

**BEYOND THE BINARY:
HOW SECONDARY STUDENTS EXPRESS GENDER-VARIANT
IDENTITIES**

by

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Abstract

The inclusion of gender identity and expression in the Canadian Human Rights Code in 2017 denoted a further step forward for LGBTQ recognition. All British Columbia school board policies must now include gender identity and expression in the list of attributes for which students have the right to be protected from discrimination.

This thesis is an examination of some of the ways that gender-variant students express their gender identities in B.C. secondary public schools. Engaging with arts-based and narrative inquiry in small group sessions, past students of B.C. secondary schools share some of their experiences of having gender identities that are recognized as falling outside of the dominantly accepted norms of binary gender.

Questioning not only how students expressed their gender identities within their school communities, but also where they did/did not find support for those expressions, queer theory and queer phenomenology form the core of the methodology by which these questions are examined. Looking at the ways that students orient themselves within the culture of their schools, the lens of queer phenomenology illuminates the ways in which gender-variant students may be faced with more difficulties than their cisgendered peers to find inclusion and belonging. The lens of queer theory assists in understanding the dominant discourse around gender in the public school system and helps to look critically at how this impacts gender-variant students.

The research is an arts-based and narrative inquiry. It involves participants sharing stories while creating individual art pieces that express inner gender identity and outer performances of gender. Discussions included ways in which gender expression during the students' years in school often varied from their inner identity, and the issues this discrepancy brought forward.

Lay Summary

All British Columbia school board policies must now include gender identity and expression in the list of attributes by which students have the right to be protected from discrimination. This thesis offers a look at some experiences of students who have gender identities that do not conform to the normally understood notions of woman (girl) or man (boy) in public secondary schools in British Columbia. Through the processes of creating artwork and telling stories, three young people expressed how/where they did or did not find inclusion and support while at school. In their story telling and sharing of artwork, the students spoke of the need to express their gender somewhat differently to the people around them than how they felt on the inside. This thesis looks at some of the possible reasons for this discord between gender identity and expression for those students.

Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Béene Savage. Photos of artwork by the participants in this study are published here with participant consent. This research was conducted with the approval of the University of British Columbia Behaviour Research Ethics Board under certificate H17-03150.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Lay Summary</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>List of figures</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>Chapter 1</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>INTRODUCTION, POSITIONALITY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS</i>	<i>1</i>
Introduction	1
Who am I to conduct this research?	3
The Edge Where I Stand.....	3
Of gender assumptions, what have I seen?.....	5
Focussing my research	9
Research questions	9
So, how do I talk about this	11
Gender-variant	11
Gendered language in our schools.....	13
And why not just say trans?	15
<i>Chapter 2</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>THEORIES AND MEHODOLOGIES</i>	<i>18</i>
Theories to help me examine this	18
Queer theory	18
Queer phenomenology.....	20
Why this work matters	22
Risks for gender-variant students	22
School climates reinforcing norms	25
A closer look at policy wording and how word choices can equal further risk	27
(In)visibility of non-binary identities; further examination of school board policies.....	31

Gender-variant youth as educators in their schools; increasing collective understanding and acceptance, but at what risk?.....	35
Methodological tools I use to look at this.....	41
Arts-based research	41
Narrative inquiry	43
Combining art and story: Arts-informed narrative inquiry	44
Where artist/researcher/teacher come together: A/r/tography	46
Developing the research project.....	49
Lenses for narratives.....	52
Chapter 3	54
RESEARCH METHODS AND FINDINGS.....	54
Setting up the sessions.....	54
Recording and transcribing.....	57
What I learned from the participants.....	57
Words used to express gender identity	59
Students as educators/change makers.....	60
(Dis)orientation: Lack of representation	64
Marking a different path; gender-variant role models	68
Artistic creations and the words to describe them	70
The power of art as expression.....	70
First view	71
Jack’s creation – now you see me, now you see me differently... ..	72
Alex’s art: button-downs and bowties	78
Marty’s artwork: a transition to norms	81
Expressing gender: outside forces influencing inner identities.....	84
Chapter 4.	88
CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS.....	88
Concluding thoughts and suggestions.....	88
Limitations	91
Possible extensions	94
REFERENCES.....	97

List of figures

Figure 1. Gendered classroom language.....	5
Figure 2. What happens if I wear... ..	8
Figure 3. Gender-variant.....	11
Figure 4. Gender-variance + school = risk.....	22
Figure 5. Frequent reminders of binary gender in classrooms.....	32
Figure 6. My own inside/outside art.....	50
Figure 7. First view of participant art.....	71
Figure 8. Jack's art; inside.....	72
Figure 9. Daily chosen skin.....	74
Figure 10. Jack's art; removeable rainbow.....	75
Figure 11. Jack's art; outer layer.....	76
Figure 12. Alex's art; outside	78
Figure 13. Alex's art; inside and out.....	79
Figure 14. Marty's art.....	81
Figure 15. Marty's art; bright beginnings.....	82
Figure 16. Marty's art; shifting to norms	83

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION, POSITIONALITY AND RESEARCH

QUESTIONS

Introduction

Gender Identity. Alongside sexual orientation, gender identity is now a required inclusion in all British Columbia (B.C.) school board policies. The Canadian Human Rights Act was amended in 2017 to prohibit discrimination based on gender identity or expression. Many provinces and territories across Canada amended their Human Rights Acts to include gender identity and/or gender expression prior to this, starting with the North West Territories in 2004. The B.C. human-rights code, as of July 2016 includes protection from discrimination based on expressions of gender identity. The B.C. Ministry for Education followed the change to include gender identity by announcing schools had until the end of 2016 to bring their policies in line with the human-rights code amendments (BC Gov News, 2016).

We have come a long way since the Canadian Human Rights Act made a definitive move towards adding protections for members of the LGBTQ¹ community, when the prohibition of discrimination based on sexual orientation was added to the Act in 1996. In 2002 the work of B.C. gay activists was instrumental in gaining the involvement of the Supreme Court of Canada

¹ LGBTQ is the initialism I have chosen to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, where the Q covers a wide array of identities and orientations within the queer community. I recognize that there are many options for this initialism and that choosing one to represent the varied and vast queer community comes with questions and possible debate.

in making decisions about the use of LGBTQ friendly resources in schools. The court ruled that a B.C. school board was at fault in banning picture books that included same sex parents, winning a big step forward for awareness about LGBTQ inclusion and equity in schools. The more recent changes involving gender identity and expression represent another great step forward in equity, with increased recognition for gender-variant students. It should follow that we see increased inclusion, safety and belonging in schools for these individuals. In practice however, as a teacher in contact with the day to day operation of schools, I am not seeing many changes, and of the changes that are happening many are occurring very slowly.

Working as an on-call educator with the Vancouver School Board (VSB), a district that is recognized for being the first in B.C. to amend policies to include gender identity and expression in June 2014 (VSB Policy Manual, ACB, 2014), I come face to face every work day with evidence that more needs to be done to create equitable environments for gender-variant students. I hear, see and experience frequent reinforcement, directed at the students, of the understanding of gender as having only two options: female or male. In the snapshot views that I gain through my on-call teaching work, I see that little space is offered in the everyday language of gender used in many schools for people whose gender identities fall between or beyond the binary options of girl/woman or boy/man.

Experiencing the various environments of different public schools in Vancouver inspired me to start asking questions. I began by asking for thoughts and ideas from other teachers, parents and friends; “how do you understand gender and what do you see happening in schools for gender-variant students?” I moved on to ask questions of myself; “how does my non-binary gender presentation disrupt gender norms prevalent in school environments? What am I doing to help students who are questioning their gender identity, or who know they don’t identify as male

or female?” This path of questioning rolled into my graduate school studies and suddenly I found myself in a position to really jump in and look at the issue of equity and inclusion for gender-variant students. I found myself ready to start looking seriously at my questions and to embark on the process of answering some of them. The following thesis outlines key points of the process, the research and the results of my study.

Who am I to conduct this research?

The Edge Where I Stand

Search

and

re-search

Who are you to research me?

How am I to research you?

How does it fit/not fit and fit

together making sense

of the why and the how.

Research.

Who am I

to research...

These are the opening lines of some poetry I wrote while trying to deepen my understanding of my position on researching binary gender assumptions in schools. I began with

the question of research; the why and the how of it for me. From there it was all about performance:

Style changes and permutations

I've shown the world so many

versions of myself that weren't true

versions of *this self* rather shielding layers

of performance layered upon

the search performed

for my own self.

An outsider to my inner identity so long

the adhesions were strong

at first but then peeling off

ragged skins thick and thin,

searching for the one

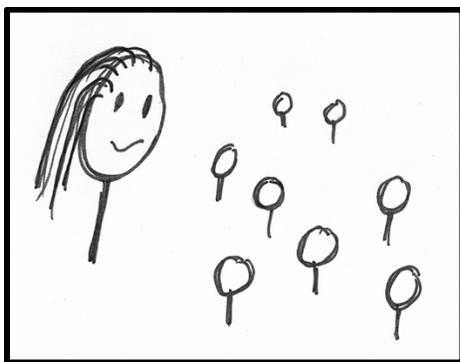
that felt right to clothe

my inner me –

In delving into this examination of my positionality, I worked my way through recognizing many layers of performance in my life. I looked at ways I stepped into roles that I believed were mine to fill by order of who I understood I was born to be. In looking back on a childhood I entered through the expectation that I was to have been born as my older sister's younger brother, I recognize that those words although unspoken were shouted to my inner ear.

As my young-self searched for acceptance, I tried to step into a boy version of me. From eschewing the top half of my bikinis to riding my pony bareback while wearing my favourite t-shirt; envisioning myself the cowboy embroidered there, arm slung casually over the shoulder of the tiny cowgirl stitched into being with coloured thread. At a young age, I learned to perform myself into being in a constantly rolling cycle of permutations. Looking back on my attempts to find ways to fit, I see how gender is performed, how it is built on foundations that are built on the performances of others, who have built their performances on the expectations placed on them by others and self; expectations understood through the performance of gender by others before. And the spiral continues. As described by Butler (1988) “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time -an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (p.519).

Of gender assumptions, what have I seen?



“Good morning
boys and girls”

Figure 1. Gendered classroom language

I am a teacher in the Vancouver public school system, and on-call work offers me glimpses into many different school environments. I notice that the understanding of gender as binary (female or male / girl or boy / woman or man) is enforced in the language used by staff

and students, by the resources available in schools, sometimes by the structure of classes and subjects and even in the policies created with gender identity as part of their focus; policies which I will later examine in this thesis.

I parent a child who, through their formative years of development criss-crossed gender lines and challenged the boundaries of what it means to be a boy, or to be a girl.

My first born, a boy

A boy? Is that all?

How to sum up one small, perfect being with one
small word?

Longing for the sparkle of shadowed eyes

gazing upon

performance of expectations.

Longing to rise on

heels of potential regardless

of bodies shaped to perform

one act or another.

One small word - boy -

searching for another.

I watched as understanding solidified for my child, that gender comes with expectations on the part of others of roles to fill and ways to be.

And as my child grew, turning
away from dresses favoured
donning the expectations of others

And as my child grew, searching
for ways to stay true
stationed on the 'right' side
of tracks imagined but built
to trip a shiny heeled boy

out of line

And as my child grew, passing
heights no longer sliding
across lines and tracks for tastes
of longings fulfilled

And as my child grew into understanding
deeper,
of a world of judgement in consequences
to choices made

And as my child grew, questioning
answers from my lips grew thin in satisfaction

A shift in wanting
more: change. education. understanding.
others on board, joining

the dance happening between
performances offered

As my child works their way to adulthood recognizing this, are they really able to develop outwardly to match their inner self? I wonder this.

My own expressions of gender also challenge the dominant, societally accepted norms of gender. What happens if I wear...



My favourite tie?



The bowtie my
daughter gave
me?

A fancy skirt?



Or mix it up
with tails and
a skirt?



Figure 2. What happens if I wear...

These photos all genuinely reflect me, and yet they all 'say' different things, in different ways, to different people. Within the context of my day to day life, for many people a tie or a skirt are gender markers that read distinctly as male for the former and female for the latter.

When wearing one of these items is taken as an expression of my gender, I am ‘read’ differently. If someone who has predominantly seen me wearing clothing they associate with male identities sees me one day in a skirt, there is often a moment of confusion and sometimes even an exclamation that “Béene is wearing a skirt!” Inwardly I slide along the curve that I see as the spectrum of gender while others try to pinpoint ways to identify me. From the students at on-call assignments who peek into the class and giggle, discussing amongst themselves whether their guest teacher is a girl or a boy/a Mr. or Mrs., to the delivery person at work one day who departed with a confused look and a “thank you sir, ma’am...”.

Others often strive to attach a label to define me as who they understand me to be, within predominant societal understandings of gender as binary. At times, it seems that it is a driving need for others to find ways to fit my identity into the gender norms they are comfortable with. In the need others demonstrate to identify me within heteronormative understandings of gender, could it be as Judith Butler (2009) suggests, an issue of power where the norms “are not only instances of power; and they do not only reflect broader relations of power; they are one way that power operates. After all, power cannot stay in power without reproducing itself” (p.ii). From this perspective, for someone to label me is for them to place me in a position/role within the dominant societal understanding of female/male so that I am no more than a cog in the machinery that continues to reify these socially accepted norms.

Focussing my research

Research questions

As a teacher, parent and genderqueer adult I found myself asking questions and becoming concerned with the answers (and lack of answers). As a student I found myself ready to dive into

the world of academic research; I found myself standing on an edge where I felt ready to take a closer look at how gender is understood and presented in our public school system, a closer look at how gender-variant youth express their gender identities and how they find their way in the midst of policy changes and the day-to-day environment in their schools. Specifically, I developed my research question as follows:

- For gender-variant youth who have recently completed their secondary school experience in British Columbia, how did they express their gender identity while at school?
 - What were the students' lived experiences relating to expressing their gender identity within their school environment, with specific consideration to how their expressions of gender identity were supported or not supported.

Gender-variant youth are often labeled an at-risk population and are 'othered' in our public school system. Gaining an understanding of how these youth express their gender-identities may offer some enlightenment as to if and how our schools are stepping up to create inclusive spaces in which youth are offered full opportunities to grow and learn. Finding ways to safely put forth the voices of gender-variant youth, about how they experience their school environments might be a step towards breaking a few of the barriers that I believe are blocking some of these youth from finding a solid sense of belonging at school.

My position is that of a queer and gender-fluid adult, teacher, parent, advocate for queer youth, facilitator of arts-based programming for youth and emerging researcher. This work is a step off the edge where I found myself perched and a dive into a much needed area of research about gender-variant youth in public school environments. I spent time absorbing the view from the edge before getting down to the work of this research; this purposeful step in the direction of troubling deeply ingrained discourses of binary gender.

On the fine edge of balance I perch
looking to trouble
rarely noticed, too rarely questioned
assumptions of performances expected
an edge to examine limitations
an edge to cut the tape binding
ill fitting boxes
an edge to scrape off the drawn line
seen and un-seen
this edge where I stand
standing ready to pull strings
from the fabric
of performance

So, how do I talk about this?

Gender-variant

Why gender-variant? Why don't I use one of the many other ways to express gender identities/expressions that are positioned outside of the binary of male/female? And more specifically, why not 'trans', as it gains way in the public realm as an umbrella term for non-normative gender that more and more people hear and use?

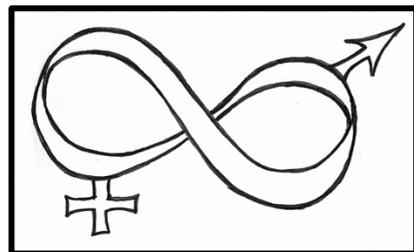


Figure 3. Gender-variant

I struggled with this; I spent time asking, talking, reading and thinking. I batted around different possibilities and ideas to adequately express my understanding of variations in gender identity: genderqueer, gender-fluid, gender-expansive, etc. In the end though, as an overarching descriptive term to cover many possible identities, gender-variant feels right to me. Gender-variant moves beyond binary thinking and opens up endless possibilities of gender identity and expression. When speaking about those of us whose gender identity falls between and/or beyond the understood female/male binary gender norms, it's difficult to find one term that covers all possible identities. I use gender-variant as it connotes variations in gender; variations from the current dominant understanding of gender as a female/male binary that prevails when the world is seen through lenses that have grown out of heteronormative understandings of how one is to fill the roles of man or woman, girl or boy. I use gender-variant to push against how those societal beliefs that categorize gender as binary have even moved beyond heteronorms and moved into queer spaces; trans spaces where to be 'in-between' is to have not yet decided about transitioning; queer spaces where to be a lesbian is to express 'queer woman' and to be a gay man is to express 'queer man' in all the ways that one must conform to those norms. Gender-variant moves beyond all of this for me and it says what I need it to say.

