dawn Currie, and Dr. Lisa Loutzenheiser, as well as the support of many UBC faculty members and graduate students, especially Dr. Saewyc, Dr. Roth, and Dr. Guppy. I would also not be where I am without my family and friends, who have supported me through thick and thin in the past six years. Laura, Dan, Brad, LJ, Heather, Patricia, Derek Lau, Vanessa, Katrina, Sarah, Nick, Manjeet, Sam, Fan' and Jaimie: I am so thankful for the laughter, serious chats, board games, hikes, adventures, and delicious food I have shared with all of you. Mariah: I am so lucky to have found you along the way. Maman, papa, and Pierre-Yves: Merci d'être là pour moi depuis bien plus longtemps que ces six dernières années. Of course, I must end by mentioning Kelenn and Meimei, whose wobbly cuddles and wiggly welcomes brighten my every day.

Thank you all for coming on this journey with me.

*fluctuat nec mergitur*

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*I like the discomfort [trans and gender-nonconforming students] present for people. I think that's a good thing. [...] Now having said that, I – I don't want to be disrespectful about the expense and the cost to the student that comes with, like I – that's just a personal thing where I think – good. That's good. We need that. It's good to get shaken up. [...] I like it when I'm uncomfortable like that because I know... it's just you're growing, moving.*

(Zoe<sup>1</sup>, teacher, District B)

It is a cool Wednesday afternoon at a local queer and trans youth drop-in where I have been volunteering for years. As part of the introduction circle, Jackson, a young trans man who is new to the space, takes the floor and shares that he was able to use the 'boy's washroom' at his school for the first time this week. The relieved delight in his voice rings through clearly as he tells the group about his encounter in the washroom with an initially surprised, but ultimately respectful, cisgender<sup>2</sup> boy. In a room where space is often held for young people to be able to share their frustrations with school, most faces in the room have brightened with cheerfulness. The empathy of this response makes sense: many of the youth sitting in the room with Jackson have been there, hope to be there one day, and/or have close friends who are familiar with the tribulations that have led to Jackson's telling of this success story (a success always partial, always contingent, always a little vulnerable).

School is not the only setting that appears in the stories of young people like Jackson, but it is a recurring, often unavoidable one. Educators – which I conceptualize here not just as teachers but as adults who work in school settings and thus become part of the school's

---

<sup>1</sup> The names of all people and places in this dissertation have been anonymized through the use of pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term cisgender to refer to people whose gender identity matches the one that they were assigned at birth. I primarily use the word to index the privilege that comes from experiencing this congruence and want to acknowledge Enke's (2012) compelling critique that the term can "encourage investments in a gender stability that undermines feminist, trans\*, queer and related movements" (p. 61).

pedagogical intention – play many different parts in these stories. Occasionally they are protagonists, sometimes they appear in the supporting role of champion or villain, and most often they exist as more-or-less helpful background extras in the drama of young lives that center on peers and family. Even when educators go unmentioned, as they did when Jackson told his story, they are always there implicitly: Jackson’s presence in this gendered washroom was authorized and likely monitored from a distance by adults. Through their actions (or lack thereof), educators as well as policies and their systemic reinforcement in schools set the stage and create the conditions for what happens in the stories of young people. This constant but often invisible presence of educators is my entry point for this dissertation. I started this project because I wanted to think about, and write about, the educators who organize the complicated spaces of school that trans and gender-nonconforming young people have to navigate.

In addition to the many stories I have heard and read from young people, I also came to this project as a (not so young now) queer adult who has been working with educators for over a decade on issues of gender and sexuality in schools. I have seen resistant educators who show little respect for students who push the boundaries of our culture’s norms of gender and sexuality, but much more frequently, I have seen educators who care deeply about their students and about creating more hospitable<sup>3</sup> schools for trans and gender-nonconforming students. This dissertation is about them, their efforts and sometimes their blind spots, the dominant discourses that they negotiate and sometimes resist, and the structures that they work within and sometimes work to change. My goal with this dissertation is to illuminate how the stories of adults complement the stories of young people about what it is like to be a trans and gender-

---

<sup>3</sup> I borrow from Gilbert (2014) the notion of hospitality as one that “resists idealization and risks ambivalence” (p. 82).

nonconforming student in British Columbia at this specific moment in time. These stories, I will argue, can in fact help scholars and educators make sense of the experiences of trans and gender-nonconforming students by offering cisnormativity as a crucial lens through which to read the encounter of educators with gender diversity.

We live in a time where more and more people are exposed to some of the reality of trans and gender-nonconforming lives. From Laverne Cox's cover in *Time Magazine* (which claims we are at a "transgender tipping point"), to Caitlyn Jenner's public transition and Janet Mock's memoir, to TV shows like *Transparent* and mainstream movies like *The Danish Girl* or *About Ray*, trans and gender-nonconforming people are increasingly visible. They also more often have a chance to take charge of the way their stories are told. Prejudice and violence are still too common elements of these stories, but they are not inevitable. This rapidly changing cultural context constitutes the backdrop for the research presented in this dissertation. When I started working on this project, I was keeping track of the in-depth coverage and news stories about young trans or gender-nonconforming people in North America (the stories of Jazz Jennings, Coy Mathis, Tru Wilson, Cory Oskam, Bella Burgos, and Harriette Cunningham are amongst the most publicized). I soon found myself overwhelmed by the growing media attention on these stories, which more and more frequently was inclusive of non-binary gender identities (Bielski, 2015; Scelfo, 2015; White, 2012). Many of these stories revolved around young people fighting for recognition at their school, a testament to a social context where this recognition can increasingly be expected and even demanded.

The mediatized struggles of these young people are not surprising. By every scholarly and experiential account, schools are spaces that function within systems that enforce gender and sexual conformity (McCormack, 2012; Pinar, 1998; Sykes, 2011; Talburt & Steinberg, 2000),

although schools are also often simultaneously spaces of discovery and new experiences (Talburt, Rofes & Rasmussen, 2004). The regulation of gender in schools affects all youth, but its effects are heightened around the lives of trans and gender-nonconforming youth (Greytak, Kosciw & Diaz, 2009; McGuire et al., 2010). When they become visible as trans and gender-nonconforming subjects, these young people disrupt dominant assumptions about the binary and coherent nature of gender. This often generates the kind of discomfort that Zoe mentions in this chapter's epigraph (Payne & Smith, 2014). These disruptions constitute interesting moments where discourses have the potential to be reworked and re-articulated, opening up space for thinking about, and challenging, the 'naturalness' of the constellation of gender-sex-sexuality (Youdell, 2005) in schools. As Zoe put it, "it's good to get shaken up" because being uncomfortable can push one to move and grow in unexpected directions. This dissertation draws attention to these moments of disruption and their potential.

The way that educators navigate and articulate their experiences working with trans and gender-nonconforming youth can also shed light on how dominant regimes of gender and sexuality maintain themselves in schools, even when their coherence is temporarily disrupted. In speaking about the reproduction of whiteness in schools, Castagno (2004) notes that we need to be able to see how inequity functions in order to address it (p. 4). I use the concept of cisnormativity in this dissertation to illuminate how educators are implicated in the school system's (re)production and management of gender and sexual conformity in ways that are rarely determined by them. Bauer et al. (2009) define cisnormativity as the expectation that "those assigned male at birth always grow up to be men and those assigned female at birth always grow up to be women" (p. 356). In other words, cisnormativity is the belief that gender is a binary category that naturally follows from one's sex assigned at birth. Cisnormativity governs all of us

by drawing the boundaries of who is seen as a legitimate and intelligible subject, and educators work within institutions that are structured by cishnormativity. By illustrating these processes through the examination of discursive practices, this thesis underlines that cishnormativity, like whiteness, “must be understood as a patterned, ideological, and institutional phenomenon” (Castagno, 2014, p. 6), and must be addressed as such.

Young people are often implicated in the policing and enforcement of systems of gender and sexual conformity in schools, as much of the literature has described (see for example: Bastien Charlebois, 2011a; Martino, 2000; Pascoe, 2007; Payne, 2007, 2010; Renold, 2004). Unlike students, however, adults hold structural positions of power within schools. This means that they play a crucial part in determining both the field of legibility – who is, and is not, going to be seen as a legitimate subject – and the material realities of youth’s lives. By validating particular discourses and disallowing others, engaging in certain practices and discouraging others, educators set boundaries for what becomes possible in their school for trans and gender-nonconforming youth, as well as for other youth. Discursive work sustains and justifies these practices and their material consequences, and is thus important to examine. The work of talking about experiences of working with trans and gender-nonconforming students is particularly interesting because it can generate moments where naturalized systems of meanings have to be more explicitly articulated. This project therefore analyzes the talk of educators to trace the workings of cishnormativity alongside other discourses as adults make sense of their experiences



working with trans and gender-nonconforming students. I also explore the implications of these discursive practices for the management of sexual and gender diversity<sup>4</sup> in schools.

## **1.1 Study overview**

This project started taking shape as I sat through meetings of a school district's LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer<sup>5</sup>) committee in the province of British Columbia (BC) during the 2011-2012 school year. I noticed that more and more conversations revolved around the topic of supporting trans and gender-nonconforming youth in the district. I became increasingly interested in how educators understood their experiences of working with trans and gender-nonconforming students within an institutional setting (school) that is structured by hetero- and cisnormative systems of gender and sexual conformity (Meyer, 2010; Pascoe, 2007; Payne, 2007; Taylor et al., 2011).

I spent the summer and fall of 2012 refining this project by reading academic literature, meeting with my committee, and having conversations with educators and community members who work closely with trans and gender-nonconforming students and their families. I went on to interview 62 educators, and conducted auxiliary interviews with 6 people who were either trans and/or gender-nonconforming youth or parents of trans or gender-nonconforming youth.

---

<sup>4</sup> As I analyze in Chapter 3, the term 'diversity' has a complicated history and complex effects (Airton, 2009) and I recognize that it is somewhat paradoxical for me to use this phrase given my critical interrogation of the uses and discursive effects of 'diversity.' I want to acknowledge the discomfort of this phrase while recognizing that I have not been able to come up with a better term or phrase to describe the range of sexual and gender possibilities that extend beyond the traditional binaries. Note, however, that I do not use the term 'gender-diverse' as that would imply that some bodies, practices or identities (usually ones that challenge hetero- and cisnormativity) somehow index diversity more than others.

<sup>5</sup> I use different iterations of this acronym depending on which parts of the acronym are relevant.

For the primary interviews, I wanted to interview school staff in a variety of positions because adults who work in schools are all actors within that institution. They all shape the context and circumstances of schooling that trans and gender-nonconforming students have to navigate. Additionally, depending on the school, adults in different positions are involved in working with trans and gender-nonconforming students. Given this reality, I did not want to limit myself to a specific staff category. Whenever I discuss a specific participant as well as when my analysis warrants it, I specify which of the four main categories a participant belongs to: administrator, teacher, school counsellor, or support staff (a phrase meant to encompass all other potential positions found in schools, including librarians, support workers, secretaries, etc.). Otherwise I use the broad term ‘educator.’

### **1.1.1 Note on vocabulary: Trans and gender-nonconforming**

I have chosen to use the phrase “trans and gender-nonconforming” to describe the youth whose experiences constitute the backdrop for this research project. The use of the words “trans” and “transgender” as umbrella terms have a complex history (Valentine, 2007). Often, they have been used by trans authors and activists who reject the gender binary (Bornstein, 1994; Feinberg, 1998; Wilchins, 1997). As such, they have been criticized for erasing the specific needs of those who tend to identify with the gender binary (Namaste, 2000, p. 1-2; Davidson, 2007, p. 64-67). As is the case with cisgender people, trans people have diverse relationships to their gender. Different trans people seek access to various degrees of gender-affirming health care, and may not even be interested in any medical intervention. Some trans people see their trans status as a temporary state while others identify as trans throughout their lives. Different trans people envision different end points to their transition, and indeed may not even frame their experience

in terms of a transition with a clear start and end point. Being “trans” is by no means one shared experience.

If the label “trans” covers complex and contradictory range of experiences, what is its analytic usefulness? I argue alongside Shelley (2008) that the shared experience of trans repudiation and erasure justifies considering together people who have a trans history, despite differences in how they identify, relate to the gender binary, or access gender-affirming health care (p. 16). It is safe to argue that trans people share the experiences of having their subjectivity and selfhood negated, as well as that of being stigmatized, marginalized, and erased in both everyday and institutional contexts. I therefore use the adjective “trans” as an umbrella term for people with a trans history, recognizing that this term sits uncomfortably across categories.

I use the phrase “gender-nonconforming” in addition to the adjective trans for several reasons. This decision resists an all-inclusive use of “trans” that would encompass people who disrupt the dominant gender/sex system but may not identify themselves as trans for a host of reasons. Many people (youth in particular) who are trying out different forms of gender expression and styles of personal appearances may not identify as trans, and may indeed strongly identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. These people may still experience trans repudiation and raise challenges for educators in ways that echo the experiences of trans youth. As a result, they may appear in conversations about trans youth and their experiences can be relevant to this research. In its current usage, gender-nonconforming is a descriptive term rather than an identity term (such as genderqueer, pangender, agender, neutrois, etc.) that serves to broadly describe people whose gender identity challenge dominant cultural expectations of gender and gender expression.

Originally (in my research proposal as well as during my interviews) I used the term ‘gender-fluid’ in an attempt to capture a similar sentiment. Upon further reflection, I am now suggesting that this term ascribes too specific a meaning onto people’s lives. People whose gender expression exceeds or eschews the dominant expectations of the gender binary may not experience their gender as fluid in any way. I believe that the term ‘gender-nonconforming’ avoids this ascription. It functions not as an identity term but as a descriptor, indicating that the person’s gender does not conform to current dominant norms of gender. In this way, the term also centers the role of norms and highlights that it is the existence of these norms (rather than the person’s gender in itself) that marks certain bodies as different in ways that can create insecurity for the people who inhabit these bodies (see Horn, 2007).

Finally, the term gender-nonconforming adds an important analytic layer to ‘trans’ as it can help illuminate potential disparities between a student’s gender identity and how this student is read. For example, educators sometimes talk about certain trans students as gender-nonconforming subjects even though the student understands themselves as having a binary gender-conforming identity. This focus on someone’s perceived disruption of gender norms at the expense of their own identification with the gender binary is precisely one of the forms of repudiation that Shelley (2008) describes (p. 26). While it is essential to talk about the experience of being read by others as gender-nonconforming, it is equally important to acknowledge the way that these readings can erase someone’s gender identity. I argue that the use of the term gender-nonconforming helps me achieve this in this dissertation, as it points to norms rather than the person’s intention or identity.

In summary, a young person may be trans, gender-nonconforming, or both. Using the phrase “trans and gender-nonconforming” captures this range of possibilities and acknowledges

that both the student's gender identity and the way that they are read by those around them contribute to their experiences at school and beyond. This is not to deny that the use of this phrase can have a homogenizing impact, flattening out a wide range of experiences and embodiments. To counteract this tendency, I specify the term when possible. Additionally, identity terms are also very personal and constitute part of the process of self-determination (Miller, 2015a). The design of my study did not give me a chance to ask young people who are featured in the stories of my participants how they identified; the terms trans and gender-nonconforming in this dissertation must therefore be understood primarily as analytical categories rather than reflections of terminology preferred by young people, with the limitations that this implies.

## **1.2 Review of the literature**

### **1.2.1 Transphobia, trans repudiation, and cisnormativity in Canadian society**

It is impossible to conduct research that is connected to the experiences of trans youth without starting by acknowledging that trans and gender-nonconforming people face various forms of violence. This violence produces significant vulnerability in people's everyday lives. Research often focuses on overt violence (Stotzer, 2009; Witten & Eyler, 1999), which ranges

...from verbal insults (e.g., calling someone a 'fag'), to an invasion of personal space (e.g., throwing a bottle at a lesbian as she walks by, to intimidation and the threat of physical assault. 'Violence' also includes the act of attacking someone's body – whether through sexual assault (rape), beating, or with weapons like baseball bats, knives, or guns. (Namaste, 2000, p. 139)

These forms of overt violence remain a reality, as is illustrated by numerous reports of fatal transphobic violence directed in particular and most often at trans women of colour in 2015 (Kellaway & Brydum, 2015; see also a recent interview with Judith Butler in Tourjee, 2015).

It is crucial to recognize these forms of transphobic violence while remaining aware of the limitations of the concept of transphobia. The idea of ‘phobia’ suggests conscious fear, even though there is “little evidence to suggest that all forms of trans-based discrimination are rooted in fear” (Shelley, 2008, p. 32). The conceptual limits of the term transphobia echo the extensive critiques that have been articulated in the literature on the framing of homophobia as an individual pathology (Kitzinger, 1996). Scholars have questioned the ways that homophobia is often imagined as a form of violence that occurs between individuals, due to individual rather than systemic prejudice (Walton, 2005). This framework draws on discourses of neoliberalism wherein “inequalities are routinely assigned to ‘private’ life, understood as ‘natural,’ and bracketed away from consideration in the ‘public’ life of the state” (Duggan, 2003, p. 5). Individualized explanations for inequality neglect the fact that violence is related to social biases and cultural norms (Bastien Charlebois, 2011b; Payne & Smith, 2013). Butler (1997) also challenges the notion that injurious speech and acts are “attributable to a singular subject and act” (p. 50): they are made possible by the context in which they are produced.

The erasure of the dominant discourses and structures that enable transphobic speech and acts marks this context as irrelevant. It also assumes that lack of intent is a relevant variable. This allows ‘nice,’ ‘tolerant’ subjects to feel as if they have no part to play in the reproduction of systemic inequality. Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues similarly that modern, liberal conceptions of racism frame racism as individualized prejudice and ignorance. As a result, ‘nice’ white people can distance themselves from systemic racism and its effects. In fact, Castagno (2014) argues that niceness and lack of intention do not simply allow the reproduction of inequality. They actually reinvigorate whiteness (and, I would add, cisnormativity) by making invisible the working of structural inequalities.

Shelley (2008) uses the term ‘trans repudiation’ as a way to better conceptualize the violence encountered by trans people as well as the ways in which trans lives are made vulnerable in our society. Trans repudiation is defined as “an array of reactive dynamics directed towards [trans people], which are often hostile and threatening” (p. 31), including acts that “reject, refuse, repel, disown, renounce, and back away from that which engenders repulsion” (p. 37). By taking the focus of individual prejudice, the concept of trans repudiation allows us to “look more at impact than intent” (Spade, 2011, p. 30). Unlike the notion of transphobia, the phrase trans repudiation frames the denial of trans subjectivities as a phenomenon that “mirrors historical problems, related to the ruling of bodies internalized by subjects through the social world” (Shelley, 2008, p. 34) rather than as a problem of individual prejudice. In this sense, trans repudiation is connected to genderism, which Browne (2004) describes as “the hostile readings of gender ambiguous bodies” (p. 332; see also Nestle, Howell & Wilchins, 2002) that results from a profound cultural investment in gender and sex binaries. This can be true even when trans people identify with the gender binary. It is often how people are read by others, rather than how they identify, that works to create vulnerability and violence in the lives of trans people.

Systematically, trans repudiation manifests itself in countless ways, including but not limited to: lack of access to respectful, affordable and competent health care; denial of parental rights; various levels of disavowal and loss of family support; lack of or insecure access to gender-appropriate bathrooms (including at school and work); high rates of imprisonment and homelessness; and discrimination in hiring, employment, banking, the justice and prison system; exclusion from, or marginalization in, the world of competitive sports (for details on these experiences and their effects on the lives of trans people, see Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bender-Baird, 2011; Girshick, 2008; Grant et al., 2011; Namaste, 2000, 2011; Ross, 2012; Shelley, 2008;

Sullivan, 2011; Sykes, 2006; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Although the majority of trans people encounter these obstacles, poor, racialized, immigrant and disabled trans people experience the most extreme forms of vulnerability. As Spade (2011) points out, “access to certain privileges that serve in determining the distribution of life chances (e.g., whiteness, perceived ablebodiedness, employment, immigration status) often confer some individuals some degree of buffering” (p. 13) from this violence. The lives of trans individuals who access these privileges are less tightly controlled and circumscribed by legal and administrative systems.

Spade (2011) offers the concept of administrative violence to further explicate the mechanisms by which trans lives are devalued and made impossible. Trans subjectivity is erased through specific policies and administrative arrangements in ways that have severe material consequences: Namaste (2000), for example, describes the way that Canadian homeless shelters do not serve the population of trans people properly because their specific needs are not identified. Yet the complete absence of policies regarding trans people makes this failure itself invisible, further rendering trans subjectivity unthinkable. She concludes that “the act of invalidating the very possibility of transsexuality bolsters rhetorical operations that exclude literal transsexual bodies while reinforcing institutional practices that do not consider the needs of transsexual and transgendered people” (Namaste, 2000, p. 52). As I will show, similar effects of the discursive operations described by Namaste are visible in schools.

Spade (2011) also focuses on how the impossibilities are produced when people do not fit in existing administrative gender categories. This heightens vulnerability in trans people’s lives:

This instability [in how gender categories are defined in different states and by different state agencies], when combined with the rigidity of administrative gender enforcement, produc[e] myriad catch-22s that generate insecurity and violence in the lives of trans people, especially in the context of the War on Terror in which inconsistencies in



identifying information have become a more significant obstacle to most basic and essential administrative processes. (Spade, 2011, p. 38)

Administrative norms function to deny the subjectivity of trans people differently depending on a person's identification with the gender binary. Trans people who wish to be identified with the gender binary are often prevented from doing so (through stringent requirements for changing the gender listed on one's birth certificate, driver's license, etc.). On the other hand, trans people who seek to challenge the gender binary are forced into it via the use of inflexible administrative categories. The concept of administrative erasure highlights the way that subjection<sup>6</sup> and power are processes that function to make certain bodies more (un)intelligible than others, and some lives more (im)possible than others. To properly understand forms of subjection, we need to think about the way that regimes of practice and knowledge coalesce in conditions that affect everyone but create particular vulnerability for certain groups. This is why it is crucial to look at the discourses embedded in our everyday practices along with the routines of bureaucracy. While discursive effects may be less visible than the kind of violence that the idea of 'transphobia' conjures up, they have far-reaching consequences for people because they authorize ways of seeing the world that "structure the entire context of life" (Spade, 2011, p. 24).

The belief system that underpins trans repudiation and administrative violence is cisnormativity. It often – but not always – works in conjunction with heteronormativity (the system of compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality) because dominant conceptions of gender assume a "causal continuity among sex, gender, and desire" (Butler, 1990, p. 31). Both systems of meaning and control (cisnormativity and heteronormativity) often bolster each other and

---

<sup>6</sup> I am drawing on Spade's (2011) use of the term subjection as it "indicates that power relations impact how we know ourselves as subjects through these systems of meaning and control – the ways we understand our own bodies, the things we believe about ourselves and our relationships with other people and with institutions, and the ways we imagine change and transformation" (p. 25).

“permeate our lives, our ways of knowing about the world, and our ways of imagining transformation” (Spade, 2011, p. 25). Educators are entrenched in these systems that govern all of us.

The discourse of cisnormativity pervades everyday language and practices in ways that construct cisnormative experiences as normal and natural, while “[trans] bodies, identities, perspectives, and experiences are continuously required to be explained and inevitably remain open to interpretation” (Serano, 2007, p. 161). As a result, cisnormativity is built into administrative systems and institutional practices in ways that create structural inequities. It is precisely the discursive regime of cisnormativity that I am interested in tracing in the talk of educators who work with trans and gender-nonconforming students. In its institutional and everyday forms, cisnormativity impacts how educators understand trans and gender-nonconforming students, what supporting these students looks like, and what schools can do to be more inclusive of gender diversity.

In the next section, I set the institutional context that educators work in by reviewing the existing literature on queer and trans students. This literature helps position schools as institutional sites that are implicated in the administration of the gendered categories and the reproduction of hetero- and cisnormativity.

### **1.1.1 Schools as sites of hetero- and cisnormativity**

There is an extensive literature that focuses on homophobia and on the reproduction of heteronormativity in schools. A multiplicity of factors contributes to school cultures<sup>7</sup> that are hostile to sexual diversity, including the pervasive presence of homophobic language in school environments (Seale, 2005; Smith, 1998; Thurlow, 2001; Varjas et al., 2008); direct verbal and physical harassment of students who are queer or perceived as such (Burtch & Haskell, 2010; Elze, 2003; Kosciw et al., 2009; Meyer, 2009; Taylor et al., 2009, 2016); heteronormative school rituals and curriculum (Best, 2000; Pascoe, 2007; Payne, 2007; Ryan, 2015; Stafford, 2013; Zlatunich, 2009); and a lack of response from adults in schools to homophobic harassment (Kosciw et al., 2009; Meyer, 2008). Given this hostile context, a plethora of research has emphasized the vulnerabilities of queer youth, particularly in terms of health outcomes and school success (see for example Chamberland et al., 2010; Cocker, Austin & Schuster, 2010; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Saewyc, 2011). Although little research fully considers intersections in the lives of queer youth, a growing amount of research indicates that racism, poverty, and ableism create increased vulnerability (Blackburn & McCready, 2004; Brockenborough, 2013; Daley et al., 2008; Diaz & Kosciw, 2009; Kumashiro, 2001; McClelland et al., 2012; Russell & Truong, 2001; there is a striking dearth of research looking at queer and Two-Spirit indigenous

---

<sup>7</sup> Although much of the literature I review uses the notion of 'school climate,' I prefer the expression 'school culture.' The distinction between culture and climate has been primarily discussed in the literature on workplace and organizations (see Morgan, 2006), but has been relevant in much of the educational literature as well. MacNeil, Prater & Busch (2009) summarize the difference thus: "climate is viewed as behaviour, while culture is seen as comprising the values and norms of the school or organization" (p. 74-75). School climate is often understood in terms of measurable behaviours and outcomes. In contrast, the notion of culture evokes the role of norms, values, and institutionalized rituals, and is thus more accurately related to my conceptual interests in this project.

youth<sup>8</sup>). However, support programs and legal protections for queer youth rarely acknowledge or address these intersections (Marquez & Brockenbrough 2013; McCready, 2004).

Increasingly, this scholarly literature has become inclusive of trans and gender-nonconforming youth. However, it is often only superficially inclusive, and the use of the phrase ‘LGBT youth’ can conceal a primary focus on the experiences of queer youth, with little attention paid to the specific barriers and experiences of trans and gender-nonconforming youth (who may or may not identify as queer). To the extent that this body of research looks at the experiences of trans and gender-nonconforming youth, it has similarly focused on the risks and negative outcomes in school environments (Greytak, Kosciw & Diaz, 2009; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; McGuire et al., 2010; Wylie et al., 2010). Its central concerns are about harassment, risk, and negative effects on physical and mental health (see Burgess, 2000; Di Ceglie et al., 2002; Olson, Forbes & Belzer, 2011; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2007; Grossman, D’Augelli & Salter, 2006; Grossman et al., 2009). Analyses of how racialization, (dis)ability, and class shape the experiences of trans and gender-nonconforming youth are scarce (for some counter-examples, see Singh, 2013; Boatwright, 2014). Many scholars have highlighted the limitations of a field of research that continually reconstitutes queer and trans youth as ‘at-risk’ victims (Ellis, 2007; Hackford-Peer, 2010; Talburt, 2004a; Youdell, 2004). Even the recent turn to ‘resilience’ is inadequate as it often identifies resistance in personal characteristics, thus reinscribing individualized understandings of the subject (Foster & Spencer, 2011).

If gender and sexuality are distinct issues that need to be analyzed separately, and if the folding of trans issues under the LGBT umbrella has often worked to make invisible trans-

---

<sup>8</sup> This is concerning given both the high vulnerability experienced by indigenous populations in Canada and the United States, and the way that colonization and racism have profoundly impacted indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality (Cannon, 1998; Le Duigou, 2000; Hunt, 2015).

specific concerns (Minter, 2006; Stone, 2009; Vitulli, 2010), why is a body of literature that overwhelmingly focuses on queer youth and heteronormativity relevant to this project? The short answer is that, although gender and sexuality are distinct concepts, gender and sexuality are profoundly connected by forms of policing (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Behaviours that “act[] to shape and police the boundaries of traditional gender norms” (Meyer, 2009, p. 2-3) are simultaneously shaping and policing heterosexual femininity and masculinity. Butler (1990) explains this connection between gender norms and heterosexuality: “the heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’, where these are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (p. 23). For heterosexuality to be natural and normal (heteronormativity), there must only be two genders that naturally follow from two sexes (cisnormativity) and are defined by their attraction to one another. This theoretical framework explains the fact that homophobia and the norms of heterosexuality that undergird it are not *solely* about one’s sexuality.<sup>9</sup> Gender-nonconformity is often interpreted and consequently policed as a cue for queerness. Because heteronormativity functions alongside cisnormativity, trans people who identify with the gender binary can also be vulnerable to harassment if they are seen to disrupt this assumed natural fusion of sex and gender.

All trans and gender-nonconforming youth can thus be directly affected by hostile heteronormative school cultures. However, heteronormative school cultures do not simply enable the harassment of trans and gender-nonconforming students. Michel Foucault (1977) develops the notion of disciplinary power to explain the way that we are governed by norms, identifying

---

<sup>9</sup> This reformulation is not meant to erase the sexual element of homophobic harassment. Gender conformity does not necessarily protect queer people from homophobic harassment, which indicates that homophobic harassment is not limited to an act of gender policing, but also evokes specifically sexual fears.

school as a key technology of this form of power. Disciplinary power is productive and “conjures the very identities to be managed” (Cherniavsky, 2009, p. 10). In school, normative gender and sexual identities become more possible than others as we “learn how to view our bodies, how our actions make us certain kinds of people, and how to practice techniques to modify ourselves to better fit the norms” (Spade, 2011, p. 104). Schools also bolster sexual and gender normativity through heteronormative curriculum, school rituals, and everyday practices (Best, 2000; Pascoe, 2007; Payne, 2007; Ryan, 2015; Stafford, 2013; Zlatunich, 2009). Part of this process is also the self-discipline that comes with disciplinary power. As Foucault (1977) notes, the ever-present possibility of being judged for one’s enactments of gender makes sanctions unnecessary in most cases, because it triggers mechanisms of self-discipline. This process contributes to the routine erasure of trans subjectivities.

Practically speaking, this process of normalization is visible whenever normative ideas about gender are made relevant in schools. Some examples include gendered school dress codes, forms that use the categories ‘mother’ and ‘father,’ common-sense assumptions about the fundamentally different ways that girls and boys learn, play, or socialize, and the segregation of students by gender for activities, competitive sports teams, or certain classes (sexual education or physical education). These normative ideas are shaped by racialized narratives that underlie our understanding of what masculinity and femininity look like (Collins, 2005), as well as discourses of class, (dis)ability, and other socially significant categories. Teacher education programs still rarely include in-depth LGBTQ content (Clark, 2010; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008; O’Malley & Capper, 2015; Quinn & Meiners, 2011; Taylor et al., 2016), let alone intersectional discussions of gender diversity. This means that teachers are often poorly equipped to interrupt these processes of normalization in their school.

Additionally, the use of gender in schools as a key administrative category in schools contributes to a logic of standardization regimented by classifications and categories that seeks to distinguish between proper and improper members of the nation (Spade, 2011, p. 111).

Administrative categories create arrangements that legitimize inequality and distribute risk and vulnerability differently across populations. What is the impact of these categories for trans and gender-nonconforming youth who attend schools? For adults in schools who work with trans and gender-nonconforming youth, this means dealing with the demands of an administrative system that classifies gender as a binary and requires that gender markers be consistent over time and between documents. This is an important site for the erasure of trans subjectivity.

These forms of power are productive in that they generate particular understandings of what a proper boy (man) and a proper girl (woman) is. Butler (1990) notes:

[T]he very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (p. 23)

Schools are a key site where we learn that personhood is intricately tangled with the capacity to identify someone as unmistakably male or female. Instances of discrimination or violence “based on the discontinuities between the sex/gender with which an individual identifies, and how others, in a variety of spaces, read their sex/gender” (Browne, 2004, p. 332) only makes sense in a context where these discontinuities have been marked as abnormal, unfamiliar, and indeed rendered unintelligible. In other words, harassment is made possible because the space of the school itself is organized, with adult consent and participation, around gender in a way that functions to create school spaces that are hostile for gender diversity. These examples underline that there is no need for adults or students to be transphobic in order for them to perpetuate the

relations of power that create a culture of trans repudiation in schools. Instead, they need only be the observers and administrators of the normative gender order that sustains school life.

While trans repudiation might happen at any point in the context of school cultures through jokes, verbal or physical abuse, or naturalized heteronormative routines, there are particular moments and spaces where this type of violence is more likely to erupt, specifically gender-segregated sites. Scholars have flagged bathrooms as a heightened site of tension and repudiation (Browne, 2004; Cavanagh, 2010; Shelley, 2008; Weinberg, 2009-2010). Taylor et al.'s (2011) climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools highlighted washrooms and change rooms as spaces most commonly identified as unsafe by students (p. 17). The fact that repudiation emerges in these specific spaces illustrates a profound cultural investment in fixed gender binarism (Halberstam, 1998a, p. 22).

Throughout this review of the literature, I have highlighted the multiple and complex ways in which school cultures (re)create properly gendered subjects. In the manner highlighted, and by the nature of their jobs, educators are active participants in this culture of cisnormativity and the institutional structures that support it, but often in complex and contradictory ways. Educators might at different times be involved in shaping it, enforcing it, and resisting it. It is the discursive work that educators do in negotiating this complicated position in schools that is the focus of my research.

## **1.2 Research questions**

Given that educators are involved in the systems of meanings and control that exist in schools, it is essential to understand how cisnormativity shapes how they understand themselves, their experiences, and the changes that they perceive as (im)possible in educational spaces. Analyzing



how educators articulate their experiences can illuminate both how cisnormativity operates in schools and how it shapes the “conditions of possibility” (Rose, 1998, p. 41) in these educational spaces. It can also help identify how to intervene into these systems to challenge cisnormativity in schools.

Although cisnormativity organizes school life even in the absence of trans and gender-nonconforming students, its workings are likely to be particularly visible in their presence, when assumptions about the fixed, binary nature of gender are (at least momentarily) disrupted. As a result, moments when educators work with trans and gender-nonconforming students and negotiate their presence in schools are analytically salient. By focusing on the way that adults in the school system talk about their experience(s) working with trans and gender-nonconforming students, this dissertation illuminates how cisnormativity operates discursively but also highlights the material implications of these discursive effects on the lives of students. Guiding and informing my analysis are the following questions:

- What are some common narratives and discursive practices that educators use to talk about their experiences of working with trans and gender-nonconforming students?
- What broader discourses do these narratives and discursive practices draw on? How does cisnormativity in particular circulate within these narratives?
- How does this discursive work open up and/or close off space for gender diversity in schools? In other words, how do these narratives and discursive practices shape what changes educators see as (im)possible?

### 1.3 Theoretical frameworks

This dissertation is grounded in a number of interconnected theoretical frameworks that I have started to outline in my review of the literature. I am particularly influenced by critical queer and feminist research, including critical trans theory, which adheres to a social constructionist<sup>10</sup> framework and emphasizes how power produces speaking subjects. Social constructionism formed in response to (1) essentialist claims that social identities such as gender, sexuality and race are fixed individual essences, and (2) positivist assumptions that truth about the social world can be discovered through careful, objective observation. Working against these assumptions, constructionist perspectives offer an epistemology that emphasizes the role that history, language, and culture play in shaping how we understand the world, as well as an ontology that challenges the assumption that there are immutable ‘truths’ to be discovered about the social world. Queer theory shares many of the theoretical underpinnings of other social constructionist approaches in that it disputes assumptions about gendered, sexual, and bodily ‘essence.’ It does so by critiquing scientific truth claims, asserting the constitutive role of language, deconstructing binaries and questioning the very notion that we should look for ‘truths’ about the social world (Brickell, 2006; Waugh, 1998; Weedon, 1999).

Within this framework, language constitutes the subject as one that is “precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse every time we think or speak” (Weedon, 1987, p. 33). Our identity as a subject is not the result of an interior essence. It comes into existence through doing and speaking. This approach emphasizes an intersectional

---

<sup>10</sup> I use the term ‘social construction’ because it resonates with many traditions within the social sciences, but I recognize its limits. In particular, the term ‘construction’ does not quite explain the ways in which sexual orientation, gender, race, and other discursively constituted identities “can be felt as inherent and bodily or even as essential” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 80).

analysis that takes into account how difference (whether sexual, racialized, or otherwise) constitutes the gendered subject (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). I further clarify below a few key concepts for this project, namely gender, power, discourse, and experience.

### **1.3.1 Gender**

I conceptualize gender as a performative accomplishment by drawing on two main traditions: ethnomethodology and queer theory. West & Zimmerman (1987) reject the notion that gender is a property of individuals, attributed to us by external forces or biological reality. Instead they conceptualize gender as “a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment... embedded in everyday interaction” (p. 126), meaning that individuals are continually accountable for ‘doing’ gender through everyday activities and interactions.

I complement this perspective with Judith Butler’s (1990) insight that gender is performative. Through “a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject” (Butler, 1990, p. 22), gender crystallizes into forms that we come to see as uniform and natural. Schools, for example, help gender “congeal” (Butler, 1990, p. 44) by calling upon it as a relevant category for organizing and classifying students. As Ahmed (2006) reminds her readers, performativity is an embodied experience:

Bodies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force. Through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being orientated in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted: they get twisted into shapes that enable some action only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of action. (p. 91)

In many ways, we do not engage in the contortions of ‘doing’ gender because it is natural to us, but because our legitimacy as members of society is dependent on our competence at producing

and doing gender appropriately<sup>11</sup> (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). It is not just the threat of social, mental, or physical sanctions that are at stake in gender performance, but also our very intelligibility as people (Butler, 1990, p. 23), as illustrated by “the continued refusal in Western society to admit ambiguously gendered bodies into functional social relations” (Halberstam, 1998a, p. 15).

The performative accomplishment of gender is necessarily interactional, relational, and discursive in nature. It is also intersectional, in the sense that it is produced and maintained through other discursively-constituted identities such as race, class, sexuality, or ability; these identities “always work as background for one another, and they often find their most powerful articulation through one another” (Butler, 1990, p. xvi; see also Collins, 2005). This means that researchers need to be paying consistent attention to the way in which gendered discourses shore up, or rely on, assumptions about other forms of difference in order to make sense.

### **1.3.2 Power**

I draw primarily on Michel Foucault’s articulation of power for this project. Foucault (1977, 1978) challenges the assumption that power is best understood as a unidirectional, repressive force operating from a single centre. Instead, power circulates throughout society in ways that are productive rather than repressive: it is “bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to ... making them submit” (Foucault, 1978, p. 136). This is what Foucault (1978) calls biopower, “a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and

---

<sup>11</sup> As West & Fenstermaker (1995) point out, this process applies to other forms of socially-significant differences.

comprehensive regulations” (p. 137). This understanding of power underlines the importance that norms, identities, and categories play in organizing power relations, as they are technologies through which power circulates. Building on this understanding of power, Spade (2011) describes three types of power that shape the distribution of risk and vulnerability in society: exclusionary power, disciplinary power, and population-management power (p. 101-36).

Exclusionary power generates willful exclusion and discrimination, carried out by one perpetrator (whether an individual or an agency) over a victim. This remains the most common understanding of power, and we tend to concentrate on this form of power in our laws (i.e., anti-discrimination and hate crimes laws) as well as in research on queer, trans and gender-nonconforming youth. In contrast, disciplinary power functions to create docile and useful bodies through careful and continuous training (Foucault, 1977, p. 135-69); Foucault (1977) explicitly implicates school as an institution that plays a central role in this form of power (p. 160). Finally, population-management power organizes the distribution of security and insecurity by generating “interventions that impact the population as a whole, usually interventions undertaken through the logic of promoting health or security of the nation” (Spade, 2011, p. 110).

While disciplinary power creates norms about who is a proper subject of the nation and who is a ‘threat’ or ‘burden,’ the population-management mode of power “mobilize[s] those standards and meanings to create policies and programs that apply generally” (Spade, 2011, p. 111). These policies and programs use classifications that target population rather than individuals, and produce gendered and racialized effects out of purportedly neutral policies (see, for example, how welfare policies both shape and are shaped by gendered and racialized notions of who is on social assistance, or the way that rigid gender categories in the shelter system impede access to this service by trans people). Schools are embedded in all three forms of power,

with important implications for trans and gender-nonconforming youth and the adults who work with them, as I have started to outline in the literature review.

### **1.3.3 Experience**

In line with a constructionist perspective I outlined above, I conceptualize experience as something that is “never wholly outside language or discourse” (Loutzenheiser, 2005, p. 31). This framework does not deny the importance of the materiality of experience, or the power that experiences, categories, and identities can have for people. As Ahmed (2006) underlines, it is important that a constructionist approach take into account how gender, sexuality, race and other identities “can operate simultaneously as effects and be lived or experienced as if they are originary or a matter of how one’s body inhabits the world” (p. 80). This is especially true in the context of research that engages (even indirectly) with marginalized populations: in a cultural context where trans subjectivities are continually negated, it is crucial to respect the way that the experience of the gendered self can be experienced as profoundly immutable.

The tension lies in acknowledging the importance of experience as a tool through which people make sense of their world and their existence while simultaneously interrogating experience as knowledge that is always contextual and historicized (Scott, 1992). Theorists such as Scott (1991), Scott (1992) and Srivastava & Francis (2006) warn against presenting experience as a foundational “truth” and remind us that there is power in which stories are heard and in which experiences are constructed as ‘authentic.’ In other words, the telling of experience is shaped by the context in which it is told. As a researcher, this means honouring the acts of telling that participants engage in while questioning how they came to be articulated in particular ways (Britzman, 1998) and acknowledging that complex and fluid constructions are constantly

produced around us (Loutzenheiser, 2005). This approach allows researchers to be self-reflexive about the data that they generate. They can illuminate the processes through which experiences are rendered intelligible, emphasize the context in which these experiences emerge, and recentre their attention to the power dynamics that construct certain experiences as more acceptable or more intelligible than others. In summary, this theoretical approach to experience endeavours to recognize both “the contingency of social categories and identities as well as the material effects of these” (Brickell, 2006, p. 105).

#### **1.3.4 Discourse**

I draw on different theoretical traditions to articulate my approach to discourse. I start with Foucault’s (1972) definition of discourses as “practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak” (p. 49) to understand the ways that our reality is constituted through the way we use the language available to us. Discursive practices include the work of defining, describing, and classifying that is carried out through language in ways that generate knowledge and power simultaneously. As Graham (2005) explains, “language works to not only produce meaning but also particular kinds of objects and subjects upon whom and through which particular relations of power are realised” (p. 4).

In addition to this Foucauldian perspective, I draw on critical approaches to discourses as ways of representing of the world. From this perspective, discourses “not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), they are also projective, imaginaries, [...] and tied into projects to change the world in particular directions” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 124). Discourses in this sense share some features with Goffman’s (1986) concept of frame, which refers to an “interpretive [schema] that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively

punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions” (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 137). However, Fairclough (2003) more explicitly ties his understanding of discourses to the workings of power through ideologies, which he defines as “representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation” (p. 9).

Although Foucault and Fairclough do not share ontological premises, I draw on them simultaneously because they each provide tools for understanding the role that power plays in legitimizing certain knowledges over others through discursive practices. I argue that Foucault’s (1972) warning that “we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” works to complement Fairclough’s (2003) interest in “the ideological work of texts [when they seek] to universalize particular meanings in the service of achieving and maintaining dominance” (p. 58). Drawing on both scholars brings attention to the way that even discourses that have gained a level of dominance in society are used in ways that are “neither uniform nor stable” (Foucault, 1972, p. 100). Together, these perspectives offer theoretical lenses for thinking about how power relations are not fixed but rather are continually (re)produced and contested through ways of representing the world that are activated through our constructions of subjects, institutions, and the everyday world.

#### **1.4 Goal and outline of dissertation**

In Chapter 2, I present the details of the methods and methodology that underlie this research.

After discussing the ontological and epistemological foundations of the project, I account for the



process through which I selected and recruited participants, reflect on my positionality as a researcher, and explain my approach to data generation and data analysis. I have integrated contributions from research participants into this chapter as a way of acknowledging that developing a research project, generating data, and analyzing data are intertwined processes rather than distinct stages of research.

Chapter 3, 4 and 5 constitute the main body of this dissertation. The goal of this dissertation is to explore how cisnormativity shapes the way that educators talk about working with trans and gender-nonconforming students, and to examine how this impacts the material (im)possibilities that exist for trans and gender-nonconforming students in the current school system. To do so, I focus on unpacking three discursive patterns that dominated my transcripts.

I start in Chapter 3 by examining how cisnormativity works within and alongside discourses of diversity. Diversity is a concept that organizes educators' understandings how schools can be safe and welcoming places for trans and gender-nonconforming students. I look at moments where diversity showed up in my interviews to analyze how the Canadian imaginary of schools as welcoming of diversity can function to make less visible the way that cisnormativity operates in educational spaces. This chapter also highlights how diversity discourses are put to work in ways that bring cisnormativity together with other regimes of power, particularly whiteness and heteronormativity. This analysis helps me establish the foundation and context for the rest of my analysis, which focuses more closely on the way that cisnormativity is produced in the stories that educators shared about working with trans and gender-nonconforming students.

In Chapter 4, I look at how trans and gender-nonconforming students are featured in the stories of teachers as (sometimes untrustworthy) decision-makers through what I call the "youth in charge" narrative. Educators try to resist cisnormative regimes of truth by framing trans and

gender-nonconforming youth as experts on their own lives. However, concerns about safety, assumptions about youth, and persistent cisnormative expectations often undergird educators' positions, thus limiting the transformative potential of this narrative.

In Chapter 5, I build on my analysis of the “youth in charge” narrative by showing how it fits into a larger pattern of talking about change that dominated the data. In talking about their experiences of working with trans and gender-nonconforming students, educators favoured stories and explanations that emphasized the need for individual accommodation rather than deeper cultural changes. These discursive practices reveal the difficulty of dislodging cisnormative practices even when (some) trans and gender-nonconforming students are (conditionally) welcomed into schools. The emphasis on accommodation provides few tools for educators to recognize and interrogate their own complicity in cisnormativity.

I conclude this dissertation in Chapter 6 by emphasizing the necessity of bringing the concept of cisnormativity into analyses of gender diversity in schools. I argue for discursive practices that open up possibilities for changing school cultures in ways that go beyond accommodating individual trans and gender-nonconforming students. Instead, it is imperative to interrogate the way that school spaces are constituted through exclusions that are undergirded by norms of gender and sexuality as well as race, class, and ability.

## Chapter 2: Methodologies & methods

*Claire: I'm going to make a total guess here. You can't put this in your research as--*

*HFD: - as a fact, no, I won't.*

(Interview with administrator, District C)

### 2.1 Introduction

As an exchange between researcher and interviewee, the above interaction between Claire and I offers an interesting glimpse into a larger conversation about the process of knowledge production, and the choices that researchers constantly have to make about how they will represent the data that they have generated. Doing research always involves speaking about others, and for others, and the methodologies that researchers choose shape how we engage in these acts of speaking as well as their consequences. Positivist research traditions in the social sciences have tended to obscure this process by encouraging scholars to remove themselves from their research in order to achieve an 'objective' perspective and taking for granted the ontological and epistemological roots of research. As a result, discussion of methods is too often considered the practical side of research, a straight-forward description of the means of data collection with little theoretical impact.

In this chapter, I deliberately challenge this perception by discussing the theoretical foundations of my methodology and methods, the choices I have made throughout the research, as well as the implications of these choices. Following Harding (1987), I distinguish between methods, which are "techniques for gathering data" (p. 2), methodology, which is "a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed" (p. 3), and epistemology, which is a theory about knowledge (p. 2). It is particularly important to acknowledge the specific ontology and epistemology underlying research, as they shape methodology *and* methods. The questions that

we ask, how we ask them, the data that we generate, and the conclusions that we reach are directly implicated in the research process (Naples, 2007).

In conducting this research, I have adopted a feminist critical approach based in the idea of social construction. Unlike the tradition of positivist research that assumes that researchers “can observe and measure reality in an objective way with no influence of the research on the process of data collection” (Hennick, Hutter & Bailey, 2012, p. 14), a social constructionist ontology instead acknowledges that the production of knowledge is “a social enterprise” (Sprague, 2005, p. 2) grounded in a particular historical and cultural moment. It also understands the researcher as an agent of knowledge who shapes “the context of discovery” (McCorkel & Myers, 2003). This ontology underlines “how privilege and self-interest are implicated in the production of knowledge—shaping what we chose to write about, whom we shared our work with, and whose voices we silenced” (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 208). It thus requires researchers to openly discuss the choices made at every methodological step.

I begin this chapter by offering an overview of my project and its genesis, and discussing the process of selecting the four school districts and individual participants who I interviewed. Following this introduction to the project, I engage more specifically in a reflection on the process of self-reflexive research and my own position as a researcher. I then delve into my choice of using interviews as the method for generating data. Finally, I discuss the analytical approaches to discourse that inform my analysis in the rest of this dissertation. Throughout this chapter, I highlight the fact that methodological choices have theoretical significance and emphasize that my analytical approach is fundamentally connected to my understanding of data.

## **2.2 Ontological and epistemological foundations**

I started to make visible the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this project in Chapter 1. These assumptions are important to revisit in a conversation about methodology, as they shape the research – not only what kind of knowledge is seen as valuable, but what kind of research becomes possible and even beneficial, what kind of assumptions are questioned from the outset of the research project, and what is seen as necessary to take into consideration when constructing a research project. For example, in-depth interviews are a common method for qualitative research (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997), but what we make of interview data is shaped by the foundational assumptions upon which a particular project is built.

My decision to conduct interviews, for example, is shaped by my interest in discourse as a space where “power and knowledge are joined together” (Foucault, 1978, p. 100). This particular epistemological leaning, in turn, directs my understanding of the stories that participants shared. It also guides my analysis of talk not as a window into people’s internal world but instead as an interactional accomplishment, a process through which people construct themselves and their world by drawing on discourses that are “both instrument[s] and effect[s] of power” (Foucault, 1978, p. 100). Highlighting the relationship between discourse and power is essential to my project as one that seeks to trace how normative regimes (like cisnormativity) shape the way we talk about, and respond to, the presence of trans and gender-nonconforming students. In other words, ontological and epistemological reflections set the stage for more practical questions about how we, as researchers, can put methodologies into action in the way that we do research.

This research project draws on feminist epistemologies and methodologies but also on their reformulations by other critical scholars. My own understanding of feminism is not one of

narrow focus on gender, but rather one of a movement for social justice that critically examines all processes of marginalization and privilege and the way that they interlock (bell hooks, 2000). This is a theoretical positioning which has led me to ask questions that may temporarily forefront questions of gender but do not assume its primacy. One of the largest contributions that this type critical feminism has made to social sciences is to encourage a shift from a concern in truth/reality to an interest in power/knowledge (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 60). How do these truth claims circulate in society, and what are the social implications for this process? I take up these questions by focusing on discursive practices, rather than on seeking to uncover the truth of stories told by participants.

This perspective has important implications for methodological considerations. Inherent to this approach is the idea that the process of knowledge production is not one where the researcher, having shed all biases, discovers a truth or an object that's 'out there', waiting to be known. Instead, researchers and their subjectivities are profoundly implicated in the process of knowledge production. As Haraway notes (1988), "accounts of a 'real' world do not, then, depend on a logic of 'discovery' but on a power-charged social relation of 'conversation'" (p. 593). Knowledge is not produced through the discovery of pre-existing objects but through social relations and discursive practices. Our understanding of the world around us depends on our social position, our embodiment, power dynamics at play, and our assumptions about the world. No knowledge can exist independently of these elements. Specific perspectives are not conceptualized as a way to access a more real 'truth', but rather they illuminate the process through which the ruling relations and their institutional order extend from everyday practices, which are specifically located and embodied (D. Smith, 2005).

## **2.3 Setting up the project**

### **2.3.1 On deciding not to interview youth and families**

One of the first and most important methodological decisions that I had to make about this project was whether the research was going to include young people and their perspectives in a significant way. This project is impacted by my own journey as a (relatively) young queer person who has been working within queer and trans communities for a decade. When I first came out, I quickly became involved in queer youth organizing, and I was immediately drawn to education as a site of interesting and complex tensions for young people, especially surrounding issues of gender and sexuality. Over the years, I have facilitated countless workshops in schools and with educators on sexual and gender diversity, and spent hundreds of hours volunteering in queer and trans youth spaces, first as a youth, then as an adult. These commitments have shaped my personal and intellectual growth. They explained why I became increasingly interested in how systems of sexual and gender conformity structure school spaces and regulate young people's lives. I have also developed many close relationships with trans and gender-nonconforming young people, as a mentor and/or a peer. I am deeply attached to these relationships, and emotionally invested in the way that people that I love have navigated, and in some cases continue to navigate, educational spaces.

Despite these personal attachments, as my idea of this project started to sharpen I became convinced that I did not want to center the project around the lives of trans and gender-nonconforming youth themselves but rather on the experiences of school staff who help shape the institutional context that trans and gender-nonconforming youth have to navigate. Two major reasons led me away from conducting a project about youth. First, I have watched mainstream culture become increasingly aware of the existence of trans and gender-nonconforming youth

and the obstacles that they face. This has led to heightened scrutiny of their lives and their experiences, and this media attention often continues to sensationalize trans and gender-nonconforming lives as fascinating and exceptional. The reality of gender diversity has not been new or exceptional to me for many years now, and I saw little point to a project that would seek to ‘uncover’ the institutional and interactional obstacles that we already know many trans students face on a daily basis at school (Greytak, Kosciw & Diaz, 2009; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; McGuire et al., 2010) (less is known about the experiences of gender-nonconforming and non-binary students).

Second, my training as a critical scholar has made me sensitive to the tendency in the social sciences to ask “questions that address a social problem [...] in terms of what is wrong with the person who is experiencing the problem, rather than in terms of what it is about the current social order that makes the problem likely” (Sprague, 2005, p. 12). Scholars have often been criticized for framing trans people as objects of curiosity and inquiry in a way that has medicalized, repudiated, and/or dismissed trans people’s own accounts of their experiences (Hale, 2009; Vipond, 2015). In large part, this is due to an objectivist tendency of health and social researchers with cisgender privilege to impose their own authoritative, ‘neutral’ conclusions onto the lives of trans people, with the consequence of shaping policy and possibilities in the lives of trans people without taking into account their insights or perspectives (Namaste, 2000, p. 27-37). This approach to research has contributed to a culture where trans subjectivity is negated and cisgender people (including scholars, clinicians, and other experts) feel entitled to making claims about who trans people are and what they need (or don’t need) in ways that has sometimes authorized political refusals to acknowledge or protect trans people (Shelley, 2008, p. 3-5).



This denial that trans people are experts on their own lives is compounded by the fact that most research on trans people is concerned exclusively with issues of gender identity: how people explain their gender identity, how they have come to understand themselves as trans, what surgeries they have gotten or intend to get, how they manage their gender identity, how people around them perceive them (for example of this type of research, see Devor, 1999; Ekins, 1997; Girshick, 2008; Rubin, 2003). Because this type of research is concerned with explaining the existence of trans people, it can function to reify the assumption that the management of one's assigned gender at birth is somehow more natural than one's gender identity, and to recentre cisgender lives as the unexamined norm (Namaste, 2000, p. 32). It also puts trans people under undue pressure to narrate themselves and to let their bodies or personal histories be dissected in order to gain some level of legitimacy. Some trans activists, for example, have noted the limitations and constraints imposed by transnormativity (Vipond, 2015), including the legitimizing effect of the dominant trans narrative of being 'born in the wrong body' (Califia, 1997; Bornstein, 1994; Halberstam, 1998b; Hines, 2007; see Davy, 2011 for a discussion of the complexities of trans embodiment).

This preoccupation with gender identity and the results of surgery "produces transsexual and transgendered [sic] people as an object of inquiry" (Namaste, 2000, p. 45) rather than as active subjects. Within this model, trans people are interesting only insofar as they have chosen to live in a gender other than the one that they were assigned at birth. This focus on trans people as transgressing the gender binary further marginalizes and negates the experiences of transsexual people who do not wish to disrupt or destabilize the gender binary. Namaste (2000) notes that queer theory and mainstream sociology have both been guilty of this problematic

framework, as both traditions focus on the production of transsexuality and transgenderism at the expense of an analysis of how these identities and experiences are erased in our culture (p. 51).

There are undoubtedly positive consequences to the increased visibility of trans youth in academic research and mainstream culture, and it is possible to conduct research that centers trans youth's lives, experiences, and perceptions without problematizing them. However, I was growing frustrated with the way even these positive frameworks do not examine closely the institutional context that young people have to navigate on a daily basis. Researchers almost never talk to the people who are directly implicated in the (re)production of the norms that structure these contexts. Given this complicated history and the privilege I gain from being read as cisgender, I realized that, as both a scholar and an activist (two identities intricately linked for me), I needed to turn my critical attention to the people who are part of the systems that create institutional and interactional challenges for trans and gender-nonconforming students. This offered me a better opportunity to ask critical questions about the reproduction of institutional norms and the limits of current discourses about trans and gender-nonconforming youth.

The research questions I outlined in Chapter 1 are inevitably tied and tangled up with the lives of trans and gender-nonconforming youth and their experiences of educational spaces, but they are not directly about them. I am increasingly convinced that if we do not look to how our everyday discursive practices and their material impacts for constituting particular institutional and interactional spaces, we are unlikely to deconstruct the ways that these spaces continue to automatically tend towards enforcing norms of gender and sexual conformity. We are thus unlikely to make a significant and sustainable change. I also have no doubt that my investment in approaching this topic from this particular angle is a product of my own position: despite my continued commitment to young people, I am increasingly situated closer to educators than I am

to queer and trans and gender-nonconforming youth. This project thus is ultimately also motivated by a desire to interrogate my own practices and investments in educational contexts that enforce sexual and gender conformity.

Regardless of my reasons for focusing on adult rather than youth perspectives, it is important not to deny the challenge of writing about this research in a way that engages with the fact that trans and gender-nonconforming youth are a constant presence – yet absence – in my interviews and in much of my analysis. I have often wondered with whom my responsibility lies most strongly: the dedicated educators who took time out of their (very) busy schedules to share their thoughts and experiences with me? Or the youth that they told me about, along with the countless of other queer and trans and gender-nonconforming youth who have to navigate hostile educational environments? The answer is not neatly dichotomous, and I have tried in my analysis to honour and respect my participants while remaining committed to a critical investigation of the way that discourses, particularly in institutional contexts, work to (de)legitimize certain lives over others (a process fundamentally tied colonization and nationalist ideologies, as Nagel (2000), Rifkin (2011) and other critical scholars of race and indigeneity have pointed out).

I also find an answer in my analytical goals: I focus not on telling the ‘truth’ of what happened at the schools that I visited (an approach which would undoubtedly be profoundly inadequate for lacking the perspectives of the youth involved) but on examining how the adults that I talked to construct accounts of what happened. My aim is to make sense of the meaning-making work that is involved in navigating dominant discourses in the institutional context of schools. I have no interest in, or illusion about, speaking for the youth whose stories are partially and inadequately told in this research: that is not how I can best engage in responsible, respectful research in this case. This is especially true given the colonizing impulse involved in speaking

for others in research (Alcoff, 1991-92; Minh-ha, 1989) and the myth of ‘authentic voice’ that it perpetuates (Ellsworth, 1989; Orner, 1992). Instead, I believe responsibility and respect in this case is best achieved by conducting and writing research that is relevant to both trans and gender-nonconforming youth and educators. This kind of research critically examines the institutional conditions that structure the lives of young trans and gender-nonconforming people and their experiences in schools, as well as the complicated discursive negotiations that educators have to engage in within constraining institutional contexts.

## **2.4 District and participant selection**

### **2.4.1 District selection**

Given that I am interested in the ways that institutional settings might constrain or expand the discursive possibilities for educators, I wanted to select participants who worked in different institutional contexts, including different school districts. I obtained ethics approval to interview school staff from four districts in BC. Three of the four districts (District A, C and D) where I conducted this research project are located in the Lower Mainland of BC, the urban area that includes Vancouver and its neighbouring cities. The fourth one, District B, is located in northern BC. I had always intended on interviewing educators in District D since it is considered to be one of the ‘model’ districts in the province and it is also the district with which I was most familiar. The other three districts were selected based on strong initial interest from one or two key educators working in these districts, who learned of the project through different avenues: informal networks (District A), a recruitment email that I sent out through the listserv of the B.C. Teacher’s Federation (District B), and a direct contact from me, as the educator in this case was a key informant (District C). Additionally, I was drawn to these three districts because they

provided a variety of institutional contexts regarding LGBTQ issues. At the time I was conducting my research, these four districts were at different stages of acquiring a district policy on LGBTQ inclusion – District A had recently established a policy, District B and District C were in the process of acquiring one, and District D had a long-established policy (see BCTF website<sup>12</sup> for information on LGBTQ policies across the province). All four districts now have such a policy on the books, although only the policy in District D specifically addresses the needs of trans and gender-nonconforming students.

In order to recruit individual participants, it was necessary to gain approval from these four districts. Although somewhat lengthy, the process was straightforward, and all districts (except for District A) quickly approved the research upon reviewing the information package I provided. District A was reluctant at first, seemingly because of a misunderstanding: their rejection letter stated that they do not track or keep statistics on trans and gender-nonconforming students, but reaching the person in charge of reviewing research projects to explain the misunderstanding proved difficult. I was finally able to obtain approval by asking the principal at Wolfe Secondary (the school where I had some interest from teachers) for a letter of support. Because the district approved the research project in connection to Wolfe Secondary specifically, I was not able to reach out to administrators at other schools. As a result, District A is the only district where all my interviews were with staff (current or former) of a single school site.

