Creating Gender-Inclusive Classrooms for Students of All Genders

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to learn the methods that exemplary teachers use to combat gender-based bullying and create gender-inclusive classrooms that validate students’ own unique understandings and expressions of their gender, and understand the barriers to this work. Educators shared the methods and materials they used, such as using gender-neutral language and toys, and seizing “teachable moments”, and reported positive responses from a diverse range of students. However, teachers reported a spectrum of willingness to explicitly address topics related to gender diversity in their curriculum, despite literature indicating that explicit discussions about gender are integral to challenging traditional gender expectations and preventing bias. While fear of parental reprisal was the most commonly cited barrier to teaching about gender diversity explicitly, findings from this study suggest that these fears may be exaggerated and teachers may be more limited by their own fears than by the parents themselves, as teachers were able to mitigate parental complaints. Understanding whether these hesitancies are supported by reality is an important avenue for future research. Furthermore, teacher education programs need to better inform teachers’ practices about the important role of explicit conversations about gender in creating gender-inclusive learning environments.

keywords: Gender, Gender Diversity, Transgender, Gender-Creative, Inclusivity
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Finally, I want to take a moment to remember the life of Leelah Alcorn, a transgender teen who took her life after being bullied relentlessly in school and at home. Her call to action to the education system has been the inspiration for this project. The aim of this research is to support the creation of gender-inclusive classrooms that validate students’ own unique understandings and expressions of their gender. My hope is to foster supportive learning communities where students like Leelah feel safe and supported.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

Leelah Alcorn was just 17 years old when she passed away in December, 2014. After being bullied relentlessly in school and rejected by her family when she came out to them as transgender, she ultimately decided to take her own life (Johnston, 2014). Transgender – or trans - is used as an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth (Teich, 2011). In her suicide note, Leelah wrote “…gender needs to be taught about in schools, the earlier the better. My death needs to mean something… fix society. Please.” This is a powerful statement and a clear call to action for all educators.

We live in a society where binary definitions of masculinity and femininity are the primary method by which we categorize people (Human Rights Campaign, 2012: Stryker, 2008). Those who transgress conventional gender expectations are often targets of harassment, discrimination and violence (Human Rights Campaign, 2012: Sherer, Baum, Ehrensaft, & Rosenthal, 2015). In the following pages I will discuss how those who do not fit inside traditional gender boundaries are perennial targets of discrimination and harassment because they defy conventional understandings of gender identity and expression.

1.1 Violence Against Transgender People

The trans community is experiencing more awareness than ever before through heightened media attention, visible trans celebrities, and increased representations in television and film (Capehart, 2014; Staley, 2011; Teich, 2011). However, anti-trans
bias is still pervasive and violence against trans people remains disproportionately high (Teich, 2011). While recent incidences of youth committing suicide have brought to the forefront the issue discrimination in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, or Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) population, transgender people experience more discrimination than LGB populations because they challenge cultural norms related to both sexuality and gender (Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006). In addition to experiencing high rates of sexual, physical and verbal violence, trans people also face significant prejudice and discrimination in school, employment opportunities, housing, and access to health care; consequently, many live outside mainstream society (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, & Keisling, 2011; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; Travers et al., 2012). As gender-atypical behavior is much less accepted in boys than girls, boys who do not conform to traditional gender norms are most often the targets of verbal and physical abuse: 72% of anti-LGBTQ homicides occur to transgender women (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; NCAVP, 2012). As members of a marginalized group, trans people also experience higher rates of mental illness, such as depression, and are nine times more likely to attempt suicide than the general population (Grant et al., 2011; Maguen & Shipperd, 2010).