Current dominant notions of gender speak to what is masculine and what is feminine. Even when one does not identify fully with one of these gender options, one is understood in relation to them. "To be not quite masculine or not quite feminine is still to be understood exclusively in terms of one's relationship to the 'quite masculine' and the 'quite feminine'" (Butler, 2004, p.42). Gender includes every possibility between and beyond this prevailing understanding of binary gender. Variations of gender are in fact endless and an overall hope I have for society is that one day we will come to understand that we are all gender-variant, all

variations of gender. For now however, gender-variant fits my requirement to express all those gender identities that are variations of gender outside of the dominant societal understanding of binary gender.

Gendered language in our schools

As an on-call educator, I'm not privy to what happens around the topic of gender identity in staff meetings and trainings at the schools where I work. I can hope that there are efforts being made in those meetings to educate the educators about the policy changes and about how to create more inclusive environments in classrooms for students of all gender identities. I believe that those efforts are being made in many schools as I have had numerous conversations with school staff before and after class time, about the VSB policies that include gender identity. What often becomes clear however in those conversations is that the dominant discourse in schools continues to set gender up in binary terms only.

The extent to which gender is seen only in binary terms in our schools is partly evidenced by language use of educators and ways of addressing both students and staff in terminology that identify each individual on a basis of gender. How do we use gendered language at school? The most obvious answers can be noticed by anyone looking for them, by spending time in school classrooms and hallways. Many students are addressed every day, many times a day, as 'girls and boys' (or boys and girls) or 'ladies and gentlemen'. This constant repetition serves as reminder and reinforcement that students have only two options for gender. Adults in schools are almost always addressed with a gendered title preceding their name, regardless of if they choose to use their last name or for those of us who ask students to call us by our first names. I request that students call me Béene, with no title. This is often difficult for them as they have been

conditioned to add a miss, ms., mrs. or mr. to the start of every adult's name they use while in school. My desire to be 'just Béene' sometimes leads to questions about my gender and occasionally on to questions about gender in general. I welcome these questions as many students may not have opportunities for discussion about this topic otherwise.

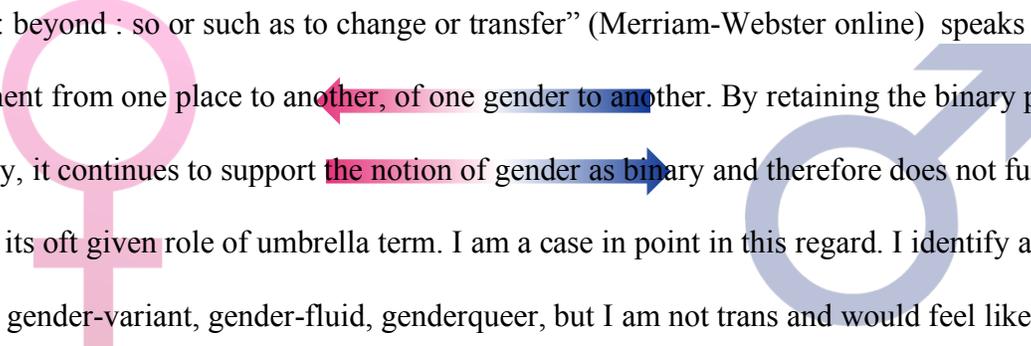
Other ways we use gendered language at school ranges from questions in math textbooks where gender is sometimes used as a categorization for quantitative questions, to gender segregated Physical Education classes, from gender division on class lists to asking students to line up by girl/boy designations. The notion of binary gender is reinforced many times daily. When students are asked to line up as girls in one line and boys in the other line, what happens for the boy who is wearing his favourite, purple, sparkly, velvet dress that day and who is feeling more girl than boy right then; which line does that student choose? And if that student, who is identified officially by the school records as a boy, chooses the boys' line, what might be the reaction of the teacher to a boy in a dress? Will the teacher assume the child is a girl, because of what the dress 'says' about gender roles and therefore tell the student that they have chosen the wrong line? Will they wonder if the child was born a boy but in choosing 'girl' clothes is signaling a desire to be the 'other' gender and is therefore in need of counselling? In my job as an on-call teacher, a number of times I have experienced calling a child's name from the attendance list while noticing that the assumed gender of the name does not match the gender cues presented by that student. In many instances where this has happened, when I didn't 'do a double take' or somehow question if it was the correct student who called out 'here' and waved at me, I noticed other students looking at me curiously while seeming to wait for a reaction from me. One student went so far as to exclaim "wow, you actually got my name right". This suggests to me that other on-call teachers have probably reacted to the oft perceived gender discordance

between name and appearance for that particular student. My non-reaction when calling out the names of these students, while earning me some baffled looks from their classmates, often elicits a very different response from the student whose name and gender presentation don't match up in the dominant understanding of gender at play in their school. I often recognize that the student realizes that I'm truly 'seeing' them and those are students who will sometimes then approach me at break time to ask a gender related question or two.

I also question what happens with other students in the class who may not outwardly show that they do not identify as all girl or all boy but are feeling that way on the inside? Maybe those students present gender expressions that match their sex as listed on the school register, but perhaps their gender identity on the inside feels different than how they express themselves outwardly. Asking those students to choose to align themselves over and over again with a gender that may not accurately express how they identify, may leave them feeling confused or less than sure of themselves. They may feel a sense of invisibility or lack of belonging in their school environment. The internal, emotional debate that this might spark in them can interfere with their ability to engage in what's happening in the classroom. Are those students perhaps the ones who are not lining up but rather milling about in the back somewhere, possibly even getting in trouble for their behaviour? The binary gender language used in many schools is telling students again and again that there are only two options for gender and that they must fit into one or the other of those boxes.

And why not just say trans?

The discussion above brings me back to questioning word choice. Again I ask, why do I not use the term trans as my umbrella? The prefix trans meaning "on or to the other side of :



across : beyond : so or such as to change or transfer” (Merriam-Webster online) speaks of movement from one place to another, of one gender to another. By retaining the binary poles in this way, it continues to support the notion of gender as binary and therefore does not function well in its oft given role of umbrella term. I am a case in point in this regard. I identify as non-binary, gender-variant, gender-fluid, genderqueer, but I am not trans and would feel like an imposter if I were asked to use trans to define my gender identity.

Trans is however gaining traction as an umbrella term under which some say all variations of gender identity sit, including those who do not identify with the gender binary of female/male. As part of the important process of getting more inclusive policies into place in B.C. public schools, the term trans is often being given this role of umbrella term. The Vancouver School Board policies offer an example this use of trans:

The Board of Education (the “Board”) is committed to establishing and maintaining a safe, inclusive, equitable, and welcoming learning and working environment for all members of the school community, regardless of real or perceived sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions, which includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, Two-Spirit, queer, and those who are questioning. (LGBTQ+) (VSB Policy Manual, ACB, 2014)

I argue that in our haste to solidify policies, we have not taken the time and care needed to ensure the term we are using is as inclusive as it needs to be. In daily life we might think of transitioning from one place to another, of making the transition from one job to another, or perhaps of being in transition in some other aspect of our lives. With these transitions there is usually a starting point and an end point. I argue that the term trans, as it relates to gender identity and expression, has come into public use through a shortening of transsexual and

transgender and that the ‘trans’ indicates a journey from one place to another; it indicates a journey from one sex to another or from one gender to another.

In an online interview, the non-binary activist Kate Bornstein has this to say about the use of trans as an umbrella term for all gender-variant identified people:

Transgender used to be the inclusive term. It’s not, anymore—well, not to mainstream popular culture: they use transgender to mean boys and girls and men and women who have transitioned out of another gender. That’s what an increasing majority of binary-identified trans women are calling themselves. And nonbinary trans people thereby are not transgender. It’s complicated, I know. It’s language in transition. (Kowalska, 2017)

Trans therefore does not cover the full range of gender identities possible, thus leaving some students out of the very policies meant to offer them safe and inclusive school environments.

Chapter 2.

THEORIES AND MEHODOLOGIES

Theories to help me examine this

Queer theory

Queer theory, a poststructuralist branch of critical theory “ceaselessly interrogat[es] both the preconditions of identity and its effects” (Jagose, 1996, pp.131-132). It helps me examine how gender-variant youth express their gender identities in school and better understand some of the influences and expectations behind the building of those identities. I also use queer theory as a way to better understand how students may disrupt the heteronormative norms that have been built over time and that are constantly reinforced by social structures today. Of note, there are homonormative norms, and gender norms within the trans community that also reify the binary model of gender. There is hence a need to examine norms and engage in queering notions of gender even within aspects of queer culture itself. Queer theory assists me to look more clearly at how the norms have come to be, what they are and who is being hurt by those norms and who is gaining from them. Specifically looking at the norms that exist around gender, queer theory helps to demonstrate why those norms are in need of critical examination.

To assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the “masculine” and “feminine” is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which

do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance. (Butler, 2004, p.42)

Queer theory is used to destabilize popular cultural narratives and question who gets to decide what counts as knowledge. In my study, I look to gender-variant youth as holders of the knowledge that very much needs to be communicated to policy makers and those in positions of power in our schools. And finally, I look to queer theory for its orientation to disrupting the specific norms of binary gender and as it helps us to understand how gender is a social construct, based on performances of what is perceived as gendered behaviour.

Although there are many queer theorists whose work could successfully assist me in this study of gender-variant youth, I have limited myself to a small number of scholars due to constraints of time and the length of this thesis. The work of Judith Butler is of key importance to my research as engaging with Butler's work on performativity, I begin to understand the depth of this cycle of performance that brings us to our understandings of gender.

To say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the "appearance" of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms to be one gender or the other (usually within a strictly binary frame), and the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power; (Butler, 2009, p. 1)

Butler's work on the performativity of gender, when read as a constant reproduction of what has come before, could leave me lacking in hope for the possibility of change. In the continuation of the above quotation however, Butler (2009) explains the potential for disrupting this spiralling cycle, by noting the possibility of creating shifts in the reproductions. One can push the boundaries in the act of reproducing gender. As Butler (2009) argues "and finally, there is no

gender without this reproduction of norms that risks undoing or redoing the norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of gendered reality along new lines” (p.1).

Queer phenomenology

When used as an overlapping lens with queer theory, queer phenomenology offers a more embodied understanding of how paths are made and followed and roles are (re)produced.

Phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds. (Ahmed, 2006, p.2)

Butler suggests that shifts in reproduction of gender will open new possibilities of understanding gender. Sara Ahmed looks at how similar change-making shifts occur in how we react to what we engage with in our environments.

The path is made out of footprints—traces of feet that “tread” and that in “treading” create a line on the ground. When people stop treading the path may disappear. And when we see the line of the path before us, we tend to walk upon it, as a path “clears” the way. (Ahmed, 2006, p.16)

Binary gender is a series of repeated followings of the same path/performance. When one walks a new path, it is not as defined, and therefore not as easy for others to follow, until they do, and then it is a repeatable motion/path.

We then come to “have a line,” which might mean a specific “take” on the world, a set of views and viewing points, as well as a route through the contours of the world, which gives our world its own contours. (Ahmed, 2006, P.17)

Following these lines creates a sense of commitment to what they lead us to and where they take us.

Looking at gender-variance through the lens of Ahmed's understanding of queer phenomenology opens my thinking about how gender-variant youth are (dis)oriented in their school environments. Where do these youth find reflections of self in their schools? I begin to see how gender-variant youth need to push on existing boundaries and norms inherent in the dominant discourses in their schools, to find ways to orient themselves.

Orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others.

Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as "who" or "what" we direct our energy and attention toward. A queer phenomenology, perhaps, might start by redirecting our attention toward different objects, those that are "less proximate" or even those that deviate or are deviant. (Ahmed, 2006, p.3)

Queer phenomenology is a lens I use to better understand how people become orientated by the ways they take up time and space, and how in queering this we focus orientation to different positions and objects. "Queer orientations might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world 'slantwise' allow other objects to come into view" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 107).

Queer phenomenology helps us recognize that we often don't question how we find our orientation, until we are disoriented. In this way we can look at how gender-variant youth must find ways to become orientated in order to find a sense of belonging in their school settings.

"Orientation involves aligning body and space: we only know which way to turn *once we know which way we are facing*" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 7).

Both Butler and Ahmed are suggesting pushing at boundaries to create shifts. “If we become orientated by tending toward the “just about,” then to be orientated is also to extend the reach of the body” (Ahmed, 2006, p.8). And when we extend the reach of the body to orient our gender identity to our surroundings, we push on the boundaries of what is understood as gender within that environment. This happens with gender identity because “In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status” (Butler, 1988, p.520).

Why this work matters

Risks for gender-variant students

This work matters because in our current social climate...



Figure 4. Gender-variance + school = risk

Schools can be an environment fraught with difficulties for gender-variant youth. In a number of studies (Taylor & Peters, 2011; Collier, van Beusekom, Bos, & Sandwort, 2013; Greytak, E. A., Kosciw, J. G., & Diaz, E. M., 2009; Toomey, R. B., Ryan, C., Diaz, R. M., Card, N. A., & Russell, S. T., 2010), rates of harassment are noted to be elevated for students whose

gender identity and expression does not conform to gender norms prominent in dominant discourses in their school, beyond those of their cisgendered² peers.

The final report of “Every class in every school: First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia in Canadian Schools” (Taylor, Peter & McMinn, 2011) offers an in-depth look at some of the difficulties faced by gender-variant students. The study involved both a publicly accessible online survey as well as in-class surveys that were conducted in every region of Canada (except Quebec, where a parallel survey was taking place). Over 3700 students were surveyed with the aim to “identify forms and extent of students experiences of homophobic and transphobic incidents at school, the impact of those experiences, and the efficacy of measures being taken by schools to combat these common forms of bullying” (Taylor et al., 2011, p.13). Key findings in the survey describe some difficult aspects of school life for gender-variant students (described in this study as trans³ students). In the survey they concluded that:

LGBTQ students are exposed to language that insults their dignity as part of everyday school experience and youth with LGBTQ family members are constantly hearing their loved ones being denigrated. LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ parents experience much higher levels of verbal, physical, sexual, and other forms of discrimination, harassment, and abuse than other students. (Taylor et al., 2011, p.27)

² Cisgender: “of, relating to, or being a person whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth” (Merriam-Webster online).

³ In this study trans is defined as “a person whose gender identity, outward appearance, expression and/or anatomy does not fit into conventional expectations of male or female—often used as an umbrella term to represent a wide range of non-conforming gender identities and behaviours” (Taylor & Peters, 2011, p.36).

A further examination into this area of the study offers information specific to trans students, regarding the above findings. They found that trans students were at highest risk of various forms of harassment. Specifically, the study found that students with different gender identities and sexual orientations faced different forms of harassment at the following rates (with rates listed for non LGBTQ students for comparison purposes):

- Verbal harassment because of gender expression: 74% of trans students, 55% of sexual minority students, 26% of non LGBTQ students
- Physical harassment because of gender expression: 37% of trans students, 21% of sexual minority students, 10% of non LGBTQ students
- Sexual harassment within the year preceding the survey: 49% of trans students, 43% of female bisexual students, 42% of male bisexual students, 40% of gay male students, 33% of lesbian students (Taylor et al., 2011, pp. 15-17)

In the examination of student perception of safety of self while at school, the study found that trans students were among those with the highest rates of feeling unsafe. Specifically, they found that:

- “78% of trans students indicate feeling unsafe in some way at school
- 44% reported missing school due to feeling unsafe
- 98% of trans youth hear transphobic comments daily or weekly from other students, and
- 23% hear transphobic language daily or weekly from teachers” (Taylor et al., 2011, p.23)

Students enduring these forms of harassment and abuse on a regular basis in their schools cannot hope to have the same chance of success as cisgendered students who are not being targeted for gender-variant expressions of self. As noted by Collier et al. (2013), the resulting effects of

experiencing harassment for these students often involves negative psychosocial, emotional and academic outcomes.