---

<sup>12</sup> <https://bctf.ca/SocialJustice.aspx?id=17994>

### **2.4.2 Note on comparisons within the data**

As stated above, part of my analytical interest going into this project was the impact of institutional context on the availability of discourses that educators might use to make sense of their experiences and on what changes were perceived as possible or not. In other words, I thought I might notice different patterns across districts in the likelihood that educators favoured certain discourses over others. Although differences did sometimes emerge, in particular in people's opinions of the importance and role of district-wide policies, even these differences very rarely drew clear distinctions between districts.

This is not to deny that there are some significant differences between the districts where I conducted research. Both my interviews and observational data confirmed that the most urban district makes accessible a wealth of expert knowledges and resources that are less easily accessible in other districts. This lack of accessibility was especially felt in the northern BC school district because of its physical distance to trans competent service providers in a province where trans competencies still tend to be centralized. However, these differences rarely made a coherent pattern that would warrant making analytical distinctions. As a result, while I occasionally point to moments where differences emerge that did seem to be partly about institutional contexts (e.g., whether an administrator felt that their district would defend their decision to let a young trans woman use the girls' washroom), I do not offer a systematically comparative analysis.

### **2.4.3 Participant selection**

All interviews were conducted between March and June of 2013. In that period of time, I interviewed 62 participants for an average of 70 minutes (see the interview guide in Appendix

A), who were currently or recently employed in a public school. Most educators were employed in secondary schools at the time of the interview. Most interviews took place at the participant's current place of employment, usually after school hours or during a free period. The large majority of participants were administrators, counsellors, and classroom teachers but I also interviewed other staff when conversations pointed me in their direction due to their experience. In three of the four districts, this included at least one district employee whose position had brought them in contact with situations involving trans and gender-nonconforming youth.<sup>13</sup> I use the term "educator" whenever I need to refer broadly to all school staff, and mention individual participants' position when possible.

Almost all of my participants had worked directly with at least one student who had socially transitioned or was in the process of socially transitioning from one gender to another. A couple of participants who did not have direct experience were interviewed for one of two reasons: either they held a position at the school (i.e., as a librarian or an administrative clerk) that meant they had had an indirect involvement in institutional processes that impacted trans and gender-nonconforming students, or they had worked with queer-identified students and conflated sexuality and gender identity. The commonplace confusion and conflation of queer and trans identities and issues meant that it was sometimes difficult to assert early on in the interview that these participants did not have the direct experience I was looking for. Rather than to discard these interviews, I use them to shed light on the perceptions of school staff of the complicated terrain of gender and sexuality, and the often-murky ideas that exist about the relationship between sexual orientation and gender identity, especially when talking about adolescents.

---

<sup>13</sup> In order to protect their anonymity, I will not be mentioning their specific position at the district.

In addition to the 62 school staff, I also interviewed 6 participants who were either trans and gender-nonconforming youth or were parents of trans and gender-nonconforming youth. As I have explained above, I made the decision early on to focus my research explicitly on educators rather than on trans and gender-nonconforming students themselves. However, as I designed the project and reflected on its boundaries, I determined that it was ethically important to make sure that, whenever possible, the students whose experiences might come up during my interviews with school staff would be made aware that I was conducting this research project. It felt important that they be invited to contact me if they had any concerns or if they wanted to talk to me (informally or formally) about the project and their experiences. Each time that I entered a new school site, I checked with key participants to see if they were able to contact the student(s) on my behalf and provide them with a sheet briefly introducing my research (Appendix C). This was possible in about half of the schools I visited, usually when the student was still attending the school or had very recently graduated. This strategy led a small number of youth and families to contact me and to be interviewed by me. Although I draw on these interviews in places to illuminate some of my findings and/or to help me put the experiences of school staff in context, these interviews are not the focus of my analysis but rather worked to inform my interviews with school staff as well as my analysis.

In spite of my own mixed school experiences as a teenager, the hallways hold few fears for me. I have always made positive connections with teachers, if not with peers. I continue to have much respect for people who work in schools, and I have developed additional familiarity with schools by completing numerous hours of volunteer work in school settings. Once I had managed to gain access to a school, this comfort with the space of school and the people who work there, combined with a friendly disposition, made the recruitment process relatively



smooth. I easily established rapport with administrators and other staff, and few people I approached were unwilling to speak to me for this research.

Practically speaking, I usually first made contact with an educator in the district who had expressed strong interest in the project. This key contact helped me identify specific schools where staff had worked with at least one trans or gender-nonconforming student and might be interested in participating in the research, so that I would be able to get multiple perspectives from people working in the same institutional context. I also usually asked participants if they could refer to me to other educators after our interview, especially if they had mentioned specific colleagues in the course of our conversations. Additionally, I always contacted the school's administrators in order to inform them of the project and of my interest in interviewing some of their current or former staff. In all cases, administrators were supportive of the project and helped me by identifying potential participants at the school and circulating information about the research to the relevant staff (see recruitment letter in Appendix B). Most administrators also agreed to participate in an interview. These different steps are aligned with a snowball sampling technique (Morgan, 2008), which uses a small pool of initial informants to identify people who could meet the eligibility criteria for participating in the study.

By accessing participants through several points of entry, and focusing on a limited number of school sites, I was able to recruit from beyond people's personal networks and avoid a sample where people shared highly similar beliefs. However, there remain limits to relying primarily on snowball sampling. Undoubtedly, people had their own idea of who would have interesting opinions and experiences to share with me when they directed me to their colleagues. Another limitation of my sample is that people typically agreed to be interviewed for this project because they saw themselves as being supportive of trans and gender-nonconforming youth (this

investment in the identity of caring, supporting educator is a theme that I explore more fully in Chapter 5). Twice in the course of recruitment, I was told that I should talk to someone because that person had struggled, at least initially, with supporting trans and gender-nonconforming students. In both cases, the people were told about the research project but were not interested in participating. This anecdote highlights the difficulty of reaching participants who might be concerned about how their perspective would be received and/or portrayed, or worried about professional consequences. This limitation echoes my earlier discussion of how knowledge production is affected by practical decisions and the reality of being in the field. As a result, this study is primarily a study of educators who understand themselves as supportive of trans and gender-nonconforming students. I critically investigate this positioning as part of my analysis.

My original idea for recruitment was to focus on a very limited number of school sites and interview as many staff as possible at each of these sites. This was somewhat successful – with the exception of two schools, I was able to talk with multiple educators at every school I visited where a trans and gender-nonconforming youth had attended or was attending. However, where I had hoped to end up with a small handful of clearly delineated school sites, the recruitment process proved messier. Educators rarely work at the same schools for many years in a row, so that many of my participants had worked with different trans and gender-nonconforming youth at different schools. Additionally, their colleagues had often moved on to working at other schools, and/or in different positions (e.g., first as a counsellor then as an administrator). In these conditions, relying on snowball sampling often led me to more school sites than I had anticipated, with more complex lines connecting my various participants.

#### **2.4.4 Description of participants**

As mentioned above, I interviewed a total of 62 school staff as well as 4 trans and gender-nonconforming youth and 2 parents of trans and gender-nonconforming youth. Table 2.1 below breaks down the demographics of my school staff participants: they are predominantly white (87%), mostly identify as straight (84%), and almost all of them have grown up in Canada (90%). They are also a majority of women (71%), hold Master's degrees (71%) and most of them are in their forties and fifties (61%). As I conducted my research, I made few efforts to recruit for particular demographics and instead let the process of snowball sampling drive the demographics of my sample.

In some ways, my sample resembles the larger body of B.C. educators: in their statistics on teachers and administrators for the year 2013-2014, the government of British Columbia report that 67% of educators in B.C. are between the ages of 40 and 60, and 69% are women (BC Ministry of Education, 2014). Given the persistent assumption that women continue to constitute a majority of school staff, I assumed I would interview a majority of women. Similarly, I expected to interview primarily white participants based on my experience in the school system and the knowledge that schools continue to be dominated by white educators. There is statistical evidence that in Canada, including BC, the “racialized teacher population has not kept pace with the racialized student and general populations” (Ryan, Pollock & Antonelli, 2009, p. 592). My observations do suggest that white educators dominate at the various schools that I visited.

However, the question of why I recruited a majority of white participants cannot be dismissed as simply a matter of statistics. It is important to acknowledge that my own embodiment as a white person – and the fact that my approach to recruitment did not incorporate specific strategies to interview people of color – shaped who I ended up interviewing. In

interactions, my whiteness carries significance, and although it is difficult to ascertain the precise impact of whiteness on the recruitment process, I see a number of possible effects: (1) my whiteness may have directed who people thought of connecting me to (other white educators); (2) my whiteness, combined with a research topic that did not explicitly mention race, may have communicated that I had no interest in issues of racialization (a perspective facilitated by the advent of the myth of colorblindness, which suggests that too much interest in race is undue); (3) racist narratives persist in Western cultures about people of colour being more homophobic/transphobic than white people (Bronski, Pellegrini & Amico, 2013; Egan & Sherill, 2009, p. 9), which may have shaped people's ideas about who would make a good participant for my research. In anticipation of this limitation, I integrated questions about racialization into my interview guide in a conscious effort to ensure that interviews touched on this subject regardless of the racial or ethnic make-up of my participants. Critical whiteness studies warn scholars against the predominant notion that "only people of color have race" (Collins, 1995, p. 729) and remind us that white people also "live racially structured lives" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1). White people are implicated in systems of racialization, a process I wanted to try and capture as part of my analysis. I discuss this more extensively in Chapter 3.

Conversely, while the research topic and my own ties to queer and trans communities could have led to a large number of queer- and trans-identified participants, most of my interviewees identified as heterosexual and, with one exception, all of them are also cisgender. As I discuss in the next section, we must not assume an uncomplicated relationship between identity and knowledge production. Nonetheless, knowledge is produced through power relations, and occupying dominant social positions give people different vantage points than those whose lives are shaped by marginalization (bell hooks, 2000, p. xvi). It was thus crucial

that my analysis would take into consideration how my participants' privileged positions worked to shape their talk and their perspectives.

For example, Fawn (teacher, District C) discussed a trans educator coming into her class to talk about gender identity: although she could not recall what specific questions her students asked of the educator, she told me that she remembered them being “normal, logical, regular questions.” One way that this account can be analyzed is in the context of a cisnormative culture that often gives cisgender people a sense of entitlement over the experiences of trans people. This can translate into microaggressions such as invasive questions, which can be experienced as traumatic by trans people (Richmond, Burnes & Carroll, 2012; Nadal, Skolnik & Wong, 2012; Namaste, 2007, p. 195) but seem entirely unremarkable to cis people like Fawn. This example is meant to serve as a reminder that participants' relative positions of privilege are not simply demographic facts to be asserted, but rather can inform my analysis throughout this dissertation. Such an approach is helpful in writing responsible research that remains respectful of the participants, as it does not attribute negative intentions and actions to individuals but instead takes into consideration the broader culture and its discourses. Ultimately, the make-up of the project's sample provides an opportunity to examine how people with dominant identities negotiate discourses about trans and gender-nonconforming students in a cisnormative context. Given that most educators in this province occupy similarly socially privileged positions, this research can provide essential insights into how to understand and thus support educators who work with trans and gender-nonconforming students.

Samples of participants always have their limitations. Rather than imagine what may have been a more ideal sample, it is more productive to acknowledge these limitations, and actively engage in the work of thinking through how the make-up of one's participants shapes

the data generated in the course of the research process. I continue this discussion as I move through my analysis in the next chapters. But first, I continue this self-reflexive work in the next section by discussing my own positioning as a researcher and how this affected my relationship to my participants and the process of data generation.

	Administrators	Counsellors	Teachers	Other staff	Total
<b>Total participants*</b>	<b>14 (23%)</b>	<b>15 (24%)</b>	<b>21 (34%)</b>	<b>12 (19%)</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>School District</b>					
A	0	2	8	3	<b>13 (21%)</b>
B	4	4	6	3	<b>17 (27%)</b>
C	6	5	2	2	<b>15 (25%)</b>
D	4	4	5	4	<b>17 (27%)</b>
<b>Age</b>					
30-40 (1982-1973)	2	3	11	4	<b>20 (32%)</b>
41-60 (1972-1953)	11	12	9	6	<b>38 (61%)</b>
61+ (1952-earlier)	1	0	1	2	<b>4 (7%)</b>
<b>Gender identity</b>					
Woman	7	13	15	9	<b>44 (71%)</b>
Man	7	2	6	3	<b>18 (29%)</b>
<b>Sexual identity</b>					
Queer spectrum	2	1	4	2	<b>8 (13%)</b>
Straight	12	13	17	9	<b>52 (84%)</b>
Unclear/No answer	0	1	0	1	<b>2 (3%)</b>
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>					
Person of color	1	2	4	1	<b>8 (13%)</b>
White person	13	13	17	11	<b>54 (87%)</b>
<b>Higher education</b>					
High school	0	0	0	2	<b>2 (3%)</b>
Bachelor's	0	4	8	4	<b>16 (26%)</b>
Master's	14	11	13	6	<b>44 (71%)</b>
<b>Grew up in CA</b>					
Yes	14	13	20	9	<b>56 (90%)</b>
No**	0	2	1	3	<b>6 (10%)</b>

**Table 2.1 Demographics of school staff participants**

## 2.5 Reflexivity

An approach based in the idea of social construction, especially when it is influenced by feminist theory, often involves some form of self-reflexivity, which is the practice of “acknowledge[ing] that the researcher’s background, position, or emotions are an integral part of the process of producing data” (Hennick, Hutter & Bailey, 2012, p. 19) Reflexivity is not simply as a restrictive practice, wherein positionality is identified in order to be neutralized. It is a way to actively

engage with the process of knowledge production with the goal of producing responsible research. For me, reflexivity means research that honours people's time and participation, recognizes the power dynamics that infuse the research/participant relationship, and generates knowledge that can be used to improve structural conditions for marginalized populations.

While widespread in feminist research, the practice of self-reflexivity has been criticized on several counts. First, it is often reduced to a superficial list of social attributes of characteristics, a "confessional tale" (Pillow, 2003, p. 182) that describes the researcher(s) but does not generate a deeper reflection on how this particular positionality has affected the different stages of research and the relationship to participants. In other words, these surface attempts at self-reflexivity do little to decenter the researcher's privilege (if anything, they recenter it) or to connect it to a larger analysis of how positionality shapes and is shaped by power arrangements. As a result, these accounts fail to "provide a meaningful account of how power organizes knowledge" (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 208). Because they assume that these declarations of identity speak for themselves, these kinds of accounts also do not adequately acknowledge that "outsiderness and insiderness are not fixed or static positions" (Naples, 2003, p. 49). Finally, reflexivity practiced in this way often suggests that these utterances can neutralize the effects of the researcher's identity on their research instead of engaging in an adequate and meaningful evaluation of them (Alcoff, 1991-92).

Pillow (2003) suggests instead that we might engage in what she calls "reflexivities of discomfort" (p. 187); this type of uncomfortable reflexivity "seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous" (p. 188) in a way that does not deny the potential and importance of self-reflexive practice, but also explicitly interrogates its "complicit relationship with ethnocentric power and knowledge in qualitative research" (p. 192). Ultimately, the value of



critical self-reflexivity is precisely not that it “somehow manages to avoid problems associated with privilege and difference [but] instead it reveals them” (McCorkel & Myers, 2003p. 229).

Certainly there is value in working to “identify the baggage we bring with us as we enter the field to collect and analyze empirical materials” (Best, 2003, p. 908). A researcher’s location is “epistemically salient” (Alcoff, 1991-92. p. 7): it shapes the question we ask, the interactions we have with our participants, how we listen and hear what they tell us (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2007; DeVault & Gross, 2007, p. 71). Pillow’s (2003) reformulation is productive precisely because it works alongside an interrogation of how “the substantive relations between the knower and the known mediate the relationship between the knower’s standpoint and the production of knowledge (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 221) and of the ways that “social privilege affects the process of knowledge production” (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 206). Yet it does not assume clear causes and effects, or static relationships of privilege and marginalization. Rather than imposing limitations based on the specific positionality of individual researchers, this approach instead questions the connection between knowledge production and researcher identity, and “interrogates the notion that one’s identity determines how one produces knowledge” (Allen, 2010, p. 149). What is important is to recognize and analyze “how the researcher’s positionality facilitates specific forms of understanding and impedes others” (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 228), no matter who the researcher is and what topic they are researching. By practicing reflexivity in this way, we do not deny that research necessarily involved speaking about, and for others, but we ensure this act of speaking always carries with it “an accountability and responsibility for what one says” (Alcoff, 1991-92. p. 25).

Further complicating the practice of reflexivity is my approach to interviews as interactions where identities are not simply relevant but are actively produced. This conception

draws on an understanding of subjectivity as “precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse every time we think or speak” (Weedon, 1987, p. 33).

The epistemological stance that one’s identity comes into existence through its doing and speaking has an impact on how we understand the interview relationship. Best (2003) notes:

An implicit assumption that underlies these discussions [about the effects of identity relations on research practice] is the idea that the researcher’s biography with regard to race, class, and gender is already formed prior to the research experience rather than being an emergent feature of the research process itself. (p. 908)

Instead of drawing conclusions about the interview relationship based on the assumed fixed identities of the interviewer and interviewee, it is important to pay attention to the way that identities are generated through the interaction of the interview, and in particular to the way that the interviewer is actively involved in this interactional encounter.

For example, as I conducted interviews, I was confronted with the fact that how I identified was less important in my interviews than how participants *read* me and my body. In my interactions with participants, it often felt as if the topic of my research combined with my gender expression (which I am tempted to describe as safely gender-nonconforming – most people do not read me as feminine, but also feel comfortable in reading me as a woman) did the work of positioning me as a (potentially queer) cisgender ally to the trans community. Sometimes, this meant that my participants felt accountable to me for their tendency to make gendered assumptions. In the middle of explaining why physical education (P.E.) at his school is sometimes segregated by gender, Ernest, a principal in District C, noted:

There are at some things like floor hockey where [P.E. teachers] want just guys because you know - and actually having said that, we have girls’ hockey academy here and so girls are welcomed to join it but it’s like 90% guys thumping each other and the girls are playing basketball or something like that.

At the beginning of the quote, Ernest assumes that gender-segregating hockey makes obvious sense. His use of ‘you know’ calls upon shared dominant narratives about hockey as an activity suited just for ‘guys.’ But immediately, he shifts as he becomes accountable<sup>14</sup> to me for the gendered assessment he just made: he softens his original claim by mentioning that the school does offer girls the opportunity to play hockey as well, ultimately reaffirming the gender order by assessing that few girls choose to take hockey. While it is impossible to know exactly why this principal felt accountable to me for his original statement, the combination of the research topic and my embodiment is likely to have played a role. This moment highlights the way that interviews are the product of an interaction between two specific people, but it also carries analytical significance. In the excerpt above, Ernest’s show of accountability provides a more complex look into his construction of sports as a gendered space – one where girls are not nominally excluded from the practice of hockey yet where the relationship to hockey to masculine enactment remains central (“it’s like 90% guys thumping each other”).

At other times, the fact that participants positioned me as a cisgender ally had the effect of allowing certain utterances. Often, this positioning seemed to work as a “point of connection” (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p. 204) that helped establish rapport between me and my cisgender participants who saw themselves as allies. However, it could also be uncomfortable. For example, participants sometimes assumed that I shared their opinion of how odd or complicated a particular situation was. This could implicate me in heterosexist and cisnormative discourses.

---

<sup>14</sup> In ethnomethodology and related approaches to discourse analysis, the notion of accountability refers to the way that people talk in ways that show that they are orienting to their conversation partner(s). Edwards & Potter (1993) explain: “At the same time as they are reporting and constructing explanations of events, speakers are accountable for their own actions in speaking, for the veracity of their accounts, and for the interactional consequences of those accounts.” If your conversational partner demonstrates surprise at one of your statements, for example, you are likely to demonstrate accountability by further explaining your perspective or softening your claim(s).

An example of this was visible in the way that Rebecca (teacher, District B) discussed Kayla, a trans girl who had attended her class a couple of years prior:

My favourite part was he'd [sic]<sup>15</sup> shave his eyebrows off and then make lightning bolts – so that, like, so, which is interesting... so he [sic] didn't try to hide, 'cause not – what kid do you know that's 17 or 18 years old shaves her eyebrows and paints on lightning bolts for eyebrows.

By using the phrase “what kid do you know,” Rebecca brings me into her assessment of the student's style as unusual and likely to attract attention, giving it additional force than if she had simply made a broad statement about what 17-year-olds do or do not do. Again, this is not simply a methodological reflection on the impact of my presence as an interviewer but has analytical relevance: it shows how cisnormativity can be bolstered through interaction.

The concept of reflexivity also invites me to reflect on another area in which I struggled with interview dynamics: my occasionally shifting identity between that of neutral interviewer and that of expert. Even though I avoided expressing opinions during interviews, the very structure of my encounter with participants located me as a researcher and expert in my field of research. Participants regularly assumed (correctly) that I already possessed knowledge on this topic. At times, it was difficult to negotiate my position as an interviewer maintaining some distance from the stories and opinions of my participants with my position as an expert and activist from whom my participants were curious to learn. Given my interest in my participants' discursive practices, it felt important not to feed particular concepts or definitions to them. I did not want to establish a dynamic that subordinated their experiences and narratives to my explanations. Yet this sometimes involved remaining quiet when participants stated uninformed

---

<sup>15</sup> I use this annotation after a third-person subject pronoun (he/she) or possessive adjective (his/her) to signal a misgendering, the act of referring to someone by a pronoun or form of address that does not accurately reflect their gender. I only use the annotation when I have strong reason to believe (based on informal conversations with informants or interviews with other participants) that the participant is misgendering the student.

opinions or specifically asked for my advice or input, such as when Amy (principal, District B) told me, “you can correct me at any point if you feel you want to share your knowledge with me.” These were tricky moments to navigate because they sometimes came in the midst of interviews with people who did not quite have the tools to properly support their trans and gender-nonconforming students and who could (and wanted to) benefit from additional insights or information. It struck me as counter-productive and epistemologically illogical to inhabit the position of distant researcher when I did in fact possess knowledge and tools (rather than straightforward truths and answers) that could be helpful to these educators. Yet I remained unsure how to best intervene into our conversation. Often there was time after our interview to share thoughts or resources with them, and I did so. Still, some of these interactions left me with the sense of having missed opportunities to effectively manifest my commitment to responsible research and to social change. I ended up feeling unsettled about the impact of maintaining distance as an interviewer, and unsatisfied about the part that I was playing in the field as a researcher.

This discomfort has not been unproductive, as it has pushed me to think further about the responsibility I have both to my participants and to the people whose lives might be impacted by my research in ways that extend beyond the interview relationship. These experiences strengthened my conviction that it is crucial for scholars to be involved in the communities they work with beyond research-oriented interactions, and that they put an emphasis on knowledge dissemination beyond academia. For instance, my involvement in policy changes in the Vancouver School Board’s LGBTQ policy is a concrete and recent attempt to ensure my knowledge would be shared with communities and stakeholders who have an impact on the lives

of the educators I interviewed *and* on the lives of queer and trans and gender-nonconforming students. These efforts do not erase my discomfort but inscribe it in a larger context.

By taking into consideration the way that interviewer and interviewee co-construct interview data, we are better able to recognize “that the insider/outsider relation is ultimately a fragile one, subject to change as the topic of talk shifts” (Best, 2003, p. 907). Power circulates in discourse to generate identities that are flexible and can shift in the course of the interview, in part because identity “is not the base of a subject but an effect of being produced as a subject through meanings of difference” (Dhamoon, 2009, p. 11). By acknowledging that the data generated in the process of interviewing are discursive productions of reality, it is possible to transform the range of our positionalities from being a problem that ‘gets in the way’ of proper interviewing to being both a potential resource for understanding our data.

This section has delineated some of the conversations that run through this dissertation as I attempt to practice reflexivities of discomfort and grapple with the way in which knowledge production is affected by the research process. To be able to fully engage in this effort, it is also important to pay close attention to the theoretical underpinnings of our actual methods of research; I do so in the next section, where I detail my understanding of interviewing as a method and a knowledge-constituting interaction. I also outline my approach to the practice of analyzing the discursive data generated by interviews.

## **2.6 Generating data: Interview as a method**

By discussing my approach to interviewing and interview data, I intend to both illuminate and complicate a process of data generation that is frequently perceived as straightforward, one that does not require a clear ontology (Cook, 2008) yet is able to give skilled researchers access to the

truth of their interviewees and “the observation of others” (Weiss, 1994, p. 1). In contrast, and as I have already highlighted in the previous section, I am interested in thinking through the implications of approaching interviews both as “meaning-making partnerships” (Hennink et al., 2012, p. 109) during which the interviewer and interviewee co-construct knowledge and meanings. As I promised Claire in the quote that opens this chapter, the goal is not to take my participants’ words as ‘facts’ in the positivist sense. Instead I want to explore what, in Claire’s words, a “total guess” might be able to tell us about the institutional context in which these guesses are made possible. In other words, in examining how events are represented in the talk of educators, the goal is not to compare “the truth about an event with how it is represented in particular texts [but to] see it in terms of comparison between different representations of the same or broadly similar events” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 136). In this way, I can illuminate the discursive processes by which educators construct their own truth or representation of an event through discourses available to them, and the potential material implications of that process.

This interest in the representational role of discourses and narratives (or processes of meaning-making) explains my choice of in-depth interviews as my method of data generation for this project. In-depth interviews, especially in a semi-structured format, provide valuable opportunities for participants to discuss their perspectives on the research topic, to tell stories, and to bring up themes and topics that the research did not anticipate. Patton (2002), for example, contends that the objective of qualitative interviews is to capture the diverse nature of people’s worldviews, experiences, perceptions, and judgments using their own words. As such, in-depth interviewing can be a powerful tool for exploring processes of meaning-making: how people make sense of their worlds, how they understand a certain topic, what discourses they have available to them to talk about their experiences, and how these discursive processes shape

what actions are understood as (im)possible. Rather than take participants' talk as unmediated truth and an unambiguous reflection of reality, I understand interviews – like other instances of talk – as moments where people are representing the world in ways that allow them to (re)construct themselves and their social world.

A critical examination of processes of meaning-making takes into account the way that power circulates in representations. I draw here on Dhamoon's (2009) work, where she describes her analytical project as one where she considers "how meanings of difference are produced, organized, and regulated through power, and the effects of these meanings on socio-political arrangements" (p. 2). As I have noted in the introduction, this approach conceptualizes power "in Foucauldian terms as a relation and as a capacity that is spread throughout the socio-political body, rather than as something that is possessed or held by a sovereign subject or the state" (Dhamoon, 2009, p. 10). Power circulates through discursive practise by making certain subjects or arrangements more legible than others; my focus is precisely on this process, and "the rules (what Foucault calls 'regimes') that determine what can be said as meaningful to other participants" (Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009, p. 65).

In approaching interview data with this lens, my goal is to shift the focus from individualized accounts to an analysis of how power functions in the life of educators and at the schools where they work, so as to avoid blaming individual educators for systemic failures and institutional limitations. Instead I seek to illuminate how dominant discourses and institutional patterns of marginalization are sustained, resisted, and negotiated by participants as they work to make sense of their experiences with trans and gender-nonconforming students, and the effects of this process on what happens in schools. In the rest of this section, I detail this approach to



interview data by considering its implications for silences and contradictions in data, as well as for the process of transcription.

### **2.6.1 Silences, contradictions, and the limitations of language**

In addition to widening dominant sociological understandings of interview data, feminist scholars have emphasized the need to also listen for hesitations and silences: in other words, for what is *not* said (DeVault, 1990). Fairclough (2003) also brings his readers' attention to the fact that "texts inevitably make assumptions. What is 'said' in a text is 'said' against a background of what is 'unsaid', but taken as given" (p.40). This attention to the unsaid is important because silences often reveal something about the taken-for-granted assumptions made by speakers. As Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz (2009) note, "established languages and frames of reference that orchestrate everyday life have been authored by those allied with dominant institutions" (p.64; see also Smith, 1990). Assumptions contained in silences are often ideological in nature in the sense that they organize the world, often according to dominant representations.

In addition to highlighting authorized and take-for-granted meaning, silences can also point to the limits of language. Sometimes, silences or hesitations can suggest that the right vocabulary is not readily available given what participants are trying to articulate. Instead of dismissing hesitations, silences, or pauses as unimportant features of language, paying attention to what they suggest about the limits of dominant frames. A lack of language can give some insight into moments where participants are negotiating dominant and/or emergent discourses. In the quote below, Adeline, a teacher in District B, is answering my request that she defines for me the words trans or transgender:

I think most people see, you know, like the play Raining Man or whatever - you see guys dressed up as females and you think that they are all gay, and maybe they are but it could be a gender thing, right. Gay is a sexual preference and gender is a gender preference. It's really when that was kind of explained to us we were going, yeah I guess that's it, right. They are like... when you really think of it.

In this excerpt, Adeline shows some confidence that she has a good grasp on the concept of gender identity (there are no hesitations when she summarizes that “gay is a sexual preference and gender is a gender preference”). Yet when she recounts the time that the definition finally made sense to her, she qualifies that experiences with hedges like ‘kind of’ (“that was kind of explained to us”) and ‘I guess’ (“I guess that’s it, right”). The tag ‘right’ at the end of the latter sentence could also be read as a dialogical element that calls onto me, the researcher positioned as (more of) an expert on gender diversity, to confirm Adeline’s definition as correct. Most significantly, when it comes to reformulating the definition in her own words, Adeline ends up with a silence as she finds herself unable to finish the utterance “they are like...” This suggests that, despite her original confidence, she still experiences trans as something that is complicated to summarize.

Similar hesitations are even more pronounced in the following quote, in which Jelena, a support staff in a District A, answers the same question about defining transgender:

I would say that, I don’t know how I would word - I - but transgender is where you may have, you are not - I don’t know how to say it, your body image doesn’t match your sexual orientation or something along that line. I know for some students where they are sort of wrestling with that idea of ‘am I a male or am I a female’?

Jelena is more obviously wrestling with finding the right words to explain the experiences of her students, hesitating and backtracking throughout the start of the quote, and twice stating explicitly that she “do[esn’t] know” how to say what she means. In slightly different ways, both Adeline and Jelena are attempting to find the language they need to articulate their experiences.

This is the case even though the concept of ‘transgender’ is not foreign or unfamiliar to them since they have worked directly with trans students. In a culture organized by heteronormative and cisnormative representations, I would argue that Adeline and Jelena’s struggle with language points to a lack of discursive certainty around concepts of gender identity and transness. This includes the conflation of gender and sexuality and an absence of clearly established and authorized definitions. In this way, these two excerpts exemplify the analytical importance of listening to, and for, hesitations and silences, rather than dismissing them as irrelevant.

My approach to interview data also challenges the traditional analytical perspective that frames contradictions in people’s talk as a problem to be resolved. This dominant understanding of contradictions originates in the conceptualization of variability in positivist as well as in functionalist strands of research. In these contexts, variability and contradictions are seen either as the result of ‘measurement errors’ or as a surface element of language that covers up an otherwise coherent view or a cognitive schema that may not be socially acceptable in certain circumstances (for example, when people use a disclaimer such as, ‘I’m not a racist but’ as a function to hide their racism). Both these perspectives assume there is a coherent subject behind the talk. Instead, a theoretical approach that understands people as actively constituting their identities during interviews allows the researcher to see how research participants may be ‘doing’ different identities at different times, drawing on different interpretative repertoires to do so, leading to what may look like contradictions or changes in meanings over the course of an interview (van den Berg, 2003). This different perspective also suggests an ontological shift, as the refusal to resolve contradictions is motivated by a post-modern questioning of our traditional understanding of the subject as a unitary, coherent whole (Waugh, 1998, p. 179). I prefer this approach because of my ontological leanings (the multiplicity of the subject, the complexity of

experience, and the instability of ‘truth’). I also appreciate the fact that it creates room to examine how people accomplish certain identities within interviews in ways that often reproduce dominant discourses (Wetherell, 2003).

This approach to interview data has important consequences for the process of data analysis. It cautions researchers against analyzing their participants’ words as factual testimonies or direct representation of what happens outside of the interview. Instead it suggests that we need to consider how participants are actively invested in creating a presentation of the self that exists in response to the interviewer but also to the context (cultural, historical, institutional) in which the interview is happening. This approach is crucial in providing me tools for data analysis that can help move beyond individualized explanations and examine participants as subjects who are navigating complex social and institutional systems.

## **2.6.2 Brief note on transcription**

Due to time constraints and the large number of interviews I conducted for this project, I had the vast majority of my interviews transcribed by a third-party company.<sup>16</sup> Transcription is usually taken to be an unambiguous process that can be done with complete accuracy if one is careful and detailed enough, instead of an analytical practice inevitably embedded in relations of power (Bucholtz, 2000). Green, Franquiz & Dixon (1997) identify two distinct processes that make transcription a situated act: it is both an interpretative process (*what* we decide to transcribe or not transcribe) and a representational process (*how* we decide to transcribe it) (see also DeVault, 1990). The decisions that researchers make about recording, transcribing, and excerpting are

---

<sup>16</sup> In order to ensure the maximum amount of confidentiality for my participants, I selected a Canadian company so the data would not be stored in the United States. The company was also based in a different province (thus reducing the likelihood that transcribers would know participants). I also had the company sign a confidentiality agreement.

analytically relevant: “All transcripts take sides, enabling certain interpretations, advancing particular interests, favoring specific speakers, and so on. The choices made in transcription link the transcript to the context in which it is intended to be read” (Bucholtz, 2000, p. 1440).

Because transcription transforms our data and produces the raw material upon which we base subsequent analyses, an awareness of the complex nature of transcription urges researchers to reflect on the choices they make during transcription. It also asks that researchers articulate how these choices may affect other parts of the analytic work that comes at later stages of the research (Witcher, 2010). Since I was not able to personally transcribe the vast majority of the transcripts for this project, this process for me takes the form of acknowledging that I relinquished control over a piece of the analytical process. This means that I need to remain attuned to the fact that the transcripts I am working from are mediated representations constructed by other people. For example, one difficulty of having a third party transcribe interviews is a potential loss of the moments of silence and hesitations whose importance I have highlighted above. Standard transcription practices tend to smooth over talk, taking out much of the false starts, repetitions, and hesitations that are traditionally seen as superfluous but contain information about the limitations of the language available to us. To compensate for this, I have re-listened to audio recordings and tried to remain attentive to textual indications that my participants are stumbling or hesitating, so I could go back to the original recording if needed.

## **2.7 Analyzing discursive data**

Now that I have set some foundations for how I understand interview data, I want to focus on the process of analyzing these data. Analytic attention to discursive practices is crucial because these practices “contribute to changes in people (beliefs, attitudes, etc.), actions, social relations, and

the material world” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 8). Goffman (1986) similarly notes that people “[take] action, both verbal and physical, on the basis of [their] perceptions” (p. 345), highlighting that discursive practices have both representational and material impacts: they change how people see the world and themselves, but also what actions people can imagine themselves taking in that world. Fairclough (2003) warns against assuming that discursive practices have straightforward casual effects on beliefs and attitudes, noting: “we cannot for instance claim that particular features of texts automatically bring about particular changes in people’s knowledge or behaviour or particular social or political effects” (p. 8). Keeping this in mind, he argues that discursive practices can contribute to sustaining or changing ideologies and thus social relations of power, domination, and exploitation (Fairclough, 2003, p. 9).

I draw on these insights for my understanding of discursive practices as sites where dominant meanings are negotiated and often reconstituted, but where they can also be disrupted in ways that can function as points of intervention into the discursive systems of institutions. This understanding bridges my approach to data with an epistemological stance that draws on the work of Foucault. Within that framework, truth claims “become very interesting to study, not for their assumed reflection of reality but [...] for their production of social and cultural effects” (Søndergaard, 2002, p. 188). My analytical project for this research, then, is to critically examine the discursive practices of educators to analyze how these practices produce social and cultural effects that affect the understanding of gender diversity within the institution of school.

I have outlined in the Chapter 1 the way that I combine different understandings of discourse in order to highlight the way that language functions to constitute identities and social realities. My approach to analyzing discourse similarly draws on different analytical traditions that do not sit easily with each other, namely a critical tradition to discourse analysis that sees

discourse as one of several social practices that constitute reality, and a more poststructuralist tradition that understands reality as entirely constituted through discourse. I share with scholars within a critical tradition of discourse analysis an interest in the way that institutions have “disproportionate power to produce and circulate discourse, and [to] promote dominant interests” (Bucholtz, 2003, p. 57). Institutions are therefore a crucial site of analysis to understand the way that discourses are implicated in the reproduction of inequities. However, I put this perspective in productive tension with the theoretical insight that understands discursive practices not just as one-sided impositions onto subjects, but rather as processes through which “power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged” (Lazar, 2007, p. 142). This poststructuralist influence helps me retain a focus on “the constitution of social practices and cultural patterns and on processes of subjectivation” (Søndergaard, 2002, p. 188). It is also a reminder that discursive practices can never exist entirely outside of normative regimes like cisnormativity or whiteness that govern social life and that it would thus be misguided to interpret discursive practices through an individual rather than structural lens.

Keeping this tension in mind, I analyzed the talk of my participants in two broad phases. First, I conducted a thematic analysis, which is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 79). Braun & Clarke (2006) distinguish between an inductive thematic analysis, in which themes emerge from the data independent of a pre-existing coding frame, and a theoretical (or deductive) thematic analysis, in which the coding frames are driven by the researcher’s analytic interests. I relied on both types in my analysis. This involved reading through transcripts carefully and coding for topics or concepts that seemed important to me based on my research questions and theoretical knowledge as well as unexpected topics or concepts that recurred in participants’ answers. I thus ended up

with codes that were connected to existing literature (e.g., discussion of gendered spaces or of bullying) and my own analytical interests (e.g., decision-making) as well as codes that I had not anticipated (e.g., ‘student in charge’). I then collated codes into potential key themes, creating clusters of codes that I was interested in examining together (see Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 89 for a detailed description of this process). These themes formed the basis for what would become the chapters of this dissertation. For example, the theme of diversity that constitutes the basis of Chapter 3 came from analyzing together codes such as ‘tolerance/acceptance,’ ‘racialization,’ ‘slippages gender/sexuality,’ and ‘safe/inclusive spaces’ because these codes seemed to be frequently coming up in together and in conjunction with the concept of diversity. In this first phase of analysis, I was attentive to the relationship between codes: whether they combined together, made visible some tensions within the data, had positive or negative associations, etc.

Once I had organized codes into themes and sketched how codes related to each other within a theme, I moved to a second phase of analysis where I returned to the data to refine my analysis. Going back to the transcripts allowed me to review my themes and confirm their analytic relevance in that they “adequately capture the contours of the coded data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). I also used this time to start examining the transcripts more closely. For this moment of the analysis, I drew in large part on a tradition of critical discourse analysis interested in the detailed analysis of specific acts and practices of speaking. In other words, this critical tradition pays attention not only to content but also to form (Cameron, 2001, p. 51). Fairclough (2003) and Gee (2005) have both published detailed accounts of this form of discourse analysis, which offers a more detailed linguistic analysis of texts (see also Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). I did not draw directly from a specific method but rather drew on insights from the work of multiple approaches to critical discourse analysis to inspect the details of talk by paying



attention to a range of discursive elements (Cameron, 2001; Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002).

Examples of discursive elements that I was attentive to in this second phase of include the use of the linguistic forms (e.g., passive vs active voice), lexical choices and the way that words are put in semantic relation with each other, the assumptions built into the use of certain phrases, what remains unsaid, the way that “particular identities, interests, representations come under certain conditions to be claimed as universal” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 40), and contradictions that might suggest that the speaker is negotiating competing discourses. This phase of analysis was important for me to identify the underlying conceptualizations and ideologies that informed the way that educators talk about the themes that I had identified in the first phase of analysis, and understand how certain discourses are naturalized through discursive means. This close attention to talk also helped me pay attention to the way that participants use language in ways that normalize and legitimize their identities and actions (Clarke, 2002; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2004; Clarke, Kitzinger & Potter, 2004).

Both phases of analysis provided me with tools to better understand the way that educators make sense of themselves and their experiences by negotiating dominant discursive frameworks. The goal of the analysis is thus to connect individual discursive practices to larger discursive constraints that we all have to contend with. In doing so, this analytical approach highlights the importance of moving beyond individualized accounts to consider the “systems of meaning-making which members of a culture have available to them” (Stokoe & Weatherall, 2002, p. 708). This approach also allows me to bridge my epistemological concerns with my analysis by providing a way to remain attentive to the ways in which power and oppression are not imposed upon individuals but rather are processes that are “continually created, sustained – and sometimes resisted – through the practices of social members in interaction” (Wilkinson &

Kitzinger, 2008, p. 556). Both of these elements of discursive practices – constraint and negotiation – strike me as crucial to avoid analytical claims that isolate individuals. Instead, I turn critical attention to the tensions that arise from navigating complex discursive landscapes within institutional spaces like schools.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

The underlying epistemologies and ontologies of the choices that researchers make about their methodology and methods too often remain unacknowledged. I have tried to make my choices visible in order to emphasize, beyond the technical details of my analysis, the fact that the encounter between researcher and participant is a “key interactional moment wherein [social] identities and inequalities are actively managed, articulated, reproduced, and at times threatened” (Best, 2003, p. 888). In this chapter, my goal was to highlight my active role in the process of generating data and the subsequent production of knowledge that constitute the foundation of the analysis detailed in the coming chapters. It was also to connect this methodological process to an analytical approach that focuses on the way that power circulates through discursive means, and is negotiated in ways that have an impact on material realities. The capacity of researchers to be critical of their practices and to reflect on the implications of these practices on the research process and on research findings is one of the keys to conducting respectful and responsible research. At its best, it is precisely this willingness to critically look at oneself and one’s work that makes possible the rethinking of how inequalities are produced and sustained in the social world. This strategy signifies a powerful kind of academic activism that can stimulate and provoke social change, and maybe start to give an answer to Pillow’s (2003) question: if doing

ethical research in an unethical world is impossible, how do we move forward and continue to do research? (p. 187)

### Chapter 3: Cisnormativity at the intersection of diversity discourses

*When I heard [the] stories [of trans and gender-nonconforming students], and I heard the way some of the teachers spoke and I recognized that it was a sign that [...] [these students] weren't getting their needs met and yet we were a public school that had to meet the needs of all of our diverse populations.*  
(Meadow, support staff, District D)

#### 3.1 Introduction

I start my analysis with an examination of how diversity discourses appeared in interviews with educators because it situates my study of cisnormativity in a larger institutional context.

Canadian educators do not understand their work with trans and gender-nonconforming students in a vacuum. Their perceptions are connected to larger discourses that frame education in Canada and form a basis for how teachers make sense of their job and of their students. Diversity discourses are part of this foundation.

In the quote above, Meadow echoes a very common sentiment amongst the educators that I interviewed: the idea that public schools in British Columbia “[have] to meet the needs of all of our diverse populations.” It is indisputable that the young people attending public school in this province are diverse. It is also a meaningless claim unless we interrogate how statements about diversity work as ideological claims that tell us about how diversity is defined (what counts, or does not count, as diversity), and how these claims shape educational practices. In other words, while Meadow’s affirmation might read as a simple statement of fact, it carries ideological weight. In it, she espouses a specific definition of diversity by explicitly encompassing trans and gender-nonconforming students in the phrase “diverse populations.” She also makes a claim about how diversity should be managed by her statement that public schools should be responsive to, and inclusive of, the needs of diverse populations. The use of ‘have to’ in the

sentence “we were a public school that had to meet the needs of all of our diverse populations” establishes that she sees this responsibility as a strong obligation.

This particular orientation to diversity in schools (how it is defined and how it should be managed) is not an idiosyncratic vision held by Meadow. It reflects a larger political and cultural construction of diversity in Canadian education, which is sanctioned by neoliberal state and educational policy that focus primarily on social cohesion and individualized understandings (Joshee, 2007, 2009). Fleras & Elliot (1992) suggest the apparatus of multiculturalism has shaped a “formal acceptance of diversity as a legitimate component of the educational system” (p. 183) in Canada. Multiculturalism is “a state-initiated enterprise” (Bannerji, 2000, p. 538) that was created as a way to manage a society with multiethnic and multiracial populations by reconciling competing claims of different groups and recuperating diversity as a central tenet of its national image as a pluralist society (Ang & Stratton, 1998; Mackey, 2002; Day, 2000).

The state-supported cultural resonance of multiculturalism in the Canadian imaginary has also enabled the expansion of diversity discourses beyond racial and ethnic diversity, so that other forms of diversity have also become part of a discourse about a national self constituted by the tolerance for, and inclusion of, ‘others’ (Blackmore, 2006; McCarthy, 2003; Moodley, 1983). This language of diversity has been put to work by some LGBTQ activists who have sought to normalize sexual orientation and, more recently, gender identity. Both concepts have undergone significant discursive resignification in neoliberal times, as they transformed from deviant characteristics to aspects of human diversity that make up the Canadian nation and thus should be recognized and protected against prejudicial or inequitable treatment (Rayside, 2008; M. Smith, 2005b). This shift is visible in the legal realm, where sexual orientation has been added to federal and provincial legislation or read into existing lists of protected grounds against

discrimination (Meyer, 2010; M. Smith, 2005a; Wintemute, 1997). Although lagging behind, gender identity is following a similar path (Cowan, 2005; Elliott & Bonauto, 2005).<sup>17</sup>

The shift has also been cultural: LGBTQ activists and scholars have employed the language of diversity to give legitimacy to their efforts to create more hospitable school environments for queer and trans students (Lipkin, 2003; McCarthy, 2007; Nichols, 1999). For example, the foreword of an educator guide edited by the Canadian Teachers' Federation highlights the need to "embrace and learn from diversity and difference" (Wells, Roberts & Allan, 2012, p. 1) in order for educators to support trans and gender-nonconforming students. Another example is the complaint brought by Peter and Murray Corren to the BC Human Rights Tribunal that the Ministry of Education discriminated against non-heterosexual students and their parents by not including sexual orientation as a cross-curricular interest in its Integrated Resource Packages (IRPs) (which provide teachers with basic information to implement curriculums) (Corren and Corren v. B.C. (Ministry of Education), 2005). This complaint led to an agreement between the Correns and the Ministry wherein the Ministry agreed to review IRPs "from the perspective of inclusion and respect for diversity with respect to sexual orientation and other grounds of discrimination" (Corren Agreement, 2006, p. 2). This language explicitly folds sexual orientation into the broader category of diversity, and illustrates the way that discourses of diversity are integrated into legal understandings of education.

I mention these examples to emphasize that discourses of diversity, as any discourse, can be "both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of

---

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, efforts to pass bill C-279, which would amend the Canadian Human Rights Act to include gender identity as a prohibited ground of discrimination (Neve & Ryan, 2014), and the recent promise by the country's new Liberal government to pass such an amendment and to add gender identity to the list of characteristics of "identifiable groups" protected by the hate speech provisions of the Criminal Code (Wählen, 2015).

resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1978, p. 110). Diversity discourses reify particular relations of ruling but can also serve to advocate for trans and gender-nonconforming students in educational spaces. These efforts, in turn, work to integrate sexual orientation and gender identity into the state apparatus of diversity and its educational system.

Taking this historical and social context into account, this chapter examines how educators drew upon diversity discourses as they discussed their experiences. I pay particular attention to the entanglements of diversity discourses with discourses of safety (Hackford-Peer, 2010; Leonardi & Saenz, 2014). In a cisnormative context, what is the role that diversity is understood to play in creating ‘safer schools’ for trans and gender-nonconforming students? When is diversity evoked as a factor that can enhance safety, and when is it evoked as a potential difficulty? In tracing the movement of diversity discourses in the talk of educators, I illuminate how cisnormativity functions alongside heteronormativity and whiteness to generate ideas about how schools can support trans and gender-nonconforming students.

### **3.2 Diversity as safety**

Diversity was often invoked by educators in broad and unspecified terms, as when Jerrilyn, a counsellor from District C, noted that she lived in “a metropolitan city where diversity is embraced.” In these cases, diversity was usually attached to notions of inclusion and safety as if the pairing was natural. It also simplifies the complexity of safety as a concept that holds multiple and contradictory meanings (Hackford-Peer, 2010; Leonardi & Saenz, 2014). In other words, the simple presence of diversity in the student body was imagined as having the positive impact of creating inclusion and safety in schools. Lea, a counsellor in District B who also had over twenty years of experience in schools, provided another example: “I think it helps, like I

think there's [...] just so many differences, that makes it work better." The idea that differences "makes it work better" attributes a specific (beneficial) role to the presence of diversity. Pruney, a support staff in District A who had been working at her school for over twenty years, described her school by saying, "we are just like a mini world and everybody is represented and everybody has the same sort of feelings and rights." Other phrases that mirror the expression "mini world," such as "microcosm for the world," were used by many other educators. This use of metaphoric hyperboles suggests that these expressions work as ideological statements rather than factual descriptions. It was important to Pruney and other educators to emphasize how diverse their schools are, because it also emphasizes that their schools are welcoming beacons of equality. They are the kinds of places where "everybody has the same sort of feelings and rights."

Within this framework, the presence of diversity is assumed to foster more tolerant or welcoming attitudes amongst students (and, to a lesser extent, staff). Eric, a teacher in District B who had been teaching at his school for ten years, exemplified this idea when he said, "I find at [Wolfe Secondary], because there's such a mix of different cultures, I think people are more accepting. But that's just my theory or my belief." Eric's use of the conjunction "because" is key: it establishes a causal relationship between the presence of diversity ("a mix of different cultures") and a "more accepting" attitude that Eric has identified in the people at his school. Only one educator explicitly articulated the possibility that diversity could lead to conflict and divisiveness rather than automatic acceptance. The vast majority of participants tended to share Eric's 'theory and belief.'

This tight discursive connection between diversity and safety is likely a product of the larger diversity discourses, in particular the national Canadian imaginary that links the diversity of Canadian citizens to the country's supposed welcoming, tolerant attitude (Dhamoon, 2009;



Mackey, 2002). The notion that diversity creates tolerant citizens (in the nation and in classrooms), however, should be put in tension with the ways that whiteness works to distribute life chances unequally, even in a time of embracing diversity in schools (Adelson, 2005; Carr, 2008; Castagno, 2014; Codjoe, 2001; Oxman-Martinez et al., 2012; Rezai-Rashti, 2005; Reitz & Banerjee, 2007; Solomona et al., 2005; Statistics Canada, 2010).

While the connection between diversity and safety was common throughout my interviews, this assumption was particularly strong when participants specifically discussed sexual diversity. Early on during my interviews, I noticed that educators easily slipped between talking about gender and sexuality. For example, conversations about gender diversity frequently turned into conversations about queer youth, and my questions about trans and gender-nonconforming youth were often answered with anecdotes about queerness. These slippages caught my attention because they often seemed to strengthen the aforementioned assumption that diversity can generate safety in the life of students (and trans and gender-nonconforming students specifically). In this section, I examine what discursive practices contributed to positioning a school's support for sexual diversity<sup>18</sup> as something that could easily translate into support for trans and gender-nonconforming youth. I then analyze the implications of this positioning for educators' understanding of how schools can become more hospitable spaces for trans and gender-nonconforming students.

---

<sup>18</sup> Educators were most likely to talk about gay and lesbian students, an unsurprising dynamic given that bisexuality continues to be made marginal and often invisible (Elia, 2010).

### **3.2.1 Understanding gender and sexuality together**

More than any other type of difference, educators brought up sexual orientation as relevant to conversations about trans and gender-nonconforming students. For example, educators sometimes mentioned out gay and lesbian people as an indication that their school was a diverse, and thus accepting, place for trans and gender-nonconforming. As we talked about creating safer school climates for trans and gender-nonconforming students, Roni, a queer teacher who had been working in District A for fifteen years, brought up the fact that her school has “kids in grade 8 coming out!” as a sign of her school’s openness. In schools where at least one staff openly identified as gay, their presence was often mentioned as a factor in creating a hospitable environment for trans and gender-nonconforming students.

One school in District B exemplified this phenomenon. Lee was an out gay teacher at the school and he was consistently identified by other staff as a crucial element of why the school was a safe place for students for LGBTQ students. Lee himself felt that his role was to “try and make it safer for kids,” including trans and gender-nonconforming students. He discussed supporting students one-on-one, helping run a group for LGBTQ students, and facilitating workshops on homophobia for colleagues. While other educators mentioned some of these efforts, his simple existence was regularly highlighted as important in and of itself. For example, Rebecca, another teacher at his school, thought that “just [the] presence in the school all the time” of this gay colleague had made “a huge difference.” In a different district, a parent and young trans man that I interviewed separately both emphasized the difference it had made for the boy to have a queer staff at his school because this way he had someone “watching his back.”

The connection that educators saw between queerness and hospitable spaces for trans and gender-nonconforming students was especially visible when participants discussed clubs focused

on gender and sexual diversity, such as Gay-Straight Alliances or Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSAs).<sup>19</sup> These groups were often mentioned without my prompting, although I usually followed up to try to get a sense of why participants thought that GSAs were relevant. In line with the idea that “the GSA presents a public image that prioritizes tolerance” (McIntosh, 2007a, p. 132), educators often thought of these spaces when discussing how to create more hospitable schools for trans and gender-nonconforming students.

In the following quote, Marcel, a teacher in District A who had been introduced to trans and gender-nonconforming people in his personal life, brings up the GSA in this way:

**HFD:** If there's one thing that Wolfe or other schools could do to make schools a more welcoming environment for transgender students, what do you think it would be?

**Marcel:** I think a student-based support unit is essential. It's not enough to have adults saying, ‘it's OK.’ You've got to have a portion of the community that's organized to do that. I think every school needs to have something like the Gay-Straight Alliance, they need that space.

Marcel distinguishes between support from adults and support from peers. In order to send a strong message that a school is welcoming, he sees a need for “a portion of the [student] community” to be organized around this message. He then brings up the GSA as a model for what that “student-based support unit” could look like. Although Marcel does not assume the GSA is that space, the fact that it is the group that comes to him first is telling of the imaginary that circulates about the role of GSAs in schools. Goofus, an administrator in District D who had experience doing queer activism in education, illustrates the same belief:

There has to be effort made that the person has, um, an ally they can go to and there's opportunities for them to find peer support within the school, whether it's a GSA or anything else.

---

<sup>19</sup> Although GSAs is primarily understood to stand for Gay-Straight Alliance, some students (and educators) have started to rework the acronym to make it more inclusive. This reformulation seemed to me important to note, as it highlights the flexibility and expansiveness of language. Participants in this study themselves did not refer to GSAs as ‘Gender-Sexuality Alliances’ and framed these clubs primarily through the lens of sexual orientation.

Like Marcel, Goofus highlights the importance of peers (“finding peer support”) in creating hospitable school environments, and connects the possibility of peer support with the GSA specifically. Both Goofus and Marcel leave open the possibility this function could be fulfilled by another space (“a GSA or anything else”; “something like the GSA”) for trans and gender-nonconforming students. However, the GSA is the only specific initiative that gets mentioned.

The mentions of GSAs in these quotes speak both to the connection that is made between gender and sexual diversity, and to the specific space that GSAs occupy in schools. Namely, I argue that the need for a separate space for support highlights the current hetero- and cisnormative conditions in schools, where few spaces (if any) are designated to discuss gender diversity. Scholars have pointed out that this construction of GSAs has problematic effects in that it produces the very exclusions that it aims to address by reaffirming that other spaces in schools can only ever be hetero- and cisnormative (Britzman, 1995; Butler, 1993, p. 53). Although GSAs provide valuable spaces for youth in schools (Lee, 2002; Mayo, 2004; Elliot, 2015), a number of scholars have also pointed out the existence of GSAs does little to “disrupt the heteronormative foundation of the education system” (Lapointe, 2015, p. 147; Macintosh, 2007a, 2007b) particularly when they are institutionalized without the integration of other structural changes. In that sense, the assumption that trans and gender-nonconforming students need GSAs or spaces like GSAs can perpetuate the positioning of GSAs as an exceptional space in otherwise hetero- and cisnormative schools.

In other interviews, the assumption that GSAs are spaces that are connected to issues of gender diversity was more visible. Helgita, a teacher in in District A who had been teaching for twenty years, was familiar with sexual and gender diversity before hearing of the trans student

who attended her school. She told me she had been introduced to these realities through books and discussions with her now-adult straight daughter, who was part of a GSA in high school. When I asked Helgita her opinion on whether her school district's LGBTQ policy addresses the specific needs of trans and gender-nonconforming students, she admitted to not having read the policy closely, and added, "you know, if I was part, running the GSA like Clark [her colleague] is, I'd want to know more about it so I could help the students understand it, what the district has done." In this answer, Helgita makes an indirect connection between the GSA and trans and gender-nonconforming students by suggesting that a GSA sponsor teacher would "want to know more" about their district's policy on trans and gender-nonconforming students than teachers (like her) who are unconnected to the GSA. The GSA sponsor teacher is framed as someone who has more of a stake in policy related to trans and gender-nonconforming students, which suggests that these teachers are understood to be more invested and/or aware of the experiences of trans and gender-nonconforming students. I would argue that the last part of Helgita's sentence cements this understanding by making explicit that this knowledge serves a purpose (the coordinating conjunction "so" signals this relationship between the two clauses). For Helgita, it is important for a GSA teacher to have this knowledge of district policy because they need it in their practice, which includes "help[ing] the students understand." GSA support teachers thus have a double duty of knowing the policy, and transmitting this knowledge to students.

Given that I was asking about policies specific to trans and gender-nonconforming students, her answer marks the GSA students as students who have a stake in understanding trans and gender-nonconforming-specific policy. This implies either that she imagines that (some of) the GSA students are trans and gender-nonconforming themselves and/or that GSA students who are not trans or gender-nonconforming still have reasons to want to understand "what the district

has done” when it comes to gender identity. Both possibilities, I argue, create a connection between trans and gender-nonconforming students and the space of the GSA. This is a connection that Helgita did not feel the need to explain or justify. Similarly, when asked explicitly, many participants struggled to provide reasons for why they believed that GSAs would be supportive spaces for trans and gender-nonconforming students, such as when I asked Roni, the teacher in District A I mentioned earlier, and she admitted, “it hasn’t been tested.”

Although this automatic association between GSA and trans and gender-nonconforming students seemed obvious to many educators, it needs to be interrogated and denaturalized. Historically, GSAs are student clubs that focus on sexual orientation rather than gender identity. This fact is obvious when one looks at early writings on these clubs (i.e., Blumenfeld, 1995), but this is not just a historical fact. Most of the current literature on GSAs still focuses largely on sexual orientation, with gender identity only being given the occasional nod (Miceli, 2013; Russell et al., 2009; Walls, Kane & Wisneski, 2010; see Elliot, 2015 for a counter-example). There are, of course, many analytically relevant reasons for bringing together issues of gender and sexuality in schools. As I have argued myself, trans and gender-nonconforming youth are directly affected by hostile heteronormative climates because heteronormativity and cisnormativity are intertwined processes (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Valdes, 1996). At the same time, gender and sexuality are often conflated in ways that can perpetuate confusion, stereotypes, and basic misunderstandings about queer and trans lives. Consequently, it is important to examine how and why the concepts of gender and sexuality are brought together and the effects of that linkage.

This connection of gender and sexuality, and slippages between the two concepts, were extremely common in my interviews. Most (though not all) people I spoke with were able to give

me a definition of “transgender and gender-fluid” that made a clear distinction between gender and sexuality, and some educators even explicitly commented on the fact that many people still confuse sexual orientation and gender identity. Filipa was a teacher of 25 years who spoke enthusiastically about the progressive way she taught sex education classes at her school. When I asked her to define transgender and gender-fluid, she answered with an anecdote about a meeting she had had with a trans student who was just starting to come out to his friends at school:

I said, “I know what the number one thing your friends are going to be asking you. They confuse gender identity and sexual orientation.” He was like, “Every single time. They’re like, Are you a lesbian now? Are you-” And they just don’t get it.

In this excerpt, Filipa tells this story in such a way that her knowledge of the distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation works to position her as an ally to this student: she knows the misconceptions the student might have to face. Her knowledge also creates rapport with the student in the story, as he recognizes the misconception she has identified. By attributing the conflation of gender and sexuality to ignorance/confusion, Filipa marks herself as a knowledgeable subject. A number of other participants similarly used their capacity to differentiate the concepts of gender and sexuality as ways to differentiate themselves from students or colleagues, who were framed as less informed or more prejudiced (Preston, 2015).

Yet this clear distinction between gender and sexuality often eroded in the course of our conversation. Xavier, a gay administrator in District D, mentioned at some point that he “grew up in a very... very rural conservative area, very... you know, homophobic. Gender wouldn’t even have been a conversation, or an idea or a concept.” In this quote, Xavier slips from homophobia to gender. This is an analytical connection that has long been supported by the literature (Pharr, 1988). However, Xavier does not make this analysis visible, and it is thus never clear why it is that he believes a homophobic climate would pre-empt a conversation about

gender. Sally was a teacher who had been working in District D for over 20 years, and she had worked closely with two young trans men recently. She provided another useful example of this tendency to slip between gender and sexuality without contextualizing the shift. At the start of our interview, Sally gave me an almost textbook definition of transgender:

Transgender to me means you exist in one physical form externally and biologically and yet emotionally, spiritually and intellectually you belong to an entirely different gender. Or perhaps you actually appear one way but you have higher levels of testosterone or estrogen in your system that disallow you to connect and see yourself as that gender that you have been deemed.

In this answer, Sally defines gender identity without ever indexing sexual orientation, which suggests that she clearly distinguishes between the two concepts. Another key indication that Sally is familiar with trans issues is that she does not rely on the standard narrative of being ‘born in a girl/boy body’ in her explanation. Instead she frames gender as something “that you have been deemed” (a phrase reminiscent of the expression ‘sex assigned at birth,’ now commonly used in trans activism). This framing makes society responsible for the mismatch between the trans person’s assigned and actual gender, rather than situating the problem within the trans person themselves.