Because classrooms mirror society – for better or for worse - it follows that transphobic perceptions of gender are reflected in classrooms (Sherer et al., 2015). Mounting evidence report the pervasiveness of gender-based bullying and violence that permeates the school system (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012; Taylor & Peter, 2011). Among primary school children, 61% of gender non-conforming report feeling unsafe, compared to 42% in the general population (GLSEN, 2012). In a national
climate survey of LGBTQ students across Canada, Egale Canada (2011) reported that homophobia and transphobia are a regular occurrence in most Canadian schools: “…homophobic and transphobic bullying are neither rare nor harmless, but are major problems that schools need to address” (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 14). This study reported that 95% of trans students felt unsafe in schools. However, not only trans students that are affected by transphobic bullying, 27% of non-LGBTQ students reported being bullied because of the expression of their gender (Taylor et al., 2011). Gender-based bullying is, therefore, not limited to those who identify outside traditional gender norms, but affects all types of students.

Research indicates that teachers rarely intervene in instances of transphobic and homophobic bullying in the school (Anagnostopoulos, Buchanan, Pereira, & Lichty, 2009; Taylor et al., 2011), and trans students often perceive teachers to be unsupportive of them (Grossman & D’Augeli, 2006; Taylor et al., 2011). It is unsurprising that many trans adults reported that attending school was the most traumatic aspect of growing up (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006). Thus, it is clear that the education system is failing to create safe spaces, free from gender-based bullying that are inclusive of students of all genders.

1.2 Terminology

Throughout this paper I will be using the term transgender, which is an umbrella term that encompasses anyone who does not conform to normative conceptions of gender (Teich, 2011). Conversely, the term “cisgender” – or cis- refers to those whose gender identities and expressions align with the sex they were assigned at birth (Teich, 2011). The use of the terms cisgender and transgender resists
“othering” trans people, where previously people who weren’t transgender were used to thinking of themselves as “normal” (Penny, 2010; Stryker, 2008). The estimated rates of occurrence of transgender people in the population vary widely (Teich, 2011). To date there has been no major consensus in the final figure, and today best estimates range between 0.25-1% (Erickson-Schroth, 2014; Teich, 2011; Travers, Bauer, et al., 2012). Many scholars, however, argue that these are conservative estimates because many people are not yet out as social stigma keeps people from expressing non-conforming gender expressions (Teich, 2011). Trans people may identify as either/both/neither male or female male (Teich, 2011) and many endorse non-binary gender identities such as genderqueer, bigender, or two-spirit (Travers, Bauer, Pyne, Bradley, Gale, & Papdimitriou, 2012). Children who have gender expressions and identities that do not conform to the norms for their given sex may be called gender-creative, gender-variant or gender non-conforming (Ehrensaft, 2011). I will choose the term gender-creative, because it connotes a more affirming stance to these children’s unique identities. Cisnormativity refers to the concept that all people are assumed to be cisgender and therefore this creates an unsafe space for transgender people who are presumed not to exist. Especially in school contexts, gender-creative and trans students report feeling “invisible” and their identities unrepresented.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The research problem for combating cisnormativity in the classroom is clear; the current context of homophobic and transphobic harassment and discrimination, and the lack of teacher intervention, highlight the necessity for teachers to acknowledge gender diversity and gender variance. There is a wonderful diversity of gender
identities and expressions that lie outside of the tiny boxes of “male” or “female,” and teachers need to ensure gender-inclusive classrooms where students feel safe to explore their own gender identities and expressions. It is not just transgender students who are limited by transphobic bullying. All students - particularly boys - are limited in the expressions of their gender by the ways that society explicitly and implicitly polices gender (Sherer, 2015). The purpose of this research was to learn the methods that exemplary teachers use to create gender-inclusive classrooms that validate students’ own unique understandings and expressions of their gender. In this project I intended to explore methods being used by exemplary educators to create gender-inclusive classroom spaces for students of all genders.

1.4 Research Questions

The main question guiding this research was: How is a sample of teachers working to create gender-inclusive classrooms and what outcomes do they observe from their practice? Through interviews and analysis, this project investigates the following questions:

1. Which experiences influence these educators’ commitment to fostering gender-inclusive classrooms?

2. What are these educators’ personal beliefs about gender diversity and transphobia and how do these influence their commitment to this work?