There is fairly strong evidence that peer victimization related to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression is associated with a diminished sense of school belonging and higher levels of depressive symptoms.... Peer victimization related to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression is also associated with disruptions in educational trajectories, traumatic stress, and alcohol and substance use. (Collier et al., p.299)

School climates reinforcing norms

Our schools are places where societal norms of gender and sexuality prevail. In a study conducted in Vancouver kindergarten classrooms, Stafford (2013) states that “Everyday repetition of hetero/gender normativity occurs in practices from gendered bathrooms, to curriculum, to picture books, hallway conversations and children’s play” (p.158). Stafford then goes on to note that although during guided classroom discussions they witnessed children saying that it is ok to cross gender lines, when it came to real life interaction with gender-variant children, this did not appear to be the case. In the study, this was evidenced by an interaction where children discussed the gender of another child who they found lacking in obvious binary gender cues, as they walked into a school bathroom. As the children could not get a solid read on the other child’s gender, they debated whether the child was a “boy-girl” or a “boy-boy-girl” (p. 153) and laughed at the child.

A recent publication about what we can learn from teachers of transgender students points to the on-going issue of risk to gender-variant students “A growing body of work reflects

the ways in which gender-creative and transgender students are ill-served by current social climates in the vast majority of public schools” (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford & Airton, 2016, p.2). Social climates in schools and the accompanying expectations of following gender norms is not only seen in student responses to gender-variant classmates, but also sometimes from school staff. Sausa (2005) reports that the trans students in their study experienced being coached by teachers to ‘normalize’ their gender presentation in order to avoid persecution. One student recalls the words of a teacher blaming him for the harassment he experienced: “Wearing that damn glitter on your face. You shouldn’t do that. You know people here at this certain school don’t understand those certain things” (Sausa, 2005, p.22). One student who identified as a drag queen recalls being coached, by a school counselor, to walk and talk like her favourite film action star (male) in order to appear more convincingly male and therefore avoid harassment (Sausa, 2005, p.23).

Studies such as the ones mentioned above point to a need to see change within schools for gender-variant students. With the B.C. Ministry of Education requirement for school boards to have gender identity and expression inserted into school board inclusion policies, along with the determined and tireless work of LGBTQ activists, school board members and policy makers, the Vancouver board officially made these policy changes in 2014. In the VSB policy, gender identity and expression are described as including “lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, Two-Spirit, queer, and those who are questioning (LGBTQ+)” (VSB Policy Manual, ACB, 2014). As I have outlined earlier in this thesis I find a number of possible issues with the use of trans as an umbrella term to describe all gender variance and its use in the policy quoted above is no exception.

A closer look at policy wording and how word choices can equal further risk

As our societal norms strongly influence the dominant discourses of our public schools, it stands that gender-variant students spend many hours a week in an environment where their gender identities/expressions are not often recognized and/or understood. In researching how gender-variant youth express their gender identities, I planned to ask participants to express and share an aspect of themselves that dominant, heteronormative societal discourses do not regularly engage with.

Further difficulty lies in asking youth to explain how they express their gender identities because often the very policies that are being created to include gender-variant youth are reinforcing the notion of gender as binary only. Those policies, meant to be a catalyst for change in the language used by school staff, do not even begin to contain all of the language needed to cover the spectrum of gender identities possible. The Vancouver School Board (VSB) policies are an example of this. Three gender choices are presented; female, male or trans. As noted above as well as in the glossary definition quoted below, the term trans commonly denotes a transition from female to male or the reverse, and does not give obvious recognition to the many gender identities that fall between or beyond the binary. The VSB policy glossary outlines the term trans as follows:

Trans*:(also Trans, Transgender, Transsexual) An umbrella term that can be used to describe people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what they were assigned at birth. Some trans* people may choose to medically transition by taking hormones, having surgery. Some trans* people may choose to socially transition by changing their name, clothing, hair, etc. (VSB Policy Manual, ACB, 2014)

In this definition, the gender binary is upheld when it is stated that gender identity must differ from how the gender of the child was identified at birth. As the dominant, most commonly understood notion of gender is binary only, having a gender that differs from the one assigned at birth therefore means the person has ‘switched’ genders from one to the other. The above quoted policy offers the three gender choices of female, male or trans, where trans still denotes the female/male binary, thereby reducing the choices back to two. In contrast, I look to the definition of gender identity offered in the BC Human Rights Code:

Gender identity is a person’s sense of themselves as male, female, both, in between or neither. It includes people who identify as transgender. Gender identity may be different or the same as the sex a person is assigned at birth. (BC Human Rights Tribunal, 2016)

The Human Rights Code, when describing gender identity, specifically describes gender that both does and does not fall into the binary categories of female/male. They include identities that land at any point on the gender spectrum, including people who include both male and female as part of the descriptors for their gender identity, or who include neither. Instead of using trans as an overarching term, they instead include transgender in the list of possible identities.

Post-secondary institutions often have policy wording that includes a wider range of student identities as the students themselves have either created or strongly influenced many of those policies. This trend is evidenced by the Ohio University’s gender-neutral housing community policy definition of gender non-conforming, where the wording was chosen and approved by the very students who determined a need for gender-neutral housing on their campus: “Gender non-conforming indicates those individuals who do not conform to gender norms as based on a gender binary system and expectations of masculinity and femininity and may or may not fit with their sex or gender as assigned at birth” (Hobson, 2014, p. 33). In this

definition, the notion of gender as binary only is clearly challenged. In comparing this definition to the VSB definition of gender non-conforming previously outlined (VSB Policy Manual, ACB, 2014), the VSB definition lacks the options for diversity that is offered in the Ohio University's version.

The VSB policy, in failing to clearly offer space to all gender-variant students, many of whom may not identify as trans, forces them to sit under an umbrella term that does not encompass all of their gender identities. The umbrella on offer here is not big enough, or impermeable enough to satisfactorily collect and shelter all of the many variations of gender other than female/male that are possibilities. In a recent news article, Sarah Hampson quotes from an interview with Genny Beemyn, director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Mass.

What we're seeing on the ground is that the majority of our trans students at colleges identify as being non-binary – gender fluid, genderqueer or agender. These are people who do not identify as trans men or trans women. (Hampson, 2017)

The article goes on to note that “There is no one term for it that is universally embraced” (Hampson, 2017).

Previous scholarship demonstrates why this is so problematic. In a study of resilience strategies of trans youth, Singh, Meng and Hansen (2012) found that having the language to describe oneself was of prime importance to many of these youth. “Participants described the importance of being able to self-define and theorize – to use their own words and concepts that were in alignment with their gender identity and expression (e.g. genderqueer, genderfluid, trans man)” (p.211). Interestingly the title of this study, *“I am my own gender”: Resilience strategies of trans youth*, includes trans as the term under which all gender-variant identities fall. The above

noted quotation expresses a sampling of the many terms that different people use to identify themselves in relation to gender, something that the title doesn't cover and which the researchers do not comment on. In another study (Sausa, 2005) where trans is used as the overarching term, the researchers examined trans youth's suggestions for improving school systems. In their study, further examples of possible options were presented when participants were invited to describe their gender identities. "The spectrum of responses included: femme queen, butch, butch queen, trans, drag queen, drag king, freak, girl, boy, gender bender, androgynous, trannyboy, MTF, genderqueer, FTM, and a male with female qualities" (Sausa, 2005, p.17). The youth in this study reported that language use by professionals in their lives was often too rigid and "not inclusive of experiences that extend beyond the dichotomy of male/female or man/woman" (Sausa, 2005, p.17).

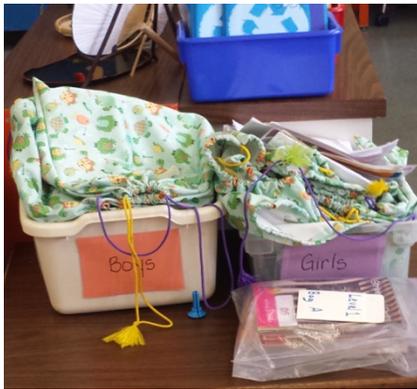
In the studies noted above, the term trans is used as an umbrella term under which all gender-variant identities are intended to shelter. In quoting these studies I feel conflicted about perpetuating the use of the word in that way, but have found very limited studies in this area that use what I feel would be a more appropriate descriptor. My use of gender-variant in this study is a possible way to facilitate movement towards changes in language around gender identity and expression that I believe are necessary. I look to the possibility of enacting another factor of performance here, where "*Performativity* is the writing and rewriting of meanings that continually disrupts the authority of texts" (Finley, 2005, p.687). There is a ball rolling to entrench trans as the main term for expressing all gender-variant identities; one hope I have for my study is to disrupt the path that ball is following, or perhaps throw some more balls in the mix.

(In)visibility of non-binary identities; further examination of school board policies

In a study aimed to trouble gender binaries in schools, Ingrey (2013), while looking at the ways that students maneuver within gender binary frameworks and police each other on expressions of gender, found that educational systems are lacking in “adequate curriculum and policy designed to become critical of gender binary reiterations and normalizations” (p. 435-436). Here I look again as an example, at the VSB policies as revised in 2014, to the section on curriculum learning resources in relation to sexual orientations and gender identities/expressions. The policy states that the Board is committed to:

- ensuring that staff utilizes language and educational resources and approaches that are inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and respectful of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions;
- enabling all LGBTTTQ+ students and families to see themselves and their lives positively reflected in the curriculum, through the provision of library and other curricular resources; (VSB Policy Manual, ACB-R-1, 2014)

This section of the VSB policy is hopeful and when I read it I want to believe that I will see variations of gender evident in resources and curriculum materials. I look for signs of this when I work in various schools and I do, upon occasion, find a copy of a picture book or two that includes and/or centralizes LGBTQ character(s) and/or families in a primary classroom. More often than not however, what I notice is an absence of these materials and instead I feel surrounded by male/female binary reminders. Some examples of these reminders that stand out for me:

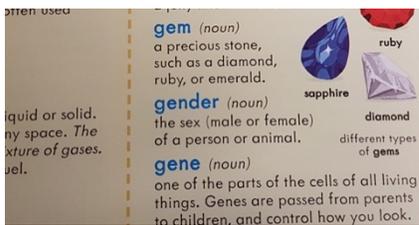


Hmm, book bags have genders?

Now how am I going to teach this lesson when my chosen pronouns are only listed as 'plural' choices?



Oh great, a new class set of primary dictionaries ... oh dear



for students to put on their desk while they are at the washroom ...



Figure 5. Frequent reminders of binary gender in classrooms

In a teaching reference book that I was one day asked to use while teaching on-call, I noted the prominence of language that assumed a gender binary. In sample lessons the authors repeatedly instructed teachers to begin by addressing the class as ‘boys and girls’ (Boushey and Moser, 2014). In the same book I noted the use of ‘he (or she)’ as in “Boys and girls, if _____ continues to do these things, will he (or she) become a better...” (Boushey and Moser, 2014, p.41). If the authors used gender neutral language in the above noted quotations, substituting the word class, friends or students for boys and girls and substituting the pronoun they for ‘he (or she)’, they would be offering educators language that would be far more inclusive and respectful of individual expressions of gender. Students on the receiving end of the use of gender neutral language from educators could potentially begin to shift their views of gender as binary and begin to open to acceptance of those around them who present themselves on one of the many intermediary points of the gender spectrum.

In addressing my concerns about the language in the book I was asked to use, I opened a conversation within that teaching community of 4 educators. The following day one of the teachers asked me for some insight on how to approach the notion of gender as a spectrum with students. During the discussion that followed one teacher told me something that I feel is a good example of dominant systems of belief among many educators today, teachers who believe themselves to be current and forward thinking members of our education system. This particular teacher told me that she had thought she was being very progressive when, at the beginning of the school year, she chose green as the colour for the girls in her class, rather than pink on a job assignment board. This was surprising to me as this teacher appeared to be attempting to stay current in her reading and engagement in professional development. This indicates to me that our system is falling short in educating the educators on a crucial and pertinent aspect of personal

identity and expression and is therefore continuing to endorse a lack of equity for segments of our population.

The VSB policy manual section quoted above denotes a commitment to changes in schools that will increase visibility for gender-variant students, and that the changes will be coming from the leadership level. One difficulty with the enactment of policy, as described by Schindel (2008) is that once protective laws and/or policies are in place, it is difficult for schools to sort out what constitutes gender discrimination, and how to protect students against it as well as how to educate the educators (with the intention that they then educate the students) about the content of the laws/policies. Perhaps this is why a number of studies are finding that it is the students themselves who are doing the work to educate the educators. It is often the gender-variant students pushing to create change in their school environments (Grace & Wells, 2009; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Meyer et al., 2016; Schindel, 2008) so that they (and others with gender identities not often, or never visible in school curriculum, resource materials, role models, etc.) will have a better chance at being recipients of the education that the BC School Act, (2016) aims to offer: “The purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable all learners to become literate, to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society.”

(preamble)

Hansman (2008) looks at the “logic of visibility” (p.20) that is the backbone of the second point in the VSB policy on curriculum and learning resources; that LGBTQ students will see their identities positively reflected back. This can be understood as part of the acceptability focus of education-activism for LGBTQ students. Hansman (2008) explains that advocates for this mode of change assert that meeting aims of policies such as VSB ACB-R-1 (2014) can help

create a school environment where what is on offer is “a representational visibility through teachers’ bodies and curricular images that will move students from ignorance to knowledge and tolerance, and that will enhance self-esteem for queer youth” (p.20). Hansman (2008) moves on to say that changes to help increase visibility of LGBTQ identities in schools are good first steps. Further to that he questions this mode of change as potentially merely reproducing identities in opposition or relation to pre-existing norms and therefore as positioning LGBTQ students as ‘other’. To this he states that “the logic of visibility exists within the logic of the heterosexual matrix through forms of support and tolerance that are merely symbolic and reproductive, and therefore on its own does not challenge the power relations that produce identities” (Hansman, 2008, p.20). This brings me back to looking at how studies that claim gender norms are being reinforced in classrooms and school contexts (Meyer et al., 2016; Stafford, 2013) tie in with Hansman’s (2008) concerns about increasing visibility without challenging the discourses upon which gender norms are built.

Gender-variant youth as educators in their schools; increasing collective understanding and acceptance, but at what risk?

I now look at who is actually stepping up to do the work of pushing for changes to the dominant discourses at play in public school environments so that those discourses begin to engage with and encompass all gender-variant identities/expressions.

There are a variety of studies that examine how youth are working to change the understanding of gender identity/expression in their schools. Schindel (2008), in a study of youth involved with secondary school Gay Straight Alliances, looks at how gender activism that is student driven, has as its focus the “right to be protected from discrimination and also a right to

expand the possibilities for gender identity and expression” (p.56). In this study, where results of both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis were in agreement, it is noted that although activists in the larger LGBTQ community have been instrumental in bringing visibility to gender issues, it is the “youth in particular [who] are leading this effort within their schools and communities” (Schindel, 2008, p.56).

Despite knowing that being LGBTQ activists in their schools would most likely cause institutional and social stigmatization and risks of harassment, three youth who participated in a Canadian study of queer student activists in high-school engaged in social change work despite the possible difficulties they would encounter (Grace & Wells, 2009, p.34). Interactions with the three students during the study brought the researchers to share the observation that “they rejected roles as victims waiting for the next hard knock, choosing instead paths of resistance and resilience in which they responded to anti-queer malice with educational activism and cultural work to transform their schools into more inclusive entities” (Grace & Wells, 2009, p.35). The three youth worked to trouble the norms in schools that continued to support the hetero/gender normative cultures that students of all sexual and gender identities were forced to navigate in order to exercise their right to public education. “They became queer critical change agents who used innovative resistance strategies...[and]...engaged in counter-public pedagogy to contest the exclusionary norms and marginalized subject positions that shape LGBTQ youth’s experiences of life in schools” (Grace & Wells, 2009, p.40).

Some studies (Grace & Wells, 2009; Ingrey, 2013) point to how youth use their own bodies and expressions of gender to become agents of change in their schools. Ingrey’s (2013) study looks at gender binaries in schools, and narrates the story of a gender non-conforming student who identified as male and wore platform boots and makeup. Regarding his choices in

gender expression, it was said that he was increasing his own agency as well as that of other students who witnessed his presentation of gender; specifically, other youth who also have gender identities that fall outside of readily accepted norms. “By disrupting the gender norms, he points to a set of possibilities of gender, that gender can be reworked and separated from the sexed body” (Ingrey, 2013, p.433). The literature suggests that students who express gender in ways counter to dominant discourses in public education settings recognize that they are stepping into potentially hazardous positions (Grace & Wells, 2009; Meyer et al., 2016), but continue to do so, despite sometimes even receiving the opposite advice from teachers who encourage them to hide their non-normative gender identities for the sake of safety (Sausa, 2005).