Despite displaying this knowledge at first, Sally made slippages between gender and sexuality several times in the interview. For example, the following quote is from a moment where she discussed exposing students to queer authors in her literature class:

I showed them the clip from [a movie where a poem by a gay poet is featured] and I said, ‘You know it’s probably important you understand that [the poet] was gay. And so when he’s writing this for his partner, his lover, his husband, this is a big deal because, look how he’s describing, the mourning is very public in the poem.’ But I don’t go, ‘and since you’re going through a gender issue you might relate to this.’ I’m not doing that.

In this quote, Sally frames a queer experience (here, losing a same-sex partner) as something that “you might relate to” if you are going through “a gender issue,” thus directly connecting



queerness and transness. Yet she does not make explicit why it is that she believes that making queer experiences visible might be important for a young trans and gender-nonconforming person. A little later in the interview, she talked about Parker, one of the trans boys that she taught, and remarked on “how remarkably open he was and how that did not hurt him.” Her admiration for Parker’s openness led her to add:

I wish kids didn’t feel that they had to be – not that you have to advertise everything. I don’t expect everybody to stand up and go heterosexual, heterosexual, homosexual, questioning. It’s not really relevant. But I would like everyone to feel safe enough to be able to be honest about who they are.

In this quote, Sally moves from an anecdote about a young trans man to a broader statement about “kids.” It only becomes obvious in the next sentence that this interpellation, “kids”, does not actually refer to trans and gender-nonconforming youth, which would naturally flow from the previous sentence about Parker. Instead, she has now shifted to talking about sexual orientation (“I don’t expect everybody to stand up and go heterosexual, heterosexual, homosexual, questioning”). Her conclusion about feeling “safe enough to be able to be honest about who they are” potentially applies to queer *and* trans and gender-nonconforming youth. Both categories of youth have to navigate a hetero- and cisnormative world that makes it necessary to “be honest about who they are.” In contrast, this honesty is automatically built into the lives of straight and cisgender children and youth, who are assumed to always have been so. Over the course of a few sentences, Sally moves seamlessly from transness, to queerness, to a statement that potentially encompasses both. My point is not that this movement is unjustified. Rather, I am pointing out both that these concepts can get merged in complex ways in the talk of educators. As Sally’s story suggests, these slippages between gender and sexuality happened even in conversations

with educators well-versed in these topics. Most notably, they often happened without the speaker acknowledging that they were doing it, or explaining why they were doing it.

The fact that educators made this connection between queerness and transness without explaining (and in some cases, without being able to explain) the logic of this connection is important to identify and highlight, because it can have negative impacts on the way that issues of gender and sexuality are addressed in schools. In particular, one possible effect of this conflation is that it can encourage the thinking that acceptance of (and safety for) sexual diversity automatically generates greater safety for gender diversity. We can see this mechanism at work in Sally's earlier comment, where she framed bringing up a gay poet in class as being something that trans and gender-nonconforming students could "relate to." While this might be true, the assumption that issues of sexual diversity and gender diversity necessarily overlap can make invisible the needs of trans and gender-nonconforming students. If it is assumed that they can relate to gay artists or historical figures, then why ensure that the curriculum also mentions trans people?

Clark, a teacher in District A, explicitly reflected on the way that approaching sexuality and gender together often works to prioritize queer issues and make the specificities of trans issues less visible. Clark was one of the most active GSA sponsors amongst my interviewees, and she had worked to educate some of her colleagues on her school district's new sexual orientation and gender identity policy. In discussing this policy, Clark remarked that transphobia often "gets lost" in the emphasis that her district has put on addressing homophobia after passing the policy. Later on, she noted that the acronym LGBTQ contributes to this tendency:

Even the acronym LGBTQ [...], I think a lot of people look at that and they think 'gay.' I don't think that the T [chuckles] is something that is – y'know, if someone was sort of like, oh what do you think the acronym is, people could spell it out but I sort of think

when they see that, they think, oh, that's gay and lesbian stuff. [...] For me, it's been education through GSA and that sort of stuff that's made me way more aware of the differences. [...] I don't think that there's... enough specifics set out about why these [issues] are different and why you might... treat them differently or look at them differently.

The term LGBTQ is meant to be inclusive of all identities, but Clark's experience is that it is not taken up as such by her colleagues. People have superficial knowledge (they can spell out the acronym), but lack a deeper understanding of why queer and trans issues "are different and why you might treat them differently." As a result, they reduce the acronym to its most well-known components, "gay and lesbian stuff." This quote from Clark illustrates how the merging of gender and sexuality (such as in the acronym LGBTQ) can lead to a sole focus on queer issues.

Neglecting the issue of gender identity and/or the specificities of the experiences of trans and gender-nonconforming people is a serious problem. Many of the obstacles or difficulties that educators had encountered in working with trans and gender-nonconforming students were not applicable to the lives of cisgender queer students. For example: dealing with class lists that indicate the wrong name or gender marker, making decisions about access to washrooms and change rooms, or keeping the knowledge of a student's recent transition private. These are some of the issues that risk going by the wayside when gender and sexuality are conflated and educators focus solely on "gay and lesbian stuff."

This risk is especially concerning given that educators still have difficulty integrating queer content in the curriculum (Brant & Tyson, in press; Freer, 2013; Hansen, 2015; Thein et al., 2013). Taylor et al.'s (2016) study on LGBTQ-inclusive education in Canada found that "educators were less likely to practice LGBTQ-inclusive education than to approve of it or to see it as relevant" (p. 20). Efforts to combat homophobia are often limited to particular times and spaces, such as GSAs or special days (Pink Day, Transgender Day of Remembrance)

(MacIntosh, 2007a). Even more in-depth efforts that attempt to change institutional educational cultures and bring discussions of sexual diversity into the curriculum (such as the Corren agreement in BC) have tended to be translated into practices that are spatially and temporally contained to specific classrooms Social Studies, Health and Career Education, Social Justice 12). These efforts can give schools a sense that they are addressing queer issues without challenging the way that heteronormativity and cisnormativity organize everyday life and administrative systems in school (MacIntosh, 2007b). Sanders & Mathis (2012) argue similarly that educators should be careful to go beyond superficial inclusion: the simple mention or presence of LGBTQ themes in the classroom is not enough to disrupt heteronormativity. If questions of gender diversity are subsumed under the integration of queer content in classrooms, and that integration itself is still inadequate, there is little chance that trans issues are sufficiently present in schools.

Slippages between sexual and gender diversity in the talk of educators reveal an instinctive understanding that issues of gender and sexuality are connected, but also a difficulty to articulate exactly how and why this connection exists. Given how tightly hetero- and cisnormativity are wound together, there is potential in the fact that educators make this connection. In fact, it may be possible to call upon this instinctive understanding to give educators tools to address heteronormativity and cisnormativity together: for example, professional development opportunities could explicitly connect the workings of sexism, homophobia *and* transphobia, administrators could be trained to recognize how forms solidify societal assumptions about gender and sexual orientation, educators could ensure that their lesson plans meaningfully integrate both gender and sexual diversity, or educators who discuss homophobic slurs with their students could discuss why trans students are also likely to be targeted by this verbal violence. The educators in this study currently lack the discursive tools

needed to articulate the potential of this connection between gender and sexual diversity. This shortcoming is not an individual one, but rather one that reflects the limits of the dominant discourses available to them, including through inadequate preparation from teacher education programs. Taylor et al.'s (2016) study notes that "almost two-thirds of participants who had completed their B.Ed. degrees in the previous five years reported that they had not been at all prepared for sexual and gender diversity education in their B.Ed. degrees" (p. 24).

### **3.2.2 GSA and gender diversity**

As an extension of the assumption that openness to sexual diversity automatically extends to gender diversity, GSAs were often discussed by participants as spaces that are naturally welcoming to (and thus safe for) trans and gender-nonconforming students. This presumption understates the tensions that have historically existed between queer and trans communities. Queer people do not necessarily understand trans issues or support trans activism. In fact, queer spaces have historically had a complex relationship with trans people, one often steeped in invisibility, exclusion, and trans repudiation (Gamson, 1997; Minter, 2006; Namaste, 2000; Ross, 2012; Stone, 2009). When GSAs are primarily queer spaces, as many still are, the situation may not be any different. In the study by Fetner et al. (2010) on GSAs, for example, a student acknowledged that her group did not make room for people of different gender identities.

In my interviews, some of the educators who were involved with their school's GSA reflected on similar limitations of that space. Clark, the GSA sponsor from District A I mentioned earlier, explained that "[the GSA's] umbrella has opened" after she took the students to attend a local event that got them "all fired up about the gender spectrum." The fact that this was a recent development suggests that the GSA was previously a space where gender identity

was not addressed much. In District B, another GSA sponsor teacher, Christine, recounted, “well, [the trans student has] been pushing for trans topics in the GSA for quite a while, unsuccessfully mainly, not because the kids don’t want to talk about it but the kids don’t know anything about it.” Later, she added that “the gay kids are so ignorant on the topic.” This frank assessment is not entirely surprising given that most queer students are cisgender, and many of them are gender-conforming.

Christine’s testimony also calls attention to the fact that trans and gender-nonconforming students often find themselves educating others in GSAs. At a different school in District B, Adeline talked about the young trans man at her school who was “teaching [her] so much about what he feels.” In District C, one of the trans and gender-nonconforming students I interviewed, Simon, explained:

Okay, being trans... I'm not out to my GSA yet, almost... Being trans I've tried to incorporate things, I've brought in stories, I've brought in documentaries and... We did a little Trans Day of Remembrance thing... We learned, so I've tried to incorporate trans issues as much as possible.

In this quote, Simon reveals the amount of work he has been doing (notice he uses the pronoun “I,” not “we,” which suggests he is the primary force behind these efforts) to engage his GSA with topics related to gender identity and create learning opportunities (through stories, documentaries, and events). The fact that he is “not out to [his] GSA yet” also challenges the idea that GSAs are automatically hospitable spaces for trans and gender-nonconforming students. While there are many reasons why Simon may have chosen not to come out to his GSA yet, I would argue that this quote suggests that one factor is that he feels that the other GSA students need to be educated before he can come out to them.

These different excerpts all illustrate the lack of knowledge about gender identity that students who attend GSA meetings (as well as the educator(s) supporting the GSA) can have. While people involved in the GSA may indeed be more receptive to learning about gender diversity than other students at the school, as many participants assumed, these quotes reveal the risk of taking for granted that GSAs provide a supportive space for trans and gender-nonconforming students. As a result, it seems even more hazardous to assume that the presence of a GSA is likely to make trans and gender-nonconforming students feel supported in schools.

At the same time, Simon, Clark and even Christine's experiences also show that GSAs can be or become spaces of gender activism (Schindel, 2008). All three of their anecdotes showcase moments where gender diversity is brought into the space of the GSA. Clark explicitly articulated that it is "education through GSA" that has made her "way more aware" of the differences between issues of gender and issues of sexuality. In Clark's case, the rest of our interview made it clear that it is students who led that process and pushed to make gender diversity a central concern of the GSA. Elliot's (2015) recent study of a GSA at one high school similarly highlights the students' commitment to activism that challenges both hetero- and cisnormativity at their school (it may matter that one of the leaders of the GSA identifies as transgender, while the other is a gender-nonconforming queer student). Addison, a teacher in District A, recounted a moment in her class when one of the GSA students stood up in front of the class and went over the basics of gender identity using a common activist teaching tool, the genderbread person.<sup>20</sup> By all accounts of the educators at this particular school, the GSA was in

---

<sup>20</sup> Although the origins of this graphic are disputed, the genderbread person is a teaching tool popularized by the blog "It's Pronounced Metrosexual." It is a tool meant to introduce people to the distinctions between gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual attraction. See the most recent iteration of this graphic at [itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/03/the-genderbread-person-v2-/](https://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/03/the-genderbread-person-v2/)

great part to thank for this student's knowledge about gender and sexuality, as well as his confidence in speaking out about these topics.

As I have noted before, there is no doubt that GSAs can be powerful spaces for students. Although most of the research focuses on queer students, it does show that GSAs and similar clubs are valuable for individual students and contribute to challenging heteronormative school environments (Griffin et al., 2004; Mayo, 2004; Miceli, 2005; Russell et al., 2009; Walls, Kane & Wisneski, 2010). Acknowledging this positive role that GSAs can play in changing school cultures, however, should not mean assuming that this potential in GSAs is already always activated, especially when it comes to gender diversity. It should also not mean assuming that these spaces are enough to counteract existing systems of hetero- and cisnormativity and bring about institutional changes in schools without the support of adults (Elliot, 2015). As Pascoe (2007) shows in her study of the "fag discourse" at a Californian high school, the presence of an active GSA does not guarantee that schools are free of heteronormativity or even of blatant homophobia. In fact, students in Pascoe's (2007) study encountered resistance from school administrators when they sought to challenge the underlying heteronormative functioning of the school, which works in conjunction with cisnormativity to create the conditions for gender policing (p. 140-151). This resistance illustrates the fact that GSAs can co-exist with an institutional context that remains invested in systems that enforce gender and sexual normativity.

This is not to suggest that GSAs are failing to do enough. As student-focused (and often student-led) spaces, GSAs are too often expected to change their school's culture without additional efforts from adults or broader institutional changes. This approach shifts the burden of creating more hospitable schools to students (MacIntosh 2007a; Mayo, 2013; Wooley, 2012) in ways that are unsustainable and likely to have limited success. Despite remarkable efforts, Elliot



(2015) notes that the students in her study “struggled to dismantle dichotomies and destabilise identity categories from within an institution and culture structured by them” (p. 12). As I will examine in Chapter 5, this is a struggle that educators themselves encounter, which highlights how unreasonable a burden it is to put onto students. Underlying the limits of GSAs should draw attention to the other kinds of interventions that are necessary in schools to make sure that hetero- and cisnormativity are adequately challenged, such as consistent integration of gender and sexual diversity in the curriculum and throughout school spaces, rethinking of administrative procedures, adequate training of educators, and other interventions that I discuss in Chapter 5.

### **3.2.3 GSAs as spaces of “valuing diversity”**

I have temporarily wandered away from notions of diversity to highlight the ways that sexual and gender diversity were articulated as connected to each other in the talk of educators. Let’s now go back to Helgita, the teacher from District A who said she would expect to know more about her district’s LGBTQ policy if she was the teacher sponsor for the GSA. I was curious about the connection that Helgita was making between GSAs and trans students, so I asked her to explain how she saw the GSA as contributing to a school that is supportive of trans and gender-nonconforming students:

**HFD:** You said yourself, the transgender thing isn’t necessarily connected to sexuality, right? And originally, at least, the Gay-Straight Alliances were specifically created for sexual minorities, so I’m really interested in how a club that was focused originally on sexuality can still be helpful to students who identify as transgender. So what do you think it is about this club rather than other diversity club or any other sort of club that promotes acceptance that makes it more likely to be welcoming?

**Helgita:** Well, I mean, the Gay-Straight Alliance is basically about supporting kids who have a different sexual orientation but it’s also about difference and kids, um, identifying differently than the mainstream, and I think within that, I think it could, um, even if they are identifying male but they still, you know, they still want to be with males or whatever. I don’t think that, I think about an open forum to, to be able to be different and

to understand that difference and maybe to see out, uh, reading, resources, teachers to talk to about that. So it doesn't necessarily have to mean about their sexual orientation but helping them discover who they are.

Helgita's statement that "the Gay-Straight Alliance is basically about supporting kids who have a different sexual orientation" supports an assertion that the GSA's original focus is on sexual diversity. However, she immediately extends her definition of GSAs to encompass difference in a much broader sense ("but it's also about difference and kids, um, identifying differently than the mainstream"). This definition echoes through the rest of her response with phrases such as "be able to be different" and "discover who they are". Because difference remains unspecified, GSAs are constructed as spaces where all differences are, or should be accepted. In other words, in this particular argument, GSAs are positioned as spaces that are hospitable to trans and gender-nonconforming students. This is not because there is an especially strong connection between the concepts of gender identity and sexual orientation, or because the experiences of queer and trans and gender-nonconforming students are similar in some ways. Rather, it is because the GSA is a space where all forms of diversity are accepted. It is this conviction that GSAs are not relevant only for queer students that Helgita reiterates at the end ("it doesn't necessarily have to mean about their sexual orientation"), when she emphasizes the importance of the space of the GSA as one where students can "discover who they are." Helgita never specifies how a space that is supportive of one difference (sexual orientation) becomes a space where all differences are accepted.

Helgita's reframing of the GSA as a space accepting of diversity was a common discursive strategy that educators used to explain the instinctive connection that they drew between gender and sexuality. Instead of tightening the connection between the two concepts, however, this particular discursive strategy tended to loosen the link between gender and

sexuality by making the GSA about diversity more generally. Like the unnoticed slippages between gender and sexuality, this loosening also speaks to the difficulty that participants had articulating and explaining the connections between these two concepts, despite their instinct to bring them together in their talk. Donna, an administrator in District D, provides an example of this particular form of diversity talk:

**HFD:** And so what do you think it is about GSAs that can make a school more welcoming to transgender students?

**Donna:** Well, I think a strong GSA in a school can make... can just make a school more welcoming period to diversity, just a sense of openness and valuing diversity. You know, I think a GSA... a strong GSA speaks to that more than a lot of other clubs would. Know what I mean? More than a multicultural club. I don't know. Maybe it pushes the boundaries a bit more or... I'm not sure. But that's my sense anyway, yeah. And while a multicultural club is often about celebratory... you know, it still tends to be rather culture, food, that kind of thing. But a GSA's a little bit more kind of personal or about the person and not so hiding behind food and other things. It's kind of more about who you are and valuing people for who they are.

In her answer, Donna barely gestures towards sexual orientation: the idea that GSAs are “more kind of personal” and “more about who you are” could be read as an oblique reference to sexuality, but she never makes this explicit. Instead, she defines the GSA by its “sense of openness and valuing diversity.” Diversity in this sentence is left undefined, leaving her interlocutor free to read as many (or as few) differences into this concept as they want. Donna continues by reinforcing this understanding of the GSA by describing it as a place that “speaks to that [a sense of openness and valuing diversity] more than a lot of other clubs.” This sentence frames GSA not as one space amongst others where ‘diversity’ (however defined) is accepted, but as *the* space where that is the case.

Donna’s subsequent comparison between the GSA and a multicultural club (a space explicitly associated with diversity via its name) is particularly effective at framing the GSA as a primary space of acceptance within a school. The implication that spaces centered on race and

culture (such as a multicultural club) are less likely to communicate this message of overall acceptance than spaces centered on sexuality (and, potentially, gender diversity) is an interesting tension. It both gestures at the cultural assumption that racialized minorities are less accepting than the white majority (Jackson, 2014), and paints spaces focused on sexual orientation as accepting of all. The prevalence of the latter notion is particularly concerning given the “White-centeredness of our conceptualizations of queerness” (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 12) and the legacy of colonialism in modern conceptualizations of gender and sexuality (Morgensen, 2012).

GSAs, like other queer spaces, tend to centre issues of sexuality to the detriment of an intersectional approach that also takes into account other forms of systemic marginalization, particularly the effects of racialization and colonialism (Fox & Ore, 2010; Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Greensmith & Gia, 2013). Scholars adopting a queer of colour critique have written extensively on the topic (Brockenbrough, 2013; Marquez & Brockenbrough, 2013; McCready, 2001, 2004). Writing specifically on trans youth of colour, Singh (2013) describes how their feeling of being welcomed in queer settings was “related to whether they were able to talk about their everyday lives with peers and friends about racism and transprejudice” (689), highlighting that this ability cannot always be taken for granted. In other words, the idea that “GSA[s] at least giv[e] an indicator that ‘Hey, we accept all people in the school’” (Alon, a counsellor, District A) erases the way that GSAs often reproduce certain hierarchies and exclusions, in particular in terms of whiteness (Diaz, 2010; McCready, 2001, 2004). As a result, statements like Donna’s indirectly contribute to downplaying the ways in which racialized people can experience marginalization in queer and trans spaces.

Whether educators made discursive slippages between gender and sexuality, whether they framed GSAs as a space always already inclusive of gender diversity, or whether they saw

GSAs as a space inclusive of all types of diversity, all these discursive practices tended to minimize the specific needs and experiences of trans and gender-nonconforming students, which may include exposure to misgendering, difficulties with forms and administrative procedures, help with misconceptions about gender identity, access to certain spaces and facilities, etc. As a result, these discursive practices leave little room for a discussion of possibilities of GSAs for trans and gender-nonconforming students that would simultaneously acknowledge the limits of that space. GSAs were one of the main examples that educators pointed to as an indicator that their school was both welcoming of diversity (including gender diversity) and that trans and gender-nonconforming students had a specific safe place to go. The idea that I discussed in the beginning of this chapter – that unspecified diversity was imagined to engender safety – were even more present in these conversations. This framework was bolstered by the complex ways in which gender and sexuality are connected and conflated in our society.

Many of the problems contained in the assumption that diversity generates safety are especially relevant when the connection between discourses of diversity and safety is tightened because gender and sexuality are imagined as ambiguously linked. The two main problems can be delineated as follows: (1) diversity is understood to exist in visible, unitary subjects that embody diversity, in this case the gay and lesbian students involved in GSAs; and (2), it assumes that visibility and presence of these students, often embodied in the GSA as an organization, automatically leads to greater inclusion for trans and gender-nonconforming students. The process tends to make invisible the specific needs of trans and gender-nonconforming students. This tightened connection between sexual diversity and safety for trans and gender-nonconforming students also raises an additional concern: if schools feel that the needs of trans and gender-nonconforming students and queer students overlap completely, GSAs and other

initiatives focused on sexual diversity may give them the sense that *they are already doing something* to be inclusive and/or to provide an inclusive environment for trans and gender-nonconforming students (MacIntosh, 2007b). This belief can prevent schools from addressing the more systemic and institutional roots of hetero- and cisnormativity that delegitimize and erase the existence of trans and gender-nonconforming students in schools.

In the next section, I compare what happened to diversity discourses when educators connected them to sexual orientation with what happened to diversity discourses when they focused on race, ethnicity, and (racialized) religion. In these cases of racialized talk, in sharp contrast with what I have described so far, the notion of diversity often became uncoupled from that of ‘safety.’

### **3.3 Diversity and racialized bodies**

I have argued so far that educators, drawing on diversity discourses available to them, often connected diversity and safety. ‘Diverse’ environments are assumed to be safer for trans and gender-nonconforming students, because diversity generates tolerance. This logic was especially applicable to sexual diversity, which participants instinctively associated with gender diversity. However, this rationale was sometimes disrupted when diversity became specified as racial and ethnic diversity. In this section, I explore how racialized diversity (which was often discussed as “cultural diversity”) got recoded as potential unsafety, and the implications of this process. I suggest that educators in this study, most of whom were white, can have conflicted relationships with racialized narratives, sometimes resisting them openly while continuing to rely on them to make sense of their experiences and expectations. This reality illustrates the fact that, despite a

national commitment to multiculturalism, Canadians – including its educators – are still “educated in whiteness” (Castagno, 2014).

### **3.3.1 Homo/transphobia as a racialized phenomenon**

One of the assumptions that lightly peppered my conversations with educators was the idea that people of colour are less likely to be accepting of difference, especially when it comes to gender and sexual diversity. Marcel, a white teacher in District A I briefly mentioned earlier, shared he had known trans and gender-nonconforming people throughout his life. He told me that he had seen his school become a “better environment” especially in terms of homophobia. He felt that homophobic slurs were less common and queerness had become more accepted (he described it as a “there's just more of an automatic, ‘oh, of course it's OK’”). Although his testimony centered on homophobia, he explicitly connected homophobia to “the idea of certain behaviors that weren't traditionally associated with the male or female” and thus to gender diversity. When I asked him to tell me more about that change, he explained,

We also have a lot of cultural backgrounds here. We all know that there are certain cultures that are less tolerant of that [queerness] than others. Without starting to sound racist, there are. Part of the battle, I think, is reaching out to those kids that... where it [tolerance] hasn't really been modeled at all in the home.

In this quote, we see the way that culture and race are imbricated: Marcel starts by talking about “a lot of cultural backgrounds” but his subsequent use of the term “racist” suggests that when he says “certain cultures,” he is specifically thinking about racialized minority cultures. He continues by expressing a racial view (“certain cultures that are less tolerant of that than others”). He introduces this statement with the expression “we all know,” which de-individualizes his statement and makes him less personally accountable for this claim by framing it as a

commonly-held view. Additionally, the phrase “without starting to sound racist” is typical of what Bonilla-Silva (2010) has termed the “rhetorical maze” of colorblindness. These types of phrases, which have become common in the speech of white people in a post-Civil Rights area where the open expression of racial views is frowned upon, “act as discursive buffers before or after someone states something that is or could be interpreted as racist” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 57; see also Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Both this phrase and the expression “we all know” allow Marcel to express a racial view while maintaining a discursive attachment to a liberal, non-racist self. Marcel reiterates this racial view in his last sentence, this time without the same discursive work to distance himself from it: “reaching out to those kids that... where [tolerance] hasn't really been modeled at all in the home.” This sentence locates the origin of the relative lack of tolerance on the part of young racialized people “in the home,” which is to say in racialized families.

When I asked him if he was thinking of particular backgrounds, he confirmed the racialized nature of his talk by specifying: “certainly some Asian communities, South Asian communities, I just don't think it's particularly tolerated.” He immediately added, “I want to preface this by... I mean, there are exceptions to every culture, we know that, but just in terms of a general worldview, in some cultures it's just not as condoned or accepted.” I argue that Marcel's statement that there are “exceptions to every culture” is another attempt to distance himself from the specter of racist accusations following his affirmation that queerness (and by extension, gender-nonconformity) is not “particularly tolerated” in certain racialized cultures. Yet his statement does little to unsettle the overall conclusion that homophobia is more common in non-white cultures. In some ways, the exception confirms the rule. In this quote, “presumed cultural practices [are imagined as] fixed features” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 40-41). As Bonilla-



Silva (2006) underlines, this is a key component of cultural racism, which justifies racial inequalities by shifting the blame for the poor standing of racialized minorities onto them and ‘their culture.’ While Marcel does not take his argument in this direction, the descriptive style of his claims nevertheless uses (and thus bolsters) the rhetorical foundations of cultural racism.

Similarly, when I asked Pruney, a white support staff in District A, how her school’s racial and socioeconomic diversity might affect how open or closed-minded the students were, she responded: “I think certain cultures, like the East Indian culture, and let’s say any of the Islamic peoples, their children probably aren’t aware of it, but if they were, if the parents were, it would be a problem, an issue.” In Pruney’s response, racialized cultures are framed as monolithic and unchanging: they are either unaware of gender and sexual diversity or they are unaccepting of it. Yet another example can be found in my conversation with Claire, another white participant who had worked for five years as an administrator in District C. She told me about the positive experiences that she had had with two trans and gender-nonconforming students in two different schools: both of them had been well-accepted by the rest of the student population. I followed up her assertion by asking, “do you feel like you could have taken any high school and that would have gone sort of similarly?” Claire answered in the affirmative at first, but moderated that statement by saying that she hadn’t worked in a lot of schools in another part of the district. This prompted me to ask what the difference was between parts of the district, and she explained:

There’s probably much more cultural diversity in [the part of the district in which she has not worked much]. So there’s-, there are some schools [there] that have a really large Asian population, some with South Asian population. So I don’t know culturally whether that might be a concern, although I know that here, it seems to be okay.

Again, we see the conflation of culture and race (the “cultural diversity” of the first sentence becomes “a really large Asian population” in the second sentence) and an assumption that the presence of trans and gender-nonconforming students “might be a concern” for racialized populations. In some ways, Claire’s statement is more nuanced than Marcel’s: both her use of “I don’t know” and the modal verb “might” soften her suggestion that schools with a higher percentage of racialized students could run into more difficulties than the school where she works where “it seems to be okay.” However, the fact that this possibility is still thinkable – let alone speakable – for Claire is indicative of the dominance of racialized discourses that frame racialized students as less open and accepting due to their culture, and its underlying framework of cultural racism.

The racialized utterances of these educators are not outlandish or unique to them. First, the association of racialized identities with homophobia and transphobia is part and parcel of dominant discourses that frame heterosexism as a racialized phenomenon (bell hooks, 1989; Collins, 2005; Jackson, 2014). The belief that people of colour are framed as more homophobic than whites both perpetuates and legitimizes racist discourses by justifying prejudicial attitudes towards people of colour, who are framed as less ‘enlightened’ than whites. The highly-mediatised case of the California Proposition 8 vote, which asked California residents whether or not they want to keep same-sex marriage legal in their state, provides a recent example of how this narrative dominates in the media. When the proposition passed, effectively ending legal same-sex marriage in California, American media outlets overemphasized the impact of the “black vote” in the passage of this proposition (Abrajano, 2010; Egan & Sherrill, 2009). In contrast, processes of racism and settler colonialism in white queer communities are rarely noted or questioned (Logie & Rwigema, 2014; Giwa & Greensmith, 2012; Greensmith & Gia, 2013).

Due to the connection between hetero- and cisnormativity in Western cultures, transphobia is also racialized in ways that emphasize the presumed lack of acceptance of people of colour and deemphasize the role of whiteness in the maintenance of cisnormativity and transphobic institutions. Lamble (2008) argues in her analysis of events held for Transgender Day of Remembrance that conversations about transphobic violence deracialize this violence and tend to absolve whiteness from its complicity in trans repudiation (institutional and otherwise). Other scholars have challenged the way that contemporary trans politics mirror gay and lesbian politics in emphasizing legal and civil rights approaches that rely on systems that carry out racist and cisnormative violence, e.g., the criminal justice system (Spade, 2011; Meyer, 2014).

Second, educators are also contending with the discursive landscape of whiteness in educational spaces, where multiculturalism encourages the superficial celebration of diversity (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Solomon, 1996) without addressing the way that whiteness continues to structure schools (Carr, 2008; Castagno, 2014; Lund & Carr, 2015;). In my conversations with educators, racialized discourses of homo- and transphobia were not always as visible as they were in the excerpts I have highlighted above. More often, racialized discourses stayed below the surface, emerging briefly in short exchanges. For example, Addison, a teacher from District A, answered my question about a student's ethnic background with, "He looked, I think, part First Nations. I think. Like, I don't know what his, I didn't go look. For me, it doesn't matter, right?" Addison's first statement briefly acknowledges that she read the student through a racialized identity, but this statement is immediately tempered by Addison's acknowledgement that this is speculation on her part and that she gave little importance to this piece of the student's identity. The difficulty to make visible racialized discourses is a product of teacher education programs, which rarely give educators tools to engage with whiteness and dislodge assumptions about

meritocracy that still bolster dominant discourses of education (Solomona et al., 2005; Castagno, 2014). As a result, the complexities that live at the intersection of sexuality, gender, and racialization were also almost entirely absent from interviews. These silences are not insignificant. They gesture towards the discursive constraints that organize educational spaces.

### **3.3.2 Racialized diversity as a potential obstacle**

The assumption that racialized communities are more likely to be prejudiced against gender and sexual diversity meant that schools with a higher percentage of students of colour were more likely to be seen or described as potentially more complicated spaces, compared to schools where the majority of students were white. ‘Diversity,’ when it specifically referred to ethnic and racial diversity, became a potential source of unsafety.

This uncoupling of diversity and safety was especially common when educators discussed South Asian students (especially boys). When we were discussing washrooms and the possibility that multi-stall unisex washrooms would become more common, Laxlady, a white administrator in District C who had first worked as a counsellor, first identified “old people” as the primary obstacle. As we kept talking, however, she started talking about the “cultural piece” that she also saw as a barrier to change. She explained, “some of the South Asian people and parents and, you know, they're very strict and very, you know, so that could even be something that could be standing in the way as well.” Although her assessment is tempered by the use of “some” and “could,” Laxlady frames strictness as a cultural trait of “South Asian people and parents.” She then identifies it as something that could be “standing in the way” (here, of more progressive washroom options). Addison, the white teacher in District A who I quoted earlier,

provided another example. In this quote, she is talking about a gender-nonconforming boy who comes to class wearing make-up:

He comes to class, and nobody really bats an eye about it. That's your grade 12s, right? And I have a huge group of East Indian boys in that class, there's seven of them, and they're typically more against that kind of thing and so I would expect them to make comments or whatever. No, they've accepted him that way.

First, Addison describes the seven South Asian boys in her class as a “huge group.” Assuming a class size of thirty, seven is less than a quarter of students. Although it is impossible to tell if Addison would find this number equally large if the boys were white, I argue that this qualifier is telling of the ways that racialized bodies – especially in groups – are more noticeable in a Western white culture. From this description, Addison then goes on to describe East Indian boys as “typically more against that kind of thing.” Again, the qualifier “typically” softens her racial claim and arguably provides some protection against accusations of intentional racism. Nevertheless, it speaks to a particular racialized imaginary; she still expects these students to “make comments.” I am not arguing here that Addison, Laxlady, Claire, Marcel or any of the educators that made similar claims stand out amongst an otherwise anti-racist body of educators. Rather, their construction of racialized students (and parents) highlights dominant racialized discourses available in Canada.

To understand why educators routinely singled out South Asian people as likely to be unaccepting of trans and gender-nonconforming students, it helps to look at what “kind of racialized gendered selves get produced” (Razack, 1998, p. 13) in Canada. South Asian communities are imagined to be sites of patriarchy and gendered violence (Ahmad et al., 2004; Batacharya, 2004; Handa, 1997; Razack, 1998), and, by extension, of homophobia and trans repudiation. These gendered narratives about South Asian communities contribute to their

experiences of marginalization and racism in Canada (Aujla, 2000; Bannerji, 2000) and reflect the way that Canadian society is organized through whiteness and systemic racism (Henry & Tator, 2009; Razack, 1998). It is worth noting that some of the educators of colour I spoke with drew upon these racialized discourses as well, which highlights that whiteness can extend beyond white bodies (Castagno, 2014, p. 7).

Often, educators framed the cultural differences that they identified in South Asian students as differences rooted in religion. I am reluctant to dismiss the racialized element of this form of talk of religion because the conflation of culture and religion is a feature of multiculturalism (and its accompanying diversity discourses) as well as of modern nationalist racist discourse (Anthias et al., 1992; Dunn et al., 2007; Puar, 2007; Rana, 2007; Smolash, 2009). Alyson, a teacher in District C, provided a salient example of this racialized treatment of religion. I asked her if she saw the socioeconomic or racial make-up of her school as having had an impact of the experience of the young trans woman with whom she'd worked. She answered:

I would say that the hardest thing would be the cultural differences, right? Because again, as soon as you're dealing with religion, things become much more difficult. And many of our South Asians do follow a very strong religion and anything that falls in the line of homosexuality, transgendered [sic], bisexual, any of those are absolutely not accepted. It goes against their cultural being. So I think that side of it would be very difficult. And then within the Caucasian population I would say there's a real mix of comfort levels just depending on how they've grown up, students who couldn't care less to students who are extremely welcoming to students who are absolutely not accepting. And there ... and I shouldn't ... to be fair, there are many students in our south Asian population who are also extremely accepting. It just depends on the depth of the religious beliefs.

From the start, Alyson's shift between culture and religion ("cultural differences" becomes "religion" in the second sentence) signals a racialized understanding of religion. This racialization is made explicit in the next sentence, when she names "many of our South Asians" as the group that "follow[s] a very strong religion." Like almost all the educators I have quoted,

she uses the qualifier “many” to soften her generalization, but there is no mention of a non-religious South Asian body or of a religious White body. This absence contributes to conflating South Asianness with “very strong religion,” a discursive effect that is emphasized when Alyson seamlessly shifts back to referring to culture with the sentence, “it goes against their cultural being.” This last sentence once again evokes the tropes of cultural racism that defined cultural traits as immutable. The expression “cultural being” suggests an essential, unified and stable South Asian subject that is in part defined by its rejection (“goes against”) of queerness and transness. This leads Alyson to say that having to deal with the anticipated negative reactions of South Asian students “would be very difficult.”

In contrast with this representation of South Asian students, her discussion of white students is more nuanced. Right away, she says “there’s a real mix of comfort levels.” By stressing the importance of upbringing as an element of variability (“depending on how they’ve grown up”), she deemphasizes race as a factor in her interpretation of white students’ attitudes. As a result, white students are explicitly given the potential to have a wide range of reaction (from “extremely welcoming” to indifference to “absolutely not accepting”). At the very end, Alyson goes back to talking about South Asian students and moderates her analysis further. The unfinished utterance “I shouldn’t...” as well as the expression “to be fair” point to her awareness that she has made a previous generalization that could be misinterpreted as ‘unfair.’ She amends her earlier depiction of South Asian students with the statement, “there are many students in our South Asian population who are also extremely accepting,” and chalks up the difference in attitude primarily to “the depth of religious belief.” This shifts the blame of non-accepting attitudes to religion rather than racial identity. However, I would argue that the fact that Islam and Sikhism are racialized religions (Dossa, 2009; Nagra, 2011; Rana, 2007) explains why

religion is more likely to be made relevant in discussions of racialized students and used to generalize about these populations. In contrast, when religion came up in the context of white families, these families were defined primarily their religion rather than race and as such, religious conservatism was not taken to be representative of whiteness.

### **3.3.3 Attempts to resist racist narratives**

The different quotes I have presented so far in this section exemplify the ways that racialized diversity was often discussed as something that could be an obstacle to creating school environments that are welcoming of trans and gender-nonconforming students. Instead of signaling safety, these quotes frame (racialized) diversity as being a site of tension, and in some cases as creating the potential for hostility and risk/unsafety. This particular framework perpetuates the racist assumptions and discourses that organize meaning-making in much of Canadian culture.

However, I want to emphasize that moments like the one where Alyson attempts to repair her earlier statement (“to be fair, there are many students in our south Asian population who are also extremely accepting”) should not be read solely as an attempt to restore a proper non-racist self. It is also an indication that Alyson, like other educators, navigate contradictory discourses about the meaningfulness of racialized categories. In other words, less than an indication of individual and intentional prejudice, the racialized talk of educators is likely a reflection of the dissonance in Canadian society between “democratic liberalism and the collective racism of the dominant culture” (Henry & Tator, 2009) and the continued dominance of whiteness in Canadian society (Lund & Carr, 2015), including in teacher education programs (Aveling, 2006; Solomona et al., 2005).



This tension was visible in Alyson's quote, as well as any time that educators tried to qualify their generalizations. It also appears in instances where white participants tried to explicitly complicate or interrupt these racialized narratives even as they sometimes relied on and contributed to them. This was the case at one point in my interview with Clark, the GSA sponsor teacher from District A:

I think I've seen [religious resistance]... like, I wouldn't necessarily pinpoint that it's a particular – and y'know sometimes I'm really surprised. My own stereotypes and prejudices come through and I think – I would expect it of somebody and maybe not of somebody else and then someone will say something and then I think oh! Wasn't really expecting that from you.

Clark starts with saying that she has witnessed religious resistance but right away she refuses to draw broader generalizations from her experience by adding that she “wouldn't necessarily pinpoint” this resistance to a particular group. Her admission that she's sometimes “really surprised” by her experiences implicitly acknowledges that cultural assumptions exist about where religious resistance comes from: her surprise comes from the discrepancy between expectation and reality. Clark is relatively unique amongst participants in her willingness to explicitly name her “own stereotypes and prejudice” as part of her process of making sense of her experience. In this quote, Clark gestures at the way that racialized assumptions about religion have shaped her expectations, but she refuses to give voice to these assumptions. Instead she emphasizes the ways in which her expectations have been disrupted.

This kind of outright refusal was rare amongst educators. It was more common for participants to use racialized narratives even as they tried to challenge them. Keith, a support staff in District D who had worked with a number of trans and gender-nonconforming students over the years, explained:

I think that culture does play a role, and certainly religion also plays a role in staff and student comfort and levels of acceptance. Of course it's not black and white. It's not absolute. There are people from every culture and religion who are extremely accepting and celebrate queer people all the time. But there are I think cultural hurdles with various cultures and how acceptable or not acceptable various people and practices are in home countries.

In this quote, Keith begins with an affirmation that culture and religion “play a role” in how accepting students and staff are of queer as well as trans and gender-nonconforming students (although he indexes “queer people” in this excerpt, I had asked him specifically about trans students and he makes connections to transness shortly after the end of this excerpt). He then immediately qualifies that statement by emphasizing “of course it's not black and white” and that he knows that acceptance exists in “every culture and religion.” Yet at the end of the quote he returns to his original analysis by reaffirming the existence of “cultural hurdles.”

This back-and-forth is typical of the efforts that many educators made to reflect on their own tendency to generalize about racialized populations. I argue that this suggests that educators are aware of the negative impact that such generalizations can have, and that they are aware of their currency in our culture, and that they actively try to resist them discursively. But in most cases, as in Keith's, this awareness did little to actually unsettle the frame of whiteness, because few educators had alternative discourses available to them to talk about their experiences.

Clark's refusal to even name the dominant assumption comes closest, and even then, the very fact that she needs to refuse the discourse is proof of its dominance in our<sup>21</sup> cultural imaginary.

Because whiteness remains a dominant discourse in Canadian society, racialized ways of making sense of the world, of education, and of personal and professional experiences all persist

---

<sup>21</sup> I think it is essential that I acknowledge here that I am no more immune to the dominance of racist narratives as any of my participants. In fact, my own whiteness is likely to have enabled the emergence of these discourses in the talk of white educators, as they likely assumed that I was aware of them and would not fundamentally challenge their relative validity.

irrespective of awareness and even open attempts to challenge or resist them. Building on the argument of Solomona et al. (2005) about teacher education programs and the fact that (white) educators are not taught to recognize and address white privilege, I would argue that this situation is partly the result of a lack of alternative discourses made available to educators. Creating alternative discourses is precisely the kind of work that anti-racist education can accomplish (Aveling, 2006), especially if it is combined with “queer ideals” (Kumashiro, 2003).

Also standing in the way of generating new discourses about students and communities of colour was a tendency to talk about racism as a problem that has been mostly resolved in Canadian society. For example, Scott, a white teacher in District D, thought that the fights against racism (and sexism) “have been rather successful,” and Pinklady, a white teacher in District B, said “we don't normally have an issue as much now with racial bullying.” Barbie, a teacher in District B who was very involved with helping several trans and gender-nonconforming students and described her ethnic background as “Caucasian and aboriginal,” offered a longer example:

When I talk about LGBTQ issues and um, the supporting of people being gay or lesbian, I always refer to it as being back in the 1960s where we were with, um, racism. And that we have a good fifty years of work with LGBTQ issues to get to where we are now with racism. Right? You don't see a lot of racism in schools anymore. You see a little bit but you don't see a lot. Not like what you do [with] the heterosexism. Right?

Barbie compares current levels of heterosexism with racism “back in the 1960s.” This frames racism as a thing of the past. She confirms this analysis by stating explicitly, “you don't see a lot of racism in schools anymore,” although she allows that “you see a little bit.” As a result of this belief that racism was no longer common, some participants expressed the belief that racism

would more obviously be interrupted and challenged than homophobia<sup>22</sup> in educational spaces. For example, Christine, a teacher in District B, noted that “kids have been told since grade 1” not to use racial slurs whereas “they suddenly get to grade 8 and oh you mean we’re not allowed to say gay, no one’s ever said that before, well why not?”

These narratives obscure the ways in which racism and colonialism continue to structure Canadian education (Battiste, 1998; St. Denis, 2011) as well as the educational experiences of Canadian youth of colour and indigenous youth (Dei, 1997, 2005; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Martin & Kipling, 2006; Rummens & Dei, 2012; Ryan, 2003; Samuel & Burney, 2003). This refusal to know racism and its continued effects (Dion, 2004, p. 58) would be concerning in any circumstances. But it is particularly worrying given that, as I have shown, educators themselves engage in discursive practices that draw on racist narratives. These discursive practices can only shift if educators are able to recognize the ongoing reality of racism and of the dominance of whiteness. Some educators were clear that racism has not been eradicated. For example, Kate, a counsellor in District D, pointedly noted that despite efforts to address it, “racism still happens, right?” However, even these assertions usually framed racism as intentional and a property of individuals (“people who are racist,” as Anuj, an administrator in District C, said) rather than a question of structural inequality.

As I have indicated, the few educators of colour that I spoke with were not immune to some of these racialized narratives. Specifically, almost all of these educators of colour I spoke to used analogies between racism and heterosexism or transphobia. There are convergences between these systems of oppression, as Collins (2005) points out: “racism and heterosexism

---

<sup>22</sup> I use the term homophobia here to reflect the framings of participants. Even in conversations about gender diversity, educators often turned to the concept of homophobia. They were far more likely to have been trained (formally or informally) to recognize homophobic slurs over acts of trans repudiation.

[...] both use state-sanctioned institutional mechanisms to maintain racial and sexual hierarchies” (p. 95). However, participants of colour used analogies that framed racism as at least partly resolved instead of connecting both systems of power. For example, Ray, an Indo-Canadian administrator in District B used the same racial analogy as Barbie to explain that he is not “well-versed” in issues of gender diversity: “I’m at the very initial stages of that learning journey, right? Just like we were with, you know, race, 50 years ago. That’s sort of is how I, you know, describe that.” Similarly, Arya, an Indo-Canadian counsellor in District C, drew a parallel between transphobia and racism to explain that she thought fear was key in explaining people’s negative reactions:

So I think generally speaking people are a lot more okay with that [people from various racialized backgrounds] now. That fear is dissipated a lot more than it once was. Of course there's still racism and all that, but now this [gender diversity] is, like, the... the new thing.

Arya acknowledges the continued relevance of racism (“of course there’s still racism”), yet still positions issues of gender diversity as less accepted than race. The currency of this particular narrative even amongst educators of colour does not speak to its validity as much as it illustrates its discursive dominance in a culture of whiteness where we all learn to downplay the persistent reality and impact of racism, especially in its institutionalized forms.

This section has explored the way that racialized meanings crystallized around diversity discourses in ways that enable rather than disrupt the way that racism and settler colonialism continue to circulate in Canadian society. While this examination might seem disconnected from my overall focus on cisnormativity, it is not. Educators rely in part on diversity discourses to understand how and why schools should support trans and gender-nonconforming students in schools. However, the potential of diversity discourses in that area should not be considered

independently of its racialized effects. Otherwise, educators and activists run the risk of bolstering the racist and colonial effects of diversity discourses as these discourses are put to work to encourage schools to be more hospitable to gender diversity. As Black feminists and other critical scholars have long pointed out (bell hooks, 2000), working towards social justice and a more equitable society can only make sense when different forms of marginalization are not compartmentalized. Cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and whiteness are regimes of power that often bolster each other (Skidmore, 2011; Vipond, 2015) and as such they cannot be properly addressed separately from one another.

Additionally, trans and gender-nonconforming students are not all white, although like queer students, they are frequently imagined as such (McCready, 2004; Campisini, 2013; M. Johnson, 2014). Thinking about how whiteness can be reproduced alongside and/or against cisnormativity is essential to capture the imbrication of social categories and the complexity with which these categories are embodied in students as well as educators.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

Ahmed (2012) notes at the beginning of her book *On Being Included*: “my aim is not to suggest that we should stop doing diversity, but that we need to keep asking what we are doing with diversity” (p. 17). The way that educators frequently drew on diversity discourses to discuss the relationship between schools and trans and gender-nonconforming students illustrates the larger way that diversity discourses organize Canadian education. It also underlines the importance of going beyond diversity’s ‘niceness’ (Castagno, 2014) to examine what these discourses accomplish when they circulate in the talk of educators.

I opened this chapter by situating diversity discourses within Canadian history, which are structured by a national imaginary that associates diversity with tolerance/acceptance. As Castagno (2014) and other scholars critical of the notion of diversity (e.g., Carr & Lund, 2009) have pointed out, this notion of diversity as a positive value often works to hide the workings of power (in particular, of whiteness). This chapter focused on examining how this association between diversity and safety played out in the talk of my participants in distinct ways depending on whether diversity was specified as sexual diversity or as racialized diversity.

In the first half of this chapter, I discussed how participants often slipped back and forth between notions of gender and sexuality and assumed a natural affinity between queer students and trans and gender-nonconforming students. I used discussions of GSAs to illustrate the effects of these slippages: efforts to create safer school environments for queer students were often assumed to have a positive effect on trans and gender-nonconforming students. This, I argued, can make invisible the specific needs of trans and gender-nonconforming students, such as making gender diversity visible in the curriculum or addressing administrative hurdles that classify students in restrictive ways. This reliance on diversity discourses also limited opportunities to go beyond superficial acceptance to address the underlying hetero- and cisnormative structures of schools.

In the second half of this chapter, I showed that when diversity appears in the talk of educators as racialized diversity, the assumption that diversity generates safety for trans and gender-nonconforming students often disappeared. Racialized diversity instead was often framed as something that might create difficulties and additional barriers to acceptance of gender and sexual diversity. This pattern is indicative of the complex ways that whiteness can maintain itself even under the veneer of the celebration of diversity. The cultural availability and dominance of

these racialized discourses made it difficult for educators not to draw on them as they discussed their experiences in schools. Some educators did try to disrupt and resist them, with limited success.

Particular articulations of diversity discourses and specifically the diversity/safety nexus have material consequences for trans and gender-nonconforming students as well as for students of colour (two groups that are not mutually exclusive). They shape who is seen as a subject worthy of acceptance in educational spaces, they make certain interventions in schools (im)possible, and they give credence to certain stories over others. For example, diversity discourses in their different forms might make it likely for a counsellor to connect a new trans student to their school's GSA, or for a teacher to hesitate discussing gender diversity in class because of the notable presence of racialized young men. I have discussed the complexities of the relationship between diversity and safety in order to denaturalize it, and highlight its different effects. It is important to think about the ways in which 'diversity,' depending on how it is imagined, may be assumed to generate safety in schools – or not. As I have emphasized, diversity discourses can serve to neutralize and hide racialized effects, and allow participants to position themselves as subjects who accept and value diversity without recognizing that they also contribute to centering whiteness in their talk.

Dei (2011) has recently suggested that, for all its limitations, multiculturalism can be “an allied discourse [and] a valuable first step towards a more critical anti-racist approach” (p. 16). I would like to suggest that diversity discourses may also have their usefulness. The fact that they resonate with educators offers some potential that they can be conduits for change, especially if they are combined with discourses that are critical of the various normativities that constrain school spaces. Diversity discourses may help create some of the conditions for classrooms to be



experienced as safer by trans and gender-nonconforming students, but this connection between diversity and safety should never be naturalized or ossified.

This risk of ossification is particularly present when we do not engage critically with the notion of diversity and the norms of niceness that constitute it: it helps whiteness and other normative regimes to “maintain[] power and privilege by perpetuating and legitimating the status quo while simultaneously maintaining a veneer of neutrality, equality, and compassion” (Castagno, 2014, p. 3). Instead, diversity discourses informed by anti-racist and critical (trans)feminisms could be offered to educators as ways to disrupt normative regimes. For example, they could serve to re-envision safety as an ongoing process (rather than a characteristic of a space), to think about inclusion without relying on the presence and visibility of ‘diverse’ bodies (an approach that re-asserts the centrality of ‘non-diverse’ bodies), and to question the mechanisms by which schools tend to administer and manufacture conformity and assimilation rather than difference and equity. In doing so, diversity discourses could potentially be deployed in ways that disrupt, rather than make invisible, systems of difference in schools that marginalize certain bodies more systematically than others, including trans, queer, racialized and gender-nonconforming bodies.

## Chapter 4: Making room for trans and gender-nonconforming students in decision-making processes

### 4.1 Introduction

*We let the students come and tell us that that's what they're comfortable with, right. So if it's a student who is coming to us, like in the intake meeting, we'll kind of discuss, we'll kind of put all that stuff out there and say, "What are you comfortable with, what are you safe with, what do we have for you?"*  
(Claire, administrator, District C)

Having established the larger context that educators navigate in Canadian schools, I now shift to an analysis of how cisnormativity is articulated in the talk of educators. As is the case with whiteness, schools do not exist independently from the rest of society. They function within broader systems that enforce norms of gender and sexual conformity, but also work as institutional sites that (re)produce and naturalize these norms.

When trans and gender-nonconforming students seek recognition in their schools, they often highlight the many ways that schools are structured by administrative systems, institutional practices, and everyday routines that rely on particular gendered assumptions and narratives. Many of these assumptions and narratives require a stable gender binary to make sense: gendered washrooms, gender-segregated Physical Education or sex education classes, M/F gender markers on class lists, the interpellation 'boys and girls' and other moments where students' gender are made relevant in the jokes and stories of educators, assumptions about how girls and boys learn differently, etc. This institutional terrain marks trans and gender-nonconforming students as different because they do not fit seamlessly in these systems and disrupt some of these practices and routines. As the quote that opens this chapter illustrates, trans and gender-nonconforming students force educators to ask themselves the question, "what do we have for you?" The disruption of difference is particularly true of students whose gender identity is non-binary, but

also happens to binary students when they go through social transition and thus become visible (at least temporarily) as trans.<sup>23</sup>

I use the term “social transition” or simply “transition” to refer to the process through which a student comes to identify (and be identified) publicly as a gender different from the one they were assigned at birth. This process usually involves a series of steps that contribute to the student being identified as the gender they identify with, such as taking on a different name and pronouns, using different washrooms and change rooms, dressing more in accordance with societal expectations for their gender, etc. In the context of this dissertation, social transition also means that the student has taken active steps to let school staff know that this process is happening, and has requested that changes be made to recognize and validate this process. It is also worth noting that social transition is distinct from medical transition.<sup>24</sup> The two may or may not be simultaneous; some students who socially transition may never transition medically. A student’s medical transition is largely irrelevant in a school context. As such, I only speak to this topic when participants make it relevant.

This process of social transition is simpler for people who identify with a binary gender. Because our society is structured by binary understandings of gender, it is much more difficult to be recognized publicly and consistently as someone with a non-binary gender identity. Indeed, the type of decision-making that I discuss in this chapter was made relevant by participants only when they discussed students who had made a binary transition from male to female, or vice-versa. Students who may have identified as non-binary were precisely made invisible by the fact

---

<sup>23</sup> For binary students, this disruption may or may not be temporary depending on how outspoken the student decides to be about their history of transition, and/or on how much they are later read as gender-conforming.

<sup>24</sup> Medical transition refers to gender-affirming medical care such as the prescription of hormone suppressants, hormone replacement therapy, and gender-affirming surgeries.

that institutional changes are less available to them.<sup>25</sup> The way that binary gendered norms structure schools makes it more difficult to communicate their needs and have them addressed in institutional settings.

When trans and gender-nonconforming students become visible in school spaces (often through a social transition), an institutional response becomes necessary. This is the process that Claire is describing in this chapter's epigraph: "we'll kind of discuss, we'll kind of put all that stuff out there and say, 'What are you comfortable with, what are you safe with, what do we have for you?'" The 'we' here stands for the team of adults that organizes around the student, usually involving at least one administrator and counsellor. These adults are tasked with figuring out how the student's identity will be integrated into established systems and practices (or, in some rarer cases, how these established systems and practices must be reworked to integrate the student). Adults who want to support trans and gender-nonconforming students thus have to negotiate a number of changes, either by making decisions themselves about these changes, or by making sense of decisions that were made by others.

Before I explore this decision-making process more fully in the next chapter, I want to start by focusing on a specific narrative that ran through my conversations with educators about decision-making. This narrative, which I call the 'student in charge' narrative, was used by educators to make sense of the way that students were involved in these decision-making processes. The main feature of this narrative was a verbal commitment on the part of the speaker that the trans and gender-nonconforming student going through a social transition (or being

---

<sup>25</sup> At the turn of the twenty-first century, Namaste (2000) pointed out that "the act of invalidating the very possibility of transsexuality bolsters rhetorical operations that exclude literal transsexual bodies while reinforcing institutional practices that do not consider the needs of transsexual and transgendered people" (p. 52). While this continues to be true in schools, I was struck me by the fact that, even when people have integrated the possibility of binary trans students, this process still functions to invalidate the possibility of non-binary students.

accommodated in some way) should be the one to guide the decision-making process. This narrative usually framed the young person as the person who sets the pace and shapes what the transition looks like, with the adults gladly following their lead. The quote from Claire provides a good example of it. In it, she is answering a question I asked about how her school would reach a decision about which bathroom a trans and gender-nonconforming student should access. Her answer starts with affirming, “we let the students come and tell us that that’s what they’re comfortable with, right.”

This narrative caught my attention because it is unusually respectful of trans and gender-nonconforming students and their identities. It suggests that educators recognize that the student is the expert on their own life and thus most capable of deciding what needs to happen so that they can thrive at school. The ‘student in charge’ narrative also sits uneasily with a common view of youth and children<sup>26</sup> as “uninformed person[s]” (Postman, 1983, p. 59), an idea which finds its roots in Christian theological constructs and often dominates Western societies. This perspective frames modern ideas about children and youth as too immature to make a number of decisions regarding their own lives and bodies, which explains “adult society’s need to control young people as well as its fear of them being autonomous” (Holm et al., 2006, p. 86). In modern Western culture, this construct of childhood often sits alongside a more recent view of children and youth as people in their own right, with “their individual personality, their unique emotional

---

<sup>26</sup>I am purposefully not distinguishing between children and youth here. Although often talked about in biological and developmental terms, distinctions between different life cycles are profoundly sociological in nature (Neugarten & Datan, 1996, p. 96), and the concept of adolescence is a relatively new one (Fasick, 1994). Childhood and adolescence are often constructed as distinct life stages (with adolescence as a time of risk and irresponsibility and childhood as a time of innocence). But both of them are set apart from adulthood by their lack of stability and maturity (both children and youth are understood to be ‘in process’ towards adulthood) and thus an incapacity to know themselves as well as adults do. It is this commonality that matters to my analysis, hence my overall lack of distinction between these life stages.

and psychological development” (Mills, 2000, p. 21). This view is informed by, and contributes to, neoliberal<sup>27</sup> discourses that conceptualize subjects primarily through notions of individual agency, personal responsibility, and free choice (W. Brown, 2003, 2006; Gill, 2008; Gonick, 2006). Within this paradigm, children and youth are tasked with becoming agentive adults but, because they are not there yet, “adults must evaluate and guide [their] development” (Talburt, 2004b, p. 117).

Both paradigms justify the imposition of adult authority over young people, a perspective seemingly at odds with the idea that trans and gender-nonconforming students should be ‘in charge’ of their social transitions in schools. In his introduction to his book on childhood studies, Richard Mills (2000) rightly notes, “the philosophical and ideological stances taken by parents, carers, and educators [on the nature of childhood], whether precisely articulated or merely implicit, will determine how children are treated” (p. 12). Because of the promising ideological shift that the ‘student in charge’ narrative seems to imply for how students (trans and gender-nonconforming students in particular) are treated, I became interested in examining it more closely, including its effects and its limits.

I start this chapter by presenting the ‘student in charge’ narrative and how it was articulated by educators. Having established what this narrative looks like, I continue by examining moments where the confines of this narrative became visible: when adults worried about ‘encouraging’ the student in their non-normative gender identity, when adults had concerns about safety, and when adults expressed doubts because of the student's age. I end this

---

<sup>27</sup> Many of these discourses have a long-standing history in liberal discourses about the subject, but have been reinvigorated by neoliberalism, which Duggan (2003) describes as “a late twentieth-century incarnation of Liberalism” (p. 3) whose key notions of privatization and personal responsibility increasingly impose market logics onto people.

chapter by looking at what I believe are unintended effects of the ‘student in charge’ narrative. Specifically, I look at the way that this narrative puts students in a situation where they are expected (and assumed to be able to) advocate for themselves. I also show that the narrative’s concerns with the student’s individual perspective leads to an individualizing approach that misses the way that trans and gender-nonconforming students are embedded in – and constrained by – existing normative systems and practices.

#### **4.2 The student “drives the car”: positioning students as empowered subjects**

Almost every educator I spoke to discussed student input as part of their stories about how decisions were made at their school following a trans student making their existence known. In their narratives, student input was often not simply one element to be taken into account, but rather the driving force in why and how decisions were made.

For example, Jelena, a support worker in District A, talked about a situation where a student and his parents had “the school know that she [sic] was in process of gender change.” Jelena summarized the process in this way: “we... let [the student] case manage us, basically.” This turn of phrase is particularly interesting because it is a role-reversal. In educational and counselling settings, it is usually adults who are in charge of students and managing their ‘cases.’ By reversing roles, Jelena suggests that, from her perspective, power shifts in situations that involve trans and gender-nonconforming students. In District D, one of the counsellors, Dawson, told me that when a student came out to her as transgender, she sought out a variety of colleagues who had already worked with trans and gender-nonconforming students to hear their perspective. Here is how she reported the advice she heard from them:

The message that I got from [a support staff] and from [another counsellor] was just that basically the student drives the car, right? It's just... It's about... simply all about wishes and needs and requirements and expressed desires of the student, which makes tremendous sense.

In this quote, Dawson makes explicit that the idea that “the student drives the car” is central to how educators understand what it means to support a trans and gender-nonconforming students. By centering the “wishes and needs and requirement and expressed desires of the student” in her understanding of “what matters,” she also implicitly positions the opinions of adults as secondary to the process of decision-making. Although I will complicate this position later, it is enough to say for now that this is how Dawson, along with many other educators, framed the role of the trans and gender-nonconforming student within the decision-making process.

Two things should be noted here. One, this narrative aligns with neoliberal understandings of individual subjectivities, namely the underlying belief that “our biographies are increasingly under individual control” (Currie et al., 2009, p. 18). Both the repeated focus on a single grammatical agentive subject (“the student”) as well as the vocabulary – “wishes and needs and requirements” – construct an image of a free-standing individual who has not only wishes that are specific to them (rather than embedded in existing systems of power) but has agency in making them happen. These notions of choice and freedom, Spade (2011) points out, constitute “the emotional or affective registers of neoliberalism” (p. 50). As a result of these assumptions, individual accommodations rather than institutional changes are emphasized in Dawson’s account. I discuss the implications of this framing further in the next chapter.