3. What types of pedagogical methods and materials do these teachers use to promote acceptance of gender diversity and how do they facilitate meaningful discussions on this topic?
4. What are the barriers to introducing content about gender diversity in their classrooms and how do they address these challenges?

5. What are the factors and resources that challenge and support these teachers in this work?

1.5 Background of the Researcher

My reasons for undertaking this research project are rooted in both personal experience and my desire to pursue topics related to social justice education. I decided to focus my MTRP on trans issues because I believe that more advocacy and research needs to be done in this area.

As a feminist, and as a woman, I have long been interested in issues of gender, in particular, gender-based violence. In my work in sexual assault centres and women's' shelters, I was able to witness the high rates of violence experienced by members of the trans community; becoming acutely aware of the degree to which this population is vulnerable and experiences marginalization in our society. While I was a member of the Sexual Assault Centre of McGill Students’ Society I facilitated workshops, which educated high school students about sexual assault and discussed the relationship between sexual violence and gender-based bullying. This experience showed me that having explicit discussions about gender, and the ways that binary conceptions of gender limit individuals’ opportunities to express themselves, has the potential to reduce harassment and gender-based bullying. As a teacher candidate, I am eager to explore methods that can be used to address gender diversity in the primary classroom. My hope is that with meaningful conversations about gender, schools will become safer, more supportive spaces for both gender-creative and transgender
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students, and for all children who ever feel limited in their ability to express their gender.

Before I continue, it is important to position myself as a researcher. As a cisgender individual, I recognize that I experience a certain privilege in choosing to address this topic. As a cisgender person, I recognize that I both have privilege in society, but also in my decision to pursue this research. Unlike a transgender person, I do not have to worry that anyone will assume that I am biased in my decision to devote my energies to this topic. Furthermore, I would like to note that no member of a trans community has specifically requested that I undertake this project; the pursuit of this research is entirely my own undertaking.

1.6 Overview

I am committed to heeding Leelah’s call to the education system; I want to learn how educators can create educational environments that are more supportive of gender diversity. This project examines the ways in which educators create gender-inclusive classrooms. The following chapter will review the relevant literature regarding the current context of trans and gender-creative students in Canada, including the pervasive nature of transphobia and homophobia in both elementary and high schools, and the research regarding creating environments that are more inclusive of gender. The third chapter will delineate the research methodology of this study. The fourth chapter will report the research findings from interviews with four teachers. Finally, the fifth chapter will discuss the implications of these results and make recommendations as well as suggestions for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The purpose of this literature review will be to examine the relevant literature on transgender and gender-creative students in order to provide context for this project. I first review guiding concepts that inform and provide context for this project. Next, I report on the current context in Canada and Canadian schools. I also investigate current research regarding how teachers address gender diversity and react to transphobia and transphobic bullying in the classroom. I then examine some of the challenges and barriers to addressing gender diversity in the classroom. Finally, I focus on best practices recommended for the creation of gender-inclusive classrooms.

2.1 Guiding Concepts

In order to discuss other aspects of the classroom context for transgender and gender non-conforming students, it is imperative to first review some of the concepts that will guide this literature review. These concepts include: the distinction between sex and gender, the gender binary, and the concepts heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Understanding these concepts provide greater context to the research problem investigated in this project.

2.1.1 The Distinction Between Sex and Gender

Scholars have come to acknowledge that sex and gender are not one and the same (Erickson-Schroth, 2014). Sex is considered biological, whereas gender is considered to be socially constructed (Erickson-Schroth, 2014; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Scholars have further divided gender into two parts: identity and role (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). *Gender identity* is defined as being an
individual’s intrinsic sense of self and their sense of being female, male, a combination of both, or neither...” Gender expression (or role); refers to the way an individual expresses their gender identity, and is dependent upon cultural expectations (TDSB, 2011). Alternatively stated, gender expression is the external representation of one’s gender identity, with either masculine or feminine behaviours such as clothing, hairstyle, voice, or other characteristics (Teich, 2011). Understanding the distinctions between these concepts is an important aspect to understanding the lived experience of transgender people, who demonstrate that sex, gender identity and gender expression do not always align (Stryker, 2008).