The willingness gender-variant students in their secondary school years show to step into spaces they understand as dangerous, makes me wonder about possible connections to the beginnings of a child’s formal education, and the early indoctrination of the understanding that gender is binary only. The learning materials young children are first introduced to when they start school are full of hetero/gender normative pictures and stories of happy families and girl/boy romances (Stafford, 2016, p.226). Narratives of grand adventures enjoyed by girls with ponytails and boys with baseball caps are being offered to Canadian students as ways to envision their future selves. For the gender-variant child the most frequently presented possibilities for their future selves include special lessons on LGBTQ issues, such as what might happen in an elementary classroom on specially designated days. During events such as anti-homophobia day and pink shirt day, part of the focus is on educating children about the bullying that often occurs for LGBTQ identified people. Stafford (2013), speaks of how these possible futures are presented to children with regard to how different children had opportunities to position themselves in their school environment. Children who envisioned themselves as cisgendered and

heterosexual found options at school every day for how their lives could be fulfilled and full of “love, family, adventures and relationships; whereas, those who might understand themselves to be queer or transgender only encountered one reference to their subject positions and that was in reference to potentially experiencing violence” (Stafford, 2013, p.226). Young, gender-variant students are first introduced to possible versions of their future identities as ones full of danger; the secondary students the literature discusses as activists are stepping into those positions of potential danger later in their schooling years, sometimes voluntarily, to be agents of social change.

There is strong evidence in the literature that students have the capacity to bring about change and reform in their schools (Ingrey, 2013; Schindel, 2008). I question whether or not this is a role that should be solely occupied by students, or if the responsibility to do the bulk of this work really sits with the teachers and administrators. As empowering as youth activism can be, without sufficient support from the adults in that student’s school, standing alone as an activist can be a cause of further harm for students already marginalized. As noted by Meyer et al., (2016), when one student steps forward as ‘the first’ gender-variant person visible within that school, oftentimes that student will find themselves in a position to increase their visibility (and consequently the visibility of other gender minority students) in hopes of reducing “the overt and covert oppression they themselves have experienced” (Meyer et al., 2016, p.17). Teachers in this study discussed the apparent need for colleagues to be exposed to gender-variance in their schools, in order to begin making necessary changes towards true inclusivity for these students. Meyer et al. (2016) express concern over when the gender-variant students themselves are the key players in this form of exposure:

some transgender or gender-creative students may shoulder an immense responsibility as singular sites of all learning and change; they risk becoming what we term *sacrificial lambs*. In other words, some students—particularly the first apparent transgender or gender-creative student in a school—may sacrifice their right to privacy, among other things, in order to bring attention to the lack of gender inclusion in a school community and, going forward, reduce the overt and covert oppression they themselves have experienced. (p.17)

The youth who are featured in stories told by teachers during interviews for this study became the ‘sacrificial lambs’ of their school “in order to ensure that gender boxes on forms were changed, in-services addressing gender diversity topics were offered, and policies were fully implemented to improve the school’s overall approach to gender diversity” (Meyer et al., 2016, p.17).

Suggestions for improving school climates for gender-variant students, both from teachers and students (Meyer et al., 2016; Singh, Meng & Hansen, 2014) involve a desire to see teachers and school leadership step further into this role of education-activism. In a list of ways to move towards inclusivity for gender-variant students, Meyer et al., (2016) outline some suggestions from teachers, including being proactive, and “to make changes well before an apparent transgender or gender-creative student arrives at a particular school” (p.33). The list of changes also includes the introduction of curriculum that covers gender diversity as early as kindergarten, as a way to lay important foundations upon which further work can be done. This could help alleviate the issue outlined earlier, in relation to the study of hetero/gender normativity in kindergarten classrooms (Stafford, 2016), where examples of gender-variant lifestyles are offered as being synonymous with dangerous lifestyles.

Dourlent-Frohard (2016) in their work on educators navigating cisnormativity, emphasizes the ways that educators often create one-off solutions to issues arising for gender-variant students, rather than backing up to look at the bigger picture and changes that could be made to root causes of lack of equity for these students.

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. (Dourlent-Frohard, 2016, P.41)

In order to assist school staff in the process of questioning their core beliefs and values around gender identity, some potential solutions are offered: “The first best practice is to have expert district- or board-level diversity mentors or resource personnel who provide consistent consultation, training and support to teachers and administrators” (Meyer et al., 2016, p.31). In my experience as a gender-variant teacher working in many different schools, teachers often know that there is someone out there, in some sort of official capacity, who could answer their questions about gender identity if they chose to find out who that person is and then take the time to ask questions. In other words, those teachers are not being given the training needed to begin to understand the issues that arise for gender-variant students or given the prompts needed to begin to question their own beliefs and potential biases. One potential cause of this lack of education for the educators, as noted by Meyer et al., (2016) is that school board appointed LGBTQ mentors often do not have the time or resources to reach everyone.

These positions have a long list of responsibilities attached to them, in our examples they were generally not full-time appointments; sometimes they represented only 50% of an educator's assigned workload and yet were intended to cover a large urban district. (p.32)

When the adult in charge of disseminating the needed information is spread so thin, it is no wonder that students are stepping in to advocate for themselves.

Many times I find myself thinking that I should have a variety of ready-made presentations and hand-outs on gender-identity with me whenever I'm working. When other teachers realize I am open to talking about gender-variance, I am often barraged by a host of increasingly detailed questions over morning recess, lunch time and after school. I often leave work feeling positive about the interest shown by other teachers to learn more, but disheartened that their learning depends on me (or other gender-variant folks who are open to discussion) coming into their work environment. I also recognize my own need to continue learning, by better understanding a wide variety of gender-variant identities of students. In my study, I am taking a first step in that direction by hearing first-hand from previous students how they expressed their gender identities and how they experienced their school environments.

Methodological tools I use to look at this

Arts-based research

If gender-variant identities are rarely discussed in school, and only then discussed as something 'other' as compared to the norm, in planning my study I questioned whether recent high school graduates would have the language they needed to talk about how they expressed their gender identities while in school. If I worked with a set of pre-determined questions, and if written and spoken language were the only accepted forms of response, then I believed there was

a strong chance that responses would be influenced and therefore limited by the binary focus on gender that is enforced in schools. With the continued focus on binary gender options, the potential is strong for gender-variant students who identify as other than trans-male or trans-female to lack the language they need to express themselves with words. To break through the barriers of this potential issue, I chose to move outside of traditional interview or survey format questioning. I decided to conduct my research using arts-based and narrative inquiry, working in a small focus group setting of gender-variant (self-)identified young adults aged 19-22 who attended secondary school in British Columbia. My research pertains to an aspect of human identity that mainstream, dominant society at the helm of decision making for public schools in B.C. are just on the cusp of understanding. I decided that the best way to succeed would be to look past or around more traditional research methods, and in that way also push at boundaries. Experiences I've had of working with youth and the creation of art have shown me that art is a mode of expression that often moves past words in ways that I knew could assist in my research. Art is often used "when there is an assumption that participants will find it difficult to express themselves verbally" (Bagnoli, 2009, p.548). Art can take us further in research however, than simply filling in a gap when verbal expression is a barrier. Artistic creation can be a mode of exploration and emergence of ideas and understandings. "The primary characteristics of arts-based research provide a formula for a radical, ethical, and revolutionary qualitative inquiry" (Finley, 2005, p.686).

Gauntlett (2007) writes of the potential for gathering knowledge when research participants create art and then reflect upon the works created. They examine "the ways in which creative, artistic and other 'making' activities, combined with time for reflection, can help us to better understand people's identities and social experiences" (Gauntlett, 2007, pp.1-2). Youth are

immersed every day at school in social experiences, and as my research aims to deepen understanding of how gender-variant youth in schools express their gender identity, while navigating the social scene of high school, arts-based research suits my work beautifully. I am an educator who wants to see change in the school system for gender-variant youth, and as I planned to conduct research into how those youth expressed their gender identities in schools, I decided to use art because “art practice, in its most elemental form, is an educational act, for the intent is to provoke dialogue and to initiate change” (Sullivan, 2006, p.33).

Narrative inquiry

“Narrative inquiry is an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (Clandinin, 2013, p.17). When expressing ourselves, especially at times when the right words to succinctly describe something are eluding us (or are words we have yet to learn/create/establish), we often use story-telling to paint a more complete picture. While the primary mode of inquiry I planned to use in this research was arts-based, I turned also to narrative inquiry to further enhance my research methods. Narrative inquiry as it is used in telling stories, interpreting stories, and using critical lenses to look at stories. “Narrative inquiry embraces narrative as both the method and phenomena of study” (Pinnegar and Daynes, 2007, p.5).

As Finley (2005) notes, narrative discourse became prominent in social science research because it is “expressive research that portrays the multidimensionality of human life as compared with truth finding, proofs, and conclusivity in traditional social science” (p.683). My aim, by including this narrative component in my research, was to allow the youth as they found words to talk about the art they created, to also tell stories about experiences they had at school.

“Narrative inquiry comprises a view of experience as composed and lived over time, as studied and understood as a narrative phenomenon and as represented through narrative forms of representation” (Clandinin, 2013, p.15).

Schools are places where youth are surrounded by peers responding to cues that often lead them to follow the social norms that dominate that environment. The experiences of my participants, I knew, would not be free of these influences and that is part of what I wanted to examine. “These stories are the result of a confluence of social influences on a person’s inner life, social influences on their environment, and their unique personal history” (Clandinin, 2013, p.17). Gender-variant youth, like their cisgendered peers, need to find ways to orient themselves in their school environments and stories could offer my research participants a way to share their experiences in so doing. Simply stated, “narrative inquiry is a way of studying people’s experiences, nothing more and nothing less” (Clandinin, 2013, p.37).

Combining art and story: Arts-informed narrative inquiry

Arts-based and narrative inquiry together are gaining ground as the combined “arts-informed narrative inquiry” (de Melo, 2007). This methodological melding of art and narrative has been and perhaps continues to queer notions of research process and data by stretching past the limits previously set for what ‘counts’ as valid research.

Arts-based/informed narrative inquiry is pushing the boundaries of the qualitative research landscape. First, narrative inquiry does not rely on searching for truth or broad generalization. Second, by honoring art and multiple aesthetic perspectives, narrative inquiry has provoked changes in the academic discourse. This change has happened

through different ways of gathering data and different ways of presenting research texts.
(de Melo, 2007, p.219)

In working towards understanding of my own experiences, and also my own interpretation and understanding of those stories shared with me by others, I often turn to various art forms including poetic writing. Other researchers also find this a useful tool for gaining understanding. “Literary writing is the artistic tool I use to live and to express the meanings I make of my stories” (de Melo, 2007, p.205). This is the researcher using the processes of arts-based narrative inquiry to better understand their own stories, but also, “when working on arts-based narrative inquiry, the researcher creates space for the participants to live an aesthetic experience” (de Melo, 2007, p.215).

I have worked in many environments where youth are striving to grow and develop personal skills. One such environment was an outdoor education, leadership centre in Ontario, Canada. Youth were chosen to come to the centre for personal or group/team leadership development and they came from a wide variety of places, including schools, community groups, provincial care homes and remote northern First Nation reserves, to name only some of them. Transformational work happened at that centre, eyes were opened and opportunities given where sometimes a young person had not even known they existed. I witnessed many participants express deep understanding of change within their own learning. I had opportunities to work in many different resource areas of the centre, including (but not limited to) high ropes and rock climbing, waterfront, leadership development sessions and the craft shop. Of that list, if you were to ask me where some of the most amazing ‘aha’ moments took place, where profound conversations often happened, you might be surprised to hear that it was in the craft shop. Yep, the place where youth could come after sessions that challenged them mentally and physically,

emotionally and socially, to ‘unwind’ and work with their hands while chatting with others. It was in this environment that sometimes looked like play or almost thoughtless doodling and drawing that I saw/heard/experienced the most insightful moments at the centre. In the creation of space for the youth to engage with others without expectation of performance or success, where they perhaps felt that eyes were not quite as intently watching, that they were able to process the content of the experiences they’d had that day, to deepen their understanding of the connections to their everyday lives and to share and understand others better. While hands were busy with brushes and paint, or subtly shaping small blocks of soapstone, allowing form and figure to emerge, conversations were likewise shaping ideas and opinions. In short, the youth were telling their stories while creating art and processing their own experiences. In some ways, those many hours I spent with varied youth in the craft shop laid some of the experiential foundations upon which I begin to build my understanding of arts-based narrative inquiry.

Where artist/researcher/teacher come together: A/r/tography

I was drawn to arts-informed narrative inquiry for the ways in which it employs many of the key ideas in two influences on my study: arts-based inquiry and narrative inquiry. In a similar way, I am drawn to a/r/tography, “the practice of living inquiry in and through the arts in diverse and divergent ways” (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo & Gouzouasis, 2008, p.xix) as a methodology. It encompasses not only the arts-based engagement that is crucial to my study, but also key tenets of my life as an educator, an artist and a student/researcher. Although currently I do not find myself in a position to fully wear the mantle of a/r/tographer, I do find that there are many aspects to the practice that fit. My research looks to queer dominant understandings of gender by working with gender-variant youth and to open dialogue with them about how they expressed

their gender while in school. I did not begin this work presuming to know what I would find, or stating what is, but rather I began with questions, curiosity, and a desire to hear/see/understand the experiences of these youth. I find a connection here with the a/r/tographic description of openings: “Openings are often like cuts, tears, ruptures or cracks that resist predictability, comfort and safety” (Springgay et al., 2008, p.xxx). I began this work with the intent of making space for creative expression from youth who I felt have not been clearly heard. I opened my research to multiple possibilities, knowing that I couldn’t know how it would turn out because I believe that it is in this way that much needed knowledge is often created.

As O’Donoghue (2008) queries in their contribution to Springgay et al.’s (2008) collection “To what extent can the processes and practices of art making lead us to research practices that are open and attend to multiple ways of coming to know, of re/presenting, and of meaning making – to research that is transformative?” (p.111). I am allowing for and making space for ‘re/presenting’ the gender identities of these youth, so that the dominant discourses of gender in schools can be challenged and new understanding might find space to unfold. In overlapping, stirring together and mixing art, education and research, a/r/tography “offers opportunities for a visceral knowing and a visual knowing, and for ways of sharing and re/presenting that resonates with the lives we live, in all their richness and complexities” (O’Donoghue, 2008, p.124).

A/r/tography looks to question and disrupt. In being a researcher open to surprises and multiple possibilities from participants, my research works towards queering the more traditional notions of what it is to be a researcher; It turns away from, or follows an unexpected path. Queer phenomenology clicks into place in the imbrication of ideas that share space to become a/r/tography here as Ahmed (2006) points out that “we do not encounter that which is ‘off

course'; that which is off the line we have taken. And yet, accidental or chance encounters do happen, and they redirect us and open up new worlds" (p 19). This brings me back to the creation of new knowledge through the creation of openings and a move away from fixed ideas or pre-knowing.

For all that I feel my research meshes with the concepts and ideas that comprise this methodology, the piece that is missing for me at present and keeping me from fully fitting the mold of a/r/tographer is that I am largely doing this work in a solitary manner. "For a/r/tographers, belonging to a community of practice is essential" (Irwin, 2008, p.74). For this research study, I am engaging with my research participants and my graduate school community, but I understand the "community of practice" that Irwin (2008) speaks of above is more than that. As I weave myself in and through different educational communities in Vancouver, B.C., I am working briefly within those communities but not in the sense of being 'in community'. As I push on boundaries and trouble notions of gender, not in overt ways but in the subtleties of my being and how I present myself to the students, how I use language and when I question language use of others, I do so alone. If I could find myself more connected to a network of others also troubling the notions of gender in similar ways, then perhaps I could also find myself in an a/r/tographic community of practice.