Second, Dawson’s quote indicates that the ‘student in charge’ narrative is often one that is not generated idiosyncratically by unconnected individual educators; rather it is often taught, or at least produced collectively, by and with educators who are positioned as ‘experts’ on the



topic. Dawson explains clearly that it is “the message [she] got” from peers who had more experience than her that has helped her discursively frame the decision-making process in this way. By concluding with the phrase, “which makes tremendous sense,” she validates the advice as logical and sensible and takes ownership of it.

Other educators got external validation of the idea that the student should lead the decision-making process. Blue, who worked as an administrator in the same school as Dawson, also talked about consulting outside sources and in particular, informal district guidelines<sup>28</sup> about supporting trans and gender-nonconforming students. The take-away message that she took from these guidelines is similar to Dawson’s:

I guess the phrase I remember more than anything else was ‘at the end of the day it is up to the individual.’ So if the individual wants to play soccer on the girl’s team, then the individual plays on the girl’s team. If the individual wants to play soccer on the boy’s team, then the individual plays soccer on the boy’s team. And for whatever reason I just thought, okay you know what, yeah at the end of the day whatever the person wants, whatever makes sense to him or her, that’s what you do.

By stating that she remembers it “more than anything else,” Blue makes clear the centrality of the ‘student in charge’ narrative. Her claim of recollection is then substantiated by her clear re-articulation of this approach in the rest of the quote. In Blue’s description, the trans and gender-nonconforming student (“the individual”) is repeatedly the subject of the active verbs “want” and “play.” This grammatical structure frames the student as the active subject and decision-maker. Meanwhile the adults only appear as responding to these requests positively: “whatever the person wants [...] that’s what you do.” Blue goes even further with the phrase “whatever makes sense to him or her,” which suggests that, even if the student wants something that does not

---

<sup>28</sup> At the time of our interview, District D had no official district policy on trans and gender-nonconforming students and thus such guidelines were usually provided by support staff with experience working with trans and gender-nonconforming students.

make sense to the adults, the student's perspective should be prioritized. This is a representation of the decision-making process where the role of adults is reduced to enacting decisions taken by the student without intervening in any way, shape, or form.

The only indication in the quote that the situation might be more complicated is the “for whatever reason” that appears in Blue's last sentence. It is a potential clue that Blue herself does not entirely buy into this approach, or is at least unfamiliar with it. This is not entirely surprising: there are few, if any, instances in schools where students are allowed to entirely dictate their path. In fact, Blue's own quote hints at the limited power that students have in schools. The idea that the trans and gender-nonconforming student dictates “what you do” as an educator suggests that, while the student might guide the process, it is adults that ultimately have the power of “doing.” Although schools are in many ways “concentrated sites of contestation” (Talbert, Rofes & Rasmussen, 2004, p. 2), they are also spaces where students are controlled through particular regimes of academic achievement and social values (Hendrick, 1997). As I will suggest, trans and gender-nonconforming students – just like any other student – also get caught in these regimes of control despite Blue and others' optimistic rendition.

In many cases, I did not directly ask how the student was involved in decision-making. Instead I started by asking educators to tell me about the first time that they worked with trans or gender-fluid students, and participants themselves integrated students (and their families) into their tales of how decision were made. Charlie, an experienced counsellor who had been working in District A for almost a decade, provides an apt example. She spoke of having a few gay and lesbian friends and of having attended professional trainings on sexual diversity, but her knowledge of trans issues was more partial and indirect. When I asked her to tell me about the

specifics of the first situation where she had worked with a trans and gender-nonconforming student, she explained:

So this person was very young but we knew that they were identified formally as female but dressed and asked to be identified as male. So we did and spoke with the child's mother, the child themselves and wanting to understand you know what was it he wanted us to do to make him feel comfortable and how, what did he want us to do?

Charlie identifies the first step in decision-making as getting the perspective of the student: as “wanting to understand ... what was it he wanted us to do.” Although she mentions the student's family, Charlie clearly centers the student's experience and needs: “what was it that *he* wanted,” “to make *him* feel comfortable,” and “what did *he* want us to do” (emphasis mine). Again, the adults are presented as the ultimate actors in this scenario (they have the power “to do”), which signals something about the limited power that students have in schools without the support of adults. Nevertheless, the actions of adults in Charlie's account are framed as directed by the student and his wishes.

In this quote, Charlie frames the initial request made by the student (“[he] asked to be identified as male”) as one that the school staff met positively, without any hesitations or questions (“so we did”). Although Charlie's wording portrays this response as automatic rather than as an active choice on the part of the staff, this recognition is in fact the first decision being made within the educational system. Not only that, but recognition is in fact crucial: respecting a person's gender identity counters a culture of trans repudiation that exists in and outside of schools (Miller, 2015a; Namaste, 2011; Shelley, 2008). In contrast, Formby (2015) notes that “the incorrect use of pronouns or names was said to cause stress, frustration, upset and anger” by her young trans participants who were denied this recognition.

Note, however, that the fact that the student has to make a formal request – has to come out – to be identified correctly already complicates the ‘student in charge narrative’: it highlights that the student is navigating an institution that would otherwise *render him invisible*. Similarly, the notion that something specific may need to be done to “make him feel comfortable” implicitly sets up schools as places that are not usually comfortable for trans and gender-nonconforming students.

In the accounts I have shared, students are both grammatical and social subjects who are assumed to be able to make decisions freely. This framing positions trans and gender-nonconforming students as free-standing, empowered individuals who can be ‘in charge’ of their social transition. This neoliberal conceptualization relies on an individualized notion of empowerment, which has been misappropriated from the language of critical education.<sup>29</sup> This notion has been criticized for failing to account for the way that choices are constrained by systemic and institutional mechanisms (Peters & Marshall, 1995). It may in fact be used to justify and perpetuate material exclusions (Bergeron, 2003; Miraftab, 2004).

The way that students exist in the ‘student in charge’ narrative as individuals who have the freedom to determine what their transition will be like simplifies the position of students within schools. Students are being tasked with making decisions within an institution whose established norms regularly work to erase trans and gender-nonconforming subjectivities; this is

---

<sup>29</sup> Peters and Marshall (1995) note that “critical pedagogy still participates in the tradition of liberatory politics which depends fundamentally on a social ontology privileging the individual as an agent of all social phenomena, signification and knowledge production” (p. 208). In other words, critical education and neoliberalism rely on similar assumptions about the subject. This is the case despite the fact the neoliberalism and critical education have fundamentally different visions for a just world, and that scholars of critical education have in fact written vehemently against neoliberalism and its impact on education (for examples, see McLaren, 2011; Orelus & Marlott, 2012). See Ellsworth (1992) for further critiques of the notion of empowerment and McLaren & Hammer (1989) for a defense of critical education and its assumptions about subjects.

hardly a simple position. This positioning also fails to take into consideration the way that the choices available to students are always already constrained by institutional settings and cultural expectations. In the next section, I further complicate the ‘student in charge’ narrative by showing how existing and persistent assumptions about transness, safety, and age limit the possibility for students to completely choose how they will transition in school.

### **4.3 At the limits of the ‘student in charge’ narrative**

While educators often featured the ‘student in charge’ narrative early on in their accounts of how their school works with trans and gender-nonconforming students, this narrative was regularly undermined by other discourses that educators drew on when re-telling these stories. These discourses usually put in question the premise that students are the most capable of knowing what decisions make sense for them. In this section, I discuss these moments where the ‘student in charge’ narrative bumped into boundaries or contradictions. I look at the underpinnings of three specific factors that worked to restrict educators’ initial commitment to letting students guide the transition process: concerns about influencing students, assumptions about safety, and concerns about age.

#### **4.3.1 The fear of ‘encouraging’ students**

One of the more hidden but fundamental limits to the ‘student in charge’ narrative was the fact that it was deployed in a context where being trans (even more so than gender-nonconforming) continues to be seen as less desirable than being cisgender. The idea of following the student’s lead could easily be complicated in educators’ talk by an underlying fear of influencing the student towards transition.

Charlie, the counsellor from District A I quoted earlier, talked about working with a student who had come to Charlie's school using the pronoun 'he' and a male name. She expressed some uncertainty over "how firm" the student's identity was because of some of his personal circumstances, and went on to explain:

So we weren't, we didn't want to create external circumstances to reinforce what we thought was not yet a firm identification and identity, so we were trying to be, in no way to persuade or to influence I guess. [...] It was just that we felt that [...] the most respectful thing to do was to give him space and to not force him to go one way or the other...

At first glance, Charlie seems simply concerned with the idea that an identity should not be imposed externally onto the student: to "give him space" to figure out his identity for himself thus becomes "the most respectable thing to do." What is at work in this account is a particular understanding of young people that includes the belief is that "teenagers are naturally emerging and outside of adult influences" (Lesko, 2001, p. 3). Representations of childhood and adolescence function as regulatory ideals (Walkerdine, 1990; Vadeboncoeur & Stevens, 2005). Here, this particular representation of youth assumes that an identificatory outcome is undesirable if it was shaped by people other than the young person themselves. This perspective disregards the way in which adults (in particular, educators, care-givers and parents) actually expend much energy "evaluat[ing] and guid[ing] adolescents' development and entry into appropriate citizenship and social relations" (Talbert, 2004b, p. 117). It also overlooks the many ways in which our identity and futures are always already dependent on the discursive possibilities (and thus, social categories) available to us.

This idea that youth should develop their identities separate from 'undue influence' is bolstered by the last sentence of Charlie's quote. She suggests that adults do not have an investment in how the student identifies – it does not matter if he goes "one way or the other" as

long this identification was not forced on him. However, this perspective is not quite aligned with the earlier part of the quote. At the beginning, Charlie's concern that educators might "create external circumstances" that could "persuade or influence" the student into a trans identity that the adults do not yet see as "firm" reveals an underlying belief that transness is not the preferred outcome. First, the language of persuasion and influence evokes long-standing heterosexist and homophobic discourses that frame queer people as seducers and recruiters of children,<sup>30</sup> who are imagined as innocent and non-sexual (King, 2004; Rofes, 1998). These discourses have created insecurity and impossibilities in queer teachers' lives (Dankmeijer, 1993; de Castell & Bryson, 1998; Duke, 2007; Jackson, 2007), continue to create cautious attitudes amongst educators who seek to bring issues of gender and sexuality in schools (Formby, 2015; Smith, 2015), and, in some cases, have generated legal prohibitions against the 'promotion' of homosexuality in school contexts (Watney, 1991; Epstein, 2000). Like the notion of recruitment, the word persuasion suggests that someone has acted upon someone else's beliefs or actions, but in excess. Because hetero- and cisnormative culture invites us to imagine "heterogendered" (Ingraham, 1994) lives as the default path, undue influence can only go in one direction – towards queer and trans lives.

Indeed, concerns are never raised when cisgender children express a strong identification with the gender they were assigned at birth. In fact, research shows that North American parents are very comfortable 'persuading' or 'influencing' their children into identifying with the gender they were assigned at birth (Kane, 2009; Martin, 2009; Solebello & Elliott, 2011; Wood et al., 2002), which is a framework that lesbian and gay parents have to actively negotiate (Berkowitz

---

<sup>30</sup> For an example of the deployment of this rhetoric in an academic context, see Cameron & Cameron (1996).

& Ryan, 2011). Emily Kane's (2012) monograph on how parents navigate what she calls "the gender trap" shows that parents "re-create gendered structures, enthusiastically and hesitantly, directly and indirectly" (p. 3), even when they try to tweak and revise these structures. Even the "resister" parents in Kane's study did not express doubts about making assumptions about their children's gender identity. Instead, they focused on gender expression and presentation, which were seen as somewhat malleable.

Decades ago, in her essay "How to bring up your kids gay," Sedgwick (1991) discussed the tension she was starting to notice between a professed acceptance of gay adults and the difficulty in embracing queerness in children and youth. She wrote that "under the overarching, relatively unchallenged aegis of a culture's desire that gay people not be, there is no unthreatened, unthreatening theoretical home for a concept of gay and lesbian origins" (p. 26). It is not difficult to see a similar cultural desire that trans people not be. This makes the concept of a trans origin equally difficult and even threatening. In turn, this tension leaves educators caught between the desire to support already-trans children, while not wanting to 'reinforce' possible transness in youth who are seen as 'not yet trans' – young people whose identity, whether because of their age or other factors, have been determined by adults not to be, in Charlie's words, "firm enough."

This is, indeed, the very position taken by Dr. Zucker and his team at Toronto's Gender Identity Service in the Child, Youth, and Family Program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Zucker et al. (2012) wrote recently that they "do not have a particular quarrel with the prevention of transsexualism as a treatment goal for children" (p. 392). In this paper, Zucker et al. note that this is not the case for adolescents, because they "believe that there is much less evidence that GID [Gender Identity Disorder] can remit in adolescents than in children" (p. 392).



Yet presumably these adolescents were children at one point, highlighting the cultural difficulty with the aforementioned question of trans origins. Zucker's approach is not only criticized by other doctors who specialize in gender identity (P. L. Brown, 2006) but also vehemently condemned by trans activists, who rightly note that this approach assumes that "to be a transgender person is seen as an unfortunate future" (Pyne, 2015, online). While these discussions from the medical community rarely explicitly appeared in my transcripts, they reflect cultural assumptions to which educators are exposed, and with which they have to contend.

What I am suggesting here is that Charlie is in the complicated position of having to make decisions about her interactions with a trans and gender-nonconforming student in a cultural context that may interpret Charlie's embracing of the student's gender identity as 'undue influence.' Charlie's words are marked by cisnormative discourses, but I do not mean to suggest that educators like her faked their support of trans and gender-nonconforming young people. Rather, their talk bears the complicated marks of the contradictory discourses available to them.

Later in our interview, when I asked Charlie about the first thoughts that she had when this student came to her, she said she "wanted to protect him" before expanding:

So to give him the circumstance where he could, y'know, come to understand himself without him suffering any judgements or anything aggressive or critical so that he felt safe. [...] So that there was that sense that he could be whoever he was on the day and that was going to be okay. And let him decide and tell us you know?

In this quote, the idea that transness might not be a desirable outcome is no longer visible, although the myth of the free-standing subject coming into themselves free of external influences still is. Instead, Charlie emphasizes that it is important for the student to "be whoever he was on the day" and talks about creating an environment where the student could "come to understand himself" free of "judgements or anything aggressive or critical." Both these elements

acknowledge that trans and gender-nonconforming students often navigate unsupportive social and cultural environments, thus necessitating spaces where their identities will not be judged or criticized. There is no reason to doubt that Charlie believes this, but it is complicated by the fact that she does not acknowledge how adults questioning the certainty of one's identity – the very thing she was doing earlier – might in itself constitute an act of aggression for trans and gender-nonconforming students. In this account, adults are no longer visible as agents who make claims about the firmness of identity in the student, but instead they are passive recipients of knowledge imparted by the student and the student alone (“let him decide and tell us”).

Even later, Charlie also talked about the importance of connecting this young man to external resources so he could access an environment that fully embraced who he was. She specifically referenced heterosexism in the surrounding culture by pointing out that, for heterosexual students, the process of falling in love and talking about feelings is just “part of our normal conversation” and that they don’t have to “be careful” or “choose [their] language.” In contrast, she recognized this could be “challenging” for a person who does not fit cultural expectations of gender and sexuality.

Charlie’s awareness of the challenges faced by queer and trans young people might seem difficult to reconcile with the cisnormativity that infused her earlier quote. I present the full narrative here precisely to underline this contradiction. Rather than claiming that Charlie was inauthentic at some points during our interview, or trying to reconcile these conflicting inflections, I want to sit with the discomfort of these contradictions, and suggest that Charlie may well hold all of these beliefs together. I am again reminded of Sedgwick’s (1991) essay about growing up gay, which despite being over 20 years old continues to resonate with the contradiction of our society in its approach to queer and trans subjectivities, and particularly to

queer and trans children. “The new psychiatry of gay acceptance,” writes Sedgwick (1991), “not only fails to offer, but seems conceptually incapable of offering, even the slightest resistance to the wish endemic in the culture surrounding and supporting it: the wish that gay people *not exist*” (p. 23). Similarly, the educators I spoke with sometimes seemed caught between established discourses that affirm queerness and transness are acceptable *adult* outcomes, increasingly visible narratives that suggest that queer and trans youth should be supported in their identifications, and the persistence of heteronormative and cisnormative discourses that continue to teach us that to grow up queer and trans is an undesirable deviation. Moreover, a dominant presumption still gives potency to the idea that queer and trans children are difficult to identify and should only be embraced once their fate has become inevitable, in the interests of tolerance and ‘diversity.’

These tensions are also visible in a quote from a participant in District C, Laxlady, who has worked both as a counsellor and an administrator over the course of her career. Laxlady told me that she had educated herself on gender diversity through books, and she believed that, as a counsellor, “you have to be open to everything and you have to learn.” She had attended a workshop on gender diversity when a young man had transitioned a few years prior, but shared that initially she had had some concerns, in particular around age. When I asked her if her concerns had been alleviated by the workshop, she answered that they had been, “for the most part.” She continued:

I feel that no matter the age, if the person is talking that way that's what they want, then for the most part...They could be supported -- I was going to say encouraged, but they should be supported, I think, is how I feel now.

The distinction that Laxlady draws between ‘supporting’ and ‘encouraging’ a student in their identity is key. She perfectly captures the contradiction of trying to be a supportive teacher in a

hetero- and cisnormative culture where straight genders and sexualities remain the norm.

Additionally, note that Laxlady's notion of support is framed by the conditional phrase "for the most part" and the clause "if the person is talking that way," both of which could suggest that support requires some conditions to be met. I speak to these concerns in the next two sections.

In his article on the heteronormative ways that schools teach about puberty, Joseph Diorio (2006) pointedly asks, "How can teachers expect students to value LGBTQ persons positively when they already have taught them implicitly that minority sexual orientations are errors of natural development?" (p. 106; see also Diorio & Munro, 2003). An adaptation of this question for this research could be, how can educators expect students (and other educators) to support trans and gender-nonconforming students when they believe implicitly that transness or gender-nonconformity is something that should not be 'encouraged'? In other words, what stopped Laxlady from using the word 'encourage'? What does it mean that encouraging someone to explore the possibilities of being queer or trans is perceived as a misspeaking, while school life (from kindergarten onwards) continues to be structured by hundreds of big and small incitements to heterosexuality and gender normativity (Mayo, 2013; Meyer, 2009; Payne, 2007; Payne & Smith, 2013; Talburt & Steinberg, 2000)? I argue that the explanation is in great part found in the persistent assumption that being straight and cisgender remains preferable. As such, someone should be fully supported in being trans and queer only after their identity has become inevitable, unchangeable, and beyond influence.

Given the presence of these contradictions in our culture, it is unsurprising that they find their ways into the talk of educators and undermine the narrative that presents the student as being independently 'in charge' of their transition. I suggest these examples must not serve to chastise individual educators but rather must work as reminders that educators are governed by

the same regimes of power that circulate throughout society. They also operate within schools that are themselves situated within a culture that sends contradictory messages about the value of trans and queer lives. These tensions impede the ability of teachers to support trans and gender-nonconforming students unreservedly.

#### **4.3.2 Making ‘safe’ choices**

Another way in which the ‘student in charge’ narrative was sometimes invalidated in the talk of educators was through discourses of safety that circulate in the spaces of schools. Meadow, a support staff in District D who had helped several students through their social transition in schools, drew on these discourses of risk and safety when she gave me an overview of how she supports students:

They [the students] are the ones who get to write every chapter. [...] They write their story and I just provide them the paper to write it on and follow the instructions. I might do some risk management and think, well, have you thought about this, and have you thought about that, and what about this and what about that just to, kind of, make... sometimes we get so focused on one thing that we don’t see the whole picture. [...] But, ultimately, once I feel like there is an understanding of the whole issue... again, it’s the decision of the student.

As with other participants, Meadow draws explicitly on the ‘student in charge’ narrative when she starts by affirming that students “are the ones who get to write every chapter,” and frames her role as the adult as “follow[ing] the instructions.” The rest of the quote, however, complicates the narrative. First, Meadow reframes the adult in a more active role by introducing the idea that one of the responsibilities of the adult is to do “some risk management.” According to Meadow, this means making sure that the student is aware of all the factors at play in their decisions: “have you thought about this, and have you thought about that.” In other words, risk management is not framed here as identifying what needs to happen so that the trans and gender-

nonconforming student's needs can be met. Rather it is a step where the student (and their family) is asked to consider the context in which the transition will be happening ("the whole picture") and possibly adapt their needs to this context. In the sentence "sometimes we get so focused on one thing," I argue that the use of the adverb "so" as well as the turn of phrase "one thing" suggests excess and minimizes the student's potential request: surely a single thing cannot be that essential. And although Meadow makes it very clear at the end of the quote that she will "ultimately" go with the decision of the student, the conditional clause "once I feel like there is an understanding of the whole issue" contributes to framing the process as one that should be vetted by knowledgeable adults – her, in this case.

This idea – that adults often know better– often came through in the talk of educators. It must be put in context of discourses about children and youth that position them as immature, or rather going through a chaotic 'developmental stage' that justifies supervision. These discourses thus justify the management of young people by adults by placing the latter – and educators in particular – as knowledgeable and responsible for guiding this process of development (Lesko, 2001; Talburt, 2004b). Teacher education programs typically train new teachers within this paradigm, where pre-service teachers learn their role is to be the "mature, objective scientist and trainer, or rational knower" (Stevens et al., 2007, p. 114) in the classroom (see also Lewis & Petrone, 2010). This creates particular ideas about what is 'developmentally appropriate' or not for students (Kelly & Brooks, 2009).

In the following excerpt, Xavier, an administrator in District D, shows some of these discourses at work. Xavier talked about being an advocate for sexual diversity at his school, a role he illustrated by telling me about discussing the importance of celebrating of all forms of diversity at school assemblies and having "learning conversations" on the topic with students

who are bullying others. He told me he had learned about gender diversity through education but also from being in the gay community, “you know, in reading articles in newspapers and hearing your friends talk.” In our conversation about one particular trans student he had worked with, I asked him how he had made the decision that the student’s transition would be a public event at his school (staff went into each of the student’s classes to announce the student would be coming back as a boy, with a new name). He answered:

Well, my attitude was it’s the parents’ decision and it’s the student’s decision, together. Those... them together. And my job then is to try to, you know, show them or explain to them what the factors of the school are that either help or hinder what they’re trying to do so that they’re aware and are being able to make a completely sound decision based on all the factors.

In this quote, Xavier makes it clear that the decision rests primarily on the parents and the student “together.” In contrast, he defined his role as a school staff not as someone who makes decisions but as someone who gives context (explaining “the factors of the school”) so that the student and their family can make an informed decision. On the surface, this seems like a simple iteration of the ‘student in charge’ narrative – the student guides the process, with educators supporting them rather than dominating the process – but this narrative becomes more complicated when considered more carefully.

For example, I would argue that Xavier’s commitment to the perspective of the student and parents (“it’s [their] decision”) is undermined by the use of the verb ‘try’ in the expression “what they’re trying to do” because it suggests that what the student (and their parents) want to do might not be realized. Additionally, by framing himself as a person who knows “what the factors of the school are that either help or hinder,” Xavier actually positions himself as the expert of the space (which is not necessarily untrue) and consequently, potentially the better judge for what constitutes a “completely sound decision.” As a result, when Xavier explains that

the goal is that the student (and their family) make a “completely sound decision based on all the factors,” he has made room for the possibility that this decision may not allow for what the student (and their parents) had in mind. As such, this quote is emblematic of the tension that exists between educators’ desire to support and take their lead from the student and the ways that the school system, drawing on available discourses about youth and students, sets up adults as being more qualified to know what a ‘sound’ decision is.

Although Xavier never clarifies what makes a decision “sound,” the notion of safety often came up in interviews as a factor that created a point of tension in narratives of student-led decision-making. In District A, Sam, a support worker who helped run the GSA at his school, answered my question about what the school had to think about in terms of accommodations in a way that again emphasized the role of the student in the decision-making process:

We think that they know more than we do and so they’re the experts. So we actually... the first thing we do is actually ask them what they need. [...] So I think that’s really an important thing to ask the kid first. And then if they’re like, ‘No, no, no, you don’t have to do anything, you don’t have to do anything,’ then we just kind of maybe make a couple suggestions.

Right away, before he gets into any specifics, Sam positions students as “experts” on their own lives whose opinion should be prioritized (“the first thing we do is ... ask them”) and valued (“that’s really an important thing”).

Sam’s last sentence, where he establishes that adults might make suggestions after a student has been asked for their opinion (especially if the student seems reluctant to make a request), is interesting because it can be interpreted in multiple ways. On one hand, Sam is indicating that students are not solely responsible for their needs being met, and that prioritizing the student’s perspective does not mean that all the responsibility is taken off of the shoulders of adults. Existing literature has pointed out that adult guidance can avoid putting the burden of



change onto students (Elliot, 2015). Additionally, Sam's scenario can be read as an acknowledgment that students might not always feel like they can state their needs given that they are not in position of authority within the school, and thus adults may in certain circumstances be in a better position to advocate on behalf of students.

On the other hand, the fact that the student's hypothetical refusal might not be taken seriously – adults are going to make suggestions regardless – can also suggest that adults have the tendency to impose their perspectives of what needs to be done. I would argue that Sam partly undermines this second reading by using the hedges “kind of” and “maybe,” which moderate the potential for intervention by adults in his narrative. However, Sam continued his explanation in ways that raise additional questions:

And then if they're like, 'No, no, no, you don't have to do anything, you don't have to do anything,' then we just kind of maybe make a couple suggestions. One is change rooms, if they're in PE or whatever. And then bathrooms, like, which bathrooms, what about using a washroom in the school. Like, wherever you [the student] feel comfortable, first of all. And then if it's... if it's realistic. Because, you know, one of the things is you want to support the kid and you want them to... to have the power but, at the same time, you also want to... want them to be safe.

In this second part of his answer, Sam complicates his original response. Although one might assume from Sam's earlier description that students, as “the experts,” would “[have] the power” to decide what bathroom or change room they should use (in this example), this quote seems to indicate that the process is, indeed, more complex than originally presented. Sam is not necessarily contradicting his earlier idea that it is important to start by “ask[ing] the student what they need” but he is clarifying that asking a student does not necessarily mean that they get to have complete control over whether their desires are enacted.

In this latter quote, Sam introduces another factor he sees as necessarily going into a decision about washroom use: ‘realism.’ This need for realism is justified, in the next sentence,

by the need for safety (“you want them to be safe”) so that what is “realistic” is constructed to be also what is safe. These factors of safety and realism, however, do not seem to sit easily with Sam’s original commitment to a student-led approach.

Despite Sam’s continued efforts to assert this commitment, which is seen in his statement that the decision should be based “first of all” on the student’s preference (“wherever you feel comfortable”), he ultimately qualifies this approach with the conditional clause “if it’s realistic.” Similarly, in the second sentence, he reaffirms a commitment to the student and their perspective on the decision (“you want them to have the power”) but again immediately moderates this claim with the conjunction “but” which introduces the idea that “you want [the student] to be safe.” By setting up an opposition between student safety and a student’s capacity to make decisions about their transition, I argue that these sentences frame young people’s capacity to decide on the best course of action (and thus, their comfort) as elements that need to be contrasted with, or at least moderated by, adults’ perceptions of realism and safety.

This discursive tension suggests that students are not well equipped to think ‘realistically’ about their own safety, again positioning students that need guidance and redirection (Stevens et al., 2007). Although this is not directly stated by Sam, I argue that the implication is that adults are better positioned to assess how “realistic” and/or safe a student’s request is. Because young people could make choices that are not realistic or safe, adults are needed to make that assessment (Lesko, 2001). The language used by Sam in the second sentence (“you want to,” where ‘you’ refers broadly to educators) indirectly makes this adult presence visible and highlights the tension between putting power in the hand of the student and in restricting this power because of safety. I suggest that this tensions reveals that Sam is negotiating discourses that offer contradictory frameworks for understanding the most supportive course of action.

It is important to note that it is the trans and gender-nonconforming student's own safety that Sam emphasizes in his explanation to justify the possibility of directing a student to use of a single-stall washroom. In other cases, educators evoked the perception of a loss of safety or comfort that *other students or their parents* might feel as a result of a binary trans student using a gender-segregated washroom in order to explain or justify decisions to have the student who was transitioning use a separate, single-stall washroom. For example, Amy, an administrator in District B, explained that she would be "fine" with the student at her school using the boy's washroom, "but then the other children might not be comfortable with it."

Arguments like Amy's are easier to question because they prioritize the comfort of the privileged group, indirectly frame the trans and gender-nonconforming student as responsible for the discomfort they might cause, and disregard the way that gendered spaces generate risk and unsafety in trans and gender-nonconforming people's lives more than in cisgender people's lives. Sam's line of reasoning, in contrast, is more complicated because it is well-meaning – the trans and gender-nonconforming student's safety is understood to be at stake.

Yet it ultimately functions to create the same result: the student is not given access to gender-segregated spaces. By evoking the trans and gender-nonconforming student's safety as justification for favoring certain decisions, Sam unintentionally creates a situation where the needs of the trans and gender-nonconforming student are only outwardly prioritized. In other words, the emphasis on the trans and gender-nonconforming student's safety makes it possible for Sam (and other educators like him) to simultaneously position themselves as supportive staff who understand the student and their needs, and to make decisions that run counter to the student's wishes. In some ways, this type of reasoning should give us pause because it uses the language of support and care for trans and gender-nonconforming students yet still requires the

trans and gender-nonconforming student to accommodate to the dominant structures and dynamics of school spaces in ways that can erase and deny their subjectivity.

At the same time, this contradiction captures a genuine tension felt by educators between their desire for students “to have the power” and the responsibility that they feel to keep the students safe. Juliette, a counsellor who had worked with several trans and gender-nonconforming students and families in District C over her long career, told me about one time in particular where she supported a student through a social transition in her school. She had brought a speaker to her class to educate her students about gender diversity and expressed clear commitment to making the school a hospitable space for the young trans man she was supporting. Yet she also remembered the student using a separate changing area and single-stall washroom because “the staff [felt] more comfortable” with that option. When I asked her about that decision, she echoed both Sam’s concern with making sure that the student was going to be safe: “The other thing was, in the change room, was really being worried about the student being beaten up in there, it was kind of around student safety, and then... what would have... I mean because there’s no adults in the change room so there’s no supervision and... yeah... what do you do... I still don’t really have an answer to that.”

Like Sam’s contradictory response, Juliette’s explanation raises questions about safety and how current dominant bullying discourses define unsafety through intentional peer-to-peer violence that renders invisible the institutional and cultural context in which this violence arises (Payne & Smith, 2012; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). As a result, adults are made responsible for student safety. In Juliette’s quote, concerns about washroom use stem from the absence of adults and “supervision,” which implies that these elements would ensure safety. Yet even adult

supervision would only stop violence at a surface level, leaving untouched the transphobic and cisnormative systems of meaning that make the violence imaginable and even likely.

How might the conversation change with a paradigm shift that problematized institutional practices and cultural norms that enforce gender conformity? How might this shift make it easier for educators like Sam and Juliette to reconcile what they sometime perceive as conflicting needs (the student's wishes and the student's safety)? Sedgwick's (1991) essay is again helpful here. In her discussion of the homophobic approach to "sissy boys" of psychologist Richard Green, she notes, "Green is obscenely eager to convince parents that their hatred and rage at their effeminate sons is really only a desire to protect them from peer-group cruelty" (p. 25). Although the educators I spoke with certainly never directed any hatred or rage towards trans and gender-nonconforming students, I think the contradictory interactions between the rhetoric of safety and the 'student in charge' narrative gestures towards an underlying cultural discomfort with gender diversity that we are often unwilling to face openly in an era of celebrating diversity (see my exploration of diversity discourses in Chapter 3).

In this context, discourses of safety become a way to avoid having to fundamentally rethink existing cisnormative structures without directly rejecting trans and gender-nonconforming students. The rhetoric of 'protecting' students who deviate from the norms of gender and sexuality can serve instead to silence them by asking them to make themselves less visible and less disruptive. Many scholars have highlighted the risk and limitations of this victim discourse for queer youth (Airton, 2013; Ellis, 2007; Youdell, 2004), and the way it "deflect[s] research and pedagogy away from a consideration of the operations of heteronormativity in schooling towards a focus on individual/group pathology" (Rasmussen and Crowley, 2004, p. 248-49). Linville (2009) also notes that discourses of safety/unsafety obscure the workings of

institutionalized heteronormativity. Too often, these discourses indirectly put the blame of disruption on the individual while leaving untouched the systems and norms that mark trans and gender-nonconforming students as different and make their lives unintelligible. What is needed are discourses that could challenge how conditions of unsafety are created for trans and gender-nonconforming students rather than simply respond to these conditions of unsafety with precautionary measures.

The fact that many educators were aware of the violence that trans and gender-nonconforming students can face in schools sometimes contributed to a sense that these conditions of unsafety were immutable instead of inviting educators to wonder about the foundations of this lack of safety. In District C, Laxlady, who I introduced earlier, told me about a time where a young trans man transitioned in a very public manner at her school. The student used a separate washroom, which prompted me to ask how this decision had been made. Laxlady responded, “I believe he was part of the discussion. I didn’t have the discussion with him. And I believe he was part of, what are you comfortable with; what do you want? That’s my belief.”

In this quote, Laxlady is reiterating the familiar narrative that prioritizes the student’s wants (“what are you comfortable with; what do you want?”). What is interesting is that she does not actually know that the student’s wants were prioritized. She admits that she “didn’t have the discussion with him.” She also explicitly frames her version of events as a personal belief by starting two sentences with the phrase “I believe” and the final sentence “that’s my belief.” Yet these facts do not seem to undermine her confidence that the decision was made in consultation with the student.

Later in our interview, I returned to this question and asked her what she thought could have been done to make it possible for the student to use the boys' washroom (which would have matched his gender identity). She responded:

I think that that's totally up to the kid. Like, I really think if he had wanted to use the boys' washroom, I don't think we would have stood in his way, or the boys' change room. Although, that being said, I know the changing rooms, 'cause I was a phys ed teacher, are disastrous for bullying and for harassment. If there's going to be any harassment that's going to happen, it's going to happen in the change room, in particular the boys. Girls too, but not to the same degree, but the boys' change room can be...[So] unless the kid was just adamant, "No I am going to use the boy's change room," you know, then I guess what you'd have to put in place is, okay if that's what you want to do, great. [...] But that's a, for me, I think we've got to follow the direction of the kid and the parents. And if they're being adamant about it, then I think we have to put a safety net in place, but if they're saying, you know, let's do it baby steps...

Throughout this answer, Laxlady continues to make clear her investment in the 'student in charge' narrative. She starts off her answer with the idea that the decision to use the boys' washroom is "totally up to the kid," later establishes that it is "great" if using the boys' washroom was "what [the student] want[s] to do," and finally at the end, she reiterates that educators have to "follow the direction of the kid and the parents."

Despite these constant affirmations, Laxlady undermines this narrative in a number of ways throughout the quote. First, her statement that she doesn't think the school staff "would have stood in [the student's] way" if he had wanted to use the boys' bathroom or change room actually works to suggest that it is imaginable that this is a request that could be refused. If this was an obvious request, there would be no need for her to assert that there would be no resistance from the staff. As a result, the option of using the boys' washroom is framed as a more daring choice than the one made (using a separate single-stall washroom).

Second, she discusses the possibility of "bullying and harassment" in gender-segregated spaces. Here the male-dominated space of the boys' washroom is painted as one where

harassment would be unsurprising and even expected: change rooms are “disastrous” for harassment and “if there's going to be any harassment that's going to happen, it's going to happen in the change room, in particular the boys.” It is also significant that Laxlady introduces this discussion with “although,” as this qualifies her earlier statement that school staff would not “stand in the way” of a student’s desire to use the boys’ washroom. The resulting meaning is that the risk of gender-segregated space might, indeed, justify restricting the choices available for the young trans man (in this story) at the school, or will at least necessitate making sure that “a safety net” is in place.

Laxlady does not position the choices available to the student as equally desirable: one choice is clearly framed as safer (and thus better) than the other. This sense is confirmed in her last sentence, where using the boys’ washroom is presented as an option, but one that adults would likely to be wary about. This is an option that becomes available if the student is “being adamant about it” (here I interpret the use of the present continuous – ‘is being adamant’ – as opposed to the present – ‘is adamant’ – as implying repeated insistence on the part of the student, possibly to the point of being irritating, which reinforces the sense that the student has to push for this option) and that requires additional work for adults: they “have to put a safety plan in place.” Laxlady trails off without making clear what adults would do if the student was open to “baby steps.” She sees this second option as not having the downsides of the first: she believes the baby steps approach is preferable.

I am not arguing that Laxlady is necessarily incorrect in her assessment that letting the trans student use the boys’ washroom may create more work for school staff or create more risk in the student’s life. As I have pointed out before, washrooms are undoubtedly complicated and potentially dangerous spaces for trans and gender-nonconforming students to navigate (Taylor et



al., 2011; Browne, 2004; Weinberg, 2009-2010). Instead I want to emphasize the fundamental tension that exists in Laxlady's words between a theoretical commitment to the idea that students are free to make any choice they want as they transition at their school, and the fact that educators often have a clear sense of what options are safer, easier, and/or better. Is it really likely that students will feel free to make all choices equally – and thus to truly lead the path of their transition as they wish – when adults have different ways of imagining and talking about the various options available?

A few educators resisted this common use of safety as a justification for moderating and even refusing the requests of trans and gender-nonconforming students. For example, I had asked Jerrilyn, an experienced counsellor in District C, what she thought could be done if a student wanted to use the gender-segregated washroom that matched their gender identity but there was concern that bullying might happen. She answered:

I think part of it is allowing the student to use it and then dealing with the problems as they come up, if they come up, because sometimes our fear of what might happen... That really irritates me sometimes when people say, well we can't do that because this might happen. Well we don't know if it's going to happen and a lot of times, it's like the whole idea, well we can't have this student declaring that they're male when they're not male because this might happen. But nine times out of ten, it doesn't happen. The kids are fine with it. The students already knew. The students are not the ones that have trouble with it. It's the adults in the building that have the most trouble with it, right. So let's go ahead, do what the student thinks is the best for them and then deal with the problems as they occur. If it becomes a problem, then we may have to rethink the direction that we're going, but if it's not a problem then hey, problem is solved and we just keep going, right. So I think that's the best way to deal with those situations.

Unlike Laxlady earlier, Jerrilyn does not set up access to a gender-segregated washroom as something that requires additional work on the part of the student (in terms of advocating for themselves) or on the part of the adults. Instead, her answer to my hypothetical question is simply to “[allow] the student to use [the bathroom].” It is not just that Jerrilyn personally thinks

that potential problems are not reason enough to prohibit a student from accessing the washroom of their choice. She explicitly contrasts this approach with more cautious ones where the anticipation of potential problems does lead to the closure of certain options (“we can’t do that because this might happen”). In providing this contrast, she acknowledges that “our fear of what might happen” (read: adult fears of what might happen) can contribute to closing down possibilities for trans and gender-nonconforming students in a more systematic way.

Additionally, by saying that this type of reasoning “really irritates” her, Jerrilyn is taking a strong stance against the rhetoric of safety discourses I have outlined so far, where concerns about safety often directly or indirectly drive decision-making and shape what is seen as viable options for trans and gender-nonconforming students. Jerrilyn continues by disrupting other dominant narratives, all of which appeared consistently throughout my interview. First, she challenges the notion that fear of bullying (intentional violence from one individual student to another) is a primary concern for trans and gender-nonconforming students. She rejects this idea by stating that “nine times out of ten, it doesn’t happen” because students “are fine with it.” Instead, she shifts the blame onto school staff: “it’s the adults in the building that have the most trouble with it, right.” This reversal holds adults responsible for the issues that trans and gender-nonconforming students face in schools.

This is a notable shift from dominant bullying discourses, which typically emphasize peer-to-peer harassment and minimize the role of adults (Formby, 2015; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). In contrast, Jerrilyn focuses on adults. The violence in her account remains connected to individual bodies, albeit adult bodies instead of student bodies, which means that she does not quite make institutional systems of violence visible. However, she recognizes that adults hold decision-making power in the school when she positions school staff as the ones who have the

power to say “we can’t do that.” I would argue that her testimony contains the potential for considering the way that established systems create insecurity in the lives of trans and gender-nonconforming students, and thus potentially intervening into these systems.

In this section, I have examined how notions of safety were deployed alongside with, and in response to, the ‘student in charge’ narrative. Educators’ explicit commitment to a student-centered approach was complicated and sometimes hindered by beliefs about how safety can be created for trans and gender-nonconforming students. The discursive tension between these two well-meaning impulses displayed by educators is important to underline. It works as a reminder that decisions that do not challenge existing structures and instead treat trans and gender-nonconforming students as exceptions to be dealt with are not necessarily the product of active, conscious prejudice. They are often the product of dominant discourses about teachers’ roles as the chaperones of young people who imagined to be in flux and need of guidance/discipline. In fact, as I explore in the next chapter, the educators I spoke to often saw themselves as supportive, open-minded adults, and they were often trying to do their best to support trans and gender-nonconforming students. This tension must be recognized rather than ignored in order to fully understand how decisions are made in schools.

#### **4.3.3 Concerns over age**

The final element that sometimes mitigated the ‘student in charge’ narrative was whether or not educators saw the student as knowing themselves well enough to make appropriate decisions. Often this belief depended on the student’s age. Namely, if the student was perceived as too young (and what counted as ‘too young’ varied depending on the speaker), their opinion was less likely to be taken seriously. In other words, the capacity for young people to determine the

conditions of their transition often spoke to whether adults thought the young person had the capacity to self-identify ‘correctly.’ This assessment has to do with how stable and consistent the young person’s identity is perceived to be: if the student is thought to be hesitant, or thought not to be capable of knowing who they are yet, then adults were much less likely to talk about them as people that are fit to make the best decisions.

Most of the educators that I spoke to had worked primarily in secondary schools, although a few had worked in elementary schools either exclusively or in addition to secondary schools. This means that I primarily heard about students who were teenagers. Overall, psychological literature is unhelpful in determining when gender identity solidifies<sup>31</sup> due to a lack of studies on trans and gender-nonconforming youth and a tendency not to distinguish in diagnoses of ‘gender dysphoria’<sup>32</sup> between identity versus behaviour. However, the latest Standards of Care (Coleman et al., 2011) express some consensus that feelings of gender dysphoria that persist into adolescence are unlikely to shift. As a result, a number of professionals now advocate for allowing prepubescent children to socially transition as well as access reversible medical interventions<sup>33</sup> if they wish to do either (de Vries et al., 2014).

This model of care should be questioned because of its reliance on often essentialist notions of gender and gender identity; it is a model that, until very recently, has entirely denied

---

<sup>31</sup> Note that this assumes that gender identity does, or should, solidify.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Gender dysphoria’ is the name used in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) for the diagnosis used by psychologists and physicians to describe people who experience significant distress with the sex and gender they were assigned at birth (APA, 2013). This diagnosis was previously labelled ‘gender identity disorder’ and was heavily criticized for its pathologization of non-normative genders (Lev, 2006; Markman, 2011). The new diagnosis is considered an improvement (DeCuyper, 2010), although some scholars and activists would prefer to see it removed from the DSM entirely.

<sup>33</sup> This usually refers to the prescription of hormone suppressants, which halt the onset of puberty and avoid the development of ‘secondary sex characteristics’ that can increase feelings of dysphoria in some trans people.

and ignored non-binary identities.<sup>34</sup> I share it here to give the reader a sense that, even within a psychiatric model that has historically pathologized non-normative genders and sexualities (Lev, 2006; Markman, 2011), professionals increasingly argue for taking seriously the identifications of trans and gender-nonconforming adolescents. In contrast, children's capacity to know themselves continues to be questioned, even though the distinction between childhood and adolescence is not a clear one (Mills, 2000, p. 8). This has remained true even as discourses of childhood have become more complex over the past century, moving from models of unilateral socialization that assumed passivity to models that understand children as "competent social agents" (Mills, 2000, p. 21; see also Prout & James, 2004).

In my data, this tension in discourses of childhood was visible in the way that the 'student in charge' narrative was put in doubt when educators talked about the young age of students. Regardless of a student's actual age, if the student was perceived and described as young, educators were more likely to express some reservations about the 'student in charge' narrative. This happened mostly in interviews where participants talked about younger students (grade 8 and below), but occasionally also with older adolescents.

Amy, an administrator in District B, was working with a trans and gender-nonconforming student in late elementary school. The student had been presenting as gender-nonconforming for a few years and had repeatedly expressed discomfort with gendered spaces and adjectives based on his sex assigned at birth. Amy, who had recently attended a professional development

---

<sup>34</sup> This denial of non-binary lives evokes the legacy of medical/psychiatric experts, who have always positioned themselves as gatekeepers of 'real' masculinity/maleness or femininity/femaleness (Fausto-Sterling, 1993), in particular in the context of gender transitions where these experts have long had the power to determine what constitutes or not an 'authentic' gender identification and trans trajectory (Shelley, 2008; Namaste, 2000; for a historical overview, see Meyerowitz, 2004). Note, however, that the latest Standards of Care explicitly state that "mental health professionals should not impose a binary view of gender" (Coleman et al., 2011, p. 16).

workshop on respecting the right of trans students, expressed clear desire to support the student throughout the interview (she talked about “just trying to make it a comfortable environment to learn and grow”). Nevertheless, she struggled to figure out the best way to support him in a cultural context where binary gender is made relevant on a daily basis (through pronouns, washrooms, school-sponsored sporting events, etc.). While this may seem contradictory, Payne & Smith (2016) report that educators often continue to be unsure about what supporting a trans students looks like, even after attending a workshop on gender diversity.

Early on in our interview, Amy stated, “trying to make a decision in the interests of the child while also trying to respect their wishes as well has been difficult given their age.” In this sentence, Amy presents “the interests of the child” and “[the child’s] wishes” as dichotomous and even contradictory forces – two things that do not align easily. Amy identifies the student’s age as the main factor creating this difficulty. This implies that the student may not know what is “in their interests” because of their (young) age, which creates a discrepancy with their wishes. A little later, Amy further reflects on the process that has gone on at the school:

Well, you think back, like maybe should we have been using, you know, the way we address pronouns before, should we be using them differently earlier on? Or, like I don’t know if we should have had more conversation and then we kind of as adults in the beginning were making decisions with mom and not so much the child’s voice. But I don’t know at what age...

In this quote, there are many grammatical indications that Amy is uncertain about both how decisions have been made, and about what other decisions might be possible (the use of maybe, the question with the modal verb ‘should,’ the repeated use of “I don’t know”). Her uncertainty is heightened by the student’s age, which is visible first when she makes the distinction between the student and “we kind of as adults,” where the adults are positioned as the decision-makers – this includes the parent but not the student themselves.

At the end of the quote, she introduces the possibility of listening to “the child’s voice” as an alternative to the way decisions have been made at her school, but she immediately moderates this claim with the unfinished sentence, “But I don’t know at what age...” For Amy, the student’s age creates additional doubt. This uncertainty points to underlying cultural beliefs about children’s incapacity to know themselves because their identities are not fully formed. Within this paradigm, instability signals risk rather than creativity (Talbert, 2004b).

Let me come back to Laxlady, the teacher in District C who was concerned about possibly ‘encouraging’ students. She expressed concerns about age even more explicitly when we were discussing a grade 9 student who had transitioned at her school:

I remember some of my thinking, like my feelings were, you know, I was a little bit conflicted because part of me was like, good for him; is this too young; you know, is he 100% sure? It's a big decision to be making. Is this too young? [...] Yeah, so those were kind of some of the feelings that I had, or some of the thoughts I had.

In this quote, Laxlady reports having had concerns about age (“is this too young?”), which she immediately reformulates as a concern about certainty (“is he 100% sure?”). She identifies that these concerns are, at least in part, the result of a social gender transition being “a big decision to be making,” which indirectly indexes the cisnormative context (in contrast, the many gendered decisions that cisgender children make about their gender identity are invisible).<sup>35</sup>

Notably, Laxlady remarks herself that she was “conflicted,” and she reports feeling supportive of the student: “part of me was like, good for him.” This caveat might be in part for the sake of her interlocutor (me) – the interview is a context that creates an incentive for her to produce herself as an adult supportive of trans and gender-nonconforming youth. Still, I argue

---

<sup>35</sup> Note that these concerns about a gender identification being ‘a phase’ very obviously echo similar heteronormative discourses that have been used to deny the subjectivity and existence of queer children and youth.

that both sentiments in her testimony are important, and testify to a tension that educators often experience when working with trans and gender-nonconforming youth. While many of them strive to be supportive, dominant discourses that frame youth as unreliable narrators of their own lives create contradictions that educators need to reconcile.

Later in our interview, I asked Laxlady if her concerns about age were alleviated as she saw the student going through his transition, and she answered,

**Laxlady:** I think they've been alleviated. I mean, even now... You know, there's still a little part of me, but I think for the most part I feel that they've been alleviated. I feel that no matter the age, if the person is talking that way that's what they want, then for the most part... They could be supported--I was going to say encouraged, but they should be supported, I think, is how I feel now. You know, there's still a little part of me that kind of goes [makes a sound] but for the most part—  
[a little later]

**HFD:** Where do you think--like you were saying that you have a little bit of hesitation still. Where do you think that that comes from?

**Laxlady:** I think it comes from just... I guess being a mom and being – having spent so many years with teenagers and... I find the 13, 14 age group is such – there's so much drama, there's so much hormones, there's so much stuff that they're dealing with. Like, are they an adult? They don't fit anywhere.

In the first part of the quote, Laxlady focuses on communicating that she has resolved her feelings about the student transitioning too young, yet she constantly moderates her claim. She starts the first sentence with the parenthetical expression “I think.” This, along with the repeated use of “for the most part,” has the effect of “weakening the claim to truth which would be implied by a simple assertion” (Ursom, 1952, p. 484). For Laxlady, some doubt remains. When I ask her about these signs of hesitation, she again returns decisively to the factor of age (“the 13, 14 age group is such...”), giving her assessment some authority by calling upon her extensive experience (“having spent so many years with teenagers”) as both a parent and an educator. She goes on to argue that being a young teenager is complicated because of social factors (“so much drama”) and biological ones (“so much hormones”). Both explanations draw on dominant



discourses of adolescence (Stevens et al., 2007), and the commonality is excess (“there’s so much stuff they’re dealing with”).

With her last question, she also associates being a teenager with existing in a limbo state between (unstated) childhood and adulthood (“they don’t fit anywhere”). The implication is that this messy ambiguity of adolescence is an unreliable and tumultuous time in one’s life and thus a bad time to make what is seen as an important decision. This approach echoes dominant discourses of adolescence where this constructed life stage is framed as a time of “turmoil, instability, and abnormality” (Ayman-Nolley and Taira, 2000, p. 42; see also Lesko, 2000). The fact that this chaos could be “potentially creative or inquisitive” (Talburt, 2004b, p. 117) is often lost. So is the reality that cisgender adolescents also make numerous gendered decisions in their lives but these decisions are less visible because they align with dominant expectations of heteronormative and cisnormative development.

Additionally, I argue that a social transition is seen as an important decision because it is understood as irreversible. In the dominant gender paradigm, gender is binary and immutable. This paradigm has started to accommodate for the existence of (some) trans people through the use of transnormative discourses that present binary gender transitions as a way to reconcile the body with one’s ‘true self’ (Sandercock, 2015; Vipond, 2015). Often essentialist biological discourses reinforce this sense that the transition re-establishes the right order of things, which is indeed a stable sense of gender. People with fluid or non-binary gender identities, or children and adolescents who could fluctuate in their understanding of their gender identity, are a much larger threat to this dominant paradigm precisely because these scenarios disrupt the immutability of gender. As such, they present a challenge for educators and school systems, which are especially unprepared to accommodate for non-binary or fluid genders (Beemyn, 2015).

Keith, a teacher in District D who had supported several students through transition, remarked at some point in our interview, “you don’t wanna do a big... toodoo if it’s a very temporary thing, if the kid’s just gonna change their mind next month.” In this comment, the importance of a “temporary thing” is devalued, and the possibility that the student is “just gonna change their mind” justifies not making certain visible decisions (“you don’t wanna do a big toodoo”). This quote illustrates the way that temporariness and uncertainty – two concepts associated with childhood and youth – can shape what courses of action are seen as possible or desirable in school spaces.

Conversely, situations where adults expressed confidence in the student’s needs and transition were often situations where the student’s transness was seen as more certain. Often this had to do with how students presented themselves prior to making their trans identity known. That is to say, binary trans students who were read as distinctly gender-nonconforming (especially students who were assigned female at birth but presented a traditionally masculine appearance) prior to coming out as trans were much more likely to ‘make sense’ to educators, and as such, their capacity to “drive the car” of their transition was less likely to be questioned, directly or indirectly, through the various processes that I have outlined in this section.

#### **4.4 The effects of putting students “in charge”**

So far I have shown that the ‘student in charge’ narrative was often undermined by other discourses available to educators to articulate their perspectives. Despite a verbal commitment to students leading the transition process, many other factors shaped how likely it was for the requests of students to be carried out. Student perspectives were most likely to be followed when they aligned with possibilities that adults were comfortable with or considered safe. In this

section, I further examine the ‘student in charge’ narrative itself to unpack its assumptions and interrogate the effects of its seemingly positive message. What are some implications of putting trans and gender-nonconforming students in charge? What does this narrative reveal about how decisions are made within educational institutions?

#### **4.4.1 Students expected to advocate for themselves**

One of the parents I spoke to, Kate, mentioned how overwhelming it was for her trans son when a teacher expected him to have answers to all her questions about how his social transition was going to unfold at the school. Kate contrasted this experience with how supported she and her son had felt when they encountered adults in the school system who already had a sense of how they could help with the process. “Other people have done it [helped a student transition at school],” she told me, so it made sense to her that school staff would come into the conversation having already educated themselves about the issue. For Kate, it was not about adults having all the answers, but about them being willing to “do the work” and “find out what works” without putting all of their potential fears, questions and concerns onto the student going through the transition (and on the student’s family).

What Kate was pointing to is a risk that students be made to carry the burden of making the school transition possible when they are put ‘in charge.’ In her work on student activism in GSAs, Elliot (2015) notes that leaving important decisions about the creation of a single-stall washroom in the hands of GSA students “effectively placed the burden of creating institutional change on some of the school’s most marginalised students” (p. 11). Narratives that frame trans and gender-nonconforming students as “the experts” can be powerful in that they provide much needed recognition for these students (Miller, 2015b), and it was clear that educators used the

‘student in charge’ narrative with supportive intentions. At the same time, these narratives can also put students in a position where they are expected to teach adults about their own needs as well as gender diversity and trans issues more broadly.

For example, Fawn, an experienced counsellor in District C, admitted that the most challenging part of working with trans and gender-nonconforming students had been knowing “how to best support them” because she had never had personal experiences with this population. She recounted a conversation she had had with a parent of a young person who was thinking about going through a social transition at Fawn’s school:

And I said, you know, I don't have a ton of experience but we'll certainly be supportive and bend over backwards for whatever you guys need, just you might have to tell me a little bit what you need. [...]

In this quote, we see Fawn express strong commitment to the idea of following the lead of the student and their family (“bend over backwards for whatever you guys need”) while she also makes it clear that she herself can provide little guidance through the process: she doesn’t “have a ton of experience” (which, based on the rest of our interview, means none). To compensate for her lack of knowledge, she anticipates that the student and their family “might have to tell [her] a little bit what [they] need.” The modal verb “might” as well as the expression “a little bit” softens this statement. Fawn did show some initiative when the parent came to her to talk about the situation with the student (she offered that the student be given access to a single-stall washroom while the student and their family decided what else they might need) but she was now “waiting for them to tell me what's next.” Fawn’s account exemplifies situations where school staff need students and their families to provide them with answers.

To be clear, educators regularly recognized the value of students’ willingness to educate them on gender diversity and/or trans issues and expressed gratitude for what these encounters

and conversations with trans and gender-nonconforming students had taught them. Dawson, a counsellor in District D, mentioned, “my sense was the student was very generous in kind of telling me what he was comfortable with and what he wanted.” The use of the adjective ‘generous’ suggests that Dawson is not taking the student’s input for granted but rather acknowledges the student’s willingness to share as going above and beyond. When I asked educators what had been the most interesting or rewarding aspect of working with trans and gender-nonconforming students, many of them acknowledged how much they had learned – often from the student(s) themselves. But this also raises the question – would it be ‘ungenerous’ of students not to be willing to lead their school into a minimum of trans competency?

Both Elliot (2015) and Wooley (2012) emphasize both the opportunities and limits contained in moments where students are invited to educate their peers (and teachers). Writing in the context of higher education, Beemyn (2003) proposes creating staffed LGBT centres in universities so that trans and gender-nonconforming students “would no longer have to assume the primary burden of educating others” (p. 42). It is worth noting here that this burden is not unique to trans and gender-nonconforming students but is rather a product of a culture that privileges certain subjectivities over others, in which Canadian education cannot be separated from whiteness and its racist colonial history (Carr & Lund, 2007; Lund & Carr, 2015). Indigenous people and people of colour have described this same responsibility of educating peers and educators in educational contexts (see for example Herr, 1999).<sup>36</sup> In all these cases, what work – mostly made invisible – is asked of marginalized students? How might this work be

---

<sup>36</sup> The project “What I learned in class today,” developed by two Indigenous students, Amy Perreault and Karmen Crey, speaks powerfully to these dynamics at my own university, The University of British Columbia.

compounded by complex identities (Two-Spirit and indigenous trans and gender-nonconforming youth, for example)?

My interview with Chacha, a support worker from District C who had worked on a school board LGBTQ committee and had supported school staff through a couple of transitions, provided a helpful example of the complexities of this dynamic. When I asked her how she would envision a non-binary transition, she answered:

My first feeling is that I'm not sure that it would be that different. My response would be the same. My response would be to sit down with the kid and say, "Hey, what does this look like for you? What do you need? How do we refer to you? How do you want staff to call you and refer to you? What do you need in this school to be comfortable?" So that would be similar.

In this quote, Chacha identifies her approach as one that is "similar" to how she would approach any transition. Like many other educators, she prioritizes engaging with the student ("I would sit down with the kid") and identifying the student's individual wishes ("What do you need?"). The string of questions in Chacha's answer highlights the same tension that I have highlighted: the student is given a chance to determine what their transition will look like, but they are also asked to anticipate what the school should do to be a "comfortable" space for a non-binary, gender-nonconforming student.

The fact that Chacha knows that she would ask "How do we refer to you?" is an indication that this educator is already familiar with some of the stakes of a transition for a student. This suggests that she would be open, or at least unsurprised, by a change of name or pronouns. The fact that Chacha can anticipate this need suggests that she would, in fact, be doing more than simply sitting down with the student and asking them to guide the entire process. Rather, she has a sense of what might be needed and thus might be in a better position to provide a supportive presence that would enable a student to make their needs known.

However, Chacha's answer still does little to recognize the particularly complicated institutional terrain that a non-binary student would have to navigate. What the student needs "to be comfortable" could implicate larger administrative systems and institutional practices (such as eliminating gender-segregated facilities or the inclusion of gender markers on the school's information system) over which Chacha herself may have little direct control. What do we make of situations where students are asked what they need to be comfortable, but cannot give easy, individual answers? Chacha's questions assume that the school system is a space that allows for answers to these questions, but it is often not. I also wonder whether these questions might serve to hold the young person responsible for how the transition goes. In other words, I wonder to what extent asking students to 'lead' their transition can become a way by which adults pass on the responsibility onto students, and thus make themselves and their school less accountable for how the process unfolds. If educators asked students about their needs, and feel like they did what they could to meet the student's requests, it is easier not to take responsibility for potential failures, missteps, or negative experiences that the student might have.

In some cases, the expectation that students (and their families) guide the transition process may create situations where school staff do not feel like they need to look at institutional factors. For example, Amy, the administrator from District B who I discussed earlier, used the justification that she and the other staff were waiting for "more direction from mom" to explain the fact that they had not resolved conflict about washroom and that they were not using the pronouns with which the student seemed to identify. She told me:

So, I think, you know the decision at the time is to have her [sic] use the girl's washroom and so... I think... when you make a decision at the time you're making the best decision you can with the information you have. So she [sic] still seems comfortable going into the girl's washroom and using it, and I don't think she liked the isolated washroom.

In this testimony, although the adults are listening to the student and what they “still [seem] comfortable” with, the analysis is so focused on the individual factor of the student’s comfort level (“*she* still seems comfortable,” “I don’t think *she* likes”) that there is no insight into what might create comfort for the student. For example, students may not feel like they can access the washroom that feels right to them unless adults have *already demonstrated* that they are willing to support that choice. Without the certainty that adults are committed to the idea, students may not feel like their choice would be respected or even that this would be a safe decision to make. If adults are not entirely supportive, it is unlikely that they would effectively communicate acceptability of this course of action to the larger student body.

Putting the students “in charge” sometimes worked to allow school staff to slow things down considerably if the student was not being clear or determined enough, but the reasons for why the student might not have clear or resolute requests were rarely if ever interrogated. This situation puts pressure on students to express themselves and their needs in ways that are coherent and legible to the adults around them. Given that the “norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (Butler, 1990, p. 23) are shaped by a dominant gender paradigm that sees gender as binary and immutable, making oneself coherent to adults who have the power to allow and disallow certain courses of action can indeed be a daunting task. The ‘student in charge’ narrative assumes that the student has the power and language to assert their identity, assess the situation, and provide adults with specific and clear solutions to potential conflicts. This is a very complex task given the dominant cultural frameworks and institutional structures with which trans and gender-nonconforming students have to contend.