2.1.2 The Gender Binary

The term gender binary refers to the notion that there exist only two genders, which have a biological basis and come with various expectations for behaviour, appearances and feelings (Grant et. al, 2011). The Human Rights Campaign, in their 2012 LGBTQ survey, provided the following explanation of the gender binary in Western culture.

…While in Western culture we only perceive of two discrete genders, other cultures have more expansive views of gender such as the 3rd and 4th gender or “two-spirit” people in some aboriginal cultures. (p.6)

Transgender people, and gender non-conforming boys in particular, are stigmatized and experience significant marginalization in Western society because they transgress traditional gender expectations and expressions (Toomey, Ryan, Diax, Card, & Russell, 2010; Vasey & Bartlett, 2007). These binary categorizations of female/feminine and male/masculine interrupt the freedom of individuals to express their gender differently (Davies, 1989). In fact, many trans people consider themselves
"gender fluid" and do not identify as either completely male or female; their identities residing somewhere outside of the male/female gender binary (Sherer et al., 2015; Sycamore, 2006). In societies where alternative expressions of gender are more accepted, such as the Samoan culture which perceives of a third gender of “feminine males”, these individuals do not experience stigma or distress (Vasey & Bartlett, 2007). This shows that the distress associated with people who don’t conform to normative gender expectations is caused by the difficulties encountered from transgressing cultural norms, and not from being transgender. There is a wonderful diversity of gender identities and expressions that lie outside of the gender binary, and throughout this paper I hope to provide some insights into strategies educators can use to create learning environments that affirm transgender and gender-creative identities.

2.1.3 Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity

*Heteronormativity*, the assumption that people are heterosexual or straight, is a part of the gender binary where in our system of two discrete genders, we assume that all women are attracted to men, and all men are attracted to women (Ferfolja, 2007). We often conflate gender with sexuality, “…even the term LGBTQ combines sexualities and gender identities into one acronym” (Teich, 2011, p. 53). Yet, being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation, and transgender people may identify as straight, gay lesbian, bisexual, etc. (Erickson-Schroth, 2014; Grant et. al, 2011). Heteronormativity is the construction of heterosexuality as being normal and natural. Non-heterosexuality, therefore, is portrayed as deviant, abnormal, and unnatural (Ferfolja, 2007; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). *Cisnormativity* is the belief that transgender identities or bodies are abnormal and inauthentic (Travers,
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Pyne, Bauer, Munro, Giambrone, Hammon, & Scanlon, 2013). Toomey (2012) argues that “gender regulation,” the construction of either a masculine or a feminine expression, is a critical component of heteronormativity that places students who violate gender norms at risk. Thus, transphobia – fear and hatred of transgender people – is a part of cisnormativity as well as heteronormativity, and a variant of homophobia, which is understood as the hatred of the formation of sexuality and/or gender that deviates from the norm of reproductive sexuality (Norton, 1997). Through this project I hope to learn how educators can challenge heteronormative and cisnormative classrooms environments by openly discussing gender diversity and recognizing diverse gender identities.

2.1.4 Gender Identity Disorder

**Gender Identity Disorder** is defined as “feelings of unhappiness or distress about the incongruence between the gender-signifying parts of one’s body, one’s gender identity, and one’s social gender (sometimes called ‘gender dysphoria’)” (Stryker, 2008). This is a medical diagnosis based on the psychological DSM-V, or the “diagnostic and statistical manual” (Stryker, 2008). This label is controversial within transgender communities, many of whom resent having their sense of gender pathologized and labeled as a sickness (Stryker, 2008). This label becomes important, however, when a trans person wants to use hormones or surgery to change their gender, or who wants to change their legal sex. In order to qualify for any of the aforementioned options in Canada, one needs to receive a formal diagnosis of gender identity disorder (Stryker, 2008). Thus, while many do not wish to have their identity
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prescribed as an illness, it becomes important if one wishes to receive medical interventions.