To end this section, I bring attention back to the way that a/r/tography's "emphasis on process rather than method allows an active space for participation that lies between existing disciplines and their methodologies while resisting the formation of new methodological criteria" (Springgay et al., 2008, p.xxvii). For all of the ways that my work fits into the methodology of a/r/tography, it is for this reason more than any other, the ways that it fills the 'in-between' spaces, that it is appropriate to include it in this work. Gender-variant youth often find themselves in the

‘in-between’ spaces; the cracks in the social structure of their school, the rarely visualized spaces that fill the void from male to female on a spectrum of gender, the slivers of space afforded them in textbooks and resources. In planning to be open in my study to how art and conversation might un-fold I allow room, and in fact invite the in-between spaces, the troubling of normative practices both in what transpires in schools and what happens in a more traditional study. A methodology that in itself queers our understanding of the main tenets of research is in fact a methodology that suits my purposes.

Developing the research project

In the past I have had the privilege of working with youth in arts-based programmes focussed on personal development. One project I developed to offer youth a way to express how they feel they engage with the world around them is something I call *inside/outside art*. I have found this project to be very successful on a number of occasions, where youth were able to create art representative of aspects of themselves from both internal and external perspectives, and then were able to share and discuss this art with others. For my research I aimed to use an art project of this type, although I remained open to the possibility of the group shifting the actual structure of the project somewhat to suit their artistic processes. The following photos show an example of my own inside/outside creation from one of the sessions I facilitated while working with youth in the past:



This is what I felt I was showing the world around me about me about who I am



And this is how I was feeling on the inside, about who I am

Figure 6. My own inside/outside art

After creating the two pieces of art, while reflecting on them I was struck with how my outer presentation felt like a subdued version of my inner presentation. While the colours, images and contrasts on the inside piece felt to me like a solid reflection of my bold and determined ideas and feelings, I toned them down for the piece that depicts what I think I show the world around me. Where my queerness was represented as a strong, wide stripe of rainbow colours on the inside, on the outside it was far more subtle, blending somewhat into the background.

When facilitating a project like the *inside/outside art*, offering a wide variety of mediums and materials and gentle guidance on how the project might unfold differently for each individual person, allows participants to find their own ways to express themselves. In asking youth to create art representing how they expressed their gender identity, I knew that it would be of key importance that I make space for responses to be individual and unique. I hoped that in a

focus group setting, using arts-based inquiry with a project such as the one I described above, I would be able to get to a deep level of engagement and understanding of how some gender-variant students express their gender identities. I envisioned that participants might create one piece of art representing how they felt on the inside about their gender identity and one representing how they felt they expressed their gender on the outside and that the possibility existed through the process of creating and discussing their art, that the youth might come to a clearer way of expressing their gender identities in words. Where they may not have the words to fully explain their gender-variance, or if words alone aren't enough to capture their expression of gender identity, I felt that art might offer a way to fill in some of the gaps. Because one can work with art in so many different ways, arts-based inquiry "can reveal a depth of understanding and communication arguably not possible through the use of one semiotic system alone" (Ewing and Hughes, 2008, p.515).

Art may be a way in to deeper understanding, both because of the ways we can express ourselves through art without words, and in the words that come after, when we ourselves describe the work and when in a group setting we hear and respond to the responses of others about the art that we created. My own inside/outside art as shown above is a piece that I've shared with numerous people, for various reasons over the past few years. The process of reflection that comes after completing the artwork is one that continues for as long as I continue to share the art with others. Often a new bit of insight comes forward as new eyes fall on the work and comments and questions are shared. Creating the art and then later sharing the art I experience as two separate but connected processes that both have great value. While planning my research sessions I kept this important process in mind, knowing that I would aim for time

and space to both create art in the sessions, and then to also have time to discuss and share the artwork with each other.

Sullivan (2010) recognizes the importance of the creative and critical form of engagement that comes from art practice in research, where “creative insights have the potential to transform our understanding by expanding the various descriptive, explanatory, and immersive systems of knowledge that frame individual and community awareness” (Sullivan, 2010, p. 97). This ability of art to be a foundation for communication is what makes it so useful a process for this research. Not only does sharing the process and product of art with others within our research community offer understanding and space to create new knowledge, it also offers a method for the transfer of knowledge to a wide variety of outside audiences.

Art, in any of its various forms, provides media for self-reflection, self-expression, and communication between and among creators and audiences. Performing social change begins with artful ways of seeing and knowing ourselves and the world in which we live. (Finley, 2005, p.692)

Lenses for narratives

Using a queer phenomenology lens to interpret student narratives elucidates the ways they make meaning of the spaces they inhabit in school settings. How did these students get orientated in their surroundings, specifically in relation to changes enacted due to policy amendments in their schools? Policy states that a gender-neutral bathroom will be made available in all Vancouver schools. How does this play out though? How does it look in the day to day? If there was a gender-neutral bathroom available, what was said about the bathroom, or not said about the bathroom? What were the experiences of these youth having used the gender-

neutral bathroom, or having not used it? Hearing and interpreting the stories of students navigating life at school, readers will have a way to briefly inhabit some of their lived experiences. In this way students can be seen as individuals, but more specifically as individuals who have developed within a societal context and social climate, because “humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world” (Connely and Clandinin, 1990, p.2). Through narrative inquiry, students can be seen as individuals, with individual stories, while recognizing that those stories have been constructed within the structure of the institutional narrative of their schools.

Combining the depth accessible through arts-based responses to gender identity and expression questions, with the details of everyday life in their schools available through storytelling, the potential would exist to paint a reasonably full picture of how these students expressed their gender identities and how they navigated their school environments. By involving art-making and story-telling in the research process, I aimed to generate shareable knowledge of how these youth experienced school. “Making art is passionate, visceral activity that creates opportunities for communion among participants, researchers, and the various shared and dissimilar discourse communities who are audiences of (and participants with) the research text” (Finley, 2003, p.288). Getting at this embodied sense of what school is like for gender-variant youth allows the hard questions about how they experience (dis)inclusion and (un)belonging in their schools to begin to surface.

Chapter 3

RESEARCH METHODS AND FINDINGS

Setting up the sessions

Gaining the support and participation of gender-variant identified youth who had attended secondary school in B.C. turned out to be more difficult than I had at first anticipated. I received approval from the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board in February 2018 and began the recruitment process immediately. I attended a number of gender identity focussed group meetings at various venues around B.C.'s lower mainland, and contacted many groups via phone and/or email. After having the information for my study posted in paper copies and on various websites used by LGBTQ youth, including via post-secondary institutions and community discussion groups geared to gender-variant folks, it required re-posting and continually looking for new places/sites to post for a few months before I successfully recruited participants. And while I had hoped for a focus group of 4 – 8 youth to engage with me for two connected sessions, my actual research took place over two separate sessions, one with 2 participants and one with 1 participant, taking place about a month apart in the spring of 2018. While it was not my original intent to work this way, having a very small group and a one-on-one session proved to be very useful and insightful as the small numbers provided opportunity to go into great depth of discussion at both sessions.

During my first research session two participants, Alex⁴ and Marty⁴, spent approximately 3.5 hours with me. During the second research session one participant, Jack⁴, spent

⁴ The names Alex, Marty and Jack are pseudonyms chosen by the research session participants.

approximately 2.5 hours with me. Both sessions consisted of discussing their experiences of expressing their gender in secondary school, creating inside/outside art pieces and discussing how those art pieces demonstrated their inner gender identity versus their outward expression of gender while in school. In all recruitment materials I had made it clear that creating art together would be part of the research process, and that experience in visual arts was not necessary for participation, so participants were prepared for this aspect of the research sessions.

I chose a small room for the sessions, with natural light and with enough table space to hold many different art supplies as well as provide room for participants to create their art pieces. I checked with all participants to ensure the space met accessibility requirements. The room offered privacy and a quiet environment and I supplied food and beverages. Art supplies included many different types and weights of art paper, painting supplies, a wide variety of drawing tools as well as everything from buttons to ribbons, old maps to sequins, stamps and ink pads. My aim was to open a wide variety of options for the participants to find their way in creating art that assisted them in describing their gender identity.

At the beginning of each of the sessions, after welcoming participants and offering food and beverages, I began by explaining my research goals and proposed schedule for the session. I suggested that we include time for questions and answers, storytelling, creating art and discussing the art. I purposefully left the schedule flexible and checked in with participants a number of times throughout our sessions, to allow them the freedom to help direct how we used our time. This was intentionally done in order to create what I felt was a welcoming and inclusive space, letting the participants know that I valued them highly as holders of knowledge and as people who I very much appreciated learning from. I explained my reasoning for working on art pieces throughout the session as a method of opening and/or expanding modes of

expression and conversations. With each of us working on our own art pieces in a shared space, we would hopefully have the opportunity to share our process as part of our conversations; something quite different than if we had all gone off on our own and created the art before coming back together to discuss what we had created. I explained my belief that the process of making art is one that is as important, and in some cases even more important, than the end product of creating artwork. The idea I had to create art while talking and sharing stories in the research sessions is backed by Finley, Vonk and Finley's (2014) writing on critical arts-based research when they "consider the process of art-making at least as important as the product of art-making because it is during the process that we exchange information" (p.622).

I shared with participants that I sometimes use different art forms to work through problems and to process issues in my day to day life. Over the course of the sessions each participant expressed differing levels of comfort and engagement with art practices coming into the study. Jack informed me that they also find artistic endeavors a useful way to process strong feelings and emotions. Alex let me know that they did not normally, in their day to day life engage in any form of art making on a regular basis, and Marty indicated that they had taken some art courses and enjoyed the process and challenge of expressing themselves artistically. Despite differing levels of experience with visual art coming into the study, all three participants showed no hesitation in selecting materials and beginning art pieces during the sessions.

Situating myself openly to participants as a non-binary, genderqueer person I felt was important to helping participants feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and stories with me. I made it clear that I work in educational settings as an on-call teacher and that I am open about my gender identity in the workplace with anyone who asks or has questions for me relating to gender-identity. Throughout the sessions I also took part in sharing stories and experiences, to

keep the flow of conversations happening as naturally as possible, while still managing to ask the questions I felt I needed to ask of participants.

Recording and transcribing

With participant permission the sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed using pseudonyms chosen by the participants. In transcribing, I opted for a hybridization between naturalism and denaturalism (Davidson, 2009, p. 39). I attempted to make the written form of the sessions true to what was said while also writing dialogue in a readable format. To that end, I often omitted words such as like, um, and uh, wherever I felt they did not warrant transcribing. If placeholder words were being said while the participant paused to think over an answer, I noted that in the transcript and wrote in a descriptor of the length of pause. This was done to recognize that a long pause may add to and/or somewhat change the meaning of the actual words said. In part the decision to use a hybridized transcription method was made in order to offer readability to the participants when I sent them the transcripts because, as noted by Davidson (2009) in an article on transcription, “extraneous information makes a transcript difficult to read and might obscure the research purpose” (p. 38). Transcriptions were sent to participants, with the offer that they could read them over and submit any changes they felt were needed. No changes were made.

What I learned from the participants

After what seemed to be a long search for participants in my study, having three youth actually show up to sessions (there were others who scheduled sessions with me but did not make it on the date/time set) felt like an incredible gift. Three young people spent time and

energy sharing with me, creating art with me and learning together, and for this I am very grateful. Gender identity is integral to our sense of who we are as human beings and as gender-variant folks, sharing how we experience the environments we live in everyday can be an act of trust and vulnerability. As I noted earlier in this thesis, gender-variant students are often putting themselves into the vulnerable positions of sharing their gender identities in schools, in order to enact changes in their educational environment. It is my firm belief that it is the policy makers, administrators and educators in our school systems who need to be doing the work required to move towards equality and fair opportunity for gender-variant students, therefore I feel it important to note here that it is with the help of previous students that I do this work.

All three of the participants attended some form of post-secondary school after completing high school, and two of the participants were still involved with their post-secondary studies at the time of the research sessions. I learned that the youth I worked with on this project all see themselves as far more knowledgeable on various aspects of gender identity and expression than they did while in secondary school. They all, in different ways, expressed an understanding of their gender identity now as being more layered and textured than it was when in high school. This ability of the participants to look back on their secondary school years with an understanding that they were in process of developing their sense of gender identity was helpful in keeping the narrative aspects of the session unfolding in the manner of story-telling. Jack, Alex and Marty were all able to tell stories about what they experienced and what some of the effects of those experiences were, with a sense of distance and of past happenings. With their sense of having moved forward since then and having learned much more about the possibilities open to them in gender identity, I feel that it was with less emotional involvement and discomfort, and perhaps with more clarity that they were able to share their stories.

Words used to express gender identity

After introducing my aims and intentions, and covering necessary consent documents and issues of confidentiality, I asked participants about what words they used to describe their gender identity while in secondary school. A common thread with all three participants was that while they now express their gender, at least in part as non-binary, while in school they expressed their gender solely as male (at least in the later years of their time at school) and used the pronouns he/him/his. In the case of both Alex and Jack, the use of male pronouns and preferred names denoted a transition in gender identity and expression from female to male. Marty's experience differed in that they used only male pronouns but presented more as crossing the line between male and female in their earlier years of secondary school, and were therefore often gendered by others as female. In their later years of school they found themselves more fully on the male side of the line, and now Marty has an internal gender identity that they describe as fluid and including non-binary and male.

Jack shared a number of stories with me about the process of discovering words that helped them express their gender identity. "I remember there not being a word" was Jack's answer when I asked about verbal expressions of identity in school. Jack then told me about being involved in on-line communities where they came across the word *trans*, and immediately felt drawn to the word. In starting to use *trans* to describe themselves, Jack described their process: "That's what I felt at the time worked for me because I was like, well I'm not a girl so then I must be the opposite, so that's kind of what I used." The dominant understanding of gender as two options only, either girl or boy, woman or man, that predominantly exists in schools is at the root of the issue of lack of visibility, recognition and equality for gender-variant students. In order to have their gender-identity recognized, there is often a strong need for each gender-

variant student to express their gender solidly as the other binary gender option from what they were assigned at birth. Jack remembered that while in school, to describe one's gender "there was either this or this, and I never knew I had an option."

As with Jack's experience, Alex also felt that to have their gender identity recognized, they needed to strongly present as the 'other' gender. When I asked Alex how they express their gender identity at this point in their life, a few years out of secondary school, their response indicated a move beyond binary presentation: "I guess more like trans-masculine, non-binary probably". Alex then let me know that they did not use the non-binary identifier while in school. "I started transitioning in high school so just presenting as masculine I guess. In high school I probably would have just used trans-male, male."

Marty joined this discussion to add that depending on who they are interacting with, it might make a difference to their gender presentation. I specifically asked if there were different situations where Marty might present their gender differently and this is what they had to say: "Yeah. With different people. Do you know what I mean? Around different people. I guess in different settings, but I feel like the setting dictates the people who are there and the people dictate how I would react. Yeah".

Students as educators/change makers

As Jack's gender identity became more openly known as trans, they became by default the school 'expert' on all things trans; "because I was the only trans person that they knew, they would end up coming to me to ask about things." Jack did not want to 'talk for everyone' but also recognized that people wanted to understand, had questions, were curious and didn't see anywhere else to get the information they were looking for. Marty also spoke about how little

understanding there was of different gender identities in their school. “Yeah, I think there’s a general lack of understanding of variations in gender [with] teachers and students, and because of that there’s an awkwardness because they don’t know”. Jack offered a talk through their school Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) about how to be respectful while sharing space with trans individuals. As Jack’s understanding of gender at that point in their life remained binary however, their ‘expert’ sharing passed this understanding on to students and staff who attended the talk. “At the time having no clue that there was the possibility of neutral, I was still fairly binary in how I was explaining things because I didn’t know for a fact that there were other options.” Having Jack as the main educator on gender identity for their school, rather than having previously educated adults in the school system sharing this information, Jack’s personal understanding of and views on gender was all that was offered to those wanting to learn more about it.

Alex and I had a conversation about schools using student gender, as assigned at birth, on class lists. Also included in that discussion was the process by which preferred names were used/not used in Alex’s school.

In high school for gender options it’s just whatever your legal gender is, I’m pretty sure. I think it comes up when they have class lists and stuff. I’m pretty sure because I was trying to help someone who is currently in the high school where I went because they wanted to change their pronouns and stuff. I was trying to get them in touch with the counsellor so that they could have their gender show up differently in the system, but I don’t think they were able to. I think the counsellor had to email all the teachers.

This anecdote demonstrates how students often must do the work themselves (or in this case have a friend help out) to get the changes needed for something as seemingly clear as being

correctly named and gendered on everyday school documents. These are the class lists that give teachers a first introduction to students. These are the lists that are left for on-call teachers to use when calling attendance. In Alex's story, it is only by working with a school counsellor, who then emails the student's teachers, that the changes are made and the student gains some recognition through being correctly named and gendered.