The ‘student in charge’ narrative is a powerful one in the sense that it recognizes the student’s lived experience and their right to self-determination. At the same time, I have shown



in this section that this narrative can have complex effects: it can shift the responsibility of the transition process onto the student. This is especially a concern given that students are trying to navigate their transition in an institutional and cultural context that marginalizes gender diversity, which limits how much they can actually determine. Similar critiques have been raised by scholars writing on disability, class, and race in educational contexts, who note for example that the “emphasis on individualism and self-determination [...] is closely linked to racialized discourses of White Eurocentric notions of merit” (Reid & Knight, 2006, p. 21; see Ladson-Billings, 2000). This emphasis puts responsibility on individual students and their families to adapt to educational contexts in ways that obscure the workings of gendered, racialized and classed inequalities (Oakes et al., 2002). In the case of trans and gender-nonconforming students, this process may create situations where the fact that the student is identified as the motor of the transition absolves the school system (and the educators who work within it) from interrogating institutional biases and the ways in which they can be accountable for potential failures. What would a school look like that does not require trans and gender-nonconforming students to advocate for themselves because the school is already set up to recognize their existence and at least some of their needs?

#### **4.4.2 Student choice: Individualizing the transition process**

Because the ‘student in charge’ narrative puts a single student at the center of the story, the responses described by educators within this framework tended to be individualized. Staff described themselves as being expected to respond to the student and their particular needs, in this one particular situation. Carrie, a teacher in District D, noted: “different parents, different

students will have different needs. And that will be reflected in what the school does to support that kid.” One can hardly fault a school for trying to respond to a student based on their needs rather than some pre-established idea of what their needs might, or based on the assumption that every trans and gender-nonconforming student will have the same needs.

John, an administrator in District C who had worked with several students over the past decade, reflected:

I would not use what I did with one student as a foundation to start with another student. [...] If you think you’re going to start off, “Here’s how we’re going to start,” based on some previous experience, [...] I don’t think you’re caring about the individual, you’re more caring about the systems or the processes that you’ve established, not how the individual is right at that time.

For John, establishing rigid systems that do not allow for the specifics of a circumstance erases the individual student and indicates that you’re not “caring about the individual.” While I take his point, I would like to question the idea that schools have to “start” with every new student. This individualized approach may limit opportunities to think about how some of the issues faced by trans and gender-nonconforming students go beyond individual circumstances. Gender-segregated facilities, divisions between boys and girls during school activities, and harassment on the basis of gender presentation, to cite just a few examples, are in fact products of cisnormative and heteronormative systems that affect all students (Payne & Smith, 2013).

To start, the idea of putting the student ‘in charge’ of their transition often invited a language of choice and comfort that is important to problematize. For example, I would like to reflect on the following quote by Jerrilyn, the experienced counsellor in District C I have mentioned before. In this excerpt, Jerrilyn is talking about a trans student in grade 8 or 9, who she described, along with her family, as “amazing”:

And we discussed the washroom. She decided to take PE online I think, rather than

challenge that whole issue, which is another option that kids can do. And really, yeah, I mean the biggest thing was I thought it was a little bit daunting that the poor student had to go home for lunch all the time, but that was their choice.

Jerrilyn's account emphasizes that the student (and her parents) are the decision-makers: the student (and her parents) is described as the active agent ("she decided" and "that was their choice"). Despite this language of active choice, a few other elements suggest that this choice is a constrained one. First, Jerrilyn talks about the "challenge" that taking PE in a regular class would have been. Second, the phrases "daunting" and "poor student" also indicate that Jerrilyn does not think that going home to use the washroom is the most practical, or appealing, course of action, but she ultimately defers to the fact that this was the student and her family's "choice." Notions of choice and freedom are rooted in a philosophy of liberal individualism that views individuals as "separate, rational agents" (Currie et al., 2009, p. 202) unconstrained by existing power structures.

There is no reflection in Jerrilyn's quote on the circumstances that create the context for the student to make these particular decisions over others. P.E. and the world of sports are notoriously complicated spaces for trans and gender-nonconforming students to navigate as they are heavily policed by gendered regimes and cultural assumptions about femininity and masculinity (Nyong'o, 2010; Sullivan, 2011; Sykes, 2011). Without an acknowledgement of this context, there is no room for discussing what could be done to change it. In other words, the framing of this story with the 'student in charge' narrative seems to close off the possibility for Jerrilyn to interrogate how the student came to the decision that she did. By prioritizing the student's choice and decontextualizing it, this framing also closes off opportunities to discuss the fact that the option chosen by the student (taking P.E. online) is hardly neutral, as it contributes to the erasure of trans and gender-nonconforming bodies from physical spaces. The point is not

that the student should have to feel obligated to “challenge that whole issue,” as Jerrilyn says. Rather, in order to create schools that are more hospitable to gender diversity, I argue that educators need to think critically about what leads students to their decisions, and the larger consequences of these decisions. It is the only way that educators can address the larger cisnormative context in which students are making these decisions and, for example, question the way that the organization of P.E. classes and change rooms create real challenges for trans and gender-nonconforming students.

This quote is especially interesting because Jerrilyn is the counsellor that I quoted earlier as strongly criticizing the tendency amongst some adults to use the threat of bullying as a way to refuse the requests of trans and gender-nonconforming students (she phrases that attitude as, “well we can’t do that because this might happen”). Jerrilyn spoke passionately to me about being a support for a young trans man, “listening and validating that, you know what, this is actually an okay thing and other people have gone through this.” In this particular situation, she also advocated to her principal so that the student would be supported in his transition and be able to use a new name and new pronouns and have access to a new bathroom. In fact, earlier in our interview, she had this to say about access to the washroom:

I think there’s still a huge resistance to allowing an identified male to go into the male washroom and vice versa if that’s not their gender that they were born with. And so I think the high schools are still really struggling with that. And I think that’s going to become more of an issue as time goes on. You know, I mean you have to think of it from their perspective, it makes them feel weird. They have to go in the wheelchair bathroom, like that’s identifying them as odd, right. And the Los Angeles thing says you can’t do that. [...] But they’re saying if the student wants to go into that washroom, that’s fine. But the student drives the decision making in that regard. And if they want to go into the – if they’re identifying as female and they want to use the female washroom, that’s okay, and the same thing even with change rooms.

By Jerrilyn's own admission, accessing the gender-segregated washroom of their choice is often difficult for binary trans and gender-nonconforming students: there is "still a huge resistance" and high schools are "still really struggling with that." She also understands that asking a student to use a separate washroom because they are trans and gender-nonconforming might "make them feel weird" because it marks them as "odd" and she is explicitly drawing on existing literature on supporting trans and gender-nonconforming youth (what she calls "the Los Angeles thing" is an American guide on supporting transgender students). Both of these utterances suggest that Jerrilyn is fairly well-educated in issues of gender diversity and recognizes the structural obstacles that trans and gender-nonconforming students can face.

Despite acknowledging this institutional terrain in the first half of the quote, this context becomes completely invisible in the second half of the quote, when she starts talking about making decisions in schools. In that section, by contrast, Jerrilyn only refers to what the students "wants." She superimposes the choice of using what she calls the "wheelchair bathroom" with the choice of using a regular female washroom, as if both choices were equally available to students: "the student drives the decision making in that regard." And to her, they might be – as I have shown, other sections of her interview suggest that she would fight for a student's right to access whatever washroom they preferred. The issue comes from the fact that, in the cisnormative cultural and institutional context that she herself describes, it is unlikely that many students will feel like every option is equally available to them. While it is impossible to know whether the young trans woman who decided with her family to go home at lunch to use the washroom would have made a different decision were the cultural and institutional circumstances different, it strikes me as important that Jerrilyn does not seem to consider that this student's choice might have been constrained in ways that were not made visible.

In addition to the language of choice, the notion of comfort was regularly used by school staff to explain how students decided to access certain spaces over others. Jennifer, a counsellor in District D who had supported several trans and gender-nonconforming students at her school, shared this story:

For the student who was out here, we did make accommodations, because that's what he wanted, that's where he was comfortable. He wasn't comfortable going in a boys' change room... I don't think at all, through school. Fair enough, I wouldn't – I mean any boy being in a boys' change room, it's horrible. That's where all the bullying and name-calling and harassing happens, so smart move on them.

Here again, the student's decision not to use the boys' change room is framed explicitly by a rhetoric of choice ("that's what he wanted"). However, Jennifer also draws on another element to explain this decision, which is the student's level of comfort: "that's where he was comfortable." Jennifer continues by giving some context for that comfort: she describes the boys' change room as "horrible" and a place where "all the bullying and name-calling and harassing happens." This description not only renders the student's decision legible but, I would go so far as to say, makes it sound like the only viable option. Jennifer herself allows this reading when she describes the student's decision as "smart."

Indeed, what kind of choice do students really have when the space that is aligned with their gender identity is one where harassment is seen as inevitable? In fact, this raises the question of why certain spaces in school are considered inevitably unsafe. Why is "all the bullying and name-calling and harassing" seemingly acceptable for other boys in the school? These questions do not challenge this particular student's right to determine which washroom he would prefer to use. Rather, they interrogate a situation where his sense of comfort is not contextualized, even when the speaker demonstrates clear awareness of why a particular space might feel unsafe.

The following quote from Xavier, the administrator from District D I discussed earlier, further illustrates how the frames of choice and comfort can lead to individualized explanations:

And we talked about that [using a separate, single-stall washroom] too actually, about how would he feel – would he feel like that’s separating him from everyone or was that something he wanted. And this was something that he wanted and that’s what the parents wanted, so we went with that. But we did have that conversation. And that’s why we said, “Once you feel comfortable with how people are responding to you, if you want to start going into the males’ washroom let us know and we’ll set that up.”

In this quote, Xavier uses the language of choice (“was that something he wanted”). Rather than taking the student’s answer at face value, however, he is careful to show that he is aware of the potential downsides to having a child use a separate washroom (“would he feel like that’s separating him from everyone else”) and that for that reason he checked in with the child (“we did have that conversation”). Xavier is drawing a picture where the student was not coerced into using a separate space, but rather made a genuine decision based on personal preference.

Xavier continues by making it clear that he sees this as a temporary situation that will end once the student “feels comfortable,” but only if he “want[s] to.” In many ways, Xavier is showing great fluency in supporting this student. He demonstrates awareness that trans and gender-nonconforming students should feel like gender-segregated washrooms are available to them, but also expresses clear commitment to honouring the student’s perspective and wishes. However, the student’s decision is still decontextualized from cultural and institutional factors. Xavier’s formulation at the end, “once you feel comfortable with how people are responding to you,” makes central the student’s level of comfort rather than the other people’s reactions. This suggests that the primary element stopping the student from using the designated male washroom is his level of comfort, not how other people might react. It is unclear how the student could become comfortable in a cisnormative context frame gender-segregated spaces – washrooms in

particular – as spaces that are not appropriate for trans people and thus position trans people as abject and unintelligible subjects (Bender-Baird, 2015; Browne, 2004; Doan, 2010; Overall, 2007). The only access to comfort in these circumstances may be through the kind of cisgender privilege that one can acquire when one starts being read as cisgender (Enke, 2012). This is not a privilege accorded to all, and especially not to non-binary students.

Xavier's turn of phrase also suggests that there is nothing the school could do about "how people are responding" to the student: it is a factor independent from him. What is missing in Xavier's account is the idea that "how people are responding" is shaped by many factors that are out of the student's reach. Many of these factors, however, have to do with school cultures. As such, they are factors that educators could well have an impact on, for example by role-modelling the use of correct pronouns and name, changing school rituals and curriculum to make visible and embrace gender diversity and gender-nonconformity, reducing practices that do not rely on gender segregation, etc. Although Xavier described his school and its culture in queer-positive terms, I argue that his account is still shaped by focus on the individual student rather than the institutional context that the student has to navigate. The risk is that, since the student is seemingly not interested in accessing a gender-segregated washroom, there is little incentive for educators to address the question of whether or not washrooms would be accessible if the student wanted them to be.

This lack of discussion of institutional context is in part allowed by the 'student in charge' narrative, because this narrative creates a situation where adults feel like intervening in ways not authorized by the student necessarily infringes on the student's right to determine what their transition will look like at school. Dawson demonstrates this tension:



[Making decisions about a trans student] is loaded because it's very much about safety too and I guess maybe that was part of my underlying assumption is that at the school we can't just kind of passively sit by and yet, you know, the message I heard was in fact indeed if that's what the student wants, then yeah, that's what you do.

In this quote, Dawson explains that her instinct is that the school should not “just kind of passively sit by” while a student transitions. This view, however, has been contradicted by the advice that she has gotten from other professionals who have guided her (and the student) through the transition process. If “passively sit[ting] by” is “what the student wants,” she has learned, “that’s what you do.”

This particular student had expressed the desire to (so far) remain private about his transition. As a result, Dawson equates this wish with the idea that the school should not do anything. In this sense, this quote illustrates a fundamental problem that arises from the individualized response that the ‘student in charge’ narrative encourages. The school’s response becomes dictated by the needs of individual students who have openly expressed the desire to transition. In contrast, can we imagine a situation where trans kids are, to gesture to Airton’s (2013) invitation, “left alone,” but where educators still work to make space for queerness and transness in schools? In other words, are there ways that educators could honour a student’s wish for privacy without “passively sit[ting] by”?

The tension felt by Dawson, I argue, is the consequence of being an educator caught in a school system where embracing sexual and gender diversity is only seen as necessary for queer and trans students, who are imagined as victims in need of protection and role-models (Allen, 2015; Ellis, 2007; Hackford-Peer, 2010; Youdell, 2014). When queer and trans students are invisible and/or want to be left alone, educators are led to believe that nothing needs to change. Yet, as Airton (2013) convincingly articulates, “making space for queerness in education is not

the same as making space for queers” (p. 533). In fact, it is essential that we make space for queerness and transness in education regardless of whether there are visible, stable queer, trans and gender-nonconforming student subjectivities to serve as the obvious and direct beneficiaries. This is because easing the weight of regimes of hetero- and cisnormativity can benefit all students (Miller, 2015b). Airton (2013) similarly suggests:

Advocating for everyone’s negative right to freedom from gender- and sexually normative coercion may open the door for all children to envision idiosyncratic lives regardless of their past, present or future affinities, expressions and/or sexual object choice(s), or the degree to which these change over time. (p. 551)

The idea that all children and youth – in fact, all people – are negatively impacted by normative expectations of gender and sexuality invites a more radical re-thinking of school spaces than the ‘student in charge’ narrative allows. The visible presence of trans and gender-nonconforming students can act as a lightning rod for change in school spaces. But if changes are framed as individual needs and choices, the very system that creates the need for these change is not questioned. Neither is its impact on young people who may not identify as trans or be read as gender-nonconforming.

## **4.5 Conclusion**

I have devoted this chapter to exploring the ‘student in charge’ narrative that was featured in many of my conversations with educators. In important ways, this narrative is an appealing and encouraging one because it positions the students as experts on their own lives. It also acknowledges that adults often have much to learn from trans and gender-nonconforming students about gender diversity and individual needs. These hopeful possibilities likely explain why, even as an informed interviewer and researcher, I rarely questioned this narrative and

explicitly asked educators to explain why it was important for them. This is an appealing narrative because it seems to prioritize students whose perspectives are too often dismissed or marginalized and, as such, it should not be dismissed.

As I have shown throughout this chapter, however, this narrative is often complicated by discourses that dominate educators' imaginaries in terms of gender, safety, and youth. Tensions often emerged between a desire by educators to follow the student's lead in order to create changes, and a simultaneous attachment to the idea that adults often know best, especially when it comes to student safety. These tensions arise in part due to the fraught encounters between cisnormativity, the neoliberal language of individuality and choice, and cultural beliefs about youth being unstable and in need of guidance. These discourses can work together to create doubts in educators' minds about young people's capacity to make sound long-term decisions.

I have argued that these discursive contradictions should not be interpreted as a sign that educators are not as committed to the 'student in charge' narrative as they say they are. Instead they reflect the fact that educators often have to negotiate conflicting discourses as they work to make sense of their experiences. Rather than trying to smooth out these contradictions, I suggest it is important to reckon with them and examine their effects, which were the focus of the second half of this chapter. I raised two specific concerns. First, by seeking to shift power onto the student, the 'student in charge' narrative inadvertently also shifts some burden of responsibility onto students. This obfuscates the fact that students are making decisions within dominant discourses and existing structures that they may have little power and authority to change. Second, the language of choice and comfort can work to individualize decision-making and reduce conversations to what is appropriate in one specific case. What is lost there is an

invitation to adults to evaluate the ways in which schools and educators are involved in systems and practices that enforce gender conformity on *all* students.

My interest in writing this chapter stemmed from a realization that this apparently ‘empowering’ narrative actually seemed to limit possibilities for larger changes in some ways. Across interviews, it seemed like when trans and gender-nonconforming students chose not to challenge existing cisnormative systems (e.g., by choosing to remove themselves from potentially conflictual situations, which often involved avoiding gender-segregated spaces), adults gladly followed the student’s lead. In fact, in some cases it seemed like the student’s decision became an indirect justification for educators not to challenge the way these systems create strict binary gendered categories that generate exclusions. In contrast, when students considered options that could be seen as contentious, adults were more likely to step in and (often gently and with good intentions) moderate the student’s requests, particularly through the language of age or safety. In other words, when students wanted to fly under the radar (which is absolutely their right), adults rarely questioned their approach. When students made requests that would require institutional or cultural changes, however, these requests were more likely to be questioned and tempered by adults, in the name of age and safety (two discourses heavily inflected by cisnormativity in this context).

As a result, the ‘student in charge’ narrative sometimes functioned to give educators a discursive framework that emphasized a student-centered approach while simultaneously authorizing a fairly conservative approach to decision-making that did not invite a rethinking of schools’ cisnormative culture and practices. At the center of this dynamic is the difficulty of seeing the norms produced by institutions and enacted through administrative, curricular, and everyday practices to erase the possibility of gender diversity. For example, Payne & Smith

(2013) have noted that “youths’ everyday gender policing practices often fail to draw adults’ attention because these behaviors largely align with the institutional values of school” (p. 21). This dynamic is not easy to change because it is not the product of individual failings. It is validated by a range of discourses that organize schools but structure how we as a society think of young people, education, and the role of teachers.

In the next chapter, I build on my observations and arguments about the ‘student in charge’ narrative by showing that this narrative is not idiosyncratic. Instead, it fits into larger discourses that educators draw on to talk about decision-making processes at their school. I show that the ‘student in charge’ narrative works in conjunction with these larger discursive frameworks to favour localized and individualized responses to trans and gender-nonconforming students over a more fundamental re-thinking of schools’ investments in cisnormativity.

## Chapter 5: Imagining change in schools

### 5.1 Introduction

*We went on to kind of a kind of planning stage as to – like how would we bring this [the student’s identity as male] back into the school? [...] You know, where was the student going to go to the bathroom and all of the questions that start coming up around trying to deal with the transgender student.*  
(Juliette, counsellor, District C)

In this chapter, I explore how educators discussed the process of implementing changes to respond to the demand for recognition posed by trans and gender-nonconforming students. I have shown in Chapter 4 that when trans and gender-nonconforming students become visible in school spaces (often through a social transition), an institutional response becomes necessary. Trans and gender-nonconforming students are marked as different and frequently do not – literally – fit in school spaces that are organized by cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions. Gender-segregated spaces and practices often pose the most obvious conundrum. As such, adults who want to support trans and gender-nonconforming students usually have to consider a range of practical changes that may help make some room for these students.

The opening quote from Juliette highlights this process: in her own words, the student’s transition at the school necessitated “a kind of planning stage” because of “all of the questions that start coming up” as a result of the trans student’s existence. As the school is “trying to deal with the transgender student” in this way, the trans and gender-nonconforming student is positioned as a problem to be resolved. The expression “deal with” signals that there is something incongruous about trans students and the space of school. It is important to note that Juliette displayed very supportive attitudes towards the trans students that she had worked with. For example, she retold with obvious frustration a moment where she had encountered resistance

from a colleague; another time, she went into a trans student's classes to explain he was transitioning and that other students should now refer to him as male and use his new name.

The disconnect between the expression “deal with” and Juliette's supportive account is important precisely because it points to the fact that Juliette and other participants are negotiating discourses that go beyond them. As actors within schools, educators are often caught in systems that are disrupted by the visible presence of trans and gender-nonconforming students. In this context, the work of making sense of their experiences of supporting students leads to a number of contradictions, hesitations, challenges, and complexities.

Practically speaking, the disjuncture between existing school structures and the needs of trans and gender-nonconforming students translates into a process of decision-making that adults engage in about what changes should occur to ensure that trans and gender-nonconforming students feel welcomed. The most common considerations include bathrooms use, the management of the student's privacy, and changes in teaching and/or administrative practices. How schools respond to the request for recognition by trans and gender-nonconforming students broadly follows one of two approaches: accommodation or cultural change. Accommodation “is predominantly focused on providing school leaders and faculty with tools to address logistical problems” (Payne & Smith, 2015, p. 1) that appear when trans and gender-nonconforming students demand recognition. In contrast, cultural change involves “envisioning and implementing pedagogical practices that challenged, resisted, or disrupted heteronormative, gendered assumptions about student identities” (Smith & Payne, 2016, p. 44).

These two different approaches are rarely equally available to educators who are trying to support trans and gender-nonconforming students. Educators have to contend with significant cultural and institutional constraints, many of which are visible in their talk. As a result of these

constraints, educators often respond in complex ways to the questions raised by the visible presence of trans and gender-nonconforming students, sometimes making decisions or implementing changes that draw from both approaches simultaneously. Although I occasionally discuss this process as one of ‘decision-making,’ I want to push back against the notion that educators (or trans and gender-nonconforming students) are autonomous decision-makers, which is a perspective informed by liberal conceptions of the agentic individual. It also presupposes that my interviews can give me access to the ‘truth’ of what decisions were made and how. To avoid bolstering these assumptions, I focus my attention on discussions of decision-making not as factual accounts of what happened, but rather as discursive processes that provide a window into understanding how cisnormativity structures how people think about, and articulate, their experiences of making decisions when navigating the institutional terrain of schools. I highlight the way that existing structures and dominant discourses constrain what educators are able to imagine, and therefore do, when it comes to gender and sexual diversity in schools. As a result, I am interested in both moments where educators feel that they have been successful and in moments where they feel unsure or articulate their experiences in contradictory ways.

I open this chapter with a discussion of gendered spaces and practices in schools. Gendered spaces are one of the major sites of accommodation in schools, while the every ways in which gender shapes educational practices are often forgotten or minimized. In the second part of this chapter, I look how educators articulate their experiences of decision-making processes. I argue educators tend to draw on discourses that distance them from their role in administering cisnormativity in schools. Finally, in the last part of the chapter, I examine the tendency of schools to address gender diversity in a reactive rather than proactive manner, which



paves the way for accommodative approaches. I end by exploring the stories of cultural change that appeared in the narratives of educators and offer insights into alternative possibilities.

Throughout this chapter, I argue that cisnormativity structures how change is both imagined and enacted in schools by educators who want to be supportive of trans and gender-nonconforming students. It is this underlying cisnormativity that needs to be more systematically questioned in order for sustainable change happen in schools when it comes to gender diversity.

## **5.2 Navigating gendered spaces & practices**

Formally and informally, cisnormative assumptions about the stable nature of the gender binary organize the spaces and practices of schooling, including but not limited to gendered washrooms, gender-segregated classes (in particular, Physical Education and sex education), M/F gender markers on class lists, assumptions about how girls and boys learn differently, the interpellation ‘boys and girls,’ and other moments where gender is made relevant in everyday talk, etc.

These practices are often naturalized to the point where they become difficult to see as practices that are not inevitable and/or necessary. This naturalization renders unremarkable the identity work done by students and staff alike to constitute themselves as gendered subjects, from Kindergarten all the way to grade 12 (Blaise, 2005; Niemi, 2005; Pascoe, 2007; Ringrose & Renold, 2010; Ryan, 2015). The structuring importance of the gender binary becomes obvious around the lives of trans and gender-nonconforming students, because (regardless and sometimes in denial of their gender identity) these students draw attention to the constructedness of this supposedly stable binary structure. This is especially true for students who are starting to transition, are gender-nonconforming, or occupy a non-binary identity, as they cannot be easily accommodated within existing structures.

In this section, I examine how educators talked about gendered spaces and practices to highlight the process of negotiation – logistical but always discursive – that was generated by the need to recognize the student’s gender identity. I start by discussing gendered spaces, specifically bathrooms and change rooms, as they often become a central point of anxiety when schools work with trans and gender-nonconforming students. I then explore the way that everyday gendered practices were featured in interviews with educators. I finish by discussing moments where conversations with educators turned to non-binary gender identity or gender-nonconformity. These moments can shed additional light on how cisnormativity organize schools. The difficulties that educators expressed in this context point to the limits of an accommodation framework that necessitates the overall maintenance of the gender binary.

### **5.2.1 Washrooms and change rooms: anxieties and solutions**

Washrooms and change rooms are often the locus of conversations about trans and gender-nonconforming students in schools. There are many recent examples that point to the ongoing anxiety that exists about trans and gender-nonconforming students being able to access gender-segregated spaces. This includes: the resistance to California’s 2013 School Success and Opportunity Act (which requires that public schools allow students to use the bathrooms and play on the sports teams that match their gender identities), the high-profile cases of trans students denied access to gendered washrooms by their school administration (such as James Spencer in Ontario<sup>37</sup> or Coy Mathis in Colorado<sup>38</sup>), or even the dubbing of Canada’s Bill C279

---

<sup>37</sup> See Alamenciak & Green (2012).

<sup>38</sup> See Payne (2013).

(which would amend the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code to include gender identity and gender expression as explicit protected classes) as ‘the bathroom bill.’<sup>39</sup>

This kind of moral panic is not new. Many scholars have explicitly focused on “the bathroom problem” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 20; see also Browne, 2004; Cavanagh, 2010; Kogan, 2009; Overall, 2007; Shelley, 2008; Weinberg, 2009-2010). These writings expose the way that gender-segregated spaces function as sites of cisnormative regulation and violence that naturalize the division of bodies between ‘male’ and ‘female,’ and consequently between ‘men’ and ‘women’. This dichotomy of public space renders difficult and even unintelligible the reality of trans, gender-nonconforming and non-binary subjectivities. The intense policing of trans and gender-nonconforming bodies in these spaces actually illustrates the instability of “normative sexed regimes” (Browne, 2004, p. 335). The boundaries of these regimes would not necessitate being guarded so intensely if the gender (and sex) binary was as natural and immutable as our sex/gender system purports it to be.

In schools, gender-segregated bathrooms and change rooms are among the most visible ways in which the everyday lives of students (and staff) are structured by cisnormativity: they literally divide students between boys and girls. Given the cultural context described above, it is not surprising that these spaces were one of the most discussed and anxiety-arousing topics in my conversations with educators. Many participants were aware of the aforementioned risk of violence, and that bathrooms and change rooms can be contentious sites. As a result, concerns about the safety of trans and gender-nonconforming students in gender-segregated spaces often infused our conversations.

---

<sup>39</sup> See Ditchburn (2013).

For example, Sam, a school staff in District A, identified “using a washroom in the school” as one of the main issues for trans and gender-nonconforming students. He explained how he envisions the process of deciding which washroom a student should use:

Like, wherever [the student] feel[s] comfortable, first of all. And then if it’s... if it’s realistic. Because, you know, one of the things is you want to support the kid and you want them to ... to have the power but, at the same time, you also want to... want them to be safe. So we have to also think about how other kids are going to treat them. So if we... if they feel safe doing something and we don’t feel safe in them doing it, for their own protection, then we really have to work on that together. Because, you know, the last thing we want to do is enable a situation where some kind of, you know, transphobia takes place and we haven’t done what we can to protect them from it.

The fact that Sam “wants [the trans and gender-nonconforming students] to be safe” is framed as a primary factor in deciding what bathroom might be most appropriate for the student to use. I have already used part of this quote to show that safety concerns can override the student’s opinion for which bathroom they would like to use (and feel comfortable doing so), “for [the student’s] own protection.”

One way to read Sam’s centering of the assessment of safety is to say that, through this assessment, Sam is displaying awareness of the cultural context in which his school is embedded. This is a context where trans repudiation results in heightened risk for physical, sexual, and emotional violence for trans and gender-nonconforming youth, especially in washrooms. By expressing specific concern with “how other kids are going to treat” the trans and gender-nonconforming student in relationship to the (gender-segregated) washroom, Sam is showing that he is cognizant of the heightened risk represented by bathrooms as spaces where “transphobia takes place.” When Sam says that allowing the student to use a particular bathroom when the adults at the school “don’t feel safe in them doing it” might “enable a situation where some kind of, you know, transphobia takes place,” his words can be read in a way that suggests

he understands educators as accountable for acts of trans repudiation that happen in their school, so that it is their responsibility not to let a student use a washroom that could be unsafe (where lack of safety has been assessed by adult).

Sam's response displays a deep care for creating a school environment where trans and gender-nonconforming students can access a washroom without the risk of encountering violence: the "last thing" he wants is for school staff to have not "done what we can to protect them from it." Although he never says this explicitly here, the implication is that, in cases where he thinks that accessing gender-segregated spaces may contribute to such violence, it may be better to create alternative options for trans and gender-nonconforming students. Providing access to a single-stall gender-inclusive or unisex washroom is such an option, and it was one of most-cited practical ways that participants' schools had addressed the needs of trans and gender-nonconforming students. Most schools already have accessible washrooms that are already unacknowledged gender-inclusive spaces,<sup>40</sup> making this option readily available. This reading of Sam's response suggests that he is displaying both knowledge of his cultural context and compassionate consideration for the well-being of trans and gender-nonconforming students.

Without taking away from this reading, I also want to highlight other implications that Sam's words have. The idea that allowing a trans and gender-nonconforming student to use the bathroom of their choosing might "enable a situation where some kind of, you know, transphobia takes place" produces transphobia as clearly-delineated actions of hate or violence triggered by a singular action (the trans and gender-nonconforming student using the space). This

---

<sup>40</sup> It is worth noting that while there is potential in the intersection of critically queer and disabled politics (West, 2010), some scholars of disability have also expressed frustration with the way that the construction of accessible washrooms as default ungendered spaces contribute to dominant constructions of disabled people as necessarily asexual and a-gender (Bonnie, 2004; for an overview of the historical links between discourses of disability and queerness, see McRuer, 2002).

understanding of transphobia draws on dominant discourses of bullying, particularly homophobic bullying, that Ringrose & Renold (2010) have argued are “now so accepted (formally and informally) in schools that they have gained hegemonic status” (p. 590).

These discourses frame bullying as individual peer-to-peer violence and “[fail] to acknowledge heteronormative social systems of power that support acts of bullying” (Payne & Smith, 2013, p. 3). Bullies are understood as ‘aberrations’ rather than products of cissexist and heterosexist (school) cultures (Meyer, 2009; Payne & Smith, 2012; Ringrose & Renold, 2010), and bullying tends to be framed as the *primary* issue facing trans and gender-nonconforming students. This is also illustrated by Sam’s quote, which forefronts the possibility of student bullies but does not index the larger culture of the school. Within this paradigm, the role of adults in maintaining these hetero- and cisnormative cultures – by ensuring that students are using gender-segregated facilities, for example, or by only discussing gender as a binary in their classroom – is mostly made invisible. Instead, as in Sam’s description, the role of adults becomes to prevent this overt violence from happening by not “enable[ing] a situation” (i.e., preventing trans and gender-nonconforming students from accessing gender-segregated washrooms) without considering the deeper cultural processes that enable this violence.

The complexity of this quote comes from the fact that Sam’s very attempt to protect trans and gender-nonconforming students from “transphobia” actually re-invigorates cisnormative regimes. It creates a context where (binary) trans students may not be able to access gender-segregated spaces that match their gender identity “for their own protection.” Although Sam’s intent is clearly benevolent, the outcome remains one where binary trans students are not granted access to the gender-segregated spaces that they choose and need. Meanwhile, cisgender students never have their access to these same spaces questioned. Sam’s production of the gender-

segregated washroom as a dangerous place for trans and gender-nonconforming students re-creates that danger because it reifies washrooms as spaces where violence is to be anticipated and expected. As mentioned earlier, Sam has good reasons to be concerned about gender-segregated spaces, but the solution that emerges from his quote reaffirms rather than disrupts these conditions of violence. Allowing a trans student to use the washroom of their choice is not, as Sam's words suggest, what "enable[s] a situation where some kind of, you know, transphobia takes place;" rather it is cisnormativity that enables this violence by making trans and gender-nonconforming subjects incomprehensible.

These tensions in Sam's quote highlight the complicated position that educators can find themselves in when supporting trans and gender-nonconforming students. This quote and the rest of my interview with Sam clearly suggest that he is motivated to make his school safe and welcoming for trans and gender-nonconforming students. He was actively working against some aspects of the heteronormative culture of school by helping educate colleagues on sexual and gender diversity, interrupting homophobic language in hallways, and helping run the school's GSA. At the same time, these quotes show that discourses of bullying and transphobia limit how he articulates what it means to create schools that can be more hospitable to trans and gender-nonconforming students. Additionally, the physical features of schools (the default existence of gender-segregated washrooms) make it difficult for him to envision changes that would re-think how schools are organized rather than re-create exclusions. Together, these constraints work to obscure the larger context of cisnormativity that makes violence against trans and gender-nonconforming students possible. As a result, they limit how Sam can envision responding to a trans and gender-nonconforming student's desire to use gender-segregated washrooms.

This lengthy example shows the complexities and limits of an imaginary that adjusts to the presence of individual students without rethinking existing structures or creating wider cultural change. I discuss this more at length later in this chapter. First, I underline the gendered practices that organize schools through the gender binary. These were often less explicitly identified by educators than washrooms and change rooms, but they play an important part in creating cisnormative school cultures.

### **5.2.2 The everyday and administrative work of gendered practices**

Gender organizes school life in a multitude of ways that go beyond the structures of gender-segregated spaces. Since Thorne's (1993/2008) book on the way that children construct and experience gender in schools, many scholars have built on her insight that "the social construction of gender is an active and ongoing process" (p. 4) in which children are actively engaged in school spaces (Archer et al., 2012; Davies, 1993, 2003; Epstein et al., 2001; Reay, 2001). This process is also present in secondary schools, where it is even more tightly interwoven with the production of sexual identities (Pascoe, 2007; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Pomerantz, 2007).

Although peer cultures play an important part in how children and youth engage in the construction of gender and gender identities, this process is inseparable from schools and interactions with educators. Already in the early 1990's, Epstein (1993) remarked that schools are not a blank terrain upon which students construct their identities, but rather "a key site for the formation of sexual (gendered) identities" (p. 27). Diorio (2006) built on this point by noting that scholars should pay attention to the ways in which "schools, themselves, promote the



crystallization of sexual identity within young people” (p. 107), a conclusion I would extend to gender identity as well.

This process is inflected by the dominance of hetero- and cisnormativity in the broader culture. In schools, this takes the form of the recognition and validation of binary (hetero)genders through a wide range of everyday practices. Some examples include: different dress codes (formal and informal) for male and female students, the understanding of professional dress for educators through gender-conforming standards, the use of dominant gender scripts by educators to connect with students, assumptions about gendered natures and their impact on learning and behaviour, school rituals, the mechanical separation of girls and boys during certain classes or activities, the hypervisibility of cisgender and gender-conforming bodies and lives in curricula and the broader school setting (and conversely, the invisibility of trans and gender-nonconforming bodies and lives, especially non-binary people).

Linville (2009), for example, points out that “schools do not teach about biological sex in a way that questions the categories, and educators do not attempt to disrupt gendered differences between girls and boys” (p. 158, cited in Elliot, 2015). Wardman et al. (2013) examine the way that school prospectuses for private schools “idealise and commodify gendered subjectivities” (p. 284) to appeal to prospective parents. Paechter (2006) also suggests that in classes that highlight embodied experiences (like sex education and physical education), “to compensate for the overt focus on the students as embodied beings, they are even more tightly controlled” (p. 128). As a result, gender-conformity is especially likely to dominate these classes (see also Harris & Penney, 2002; Scraton, 1992). In other words, dominant gender assumptions and cisnormativity organize how students and educators occupy school spaces, what they do in that space, who they do it with, and the stories that they tell.

This everyday production of gender in schools (and its hetero- and cisnormative inflections) was regularly visible in my data. As part of our discussion about the feasibility of gender-inclusive washrooms, Blue, an administrator in District D, pointed out:

We are working in a physical plant that was built in the 1950's and a lot of the values that were part of the society then, carry over because of how – you know your physical set-up. There probably still are in some elementary schools anyway around the city signs on the outside that say girls and boys because we would line up at different entrances. So, you know, so obviously we don't anymore but the remnants remain about the way it was. And again high school a lot of what you-, you've got a large number of kids and a smaller number of adults and you have a certain amount of control that you [laughter] that you, you know want to appear to have or actually physically need to have and I think for generations it's been a way of sort of managing the bodies in the building.

Blue notes that gender is sometimes literally built into schools, as when some schools have “signs on the outside that say girls and boys because we would line up at different entrances.” Although she identifies this division (and the “values” that it represents) as “part of the society then,” she also acknowledges that it can have an impact nowadays: these outdated values can “carry over” and even if we don't organize schools as blatantly as we once did, “the remnants remain about the way it was.” In this first part of the quote, Blue is painting a complicated image of schools as both having progressed away from unabashed differential treatment between boys and girls yet being still constrained by, and caught up in, these artificial binary divisions.

She continues on to say that gender “[has] been a way of sort of managing the bodies in the building.” This idea that gender is a mechanism of control echoes Michel Foucault's (1978) argument about the regulation of sexuality in schools. In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) speaks specifically of “the architectural layout” (p. 27) as an element that reveals the intense preoccupation of adults with the sexuality of children. He expands on this notion in *Discipline & Punish* (1977) by discussing how the design of schools contributes to a multiplicity of mechanisms that create docile bodies not through force but through careful and

continuous training (p. 170), a process which helps maintain the rule of hetero- and cisnormativity in schools. Blue's example of differentiated entrances, like gender-segregated washrooms, is a powerful example of how the management of physical bodies allows the reproduction of systems that naturalize the gender binary in schools.

Educators also spoke to the cisnormative practices that are built into administrative systems. In the process, participants described real systemic barriers that illustrate the entrenched nature of the systems of power in schools. For example, Roni, a teacher in District A, was very aware of the potential repercussions of having gender markers visible on class lists:

Mom, when she registered him, refused to register him as M - male. So on all of our attendance sheets the M/F come up. So the kid, y'know - up comes his name, and F, so right away now - because these attendance sheets are primarily seen by teachers but in phys ed, they're seen by leadership students as well – grade 11,12 students.

In this quote, Roni demonstrates the pervasiveness of administrative categories (“on all of our attendance sheets the M/F come up”). This is an expression of disciplinary power that makes “those on whom [it is] applied clearly visible” (Foucault, 1977, p. 171) by generating two – and only two – categories through which bodies can be understood.

Because they permeate school life, the gendered categories in Roni's explanation come to implicate numerous people (herself, other school staff, the trans student, his peers) in the administrative processes that render unintelligible the student's identity and in fact performatively reiterates gender as a fixed binary “produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (Butler, 1990, p. 33). It is worth noting that Roni locates the source of the problem with her class list externally (the mother, who did not register the student as male) instead of questioning the need for this particular administrative practice.

Other participants struggled to recognize the ways that gender organizes the rhythms and routines of school. After I asked him whether he had any hesitations using the proper pronouns for the trans student in his class, Gideon, a teacher in District A, explained he did not “recall it coming up,” noting that he was not very aware of how much he uses gendered language in his class, except for using ‘gentlemen’ or ‘ladies’ with “single-gender groups.” He then reflected, “that would actually be an interesting thing to put somebody at the back of the room and actually... to monitor that. It’s not something I was consciously aware of.” Gideon’s uncertainty points to the fact that gendered language is often naturalized, making it difficult to reflect upon because it makes its way into conversations unnoticed.

This difficulty was not unique to Gideon. Arya was a counsellor in District C who had taken courses that explicitly addressed gender and sexual diversity during her teacher training. When I asked her if she saw gender as something that organized the lives of students or school life more generally, she told me that “male-female dynamics are a huge part of high school life” and that “a lot of high school and the social interactions that play out are based on, you know, [...] feelings of attraction.” However, she did not connect these rituals of heterosexuality to gender norms. Instead she expressed uncertainty that gender mattered at her school:

I wouldn't say in the events so much because, I mean, a lot of them are sporting events, outdoor clubs, chess clubs, whatever. And they're all... I wouldn't see any of those as gender specific. School dances, I guess you could, but then even then there's no push to bring a date or anything like that. So... I mean, I'm sure I'm missing something huge that's in my face, but not that I've noticed that would discriminate.

Given the long-standing history of gender-segregated sports and the tendency of gendered differences to be played up in sports-related spaces (Theberge, 1997), it is surprising that Arya does not see “sporting events” as a potential space where gender might matter. More importantly, Arya suggests that the fact that school activities are not explicitly “gender specific” and do not

encourage heterosexual dating (“there's no push to bring a date”) suggests that gender (and in conjunction, sexuality) do not come into play in these activities. This implies that gender and sexual norms have to be explicitly imposed for them to matter in everyday life and activities at school, but this is not necessarily the case.

Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power is a helpful theoretical tool to understand that force is not necessary to produce docile, properly gendered bodies. Increasingly, cis- and heteronormativity in schools are less visible through exclusionary practices and visible punishment than through rituals, configurations, expectations, and allowances that continuously re-establish heterosexual and cisgender bodies as the most ordinary bodies and the most natural pathway to adulthood (Best, 2000; Diorio, 2006; Diorio, & Munro, 2003). There may not be “a push” for students to bring dates to school dances at Arya's school, but are queer and trans and gender-nonconforming students as likely to bring dates as straight students? How might gender play a part in how these events are advertised and talked about at the school? How does the visibility (or lack thereof) of queer and trans subjects amongst staff and students, in imagery throughout the school or in the curricula across grades, impact who students think of as an appropriate date? How could cultural expectations of what constitutes ‘formal wear’ discourage trans and gender-nonconforming students from attending?

As Foucault (1977) argues, the regime of disciplinary power does not require judgment and sanction so much as the anticipation of both. It is the knowledge that we are (or could be) visible to others that leads us to disciplining our own gestures and desires. One of the powerful effects of the disciplinary power is precisely that, while all students are imbued with the power to judge the success or failure of others' (heteronormative) gendered performances, all students are also at risk of being the target of “normalizing judgment” (Foucault, 1977, p. 177). This makes

gender – and by extension, sexuality – a high-stake terrain, where one’s performance is always at risk of being challenged (Pascoe, 2007).

It is these subtler forms of discipline, including self-discipline, that get overlooked by Arya. This is by no means unique to her; I have already outlined the way that common understandings of bullying fail to capture these forms of subtler discipline and their cultural underpinnings (Ringrose & Renold, 2010; Walton, 2011). This absence in Arya’s response gestures to a larger lack of language for understanding what marginalization looks like for trans and gender-nonconforming students in schools. It also highlights the lack of discursive tools to articulate how gender organizes all lives in schools. In a way, Arya’s earnest admission that she is “sure [she’s] missing something huge” is precisely a testimony to the ways that cisnormativity is normalized in school spaces (and beyond) to the point where it becomes invisible.

As she continued talking, however, Arya started to come up with examples:

I don't see how they'd be left [...] out intentionally -- or that there's not that room for people to come in, but I can see that a person maybe would feel that -- this sort of activity, I don't know what sort of activity... well, even like an outdoor club might not be comfortable for someone who's trans because they think, okay, well, [...] where am I going to change when I go to this, or where am I going to sleep? Am I going to sleep in the -- yeah, like, I guess if they're -- if you're going camping, you know - I guess there would be, you know, for an outdoor club there would be -- of course as a school we would separate the males and females. [...] So I guess in those ways it could be uncomfortable for a child.

At the beginning of the quote, Arya is demonstrating her awareness that some students experience exclusion in schools (“I can see that a person maybe would feel that -”). However, she continues to struggle to figure out what exactly might create that feeling of exclusion (“I don't know what sort of activity”). Part of the difficulty is that she believes that no one would be “left out intentionally” and there is “that room for people to come in.” The notion of intention shapes what is understood as violence or rather, what is *not* understood as violence.

Building on my discussion of disciplinary power, I would argue that the concept of intention is at the heart of Arya's difficulty in identifying how a trans and gender-nonconforming student could experience marginalization. In this quote, she is looking for examples where her school is actively and knowingly excluding trans and gender-nonconforming students. As a result, she is not thinking of the ways in which routine activities, procedures, or interactions might be built in ways that assume cisgender (and heterosexual) bodies. In fact, when she finally finds an example that she identifies as potentially problematic ("even like an outdoor club might not be comfortable for someone who's trans"), Arya is indeed describing an obstacle that has little to do with intentional prejudice but everything to do with institutional practices: gendered sleeping arrangements and change rooms ("where am I going to change when I go to this, or where am I going to sleep?").

It is important to note Arya still does not explicitly recognize the shift in framing that has occurred in her talk. In fact, when she later says that "of course as a school we would separate the males and females," the expression "of course" positions this organization as unquestionable. The naturalization of gender binaries as organizing principles in schools – and her incapacity to imagine an alternative way to organize sleeping arrangements - sits in tension with her brief recognition that it is this ubiquity of gender binaries that generates difficult questions for trans and gender-nonconforming students. Arya's final statement and its acknowledgment of the violence done by institutional practices ("I guess in those ways it could be uncomfortable for a child") is also undermined by the multiple forms of hedging (the use of the expression 'I guess' as well as the use of the modal verb 'could') as well as the choice of the word "uncomfortable" which I have argued earlier denotes personal preference rather than systemic marginalization. Arya's words indicate her desire to imagine schools where no one feels excluded. At the same

time, the unquestionability of gendered organization built into her response as well as the hedges found throughout her statement point to the difficulty of thinking beyond cisnormativity within an institution that is structured by it.

Arya's difficulty in identifying the role of gender in structuring everyday and administrative practices at school was shared by many educators, especially those who worked in secondary schools. As I discussed in the previous section, participants readily discussed bathrooms and P.E. but struggled to see the relevance of gender in other situations. Because gender divisions often organize elementary school life in much more explicit ways, participants who had worked with younger children often recognized this more easily.

Jerrilyn, who had worked as a kindergarten teacher, noted that gender-nonconformity "gets drummed out of them really early." Although Jerrilyn focused on gender policing by peers, several participants recognized that this policing was part of a larger tendency to segregate by gender which is more ingrained in elementary school settings. Keith, a teacher in Vancouver, related an anecdote about his 7-year-old child's hockey class where boys and girls were expected to engage in different activities. When he asked the instructor about this gendered division, he was told this mirrored competitive hockey:

And I just thought 'Oh, well how dated.' So we're just going to carry on with that tradition because that's the way it's always been done so let's indoctrinate five-year-olds with this notion that they are absolutely different because of what's in their pants.

While this particular class operated outside the school system, the anecdote is helpful in illustrating the ways in which we naturalize ("indoctrinate") gender binarism early on. In District B, Amy, who had several gender-nonconforming students at her school, explained that "the teachers make a conscious effort not to [segregate by gender]." The fact that Amy emphasized that this was a "conscious effort" and that the teachers have to think about other ways of



organizing children is a telltale sign of how easily educators can rely on the gender binary in the curriculum and during activities (Riddell, 2011).

Unlike Keith and Jerrilyn's more critical perspectives, some educators did not problematize the way that they or their school still engaged in gendered divisions. This often happened in the context of talking about physical education classes, but not only. For example, Gillian, a teacher in District C who had a young trans man in her class, was explicit in telling me about the way gender organizes some of her class:

**HFD:** Are there moments where before you would have talked about gender or split the class, like boys on this side, girls on this side?

**Gillian:** I still do that and he's with the boys. [...]

**HFD:** Did you think about it at first? Or were you just like no, obviously he's on the boys' side?

**Gillian:** [...] Things are a lot split up that way. But no, as long as it's appropriate, right, [...] he's a boy and he goes with the boys.

In this quote, Gillian explains that "things are a lot split up [along binary gender lines]" in her class. This illustrates the way that gendered practices can still work to manage bodies in schools.

It would be easy to find fault with Gillian for unthinkingly reproducing the gender binary, but I argue it is important to also think about how her affirmation "he's a boy and he goes with the boys" validates the student's identity. Briefly after the exchange quoted above, Gillian mentioned one situation where this student frequently ends up in a group where he is the only boy, and explained that she "consciously" makes sure not to use the gendered term "girls" to address the group. She continued, "so there are times, if it's all girls and him, I purposely make sure that I recognize that he's the boy in the group." Although Gillian's investment in binary categories makes gender hyper-relevant in the learning environment in ways that reify the gender binary, this practice may also have a positive impact on the individual student given that he identifies within the binary. One of most basic forms of violence that trans and gender-

nonconforming people encounter in a cisnormative society is the act of misgendering – something that has already featured in some of the transcript excerpts I have quoted so far – so experiencing a gendered environment where he is explicitly marked as a boy may be validating for this student. For binary trans people, being integrated into gendered activities in ways that validate their gender identity can be a powerful and significant experience.

At the same time, this reality does not change the fact that this type of gendered organization creates insecurity and marginalization for many trans and gender-nonconforming students (especially students who identify as non-binary) because it reproduces cisnormative institutional and cultural expectations (Beemyn, 2015; Sausa, 2005). For example, Simon, a trans student from District C, expressed profound frustration at the unintentional hurt that these moments create for him when shared that he gets “very angry” when he encounters activities where boys and girls are separated. Gillian’s testimony highlights the everyday presence of gender in the life of school but more importantly it points to the tension that can exist between an accommodation approach where schools seek to meet the individual needs of specific students and a cultural change model that calls into question the necessity to have school life structured by the binary gender system.

Everyday and administrative gendered practices that I have highlighted in this section were rarely identified by participants as fundamental issues to be resolved, the way that washrooms and change rooms were discussed. Instead they were more likely to be naturalized as part of the fabric of schools. This makes them difficult to identify, let alone change. It also makes it difficult to see the connections between these gendered practices, the marginalization of trans and gender-nonconforming students in school spaces, and the possibility of gender-inclusive school cultures (Payne & Smith, 2016). In the next section, I shed additional light on the ways

that schools are structured by cisnormativity by turning my attention how educators talked about moments of encountering non-binary gender identities or students that they perceived as being ‘in-between’ genders.

### **5.2.3 Youth in transition, gender fluidity and non-binary identities**

It is not by chance that the ‘problem’ of gendered spaces primarily came up when educators discussed either students who were beginning their social transition or students they perceived to have a fluid or non-binary gender identity. These situations are least easily accommodated within the existing structures of schools. When binary trans students had transitioned prior to attending the school and could be read unambiguously as male or female, educators were much more likely to treat the situation as straight-forward. These students could easily be accommodated into the pre-existing cisnormative structures and routines of schools with relatively little disruption. In other words, the appearance of adherence to cisnormative standards of binary gender and gender presentation can sometimes work to re-naturalize these norms. In contrast, many interviews highlighted the difficulties of navigating school spaces for students who are visibly gender-nonconforming. Roni, a P.E. teacher in District A, acknowledged that “phys ed is a very tricky place for a kid who doesn’t identify – y’know, in the polarity of male/female,” and the statement that can be applied much more widely to school spaces.

A fundamental obstacle for non-binary or more broadly gender-nonconforming students seemed to stem from a lack of understanding. One of the first things that I asked educators was

to define ‘transgender’ and ‘gender-fluid’<sup>41</sup> for me. While most of the people I spoke with had a good grasp of the concept of transgender (if not always the most up-to-date language), they had more difficulty explaining gender-fluid, relying on guesses rather than pre-existing understanding. I believe this lack of familiarity with non-binary gender identities partly explains the fact that most interviews focused on students with binary gender identities, and that educators were much less likely to speak to their experiences with non-binary trans and gender-nonconforming students. Lack of familiarity, reflected in unavailable or hesitant language, makes it difficult to be supportive and even more so to create the conditions for others to be supportive.

Matt, a support worker in District B, explained that he had worked with some gender-nonconforming students, mainly male students who wore clothing traditionally associated with femininity. Even though he said explicitly that he didn’t “see a problem with it at all,” he also acknowledged that this was not something he was very familiar with:

I haven’t had really any issues but the thing for me is, understanding it. [...] And I, I mean it’s really hard for me to really show that support when I don’t even understand it, right? So, so I mean it’s, we’re so, I think we’re, I feel we’re so far behind in that sense.

When I asked him what he had done to improve his understanding, his answer focused on listening to students and their experiences in order to understand “where they’re at, on a personal level.” That understanding was not connected to a broader institutional context, nor did Matt give me a sense that he was aware that the challenges faced by these students might go beyond the problem of “gett[ing] judged” by other people.

Other educators offered similar responses that suggested that they had a desire to help *and* a lack of tools necessary to be able to be an effective ally or support person beyond an active

---

<sup>41</sup> I used this expression at the time of the interviews although I would now prefer the terms ‘non-binary’ or ‘gender-nonconforming’ for the fact that both of these tend more towards the descriptive.

listening role. Sunnyschick, a counsellor in District B, offered another example of this phenomenon when she spoke to the difficulty of supporting gender-nonconforming students who do not fit (and may never fit) into a binary transition narrative. Speaking of a student she was working with, she said:

I feel like I'm being judgmental in a sense when I say I think he is confused and I don't mean that in a judgmental way. I need to figure out how do I support this young lad with – because he can't tell me, he hasn't articulated yet.

In this quote, Sunnyschick recognizes that the word “confused” is value-laden and she is trying to figure out how to support the student without “being judgmental.” This appropriately puts the onus on her to understand, rather than on the student to explain. At the same time, I would argue that the use of the word ‘yet’ (“he hasn't articulated yet”) at the end of the quote is a small indication that this educator is struggling to move away from dominant discourses about gender identity as a linear journey with an ultimate resolution – the idea that with enough time, this student will be able to “articulate” his gender in ways that are intelligible in our society rather than the current puzzle she finds herself confronted with, where the student “can't tell” her how to be supportive because there is even less of a pre-determined script with a non-binary or gender-nonconforming student than with a student interested in a binary gender transition.

I want to challenge the assumption that these difficulties of these educators are simply proof of individual failings or of a need for education that assumes that ignorance is simply a lack of knowledge (Britzman, 1998). Instead, I suggest that the lack of understanding displayed by educators needs to be framed within an institutional and discursive context that makes little to no room for gender-nonconformity and non-binary experiences (an experience that is not unique to schools).

During my interview with Roni, the P.E. teacher in District A, I asked her about gender markers on school documents. She explained to me that the markers M or F show up on class lists and that her understanding was this was not something that she or her administrator could change. I asked her if she thought there would be resistance if it became possible to remove that column entirely. She replied:

Um I think that... there's um... for me I wouldn't have an issue. But [...] maybe some staff from other schools that I've worked at, where... they may look at a kid that's gender-ambiguous and really need to know – M or F [...] and so they seek those out to try and figure out if they're a boy or a girl, what that value, what that information gives them in terms of value, I don't know. Maybe they need to know which pronoun that they – so that they're not insulting the student or whatever. For me I just look at the changing rooms. Which one did you come out of?

Roni starts by positioning herself as an open-minded person who “wouldn't have an issue” with removing gender markers. With the conjunction “but,” she introduces a contrast between herself and “staff from other schools” who may “really need to know” the gender of a gender-nonconforming (“gender-ambiguous”) student and thus might resist the removal of gender markers from class lists.

After that, the tone shifts slightly as Roni explains that these staff members may need that information in order to know which pronouns “so that they're not insulting the student,” which excuses the reliance on the gender marker as motivated by a desire to be respectful. She continues by revealing her own strategy for addressing students properly: “which [changing room] did you come out of?” These last two sentences are interesting to me because they highlight that administrative gender categories function in conjunction with the physical structure of school spaces (here, the change rooms) to limit the options available to educators for understanding their students. In this moment, it does not occur to Roni that students may use or want to use pronouns or facilities other than the binary options built into the school's physical

space. Even though my question opened up the possibility of not needing gender as an identifier and Roni embraces this possibility at first, she is ultimately constrained by how she understands the available physical space. This leads her to return to a system where only one of two options exists for students.

In this way, non-binary students were often unimaginable for educators. However, students did not need to identify as non-binary to create complications within a system that requires stable binary gender categories; a student simply needed to be *read* or *understood* as ambiguous when it comes to gender. Elizabeth, an administrator in District B who spoke with some of the gender-nonconforming students at her school almost daily to check in and make sure they were doing OK, articulated this challenge:

If we're on a field trip and you're in the transgender journey half your class thinks of you as male and half your class thinks of you as female, when you're dividing up rooms because we usually do boys to boys, girls to girls, where does this individual fit. I mean part of that is going to be self-awareness where am I in the transgender journey and how am I – if I think they're still male and yet they're identifying female that would be interesting, I don't know how we do that dance. [...] What if somebody had started the hormone therapy but hadn't had the surgical like what – I guess probably all they would care about at the end of the day because BC School Sports is fairly progressive is that you identified with one gender and then didn't bounce back and forth. That you stuck with it for that season and play maybe the adjacent.

Elizabeth starts by describing the predicament that she sees as arising if “half your class thinks of you [the trans student] as male and half your class thinks of you as female.” In this scenario, Elizabeth gives no indication that the student's self-identification matters in answering the question “where does the individual fit.” This question, however, highlights the way that students are expected to adapt to the existing structures of school.

Elizabeth does bring in the student's perspective in her second sentence, but I would argue that the mention of “self-awareness” and the question “where am I in the transgender

journey” suggests less that the student’s identity would be prioritized and more that Elizabeth hopes that a ‘self-aware’ student would follow the opinion of the majority (and/or of the adults) about where they best belong. Indeed, the next sentence brings up her main concern again – a potential mismatch between her opinion (“if I think they’re still male”) and the student’s (“they’re identifying female”) that would lead to complete uncertainty about how to act: “I don’t know how we do that dance.” In this sentence, neither perspective (Elizabeth’s opinion or the student’s identification) is framed as having greater importance.

The second half of the quote makes even more explicit the cisnormative premises that underlie Elizabeth’s response. First, the idea of a singular “transgender journey,” with an implied clear start and conclusion, reinforces the idea of a gender binary where both categories (man and woman) are mutually exclusive. It also assumes that transition looks similar for – and requires the same steps of – every trans person. As the next sentence makes clear, this transition is imagined as a medical one for Elizabeth: “What if somebody had started the hormone therapy but hadn’t had the surgical like what –.” This sentence not only implies that medical transition – not the student’s self-identification – determine whether the student is a boy or a girl, but also suggests that medical procedures (surgery) determine eligibility into a new gender category. Given that Elizabeth is surrounded by a culture that medicalizes trans bodies (Davy, 2011; Vipond, 2015), it is not surprising that she would draw on this particular dominant discourse.

In conclusion, while Elizabeth may genuinely feel like she does not “know how we do [the] dance” of figuring out where a trans and gender-nonconforming student might fit when her opinion differs from the student’s, the elements of her response suggest less uncertainty. The way she constructs her answer implies that the identity of a trans and gender-nonconforming student needs to be intelligible within a binary gender system but also that external validation –



whether that's the validation of peers (and adults) gendering them properly, or the validation of the medical system and its interventions – is necessary for that identity to be recognized.

The quote also offers a glimpse into another model, however. At the end, Elizabeth opens up the possibility that self-identification might be the determining factor. Guessing at the standards of BC School Sports, Elizabeth notes: “probably all they would care about [...] is that you identified with one gender.” She does not herself indicate that she would adhere to that standard, but her capacity to imagine it is, I would argue, significant in and of itself. She also introduces a second criterion (that the student “then didn’t bounce back and forth”) that marks the other sticky spot when it comes to trans and gender-nonconforming students: the possibility that a student may not identify as either male or female in a definitive manner.

Although Elizabeth’s focus is on the possibility of fluidity, her hesitation indirectly gestures towards the challenge posed by non-binary students whose identities do not neatly adhere to a linear “transgender journey” from one end of the gender binary to the other, and whose refusal to fit into one of these two categories may be interpreted as indecisiveness. The identification of “bounc[ing] back and forth” as a potential problem also points to the cisnormative standard of binary gender as an immutable, fixed characteristic. Binary trans people may fit (or be made to fit) into the discourse of immutability through essentialist narratives of ‘being born this way,’ but fluid or non-binary gender identities often resist this discourse more directly. This disruption also renders more difficult an institutional response of accommodation, which can only work to correct a mistake in assignment (this box rather than that box) rather than to question the existence of the boxes.

The notion that non-binary, fluid or gender-nonconforming genders are products of uncertainty or indecisiveness was apparent in other interviews. Gideon, the teacher from District

A I briefly mentioned earlier, told me about a student of his whose appearance became more gender-nonconforming as she started identifying as queer. This student had a difficult time fitting in with her peers, and Gideon explained to me that “being gender fluid or not really understanding her own gender or sexuality, or in the process of exploring that, made things a little bit harder.” Setting aside the way in which gender and sexuality become entangled in the quote, the structure of the sentence suggests a connection between “being gender fluid” with “not really understanding her own gender.” Both this and the expression “process of exploration” frame this student’s gender-nonconformity as a temporary state of uncertainty, one that time and knowledge would bring to an end. At the same time, there is something potentially powerful about Gideon’s recognition that gender fluidity has the potential to create additional obstacles for students because it is less well-understood and overtly challenges some of our beliefs about gender, gender identity, and gender expression.

Another example came from Charlie, the counsellor from District A that I introduced in the previous chapter. She mentioned:

I think it’s very, always more challenging before people have made a decision because, and I think then it’s kind of like if you have categories then your mind is trying to make the decision in your head of where to –

In this quote, Charlie is speaking to how “challenging” it can be for schools when students are expressing either uncertainty or fluidity, which is indexed here by the phrase “before people have made a decision.” The idea that schools need a relative amount of certainty or guarantee that the student is going to stick with their gender identification before they can make changes leaves little room for students to explore their gender and still be recognized in the school system. Part of that difficulty, Charlie notes explicitly, is the cisnormative context wherein adults are trying to

supply answers with pre-determined “categories” that limit the “decision in your head” to one of having to choose between two spaces (one marked as male, one marked as female).