2.2 The Current Context in Canada and Canadian Schools

I will first review the current context in Canada and Canadian schools. First, I discuss findings that report pervasive gender-based bullying in schools in Canada. Next, I explore the legal protections and policies that are in place at different levels of government. I will also discuss the recent update of the Ontario Health and Physical Education Education curriculum and how this impacts teaching about gender identity and gender diversity in the classroom. I will highlight the need for a call to action for schools and educators.

2.2.1 Gender-Based Bullying in Canadian Schools

Mounting evidence reports the pervasiveness of gender-based bullying and violence that permeates schools (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011), where among primary school students, 61% of gender non-conforming children report feeling unsafe, compared to 42% in the general school population (GLSEN, 2012). Transgender students and others who don't fit traditional gender roles face high rates of harassment, discrimination, and physical assault in school settings. Out of 6,500 transgender and gender nonconforming participants in a US survey, 78% reported being harassed, and nearly one-sixth said they had left their school due to harassment (Grant, Mottet, et. al, 2011). A National Climate Survey done by Egale Canada reported that “…homophobic and transphobic bullying are neither rare nor harmless, but are major problems that schools need to address,” (Taylor et al., 2011, p.7). The reported occurrence of assault was high among transgender students in this
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Canadian sample; 37% reported being physically assaulted, and 49% reported being sexually assaulted (Taylor et al., 2011). Sadly, too often teachers are at the hands of this abuse (Grant, Mottet, et. al, 2011). Respondents who have been harassed and abused by teachers in K-12 settings showed dramatically worse health outcomes than those who did not experience such abuse (Grant, Mottet, et. al, 2011). Gender-based bullying affects all students, not just trans students as 25% of non-LGBTQ students surveyed report being verbally harassed because of the expression of their gender (Taylor et al., 2011). These results paint a troubling picture of the widespread nature of gender-based bullying and, in particular, the high rates of violence experienced amongst trans and students who do not conform to normative gender expectations. These findings highlight the necessity to react to Leelah’s call to action to educators. We need to work towards creating safer, more inclusive spaces that celebrate the diversity of our students.

2.2.2 Protections in Canada

Bill C-279 proposed including gender identity in the Canadian Human Rights Act, making it a prohibited ground of discrimination, thereby strengthening human rights protections for transgender people (Bill C-279; King, 2015; QMI agency, 2015). Currently, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms does not include gender identity to its list of protect groups (Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982). The Senate in 2015 proposed an amendment to Bill C-279, which excluded federal “sex-specific” facilities like washrooms, change rooms, shelters and correctional facilities from protections (King, 2015; Browne, 2015). The bill has been labeled the “bathroom bill,” because it was intended to legally protect trans people’s right to use the bathroom that best
matches their gender identity (Wingrove, 2014), the public space most commonly avoided by transgender individuals for fear of harassment (Bowers & Lopez, 2013; Travers, Bauer et. al, 2012). Activists have been angered by this new amendment because it would be effectively bar trans people from using public washrooms (Friesen, 2014; King, 2015). Opponents of the bill insisted it is an issue of “public safety,” not a human rights issue, and despite a lack of evidence to support their claims, resisted criticisms that excluding transgender people is discriminatory (Browne, 2015; King, 2015; Wingrove, 2014). Sadly, this bill ultimately did not become law, highlighting the pervasive nature of anti-trans bias (Bill C-279; Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982).

In Ontario the Ontario Human Rights Commission has created prohibited discrimination on the basis of gender identity (The Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2012). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education in Ontario has created Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, which aims to ensure the promotion of inclusive education by identifying and eliminating discriminatory biases (Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education, 2009). The policy outlines preventative strategies, such as training for all staff, and gender-based peer educations programs, related to stereotyping, homophobia and sexuality (Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education, 2009). These policies represent an important step towards protecting trans people in Ontario.