Jack also shared a story about working with a counsellor in order to get the assistance they needed to be correctly named and gendered on class lists and on other school documents/records. It is an example of one person using art to express themselves when other options are too hard. Jack shares a poem with their youth care worker, in order to be seen.

I had that youth care worker. I was starting to struggle in school again, and she was like 'what's up' and I basically pushed a poem that I wrote to her, and closed my eyes and put my hands over my ears and just waited. And she was like 'ok, how do I deal with this and how do I make it so that you're comfortable?' and slowly made it so that the teachers knew that it was important to tell, to make me comfortable. 'Who can I tell and is it alright?' And I was like yeah cause I can't do it myself.

Although sharing a poem with the youth care worker achieved the results needed in that moment, I ask what that took from Jack in time and energy. What was the cost of the emotional drain on Jack? Rather than simply filing out a form at the start of their years in school (or making changes when needed) with their chosen name and gender, they needed to go through an entire process that their cisgendered peers were not required to perform in order to be 'seen'. Again, at what cost?

Jack recalls that even by the end of their time in secondary school, when a number of years had gone by since their initial steps of coming out, that some teachers continued to

misgender them. “Up until graduation I had some teachers that I hadn’t had in years misgender me because I hadn’t come out to them. It hadn’t worked its way along the grapevine”. Jack completed this recollection with a very dramatic, emphatic re-enactment of what went through their mind each time this happened: “Oh no, you don’t know!” While working with a counsellor helped to notify teachers actively working with Jack, the system did not kick into place to make those changes of name and gender schoolwide on pertinent documents. On a positive note, Jack shared an experience where they did feel recognized.

One thing that I was thankful for, and I don’t know who decided it, was my dogwood certificate has my preferred name on it, that I am going to get legally changed. I don’t remember pushing for it and asking for it, they just called it out during the ceremony. It was nice and now I won’t have to change it later.

Participants noted that the work required to undertake educating their peers and teachers, oftentimes through advocating for changes they needed for themselves, was tiring and sometimes just too much to handle. “Takes a lot of energy when you’re focussing on everything else that is high school then it’s hard to have that extra energy to go towards that” (Marty). When talking about school policies that include gender identity, I asked participants if they understood how those policies pertained to them while in school. “No. Because I didn’t learn about any of the policies. The teachers would ask if we’d like that but at the time I was already exhausted from multiple..., just struggling at school and anxiety to begin with” (Jack). Marty expressed concern about policy makers not understanding life on the ground in schools, for students experiencing the outcome of a system that portrays gender as binary only. “I feel like the policy makers are in a world where maybe to them it’s not a big deal because everyone they work with is educated

and aware, but that's not in the real world". And this brings us back to students as educators and a reminder from Marty that "School is hard enough without adding that on".

Here I restate my earlier question of who should be responsible for making changes in schools to create more inclusive environments for gender-variant students. Teachers and administrators seem an obvious answer to me, but as found in the Meyer et al.(2016) study of educators working with these youth, it is often only when faced with a student who makes themselves known/seen/heard that educators begin to make changes. "However, most of these educators admitted that, in the absence of a transgender or gender-creative student, school staff tend to be uninterested or unmotivated in relation to learning more about the topic" (Meyer et al., 2016, p.17).

(Dis)orientation: Lack of representation

Marty expressed that maintaining outward appearances to match their internal gender identity became harder as they progressed through the years in secondary school. They made it clear that it was the outward performance of expressing their gender that was increasingly difficult, and that the level of difficulty in showing their identity to others depended somewhat on the understanding the others had of variations in gender. "Well, not necessarily to identify differently but to express differently. I feel like it depends on the person". When they were younger, and often read as a girl by others, their outward expression of gender connected closely with their internal sense of gender fluidity. As their body grew taller and more often read as masculine only, the work needed to project the aspects of themselves that read as more feminine became more and more difficult to express. "I mean I kind of stopped presenting as ... I don't know. I stopped challenging those markers so much, later on in high school" (Marty).

As Ingrey's (2013) study demonstrates, students use clothing to express and read gender cues, and often engage in an informal type of gender policing based on these cues.

Students in this study conveyed an understanding that dress symbolizes agency and is integral in the de-codification of gender. ... gendered dress, as it relates to self-fashioning practices, is framed in binary terms. Thus, these students exercised a modern form of sumptuary law upon one another, keeping each other in their proper stations. (Ingrey, 2013, p.429)

Marty explained that during their earlier years in secondary school, sometimes using the men's bathroom or change-room was cause for discomfort where they felt "the kind of, not direct, but just the kind of feeling of ridicule or [being] looked at like 'what are you doing?', from guys on the basketball team and stuff like that." Students questioned Marty's presence in male-only spaces because the gender cues they were reading from Marty did not fit the dominantly accepted idea of 'male'. "Through their negotiations of gender, the students defined the limits of gender acceptable behaviour ultimately by defining what is rejected" (Ingrey, 2013, p.431).

As their height grew past what is normally expected of even a tall woman, Marty started losing the option of wearing 'feminine' styled clothing. As others began to more quickly place them unquestionably in the 'male' box, they found themselves following that more easily accepted path and not veering so much off in any other direction. As Ahmed (2006) clearly explains, once you find or stumble your way onto a certain path you become invested in the time and energy spent on the journey, so that even if you are questioning the path it is hard to turn from it. "The longer you proceed on this path the harder it is to go back even in the face of this uncertainty. You make an investment in going and the going extends the investment" (Ahmed, 2006, p.18). Others in their school expressed their earlier confusion about Marty's gender, once getting to

know them better: “I had multiple people, once they knew me tell me it was like ‘what the heck is this person doing in the guys’ change room’, cause in grade 8 everyone thought I was a girl, because of those markers”. In expressing these feelings to Marty, once they knew them and once Marty started presenting more in the manner of the dominant view on what defines ‘male’, they were telling Marty that they ‘get him’ now. Once Marty’s outward expression of gender started meeting the inherent requirements for the set of markers recognized as ‘male’, the words of Marty’s peers explained that they were uncomfortable before, when Marty’s gender cues were mixed. “There’s definitely a need to know what, where the person is on the binary. Definitely people told me they were really confused about me and trying to figure that out because there definitely is a need to categorize” (Marty). Marty eventually found themselves following the more expected path of cisgendered male when others let Marty know that they saw them on that path.

If there had been other, well-trodden paths for Marty to find and follow perhaps would they have chosen a different path? If gender-variant folks were visible in their school environment, creating and re-creating paths that others could see and follow, would that have made a difference? Marty stayed on the path that others began assuming they were following, perhaps because “the social pressure to follow a certain course, to live a certain kind of life, and even to reproduce that life can feel like a physical ‘press’ on the surface of the body, which creates its own impressions” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 17). I wonder, what are the impressions that have been left on Marty from their time in school. What are some of the impacts for Marty, from expressing their gender to those around them in a manner that did not match their internal sense of gender identity?

Here I once again question how school board policies are fulfilling their promises for visibility and recognition of gender-variant students. I bring us back to the Vancouver School Board policies, where they state that they are committed to:

- ensuring that staff utilizes language and educational resources and approaches that are inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and respectful of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions;
- enabling all LGBTTTQ+ students and families to see themselves and their lives positively reflected in the curriculum, through the provision of library and other curricular resources; (VSB Policy Manual, ACB-R-1, 2014)

The lack of visibility and representation of gender-variant folks in schools is something that I have recognized in my on-call teaching work and an issue that has also been noticed by my research participants. I asked Alex and Marty if, of all the characters in books they were required to read, of all the important figures they were asked to study if any one of those people/characters varied from cisgender. The participants' emphatic responses were: "Not in my school" (Marty) and "No!" (Alex). Alex commented that not only in secondary school, but also in university "I would have to bring it up if we were going to talk about anything different". I also received a solidly negative response from those two participants when I asked if the pronoun *they* was ever included in the list of singular pronouns to be used in writing. When Jack and I talked about the use of 'they' as a singular pronoun, they noted how the option for sharing personal pronouns with teachers and classmates was missing from classroom introduction processes. "In high school there were no pronoun questions on the ice breaker sheets from teachers." Marty attributed the lack of recognition for neutral pronoun choices that they experienced while in school, to teachers not believing it is important enough to include;

Then again, teachers just don't see the importance, so they think it's just too much work, too much extra. Any education that is to do with gender or sexuality, that is away from the norm that has been going on forever, is just too much work. (Marty)

Marty also expressed their belief that "education is the root of everything with norms". These norms are what are creating an environment that is often hostile to gender-variant youth. In the Meyer et. al. (2016) study designed to examine some of "the barriers and supports that exist for educators working to create learning environments that affirm transgender and gender-creative students" findings demonstrated that these students are not afforded the same level of acceptance and comfort as their cisgendered peers. Gina, a behaviour specialist resource teacher who took part in that study questioned why all of the (identified) gender-variant students in their school came to them for support.

So how come all four of the transgender kids crossed my path at one time or another?

Because learning became so difficult at some point for some reason, that they needed a safe harbor, a place to breathe, another way of learning, because learning in the classroom was becoming too difficult. (Meyer et al., 2016, p.10)

Marking a different path; gender-variant role models

Young people look to role models for direction, for ideas and clues and on how to be and what to wear and how to get from here to there. In getting themselves orientated in a school environment, a gender-variant student needs to figure out which way to face, what to follow and how to find the path. This finding and following of a path becomes much clearer if there is a role model leading the way. If a student has read about notable gender-variant figures in history or present day society, or if they have encountered fictional gender-variant characters who they find

inspiring, then they will have found clues to a potential path. They will be able to see the potential outcome if they follow the line left by the footprints of those who tread there first.

“Following lines also involves forms of social investment. Such investments “promise” return (if we follow this line, then “this” or “that” will follow), which might sustain the very will to keep going” (Ahmed, 2006, p.17).

In openly expressing myself as gender-variant, while in my role as on-call teacher, am I perhaps setting out a faint path of footprints for others to potentially follow? Sometimes it feels just that way. When a student, educational assistant, administrator or teacher approaches me and asks about my gender; when a class discussion about gender happens just because of the mix of gender cues the students ‘read’ off me; when a principal asks for advice about how to address students in a gender neutral way. All of these events allow me to leave footprints that sink a little deeper on those occasions and allow others to wonder at those indentations, and then perhaps to see if their own feet fit to follow that path. “Deviation leaves its own marks on the ground, which can even help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways” (Ahmed, 2006, p.20).

If my affective presence alone in some schools, simply my being there with my mix of gender cues visible to those who meet me, opens dialogue and questioning then that is a step towards visibility. I feel it necessary to mention here however, that I have been told that I am an anomaly. I have rarely seen other adults in the school system whose gender presentation diverges from the binary gender norms students have come to expect from their teachers and school staff. There are not a whole crew of gender-variant teachers and administrators out there, showing up for work in B.C. schools, so the work remains to be done through education of the educators and administrators.

Artistic creations and the words to describe them

The power of art as expression

“The introduction of a simple visual task within the context of an interview may be very helpful for elicitation purposes” (Bagnoli, 2009, p.565). In Bagnoli’s (2009) article that includes an examination of the usefulness of arts-based methods within certain modes of research, I agree with the idea that “mixing methods allows one to see things from different perspectives and to look at data in creative ways” (p.568). Using art to potentially help us find words, is one of the main reasons I chose to include the creating of art in my research process. I recognize that the efficacy of art in research has a direct relation to the form of research being conducted, and that perhaps only a small percentage of qualitative studies can be enhanced by artistic process during research sessions. I employed the use of art making in my research partially because I myself often have great success with deepening my understanding of issues through the process of creating art. When I am stuck or wanting to dig deeper into a response I am having to information or an experience, art can often help me to unravel my thoughts into clearer streams of understanding. Jack expressed a similar sentiment during our research session. “Artwork has always been kind of my jam I guess, it’s been definitely one thing that’s helped with figuring things out” (Jack). Jack also shared a story about their early days of coming out, and how an online friend helped them to find their new name and then followed up with a gift of art.

Immediately after I settled on my name, with help from a friend online, who immediately after made artwork of me using the name, using the pronouns. And I said ‘that’s the most affirming thing I’ve ever come across, thank you’. (Jack)

First view



Alex-outside

Marty – entire work

Jack – outside (overlay)

Figure 7. First view of participant art

I presented the art project during research sessions with an example of my own inside/outside art (see Figure 6) as a project that involves two pieces of artwork. In my example, both pieces are created on the same type and weight of art paper, and are matched in shape and size. I have had experience using this type of project in the past, while facilitating empowerment through the arts sessions for youth. It has been a successful project for offering folks a way to express how they feel about who they are on the inside, and how they believe they express themselves on the outside, amidst the pressures and expectations that might be a part of their lives. While making an artistic distinction between one's gender expression and identity might be interpreted as situating the one against or in juxtaposition to the other, I believe that they can more accurately be seen as describing two parts or layers of a whole. In some cases this can be a 'tuning up' or 'tuning down' of one's gender presentation to more closely resemble an expected norm of binary gender in order to orient oneself within one's social environment. During research sessions, I explained that while the two piece example was how I approached the idea

for this project, participants were free to move beyond that model to whatever worked for them, recognizing that not all participants would necessarily want to or even benefit from engaging in the same form of art project.

As my research was focussed on the experiences of gender-variant youth while attending secondary school, participants worked on art pieces to represent how they felt they expressed their gender outwardly to the school around them and how they felt about their gender identity on the inside. As we talked, asked questions, shared stories and thoughtful moments, our hands were busy painting, colouring, cutting, gluing and sewing. Over the course of each of the sessions, the table in front of us became increasingly messy, piles of supplies mixed with other supplies as we sorted and sifted, looking for the ‘just right’ bits to express ourselves. The creating of art became a part of the conversation; sometimes the words were flying around the table, with stories and questions coming fast, and sometimes the only sounds were those of pencils leaving marks, scissors freeing shapes and brushes transferring paint to page. Closer to the end of the sessions, I specifically asked each participant about their creations and I will share here some of their responses.

Jack’s creation – now you see me, now you see me differently...

Jack’s art, upon lifting the top layer, shows swirls and lines of purple, green and red. Colour was one of the areas that Jack chose to highlight when talking about their art with me.

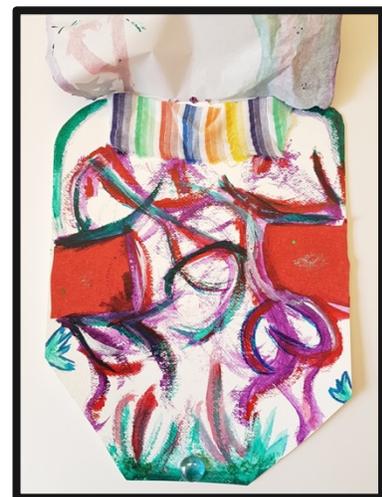


Figure 8. Jack's art; inside

I've always had the purple; the blue and pink always kind of make purple when I mix them together so the purple's always solidified itself to me as a neutral kind of colour. And also green because I don't like yellow, and green was the other thing that my, well not family, but a lot of the people I knew started to gravitate to because everyone was 'I don't like yellow for a neutral colour so we'll go green instead'. (Jack)

This mention of colour blending to make purple, the swirling together of blue and pink, tied in with another story that Jack shared with me. While sharing thoughts on the period of their life where they were perhaps not even aware that they were lacking the words to describe their gender-identity, Jack recounted the following:

In the case of not having words, I think also one thing that definitely I feel works for that is, in grade 8 for art, my teacher for art was a... went a little bit further from like what was supposed to be taught in art and very much showed that art is not just fine art, it can be experimental and whatnot. So one of the things that she had us do was a self-portrait but instead of drawing yourself you drew aspects in a pie chart almost, of what makes you you. I remember that a lot of it was like a grade 8, grade 7 level of food and computers and games and then there was one that was, 'one of these was not like the others' and it's a figure that is drawn and that is coloured in pink and blue all mixed together because at the time I was like..., but that was before I came across some of those words so it was like this is how that works. I wish I could find it [the artwork].

Jack's story speaks not only of not having words, but of being different 'one of these was not like the others'. I would also note here that this art project made a lasting impact on Jack, for them to be sharing it with me years later. In much the same way that I am using art in this

research project, Jack's teacher used art to allow students a way to express themselves outside of words and perhaps gave Jack something to fill in some of the gaps in their sense of self identity.