Rebecca, a teacher in District B who helped students find volunteer placements, provided yet another example of the way that educators struggled to figure out how to support gender-nonconforming students. Rebecca worked with a student who was assigned male at birth and who was shifting her gender presentation significantly to appear more feminine. This shift created situations that Rebecca found challenging, as she explained after I asked her if she had had explicit conversation with this student about her gender presentation:

I thought right off the bat, he [sic] has to pick to dress like a girl or a boy. You can’t... that’s what in my head... not for school, I could care less, but if I’m sending him [sic] out and it wasn’t because I felt, I just felt, for his [sic] protection.

In this quote, Rebecca identifies gender ambiguity as a problem: the student “has to pick to dress like a girl or a boy.” The fact that she saw the student as not fitting into the gender binary was problematic to this teacher, but she is careful to note that this is not a problem “for school” or for her (“I could care less”) but for the outside world. Rebecca is concerned about the student’s safety: as in the quote from Sam earlier, the pressure not to disrupt the status quo (she wants the student to choose one side of the binary or the other) is framed as being for “[the student’s] protection,” and it is also a demonstration of Rebecca’s desire to protect the student.

While it is difficult to assess Rebecca’s assertion that she or the school did not care about the student’s gender presentation, this teacher’s focus on the outside world attests to the cisnormative context that schools operate in. There might indeed be a hefty price to be paid for those who do not “pick” a side.

Rebecca continued her narrative by explaining that another teacher at her school, who was the GSA sponsor at the time, told her, “no, you can’t make him [sic] choose to dress like one

or another cause he's [sic] not one or the other." Rebecca's response was, in her own words, "what the heck." This highlights that her assessment that "she could care less" about the student's gender-nonconformity does not necessarily denote understanding. Nevertheless, she explained that after this exchange with her colleague, her concern became figuring out "how do I make this kid look professional when he's [sic] out there and not make him [sic] make a choice about a boy or a girl." Rebecca took great pride in telling me how she had managed to resolve this dilemma by finding an outfit that she deemed professional and that had elements of both masculine and feminine dress. It was obvious she had cared deeply about making sure the student was set up for success. Her story highlights that the difficulty of navigating the world outside of the gender binary. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that educators lack tools to know what being supportive looks like, a direct consequence of inhabiting a society that makes non-binary lives invisible (Gilbert, 2009).

Students who are read as having a gender identity or gender expression that is fluid, ambiguous, or nonconforming present particular challenges for schools because these students often cannot be easily accommodated within existing structures or language. My interviews emphasized that even well-meaning adults often do not have the right tools or knowledge to properly support these students. What could these tools look like? Case & Meier (2014) highlight the need to "develop[] a common vocabulary" (p. 68) as well as to train educators to respond to comments that attack or marginalize gender-nonconformity, while Smith & Payne (2016) emphasize "diversifying the representations of gender identities and expressions in images and texts throughout the school, redesigning single-gender classroom activities, and closely examining the academic curriculum for materials and activities that reinforce gender stereotypes" (p. 44). Other possibilities could include modeling correct use of gender-neutral

names and pronouns, allowing students to use any gendered facilities (and not needing to use one facility consistently), and revising administrative practices that require students to identify their gender within restrictive binary options, including advocating at the level of the Ministry for reforming information systems.

These suggestions address the sexist, heteronormative and cisnormative foundations of school life, and open up space for making visible the possibilities of gender diversity. However, in conversations about students who were read as gender-nonconforming, or identified with non-binary identities, educators could rarely envision these kinds of possibilities. Since accommodations are more difficult to find for students who do not fit neatly in the gender binary, the difficulty to imagine how school spaces could be re-organized to embrace gender diversity meant that educators were often left with uncertainty about how to be supportive. In the next section, I focus on these difficulties further as I examine the various discourses and frameworks that appears in educators' talk and made cultural changes more complicated to envision.

### **5.3 Facing constraints**

By discussing gendered spaces and practices, I have started to highlight the tensions between approaches that focus on accommodation versus attempts to create institutional and cultural changes to schools. In this section of the chapter, I explore three different discursive practices that I argue made it difficult for educators to envision larger changes. First, I look at the discursive framing of transphobia; second, I look at the way that educators produced themselves as open-minded and caring adults; and finally, I look at the way that educators conceptualized the systems they work within. These practices are connected to larger dominant discourses that functioned together to limit the possibility of transforming school cultures.

### **5.3.1 Transphobia v. cisnormativity: talking about systems and structures**

As I have highlighted earlier, many of my transcripts featured a narrow understanding of the violence that trans and gender-nonconforming students face. Educators often drew discursive links between ‘transphobia’ and ‘homophobia,’ both of which tended to be framed as overt acts of hate or discrimination rather than products of hetero- and cisnormative cultures (Formby, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2013; Walton, 2011). They often saw derogatory comments as motivated by individual ‘ignorance’, maybe fueled by fear. This understanding overlooks how injurious speech and acts are not “attributable to a singular subject and act” (Butler, 1997, p. 50) but rather only become intelligible in the context of a particular ideological and discursive context. Several scholars have also noted that ignorance is often a refusal of knowledge rather than a lack of it (Felman, 1982; Britzman, 1998).

One of the consequences of this restrictive understanding of transphobia is that it sometimes led to the impression that this form of oppression is not very prevalent in schools. During our interview, Claire, an administrator in District C, talked about bringing different speakers to her school to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity. I asked her specifically if she saw connections between homophobia and what trans students deal with at school. In her answer, Claire said that she thought other students were “not as outwardly mean” to trans students, especially compared to the way she had seen LGB students be treated. She continued:

There’s more homophobic slurs out there. I’d hate to think [being transgender] is more accepted. Like that’s the wrong word, but it’s more common maybe to be anti-gay. And to be anti-transgender is just so unusual. [...] We’ll have a transgender student in the school, and you know, but there’s also a whole lot of work that goes around that, whereas we have far more kids in the school who are openly gay. We don’t put all these like teams and supports around them. They’re just kind of... we have support in general, but it’s becoming much more part of the fabric of the school.

In this quote, Claire starts with suggesting that the prevalence of homophobic slurs (over transphobic ones) is an indication that trans and gender-nonconforming people are “more accepted,” an assertion that she reframes almost right away: “to be anti-transgender is just so unusual.” In the first sentence, Claire associates the relative absence of transphobic slurs with the possibility of greater acceptance. This leads me to interpret her revised statement about “anti-transgender” being an unusual attitude to mean that she understands being ‘anti-transgender’ in narrow terms. Someone who is ‘anti-transgender’ in this framework is someone who demonstrates open animosity towards trans people, in particular through the use of derogatory language. Because Claire does not hear transphobic slurs as frequently as homophobic ones, she reaches the conclusion that “to be anti-transgender is just so unusual.”

However, this assessment relies on a limited understanding of what ‘transphobia’ is. Simon, the trans student from District C I quoted earlier, explained: “People aren’t as blatant with their transphobia as they are with homophobia... They don’t even usually know what the word transphobia means.” Simon identifies homophobia as both more visible, but also as better understood. Part of the problem with transphobia, according to him, is that people “don’t even usually know what the word [...] means.” Although Simon does not explicitly connect lack of visibility to lack of discourse, I argue that one of the reasons why people “aren’t as blatant with their transphobia” is indeed not that ‘transphobia’ is not there, but that what is ‘there’ is often not recognized as transphobia, unlike with homophobia.

This is not to say that educators’ understanding of homophobia was flawless: many participants were well-versed in recognizing and interrupting very specific instances of homophobia (such as ‘that’s so gay’ or ‘fag’). However, they did not necessarily see homophobia

as a more systemic phenomenon that extends well beyond the use of derogatory language (Martino, 2000; Payne, 2010). However, the visibility (gained through years of queer activism) of this specific understanding of homophobia has at least given educators tools to recognize some expressions of it. In contrast, people often do not have access to an interpretive lens that would allow them to read particular events, narratives, or language as ‘transphobic’ despite the fact that accounts from trans and gender-nonconforming students indicate that trans repudiation is widespread in schools (Greytak et al., 2009; Gutierrez, 2004; Jones et al., 2015).

An example of this phenomenon was provided by Goofus, an administrator in District D, who told me during our interview that he “[hadn’t] been exposed to any trans harassment in the school system” but did not clarify what he would count as ‘harassment.’ He added,

I haven’t heard anybody say, you know, derogatory transgender slurs. I do hear, you know, homophobic and misogynistic and those are the ones I deal with.

Goofus uses the word “harassment” and “slurs” to talk about the violence directed at trans and gender-nonconforming students, which both signal an understanding of transphobia as direct and interpersonal acts of violence rather than a systemic phenomenon. By using this lens to understand violence, homophobia is much more visible to Goofus.

In contrast, the young trans man from District C, Simon, highlighted a different understanding of lack of support when he told me about his experience with school:

You marginalize people and making them feel alone and like they're freaks, cause that's how I feel in gym class, I feel like a freak, because I can't do this, I can't do that, without having people put their gender expectations on me.

The marginalizing violence that Simon is talking about in this quote has little to do with being called names but rather about being made to “feel alone” and having “people put their gender expectations” on him. Although these are individual experiences, they point to systems: it is the



way that P.E. is structured by gender<sup>42</sup> that creates marginalization in Simon's life. This quote highlights that one does not need to experience verbal violence at the hands of peers (or adults) to "feel like a freak." Instead, the organization of schools itself can generate that feeling by erasing the possibility of trans and gender-nonconforming subjectivities from view. This happens in particular through the physical separations between boys and girls for classes, activities, or access to certain facilities and the absence of trans and gender-nonconforming representations in the curriculum and around the schools (Elliot, 2015; Miller, 2015a). Simon's experience was echoed by the few other trans students I interviewed, as well as existing literature (Beemyn, 2015; Gutierrez, 2004; Jones et al., 2015). It speaks to the cisnormative context that trans and gender-nonconforming students have to navigate: one that is structured – physically and discursively – by a cisnormative gender binary. If 'transphobia' is interpreted through this broader lens of cisnormativity, there is indeed nothing "unusual" with being anti-transgender, unlike Claire was suggesting.

As a result of this narrow understanding of transphobia, educators also struggled to explain the connections between transphobia, homophobia, and sexism, because they often they lacked the language to connect these forms of oppression to the cis- and heteronormative systems that connect them. These missed connections are visible in both Claire and Goofus's narratives: they both overlook the way that cisnormativity connects transphobia with homophobia and sexism. Specifically, when Claire talks about homophobic slurs being "more prevalent" than transphobic ones, she fails to acknowledge that these slurs do not just target queer students but often any student who is seen to transgress existing norms of sexuality *and gender*. Gender-

---

<sup>42</sup> Based on what participants reported, gender-segregated P.E. is still common in BC, although by no means the norm. Even in schools that do not practice gender segregation for P.E., however, educators often described this particular class as a space where gender was often made hyper-relevant, whether by teachers or by students.

nonconforming queer students, in fact, are more likely to be targeted than their gender-conforming counterparts (Horn, 2007).

Similarly, Goofus makes no connection between the misogynistic and homophobic slurs that he hears and the presence of transphobia simply because the slurs do not explicitly index transness. Yet trans repudiation is rooted in the same denigration of femininity and belief in distinct binary genders that undergird sexism and homophobia (Browne, 2004; Serano, 2007). The very existence of these slurs suggests a culture that is unaccepting of gender diversity. Kate, the parent of a trans youth, made this link explicit when I asked her how she thinks homophobia and transphobia are connected. She explained:

A lot of the homophobic slurs are almost like feminizing the men, right? Like, "What are you, a fag?" But it's also, like, "What are you, a girl?" [...] This language is all about, if we feminize you then you're less than and you're worthless. It's an insult to be anything female. [...] And they want it to be so binary and so distinctive, and anything, whether it's gay culture or trans culture, that blurs the line, is threatening and we must attack it.

In this quote, Kate draws a clear link between homophobia, sexism, and transphobia by highlighting that all these forms of oppression draw some of their potency from the idea that femininity make you “worthless” and that “it's an insult to be anything female.” But she goes further by pointing out that this devaluation of femininity necessitates a culture where gender is seen as “so binary and so distinctive” that any transgression is “threatening” to the existing system and thus generates an aggressive reaction (“we must attack it”). Both hetero- and cisnormativity function at the intersection of the “micro-penalt[ies]” of the body and of sexuality (Foucault, 1977, p. 178; see also Butler, 1990), which partly explains why gender expression and gender identity are so often confused with sexual identity.

Simon’s earlier frustration with the fact that people at his school “don’t even usually know what the word transphobia means” points to the necessity of giving educators new

discursive tools for understanding transphobia beyond dominant frameworks of bullying and direct verbal violence (Formby, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2013). Transphobia needs to be understood as the most visible aspect of a larger cisnormative system that regulates spaces, activities, and interactions in school spaces by demanding students to be legible within the gender binary. Without being able to identify moments where cisnormativity operates, educators are left with few tools to change their school, office, or classroom.

Unlike the language of transphobia, the lens of cisnormativity could help educators identify moments where assumptions are being made about bodies, gender, behaviour, and gender identity, but would also help them make connections between sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. In other words, new knowledges could be generated that are less about educating individual people out of ignorance and more about offering new discursive ways of understanding the experiences of trans and gender-nonconforming students.

### **5.3.2 Self-perception: open-minded and caring adults**

Dominant bullying discourses emphasize individualized peer-to-peer violence by systematically conceptualizing bullying “as relational violence among children and youth” (Walton, 2011, p. 133). Like Sam and his concern for “how other kids are going to treat” trans and gender-nonconforming students in the bathroom, most educators focused on the potential for peer negativity or peer aggression as a primary apprehension.

Because the gender-segregated spaces of washrooms and change rooms are not accessible to adults, educators saw them as spaces where peer violence was especially likely to occur. Barbie, a teacher in District B, talked about a gender-nonconforming gay student who had experienced so much bullying in the school’s change rooms that he refused to use the space. The

school's solution to this problem was to give him access to a single-stall washroom where he could change separately. This anecdote prompted me to ask if there had been conversations about how to lessen the interpersonal violence encountered by this student. Barbie answered:

Well the problem is, teachers don't go into change rooms [...] but when you're, um, when he's in the change room and he's getting pelted with dodgeballs, while he's trying to change, like, that's not okay. You know, so then, of course everybody gets into action, this is what we're going to provide, this is a safer environment for you. So one of the things that they were doing too for a little while there, I think this is what was happening. He'd either be able to come into class a little bit later and change after everybody had already changed or would leave a little bit earlier and change before everybody went in to get changed. And I mean, you learn to change fast. Get in, get out.

In this quote, Barbie explicitly identifies “the problem” as “teachers don't go into change rooms.” The implication is that, if teachers were allowed inside, they would be sources of protection for the student and he would not be “getting pelted with dodgeballs.” I argue that her words position adults as entities that generate safety in the lives of trans and gender-nonconforming students and can “provide... a safer environment” for these students.

This construction of adults draws on established discourses that emphasize educators' professional and legal responsibility to protect students from bullying and harassment (AERA, 2013; Meyer, 2010; Sharp & Smith, 2002). It also bears the mark of “professionalism discourses that shape the role of US public educators and construct the cultural myth of the good teacher” (Smith, 2015, p. 224), which frames educators as people who are “supposed to care, inspire, and make a difference” (Smith, 2015, p. 227). As Britzman (1991) points out, this ideal is inflected by a gendered imaginary: “like the ‘good’ woman, the ‘good’ teacher is positioned as self-sacrificing, kind, overworked, underpaid, and holding an unlimited reservoir of patience” (p. 5).

By drawing on this construction of the good teacher, Barbie's account suggests that adults can intervene unproblematically into exclusionary systems of gender conformity as if they

operated outside of these systems. This was a recurring theme in my interviews. Unless they were talking about prejudiced colleagues (and this rarely happened), educators assumed adults were not responsible for the problems encountered by trans and gender-nonconforming students.

Katherine had worked as a principal in District C for a decade and she was supporting two trans and gender-nonconforming students at her school at the time of our interview. She recounted an older experience she had had with a student who was transitioning when she was in her first year as an administrator:

I would say there were a lot of negative comments. He [sic] wasn't treated in a respectful way by students, staff were fine. We are adults, we know no matter what we are thinking. We know the filter is between the head and the mouth. So I can't tell you how staff members reacted because I never saw anything negative. But he [sic] struggled with his [sic] peer group.

Katherine differentiates between adults and students: unlike students, adults are capable of refraining from verbal violence. In her story, school staff are absolved due to a lack of (visible) negative reaction, rather than due to efforts to actively create an inclusive environment. While educators' non-interventions can be the product of unsupportive institutional settings (Meyer, 2008), this framing downplays how the silence of adults, their misgendering of a student, or their complicity in gendered practices, can contribute to an unsupportive school culture. And while supportive adults can have a positive impact on the experiences of queer and trans students (McGuire et al., 2010), educators are also often resistant to change (Payne & Smith, 2014; Sausa, 2005), especially if it involves questioning their own practices (Smith & Payne, 2016).

The primacy of bullying discourses and the discourse of good teacher leave little room for recognizing that educators are structurally positioned within violent institutional and administrative systems and practices that mark trans and gender-nonconforming students as illegitimate subjects. Within this framework, assumptions about what constitutes violence

underestimate the way that it is the very administration of gender categories that creates “structured insecurity” (Spade, 2011, p. 29) for trans and gender-nonconforming people. As a result, I argue this position minimizes the violence that institutional processes (in which adults are very much involved) perpetuate in the lives of trans and gender-nonconforming students, along with the fact that administrative systems “are the greatest sources of danger and violence for trans people” (Spade, 2011, p. 38). While the effects of these systems and practices may be less visible than peer aggression, they create the foundation for school cultures that privilege gender conformity and heterosexuality, making gendered harassment and gender policing imaginable and even inevitable (Røthing & Svendsen, 2010; Diorio, 2006; Payne & Smith, 2013). Educators’ reliance on bullying and good teacher discourses is understandable given their dominance. It also gives educators tools to intervene (Smith, 2015) that, while ineffective in some ways, remain important for people who genuinely feel that they want to make a difference.

Overall, the willingness to consider one’s role in cisnormative systems was rare amongst participants. This may be in part an effect of the way that teachers are trained to produce their professional self within the discourse of good teacher that emphasizes that they have to “care for their students and make them feel safe and accepted” (Smith, 2015, p. 227). Many educators displayed an investment in producing themselves as good (therefore caring and open-minded) educators, for example when they assessed their classroom as open and inclusive, as when Addison, a teacher in District A, told me: “I have a safe classroom, a safe space classroom,” as if the force of her declarative statement was enough to make it so. Smith (2015) notes similarly of the teachers that she interviewed that “none of them accounts for the possibility that their antihomophobic interventions and commitment to tolerant attitudes may not create the powerful, nurturing effects that [they] imagine (p. 235).”

Alyson, a teacher in District C who learned about gender diversity from students and a speaker she had brought to her class, gave a good example of this discursive positioning when she explained, “I don't care what you do between the bed sheets. Like, it's none of my business. [...] That's the same thing with transgender. I don't care what's under your clothes. I don't see what's under your clothes. Like, be who you are.” Here, Alyson positions herself as someone who “[doesn’t] care” about sexual orientation or gender identity. The repeated use of the first person pronoun “I” suggests that the statement is as much about making a statement about Alyson as a (professional) individual than it is about affirming that a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity is unimportant. This particular framing is unsurprising given that participants self-selected into research related to trans and gender-nonconforming students. This makes it likely that they thought of themselves as supportive and thus produced themselves as such during our interview.

This is not to say that participants faked their supportive attitude. Instead I want to suggest that it is possible for educators to simultaneously understand themselves as open-minded *and* to express opinions (e.g., expressing doubt about the solidity of a student’s gender identity) or engage in practices (e.g., never teaching about gender diversity) that can contribute to creating schools that are not hospitable to trans and gender-nonconforming students. It is important to acknowledge that overall, the educators I spoke with expressed clear commitment to creating school environments hospitable for trans and gender-nonconforming students. Even if it was not always clear how this commitment translated into action, their opinions stood in sharp contrast with some of the misinformed and prejudiced opinions often reported in media cases where a student is excluded or marginalized by their school (Alamenciak & Green 2012; Payne, 2013). However, my goal is not to assess participants’ level of open-mindedness (a simplistic and

unrealistic goal given the nature of my data). Rather I am interested in thinking through what the framing of ‘open-minded adult’ accomplished in my conversations with educators, and what impact this has for how we think about the role of schools and educators.

One effect of the good teacher discourse and the subsequent production of oneself as a caring and open-minded educator is that it makes it difficult for educators to recognize how embedded they are in regulatory systems of power. Spade (2011) has noted the importance of looking “more at impact than intent” (p. 37) to understand process of subjection and marginalization (see also McKenzie, 2014). An emphasis on open-mindedness does exactly the opposite by highlighting identity and intention (who the person sees themselves to be) rather than action and impact (the effect of what they are doing).

Participants frequently talked about having always been accepting, as when Adeline, a teacher from District B, stated, “I think I’m the kind of teacher that has always been so open.” Missy, a staff member in District D who had never attended any training on gender diversity, shared something similar. She assured me that working with trans and gender-nonconforming students “didn’t bother [her] at all and it doesn’t shock [her]” because she had “always been that way. It’s like whatever, you know.” The notion of having ‘always’ been accepting, as Missy and Adeline expressed, reveals an identificatory investment: this is an important element of who the person sees themselves to be. Recognizing complicity with certain oppressive systems of power can be difficult if it risks jeopardizing an identity, such as that of open-minded person, in which the person has invested. If Missy had to consider how some of her (discursive or material) practices normalize cisnormative expectations in ways that undermine her statement that gender diversity is “whatever” to her, this might threaten her idea of herself as someone who is not “bother[ed] at all.”



Scholars have previously highlighted the role that discursive identifications can play in the maintenance of systems of marginalization; for example, the normative cultural stigma now attached to the idea of “racism” means most white people disidentify with the term and invest in the identity of a “colour-blind” actor unmotivated by racial biases (Bonilla-Silva, 2010).<sup>43</sup> Rather than eliminating racism, this discursive shift can make it difficult for white people to recognize how they still participate in racist institutional practices regardless of their intentions (Aveling, 2006; Solomona et al., 2005). Similarly, Ahmed (2012) has noted that “when criticality becomes an ego ideal, it can participate in not seeing complicity” (p. 179).

These examples underscore the way that “discursive technologies of power constitute, disavow, and resist particular knowledges” (Youdell, 2006, p. 37). Language shapes our understanding of marginalization (prejudice v. institutionalized mechanisms) but also of our position in systems of exclusion. Investments in an open-minded identity discursively distance individuals from the tarnish of prejudice. This positioning, just like that of colour-blindness, may make it complicated for educators to articulate the ways in which they are simultaneously supportive and embedded in systems that negatively impact the lives of trans and gender-nonconforming students (by organizing people through binary conceptions of genders via the physical space of school buildings, administrative practices such as the presence of gender on forms or class lists, school traditions that play up binary genders, etc.).

Fawn, a counsellor in District C, offered another example of the impact that these narratives of open-mindedness can have. She explained that she does not think she has “changed much in how [she] was presenting with regards to the issues [...] in [her] whole teaching career.”

---

<sup>43</sup> It may be worth noting that white participants in this study were less likely to produce themselves and school environments through this discourse of colour-blindness as much as through discourses of multiculturalism, as I have discussed in Chapter 3.

As a rationale for why she has not had to change much, she explained that “it was really early in [her] teaching career when [she] was a sponsor of a Gay/Straight alliance club.” As I have noted in my earlier analysis of GSAs, sponsoring a GSA, no matter how early on, does not necessarily mean much about one’s knowledge about gender diversity. This is especially true given how much the conversation about gender and sexuality has shifted since GSAs were first established (Miceli, 2005). Fawn herself acknowledged that she would “probably” benefit from more information “specifically on the transgender issue because I know little.” As she continued telling me about the possibility of professional development in the area of gender diversity, she added, “Maybe I will get some ideas of things I should do differently. At this point [...] nothing has come to mind that seems like oh, maybe if I did this it would help.”

Together, these two elements of her answer suggest that she differentiates having the appropriate knowledge (which she does not) from having the appropriate attitude (which she does) in a way that allows her to see herself as someone who does not need to change much despite not knowing much about an issue. Her lack of imagination (and of urgency) in thinking through what “would help” for her to do in particular suggests a certain amount of complacency that I argue is facilitated by the belief in one’s open-minded disposition. By positioning herself as someone who already has the right attitude, and although she recognizes she would benefit from having tools to act, Fawn has little incentive to try to figure out what she “should do differently.” Yet school cultures are replete with practices, routines, and discourses that privilege hetero- and cisnormative regimes of power that will not be dismantled through intentions but through active change.

The tendency to overprize open-mindedness over more systemic efforts to change schools was visible in many interviews. For example, Sam, the support staff in District A whom I quoted in the first part of this chapter, talked about his school in the following way:

I don't feel like we're super equipped to deal with trans kids at this school or anything like that, but I think we're ahead of the curve in that we're so open to it and want to help them and they'll see that. [...] I'm really okay with how things are here. Not that people couldn't learn more or anything like that or be better educated, but we're off to a really good start, you know.

Although Sam recognizes his school is not “super equipped to deal with trans kids” (an expression that positions trans and gender-nonconforming students as a problem to be solved) and acknowledges the staff could be “better educated,” he prioritizes intention - the open-minded and supportive attitude of the staff - in making his assessment. This leads him to evaluate his school positively.

A similar tension exists in the story that Marcel, a teacher in the same district, told me about his school introducing ‘safe space’ stickers:

We tried to identify certain places, or rooms, or people in the school that had already kind of demonstrated that they had some, call it skill or awareness. Don't call it skill [laughs] call it awareness. [...] I think it's a nice message to send out. I think it tells a kid that once you walk through that door you don't have to fear anything that way, or that you're going to have people supporting you if stuff happens.

Marcel recognizes that skill and awareness are different things. Yet the assumption persists in his account that having awareness is enough for students to trust they “don't have to fear anything” when interacting with that adult. Knowledge (implicitly positioned against the ignorance of less ‘enlightened’ teachers) is assumed to come with a capacity for supportive action, without that capacity being demonstrated.

This analysis does not diminish the fact that both Marcel and Sam were committed (as they displayed in these quotes as well as the rest of their interviews) to identifying themselves as

supportive adults. This is important; having access to supportive school staff has been shown to have a protective role for trans students (McGuire et al., 2010). They also had both invested time to create space for gender diversity in their classroom via drama exercises (Marcel) and his school's GSA (Sam). They are both educators who are trying their best *and* their talk displays investments that should be interrogated to understand the limits of how support is understood in schools. These investments are not specific to these educators but rather reflect a broader culture that disfavours systemic understandings of power (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). In particular, a possible effect of this focus on intention and open-mindedness is to minimize the ways in which someone may inadvertently create moments of unsafety or participate in oppressive institutional practices.

Like other discursive practices that I have discussed in this section, this framing gives educators few tools to discuss unintentional complicity in institutional practices that contribute to the maintenance of hetero- and cisnormativity in schools. Instead, self-perceptions of open-mindedness emphasize intention over action and tend to distance educators from moments where their institutional position might generate their complicity in regimes of power.

### **5.3.3 (Cis)normative systems**

In this section, I discuss how systems that enforce gender and sexual conformity were framed by educators to examine the effects of constructing these systems as static and/or separate from the actors that inhabit them. This section is divided discussion of two elements that educators framed as constraints in their work of supporting trans and gender-nonconforming students: administrative systems and local communities.

### 5.3.3.1 Administrative hurdles

Let's start with Fawn, the administrator in District C I discussed briefly earlier. She told me about a student transitioning at her school and described the process as relatively smooth. I asked what she thought it was about the school that made this possible, and she responded:

I don't know that it's particular to our school. I think it's the times. I think it's getting better in society in general. I hope so. That's my feeling is that it's certainly more tolerated than it was maybe years ago, if not even a little bit more accepting. So no, I don't think it's our school in particular. I wish we could take credit for it. I wish we had done something amazing. I don't think so. I don't have the feeling that we have. And myself as a person, I don't think there's been a real difference in what I was doing 20 years ago and what I'm doing now and yet I hear more of it now so I don't think it's me. I seem to be the constant, not the new.

In this quote, Fawn sets up her school's supportive attitude as a consequence of broader society ("I think it's the times") rather than as the result of anything "amazing" that the school did or has done. In fact, she denies that her school took an active role in the process: "I wish we could take credit for it. I wish we had done something amazing." She then draws a parallel with herself, also positioning herself as a static element rather than an agent of change: "I don't think there's been a real difference in what I was doing 20 years ago and what I'm doing now [...] so I don't think it's me."

While Fawn's modest attitude can be read as a laudable effort not to overemphasize the role played by her or by her school, I want to interrogate the impact of framing the school as a passive receiver of the broader culture, rather than as an integral part of the process of the cultural production. By suggesting that this student's transition went well despite her feeling that the school has not "done [any]thing amazing," Fawn is also inadvertently suggesting that school may not need to worry about taking an active role in making sure that they are hospitable to trans and gender-nonconforming students. Instead, schools can just wait for the broader society to

become more ‘tolerant.’ By extension, this framework could also imply that she does not need to think through her role in reproducing particular norms at her school. The use of the passive in the phrase “it’s getting better in society in general” reinforces this sense by erasing the grammatical – and actual – agent from the sentence. Who and what is contributing to things “getting better”? Without a sense of this, what we are left with is a picture of inevitable progress that is disconnected from activism and specific efforts to transform ideas and practices.

Liberal narratives of continuous and linear progress have been contested as narratives that enable a refusal to know persistent patterns of marginalization and the ways in which they shift to adapt to new cultural contexts (see Bonilla-Silva, 2006). In the context of a school, the idea that Canadian society and, thus, Canadian schools are “getting better” with no “real difference” between what people are doing now compared to 20 years ago removes the onus from the school system for its implication and investment in systems that (re)produce and enforce cis- and heteronormativity. This positioning fails to generate necessary conversations about the multiple every day and administrative practices that marginalize trans and gender-nonconforming students even as tolerance (and even acceptance) are professed.

Participants’ talk also tended to work to distance them from the part that they play in systems of power. I noticed that some educators framed systemic obstacles that they had encountered in a way that deemphasized their own institutional position in schools. Instead of articulating their own embeddedness in institutional regulations and practices, educators tended to focus on the constraints that they faced as actors working within a rigid system of hetero- and cishnormativity. In this process, participants described very real systemic barriers that illustrate the entrenched nature of the systems of power that educators face. Administrators in particular regularly discussed the difficulty of contending with these systems of administrative violence

when trying to modify student information in computer systems and on related documentation (class lists, diplomas, student cards, etc.).

Dawson, a counsellor in District D, explained the limits of her influence:

We can go in our kind of school records and change the identification but it's to be done at the kind of provincial level for all the formal transcripts and so on. We cannot. So the student remains officially on file with the Ministry of Education as being female.

By underlining the larger institutional context (the province and its Ministry), I argue that Dawson is indirectly acknowledging the ways life is managed and administered through aspects of government and the law, especially for trans and gender-nonconforming people (Spade, 2011). Dawson's use of the definitive 'we cannot' also illustrates the sense of powerlessness that many administrators and other educators feel in the face of these systems.

This emphasis on external limitations, however, does not recognize the various ways in which educators are themselves involved in administering these systems on an everyday basis. Yet this is where opportunities for disruption might arise. In one school, one of the administrators mentioned to me that they made sure their internal information system indicated the right gender marker and name for trans students who needed this information changed. I was surprised that this was possible, as I had heard from many other educators that they were frustrated by the inflexibility of the Ministry of Education's information system, and decided to interview the support staff who was in the charge of this school's information system.

This person proceeded to share with me the way that she doggedly changed the information for all the trans students back and forth whenever she needed to communicate with the Ministry's information system. This carefully timed procedure ensured that her school could

both comply with Ministry requirements<sup>44</sup> and also generate class lists and other internal administrative documents that featured students' correct names and gender information. While she noted that there were limits given that certain documents (such as report cards or diplomas) require that the school print students' legal names, her actions and support of her administrators stand out as interventions that clearly minimized the impact of administrative violence on trans and gender-nonconforming students.

In another district (District C), a different administrator, Claire, also illustrated the work involved in mitigating potential negative effects of rigid administrative systems with the following anecdote about provincial exams:

The worst part was definitely around the Ministry of Education because all of the transcripts, the diploma, everything was coming back to us with the girl name. Signing into provincial exams, [we] had to make a real point of being careful because they all have a little sticker on them with the name on them and everything identifying them, so alerting whoever was in there invigilating the exam that no, in fact this boy is on this girl's exam, that's okay.

The absence of grammatical subject in the passive phrase "everything was coming back to us" gives a disembodied impression of the Ministry of Education as a bureaucracy rather than an assemblage of people with whom discussion is possible. With no visible possibility for intervening into the ministry's persistent institutional misgendering of the student, Claire and other adults at the school had to lessen the damaging effects of this administrative violence by "being careful" and making sure that "whoever was in there invigilating the exam" has the proper information. In doing so, they are working in solidarity with the student and demonstrate

---

<sup>44</sup> At the time of writing, the BC Ministry of Education requires that a student provides specific documentation (an updated birth certificate or BC Services Card, or, as of recently, a letter from a health care provider) in order to change their name or gender on their Permanent Student Record Information.



a commitment, both discursive and material, to helping him navigate cisnormative systems that erase his existence.

In both the situations I have just described, adults are actively pushing back against systems and disrupting their functioning at the local level of their school; in doing so, they show that even an accommodation approach (which adapts and responds to individual situations) can involve necessary and powerful actions. Educators have language available to them to speak to that possibility.

While institutional constraints are real, educators' sense of being limited by existing systems was also a reflection of the fact that few of them possessed knowledge about the exact process of changing a student's gender marker or name in the provincial information system. This lack of clarity about procedures can obviously limit a person's sense that they can help a student with an administrative change of gender marker. However, it also has an impact that extends beyond gendered documentation. In the following quote, Alyson, the teacher in District C I quoted earlier, explained her understanding of why the trans girl in her class was using a single-user washroom rather than the girls' washroom:

I'm assuming more than I know [...] but basically it's the school's liability. You can't have a male using a female washroom. That's not acceptable, right? [...] So it had to be a legal designation in order for them to see it. [...] My guess is they would have had to contact the superintendent on that one. Again, this is assumption. But I am assuming that knowing who the vice-principal was he was probably pushing to allow the [...] student for her to use that female washroom but he doesn't even have that power to make that decision.

Alyson's story does not simply illustrate how well-intentioned educators can contribute and draw on essentialist discourses that deny trans subjectivities (as she does in misgendering this student by using the expression "a male using a female washroom"). As I have discussed at length in the first section of this chapter, washrooms are important sites of gendered regulation and violence

(Browne, 2004; Cavanagh, 2010; Halberstam, p. 22). As such, they constitute a key space for change that can create more trans-inclusive environments (Bender-Baird, 2015).

Instead of inviting an intervention into this system, however, Alyson's explanation defers to higher authorities (the law, the school district) to justify her school's decision to keep the student out of the girls' washroom. Her story also produces her vice-principal as someone who would help the student but is constrained by systems beyond his control. Here it is *the assumption* of transphobic institutional structures (rather than their actual presence) that serves to allow the structural and practical violence of gender conformity.

This anecdote also highlights how lack of knowledge about decision-making processes can encourage hesitation or/and inaction, both of which prevent educators from providing clear leadership to other staff and to students. Claims of ignorance can work as discursive resources to continue not knowing, and thus, not acting (Britzman, 1998). In contrast, educators who possessed clearer knowledge could sometimes help students navigate administrative systems, for example by reminding a student to fill out the appropriate paperwork before graduation so the correct name would appear on their diploma. When systems are portrayed as unchangeable and impersonal, the capacity for knowledge to enable advocacy becomes harder to see.

### **5.3.3.2 The risk of unsupportive local communities**

In addition to administrative systems, the other systemic obstacle educators identified was their school's local community. This was usually embodied by the specter of parent complaints. Blue, an administrator in District D who was just starting to work with a trans and gender-nonconforming student, told me: "Would I anticipate a phone call from a mother that a girl was in the bathroom watching her son? Yeah I do." Similarly, Annie, a counsellor in the same district

who worked closely with a student to support his transition at school, reported that parent complaints were the number one concern of another staff member: “she was worried because she said I’m just going to have so many parents calling me and how do I answer that?” Still in District D, Keith, a support staff, shared, “parents worry that the sky’s going to fall in if this kid uses the other washroom in a high school or whatever,” a concern he dismissed by talking about the fact that, in his experience, students’ transitions do not have a significant impact.

Existing research has shown that local communities and parents can resist efforts to challenge heteronormativity and gender conformity in schools (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; McCormack & Gleeson, 2010). We also witnessed this directly in B.C. on two separate and widely mediatized occasions (Dhillon, 2011; G. Johnson, 2014). Despite the fact that parents and the local community were frequently invoked as potential obstacles that limited what changes educators felt they could make to support trans and gender-nonconforming students, few participants actually encountered negative feedback from either group. In cases where students were open about their transition, participants were much more likely to relate they had witnessed positive or neutral reactions from parents. For example, the staff who was very concerned in Annie’s story above ended up talking to a couple of parents about the logistics of the transition, but no complaints was important enough to be reported to, or dealt with by, Annie.

By discussing the local context of the school, educators demonstrate an awareness of the cisnormative culture in which schools are embedded (Namaste, 2000; Shelley, 2008). But the assumed conservatism of parents and/or the community can function to avoid considering certain changes at the school, particularly systemic ones which might be more likely to draw outside attention. Invoking potential resistance from outside forces can allow educators to frame

themselves as open and accepting while also continuing to imagine a limited range of options for trans and gender-nonconforming students at their school.

Notably, these concerns about parents were not raised with equal frequency in every school: class and race played a part in how local communities were imagined. While class was evoked in contradictory ways (depending on the participant, working-class communities were framed as more *and* less likely to be accepting), racialized discourses were much more consistent. When they were explicitly mentioned, parents with immigrant/racialized backgrounds were more likely to be imagined as unsupportive or uninformed. For example, Blue, an administrator in District D, explained that “you’re dealing with a lot of different backgrounds, immigrant backgrounds, just exposure too.” When I asked her if that meant she would expect more resistance from immigrant families, she added, “I don’t know, it’s just something to consider as well, right. I don’t know necessarily if they would push back, but you can probably add that to the lists of questions [laughter] that may come at me right?”

This quote illuminates the way that racialized discourses can circulate in ways that do not simply peddle in obvious hateful stereotypes. For Blue, it is not that immigrant families will necessarily have negative reactions or “push back” against the school. In fact, she offers little judgment of the questions she imagines these families will have. Yet the fact that she envisions (implicitly racialized) immigrants as coming from places where supporting the right of trans students to access gender-affirming facilities is “not something you do” speaks to an imaginary connected to colonial ideologies that frame non-white communities as less accepting of sexual and gender diversity (Awwad, 2015; Gosine, 2012; Jackson, 2014). It also indirectly erases the existence of non-white trans and gender-nonconforming students.

These racialized discourses are not inevitable. In fact, in District C, Jerrilyn resisted the dominant narrative that frames one part of her district (the part with a higher percentage of South Asian students) as the part where more problems might arise in relation to gender diversity. Instead, she flipped this script on its head and framed the other part of the district, where white and wealthier families were in the majority, as the one where the issue might be contentious: “maybe in a school in the [other part] where the parents might have been a little bit more reactive or felt more ownership of what was going on in the school, you could have gotten [phone calls from parents].” I bring up this example to emphasize that, while dominant discourses are most available to educators and educators must often contend with them, there are also opportunities to resist and disrupt them.

In their discussions of both administrative systems and local communities, educators discussed barriers that in many ways have a real impact on the conditions of (im)possibilities that determine what can happen for trans and gender-nonconforming students in schools. At the same time, the way institutional obstacles were framed tended to minimize the ways in which schools are not simply shaped by their context, but actively constitute this context as well. This discursive emphasis on outside forces can make it difficult for educators to articulate a sense of possible agency within what are undeniable institutional constraints.

Educators are actors within systems of power, who make daily decisions that can either confirm and naturalize these systems, or question and resist them. It is precisely the fact that “signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects” (Butler, 1990) that there are chances for resistance and disruptions. However, these opportunities have to become discursively imaginable before they can be realized, and few of the discourses that my

participants drew upon allowed for the generation of such possibilities; instead, they tended to entrench (and in some cases, justify) dominant narratives and existing practices.

#### **5.4 Reactive accommodation versus cultural change**

The tension between accommodation and cultural change has run as a thread throughout this chapter. I turn my attention to this tension and in particular to the limitations of the accommodation approach. First, however, it is important to acknowledge that the language of accommodation in North American law and culture is deeply connected to conversations about disability (as well as religion and pregnancy/parenting, particularly in the workplace). Many scholars have highlighted the conflicting usages and effects of the language of accommodation and the mandates that have followed from it. For example, although accommodations themselves are individualized, Bagenstos (2003) notes that the intention of accommodation law is to “overcome systematic patterns of stigma and subordination by targeting [the practices] that undergird[] those patterns” (p. 830; see also Finley, 1986; Arnow-Richman, 2003).

Accommodation sometimes leads to restructuring space in significant ways (providing ramps, accessible washrooms, etc.). At the same time, the rhetoric of accommodation often re-naturalizes neoliberal notions of the subject and of individual productivity: “once these accommodations have been provided, it is the individual responsibility of a person with a disability to seek integration into the society and to make herself productive in the market economy” (Vazquez, 2011, p. 2). Similarly, the assumption is often that the lack of individual accommodations is the only thing standing in the way of trans and gender-nonconforming students’ full participation in education.

Other scholars have also underlined the way that accommodation's legal and routine attachment to 'reasonable' assumes that accommodation is "is inherently 'unreasonable' or, at the very least, ambiguous as to its reasonableness" (Davis, 2007, p. 536) and points to its entanglements with settler colonialism (Legassie, 2009). Davis (2007) summarizes the tensions in the notion of accommodation in this way:

On one hand, 'accommodation' calls attention to the fact that traditional notions of workers, workplaces and workplace standards do not accurately reflect reality. On the other hand, 'accommodation' perpetuates the idea that the 'ideal worker' exists, and only through exceptions in the form of accommodations can other workers who are not "ideal" be included in the workplace. (p. 546)

Likewise, in the context of schools, accommodations for trans and gender-nonconforming students often re-naturalize the 'ideal' (heterosexual, cisgender, gender-conforming) student without questioning the structures and norms that normalize certain subjectivities and existences over others.

Asch (2001) notes the need for disability policy and politics to shift this dominant framing and instead highlight the ways in which "the nondisabled majority, too, is "accommodated in all manner of ways by social and architectural structures" (p. 402). Similarly, for gender diversity in schools, a cultural change approach would seek to alter the way that school life is organized by cisnormativity – what Payne & Smith (2015) call the "institutional privileging of binary gender [and] the deeply rooted stigma associated with transgender and gender nonconforming identities" (p. 1). A focus on cultural change "includes logistical adjustments to accommodate the needs of individual students in specific contexts" (Smith & Payne, 2016, p. 44) but does not end there. Instead it understands these adjustments as part of a larger program of cultural and structural change.

Having acknowledged this context, I examine the specificities of the tension between accommodation and cultural change when it comes to gender diversity in schools. First, I examine the fact that most educators come to work with trans and gender-nonconforming students in a reactive manner: this encourages and even structures the dominant accommodation approach. I then turn my attention to moments of transformation that occasionally came up in my conversations in order to look at the possibilities for change that educators highlighted.

#### **5.4.1 The limits of reactive responses**

Many of the educators I spoke with had come to work with trans and gender-nonconforming students unexpectedly. As a result, they often had given relatively little thought to trans issues or to gender diversity before a trans and gender-nonconforming student came out to them, started attending their school, or took their class. Given these circumstances, the process of making the school or class more hospitable to trans and gender-nonconforming students was almost always a reactive process, one that was attached to a particular body, a particular student, and a particular set of circumstances. This generally created a ‘crisis’ that then needed to be resolved.

Annie, the counsellor in District D I mentioned earlier, told me about a situation where a trans student was wanting to socially transition at school but did not have the full support of their parent. I was asking some follow-up questions to understand what kinds of decisions the school took as a result, and Annie remarked:

When you ask those questions I’m thinking maybe more could have been done, but it was always so busy at that school, it always felt like there was people coming in or crisis situations happening and you don’t always have time to be proactive and sit down and think about things and then do something about it because all that takes a lot of time.



Annie is explicitly using the language of crisis here explicitly to describe the fact that her school functioned in a reactive manner (“you don’t always have time to be proactive”). What Annie is indexing here is the fact that schools often work in a reactive manner, not just with trans and gender-nonconforming students but as a default setting (Emanuelsson, 2001). This is in part because of the very real time constraints put on all school staff (“you’re always so busy,” says Annie). These constraints need to be situated in the context of neoliberal educational policies that increasingly tighten budgets, increase student load per teacher and counsellor, and cut funding for social programs (Apple, 2001; Davidson-Harden et al., 2009; Hursh & Martina, 2003).

Reactivity is part of the accommodation approach, and is often the default mode of functioning in schools, underlining the importance of examining its effects. Unpacking the rhetoric of accommodation, Davis (2007) points out that the fact that accommodation’s link to the notion of crisis emphasizes its connection to the extraordinary and temporary, instead of imagining accommodation as a matter of routine and structure (p. 546). This re-emphasizes particular moments or students as the focus of accommodation.

Patrick was a counsellor in District C who had supported a young trans man through transition at his school and had originally struggled with the idea that the student’s transition would be announced openly in the student’s classes. He provided an example of how a reactive process can shape future decisions:

I guess if this situation walked into my counseling office again, today, it would be easier to handle it today, because we've done it before. Now, it would be hard not to do the same thing, because this is what we did the last time. It would be almost like we aren't approving it if we didn't announce it. Does that make sense?

Patrick’s description that you “handle” a situation once it “walk[s] into your counselling office” perfectly illustrates the most common way that schools and educators tended to imagine their

relationship to trans and gender-nonconforming students: as individuals that need help, guidance, or accommodation once they request it. This approach is fundamentally reactive (rather than proactive) in nature. As the rest of Patrick's quote shows, this reactive approach can create tension between the desire to learn from previous experiences and the instinct to individualize responses. Patrick imagines that if "the situation" came up again, it would be "easier to handle it [...] because we've done it before." Yet at the same time, Patrick worries that this previous experience would have too much of an impact on future responses: "it would be hard not to do the same thing."

In this specific case, Patrick is worried that not doing the same thing (openly announce the student's transition) would indicate disapproval ("it would be almost like we aren't approving it if we didn't announce it"). The unstated issue in this quote is, what if the next student does not want to "announce it" and be this public about their transition? I want to draw attention to the fact that Patrick finds it difficult to imagine how the school could show that it "approves" without making a public announcement. This understanding of what approval looks like could easily create a potential conflict in the future, should another student not desire to be public about being trans.

The assumption underlying this perspective is that support and approval by a school depends on the visibility of individual students, echoing Airton's (2013) concern that "making space for queerness in education has generally meant making space for queers" (p. 541) and thus necessitates visible queer (and trans) subjects.<sup>45</sup> This is part of the issue of a reactive approach: decisions made in the context of individual situations become by necessity meaningful and

---

<sup>45</sup> See also Talburt & Rasmussen (2010) who problematize a similar need as fueling queer educational research.

representative of the school's broader perspective on gender diversity because they are the only decisions that are made.

As I have already argued in Chapter 4, the strong desire of educators to follow the lead of the student and their family also encourages this individualist, reactive approach. The assumption is that waiting for individualized instructions from the student and their family is the best way for schools to be supportive of trans and gender-nonconforming students. Dawson, a counsellor in District D, illustrated this phenomenon when she discussed a meeting that she had with a mom and her son, who was just starting the process of social transition:

So [at the meeting] the student was able to bring up a couple of things that he wanted addressed that ... for us to manage or deal with here and also to tell us what he didn't want to happen. So for example, [the district employee they consulted] had said something like, you know, if the student wants to be very out and almost like at a school wide level there are ways to go about that. But the student does not want that at all and, you know, this isn't what that looks like. So to ask the student how they wanted to manage it.

This quote is peppered with expressions that emphasize the individual student and his needs: ("things that he wanted addressed", "what he didn't want to happen"). As a result, doing something "at a school wide level" depends on how the student "[wants] to manage it" and whether he wants to be out.

Many students do not, for a multitude of reasons, want to be particularly out; scholars have problematized the limits of dominant 'coming out' narratives and their collusion with neoliberal discourses, often noting that these limits may be especially felt by indigenous students and students of colour who also have to navigate the vulnerabilities created systems of racism and settler colonialism (Clark, 2005; Saxey, 2008; Smith, 2010). Although educators discussed a number of students who wanted to use their experience to educate their peers and adults about

gender diversity and gender identity, I also heard many stories of students who wanted nothing more than to be ‘stealth’ – they did not wish to have their trans history disclosed, even to other adults at the school. There are undoubtedly problems that arise when schools rely on “the recognition of individual rights and the possibility of a youth speaking themselves into existence” (Loutzenheiser, 2015, p. 109) to make changes.

What I want to interrogate here is not the decision by individual students to be out or not, but rather the fact that these individual decisions about visibility get attached to what it means to create an inclusive school. In this paradigm, accommodation only has the potential to create broader cultural change if the student and/or their family asks for it. What would it look like to think about supportive and inclusive school before a student has explicitly expressed a need for accommodation? What would it look like to question the cisnormative organization of school while simultaneously respecting individual students’ need for privacy?

The handful of educators who spoke to this possibility were educators who had already been involved in actively changing their school’s culture before the trans or gender-nonconforming student came to them. This had usually taken the form of queer-related school activism (i.e., sponsoring their GSA, campaigning against common homophobic slurs, teaching with materials that include representations of gender and sexual diversity). This type of activism contains some potential for challenging the logics of neoliberal rationalization that espouse privatized (and thus individualized) understandings of students as consumers and “displac[e] democracy and equality as governing principles in provisioning goods like education” (Brown, 2011, p. 199). As such, it offers a hopeful glimpse into how efforts for cultural change could be mobilized without needing a visible trans and gender-nonconforming body as a catalyst.

It is also worth asking about the systemic and cultural conditions that make the ‘choice’ to be out more or less available, more or less dangerous, to individual students. These conditions are themselves part of why cultural change is so needed in schools when it comes to gender diversity. Jennifer, a counsellor in District D who had supported several trans students, discussed the difference she had seen between students who were out and students who were not. She felt that when students had “been able to be out and talk about it, [...] it was a lot easier for them than to try to constantly try to hide the secret and not getting caught and not getting found out.” Yet the choice not to be open about one’s trans status is not an idiosyncratic one, and it is important to ask what creates secrecy as a viable (even necessary) condition of survival for young trans and gender-nonconforming people in schools. When Jennifer says, “I just wish we could get to the point where coming out as transgender is just as non-eventful as coming out as gay or lesbian or whatever,” part of what she is getting at is precisely the cisnormativity that still structures society and the school system.

Jennifer acknowledged this when she recognized that one of the reasons that these students often do not wish to be out as trans is that “they’ve come from different experiences and they’ve been burned.” However, when I asked her if there was anything she could imagine the school could do to make it easier for these students to come out, she was at a loss:

I can’t see anything that we would do differently. It’s such a welcoming environment. For my kids that aren’t out, I know [if] they came out, I feel confident that they would be just fine. I feel that they’d be friends, have friends, I don’t think that they’d be isolated. Could I guarantee it? No, there’d be at least one or two people that would say something and do something stupid and horrible probably. Do I think that they’d be in danger? No, I don’t. [...] I can’t say anything that the school can do differently, I just wish we could get to the point where coming out as transgender is just as non-eventful as coming out as gay or lesbian or whatever.

The last part of this quote is particularly interesting to me because it juxtaposes the idea that

there is not “anything that the school can do differently” with the wish that being or coming out as trans could be “non-eventful.” Is there nothing, then, that a school could do to contribute to this cultural shift where being trans would no longer be a negative marker of difference?

Jennifer mentions that her school is a “welcoming environment” and that she doesn’t think students would “be isolated” if they came out. However, she gives a more complex sense of her school when she continues by saying that some people “would say something and do something stupid and horrible probably.” Yet she is certain that the students would not “be in danger.” Being able to go to school without feeling in danger, but “probably” having a couple of people say “horrible” things to you is a very different picture than a school that is a “welcoming environment.” By throwing all these things in together, Jennifer seems to be conflating safety with acceptance. While cisnormativity involves the enabling of overt physical and verbal violence onto trans and gender-nonconforming bodies, it is far from being its only potent aspect. It is living with the constant potential of verbal but also administrative and structural violence that makes the lives of trans and gender-nonconforming people – including students – more difficult. As the student Simon remarked in his earlier quote, a place does not need to be unsafe for one’s existence to be made invisible, which is a form of violence.

The implications of a reactive and individualistic approach were also visible when people told me about how their experiences would impact them moving forward. Ramona, a teacher in District D, explained that she would have more confidence should a similar situation arise:

We certainly might know a bit more about what to talk with the family about in terms of the things that, you know, the school would be dealing with and how we would need to work with them around some things. [...] Certainly, you know, the logistics of getting the pictures taken [...], how to organize for sports and field trips.

Although the obstacles that Ramona mentions are tightly connected to systemic cisnormative practices, her answer is one that focuses on responding to an individual case: “what to talk with the family about in terms of the things that, you know, the school would be dealing with.” There is little sense of what could be done before the situation arises again, or whether it could be the organization of sports and field trips that is changed so that there might be less of a need for individual accommodation. These are not likely to be changes that Ramona could enact alone as a single educator, so I am not suggesting that the failure is Ramona’s. I am arguing that it is telling that these changes do not enter the conversation.

Karine, a counsellor in District B, offered a similar answer when I asked her how her work with trans and gender-nonconforming students had changed how she approaches her work:

I hope all the kids I work with change (laughs) how I work because it’s just, you learn from, I don’t know, it just gives me more perspective and hopefully more tools from their experiences to help other students and guide them through the process and say, just be there to be able to support and think, like, not offer, like, this is something that might have worked for someone else not necessarily going to work for you but give them some options or some reassurance that you can figure things out and what supports there are. Probably finding out what community supports or different things there are for students, it’s helped me in that way, to know. And it’s helped educate me what classrooms to put them (laughs) in. What teachers and what peer groups and those kinds of things would be safe, healthy places for them to be.

Karine says that working with trans student has given her “more perspective and hopefully more tools from their experiences to help other students and guide them through the process.”

However, her answer features a very limited range of what she imagines that help and guidance could be. When she talks about “giv[ing] them some options or some reassurance that [they] can figure things out and what supports there are,” all these elements focus on how she can help the student through a personal crisis, but there is little sense of the context that the student has to

navigate and what changes might happen with that context – rather than with the student themselves – to create a more supportive situation.

In some ways, it is expected that her answers would cater to individuals. As a counsellor, her primary concern is to the individual students who are her clients. But as she notes herself in later part of this quote, context matters. When she says that working with trans and gender-nonconforming students has “helped educate me what classrooms to put them in, what teachers and what peer groups and those kinds of things would be safe, healthy places for them to be,” she is acknowledging that the teachers and peers that trans and gender-nonconforming students are surrounded by can make a space more or less “safe” and “healthy.” Yet this acknowledgment does not come with a sense of what she, the counselling team, or the school could do to make sure that teachers and peers are more consistently supportive of trans and gender-nonconforming students. Instead, identifying community supports and carefully selecting classes for trans and gender-nonconforming students are options that mitigate risk rather than challenge the existence of unsafe or unhealthy places. In other words, these options are about adapting to a cisnormative school culture rather than addressing and changing it.

These anecdotes illustrate the tensions and questions that arise when individual needs are considered separately from institutional changes. These tensions are highest when individual needs can be contrary to the need for broader cultural shifts. Scott, a teacher in District D, provides a final example. He explained that when he has trans and gender-nonconforming students in his classroom, he makes an effort to ensure that “nothing’s changed in a lot of ways because, you know, there's nothing worse than the elephant in the room.”

While there is undoubtedly well-meaning concern in Scott’s desire not to make trans and gender-nonconforming students feel singled out, the consequences of enacting this approach are



that it becomes difficult to bring gender diversity into the curriculum if there is a trans and gender-nonconforming student in the class. Yet this content is unlikely to have already been present in the curriculum. Ryan et al. (2013) suggest that teachers are just starting to include gender diversity in K-12 education, while Case et al. (2009) and Wentling et al. (2008) show that even undergraduate courses often do not yet address this topic.

Given this context, the desire not to put a trans or gender-nonconforming student on the spot (as Scott describes) can result in a lack of curricular changes. There is little indication from Scott that he prioritized addressing potential gaps in his curriculum after the student was no longer in the class. Often, educators often felt that their previous experience with one or several trans and gender-nonconforming students had prepared them for the next time that a trans and gender-nonconforming student would walk into their office or classroom. However, it rarely spurred them to re-think school or classroom practices more systematically. In an individualizing and reactive approach, questions of disclosure and education are enmeshed in individual students' needs and requests. It becomes difficult for educators to imagine what transforming schools to be inclusive of gender diversity could or should look like when an individual student's safety or acceptance is not at stake.

I argue that it is in fact crucial to think about how cultural changes for schools should happen even when they are simultaneous with a request for complete privacy by a student. Some of these changes, as Case & Meier (2014), Smith & Payne (2016) and Miller (2015b) propose, could include familiarizing educators with a wide range of gender identities outside of the gender binary, making representations of gender diversity available in the curriculum and beyond, minimizing (by eliminating or providing alternatives to) gender-segregated activities and spaces, training educators to recognize and respond to disparaging comments about gender-

nonconformity, and reducing administrative practices that rely on binary gender categories. These changes are crucial because they can create the conditions for other trans and gender-nonconforming students to feel recognized and respected in schools regardless of one student's personal decision to be visible or not.

This call for cultural change should come with an effort to resist universalizing narratives about all trans and gender-nonconforming students and assume that we can unquestionably anticipate everyone's needs – as scholars of disability have pointed out, the flexibility of individual accommodations can be crucial (Carter et al., 2012; Kurth & Mellard, 2006). These changes are also needed to loosen the grip that dominant gender discourses have on everyone, what Airton (2013) calls the possibility of “envision[ing] idiosyncratic lives regardless of their past, present or future affinities, expressions and/or sexual object choice(s), or the degree to which these change over time” (p. 551). Instead, they would offer new discourses about gender diversity that educators could draw on.

Finally, the necessity to think beyond individual circumstances for accommodation is particularly important for gender-nonconforming and non-binary students, whose lives can often less often be easily accommodated into the existing structures and practices of schools. For them, more cultural and institutional changes are necessary to disrupt marginalizing practices that often render them unintelligible within school systems.

#### **5.4.2 Questioning and changing practices**

While the reactive accommodation approach dominated transcripts, educators also provided examples of moments where they or their school went beyond accommodation and enacted cultural changes. These moments are essential to highlight because they provided examples of

what change can look like, even with the inevitable contradictions and complexities that arise when educators navigate the hetero- and cisnormative terrain of their school. Some of these moments of change unsettle the assumption that cultural shifts are necessarily more complicated than individual accommodations, and they provide a helpful reminder that although cisnormative practices and discourses are prevalent in schools, often built into established routines and naturalized, they are not inevitable.

I discussed earlier the limitations of dominant discourse of ‘good teacher’ to which educators are professionally accountable, which sets a context for educators producing themselves discursively as open-minded and caring adults. Encouragingly, many participants explicitly acknowledged that this open-mindedness did not negate the need to educate themselves. Ray, a principal in District B, recognized that he and his colleagues were in the process of “trying to get as much knowledge on this issue as we possibly can.” He added, “I mean anyone that tells you they’re an expert on here, they’re lying to you, because this is a new issue in our schools, and it’s something that we’re all trying to learn about, right?”

Echoing Ray’s formulation, educators often refused the label of ‘expert’ and readily admitted they still had learning to do. This was the case sometimes even when they had considerable experience working with trans and gender-nonconforming students, had worked in schools for decades, and, in many cases, had advanced degrees in education.

Amy, who had been a principal for ten years and was working with a trans student in District D for the first time, provided a nuanced self-assessment: “I just think I still have a lot of room for growth and understanding. I’m a very accepting person so that’s not, um, I think that’s never been an issue.” Amy combines a sense of continuity in her identity as an open-minded person (the adverb ‘never’ in the phrase “that’s never been an issue” marks this continuity) with

the awareness that she could be more knowledgeable about the needs of trans and gender-nonconforming students (“I still have a lot of room for growth”).

These acknowledgements are important because, unlike the positioning of unquestionable ally or expert, they suggest a willingness to learn. As I have argued, producing oneself as open-minded can limit one’s ability to see oneself as complicit in institutional systems and thus obscure potential opportunities for intervention in these systems. When this identity is produced in conjunction with discourses that position the speaker as a continuous learner, however, productive possibilities for change arise. The relation to knowledge is framed as ongoing, rather than fixed onto a specific identity, opening up potential for the interception and disruption of existing meanings (Youdell, 2006, p. 48).

Along with these efforts to highlight the need for learning, a number of educators spoke directly to their attempts at changing small and big things about the way they approach their professional practice and/or informal interactions with their colleagues and students. One of the primary changes that educators were likely to report had to do with language. For example, Sam from District A explained that he was “finding it really difficult” with not saying ‘hey guys,’ an expression which one of the GSA students was pushing him to stop using, but that he was making efforts to curtail his use of this gendered expression. Sunnychick, a counsellor in District B, talked about how she “notices when conversations come up and when jokes happen” more than she used to because she has “people who I am definitely connected with who have emotional attachments to these comments.” This has also led her to want to make a difference by interrupting certain comments and educating herself about proper language. These efforts at linguistic changes are small but highlight a willingness to question one’s discursive practices.