2.2.3 School Board Policies

At the school board level there are some boards that are passing policies explicitly protecting transgender students’ rights. In a landmark decision, the
Vancouver School Board (VSB) approved a policy in 2014, which created greater institutional support for transgender students (Robinson, 2014). Included in this policy are stipulations that all schools must provide gender-neutral washrooms and that students be allowed to choose their preferred gender pronouns and given name (Robinson, 2014). Additionally, this policy allows trans students to join the sports teams that best correspond with their gender identity (Robinson, 2014). These gender-inclusive policies at the VSB create a new precedent for school board inclusion policies that protect of transgender students. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has created the TDSB Guidelines for the accommodation of transgender and gender non-conforming students and staff, which are similar to the VSB’s, but not quite as extensive. Trans students in the TDSB are not given the right to use the washroom and change room that best corresponds to their gender identity. Instead, decisions are to be made on a “case-by-case basis” (TDSB, 2011).

2.2.4 The Ontario Health and Physical Education Curriculum

Discussions about gender diversity and transgender identity are now included in the Ontario Sexual Education curriculum for the first time (Patel, 2015). Until it was updated in March 2015, the Ontario Sexual Education curriculum was the oldest in Canada; the last time it was updated was in 1998 (Leslie, 2014; Morrow, 2015). When the Ministry of Education initially tried to introduce an updated version in 2010, the government backed down and it was withdrawn due to the objections from religious leaders and conservative groups (Leslie, 2014; Morrow, 2015). The topics that these groups were most opposed to were sexual orientation and gender identity (Howlett & Hammer, 2010). The new Health and Physical Education curriculum, which brings the
Ontario curriculum into the “digital age,” will, among other things, discuss gender expression starting in grade 6, and include expanded discussions about gender identity in grade 8 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015; Morrow, 2015). This is an important landmark for trans rights, because for the first time in the province of Ontario, gender-creative and trans students will hear about their identities acknowledged and reflected in the curriculum.

2.3 Supporting Trans and Gender-Creative Students

Gender non-conforming behaviours and expressions are common amongst children (Zucker and Bradley, 1995). While only a small percentage of these children will go on to become transgender adults (Zucker and Bradley, 1995), the research is conclusive about the danger of rejecting or stigmatizing a child’s exploration of their gender (Dean, 2000; Paterson, 2015; Sherer et al., 2015). Below I will discuss the research advocating the imperative of supporting gender-creative children, the protective factors for transgender adults, and the implications of these findings for educators.

2.3.1 Supporting Gender-Creative Children

There is a growing consensus that it is dangerous to outright reject a child’s own sense of their gender identity (Lev, 2004; Paterson, 2015; Sherer et al., 2015; Staley, 2011). Some clinicians advocate that gender-creative children should be encouraged to be more accepting of their biological sex to avoid becoming transgender (Zucker & Bradley, 1995). Research shows, however, that there is a high risk for adverse health outcomes, such as self-hatred, suicidality, and mental health issues, if gender-creative children are not met with supportive and affirming environments.
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(Dean, 2000; Drescher, 2012; Sherer et al., 2015). Today, the vast majority of experts believe that any type of therapy that seeks to reverse gender identification, referred to as “reparative” or “conversion” therapy, is an extreme example of bias against trans people and completely unethical (Dean, 2000; Drescher, 2012; Cross Smith, 2015). In 2015, CAMH was forced to close its controversial treatment of trans youth, which advocated reparative therapy (Cross Smith, 2015). Doctors, motivated by the high incidence of depression and suicide, advise families to support their gender-creative children, and allow them to express themselves however they wish (Sherer et al., 2015; Brown, 2006; Paterson, 2015; Drescher, 2012). These findings highlight the importance of supporting gender-creative children and of affirming their exploration of their gender identity and expression.