I queried Jack about the rainbow striped fabric, secured to the inside layer of their artwork with small velcro attachments. "And of course I just love the little stripy fabric...". I was not surprised to find a participant drawn to the rainbow-like fabric, I myself proudly wear rainbow fabric as patches on several pieces of clothing, it feels right and it makes me smile.

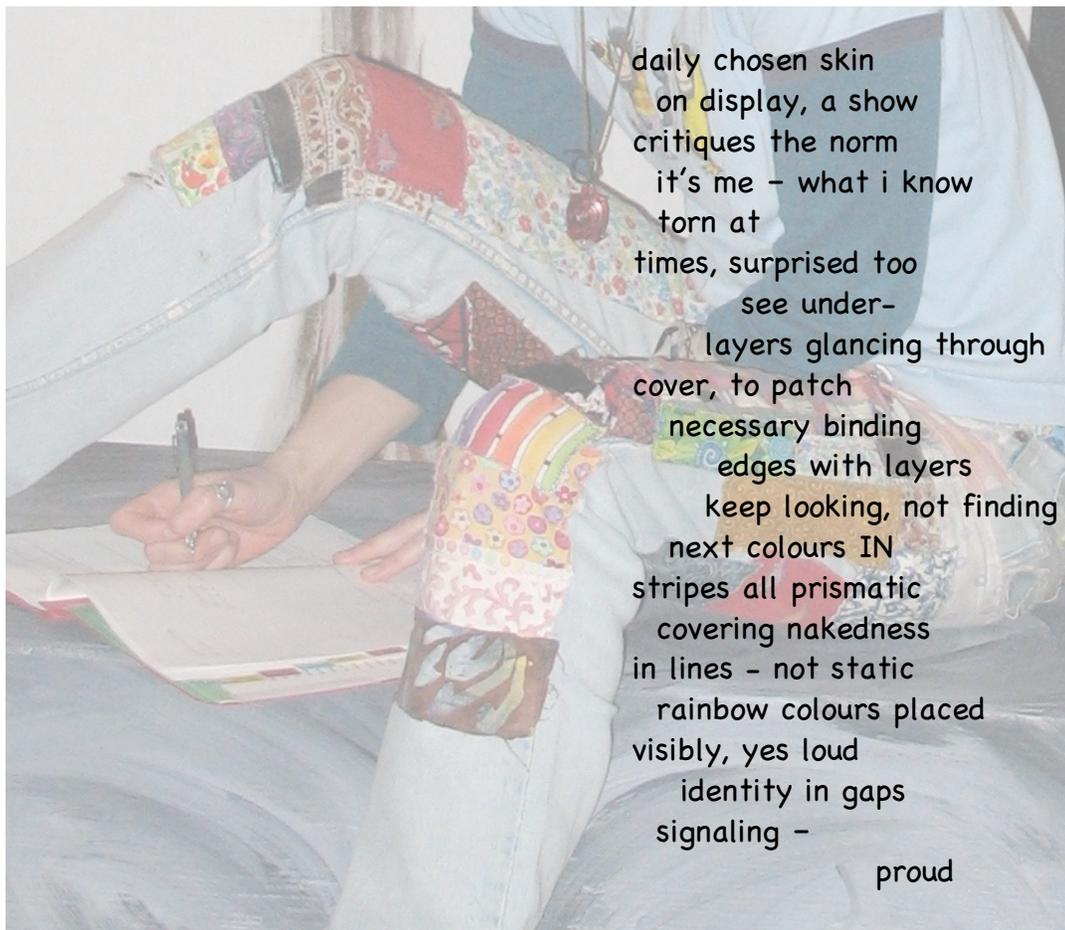


Figure 9. Daily chosen skin

In fastening the rainbow patterned/coloured fabric with velcro tabs, Jack's work speaks of a changeability or a possibility of shifting.

Well, things change a little bit and I was thinking about it a little bit. One of the things my



Figure 10. Jack's art; removeable rainbow

mom told me when I came out is that sexuality is fluid. I don't necessarily believe in the fluidity of it but I do believe that things change as you learn new stuff. When I first came out I came out as a trans guy, thinking that that was my only option and then found out later on no, you can be multiple or neither or something else entirely different. (Jack)

Jack's stories offer insight into how their understanding of gender identity options grew through their years in secondary school. From their earlier stories of first coming across the word trans, to the end of their time in secondary school when perhaps the gender binary was starting to chafe a bit. "I do believe that things change as you learn through more experiences and being able to change things out when you need it is helpful in a way" (Jack).

The topmost layer of Jack's work is visibly less bright, with more white area and less colour. As Jack put it, "the top layer is kind of a little more subdued". The outside image, when you look for it, is of a gently smiling face. For me it is an image of a face that suggests someone quite different than the very vibrant, quick speaking, openly sharing, excitable youth who I interacted with. I wonder at how the public 'face' of Jack was seen/felt/experienced by those in their school community. I interpret this part of the artwork Jack created as representing the overlay that Jack applied to their gender-identity to make it better 'fit' the expectations they felt applied to them in school.

Jack also talked about the somewhat transparent nature of the outside layer of their artwork, having chosen not to create two exactly matched shapes for the inside and outside, and having chosen very different papers on which to create the pieces.

The transparency is that a lot of the times I want and like to be transparent and I like the fact that people aren't necessarily able to tell exactly what's going on. Or have a feeling because it's one thing that I always look out for. With people I run into day to day, it's like I think that there's something there, but I'm not certain. It's that I kind of 'I see you a little bit'.



Figure 11. Jack's art; outer layer

I interpret this desire to be seen 'a little bit' through the outer layer to what lies at the core, to be born of the fact that Jack did not feel able to fully express their gender-identity to the school community where they spent much of their time throughout their teen years. When we talked about the clothing choices Jack made while in school, they again made it clear that they felt they needed to express themselves as male, within the prevailing school view of binary gender, despite internal feelings of a more variable gender identity. Jack told me that wearing clothing recognized by others as male clothing helped them to have their trans identity recognized.

It was being able to more fully settle in that way. It also, I feel now, if I hadn't done that, if I hadn't been a little bit more in the binary to what everyone else was seeing, it would

have been a little bit harder to, not exactly accept it, but more like ‘there is no option for the middle ground so you have to perform to how we see you should be’, in a way.

Jack expressed this further by coming back to the earlier processes of self-identifying their gender. “One reason I thought I was a trans guy was that I was uncomfortable in dresses and men don’t like dresses so I must be a man”. When Jack completed secondary school and moved on to post-secondary studies and working, they found themselves moving away from their earlier binary expression of gender.

Then slowly, over time, I started to kind of gravitate back towards the skirts and the dresses because finally I was being seen somewhat as how I wanted to and it was like I’m finally not discomforted. It’s not the dress that was making me uncomfortable, it was the fact that it was signalling to everyone else that this is how something was when it wasn’t true effectively. My school, or just people in general would see ‘oh you’re in a dress so you’re a girl or you’re in a dress so you’re a woman’ but if I came in with a suit it was like ‘oh yep, alright that’s a guy’, there’s no doubt about it despite any other presentations.

Jack felt required to express their gender as a trans man while in school, in order to have their gender identity recognized as something other than cisgender; recognized as other than the birth assigned gender that appeared on class lists and school registration and administration forms. Jack’s need to find a way to express themselves that was recognizable to their peers fits with the findings in Ingrey’s (2013) study, where participants commented that they noticed “how their peers work on themselves in order to mark themselves as a certain ‘acceptable’ sort of gendered body” (p.429). Despite not necessarily wanting to always wear the clothing associated with the dominant idea of what men wear, that is how Jack found a way to orient themselves within the

culture of their school. “Gender is known, experienced and produced through sartorial means” (Ingrei, 2013, p.429). Once removed from the secondary school environment, as they began expressing a less binary variation of gender, Jack was more able to recognize what exactly was making them uncomfortable when wearing a dress or skirt. “Oh, it’s not the dress it’s the fact that everyone is not seeing what I want them to see effectively”. Others were reading the dress as a gender cue; a signal of Jack expressing female gender despite that not matching Jack’s internal sense of gender identity.

Alex’s art: button-downs and bowties

Having one’s gender recognized or ‘seen’ by others is a common thread in the



Figure 12. Alex's art; outside

discussions I had with participants. The need to firmly express gender as the binary opposite from the gender one was assigned at birth was also expressed by Alex. The outside image of Alex’s artwork includes a glued-on cloth bowtie and three buttons. The background colours Alex chose are ones often considered ‘masculine’ colours. When I asked Alex about their work, the first thing they explained was the reason for such a ‘masculine’ presentation.

I did a button-down and bowtie because I dressed like that in high school. I really liked button-downs and bowties a lot of the time. On the inside it was kind of just a mess in my life. Fluid of everything else. In high school I had to dress more masculine to be accepted as trans and for people to actually start using my name and pronouns.

In creating their art, Alex followed the example I explained at the start of the sessions whereby the ‘outside’ piece, as shown above, represents how they felt they expressed their gender identity to the world around them while they were in secondary school. The inside layer of their artwork, depicting how they felt about their gender identity on the inside while in school, is in stark contrast to the ‘button-down and bowtie’ outer piece. I feel that the first hint that something is going to be different on the inside however, comes if you look carefully at Alex’s choice in fastener. The two pieces of art are attached by a soft, turquoise velvet ribbon and this is not something that definitively goes with the ‘masculine’ presentation of the bowtie and button-down look that is otherwise shown.

The inner piece of Alex’s creation, representing their inner gender identity, is full of warmer colours of the palette: pink, red, purple, yellow and orange. As these colours are often recognized as more ‘feminine’ colour choices for clothing and accessories, Alex’s inner piece feels very much in contrast to the outer in terms of gender presentation. When I asked Alex about this aspect of their art, they expressed that they needed to fully embrace a style of dress recognized as ‘masculine’ in order to be seen as other than cisgendered. “Yeah, to see that there’s a difference. To accept the transition, I had to only show one side.” Alex then went on to discuss how they felt about expressing themself in this way. “I don’t mind presenting that way, it’s just that I don’t feel like I have as much option to present otherwise”.



Figure 13. Alex's art; inside and out

I wondered if there was any reason that growing up and going to school in a small town might make this a larger issue for Alex than for gender-variant folks living in cities, but they felt that it was the same. “I think it’s the same everywhere. I know people in the city who have to really over exaggerate their presentation to be accepted”. There was a theme emerging in the stories and thoughts shared by all of the participants, that others are quick to ‘read’ you and determine your gender, based on the dominant binary understanding of gender as female/male.

I’m just very cautious of how ... I can tell when I’m talking to someone how they’re reading me, and if they’re putting me into the category of male or female. I can always kind of just tell by body language and tone and I base the conversation off that.

Alex expressed a willingness to go along with whatever ‘read’ others have of them when they meet new people.

Friends who I talk to more would see me as queer for sure, but if I’m just kind of like ... meet someone in the cafeteria or something, I just roll with cisgender male. I just go with whatever the reaction is.

Alex spoke about the need that others impose on gender-variant folks to express themselves solely as male or female as extending beyond cisgendered spaces and into trans spaces.

Yeah, I also feel like even in trans spaces, some people are not as accepting of people who don’t transition fully into a binary expression. Or even if you identify as trans guy but you still have feminine attributes, that’s still really not met that well. It’s still really binary even within trans groups.

This speaks to my earlier points made about trans as an umbrella term, and how it is not a term that fits as a catch-all for all variations of gender outside of cisgender. What Alex shared in the

above quotation demonstrates that the understanding of gender as binary only has been so deeply ingrained into our understanding of gender that even folks who identify as transgender sometimes refute the possibility of gender between and beyond the opposing points of female and male.

As a final note about their artwork, Alex commented on choosing to cut circles of paper upon which to create their pieces. “I would say I’m a pretty soft person, and there are no edges on a circle”. In this comment we see that art as a way to express oneself can go beyond what is created on the page, to encompass even the shape of the page itself.

Marty’s artwork: a transition to norms

Marty’s experience of gender identity and expression differs in many ways from the experiences of Alex and Jack, as Marty’s gender as assigned at birth was male. While in secondary school, not conforming to gender norms for Marty meant expressing themselves in ways generally understood to be



Figure 14. Marty's art

feminine, in terms of dress, hair style, accessories, etc. Marty chose a different format for the art project during our research session, creating only one piece of art that expresses the shifts in gender expression that Marty made throughout high school. “I don’t really have two pieces, it’s kind of like different sides to the same piece. It’s kind of like the whole inside/outside thing but also sort of a timeline”. During

our conversation, Marty expressed a number of times their thought that showing the world around them their inside gender identity was a difficult route to take. “It’s... I was kind of like this, but then like ‘ahhhhh’ and then ok, I’ll just settle for the easy road”. I questioned Marty about what they meant by the ‘easy road’ in terms of gender expression, and Marty responded that it is “easy because it’s what’s expected. Or what’s normal”. Alex joined the discussion here to comment that they didn’t really feel that what Marty went through, in terms of making decisions about gender expression was easy. What Marty was describing as ‘the easy road’ was perhaps easier in terms of responses from others, but by following that path I would question whether or not it was easier for Marty in the long run, to have expressed an outward gender differing from their inner identity.

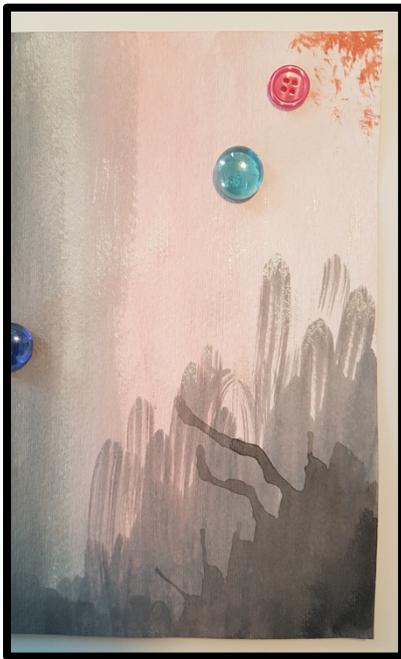


Figure 15. Marty's art; bright beginnings

In describing their artwork, Marty gave me a timeline commentary that starts in the upper right hand corner, where the colours are bright and paint choices include metallics. In this section, representing how Marty feels they expressed themselves in their early years in high school and how they feel on the inside, there is a pink button and pale blue, shiny gemstone glued on. “This would be where I was more open and confident in expressing myself and how I’d like to or how I would want to”. Marty indicated that the upper right hand section was not only how they expressed themselves early in high school, but also an indication of aspects of their current inner gender identity. As you move down the page, Marty indicated where the grey, tipped with silver,

overlapped the pink area. “And then I guess this is just some current feelings of doubt and confusion mixed in there”.

Moving to the centre section, Marty indicated a separation between inner and outer self, as well as a shift in presentation of gender as they progressed through their years in school. “The grey is kind of separating them”.

On the left hand side of Marty’s artwork, where colours are more muted and the metallic paints are overlaid with grey, we see the representation of how Marty feels they expressed gender by the end of their time in high school. “And this is kind of how I did, it’s kind of muted, but with some colour but just nothing too extreme”. Marty went to a place of expressing themselves more in line with what those around them expected of a



Figure 16. Marty's art; shifting to norms

cisgendered male. The inner, more shiny pink and ‘feminine’ parts of Marty were muted and left buried.

I kinda went to this place of just presenting as ‘a guy’ in high school. And all my friends in high school, any change I made to that would be a big shock to them. But any friends I’ve met now, I feel like they would be less like that and also when they met me, didn’t place me in the place I was coming from in high school.

In contrast, Marty speaks of the friends they meet now, in post-secondary school, seeing them not necessarily as cisgendered and straight. “They identified me as queer right away”.

Marty spoke more about why they felt they followed the path they did in high school, why they covered over the sparkly and pink bits with dulled out grey. They talked about this change coming about as their recognition grew of the difficulties in expressing a more ‘feminine’

presentation than the norm for a teenaged boy, as discussed earlier in this thesis where Marty shared stories of feeling uncomfortable in all-male spaces such as bathrooms and changerooms. As Marty's self-expression began to meet more of the expected norms for 'masculine' and they received recognition from peers as being acceptable, they allowed the 'masculine' parts of their presentation to override the more 'feminine'. "I started putting myself in a place and once I'd started I kind of had to stay there because moving away from that would be just too hard". This brings me back to Ahmed's (2013) recognition of the difficulty of leaving a path once committed to it as the investment becomes too great to walk away from.