Because discourse and action are interconnected, building an awareness of language is an important first step.

Other changes had more to do with questioning established practices. Alyson, the teacher in District C I've mentioned a few times, wondered out loud about a new class she was going to teach given that the tradition was to separate boys and girls for sexual health education:

That question actually came to me the other day when someone had mentioned that to me and I went oh, there's an issue. Maybe it won't be an issue in this school but they're going to have to think about that because what if you have a student who doesn't know where they fit right now. What room are they going to, right? And so it just made me question more and I like that.

Alyson may not have given much thought to this gendered division before. This time, however, “the question actually came to [her].” Interestingly, she first frames the problem of gender segregation for this class as a definitive one (“oh there’s an issue”) but then immediately turns it into a potential instead: “maybe it won’t be an issue in this school.” This is because Alyson sees this gendered division as posing a problem only “if you have a student who doesn't know where they fit right now.” As a result, for her the question of gendered division is not an immediate concern. Rather it is one that they are “going to have to think about” in preparation for the possibility of a trans and gender-nonconforming student who would not ‘fit’ easily into existing gendered categories.

There is little sense from Alyson’s quote that this gendered division may also be problematic in itself because it reinforces a culture of cisnormativity, and that cisgender or gender-conforming students may also be impacted negatively by the (cisnormative) assumption that boys and girls should learn about their bodies and sexual health separately. Without that discursive recognition, it becomes difficult for Alyson to move out of the accommodation framework. Alyson’s final acknowledgment that her new awareness of trans and gender-

nonconforming students “made [her] question more and I like it” is a powerful one in that it gestures towards a willingness to interrogate oneself. This interrogation is a necessary starting point for enacting cultural change. It gives a different inflection to the rest of the quote, providing a glimpse that Alyson has been durably affected by her experience of working with a trans student.

Later in our conversation, Alyson did demonstrate the way that the accommodation framework can be simultaneously evoked and challenged by educators. I asked her if her experience of having a young trans woman in her class had made her think about the way she teaches, and she emphatically answered, “Very much so actually.” She went on to tell me about an activity she organizes where students create “genetic babies” in order to understand how genetics works:

And I used to always have the males line up on one side and the girls line up on another side and I'd pick. Well, this year I stopped and I went well this is dumb [sic], right? Like I need to really rethink this. And so we actually pulled out of a hat. So there was two boys together and two girls together and there was some mixed pairs. And so just little things like that, how I pair students, how I ... even the way in which I present rather than, you know, always that, you're mom, you're dad. I've had to really learn that one through the years in many situations. I've had numerous students who either have two dads or two moms and now having a transgender student that just adds a whole new ... a whole new thing for me to think about.

In this quote, Alyson shows how cis- and heteronormative assumptions used to organize this class activity: male and female students were separated out and paired accordingly to create reproductive pairs supposed to imitate family structure (“you’re mom, you’re dad”). However, the presence of a young trans woman in the class made Alyson realize she needed to “really

rethink this.” She easily transformed the activity so that pairs would no longer be created according to hetero- and cisnormative expectations:<sup>46</sup> “so we actually pulled out of a hat.”

Towards the end of the quote, she admits that she has long had students who “either have two dads or two moms” and thus already put into question the original concept for the activity, yet it is “now having a transgender student” in her class that led her to change up the activity to be more inclusive. This quote highlights the concurrent potential and limit of relying on individual circumstances (the presence of an individual student) to create systemic change. On one hand, the presence of trans student has transformed Alyson’s practice in a durable way: she indicated later in the interview that she would continue to lead this particular unit in this new way. On the other hand, the previous presence of students with queer families had not previously encouraged Alyson to rethink her practice. This underlines the fact that educators may be simultaneously supportive of individual circumstances (there is no indication that Alyson was not welcoming of students with queer families in her class) and continue to engage in professional practices that create an institutional environment where, in this case, queerness is made invisible and straightness made hyper-visible. In other words, sustainable change can happen out of a reactive, accommodative approach but it does so inconsistently. As such it is not a reliable way to change school cultures.

In other cases, educators told me about changes that occurred beyond single classrooms. Ramona was a teacher in District D who had extensive knowledge about gender and sexual diversity, and had supported colleagues with queer and trans issues in the past. She described an institutional change at her school:

---

<sup>46</sup> It does, however, maintain the primacy of the dyad in imagining families.

At the end of the year, we make our cards with all the students' names on them, [...] for class placement when you are setting the classes for next year. And they used to be pink and blue. [...] We decided a few years ago that we weren't okay with the gendered color, so now they are completely neutral and we just carry on.

The decision to challenge the school's reliance on the gender binary for class placement questioned the instinctive reliance on gender categories that structures schools. It offers a promising glimpse into possibilities for disrupting and changing school cultures. Importantly, Ramona notes that this change has been easy ("and we just carry on"), which highlights that the pervasive reliance on gender is often based in tradition rather than necessity.

As simple as Ramona makes the change sound, it also challenged something more fundamental about the way that educators sometimes work: the dominant idea that boys and girls are different, and thus need to be taught differently (Epstein et al., 1998; Skelton, 2001). Ramona explained, "Next year I have 20 boys and nine girls in my class, who cares. It actually doesn't make a difference to me in how I teach if there are more boys than girls and who knows." The challenge to the dominant discourse that boys and girls have fundamentally different learning needs is in some ways more radical – in its literal sense – than the move away from gendered colours for class placements. Ultimately, both practice and discourse are profoundly intertwined: gendered cards performatively produce and give force to gendered assumptions, while gendered assumptions make the practice of gendered placement cards seem possible and even logical.

Clark, the teacher from District A that I have mentioned previously, was one of the more articulate participants on questions of gender diversity. She also drew explicitly on discourses that frame gender as important for class composition. In answer to a question about when gender might become relevant in school, she explained:

I'm wondering, what's my male/female ratio gonna be – that's a time where I would be curious... just because... speaking in a huge generalization, males tend to learn



differently from females, especially struggling males, so, if I've got 15 males and 3 girls, versus... kind of an equal balance, or the opposite, yeah – it would just – it would mean something different for me, in the way that I approach things.

In this excerpt, Clark acknowledges that this is “a huge generalization.” Still, she makes use of this generalization in preparing for her class and shaping her approach to teaching.

This quote is interesting illustrates how gender can organize teaching and schooling, but it also highlights the contradictions that many participants negotiated. Shortly before, Clark had shared with me her annoyance with the gendered medals that were given out at a sporting event that she attended. The idea that people giving out medals would have to make a determination as to whether the athlete was a man or a woman “horrificed” her and frustrated her enough that she briefly digressed from our interview so that she could share this anecdote with me. Her awareness of the problems raised by the reliance on appearance to make assumptions about someone's gender stands in contrast with her admission that she herself relies on binary gender categories to make assumptions about student learning and the dynamics of her class.

Yet Clark was also one of the few people I interviewed who brought up the possibility that it is the very organization of washrooms as gender-segregated that might need to be questioned, another indication that she had grappled with the problems that arise from assuming that the gender binary is an unproblematic way to organize spaces and practices. She told me about a conference that she had attended with some of the GSA students where the bathroom set-up caught her and her students' attention:

So they had a male and a female bathroom but they also had a mixed gendered bathroom, and the kids were freaked out, they loved it. They were just like, this is so amazing. [...] But they love that idea, why do we have to have a male bathroom and a female bathroom and... and Darryl, the president of our club, was like – he said even for him sometimes he doesn't know – where he wants to, where he wants to go – I mean as far as I know his gender pronoun is he, but he – y'know, he wears make-up, and he loves... doing his nails and he said, sometimes I feel more comfortable in a female bathroom.

In this excerpt, Clark questions the necessity for gender segregation in washrooms through her students' comment, "why do we have to have a male bathroom and a female bathroom." She strengthens this claim by giving an example that shows that the binary system is flawed for trans students but also for students who, like Darryl, may not be looking to transition from one binary category to another but do not fit neatly into these pre-existing gendered categories. Although Clark is primarily relaying her students' experience of gender-inclusive bathrooms ("they loved it"), she makes no attempt to discursively soften these claims or to insert a different assessment.

At the same time, when I asked Clark if she could envision her school implementing gender-inclusive washrooms, she responded:

I wonder. I mean I think it's a wonderful idea in theory um... I think the only, we just have to think about like... um... like the logistics around um safety and security and that kind of thing. I mean I think if you have the provision of... gender-specific bathroom and you can choose that... and you also have the provision of a... mixed-gender bathroom, if you choose that, then probably – no big deal.

Unlike when she was reporting the students' enthusiasm at gender-inclusive options, Clark expresses a more cautious perspective in this quote. She contrasts "it's a wonderful idea in theory," with the practical reality of this change, which she sees as being constrained by "the logistics around safety and security." Although it is not clear who is the "we" that has to think about these logistics, it seems to refer to adults (since this is the group that Clark is part of). This framing positions adults (in possible opposition to the idealistic GSA students) as actors who have to remain grounded in the reality of their institution: gender-inclusive washrooms may be wonderful "in theory" but not in practice (note that, as I have discussed earlier and in the previous chapter, it is again safety that is invoked to justify the difficulty of putting theory into practice). Clark continues with a compromise as she suggests that if "mixed-gender bathroom[s]"

were paired with gender-segregated bathrooms, then the situation would probably be “no big deal.” This option is not trivial: it involves a significant reorganizing of space in the school. It also leaves untouched the binary foundation – creating a space of exception rather than a radical challenge to the way gender organizes school structures (see previous work on accommodation logics in neoliberal times, such as Arnow-Richman, 2003; Davis, 2007; Vazquez, 2011).

I argue that the compromise that Clark arrives at illustrates the complicated negotiations that she and other educators have to engage in. Many of them are trying to accommodate trans and gender-nonconforming students and changed ingrained school practices, but they have to contend with discursive and physical constraints shaped by cisnormativity and its reliance on a fixed gender binary. Similarly, the tension between Clark’s admission that she takes gender into account in class composition and her efforts to disrupt cisnormative practices in other areas does not have to signal insincerity on her part. Instead I argue t

This very tension indicates that she is negotiating contradictory discourses, and speaks to the tenacity of cisnormativity in the current culture. Additionally, we all live complex gendered lives that at times reify notions of masculinity and femininity. This means that gendered patterns can develop, regardless and maybe because of the constructedness of gender. This can make gender relevant in certain contexts such as a classroom, especially with teenagers whose bodies have already, in the words of Sarah Ahmed (2006), “[taken] the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force” (p. 91). Even when we are aware of the gender binary as a social construction and organizing concept – even when we are frustrated with how prevalent this binary is, and even when we are dedicated to challenging it, as Clark is – it can continue to arrange our thoughts and our approach to the world in certain situations, because it often impacts our embodied material experiences.

Zoe, a teacher in District B, provides another example of the complexities that infuse efforts to change school cultures. In the course of our interview, she offered a thoughtful reflection on how gender shapes her (and others') teaching:

I'm even thinking in terms of um... assumptions of gender. [...] Even the simplest thing, we talk to kids when they answer examples from government exams, that they have to be really careful when they look at the name because they should get the poet's gender right. [...] But when we do that, that's fair, and I understand that, but when we do that, what are we actually teaching kids then about – because we assume they know what looking at the world like a male means – like we assume they know that, so chances are we're making assumptions like that // whatever we're assuming, and all of us are assuming, is what the current belief of society is, which is not actually – fair. Or full. It's not a full – it's a stereotyped version of how men look at the world, or how women look at the world, and – we don't, we don't – [...] [with this poem] kids could sort of tell that [the author was] female because of some of the description or detail or the attention – the sensitivity of the writer, and that's a real – that – if you don't catch that with kids, and you don't actually teach them to be aware of that immediate bias, that's not true at all. There are many men who are highly descriptive, artistic and sensitive, and we just assume and then run with that. And we kind of just ignore it, like in our teaching.

At the start of the quote, Zoe establishes gender as something that is seen as vital in the context of learning: students should be “really careful” when identifying an author's gender and “should get [it] right.” The use of the modal verb ‘should’ implies an obligation and frames gender as something that is fundamental to a person and their work. As such, it is a piece of information that must be identified but correctly so – to identify it incorrectly, the passage implies, would have a negative impact on the quality of a student's answers. The fact that Zoe contextualizes this expectation as part of “government exams” places this practice of gender within an institutional context that extends beyond her classroom. If provincial exams are structured in a way that expect students to engage in a particular kind of gendered literacy, this encourages teachers to do the same – if only to ensure their students' success.

Remarkably, Zoe does not use the constraint of this institutional expectation to absolve herself and her teaching from responsibility. Throughout the quote, she continues to use “we” as

she explains the ways in which teachers are caught in particular gendered narratives, which encompasses her in the problematic assumptions and practices she discusses. Namely, Zoe's quote takes to task the idea that an author's gender tells us something about their writing by making visible its underlying assumption: that there is such a thing as "looking at the world like a male" that students know and can easily identify. She further breaks down this assumption by pointing out that it relies on "a stereotyped version" of men and women which is "not true at all."

Zoe offers a fairly harsh assessment of teaching practices when she notes that teachers "just kind of ignore" these assumptions that imbue teaching practices, and draws an explicit parallel between "[not] catch[ing] that with kids" and "[not] teaching them to be aware of that immediate bias." In other words, her conclusion is that her own teaching currently reinforces sexist biases and assumptions even though she also challenges them in other ways (by making her class a space where students can explore the complexities of gender in their writing, for example). It is worth pointing out that Zoe starts this explanation by saying that it is "fair" and she "understand[s]" that students are taught to engage with literary texts through this cisnormative lens. Although it is impossible to guess at Zoe's intentions, I argue that her attempt to placate this established practice even as she interrogates it highlights the difficulty of changing culture as an individual still working within – and thus still accountable to – that system.

Change is rarely a seamless, linear process. When I asked Zoe explicitly if she had made different decisions because of what she had learned by teaching a trans student, she replied:

I would say yes, especially in the sense of – I haven't had the same urgency [...] because I currently don't have anyone who's identifiably transgender or gender-fluid but there's two things that I believe now. [...] You can't always tell, 'cause you don't know, when people are questioning, you don't know, how they present to the world versus what's going on inside them. And the other thing is sort of a larger idea of equality and fairness to me as a teacher, you – once you learn something, once you know something, you can't not know it. [...] [And] now I ask the further question of, how fair is that [the way

women and men are traditionally represented in literature]? That we assume that the male will do this, and that's what all men do, as opposed to – I never asked those questions before. I never saw it.

Here as well, Zoe's answer offers a complex mix of elements. First, she expresses a clear belief that her experience with the trans student in her class has permanently shifted her perspective. In the sentence "there's two things that I believe now," the temporal adverb "now" marks these "two things" as new beliefs, while in the sentence "once you learn something, once you know something, you can't not know it," the use of the modal verb "can" frames this shift in knowledge as unavoidable ("you can't not know it").

As for the impact of these shifts in perspective, she distinguishes between two forms of learning. The first one she mentions has more to do with direct knowledge of how questions of gender identity might affect the students she teaches. Her acknowledgment that students may not always struggle with gender and gender identity in visible ways ("you can't always tell ... when people are questioning") is a powerful one, as it has the potential to challenge the dominant reactive approach that necessitates visible trans and gender-nonconforming students to generate change. The second form of learning has to do with her teaching practice. Although Zoe frames this shift in the language of "equality and fairness," her questioning of the assumption that "the male will do this, and that's what all men do" suggests a shift that has more to do with a newly critical perspective on gender and its representational politics. The use of the temporal adverb 'before' in her admission that she "never asked those questions before" again marks a discontinuity between now and then, suggesting that she does ask those questions now.

Zoe also alludes to the reactive approach at the beginning of this quote when she says "I haven't had the same urgency [...] because I currently don't have anyone who's identifiably transgender or gender-fluid." Indeed, the central feature of a reactive accommodation approach is

that it requires the “identifiable” presence of a trans and gender-nonconforming student to generate change. That presence creates “urgency” and necessitates accommodation in some form or other. In the absence of this visible presence, schools and educators are often quick to dismiss or underestimate the need for change in practices as the impact is less obvious. Keeping this in mind, I offer that Zoe’s admission that she no longer feels the same sense of urgency is not the return to the status quo that could be expected and feared. The two permanent shifts in her thinking that she describes give an encouraging indication that her thinking and practice are continuing to evolve even now that this student is no longer in her class.

This is not to say that this change is simple to carry forward. As we continued discussing her teaching, Zoe mentioned that she tried to integrate complex issues into the readings she gives to students and that she would like to do the same with issues of gender and gender diversity. When I asked her, “would you know where to find these books?” she responded, “No. No idea. I do not even know if they’ve been written yet.” Her double uncertainty – both that she can find these books and that these books exist at all – point to the gap between change in thinking and change in practice. Some books, of course, have already been written, and have been publicized enough that other educators knew of them and, in some cases, had used them in their class (such as *Luna* by Julie Anne Peters).

It is crucial to note that this kind of curricular inclusion was often not just the result of an individual effort. In one of the schools where teachers mentioned to me that they had used queer- and even trans-inclusive content in their classes, the librarian was dedicated to bringing these books into the school’s collection, and made a concerted effort every year to add new titles. The task of integrating these books into her teaching might seem less daunting to Zoe if the librarian at her school had already made efforts to buy these books and publicize these purchases. Zoe’s

uncertainty highlights the need for changes taking place across the school, including amongst staff who may not interact directly with trans and gender-nonconforming students (to their knowledge). By disrupting cisnormative logics, their actions can still help create the conditions for more hospitable school environments. This is another limit of the reactive approach: it risks inviting change only amongst educators who have had direct personal experiences with trans and gender-nonconforming students. This can leave educators disconnected from larger institutional changes, as Zoe was, and leave them overwhelmed by the magnitude of a task (changing school culture's reliance on cisnormativity) over which they only have partial control.

In this section, I have highlighted examples of various forms of changes that educators relayed in my interviews with them, including shifts in thinking, professional practices, and even institutional structures. All these levels of change are necessary to move past accommodation to an approach that seeks to change school cultures and the administrative practices that undergird them in a systemic and sustainable way. I have also drawn attention to the contradictions that often remained in educators' talk in order to emphasize not individual failings but rather precisely the constraints that dominant discourses and existing institutional systems put onto individual educators and their efforts towards change.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

Many of the educators I spoke to felt much more confident in their ability to support trans and gender-nonconforming students after having worked with a student and seeing a number of their concerns dispelled. Yet this sense of “hey, we know how to do this now kind of thing” (as Jerrilyn put it) often focused solely on supporting individual students through their specific needs



and requests, and was often contained to these situations, rarely extending to before or after the student's presence in the school.

Often absent from these assessments was the idea that supporting trans and gender-nonconforming students necessitates broader, systemic changes in how schools operate, at multiple levels – in how and what material is taught, in how educators interact with students, in administrative and practical procedures that assume a cisnormative binary gender system, etc. Without these changes, schools remain a space that is always tentatively welcoming, a space where, under the cover of safety discourses, the comfort of the majority might always be considered over the right of trans and gender-nonconforming students to access certain spaces, and also a space where non-binary and gender-nonconforming students are made invisible and struggle to be accommodated.

Accommodation is crucial. It solves real logistical problems (Smith & Payne, 2016) and can often be validating, especially for students who have come from other schools where even accommodation was not an option. However, it is not enough on its own. My analysis of educators' narratives of change points to the need to re-think what it means to create supportive schools when it comes to gender diversity, so that it becomes possible for educators to see beyond accommodation. This re-thinking can be facilitated by a critical attention to discourses and narratives that help or hinder efforts to disrupt dominant hetero- and cisnormative practices.

Educators make sense of their experiences by drawing on the discourses available to them. Since language is a "reality-constituting practice" (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 28), these discursive practices make certain changes more imaginable than others in school contexts. When these discourses authorize individual-level knowledges and solutions, it becomes difficult for

adults to critically consider how systems of gender and sexual conformity are embedded in institutional structures.

In this chapter, I have highlighted some of the discursive practices that work to distance adults from understanding themselves as actors in regulatory systems of power. I wonder about discursive practices that would instead give them – us – tools to acknowledge the multiple, complicated, and often unintentional ways in which being an educator embeds us in these oppressive systems, despite our best efforts to resist. I use ‘we’ here because, although I do not work as a K-12 educator, I am not immune to these patterns, which extend beyond schools and into all efforts to work in solidarity with marginalized communities towards a more socially just world. It is hard, complex work to recognize not just our privileges but the ways in which we (un)willfully participate in what we recognize as oppressive norms and institutions.

I am hopeful that these different discursive practices are possible. New stories “have the potential to create new and expanded possibilities for LGBTQ and straight youth alike” (Fields et al., 2014), but also for the educators that work with them. Disrupting the effects of cisnormativity in educational spaces will have to come with new ways of talking about being an educator that can acknowledge the undeniable effects of institutional constraints on their capacity to generate cultural changes and also highlight where possibilities for disruption and cultural change exist.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

*Perhaps it is the knowledge that everyone must change, not just those we label enemies or oppressors, that has so far served to check our revolutionary impulses. Those revolutionary impulses must freely inform our theory and practice if feminist movement to end existing oppression is to progress, if we are to transform our existing reality.*

bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From margin to center*, p. 166

*My job is to help him be safe. And I just acknowledge that it's going to take a minute to get adjusted and I'll probably mess up those pronouns too and he knows that's okay, and we're just going to muddle through together and just be busy loving each other.*

Sally, teacher, District D

In May 2014, as I was analyzing interviews and starting to write this dissertation, the Vancouver School Board (VSB) was swept by an unexpected controversy. After months of work, the VSB's Pride Advisory Committee proposed amendments to the district's existing LGBTQ policy that would set explicit and consistent guidelines on how to support trans and gender-nonconforming students in Vancouver schools. Given that these proposed amendments were putting into policy procedures that had already been successfully implemented in many schools, the opposition that it met from a small but vocal portion of the general public came as somewhat of a surprise.

In response to this opposition, the board organized four public meetings that each lasted several hours as people who both supported and opposed the amendments spoke in front of the trustees in an emotionally-charged and packed board room. On June 16, 2014, the proposed revisions to the policy were ultimately passed by an overall highly sympathetic board of trustees. The situation deserves its own detailed investigation, but I bring it up here to highlight a few aspects that resonate with the analysis that I have presented in this dissertation:

- (1) Many of the parents who opposed these guidelines made sure that they framed themselves as not homophobic or transphobic. In fact, they often actively rejected the

idea that these terms accurately described them. Instead, they framed themselves as parents concerned for ‘all’ students (as opposed to supporters, who were constituted as being concerned only for trans and gender-nonconforming students). This discursive framing attests the well-documented limitations of dominant discourses of homophobia and transphobia, as these dominant discourses cannot adequately explain how people can understand themselves as ‘not transphobic’ yet oppose policy that would help schools better support trans and gender-nonconforming students. This framing simultaneously highlights the relevance – I would even say necessity – of the concept of cisnormativity as an alternative for understanding both the violence (in a broad sense) that trans and gender-nonconforming students experience in school and the way that the everyday functioning of schools creates exclusions.

- (2) The policy revisions in many ways “relocate[] the site of the problem from at-risk youth to problematic school structures or erasures” (Loutzenheiser, 2015, p. 103), for example by encouraging schools to reduce gender-segregated activities. At the same time, most of the amendments are framed as individual accommodations: giving students gender-affirming options in bathrooms and change rooms, respecting their right to privacy, changing their names and gender markers, etc. As Payne & Smith (2015) note about similar guidelines out of the New York State Education Department, this type of policy tends to promote the kind of accommodation approach that I examined in Chapter 5. Additionally, the Vancouver policy amendments echo the ‘student in charge’ narrative that I discussed in Chapter 4, evoking both its positive effects and limitations. Given that these guidelines (expectedly and maybe understandably) do not radically rethink the spaces of schools, but rather attempt carve out some (limited) space for trans and gender-

nonconforming students, the negative reactions to these guidelines is all the more concerning. This opposition underlines the difficulty of creating the kind of systemic changes that I have argued is needed in schools, and illustrates the bind in which educators can find themselves.

- (3) The meetings organized to allow the public to give feedback on the amendments policy brought to the fore some racialized tensions. Many of the opponents to the amendments were East Asian and did not speak English as their first language. As a result, they became defined by their ‘cultural difference,’ echoing the workings of racialized discourse that I discussed in Chapter 3. Long histories of racism congealed in the hostility that racialized minorities (some of whom had come to signify their support to the amendments) felt from white supporters during these meetings. In the original coverage of the events, this imagined opposition between transphobic racialized minorities and trans-friendly white advocates often appeared (Todd, 2014; Young, 2014). Such a framing erases the existence of trans and gender-nonconforming people of colour and implies that anti-racism sits uncomfortably with advocating for trans and gender-nonconforming students. These implications stress the necessity to theorize the workings of trans repudiation and cisnormativity within an anti-racist analysis. Otherwise, trans advocacy and the research that contributes to these efforts risk bolstering already prominent racialized discourses that enable forms of cultural and institutional racism.<sup>47</sup> In

---

<sup>47</sup> It is important to note that BC Safer Schools, a coalition of activists that emerged out of the debates at the Vancouver School Board, did take note of these racialized dynamics, in large part due to the interventions of its racialized members, and made some efforts to shift public discourse over the few weeks that the debates spanned over by speaking to both English and Chinese media and editing flyers in Chinese. As a result, two supportive Asian spokespersons emerged and started being featured heavily in media pieces. These interventions provided needed disruptions of dominant racialized narratives. However, they also evoke the power of whiteness to bring in selective

contrast with these racialized tensions, issues of indigeneity and settler colonialism were virtually absent from these conversations and for the policy itself, as Loutzenheiser (2015) points out. An anti-racist analysis necessitates paying attention to this silence as well as thinking about how it contributes to positioning issues of gender diversity as more relevant to certain groups than to others.

The debates surrounding the Vancouver policy were an unexpected and emotionally exhausting reminder that it is crucial to bring a nuanced analysis to the current political and social moment. Advocacy for trans and gender-nonconforming students is an ongoing struggle and has real consequences for the ability of these students to access and thrive in educational spaces. I carry with me this experience within the VSB and the interrogations it raised as I bring this dissertation to a close. In this final chapter, I review the key points of my analysis, reflect back on the research questions that I outlined in the introduction, and situate my analytical contributions in relationship to current research in the field of gender, trans studies, and education. I also contemplate the strengths and limitations of the study I have conducted, and use this as a springboard into a consideration of the multiple directions that future research could take. I end this chapter with some final thoughts and implications for moving forward.

## **6.1 Thinking trans inclusion through cisnormativity: Research findings, significance and contribution to research**

I started this research wanting to better understand how cisnormativity shapes the way that educators talk about their experiences of working with trans and gender-nonconforming students. I also wanted to consider the material effects of this discursive process for how schools respond to trans and gender-nonconforming students. I set out to do so by asking the following questions:

- What are some common narratives and discursive practices that educators use to talk about their experiences of working with trans and gender-nonconforming students?
- What broader discourses do these narratives and discursive practices draw on? How does cisnormativity in particular circulate within these narratives?
- How does this discursive work open up and/or close off space for gender diversity in schools? In other words, how do these narratives and discursive practices shape what changes educators see as (im)possible?

Educators who want to be supportive of trans and gender-nonconforming students face the complicated task of doing so in a cisnormative institutional context that marginalizes trans and gender-nonconforming lives. To explain how they support trans and gender-nonconforming students, educators deployed discursive practices that focus on the positive effects of diversity, emphasize the importance of letting trans and gender-nonconforming students guide the process of change, and frame themselves through the language of care and open-mindedness.

As actors that work within a hetero- and cisnormative system, educators must continually navigate the multiple tensions contained in these discursive practices when they talk about their experiences of working with trans and gender-nonconforming students. I have argued that these tensions must be made sense of by connecting them to the concept of cisnormativity. Unlike

dominant explanations that focus on prejudice and ignorance for explaining the obstacles that trans and gender-nonconforming students face in schools, the concept of cisnormativity can help explain the pervasiveness and persistence of the violence and marginalization that these students encounter. It gives scholars and educators a way to understand that schools are structured by institutional and everyday practices that create exclusions through the underlying assumption that sex and gender are stable binaries (from which heterosexuality most often and most naturally follows). Because cisnormativity is a regime of power, not an individual characteristic, it also helps explain the role that educators play in perpetuating this regime despite their best intentions. Supporting trans and gender-nonconforming students can be a complex task within the constraints of this institutional context.

In their attempts to make sense of their experiences with, and their commitment to, trans and gender-nonconforming students, educators often draw on multiple and contradictory discourses. In Chapter 3, I examined the way that educators told stories about trans and gender-nonconforming students by making them part of the larger imaginary of diversity discourses. I discussed the centrality of diversity as an organizing concept in Canadian education, and argued that this concept is evoked differently by educators when they talk about trans and gender-nonconforming students in relation to sexual diversity or racialized diversity. These discursive practices highlight the persistent conflation of gender and sexual diversity as well as the continued relevance of racism and settler colonialism in the construction of educational spaces. I also highlighted the risk of employing diversity discourses in ways that assume that the simple presence of diversity (in its broadest sense) works in and of itself to create safety for trans and gender-nonconforming students. This discursive positioning does not interrogate the mechanisms



by which schools tend to administer and manufacture conformity to dominant norms, including whiteness and cisnormativity.

In Chapter 4, I use the example of the ‘student in charge’ narrative to look at the details of how educators attempt to resist but often reinvigorate cisnormative modes of thinking. In Canadian and American contexts, educators are invited to think of themselves and understand the work of schools through the lens of the caring professional (Smith, 2015; Hackford-Peer, 2010). This discourse was visible throughout my interviews as educators positioned themselves as people who wanted to help, protect, and/or support trans and gender-nonconforming students. It was most visible in the way that many educators articulated their experiences with trans and gender-nonconforming students through narratives that framed the student as being ‘in charge’ of school-related decisions and (in some cases) their transition in that space. By framing trans and gender-nonconforming students as experts of their own lives, this narrative has the potential to destabilize dominant discourses that construct trans identities as unstable, unreliable, and abnormal. However, this narrative is often complicated by a simultaneous attachment to the idea that adults often know best what constitutes the best, or safest, set of decisions – an assessment influenced by the cisnormative structures of schools. In this way, the ‘student in charge’ narrative illustrates how narratives can emerge out of the need for educators to negotiate discourses that often suggest contradictory positions for them and make it difficult to disrupt or resist decision-making processes.

The stories that educators tell about their experiences working with trans and gender-nonconforming are shaped by larger discourses that *all* educators have to contend with, such as discourses about safety and bullying, about youth’s capacity for self-determination, about the liberal subject, or about diversity. In the context of working with trans and gender-

nonconforming students, these larger discourses often work in conjunction with cisnormativity to reinforce rather than challenge the way that schools are structured to mark trans and gender-nonconforming students as exceptions. In Chapter 5, I argued that the way that educators imagine what supporting trans and gender-nonconforming students looks like is dominated by an individualized, reactive approach that seeks to accommodate specific students and their particular needs rather than to change the way that school spaces are organized by cisnormative and heteronormative expectations. Yet without these deeper changes, schools remain a space that is always tentatively welcoming, a space where (under the cover of safety discourses) the comfort of the majority may always be considered over the ability of trans and gender-nonconforming students to access gender-affirming spaces, and a space where non-binary and gender-nonconforming students are made invisible and consequently struggle to be accommodated.

These findings contribute to the growing body of work produced by scholars who are studying the experiences of trans and gender-nonconforming students and more broadly how gender diversity is managed in educational spaces, particularly K-12 schools (Jennings, 2015; Jones et al., 2015; Loutzenheiser, 2015; Miller, 2015b; Newhouse, 2013; Payne & Smith, 2014; Sausa, 2005; Smith & Payne, 2016). By focusing on the perspectives of educators that are or want to be supportive of gender diversity, this research makes a crucial intervention in this field. My findings help illuminate how educators articulate what it means to support trans and gender-nonconforming youth and the limitations of these articulations, which are often bound by dominant discourse upon which educators draw. These limitations are substantial and need to be identified. At the same time, it is key to understand these discursive and institutional processes

that give rise to these limitations in order to make visible potential opportunities to create cultural changes and disrupt the cisnormative habitual workings of schools.

Second, this research highlights the necessity of bringing the concept of cisnormativity to bear to examinations of how schools are responding to the presence of trans and gender-nonconforming students. This analysis builds on the work of scholars who have called for the necessity to rethink how gender policing and bullying works in educational spaces (Fields et al., 2014; Formby, 2015; Meyer, 2009; Payne & Smith, 2012, 2013; Ringrose & Renold, 2010; Walton, 2011). I have argued that cisnormativity, by emphasizing the way that norms of the current gender/sex system become institutionalized into the structures and everyday workings of schools, enables an analysis that does not focus on individual faults but instead articulates both the discursive and institutional complexities that constrain educators in their efforts to support trans and gender-nonconforming students.

Third, my analysis of the discursive navigations of educators augments scholarly accounts of how educators occupy a complex position within educational systems as adults who, at different times and to varying degrees, enact, shift and sometimes resist the systems of power that enforce gender and sexual conformity within school spaces (Hackford-Peer, 2010; Preston, 2015; Smith, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2014). In this sense, this research adds to the literature that uses discourse analysis to understand how schools, students, and educators are constantly reconstituted in language through hetero- and cisnormative discourses (Best, 2000; Blount & Anahita, 2004; Davies, 2003; Ryan, 2015; Youdell, 2004). My focus on discourse sheds light on how the conditions of possibilities for trans and gender-nonconforming students are generated by educators without losing sight of the discursive and institutional constraints that educators have to navigate and sometimes manage to resist or disrupt. This kind of examination is essential to

provide answers that do not condemn individual educators but instead unpack the workings of regimes of power.

These various contributions sketch a complex picture of the possibilities and limitations that shape the experiences of educators who work with trans and gender-nonconforming students. Emphasizing the need for institutional solutions (bolstered by new ways of understanding) avoids putting the burden of change on individuals and instead demands changes in institutional and administrative practices as well everyday routines over which individual may have more control. It also helps articulate possibilities that can go beyond the accommodation of individual students and instead help shift school cultures towards making room for gender diversity and the self-determination of all students.

## **6.2 Strengths and limitations of the research**

In the literature on gender diversity in schools, most of the writings focus on the trans and gender-nonconforming students themselves. While the perspectives of these students are essential to understanding how they are affected by cisnormativity in school systems, it is also important to have a better understanding of the perspectives of adults who play a crucial part in shaping conditions of possibility that these young people encounter in schools. My research is one of the few studies that explores the experiences of supportive educators who have worked directly with trans and gender-nonconforming youth.

The purpose was not to evaluate these educators but to understand how they make sense of their work with trans and gender-nonconforming students. This can help inform scholars on what available discourses these educators draw on to make sense of their experiences and to navigate the complicated position they occupy within schools. Because the educators featured in

this study think of themselves as supportive of gender diversity, they access discourses that highlight the subtler workings of regimes of power. As a result, this dissertation paints a nuanced picture of how cisnormativity functions within discourse beyond the more obvious forms of repudiation and denial often faced by trans and gender-nonconforming students.

Although my sample is by no means representative of BC educators (nor do I have an interest in claims of representativeness), the number of people that I interviewed allows me to make tentative claims about the ordinariness of the narratives and discourses highlighted in this work. The fact that similar narratives circulated in urban, suburban, and northern communities of educators speaks to their wide availability, at least for teachers who already understand themselves as supportive of students who are marked as different. It also highlights the need to take these narratives into consideration in the work of shifting school cultures and making more knowledge about gender diversity accessible to educators. There are complex historical and social reasons why certain discourses resonate with educators. Rather than dismiss these discourses and their complexities, it might be worth thinking about harnessing their resonances towards the goal of changing schools. I am reminded of Dei's (2011) defense of multiculturalism calling for a "valuable first step towards a more critical anti-racist approach" (p. 16) despite the profound limitations of multiculturalism as an official discourse.

Having said this, some reservations about this study should be noted. First, research that is based in interview data needs to reckon with the fact that interviews do not collect facts but stories through which interview participants are producing themselves as particular kinds of people. While discursive practices are important to analyse, not generating ethnographic or observation data limits the scope of this work in some ways. It is impossible, for example, to determine if educators did the things that they said they did, or if they did anything else that

could have been relevant but that, for whatever reason, they chose not to share in the interview. All research is partial and incomplete. The choice to conduct interviews was not an oversight but a deliberate decision to focus on the analysis of discursive practices. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the boundaries of the knowledge I have produced here.

Second, the make-up of my participants has its limitations, as all samples do. Most participants occupied relatively privileged positions as white cisgender people with years of experience in the school system, many with graduate degrees. This composition is likely a product of a number of circumstances, including the continued predominance of white and female teachers in Canada (Ryan et al., 2009; National Household Survey, 2011) and my recruitment strategy, which did not specifically seek to recruit a wide variety of participants along the lines of race, experience, gender identity, etc. I also set out to interview only people who had worked directly with trans and gender-nonconforming students, and my recruitment message/poster likely suggested a perspective sympathetic to trans and gender-nonconforming students. This was unlikely to draw in participants with oppositional views.

It is also worth asking, who are the educators likely to work with trans and gender-nonconforming? This necessarily raises the question of who is likely to be (problematically) understood as someone who would be supportive of these students. Although there is some randomness in terms of which educators end up having these experiences, several participants spoke of specific teachers being assigned to trans and gender-nonconforming students by counselors or administrators. For example, the conflation of gender and sexuality can mean that queer adults or educators involved in GSAs are read as natural allies to trans and gender-nonconforming students. Due to broader gender norms that put expectations of care-taking onto women, female educators might also be more responsive to discourses of teachers as caring

professionals (Britzman, 1991; Smith, 2015). This might contribute to them being identified as educators willing to support trans and gender-nonconforming students. To be clear, I am not suggesting here that queer and female educators should be made primarily responsible for supporting trans and gender-nonconforming students in schools. The cultural shifts necessary to make schools hospitable for trans and gender-nonconforming students require that all educators be involved in these changes. Rather, I am pointing out that who participants ended up being is in part shaped by who is likely to work with trans and gender-nonconforming students, which itself is shaped by people who are perceived to be potential ‘allies’ to these students.

Finally, it is necessary to acknowledge the tension of doing queer and trans research on unceded indigenous lands without centrally focusing on indigeneity. While “queer and Two-Spirit Indigenous people have long written about the necessity for anti-colonial struggles and queer rights to be investigated as inherently linked in social justice movements” (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 155), this necessity is rarely activated in queer scholarship, including this work. I do see the critical interrogation of the discursive practices of cisnormativity (including its compatibility with discourses of diversity) that I have conducted as a project that is compatible with, and has much to gain from, the project of decolonizing ways of knowing about gender and sexuality given that “the erasure of trans and Two-Spirit people [is] an ongoing form of colonial violence” (Hunt, 2015). The important intersection of these two projects has led me to reflect on Hunt & Holmes (2015)’s invitation to ask “critical questions about non-Indigenous queer and trans claims for safe space, rights, and belonging in the context of ongoing colonial dispossession” (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 155). A critical interrogation of the discursive practices of cisnormativity must be understood as inextricably tied to the discursive effects of settler colonialism. As I look ahead, I know that I must consider how research, especially when it

endeavours to be socially-responsible, needs to be part of “the politics of everyday decolonization” (Hunt & Holmes, 2015, p. 155; see also Smith, 1999).

### **6.3 Directions for future research**

The connection between queer and trans rights and anti-colonial struggles is one that is at the forefront of my mind as I consider potential directions for future research in the area of sexual and gender diversity. Although there is a long history of scholarship looking at queer students and the complicated relationships that schools have to sexual diversity, work on gender diversity in educational spaces is in many ways still in its infancy. This is an ideal moment to make an intervention into the existing literature to ensure that, as we build on the work that has been done on the accomplishment of (hetero)gender in schools (Best, 2000; Davies, 2003; Ryan, 2013; Stafford, 2013; Thorne, 1993/2008). We must examine more systematically how cisnormativity is accomplished in everyday educational practices, by learning from the insights of critical scholars of indigeneity (Dakin, 2012; Driskill et al., 2011; Hunt, 2015; Morgensen, 2011, 2012; Smith, 2010) and of race and ethnicity (Brockenbrough, 2013; Castagno, 2014; Marquez & Brockenbrough, 2013; McCready, 2013).

In particular, I would like to see an expansion of this research into ethnographies that could explore the way that cisnormativity, alongside other regimes of power, is reproduced in educational spaces (including classrooms, hallways, school events, administrative meetings, etc.) both in the presence and in the (seeming) absence of trans and gender-nonconforming students. Additionally, studies that bring attention the everyday work of disrupting cisnormativity in educational spaces would be beneficial in helping articulate what alternatives exists for educators within established systems. Building on the work of Smith & Payne (2016), I would be



particularly curious about a study that follows educators through ‘gender diversity training’ and the subsequent changes (and/or consistencies) that they bring to their practices. Such research has the potential to provide more detailed and much needed insights into the process of shifting classroom and school cultures.

Finally, the rising number of young people who identify with a multiplicity of non-binary gender identities points to the necessity of examining the specificities of these students’ experiences. Non-binary gender identities overtly challenge the foundations of cisnormativity and thus the way it functions in schools. In this context, how do educators understand and/or support these students? How is an accommodation approach made unviable in relation to these students, or what does that mean for the day-to-day life of non-binary youth in schools? Beemyn (2015) is one of the first academics to focus specifically on these issues. Both the perspectives of students and of educators would benefit from being explored and documented further, as they hold much promise for shedding light on the ongoing work of changing school cultures. Given Hunt’s (2015) insight about the tight connection between the erasure of non-binary genders and colonial violence, as well as my earlier reflection on the limitations of the present research, any research on non-binary identities in educational spaces would also greatly benefit from learning from the work of indigenous scholars and integrating indigenous perspectives into their design.

## **6.4 Final thoughts**

It is usual for a dissertation like this one to end with a set of proposed recommendations, in particular aimed at practitioners and policy-makers. However, I hesitate to do so. Lists of practical recommendations have already been published in other places, often in documents that are realistically more accessible to practitioners and policy-makers. For example, the conclusions

of both Taylor et al.'s (2011) and Taylor et al.'s (2016) community-friendly reports outline comprehensive series of recommendations in terms of policy, curriculum development and teacher education that are extremely relevant for anyone looking for actionable items. Similarly, Vancouver Park Board's Trans\* and Gender Variant Inclusion Working Group released a public report in 2014 that, while focused on city recreational spaces, contains many compelling recommendations on facilities, signage, forms and staff training that could fairly easily be translated into educational spaces. The recommendations listed in these three documents would go a long way towards transforming existing administrative practices and interpersonal interactions in ways that would help create schools where students are welcome regardless of their gender identity or gender expression.

sj Miller (2015a, 2015b) has recently developed the idea of a queer literacy framework “that can both validate trans\* and gender creative youth and support their legibility and readability in schools” (2015b, p. 6). This framework is founded on a trans\* pedagogy summarized in a list of non-negotiable axioms, such as “children have rights to their own (a)gender and (a)sexuality legibility” and “binary views on gender and sexuality are potentially damaging” (Miller, 2015a, p. 41). Miller expands these axioms into a list of powerful principles and commitments that educators can follow to support their students' right to self-determination and make space for “evolving understandings of (a)gender and (a)sexuality” (Miller, 2015a, p. 42). These propositions strike me as a powerful foundation for educators who want to shift the culture of their classroom and their school. Indeed, they offer tools for displacing some of the normative discourses that I have highlighted throughout this dissertation. In fact, Miller's framework resonates powerfully with the moments of disruption and resistance to cisnormativity that I have documented throughout this dissertation: Sally's commitment to “muddling through”

mistakes, Alyson's rethinking of her lesson on genetics, the renouncement of gendered cards for class placement in Ramona's school, Clark's willingness to accompany her students to multiple conferences on gender and sexual diversity, Jerrilyn's determination to let students use the right bathroom, Zoe's questioning of the use of gender in literary analyses, and Missy's administrative manoeuvres to ensure that the right gender marker will appear on class lists without a legal change, to cite a few.

All these efforts, incomplete and imperfect as they tend to be given the institutional context that constrains them, offer tangible examples of what it could look like to support trans and gender-nonconforming students. These examples especially invite us to think about what could become possible if school districts and ministries of education were to commit to challenging dominant norms of gender and sexuality and the structures that sustain these norms by providing institutional support to the educators who are already trying to make these commitments in their everyday practice. In that sense, a framework like the one that Miller (2015a, 2015b) develops can go beyond the context of literacy classrooms and provide a foundation for considering changes that remain flexible to contextual differences (such as administrative support from school board or administrators, general level of awareness of gender diversity, school context, etc.). Miller's framework is also compatible with the need to consult and work with local trans organizations and advocates, trans and gender-nonconforming youth, as well as educators, when working towards creating sustainable change in educational spaces.

These changes are not new suggestions, and they cannot occur over night, but neither are they unthinkable. They offer the possibility that, in Airtton's (2013) words, schools could help students "envision idiosyncratic lives regardless of their past, present or future affinities, expressions and/or sexual object choice(s), or the degree to which these change over time" (p.

551). I return to this notion because it seems to hold space for unexpected shifts, disruptions, and new possibilities. What could schools look like if they found a way to foster, discursively and otherwise, the right to live this kind of idiosyncratic life?

Underlying these thoughts is a conviction that we need to change school cultures rather than to try and ineffectively make trans and gender-nonconforming students fit into existing structures that often barely work for students who are neither trans nor gender-nonconforming. The power of language to shape how we think about the world and how we act in it should not be mistaken for a call for individual changes but rather speaks to the necessity for change at the level of institutions, which enable and curtail particular discourses. Finally, interrogating and problematizing the reliance on accommodation must not make invisible the fact that accommodation is the first and often the incredibly important step that allows a young person to be recognized as fully human, to stay connected to their school, and to feel supported in that environment. At the same time, doing our very best to be responsive to students' individual needs cannot be an excuse to delay or avoid more fundamental questionings of school cultures and school spaces. We cannot rely on students to goad adults into changing their schools just enough to be tolerable, and hope that the changes will stick once these students have left the buildings; we owe them, and ourselves, better than this.

## References

- Abrajano, M. (2010). Are Blacks and Latinos responsible for the passage of Proposition 8? Analyzing voter attitudes on California's proposal to ban same-sex marriage in 2008. *Political Research Quarterly*, 63(4), 922–932.
- Adelson, N. (2005). The embodiment of inequity: Health disparities in Aboriginal Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 96, S45-S61.
- Ahmad, F., Riaz, S., Barata, P., & Stewart, D. E. (2004). Patriarchal beliefs and perceptions of abuse among South Asian immigrant women. *Violence Against Women*, 10(3), 262–282.
- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: racism and diversity in institutional life*. Durham ; London: Duke University Press.
- . (2006). *Queer phenomenology: Orientations, objects, others*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Airton, L. (2013). Leave those kids alone: On the conflation of school homophobia and suffering queers. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(5): 532–562.
- . (2009). Untangling 'gender diversity': Genderism and its discontents. In S. R. Steinberg (Ed.). *Diversity and multiculturalism: a reader* (pp. 223-246). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Alcoff, L. (1991-92). The problem of speaking for others. *Cultural Critique*, 20, 5-32.
- Allen, L. (2015). Picturing queer at school. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 12(4), 367.
- . (2010). Queer(y)ing the straight researcher: The relationship(?) between researcher identity and anti-normative knowledge. *Feminism & Psychology*, 20(2), 147-165.
- Alamenciak, T. & Green, J. (2012, Nov 13). Transgendered student denied access to men's washroom. *The Toronto Star*. Retrieved Nov 20, 2015 at

[http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2012/11/13/transgendered\\_student\\_denied\\_access\\_to\\_mens\\_washroom.html](http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2012/11/13/transgendered_student_denied_access_to_mens_washroom.html)

American Educational Research Association (AERA). (2013). Prevention of bullying in schools, colleges, and universities: research report and recommendations. Washington, D.C.:

American Educational Research Association.

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5. Washington, D.C: American Psychiatric Association.

Ang, I. & Stratton, J. (1998). Multiculturalism in crisis: The new politics of race and national identity in Australia. *Topia* 2, 22-41.

Anthias, F., & Yuval-Davis, N. (1992). *Racialized boundaries: race, nation, gender, colour and class and the anti-racist struggle*. London: Routledge.

Apple, M. (2001) *Educating the "right way": Markets, standards, God, and inequality*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Archer, L., DeWitt, J., Osborne, J., Dillon, J., Willis, B., & Wong, B. (2012). "Balancing acts": Elementary school girls' negotiations of femininity, achievement, and science. *Science Education*, 96(6), 967–989.

Arnow-Richman, R. S. (2003). Accommodation subverted: The future of work/family initiatives in a 'Me, Inc.' world. *Texas Journal of Women and the Law*, 12.

Atkinson, P. & Silverman, D. (1997) Kundera's immortality: the interview society and the invention of the self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(3), 304-25.

Aujla, A. (2000). Others in their own land: Second generation South Asian Canadian women, racism, and the persistence of colonial discourse. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 20(2), 41-47.

- Aveling, N. (2006). "Hacking at our very roots": Rearticulating White racial identity within the context of teacher education. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 9(3), 261–274.
- Awwad, J. (2015). Queer regulation and the homonational rhetoric of Canadian exceptionalism. In O. H. Dryden, & S. Lenon (Eds.), *Disrupting queer inclusion: Canadian homonationalisms and the politics of belonging* (pp. 19-34). Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Ayman-Nolley, S., & Taira, L. L. (2000). Obsession with the dark side of adolescence: A decade of psychological studies. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 3(1), 35–48.
- Bannerji, H. (2000). *The dark side of the nation: Essays on multiculturalism, nationalism and gender*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Bastien Charlebois, J. (2011a). *La virilité en jeu: Perception de l'homosexualité masculine par les garçons adolescents*. Québec: Les éditions du Septentrion.
- . (2011b). Au-delà de la phobie de l'homo: quand le concept d'homophobie porte ombrage à la lutte contre l'hétérosexisme et l'hétéronormativité. *Reflets*, 17(1), 112–149.
- Batacharya, S. (2004). Racism, 'girl violence,' and the murder of Reena Virk. In C. Alder & A. Worrall (Eds.), *Girls' violence: Myths and realities* (pp. 61-80). New York, NY: SUNY Press.
- Battiste, M. (1998). Enabling the autumn seed: Toward a decolonized approach to aboriginal knowledge, language, and education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 22(1), 16.
- Bauer, G. R., Hammond, R., Travers, R., Kaay, M., Hohenadel, K. M., & Boyce, M. (2009). "I don't think this is theoretical; this is our lives": How erasure impacts health care for transgender people. *Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care*, 20(5), 348–361.
- BC Ministry of Education (2014). Teacher Statistics - 2013/14 - Province - Public Schools. Retrieved Aug 23, 2014 from <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reporting/province.php>.

- Beemyn, G. (2015). Coloring outside the lines of gender and sexuality: The struggle of nonbinary students to be recognized. *The Educational Forum*, 79(4), 359–361.
- Beemyn, B. (2003). Serving the needs of transgender college students. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, 1(1), 33-50.
- Beemyn, G., & Rankin, S. (2011). *The lives of transgender people*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- bell hooks (2000). *Feminist theory: from margin to center* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). New York, NY: South End Press.
- . (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Bender-Baird, K. (2015). Peeing under surveillance: bathrooms, gender policing, and hate violence. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 1–6.
- Bergeron, S. (2003). The post-Washington consensus and economic representations of women in development at the World Bank. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 5(3), 397-419.
- Berkowitz, D., & Ryan, M. (2011). Bathrooms, baseball, and bra shopping: Lesbian and gay parents talk about engendering their children. *Sociological Perspectives*, 54(3), 329–350.
- Best, A. L. (2003). Doing race in the context of feminist interviewing: Constructing whiteness through talk. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(6), 895-914.
- . (2000). *Prom night: Youth, schools and popular culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bielski, Z. (2015, July 16). Growing up trans: Six teens open up about discovering who they really are. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved October 24, 2015, from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/growing-up-trans-six-teens-open-up-about-discovering-who-they-really-are/article25527446/>



- Blackburn, M. V., & McCready, L. T. (2009). Voices of queer youth in urban schools: Possibilities and limitations. *Theory Into Practice*, 48(3), 222-230.
- Blackmore, J. (2006). Deconstructing diversity discourses in the field of educational management and leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 34(2), 181–199.
- Blaise, M. (2005). *Playing it straight: Uncovering gender discourse in the early childhood classroom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Blount, J. M., & Anahita, S. (2004). The historical regulation of sexuality and gender of students and teachers: An intertwined legacy. In M. L. Rasmussen, E. Rofes, & S. Talburt (Eds.), *Youth and sexualities: Pleasure, subversion, and insubordination in and out of schools* (pp. 63–84). New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Blumenfeld, W. J. (1995). “Gay/Straight Alliances”: Transforming pain to pride. In G. Unks (Ed.), *The gay teen: Educational practice and theory for lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents* (pp. 211–224). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Boatwright, T (2014). *Trans students of color taking up space in school*. Paper presented at American Educational Studies Association, Toronto, CA.
- Bond Stockton, K. (2009). *The queer child, or growing sideways in the twentieth century*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2006) *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bonilla-Silva, E., & Forman, T. A. (2000). “I am not a racist but...”: Mapping White college students’ racial ideology in the USA. *Discourse & Society*, 11(1), 50–85.

- Bonnie, S. (2004). Disabled people, disability and sexuality. In J. Swain, S. French, C. Barnes & C. Thomas (Eds.), *Disabling Barriers, Enabling Environments* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 124-132). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Bornstein, K. (1995). *Gender outlaw: On men, women, and the rest of us*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Brant, C. A. R., & Tyson, C. A. (in press). LGBTQ self-efficacy in the social studies. *The Journal of Social Studies Research*.
- Brickell, C. (2006) The sociological construction of gender and sexuality. *Sociological Review*, 54(1), 87-113.
- Britzman, D. (1998) *Lost subjects, contested objects: Toward a psychoanalytic inquiry of learning*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- . (1995). Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight. *Educational Theory*, 45(2), 151–165.
- . (1991). *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Brockenbrough, E. (2013). Introduction to the special issue: Queers of color and anti-oppressive knowledge production. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(4), 426-440.
- Bronski, M., Pellegrini, A. & Amico, M. (2013). *"You can tell just by looking": And 20 other myths about LGBT life and people*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

- Brown, P. L. (2006, December 2). Supporting boys or girls when the line isn't clear. *The New York Times*. Retrieved Jun 27, 2013 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/02/us/02child.html>
- Brown, W. (2011). Neoliberalized knowledge. *History of the Present*, 1(1), 113–129.
- Browne, K. (2004) Genderism and the bathroom problem: (Re)materialising sexed sites,(re) creating sexed bodies. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 11(3), 331-46.
- Bucholtz, M. (2003). Theories of discourse as theories of gender: Discourse analysis in language and gender studies. In J. Holmes and M. Meyerhoff (Eds.), *The Handbook of Language and Gender* (pp. 43-68). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- . (2000). The politics of transcription. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32(10), 1439-65.
- Burgess, C. (2000). Internal and external stress factors associated with the identity development of transgendered youth. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 10(3-4), 35–47.
- Burtch, B. & R. Haskell (2010) *Get that freak: Homophobia and transphobia in high schools*. Toronto, ON: Fernwood Books.
- Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable Speech*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- . (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* New York, NY: Routledge.
- . (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Califia, P. (1997). *Sex changes: the politics of transgenderism* (1st ed). San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press.
- Cameron, D. (2001). *Working with spoken discourse*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Cameron, P., & Cameron, K. (1996). Do homosexual teachers pose a risk to pupils? *The Journal of Psychology*, 130(6), 603-613.

- Campisini, C. (2013). *Homonationalism on TV?: A critical discourse analysis of queer and trans\* youth representations on mainstream teen television shows* [thesis]. University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON.
- Cannon, M. (1998). Regulation of First Nations sexuality. *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 18(1), 1-18.
- Carr, P. (2008). The “equity waltz” in Canada: Whiteness and the informal realities of racism in education. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, 3(2), 4-23.
- Carr, P. R., & Lund, D. E. (2009). The unspoken color of diversity: Whiteness, privilege, and critical engagement in education. In S. R. Steinberg (Ed.), *Diversity and multiculturalism: A reader* (45-55). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Carter, I., Hanes, R., & MacDonald, J. E. (2012). The inaccessible road not taken: The trials, tribulations and successes of disability Inclusion within social work post-secondary education. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 1(1), 109.
- Case, K. A., & Meier, S. C. (2014). Developing allies to transgender and gender-nonconforming youth: Training for counselors and educators. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 11(1), 62–82.
- Case, K. A., Stewart, B., & Tittsworth, J. (2009). Transgender across the curriculum: A psychology for inclusion. *Teaching of Psychology*, 36(2), 117–121.
- Castagno, A. E. (2014). *Educated in whiteness: good intentions and diversity in schools*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cavanagh, S. (2010). *Queering bathrooms: Gender, sexuality, and the hygienic imagination*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

- Chamberland, L., Emond, G., Julien, D., Otis, J., & Ryan, W. (2010). *L'impact de l'homophobie et de la violence homophobe sur la persévérance et la réussite scolaires*. Rapport de recherche: Programme Actions Concertées.
- Cherniavsky, E. (2009). Neocitizenship and critique. *Social Text*, 27, 1-23.
- Chouliaraki, L., & Fairclough, N. (1999). *Discourse in late modernity: rethinking critical discourse analysis*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Clark, C. (2005). Diversity initiatives in higher education: Deconstructing “the down low” people of color “coming out” and “being out” on campus: A conversation with Mark Brimhall-Vargas, Sivagami Subbaraman, and Robert Waters. *Multicultural Education*, 13(1), 45-59.
- Clarke, V. (2002). Resistance and normalisation in the construction of lesbian and gay families: A discursive analysis. In A. Coyle, & C. Kitzinger (Eds.), *Lesbian and gay psychology: New perspectives* (pp. 98-1189). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Clarke, V. & Kitzinger, C. (2004). Lesbian and gay parents on talk shows: resistance or collusion in heterosexism? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 1(3), 195-217.
- Clarke, V., Kitzinger, C., & Potter, J. (2004). ‘Kids are just cruel anyway’: Lesbian and gay parents’ talk about homophobic bullying. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 43, 531-550.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (1995) Color-blindness and basket making are not the answers: confronting the dilemma of race, culture and language diversity in teacher education, *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 493–522.
- Coker, T. R., Austin, S. B., & Schuster, M. A. (2009). Health and healthcare for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth: Reducing disparities through research, education, and practice. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 45(3), 213-215.

- Codjoe, H. M. (2001). Fighting a “public enemy” of Black academic achievement—the persistence of racism and the schooling experiences of Black students in Canada. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 4(4), 343-375.
- Coleman, E., Bockting, W., Botzer, M., Cohen-Kettenis, P., DeCuypere, G., Feldman, J., ... Zucker, K. (2011). Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender-Nonconforming People, Version 7. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 13(4), 165–232.
- Collins, P. H. (2005). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- . (1995). Book review of *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* by Ruth Frankenberg and *Black Popular Culture* by Gina Dent and Michele Wallace. *Signs*, 20(3), 728-731.
- Cook, K. E. (2008). In-Depth Interview. In L. Given (Ed.), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Settlement Agreement: Corren & Corren (2006). Ministry of Education. Retrieved 15 November, 2016 from <http://www.bcptl.org/Corren.pdf>
- Corren and Corren v. B.C. Ministry of Education (No. 2), BCHRT 497 (2005).
- Cowan, S. (2005). ‘Gender is no substitute for sex’: A comparative human rights analysis of the legal regulation of sexual identity. *Feminist Legal Studies*, 13, 67-96.
- Crowley, V., & Lou Rasmussen, M. (2004). Editorial overview. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 25(4), 427-430.
- Currie, D. H., Kelly, D. M. & Pomerantz, S. (2009). *‘Girl Power’: Girls reinventing girlhood*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

- . (2007) Listening to girls: Discursive positioning and the construction of self. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 20(4), 377-400.
- Dakin, C. (2012, September 1). Hearing Two-Spirits: Two-Spirit voices are integral to cultivating community resistance and decolonization. *Briarpatch Magazine*. Retrieved Oct 2, 2015 from <http://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/hearing-two-spirits>
- Daley, A., Solomon, S., Newman, P.A. & Mishna, F. (2008). Traversing the margins: intersectionalities in the bullying of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 19(3-4), 9-29.
- Dankmeijer, P. (1993). The construction of identities as a means of survival: Case of gay and lesbian teachers. *Journal of homosexuality*, 24(3-4), 95-105.
- Davidson, M. (2007). Seeking refuge under the umbrella: Inclusion, exclusion, and organizing within the category transgender. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 4(4), 60-80.
- Davidson-Harden, A., Kuehn, L., Schugurensky, D., & Smaller, H. (2009). Neoliberalism and education in Canada. In D. Hill (Ed.), *The rich world and the impoverishment of education: Diminishing democracy, equity and workers' rights* (pp. 51-73). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Davies, B. (2003). *Frogs and snails and feminist tales: Preschool children and gender* (2nd ed.). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- . (1993). *Shards of glass: children reading and writing beyond gendered identities*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Davis, K. K. (2007). The rhetoric of accommodation: Considering the language of work-family discourse. *University of St. Thomas Law Journal*, 4(3), 530-555.
- Davy, Z. (2011). *Recognizing transsexuals: Personal, political and medicolegal embodiment*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

- Day, R. J. (2000). *Multiculturalism and the history of Canadian diversity*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- de Castell, S., & Bryson, M. (1998). Don't ask, don't tell: 'Sniffing out queers' in education. In W. Pinar (Ed.), *Curriculum: Toward new identities* (pp. 233-54). New York, NY: Garland Publishing.
- DeCuypere, G., Knudson, G. & Bockting, W. (2010). Response of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health to the proposed DSM 5 criteria for gender incongruence [online]. Retrieved Jan 20, 2016 at [http://www.wpath.org/uploaded\\_files/140/files/WPATH%20Reaction%20to%20the%20proposed%20DSM%20-%20Final.pdf](http://www.wpath.org/uploaded_files/140/files/WPATH%20Reaction%20to%20the%20proposed%20DSM%20-%20Final.pdf)
- Dei, G. J. S. (2011). Defense of official multiculturalism and recognition of the necessity of critical anti-racism. *Canadian Issues, Spring 2011*, 15-19.
- . (2005). Racism in Canadian contexts: Exploring public and private issues in the educational system. In W. Tettey & K. P. Puplampu (Eds.), *The African diaspora in Canada: Negotiating identity & belonging* (pp. 93-112). Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press.
- . [Ed.] (1997). *Reconstructing 'dropout': A critical ethnography of the dynamics of black students' disengagement from school*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- DeVault, M. L. (1990). Talking and listening from women's standpoint: Feminist strategies for interviewing and analysis. *Social Problems*, 37(1), 96-116.
- DeVault, M. L., & Gross, G. (2007). Feminist interviewing: Experience, talk, and knowledge. In S. N. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (pp. 173-197). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.



- Devor, H. (1999). *FTM: Female-To-Male transsexuals in society*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- de Vries, A. L. C., McGuire, J. K., Steensma, T. D., Wagenaar, E. C. F., Doreleijers, T. A. H., & Cohen-Kettenis, P. T. (2014). Young adult psychological outcome after puberty suppression and gender reassignment. *Pediatrics*, 134(4), 696–704.
- Dhamoon, R. (2009). *Identity/difference politics: How difference is produced, and why it matters*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Dhillon, S. (2011, May 24). Burnaby's policy on homophobic bullying meets opposition from parents. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved Jan 27, 2016 from <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/burnabys-policy-on-homophobic-bullying-meets-opposition-from-parents/article580857/>
- Diaz, E. M. (2010). *Demographic differences in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth's participation in school-based Gay-Straight Alliances in the United States* [Master's Thesis]. George Washington University, Washington, DC.
- Diaz, E. M. & Kosciw, J. G. (2009). *Shared differences : The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students of color in our nation's schools*. New York, NY: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN).
- Di Ceglie, D., Freedman, D., McPherson, S., & Richardson, P. (2002). Children and adolescents referred to a specialist gender identity development service: Clinical features and demographic characteristics. *International Journal of Transgenderism*, 6(1), NP.
- Dion, S. D. (2004). (Re)telling to disrupt: Aboriginal people and stories of Canadian history. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, 2(1), 55-76.

- Diorio, J. A. (2006). Schools as sites for constructing minority sexual orientations. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, 3(2-3), 103–110.
- Diorio, J. A., & Munro, J. (2003). What does puberty mean to adolescents? Teaching and learning about bodily development. *Sex Education*, 3(2), 119–131.
- Ditchburn, J. (2013, Mar 21). Transgender 'bathroom bill' passes with crucial support of 16 Tories. *The National Post*. Retrieved Nov 20, 2015 from <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/canadian-politics/transgender-bathroom-bill-passes-with-crucial-support-of-16-tories>
- Doan, P. L. (2010). The tyranny of gendered spaces: Reflections from beyond the gender dichotomy. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 17(5), 635–654.
- Dossa, P. (2009). *Racialized bodies, disabling worlds: Storied lives of immigrant Muslim women*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Driskill, Q., Finley, D., Gilley, B.J., and Morgensen, S.L. (2011). Introduction in Driskell et al. (Eds.), *Queer Indigenous studies: Critical interventions in theory, politics and literature* (pp. 1–28). Tuscon, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- Duggan, L. (2003). *The twilight of equality?: neoliberalism, cultural politics, and the attack on democracy*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Duke, T. S. (2007). Hidden, invisible, marginalized, ignored: A critical review of the professional and empirical literature (or lack thereof) on gay and lesbian teachers in the United States. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, 4(4), 19-38.
- Dunn, K. M., Klocker, N., & Salabay, T. (2007). Contemporary racism and Islamophobia in Australia: Racializing religion. *Ethnicities*, 7(4), 564–589.

- Edwards, D., & Potter, J. (1993). Language and causation: A discursive action model of description and attribution. *Psychological Review*, 100(1), 23–41.
- . (1992). *Discursive psychology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Egan, P. & Sherill, K. (2009). *California's Proposition 8: What happened, and what does the future hold?* Washington, DC: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute.
- Ekins, R. (1997). *Male femaling: A grounded approach to cross-dressing and sex-changing*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Elia, J. (2010). Bisexuality and school culture: School as a prime site for bi-intervention. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 10(4), 452–471.
- Elliott, K. O. (2015). Queering student perspectives: gender, sexuality and activism in school. *Sex Education* (online ahead of print), 1-14.
- Elliott, R. D. & Bonauto, M. (2005) Sexual orientation and gender identity in North America: Legal trends, legal contrasts. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 48(3/4), 91-106.
- Ellis, V. 2007. "Sexualities and schooling in England after Section 28: Measuring and managing at-risk identities." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, 4(3): 13–30.
- Ellsworth, E. (1992). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. In C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds.), *Feminism and critical pedagogy* (pp. 90–119). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Emanuelsson, I. (2001). Reactive versus proactive support coordinator roles: an international comparison. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 16(2), 133–142.
- Enke, A. F. (2012). The education of little cis: Cisgender and the discipline of opposing bodies. In A. F. Enke (Ed.), *Transfeminist perspectives in and beyond transgender and gender studies* (pp. 60-77). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

- Epstein, D. (2000). Sexualities and education: Catch 28. *Sexualities*, 3(4), 387-394.
- Esptein, D. (1993). Practising heterosexuality. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 1(2), 275–286.
- Epstein, D., Elwood, J., Hey, V. & Maw, J. (1998). *Failing boys?: Issues in gender and achievement*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Epstein, D., & Johnson, R. (1998). *Schooling sexualities*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Epstein, D., Kehily, M., Mac an Ghaill, M. and Redman, P. (2001). Boys and girls come out to play: making masculinities and femininities in school playgrounds. *Men & Masculinities*, 4(2): 158–172.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fasick, F. A. (1994). On the “invention” of adolescence. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 14(1), 6–23.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (1993). The five sexes. *The sciences*, 33(2), 20-24.
- Feinberg, L. (1998). *Trans liberation: Beyond pink or blue*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Felman, S. (1982) Psychoanalysis and education: Teaching terminable and interminable.” *Yale French Studies* 63: 21-44.
- Fetner, T., Elafros, A., Bortolin, S., & Drechsler, C. (2012). Safe spaces: Gay-Straight Alliances in high schools. *Canadian Review of Sociology*, 49(2), 188–207.
- Fields, J., L. Mamo, J. Gilbert & N. Lesko (2014) Beyond bullying. *Contexts*, 13(4): 80–83.
- Finley, L. M. (1986). Transcending equality theory: A way out of the maternity and the workplace debate. *Columbia Law Review*, 1118-1182.

- Fleras, A. & Elliott, J-L. (1992). *Multiculturalism in Canada: The challenge of diversity*. Scarborough, ON: Nelson.
- Formby, E. (2015). Limitations of focusing on homophobic, biphobic and transphobic ‘bullying’ to understand and address LGBT young people's experiences within and beyond school. *Sex Education* (online ahead of print), 1-15.
- Foster, K. R., & Spencer, D. (2011). At risk of what? Possibilities over probabilities in the study of young lives. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 14(1), 125–143.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- . (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- . (1972). *The archeology of knowledge and the discourse on language*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Fox, C. O., & Ore, T. E. (2010). (Un)covering normalized gender and race subjectivities in LGBT “safe spaces.” *Feminist Studies*, 36(3), 629.
- Frankenberg, R. (1993). *White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Freer, P. K. (2013). Challenging the canon: LGBT content in Arts Education journals. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 196, 45–63.
- Gamson, J. (1997). Messages of exclusion: Gender, movements, and symbolic boundaries. *Gender & Society*, 11(2), 178–199.
- Gee, J. P. (2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis theory and method*. New York; Abingdon: Routledge.
- Gilbert, J. (2014). *Sexuality in school: The limits of education*. Minneapolis, MN: University Of Minnesota Press.

- Gilbert, M. A.. (2009). Defeating bigenderism: Changing gender assumptions in the twenty-first century. *Hypatia*, 24(3), 93–112.
- Gill, R. (2008). Culture and subjectivity in neoliberal and postfeminist times. *Subjectivity*, 25(1), 432-445.
- Girshick, L. B. (2008). *Transgender voices: Beyond men and women*. Hanover, MA: University Press of New England.
- Giwa, S., & C, Greensmith. (2012). Race relations and racism within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community of Toronto: Perceptions of gay service providers of color. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 59(1), 149-185.
- Goffman, E. (1986) *Frame analysis: an essay on the organization of experience*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Gonick, M. (2006). Between “girl power” and “reviving Ophelia”: Constituting the neoliberal girl subject. *NWSA Journal*, 18(2), 1-23.
- Gosine, A. (2012). FOBS, banana boy, and the gay pretenders: Queer youth navigate sex, ‘race’, and nation in Toronto, Canada. In M. Fitzgerald & S. Rayter (Eds.), *Queerly Canadian: An introductory reader in sexuality studies* (pp. 507-520). Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars’ Press.
- Graham, L. (2005). *Discourse analysis and the critical use of Foucault*. Paper presented at Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference in Sydney, Australia.
- Grant, J. M., Mottet, L.A., Tanis, J., Harrison, J., Herman, J.L., and Keisling, M. (2011). *Injustice at every turn: A report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

- Greytak, E. A., J. G. Kosciw, & E. M. Diaz (2009) *Harsh realities: The experiences of transgender youth in our nation's schools*. New York, NY: GLSEN.
- Green, J., Franquiz, M., & Dixon, C. (1997). The myth of the objective transcript: Transcribing as a situated act. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(1), pp. 172-176.
- Greensmith, C., & Giwa, S. (2013). Challenging settler colonialism in contemporary queer politics: Settler homonationalism, Pride Toronto, and Two-Spirit subjectivities. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 37(2), 129–148.
- Griffin, P., Lee, C., Waugh, J., & Beyer, C. (2004). Describing roles that Gay-Straight Alliances play in schools. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, 1(3), 7–22.
- Grossman, A. H., & D'Augelli, A. R. (2007). Transgender youth and life-threatening behaviors. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 37(5), 527-537.
- . (2006). Transgender youth: Invisible and vulnerable. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 51(1), 111–128.
- Grossman, A. H., D'Augelli, A. R., & Salter, N. P. (2006). Male-to-female transgender youth. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 2(1), 71-92.0
- Grossman, A. H., Haney, A. P., Edwards, P., Alessi, E. J., Ardon, M., & Howell, T. J. (2009). Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth talk about experiencing and coping with school violence: A qualitative study. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 6(1), 24-46.
- Gutierrez, N. (2004). Resisting fragmentation, living whole: Four female transgender students of color speak about school. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 16(3-4), 69–79.
- Hackford-Peer, K. (2010). In the name of safety: Discursive positionings of queer youth. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 29(6), 541–556.
- Halberstam, J. (1998a) *Female masculinities*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- . (1998b). Transgender butch: Butch/FTM border wars and the masculine continuum. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 4, 287-310.
- Hale J (2009) *Suggested rules for non-transsexuals writing about transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or trans*. Retrieved Jan 22, 2016 from <http://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html>
- Handa, A. (2003). *Of silk saris and mini-skirts: South Asian girls walk the tightrope of culture*. Toronto, ON: Women's Press.
- Hansen, L. E. (2015). Encouraging pre-service teachers to address issues of sexual orientation in their classrooms: Walking the walk & talking the talk. *Multicultural Education*, 22(2), 51-55.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599.
- Harding, S. (1987). *Feminism and methodology: social science issues*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Hare, J., & Pidgeon, M.. (2011). The way of the warrior: Indigenous youth navigating the challenges of schooling. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'Éducation*, 34(2), 93-111.
- Harris, A. & Gray, E. (2014). *Queer teachers, identity and performativity*. London, UK: Palgrave Pivot.
- Harris, J. and Penney, D. (2002). Gender, health and physical education. In D. Penney (Ed.), *Gender and physical education: contemporary issues and future directions*. London, UK: Routledge



- Hendrick, H. (1997). Constructions and reconstructions of British childhood: An interpretative survey, 1800 to the present. In A. James & A. Prout, *Constructing and reconstructing childhood contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood* (pp. 33–60). Philadelphia, PA: Routledge Falmer.
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I. & Bailey, A. (2012). *Qualitative research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Henry, & Tator, C. (2009). *The colour of democracy: Racism in Canadian Society* [4<sup>th</sup> edition]. Scarborough, ON: Nelson College Indigenous.
- Herr, K. (1999). Private power and privileged education: De/constructing institutionalized racism. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 3(2), 111-129.
- Hines, S. (2007). *TransForming gender: Transgender practices of identity, intimacy and care*. Bristol, UK: The Policy Press.
- Holm, G., Daspit, T., & Kelaher Young, A. (2006). The sky is always falling: (Un)changing views on youth in the US. In C. Leccardi & E. Ruspini (Eds.), *A new youth?: Young people, generations and family life* (pp. 85–102). Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Horn, S. (2007). Adolescents' acceptance of same-sex peers based on sexual orientation and gender expression. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 36(3), 363-71.
- Hunt, S. (2015) Embodying self-determination: Beyond the gender binary. In M. Greenwood, C. Reading and S. de Leeuw (Eds.), *Determinants of Indigenous peoples' health in Canada*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Hunt, S., & Holmes, C. (2015). Everyday decolonization: Living a decolonizing queer politics. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 19(2), 154–172.

- Hursh, D., & Martina, C. A. (2003). Neoliberalism and schooling in the US: How state and federal government education policies perpetuate inequality. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 1(2), 1-13.
- Ingraham, C. (1994). The heterosexual imaginary: Feminist sociology and theories of gender. *Sociological theory*, 12, 203-203.
- Jackson, J. (2007). *Unmasking identities: An exploration of the lives of gay and lesbian teachers*. Washington, DC: Lexington Books.
- Jackson, K. (2014) The construction of Black Jamaican masculinity in a neocolonial imaginary: Canadian “homohegemony” and the “homophobic other.” *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, 8, 209-234.
- Jennings, K. (2015). Leelah Alcorn and the continued struggle for equity for LGBT students. *The Educational Forum*, 79(4), 343–346.
- Johnson, G. (2014) Vancouver school board's LGBTQ policy sparks debate. *Georgia Straight*. Retrieved Nov 13, 2015 from <http://www.straight.com/life/652381/vancouver-school-boards-lgbtq-policy-sparks-debate>
- Johnson, M. (2014). The It Gets Better Project: A study in (and of) Whiteness – in LGBT youth and media cultures. In C. Pullen (Ed.), *Queer youth and media cultures*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jones, T., Smith, E., Ward, R., Dixon, J., Hillier, L., & Mitchell, A. (2015). School experiences of transgender and gender diverse students in Australia. *Sex Education* (published online ahead of print), 1–16.

- Joshee, R. (2009). Multicultural education policy in Canada: Competing ideologies, interconnected discourses. In J.A. Banks (Ed.), *The Routledge International Companion to Multicultural Education* (pp. 96-108). New York, NY: Routledge.
- . (2007). Opportunities for social justice work: The Ontario diversity policy web. *Journal of Educational Administration and Foundation*, 18(1-2), 171–199.
- Kane, E. W. (2012). *The gender trap: parents and the pitfalls of raising boys and girls*. New York, NY: New York University.
- . (2009). “I wanted a soul mate”: Gendered anticipation and frameworks of accountability in parents’ preferences for sons and daughters. *Symbolic Interaction*, 32(4), 372–389.
- Kellaway, M. & Brydum, S. (2015). These are the U.S. trans women killed in 2015. *The Advocate*. Retrieved Nov 3, 2015 from <http://www.advocate.com/transgender/2015/07/27/these-are-trans-women-killed-so-far-us-2015>
- Kelly, D. M., & Brooks, M. (2009). How young is too young? Exploring beginning teachers’ assumptions about young children and teaching for social justice. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 42(2), 202–216.
- King, J. R. (2004). The (im)possibility of gay teachers for young children. *Theory into Practice*, 43(2), 122-127.
- Kitzinger, C. (1996) Speaking of oppression: psychology, politics and the language of power. In Rothblum, E. and Bond, L. (Eds.), *Preventing heterosexism and homophobia* (pp. 3-19). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kogan, T. S. (2009). Transsexuals in public restrooms: Law, cultural geography and Etsitty v. Utah Transit Authority. *Temple Political and Civil Rights Law Review*, 18, 673–697.

- Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Diaz, E. M., & Bartkiewicz, M.S. (2009). *The 2009 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools*. New York, NY: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN).
- Kumashiro, K. K. (2003). Queer ideals in education. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45(2-4), 365–367.
- . (2001). Queer students of color and antiracist, antiheterosexist education: Paradoxes of identity and activism. In K. Kumashiro, *Troubling intersections of race and sexuality: Queer students of color and anti-oppressive education* (pp. 1-26). New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kurth, N., & Mellard, D. (2006). Student perceptions of the accommodation process in postsecondary education. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 19(1), 71-84.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). Racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 257–277). London, UK: Sage.
- Ladson-Billings, G. & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a Critical Race Theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47–64.
- Lamble, S. (2008). Retelling racialized violence, remaking white innocence: The politics of interlocking oppressions in Transgender Day of Remembrance. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 5(1), 24–42.
- Lapointe, A. A. (2015). Standing “straight” up to homophobia: Straight allies’ involvement in GSAs. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 12(2), 144–169.

- Lazar, M. (2007). Feminist critical discourse analysis: Articulating a feminist discourse praxis. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 4(2), 141-164.
- Le Duigou, C. (2000). An historic overview of two spirited people: A context for social work and HIV/AIDS services in the aboriginal community. *Native Social Work Journal*, 3(1), 195-214.
- Lee, C. (2002). The impact of belonging to a high school gay/straight alliance. *High School Journal*, 85, 13–26.
- Leonardi, B. & Saenz, L. (2014). Conceptualizing safety from the inside out: Heteronormative spaces and their effects on students’ sense of self. In L. Meyer & D. Carlson (Eds.), *Gender and sexualities in education: A reader* (pp. 202-229). New York: Peter Lang.
- Lesko, N. (2001). *Act your age!: A cultural construction of adolescence*. New York, NY: Routledge Falmer.
- Lev, A. I. (2006). Disordering gender identity: Gender Identity Disorder in the DSM-IV-TR. *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality*, 17(3-4), 35–69.
- Lewis, M. A., & Petrone, R. (2010). “Although adolescence need not be violent...”: Preservice teachers’ connections between “adolescence” and literacy curriculum. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53(5), 398–407.
- Linville, D. (2009). Queer theory and teen sexuality: Unclear lines. In J. Anyon (Ed.), *Theory and educational research: Toward critical social explanation* (pp. 156–174). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lipkin, A. (2003). *Beyond diversity day: A Q&A on gay and lesbian issues in schools*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.

- Logie, C. H., & Rwigema, M.-J. (2014). "The normative idea of queer is a White person": Understanding perceptions of white privilege among lesbian, bisexual, and queer women of color in Toronto, Canada. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 18(2), 174–191.
- Loutzenheiser, L. W. (2015). "Who are you calling a problem?": Addressing transphobia and homophobia through school policy. *Critical Studies in Education*, 56(1), 99–115.
- . (2005). Working fluidity, materiality and the educational imaginary: A case for contingent primacy. *Journal of the Canadian Association of Curriculum Studies*, 3(2), 27-39.
- Lund, D. E., & Carr, P. R. (2015). *Revisiting the great white North?: Reframing whiteness, privilege, and identity in education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Sense Publishers.
- Macgillivray, I. K., & Jennings, T. (2008). A content analysis exploring lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender topics in Foundations of Education textbooks. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59(2), 170–188.
- MacIntosh, L. (2007b). Does anyone have a band-aid? Anti-homophobia discourses and pedagogical Impossibilities. *Educational Studies*, 41(1), 33-43.
- . (2007a). Gay-Straight Alliances: From frontline to bottom line. *Journal of Curriculum & Pedagogy*, 4(2), 130–134.
- Mackey, E. (1999). *The house of difference: Cultural politics and national identity in Canada*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- MacNeil, A. J., Prater, D. L., & Busch, S. (2009). The effects of school culture and climate on student achievement. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 12(1), 73-84.
- Markman, E. R. (2011). Gender Identity Disorder, the gender binary, and transgender oppression: Implications for ethical social work. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 81(4), 314–327.

- Marquez, R. & Brockenbrough, E.(2013). Queer youth v. the State of California: Interrogating legal discourses on the rights of queer students of color. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(4), 461-482.
- Martin, D. E., & Kipling, A. (2006). Factors shaping Aboriginal nursing students' experiences. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 6(6), 380–388.
- Martin, K. A. (2009). Normalizing heterosexuality: Mothers' assumptions, talk, and strategies with young children. *American Sociological Review*, 74(2), 190–207.
- Martino, W. (2000). Policing masculinities: Investigating the role of homophobia and heteronormativity in the lives of adolescent school boys. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 8(2), 213-236.
- Mayo, C. (2013). *LGBTQ youth and education: Policies and practices*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- . (2004). Queering school communities: Ethical curiosity and gay-straight alliances. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, 1(3), 23–35.
- McCarthy, L. (2003). Wearing my identity: A transgender teacher in the classroom. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 36(2), 170-183.
- . (2003). What about the "T"? Is multicultural education ready to address transgender issues? *Multicultural Perspectives*, 5(4), 46-48.
- McCready, L. T. (2013). Conclusion to the special issue: Queer of color analysis: Interruptions and pedagogic possibilities. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(4), 512–522.
- . (2004). Some challenges facing queer youth programs in urban high schools: Racial segregation and de-normalizing whiteness. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, 1(3), 37-51.

- . (2001). When fitting in isn't an option, or why Black queer males at a California high school stay away from Project 10. In K. Kumashiro, *Troubling intersections of race and sexuality: Queer students of color and anti-oppressive education* (pp. 37-54). New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- McCorkel, J. A., & Myers, K. (2003). What difference does difference make? Position and privilege in the field. *Qualitative Sociology*, 26(2), 199-231.
- McCormack, O. & J. Gleeson (2010) Attitudes of parents of young men towards the inclusion of sexual orientation and homophobia on the Irish post-primary curriculum. *Gender and Education*, 22(4), 385-400.
- McClelland, A., Flicker, S., Nepveux, D., Nixon, S., Vo, T., Wilson, C., Marshall, Z., Travers, R. & Proudfoot, D. (2012). Seeking safer sexual spaces: Queer and trans young people labeled with intellectual disabilities and the paradoxical risks of restriction. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 59(6), 808-819.
- McCormack, M. (2012). Queer masculinities, gender conformity, and the secondary school. In J. C. Landreau & N. M. Rodriguez, *Queer masculinities: A critical reader in education* (pp. 35–46). New York, NY: Springer.
- McGuire, J. K., Anderson, C. R., Toomey, R. B. & Russell, S. T. (2010). School climate for transgender youth: A mixed method investigation of student experiences and school responses. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39, 1175-1188.
- McKenzie, M. (2014) *Black Girl Dangerous on race, queerness, class and gender*. Oakland, CA: BGD Press.
- McLaren, Peter. (2011). Critical pedagogy in stark opposition to Western neoliberalism and the corporatization of schools: A conversation with Peter McLaren. In P. Orelus (Ed.),



- Rethinking Race, Class, Language, and Gender: A Dialogue with Noam Chomsky and Other Leading Scholars* (pp. 97-110). Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- McLaren, P., & Hammer, R. (1989). Critical pedagogy and the postmodern challenge: Towards a critical postmodernist pedagogy of liberation. *Educational Foundations*, 3(3), 29-62.
- McRuer, (2002). Compulsory able-bodiedness and queer/disabled existence. In S. Snyder, B. J. Brueggemann & R. Garland-Thomson (Eds.), *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities* (pp. 88-99). New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America
- Meyer, D. (2014). Resisting hate crime discourse: Queer and intersectional challenges to neoliberal hate crime laws. *Critical Criminology*, 22(1), 113–125.
- Meyer, E. J. (2010). Teachers, sexual orientation, and the law in Canada: A human rights perspective. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 83(3), 89–95.
- . (2009). *Gender, bullying, and harassment*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Meyerowitz, J. J. (2004). *How sex changed: A history of transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Miller, sj. (2015a). A queer literacy framework promoting gender and sexuality self-determination and justice. *English Journal*, 104(5), 37-44.
- . (2015b). Why schooling must move into a trans\*/post-trans\* era. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*. [Online]. Retrieved Jan 15, 2016 from <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/>
- Mills, R. (2000) Perspectives of childhood. In Mills, J., & Mills, R. W. (Eds.). *Childhood studies: a reader in perspectives of childhood* (p. 7-38). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Miceli, M. (2005). *Standing out, standing together: The social and political impact of Gay-Straight Alliances*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Minh-ha, T. T. (1989). *Woman, native, other: Writing postcoloniality and feminism*.  
Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Minter, S. P. (2006) 'Do transsexuals dream of gay rights? Getting real about transgender inclusion. In P. Currah, R. Juang & S. Minter (Eds.), *Transgender Rights* (pp.141–70).  
Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Miraftab, F. (2004). Making neo-liberal governance: The disempowering work of empowerment. *International Planning Studies*, 9(4), 239-259.
- Moodley, K. (1983). Canadian multiculturalism as ideology. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 6(3), 320-31.
- Morgan, D. L. (2008). Snowball Sampling. In L. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of organization* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Morgensen, S. L. (2012). Theorising gender, sexuality and settler colonialism: An introduction. *Settler Colonial Studies*, 2(2), 2–22.
- . (2011). *Spaces between us: Queer settler colonialism and indigenous decolonization*.  
Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nadal , K., Skolnik, A. & Wong, Y. (2012) Interpersonal and systemic microaggressions toward transgender people: Implications for counseling. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 6(1), 55-82.
- Nagel, J. (2000). Ethnicity and sexuality. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 107–133.
- Nagra, B. (2011). *Unequal citizenship: Being Muslim and Canadian in the post 9/11 era* [unpublished dissertation]. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto.

- Namaste, V. (2011). *Sex change, social change: Reflections on identity, institutions, and imperialism* (2nd ed.). Toronto, ON: Women's Press.
- . (2007). Interview with Vivian Namaste (pp. 193-200). *Handbook of the new sexuality studies*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- . (2000). *Invisible lives: The erasure of transsexual and transgendered people*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Naples, N. (2007). Feminist methodology and its discontents. In Outhwaite, W. & Turner, S. (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of social science research* (pp. 547-564). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- . (2003). *Feminism and method: Ethnography, discourse analysis, and activist research*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- National Household Survey (2011). Occupation - National Occupational Classification (NOC) 2011 (691), Class of Worker (5), Age Groups (13B) and Sex (3) for the Employed Labour Force Aged 15 Years and Over, in Private Households of Canada, Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2011 National Household Survey. Retrieved Feb 10, 2015 from <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/dt-td/Rp-eng.cfm?LANG=E&APATH=3&DETAIL=0&DIM=0&FL=A&FREE=0&GC=0&GID=0&GK=0&GRP=0&PID=105897&PRID=0&PTYPE=105277&S=0&SHOWALL=1&SUB=0&Temporal=2013&THEME=96&VID=0&VNAMEE=&VNAMEF=>
- Nestle, J., Howell, C., & Wilchins, R. A. (Eds.). (2002). *GenderQueer: Voices from beyond the sexual binary* (1st ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Alyson Books.

- Neugarten, B. L. & Datan, N. (1996). Sociological perspectives on the life cycle. In Neugarten, B. L., *The meanings of age: Selected papers of Bernice L. Neugarten* (p. 96-113). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Neve, A. & Ryan, A. (2014). Human-rights victory draws close for transgender Canadians. *Ottawa Citizen* (June 7). Retrieved Nov 26, 2014 from <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/national/alex-neve-and-amanda-ryan-human-rights-victory-for-transgender-canadians>
- Newhouse, M. R. (2013). Remembering the "T" in LGBT: Recruiting and supporting transgender students. *Journal of College Admission*, 220, 22-27.
- Nichols, S. L. (1999). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth: Understanding diversity and promoting tolerance in schools. *The Elementary School Journal*, 99(5), 505–519.
- Niemi, N. S. (2005). The emperor has no clothes: Examining the impossible relationship between gendered and academic identities in middle school students. *Gender and Education*, 17(5), 483–497.
- Nyong'o, T. (2010). The unforgivable transgression of being Caster Semenya. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 20(1), 95–100.
- Oakes, J., Rogers, J., Lipton, M., & Morrell, E. (2002). The social construction of college access: Confronting the technical, cultural, and political barriers to low-income students of color. In W. G. Tiernet & L.S. Haedorn (Eds.), *Increasing access to college: Extending possibilities for all students* (pp. 105-122). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Olson, J., Forbes, C., & Belzer, M. (2011). Management of the transgender adolescent. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 165(2), 171-176.

- Orelus, P. and Malott, C. (Eds.) (2012). *Radical voices for democratic schooling: Exposing neoliberal inequalities*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Orner, M. (1992). Interrupting the calls for student voice in “liberatory” education: A feminist poststructuralist perspective. In C. Luke & J. Gore (Eds.), *Feminism and critical pedagogy* (pp. 74–89). New York, NY: Routledge.
- O’Shaughnessy, M., Russell, S., Heck, K., Calhoun, C. & Laub, C. (2004). *Safe place to learn: Consequences of harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender nonconformity and steps for making schools safer*. San Francisco, CA: California Safe Schools Coalition.
- O’Malley, M. P., & Capper, C. A. (2015). A measure of the quality of educational leadership programs for social justice: Integrating LGBTIQ identities into principal preparation. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 51(2), 290–330.
- Overall, C. (2007). Public toilets: Sex segregation revisited. *Ethics and the Environment*, 12(2) 71–91.
- Oxman-Martinez, J., Rummens, A., Moreau, J., Choi, Y. R., Beiser, M., Ogilvie, L. & Armstrong, R. (2012). Perceived ethnic discrimination and social exclusion: Newcomer immigrant children in Canada. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 82(3), 376–388.
- Paechter, C. (2006). Reconceptualizing the gendered body: learning and constructing masculinities and femininities in school. *Gender and Education*, 18(2), 121–135.
- Pascoe, C. J. (2007). *Dude, you’re a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Payne, E. C. (2010). Sluts: Heteronormative policing in the stories of lesbian youth. *Educational Studies*, 46(3), 317–336.
- . (2007). Heterosexism, perfection, and popularity: Young lesbians' experiences of the high school social scene. *Educational Studies*, 41(1), 60-79.
- Payne, E. (2013, Jun 24). Transgender first-grader wins the right to use girls' restroom. *CNN*. Retrieved Nov 20, 2015 from <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/24/us/colorado-transgender-girl-school/#>
- Payne, E. C. & Smith, M. (2015). Queering Education Research Institute (QuERI) position statement on the New York State Education Department (NYSED) document guidance to school districts for creating a safe and supportive environment for transgender and gender nonconforming students. Retrieved Oct 20, 2015 from [https://www.academia.edu/14716483/QuERI\\_Response\\_to\\_NYSED\\_Transgender\\_Student\\_Guidance](https://www.academia.edu/14716483/QuERI_Response_to_NYSED_Transgender_Student_Guidance)
- . (2014). The big freak out: Educator fear in response to the presence of transgender elementary school students. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 61(3), 399–418.
- . (2013). LGBTQ kids, school safety, and missing the big picture: How the dominant bullying discourse prevents school professionals from thinking about systemic marginalization or... why we need to rethink LGBTQ bullying. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking, Inaugural Issue*, 1–36.
- . (2012). Rethinking safe schools approaches for LGBTQ students: Changing the questions we ask. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 14(4), 187–193.

- Peters, M. & Marshall, J.D. (1995) Education and empowerment: Postmodernism and the critique of humanism. In P. McLaren (Ed.), *Postmodernism, Post-colonialism and Pedagogy* (pp. 3-36). Alberta Park, Australia: James Nicholas Publishers.
- Pharr, S. (1988). *Homophobia, a weapon of sexism*. Inverness, CA: Chardon Press.
- Phillips, L., & Jørgensen, M. (2002). *Discourse analysis as theory and method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pillow, W. (2003). Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(2), 175-196.
- Pinar, W. (Ed.). (1998). *Queer theory in education*. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Pomerantz, S. (2007). Cleavage in a tank top: Bodily prohibition and the discourses of school dress codes. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 53(4), 373-386.
- Postman, N. (1983) *The disappearance of childhood*. London, UK: W.H. Allen.
- Preston, M. J. (2015). 'They're just not mature right now': Teachers' complicated perceptions of gender and anti-queer bullying. *Sex Education*, 1-13.
- Prout, A., & James, A. (1997). A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems. In A. James & A. Prout (Eds.), *Constructing and reconstructing childhood contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. (pp. 7-32). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Puar, J. K. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pyne, J. (2015, January 14). "Fix society. Please." *NOW*. Retrieved Jan 15, 2015 from <https://nowtoronto.com/news/leelah-alcorn-fix-society-not-trans-people/>

- Quinn, T., & Meiners, E. R. (2011). Teacher education, struggles for social justice, and the historical erasure of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer lives. In A. Ball & C. Tyson (Eds.), *Studying diversity in teacher education* (pp. 135-151). New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Ramazanoglu, C., & Holland, J. (2002). *Feminist methodology: Challenges and choices*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rana, J. (2007). The story of islamophobia. *Souls*, 9(2), 148–161.
- Rasmussen, M. L., & Crowley, V. (2004). Editorial overview: Wounded identities and the promise of pleasure. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 25(4), 427–430.
- Razack, S. (1998). *Looking White people in the eye: Gender, race, and culture in courtrooms and classrooms*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Reay, D. (2001). “Spice Girls”, “nice girls”, “girlies”, and “tomboys”: Gender discourses, girls’ cultures and femininities in the primary classroom. *Gender and Education*, 13(2), 153–166.
- Reid, D. K., & Knight, M. G. (2006). Disability justifies exclusion of minority students: A critical history grounded in disability studies. *Educational Researcher*, 35(6), 18-23.
- Reitz, J. & Banerjee, R. (2007) Racial inequality, social cohesion and policy issues in Canada. In *Belonging? Diversity, recognition and shared citizenship in Canada* (pp. 489-546) by K. Banting, T. Courchene, & L. Seidle (Eds.). Montréal, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Renold, E. (2004) ‘Other’ boys: Negotiating non-hegemonic masculinities in the primary school. *Gender and Education*, 16(2), 247-267.



- Rezai-Rashti, G. (2005). The persistence of colonial discourse: Race, gender, and Muslim students in Canadian schools. In V. Zawilski (Ed.), *Inequality in Canada: A reader on the intersections of gender, race, and class* (pp. 178-187). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Richmond, K., Burnes, T., & Carroll, K. (2012). Lost in trans-lation: Interpreting systems of trauma for transgender clients. *Traumatology*, 18(1), 45-57.
- Riddell, S. (2011). *Gender and the politics of the curriculum*. London: Routledge.
- Rifkin, M. (2011). *When did Indians become straight?: kinship, the history of sexuality, and native sovereignty*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Ringrose, J., & Renold, E. (2010). Normative cruelties and gender deviants: The performative effects of bully discourses for girls and boys in school. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(4), 573-596.
- Rofes, E. (1998). Innocence, perversion, and Heather's two mommies. *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 3(1), 3-26.
- Ross, B. (2012). Outdoor brothel culture: The un/making of a transsexual stroll in Vancouver's West End, 1975–1984. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 25(1), 126–150.
- Rose, N. (1998). *Inventing our selves: Psychology, power and personhood*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Røthing, A. & Svendsen, S. (2010). Homotolerance and heterosexuality as Norwegian values. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 7(2), 147-166.
- Rubin, H. (2003). *Self-made men: Identity and embodiment amongst transsexual men*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

- Rummens, J. A. & Dei, G. J. S. (2012). Addressing marginalization inside education: Racialized, immigrant and aboriginal youth. In K. Tilleczeck & H. B. Ferguson (Eds.), *Youth, Education, and Marginality: Local and Global Expressions* (pp. 115-134). Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Russell, S., Muraco, A., Subramaniam, A., & Laub, C. (2009). Youth empowerment and high school Gay-Straight Alliances. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38(7), 891–903.
- Russell, S. & Truong, N. (2001). Sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, and school environments: A national study of sexual minority youth of color. In K. Kumashiro (Ed.) *Troubling intersections of race and sexuality: Queer students of color and anti-oppressive education* (pp. 113-130). New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Ryan, C. L. (2015). Kissing brides and loving hot vampires: children's construction and perpetuation of heteronormativity in elementary school classrooms. *Sex Education* (online ahead of print), 1-14.
- Ryan, C. L., Patraw, J. M., & Bednar, M. (2013). Discussing princess boys and pregnant men: Teaching about gender diversity and transgender experiences within an elementary school curriculum. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 10(1-2), 83–105.
- Ryan, J. (2003). Educational administrators' perceptions of racism in diverse school contexts. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 6(2), 145–164.
- Ryan, J., Pollock, K., & Antonelli, F. (2009). Teacher diversity in Canada: Leaky pipelines, bottlenecks, and glass ceilings. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 32(3), 591-617.
- Saewyc, E. (2011). Research on adolescent sexual orientation: Development, health disparities, stigma, and resilience. *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 21(1), 256-272.

- Samuel, E. & Burney, S. (2003). Racism, eh? Interactions of South Asian students with mainstream faculty in a predominantly White Canadian university. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 33(2), 81-114.
- Sandercock, T. (2015). Transing the small screen: Loving and hating transgender youth in *Glee* and *Degrassi*. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 24(4), 436–452.
- Sanders, A. M., & Mathis, J. B. (2013). Gay and lesbian literature in the classroom: Can gay themes overcome heteronormativity? *Journal of Praxis in Multicultural Education*, 7(1), 1–18.
- Sausa, L. A. (2005). Translating research into practice: Trans youth recommendations for improving school systems. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, 3, 15–28.
- Saxey, E. (2008). *Homoplot: The coming-out story and gay, lesbian and bisexual identity*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Scelfo, J. (2015, February 3). A university recognizes a third gender: neutral. *New York Times*. Retrieved Feb 10, 2015 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/education/edlife/a-university-recognizes-a-third-gender-neutral.html>
- Schilt, K., & Westbrook, L. (2009). Doing gender, doing heteronormativity: “Gender normals,” transgender people, and the social maintenance of heterosexuality. *Gender & Society*, 23(4), 440–464.
- Schindel, J. (2008). Gender 101— beyond the binary: Gay-Straight Alliances and gender activism. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy*, 5(2), 56–70.
- Scott, D. (1992). Anthropology and colonial discourse. *Cultural Anthropology*, 7, 301–27.
- Scott, J. (1991). The evidence of experience. *Critical Inquiry*, 17, 773–95.

- Scruton, S. (1992). *Shaping up to womanhood: Gender and girls' physical education*.  
Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1991). How to bring your kids up gay. *Social Text*, 29(29), 18–27.
- Seale, E. K. (2005). *The policing of gender in middle school* [unpublished dissertation].  
Retrieved Oct 31 from <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/resolver/1840.16/1804>.
- Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity*. Berkley, CA: Seal Press.
- Sharp, S., & Smith, P. K. (Eds.). (2002). *Tackling bullying in your school: A practical handbook for teachers*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Shelley, C. (2008). *Transpeople: Repudiation, trauma, healing*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Singh, A. A. (2013). Transgender youth of color and resilience: Negotiating oppression and finding support. *Sex Roles*, 68(11-12), 690-702.
- Skelton, C. (2001). *Schooling the boys: masculinities and primary education*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.
- Skidmore, E. (2011). Constructing the "good transsexual": Christine Jorgensen, whiteness, and heteronormativity in the mid-twentieth-century press. *Feminist Studies*, 37(2), 270-300.
- Smith, A. (2010). Queer theory and Native studies: The heteronormativity of settler colonialism. *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, 16(1–2), 41–68.
- Smith, D. (2005). *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Smith, D. (1990). *Texts, facts, and femininity: Exploring the relations of ruling*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. London, UK: Zed Books.
- Smith, M. (2005). Social movements and judicial empowerment: Courts, public policy, and lesbian and gay organizing in Canada. *Politics & Society*, 33(2), 327–353.
- Smith, M. (2005). Resisting and reinforcing neoliberalism: Lesbian and gay organising at the federal and local levels in Canada. *Policy & Politics*, 33(1), 75–93.
- Smith, M. J. (2015). It's a balancing act: The good teacher and ally identity. *Educational Studies*, 51(3), 223-243.
- Smith, M. J., & Payne, E. (2016). Binaries and biology: Conversations with elementary education professionals after professional development on supporting transgender students. *The Educational Forum*, 80(1), 34–47.
- Smolash, W. N. (2009). Mark of Cain(ada): Racialized security discourse in Canada's national newspapers. *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 78(2), 745–763.
- Snow, D. & Benford, R. (1992). Master frames and cycles of protest. In A. Morris and C. McClurg Mueller (Eds.), *Frontiers in social movement theory* (pp. 133-155). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Solebello, N., & Elliott, S. (2011). “We want them to be as heterosexual as possible”: Fathers talk about their teen children's sexuality. *Gender & Society*, 25(3), 293–315.
- Solomon, R. P. (1996). Beyond celebratory multiculturalism: Where teachers fear to tread. In K. A. McLeod (Ed.), *Multicultural education: The state of art national study, Report #4* (p. 67-74). Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers.

- Solomona, R. P., Portelli, J. P., Daniel, B., & Campbell, A. (2005). The discourse of denial: how white teacher candidates construct race, racism and “white privilege.” *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(2), 147–169.
- Søndergaard, D. M. (2002). Poststructuralist approaches to empirical analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 15(2), 187–204.
- Spade, D. (2011). *Normal life: Administrative violence, critical trans politics, and the limits of law*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press.
- Sprague, J. (2005). *Feminist methodologies for critical researchers: Bridging differences*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Srivastava, S. & Francis, M. (2006). The problem of ‘authentic experience’: Storytelling in antiracist and antihomophobic education. *Critical Sociology*, 32(2–3), 275–307.
- St. Denis, V. (2011). Silencing aboriginal curricular content and perspectives through multiculturalism: “There are other children here.” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 33(4), 306–317.
- Stafford, A. (2013) "Is it still a boy?": Hetero/gender normativity in Kindergarten [unpublished dissertation]. Vancouver, BC: The University of British Columbia.
- Statistics Canada (2010). *Aboriginal Statistics at a Glance*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada Catalogue No. 89-645-X.
- Stevens, L. P., Hunter, L., Pendergast, D., Carrington, V., Bahr, N., Kapitzke, C., & Mitchell, J. (2007). Reconceptualizing the possible narratives of adolescence. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 34(2), 107–127.
- Stokoe, E. & Weatheral, A. (2002). Gender, language, conversation analysis and feminism. *Discourse & Society*, 13(6), 707–713.

- Stotzer, R. L. (2009). Violence against transgender people: A review of United States data. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 14*(3), 170-179.
- Stone, A. L. (2009). More than adding a T: American lesbian and gay activists' attitudes towards transgender inclusion. *Sexualities, 12*(3), 334-354.
- Sullivan, C. F. (2011). Gender verification and gender policies in elite sport: Eligibility and "fair play." *Journal of Sport & Social Issues, 35*(4), 400-419.
- Sykes, H. J. (2011). *Queer bodies: sexualities, genders, & fatness in physical education*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- . (2006). Transsexual and transgender policies in sport. *Women in Sport & Physical Activity Journal, 15*(1), 3-13.
- Talbert, S. (2004a). Intelligibility and narrating queer youth. In M. L. Rasmussen, E. Rofes, & S. Talbert (Eds.), *Youth and sexualities: Pleasure, subversion, and insubordination in and out of schools* (pp. 17-39). New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Talbert, S. (2004b). Constructions of LGBT youth: Opening up subject positions. *Theory into Practice, 43*(2), 116-121.
- Talbert, S., Rofes, E. & Rasmussen, M. L. (2004). Transforming discourses of queer youth and educational practices surrounding gender, sexuality, and youth. In M. L. Rasmussen, E. Rofes, & S. Talbert (Eds.), *Youth and sexualities: Pleasure, subversion, and insubordination in and out of schools* (pp. 1-16). New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Talbert, S., & Rasmussen, M. L. (2010). "After-queer" tendencies in queer research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 23*(1), 1-14.
- Talbert, S., & Steinberg, S. (2000). *Thinking queer: Sexuality, culture, and education*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

- Taylor, C. & Peter, T., with McMinn, T.L., Elliott, T., Beldom, S., Ferry, A., Gross, Z., Paquin, S., & Schachter, K. (2011). *Every class in every school: The first national climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools*. Final report. Toronto, ON: Egale Canada Human Rights Trust.
- Taylor, C., Peter, T., Campbell, C., Meyer, E., Ristock, J., & Short, D. (2015). *The every teacher project on LGBTQ-inclusive education in Canada's K-12 schools: Final report*. Winnipeg, MB: Manitoba Teachers' Society.
- Theberge, N. (1997). "It's part of the game": Physicality and the production of gender in women's hockey. *Gender & Society*, 11(1), 69–87.
- Thein, A. H., Kavanagh, K. M., & Fink, L. (2013). Language arts teachers' resistance to teaching LGBT literature and issues. *Language Arts*, 90(3), 169-180.
- Thorne, B. (1993/2008). *Gender play: Girls and boys in school* (11th ed.). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Thurlow, C. (2001). Naming the 'outsider within': Homophobic pejoratives and the verbal abuse of lesbian, gay and bisexual high-school pupils. *Journal of Adolescence*, 24(1), 25-38.
- Todd, D. (2014). Ethnic Chinese groups protest LGBT programs again. *The Vancouver Sun*. Retrieved Jan 27, 2016 from <http://blogs.vancouversun.com/2014/05/29/ethnic-chinese-once-again-protest-lgbt-programs/>
- Tourjee, D. (2015, December 16). Why do men kill trans women? Gender theorist Judith Butler explains. *Broadly*. Retrieved Jan 20, 2016, from [https://broadly.vice.com/en\\_us/article/why-do-men-kill-trans-women-gender-theorist-judith-butler-explains](https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/why-do-men-kill-trans-women-gender-theorist-judith-butler-explains)
- Urmson, J. O. (1952). Parenthetical verbs. *Mind*, 61(244), 480–496.



- Vadeboncoeur, J. A., & Patel Stevens, L. (Eds.). (2005). *Re/constructing "the adolescent": sign, symbol, and body*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining transgender: An ethnography of a category*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Valdes, F. (1996). Unpacking hetero-patriarchy: Tracing the conflation of sex, gender & sexual orientation to its origins. *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, 8(1), 161-212.
- Vancouver Park Board Trans\* and gender variant inclusion working group. (2014). *Building a path to Parks & Recreation for all: Reducing barriers for trans\* & gender variant community members*. Retrieved Jan 18, 2016 from <https://transgendervariant.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/building-a-path-to-parks-recreation-for-all-2.pdf>
- van den Berg, H. (2003) Contradictions in interview discourse. In H. Van Den Berg, M. Wetherell and H. Houtkoop-Steenstra (Eds.), *Analyzing Race Talk: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Interview* (pp. 119–37). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Varjas, K., Graybill, E., Mahan, W., Meyers, J., Dew, B., Marshall, M., et al. (2007). Urban service providers' perspectives on school responses to gay, lesbian, and questioning students: An exploratory study. *Professional School Counseling*, 11, 113-119
- Vaught, S. E., & Castagno, A. E. (2008). "I don't think I'm a racist": Critical Race Theory, teacher attitudes, and structural racism. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 11(2), 95–113.
- Vazquez, D. (2011). Defining more inclusive social policies for people with disabilities. *Critical Disability Discourses/Discours critiques dans le champ du handicap*, 3, p. 1-13.
- Vipond, E. (2015). Resisting transnormativity: Challenging the medicalization and regulation of trans bodies. *Theory in Action*, 8(2), 21–44.

- Vitulli, E. (2010). A defining moment in civil rights history? The Employment Non-Discrimination Act, trans-inclusion, and homonormativity. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 7(3), 155-67.
- Walkerdine, V. (1990). *Schoolgirl fictions*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Walls, N. E., Kane, S. B., & Wisneski, H. (2010). Gay-Straight Alliances and school experiences of sexual minority youth. *Youth & Society*, 41(3), 307–332.
- Wählen, C. (2015, Nov 13). Breakthrough for transgender rights included in Justice mandate (Nov 13). *iPolitics*. Retrieved Nov 13, 2015 from <http://ipolitics.ca/2015/11/13/breakthrough-for-transgender-rights-included-in-justice-mandate/>
- Walton, G. (2011). Spinning our wheels: Reconceptualizing bullying beyond behaviour-focused approaches. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(1), 131-144.
- . (2005). Bullying widespread. *Journal of School Violence*, 4(1), 91-118.
- Wardman, N., Gottschall, K., Drew, C., Hutchesson, R., & Saltmarsh, S. (2013). Picturing natural girlhoods: Nature, space and femininity in girls' school promotions. *Gender and Education*, 25(3), 284–294.
- Watney, S. (1991). School's out. In D. Fuss (Ed.), *Inside/out: Lesbian theories, gay theories* (pp. 387-401). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Waugh, P. (1998). Postmodernism and feminism. In S. Jackson & J. Jones (eds), *Contemporary feminist theories* (pp. 177-193). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Weedon, C. (1999). *Feminism, theory and the politics of difference*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

- Weinberg, J. D. (2009-2010) Transgender bathroom usage: A privileging of biology and physical difference in the law. *Buffalo Journal Gender, Law & Social Policy*, 18, 147-156.
- Weiss, R. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Wells, K., Roberts, G. & Allan, C. (2012). *Supporting Transgender and Transsexual Students in K-12 Schools*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Teachers' Federation.
- Wentling, T., Windsor, E., Schilt, K., & Lucal, B. (2008). Teaching transgender. *Teaching Sociology*, 36(1), 49–57.
- West, I. (2010). PISSAR's Critically queer and disabled politics. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 7(2), 156–175.
- West, C. & Fenstermaker, S. (1995). Doing difference. *Gender & Society*, 9(1), 8-37.
- West, C. & Zimmerman, D. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society*, 1(2), 125–51.
- Westbrook, L., & Schilt, K. (2014). Doing gender, determining gender: Transgender people, gender panics, and the maintenance of the sex/gender/sexuality system. *Gender & Society*, 28(1), 32–57.
- Wetherell, M. (2003). Racism and the analysis of cultural resources in interviews. In H. van den Berg, M. Wetherell & H. Houtkoop-Steenstra (Eds.), *Analyzing race talk: Multidisciplinary perspectives on the research interview* (pp. 11-30). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- White, R. (2012, August 20). Neither man nor woman: Meet the agender. *The Cut*. Retrieved Aug 30, 2012, from <http://nymag.com/thecut/2012/08/neither-man-nor-woman-meet-the-agender.html>

- Wilchins, R. A. (1997). *Read my lips: Sexual subversion and the end of gender*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.
- Wilkinson, S., & Kitzinger, C. (2008). Using conversation analysis in feminist and critical research. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2(2), 555-573.
- Wintemute, R. (1997). *Sexual orientation and human rights: The United States constitution, the European Convention, and the Canadian Charter*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Witcher, C. (2010). Negotiating transcription as a relative insider: Implications for rigor. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 9(2), 122-132.
- Witten, T. M. & Eyler, A. E. (1999). Hate crimes and violence against the transgendered. *The Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice*, 11(3), 461-8.
- Wood, E., Desmarais, S., & Gugula, S. (2002). The impact of parenting experience on gender stereotyped toy play of children. *Sex Roles*, 47(1), 39-49.
- Woolley, S. W. (2012). "The silence itself is enough of a statement": The day of silence and LGBTQ awareness raising: The silence itself is enough of a statement. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 43(3), 271-288.
- Wylie, S. A., Corliss, H. L., Boulanger, V., Prokop, L. A., & Austin, S. B. (2010). Socially assigned gender nonconformity: A brief measure for use in surveillance and investigation of health disparities. *Sex Roles*, 63(3/4), 264-276.
- Youdell, D. (2006) *Impossible bodies, impossible selves: Exclusions and student subjectivities*. Dordrecht, NDL: Springer.
- Youdell, D. (2005). Sex–gender–sexuality: How sex, gender and sexuality constellations are constituted in secondary schools. *Gender and Education*, 17(3), 249–270.

- . (2004). Wounds and Reinscriptions: Schools, sexualities and performative subjects. *Discourse*, 25(4), 477–493.
- Young, I. (2014). School transgender policy angers Vancouver's Chinese Christians. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved Jan 27, 2016 from <http://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1517362/school-transgender-policy-angers-vancouvers-chinese-christians?page=all>
- Zucker, K. J., Wood, H., Singh, D., & Bradley, S. J. (2012). A developmental, biopsychosocial model for the treatment of children with Gender Identity Disorder. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 59(3), 369–397.
- Zlatunich, N. (2009). Prom dreams and prom reality: Girls negotiating 'perfection' at the high school prom. *Sociological Inquiry*, 79(3), 351-75.

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A - Interview guide**

#### **Background**

1. Briefly describe your current position at the school.
2. How long have you been teaching or working at this school? How long have you been teaching or working as an administrator/counsellor in total?
3. What is your definition of trans? How would you compare trans students and gender-fluid students?
4. Where do you get your information on trans issues and/or on gender fluidity? (TV, websites, family, acquaintances, etc.)
5. (If hasn't mentioned it) Do you know any trans or gender-fluid adults? How have they influenced your thinking?
6. (If hasn't mentioned it) Have you attended any training on trans issues or gender fluidity? What was it like? Who offered the training?

#### **Professional & personal experience**

1. Tell me about the first time that you worked with trans or gender-fluid students. How did you first learn that the student was trans or gender-fluid?
2. What were your thoughts originally?
3. How did other people at the school react?
4. Your school has a large population of white/Chinese/Filipino/etc. students. How do you think that impacted the way that the school managed the situation?
5. How about the religious make-up of the student population?
6. How has your thinking changed over time? What do you think created that change?
7. Have you worked with other trans and gender-fluid students since? How has your experience been similar/different?
8. Have the trans and gender-fluid students that you know always been white? How do you think their racial or ethnic background affected their experience? How about their religious background?

### **Working with trans and gender-fluid youth in schools (politics)**

1. Thinking of the different times where you have worked with trans and gender-fluid students, what are the practical changes that were made at the school to accommodate the student and their needs? (bathrooms, sports team, etc.)
2. Were some of these changes more difficult to implement than others? Why?
3. How successful do you think these changes were? How are you measuring success?
4. If your school could have done one thing differently, what would it be?
5. Do you think other people at the school share your opinions on this topic?
6. What education have you had to do with your colleagues on this topic?
7. Tell me about some conflict or resistance that you experienced with school staff.
8. How does your school decide to whom the student's gender identity should be disclosed?
9. Can you think of concerns that you or other people might have about having trans and gender-fluid youth at the school?

### **The current situation in schools (policy)**

1. Are you aware of a policy on trans and gender-fluid youth at your school, in your district or in the province?
2. What role have parent associations had in making decisions about trans and gender-fluid students? Do you think this is the role that they should play?
3. What unique challenges do you think trans and gender-fluid youth face at schools? How about unique opportunities? (NOTE: Make sure to differentiate trans and gender-fluid if respondent doesn't)
4. What do you think can be done to improve the experiences of trans and gender-fluid youth?
5. Are there specific support groups for trans and gender-fluid students to access?
6. Can student clubs like Gay-Straight Alliances be helpful for trans and gender-fluid youth? How so? What about other groups for minority students?
7. How are transphobia and homophobia different? Similar?

8. Do you know trans adults in the school system? Do you think they have a particular role to play in this?

### **Impact on school practices (pedagogy)**

1. Do you talk about trans issues or gender fluidity in your classroom / in your school?
2. If yes, what resources do you use?
3. How do you think your ideas about gender have changed as a result of working with trans and gender-fluid youth?
4. Do you notice it more when gender comes up in the classroom / in your work? Give me some examples.
5. Do you think you would approach your work differently if you had not worked with trans and gender-fluid youth? How so?
6. What kind of impact do you think having (a) trans and gender-fluid youth at the school has had on your colleagues?
7. What kind of impact do you think having (a) trans and gender-fluid youth at the school has had on other students?
8. Who teaches Social Justice 12 in your school? Do you know if the course touches on trans issues and gender fluidity?

### **Conclusion**

10. What would you say is the most interesting part of working with trans and gender-fluid youth?
11. What is the most challenging part of working with trans and gender-fluid youth?
12. What has been the most surprising thing you have learned about trans people and/or gender fluidity?
13. Anything else you want to mention?

Thank you so much for your help with this study.



## Appendix B - Recruitment letter



**a place of mind**  
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

**Department of Sociology**  
6303 N.W. Marine Drive  
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z1  
Tel: 604-822-2878  
Fax: 604-822-6161  
[www.soci.ubc.ca](http://www.soci.ubc.ca)

### Seeking participants

*Project title:*

*How schools respond to trans and gender-fluid youth*

Hello,

I am contacting you about a research project that I am undertaking on the way that schools respond and adapt to the presence of trans and gender-fluid youth. I am working under the supervision of Dr. Becki Ross and Dr. Dawn Currie.

This research project looks at the experiences of adults who work in schools and have encountered trans and gender-fluid youth in their work. I am interested in the way that adults think about their work with these youth, the challenges that they have encountered, the resources that they have used, and the impact that this work has had on them. I am particularly interested in how people may have had to negotiate learning about gender diversity and deal with diverging opinions within their school.

This study aims to provide scholars and the educational community with a deeper understanding of how we can best support school staff who work with these youth, as well as give trans and gender-fluid youth and those who support them a better sense of what to expect and how to advocate for themselves in school settings. This knowledge will ultimately contribute to creating more inclusive learning environments for all students.

I believe your participation would benefit this project and I hope that you will consider letting me interview you. The interview would last approximately 90 minutes and I can meet you at a place and time of your convenience.

If you are interested in participating in this project, or for more information, please contact me by email at [email] or by telephone at [phone number]. If you know of another person who might be interested in participating in this project, please invite them to contact me as well. Finally, my supervisors Dr. Dawn Currie (email omitted) and Dr. Becki Ross (email omitted) are happy to answer any questions you might have.

Thank you for your time and your consideration.

Yours sincerely,  
Hélène Frohard-Dourlent | [phone number] | [email]



## **You work in a school**

as a teacher, an administrator,  
a counselor, a nurse, or in another position  
*and*

You have worked in your school with  
**trans or gender-fluid youth**

*for example...*

A youth in your school has wanted to use a bathroom or changing room  
other than the one assigned to them based on their legal gender

A boy in your school  
has wanted to wear  
feminine clothing or  
be addressed as a girl

A youth in your  
school has  
transitioned from  
male to female, or  
female to male



A girl in your school  
has wanted to wear  
masculine clothing or  
be addressed as a boy

A youth in your  
school does not know  
which group to  
choose during gender-  
segregated activities

A youth in your school  
doesn't feel that they are a boy *or* a girl

**I am interested in hearing about your experience,  
whether positive or negative**

*Contact H       at [email] or at [phone number]  
for more information or to participate in the study.*

## Appendix C - Letter of information to youth



a place of mind

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Department of Sociology  
6303 N.W. Marine Drive  
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z1  
Tel: 604-822-2878  
Fax: 604-822-6161  
[www.soci.ubc.ca](http://www.soci.ubc.ca)

### Conducting university research project

*Project topic: How schools respond to trans and gender-fluid youth*

Hello,

My name is Hélène and I am contacting you about a research project that I am undertaking on the way that schools respond and adapt to the presence of trans and gender-fluid youth. This letter has been sent to you through [school staff contact]: I will not know your identity unless you choose to contact me.

My project looks at the experiences of adults who work in schools and have encountered trans and gender-fluid youth in their work. I explore the way that adults think about gender diversity, the challenges that they have encountered, the resources that they have used, and the impact that this work has had on them. This project *does not* focus on young people's understanding of their gender identity or any aspect of their private life.

I want to inform you that I am conducting part of this research at [name of school]. As the description of my research indicates, I am not seeking to gather personal information about you. However, given that I am talking to adults in this school about their experience working with trans students, details about your experience at the school might come up. As such, I thought it was important to let you know that this research is happening.

It is incredibly important to me that **your privacy and confidentiality be respected in this project**. As I indicated, the study does not focus on your private experience but rather the experiences of school staff with gender diversity. To ensure that research is not linked to you or your school, your name will not appear in any report, and details about the school will be changed (including the name of the school and the names of the adults who talk to me). I will also modify enough of the information that is shared with me so that the events cannot be traced back to your school or to yourself.

If your family has helped you discuss gender identity with adults at your school, I would like to ask these members of your family if they would be interested in sharing their experience dealing with the school system. I am only interested in their experience with the school; I will not ask them questions about your personal life, nor will I share information with them that they do not already know. If you would be fine with me talking to these members of your family, please **let me know** that this is the case.

If you have any concerns or questions about the project, I would be happy to talk to you. It is absolutely OK to let me know if you are uncomfortable with any aspect of the study, and I want to work with you to address any concerns you may have. I am also interested in your perspective if you are interested in sharing it with me. I am available by phone (phone number omitted) or email (email omitted).

Finally, my supervisors Dr. Dawn Currie (email omitted) and Dr. Becki Ross (email omitted) are also happy to answer any questions you might have.

Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely,  
Hélène Frohard-Dourlent | [phone number] | [email]