As noted earlier, Marty's path differed from the paths of Alex and Jack significantly as Marty was identified as a boy at birth and was looking for ways to express a gender identity that included qualities expected from the dominant understanding of what it is to be a girl. Both Alex and Jack were in the reverse position in terms of gender identity, expression and societal expectation and there was some discussion about the different levels of perceived acceptance from society for the two different positions. "Yeah, I feel like the preconceptions in society, or, I don't even really know what the word is for this, but the judgements about people who are male to female are harsher?" (Marty).

Expressing gender: outside forces influencing inner identities

Of significant importance when discussing the participants' artwork, is the notion explained by Butler (1988) that we do not create our gender in a unique bubble, but rather under the influence of the environment around us, and the dominant discourse on expected norms of gender that permeate the culture we live in. "Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of doing one's gender, but that one does it, and that one does it in accord with certain sanctions and

proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter” (Butler, 1988, p.525). It is therefore of importance to the recognition of gender-variant students, that continuing to work towards understanding and inclusion be understood as critically important in all schools, for all students. Until the dominant understanding of gender shifts to include all variations of gender in our schools, students not following the prescribed notions of binary gender may struggle to express their gender identities to the communities around them. For how can one express something that is not spoken of, that there are sometimes not words for, and that is not understood?

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. (Dourlent-Frohard, 2016, pp. 20-21)

All three participants spoke of the wording used on school forms as continuing to enforce binary gender norms. What seems such a simple change that schools could make to recognize students of all genders, was not being done in the schools where the participants spent much of their teen-aged lives. Alex brought up this point as we were discussing school policy that includes gender-identity, where the policies state that all students, male, female or trans will be supported. “Why don’t they just say students of all gender? It’s just like those forms that say daughter/son. They’re putting more work in when they could just say child” (Alex). To this Marty responded “Or when they say him/her. Just say they.” In my experience, the process of changing forms is not overly onerous, as I have done so in the past at schools where I have been employed in longer term positions. Changing *he/she* to *he/she/they* and *your son/daughter* to *the child in your care*, on permission forms was as simple as drafting the new wording and submitting my proposed changes to the principal. Changing forms to reflect not only gender

options beyond the binary male/female but also that recognize that not all students live with parents (*the child in your care*) are changes that will hopefully be made at a district level for all schools in the future, and not just on a case by case basis where/when a teacher deems it necessary.

Two participants in my research study found that post-secondary institutions sometimes open doors to conversation and understanding of non-binary gender; Jack spoke of a professor who included pronoun choice in the class introductions and Marty described being more openly ‘seen’ and recognized as queer by other students. What these participants shared however, does not necessarily indicate a shift in overall patterns of behaviour and belief in these schools. Alex spoke of the experience of wanting to engage in transgender studies in university, and how when sharing that wish with professors they received a less than empowering response. “Two of my profs said that being transgender is not a big deal. I was interested in studying gender and two of my profs just said being transgender is not a big deal”. Alex repeated the same phrase twice, emphasizing that this response was in fact a ‘big deal’ in itself. I believe that the response from those two professors perhaps indicates an understanding of transgender as the most widely understood idea of male to female or female to male transitions. In my opinion, while nothing about following a transgender path of identity could be described as simple or straightforward, I here repeat what I have outlined earlier in this thesis, that the binary understanding of trans is somewhat less complicated and better understood than a non-binary identity. It is with this in mind that I have included this information, even though it’s not about secondary schools, as it further emphasizes the depth to which our education systems remain firmly stuck in binary gender codes. Rankin and Beemyn (2012) write about this continued understandings of gender as binary in their study of ways that colleges and universities can disrupt binary gender systems.

Even those colleges and universities that have implemented transgender-supportive policies and practices still remain, like the broader society, firmly entrenched in a binary gender system that largely privileges gender-conforming students (p. 9)

This study also noted the problem with gender choices on forms that participants discussed in relation to their secondary schools. “Having a process whereby students can switch the male/female designation on their college records, for example, is of little value to gender-nonconforming students who fit into neither box” (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012, p. 9). A short summary by Jack, of how they felt about trying to fit into gendered boxes illustrates this point well:

For me I had ... been pushing myself into this box that wasn't right anyway, but it was just a little more right than this one. I kinda got there but realized that I still didn't connect with men as I thought I should have and it was like, ok that's uncomfortable, maybe it's because I was raised as a girl, oh no, it's because this box isn't right either. There's something in the middle there that no one told me existed. I glossed over it. So that's something that I found out way later, through a lot of stuff online and hearing other people's experience and thinking 'oh, the thing that you're explaining sounds very similar to me, oh that's what it is'.

Here I will end this section with the query of why we ask students to fit into binary gender boxes at all, when a check in one of those empty spaces connotes so much more than simply the words male or female? When each of those options comes with a long list of expectations and assumptions, how and why can anyone expect such a varied group of people to be capable of fitting themselves into such restrictive boxes?

Chapter 4.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Concluding thoughts and suggestions

The primary aim of my study was to examine how gender-variant youth who have recently completed their secondary school experiences in British Columbia expressed their gender identity while at school. Employing art making practices with storytelling in conversation, I gained insight on this question from Jack, Alex and Marty as they joined me in research sessions. While hands were busy with brushes and paints, buttons and glue, fabric and twine, the three gender-variant youth shared with me (and with each other in the case of Alex and Marty), memories and feelings from their years as high school students. Through posing questions of each other and sharing stories, we achieved brief glimpses of life as a gender-variant student in each of their schools. As we observed, admired and questioned each work of art, understanding of those experiences deepened. Taking in the artwork of the participants, having a visual representation of their experiences right there in front of me, brought forward an emotional response from me not only as a researcher, but as an educator, as a student, as a gender-queer individual, and as an adult who parents two young people who have spent many hours in the environment of a B.C. secondary school.

One of the key themes that emerged was that of how participants felt they needed to fully express their gender as the binary ‘other’ to what they were assigned at birth in order to have their gender identity recognized as other than cisgender. This theme became more apparent and noticeable for me as different aspects of the research layered upon each other: conversation, story, creating art, discussing art. In learning that these youth all felt a strong need to express

themselves in this way informs me further of the issues inherent in the dominant discourse of binary gender in schools. The male and female boxes offered to students, both in the concrete as in where to put the check mark on forms as well as in the understanding of what it is to embody and express male or female, are limiting and rigid. They are boxes that don't fit for gender-variant students, boxes that these students must climb out of, just to climb into the 'other' potentially ill-fitting box. All three of the participants in this study, after graduating from secondary school and engaging in post-secondary education and working, began to move away from, and even in one case fully eschew, the limits of identifying and expressing themselves as only one of the binary options of gender.

In their expressions of gender, all of the participants noted how clothing choices were strong signals to others in how to 'read' their gender. Both Jack and Alex explained that while in school they wore clothing expressly recognized as 'male' clothing, in order to have their gender identity recognized as other than cisgendered. Marty explained that in their earlier years in secondary school, when their size and shape allowed them to easily choose to wear 'girl' clothes, they were most often read as a girl, but as they grew taller and began to wear clothing sold as men's clothes, they were suddenly only seen as a cisgendered male. All three participants learned to don clothing as an outer layer to express gender to the school community around them, and to recognize that the clothing could be used as a means to the end of being recognized as other than cisgendered, but not necessarily to have their gender identity correctly read.

Another importance finding to summarize here, in relation to my primary question of how gender-variant students express their gender, is that of not having the words to express gender identity. Jack most clearly expressed this lack of words available to them as they explained their process of discovering (and uncovering) their gender identity. They explained the role that on-

line forums played in their education of the term trans, but how in school they could recall no gender identity options spoken of or offered, either in resources and materials, in role models, on forms or in conversations. Marty and Alex also confirmed this lack of visibility and recognition for gender-variant folks by speaking of never learning of/being offered the option of gender neutral pronouns in school and through the complete lack of gender-variant visibility in resource materials used.

My secondary question examined how students' lived experiences, as they related to expressing their gender identity within their school environments, were supported or not supported. There have been recent, significant policy amendments to prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression in B.C. schools, although as I have discussed in my examination of policy wording versus the on-the-ground needs of students, those policies are perhaps not covering all members of our school communities as fully as they could. Participants shared stories of support from teachers and counsellors, for some of the participants, some of the time. These included Jack's stories regarding the counsellor who helped get their name and pronouns clear for teachers, as well as the happy mystery of how Jack's chosen name appeared on their diploma at the time of graduation. More often than not however, the participants did not find the support they needed; school forms continually lacked gender options beyond the binary female/male; role models and visible gender-variance was lacking in lesson plans, books and other resources; often they as students needed to advocate for their rights as well as the rights of others who were also marginalized. Through this study I learned that even after two of the participants finished school, they assisted younger students who still attended their schools, to have their genders accurately recognized by school staff.

One main issue at play in the lack of support participants felt, is the frequent lack of work being done by/with educators and administrators before being faced with a gender-variant student in their school. It is important for adults working in school settings not only to support and hear the youth already in their care, but to search out the education they need to begin this important work without the impetus of a self-identified gender-variant student to prod them along. Recognition of the need for deeper change is important, in order to move beyond accommodating only the gender-variant student who makes themselves visible and heard within a system that otherwise does not recognize them. Finding ways to help educators and administrators question their own biases and beliefs about gender lies at the heart of the issue of changes needed in schools in order to offer gender-variant students a truly inclusive learning environment.

My research demonstrates clearly that for the three youth in my study, having gender identities that challenged dominant discourses of gender was cause for their high school years to be more difficult. Their gender-variance raised issues and difficulties that their cisgendered peers did not have to deal with. The lack of representation, recognition and visibility of all the gender-variance that comprises gender identity, combined with predominantly held views of gender as binary only, was cause for these students to not fully be offered equity in their school environments.

Limitations

In this study of three participants who identified as gender-variant, all three appeared as part of the dominant white racial group and as able bodied. I would therefore say that my study was limited by the lack of diversity in race, cultural background and (dis)ability amongst my

research participants. The increased negative outcomes for a student when combining gender-variance with further marginalization due to race, disability or other factors is something that my study, if taken further, would ideally address. During the research session with Jack, a story was shared about an experience they had at school that begins to look at some of the connections and intersections of gender-variance and disability. Rather than involving one student dealing with both marginalizations of gender-variance and disability, Jack's story is about two students, Jack and a classmate with a disability. I feel it's useful to present Jack's story here as it demonstrates the lack of recognition given to the needs of both students, and ties also into the ways that students expend energy advocating for each other at times and in ways that I believe it is not their job to be doing.

Jack's story takes place in a physical education class where the students were being taught a variety of dances. This class occurred during the earlier years in high school for Jack, when they were predominantly recognized as a girl, so the teacher in this story is insisting that Jack dance the female role of the partnered dances.

The other thing that got me, that bothered me a lot, was there was a girl there that had a learning difficulty. A lot of the kids made fun of her because she was supposedly slower than them and they didn't want to dance with her because her face didn't look normal. I remember my blood boiling because she was having the time of her life and they were making fun of her, and she didn't even realize it. I finally said to the teacher 'can I just dance with her, like let me be her dance partner I'm cool with that, you don't have to keep changing' and they were like 'nope' and I was like 'why not' and it's like you need to ... they effectively said 'you need to fit within the role to learn the dance properly'.

There were different types of dance. We did line dance, and swing. All the guys on the inside and the girls on the outside of the circle. Because we had more guys than girls, some of the guys would be interspersed with the ladies on the outer circle. And then you'd dance a little with one partner. And to avoid having someone left out, you'd dance with one partner and then switch partners, on to the next. At the time I wasn't out fully so I was still getting severely bullied and none of the guys wanted to be near me. I felt upset because of what this is putting me through and also because of what this person is going through every time she gets passed to a new partner. Just let me dance with her, I'll be fine, we'll just dance in the corner and do our thing.

Despite the fact that there were already switches in gendered roles happening due to the higher number of boys than girls to fill the partnered roles, the teacher did not respond positively to the request that Jack made to dance with the girl who others were making fun of. "The teacher ignored me fully and utterly and continued on with the lesson. And I was like 'ok fine, I'm not gonna even push this anymore'". Jack stopped trying to offer a solution to the difficulties that both they and the girl with disabilities were facing in the class because, as I discussed earlier, there is only so much extra energy that students have to advocate for themselves and others while also navigating all of the challenges that high school presents.

When considering factors of race in my study and what I might have learned had I been able to examine the intersections of race and gender-variance, I would have liked to explore the racial influence of the understanding of gender that is pervasive in our public school culture. The norms associated with gender in our schools, despite the range of cultural backgrounds held by students, is a white view of what it is to be man or woman, girl or boy. Butler (1999) writes of the importance of recognizing that "racial presumptions invariably underwrite the discourse on

gender in ways that need to be made explicit” (xvi), and “that race and gender ought not to be treated as simple analogies” (xvi). With further time and resources to work with a wider section of gender-variant youth, I believe that there would be great relevance in studying the ways in which gender-variance and race would overlap and interweave in the experiences of the students.

When considering limitations of this study, I would be remiss in not examining how expanding my current scope of understanding and grasp on queer theory and queer phenomenology could open further pathways of interpretations of my research sessions. I am located within the early stages of academic engagement with the work of the theorists I’ve used to inform this study. There are also more theorist whose work could assist me to look critically at the questions I’ve raised and the observations I’ve made, therefore I believe that this study could be enhanced with further engagement with the works of those theorists.

Possible extensions

Gender identity/expression and sexuality are often found in close proximity to one another on school policies and are also often intertwined when folks speak of and attempt to categorize others who they understand to be queer in some way or another. With further time and resources for this study, I believe it would offer valuable insight into the understanding of the experiences of gender-variant youth, to look at the intersection of gender-variant identities and sexuality. The incorrect but oft held understanding within public view of gender and sexuality being interconnected and/or unquestionably linked (or even, in conversations I’ve experienced, believed to be the same thing), could be cause for further marginalization of gender-variant youth. With this in mind, I will consider the possibility of including in any further research I

might conduct in this area of study, a question to examine how gender-variant youth experience perceptions of their sexuality while attending school.

At various points in this thesis, I discuss the wording of a number of different policies as they pertain to gender identity and expression and the rights of students. I look to the provincial human rights code, as well as more school specific policies. I focus most of my attention on school based policies on the Vancouver School Board. It is the school district where I am employed and therefore where I see some of the ways the policies do/do not play out on the ground in schools, and it is also noted and recognized as the first district in B.C. to include gender identity and expression in their policies. I feel that one way to extend my study would be to examine the ways that gender identity and expression have been included in the policies in other districts in B.C. since the 2016 provincial Ministry of Education gender identity policy inclusion requirements. Engaging with the policies from a variety of districts could enhance the overall understanding of how gender-variant students are experiencing (dis)inclusion in their learning environments.

A possible extension to the arts-based aspect of my study would be to have multiple sessions with each group of participants, and to have artwork created individually, sometime between the first and second meetings of the group. Having participants create art on their own and then coming back together to share their work and discuss it with one another, would potentially allow for a different focus on the art. The sharing of finished art pieces would be the impetus for discussion and might bring forward different memories and stories for participants.

Another further extension that I see as possible to this study would occur with the sharing of the participants' artwork, beyond the scope of what I can hope to achieve with this thesis. Because art evokes varying responses from those who view it, because inherent to the design of

art itself is the bringing about of individual responses, there would be benefit to a public showing of art produced in the way it was created in my research sessions. Recognition of youth as knowledge holders and knowledge creators is a step in the right direction to begin seeing the words of students populating the school policies that are there to serve them. As explained by Knowles and Cole (2008), arts-informed research often makes an attempt to make a difference through informing “the thinking and decisions of policymakers, politicians, legislators, and other key decision makers” (p.3). In the case of this study, finding ways to share the results with school administrators could be most effective in affecting change because as noted by Hansman (2008) “educational ‘change’ is also usually associated with ‘educational leaders’ — which, due to the hierarchical tradition of the public school system coupled with patriarchal attitudes, is linked for the most part to school-based administrators” (p.6).

Possibilities for disseminating some of the results of this study to school leaders might involve the writing and submission of papers that summarize different aspects of this thesis to journals geared towards the educational community. Presenting at school administrator meetings and/or conferences is also an area that I could explore as a way to offer some of the insights I gained to those in positions to create change in schools. With the results of this study coming to the attention of school leaders, it can hopefully serve as an opener to discussions that are necessary to begin to bridge the gap for gender-variant students to experience inclusion and belonging in their schools.

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