2.3.2 Protective Factors

While transgender people experience a host of negative outcomes due to stigma it is important to understand the protective factors. Transgender adolescents who receive family and professional support in early interventions are less likely to experience negative health outcomes and report feeling better adjusted (Drescher, 2012). In fact, family acceptance is protective against negative psychosocial adjustment among transgender people (Grant et. al, 2011). Family acceptance also has a protective effect against suicide, where family acceptance was associated with a 50% drop in suicidality (Grant, et. al, 2011). Fortunately, research indicates that families are more likely to accept transgender and gender non conforming family members than stereotypes would suggest, with 43% maintaining most of their family bonds (Grant,
et. al, 2011). Teachers too have an impact on their students, and should note the powerful impact that acceptance can have on a young person.

2.3.3 Implications for Educators

These findings have clear implications for educators. As teachers, the best way we can support our gender-independent students is by creating gender-inclusive spaces that let students express themselves and their gender however they wish. Ehrensaft (2011) advises that the role of the adult is to listen – not to judge or police a child’s choice about their gender expression or identity – and instead let them explore how they wish to express themselves. TDSB (2008) guidelines reveal similar thinking: “If a student talks to you about their gender identity, listen in a respectful and non-judgmental way.” In the words of one school director: “…allow [students] to move back and forth until something feels right” (Brown, 2006).

2.4 - Barriers to Discussing Gender Diversity in the Classroom

While research shows that teachers tend to have a sympathetic attitude toward LGBTQ students, many do not intervene in instances of LGBTQ bullying, and few are willing to incorporate lessons with this content into their classroom teaching (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009). Below, I will review some of the real and perceived barriers to addressing gender diversity in school. These include, but are not limited to, teachers’ beliefs, their fears of reprisal and limited teacher education.

2.4.1 Teacher Attitudes and Beliefs

Teachers’ attitudes towards LGBTQ identities are a predictor of whether or not they will intervene in incidences of anti-LGBTQ bullying or integrate these topics into
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their curriculum (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Bellini, 2012; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). While many teachers are sympathetic to LGBTQ identities (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009) some are not. Not unsurprisingly, teachers who are personally opposed to LGBTQ identities do not discuss these issues with their students (Bellini, 2012). Surveys also indicate that despite feeling sympathetic to LGBTQ students, only 30% of teachers feel very comfortable teaching about these topics (Schneider & Dimito, 2008). There is also the belief that only LGBTQ teachers would be interested in teaching these topics, and teachers reported being fearful to address homophobia because they were worried about being “read” as homosexual and considered a sexual predator or pedophile (Ferfolja, 2007).

2.4.2 Teachers’ Fears of Reprisal

Despite legislation protecting against anti-LGBTQ discrimination, many teachers are fearful of introducing LGBTQ-positive curriculum proactively (Bellini, 2012; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). The threat of parental protests, for moral or religious reasons, were the most frequently cited barrier to teaching LGBTQ topics in the classroom (Schneider & Dimito, 2008). While teachers have also stated that they were afraid of offending colleagues and their administration, they reported being more concerned about negative reactions from parents and students than of colleagues or administrators (Schneider & Dimito, 2008). Traditionally, discussing LGBTQ issues in school has been considered taboo (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). There is the notion that this will “…threaten the perceived innocence and asexuality of the educational space and the children who inhabit it” (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, p. 8). The stereotype is that if teachers openly
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discuss gender and sexual diversity, this will be perceived as activism (Payne & Smith, 2014), or worse, talking openly about LGBTQ issues will persuade children to become homosexual or transgender (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007; Payne & Smith, 2014). In an Ontario example, despite fear of losing their jobs for addressing LGBTQ issues in the classroom, teachers did feel that current legislation would at least somewhat protect them (Schneider & Dimito, 2008).

2.4.3 Limited Knowledge and Teacher Education

Lack of knowledge is a major barrier to proactively addressing transphobia in the classroom (Payne & Smith, 2014). To date, there is little research on the educator experiences with transgender students – it is virtually nonexistent (Payne & Smith, 2014). In one of the first studies of its kind by Payne and Smith (2014), educators and administrators who had worked with a transgender student in their school expressed high levels of fear and anxiety over effectively providing a supportive environment (Payne & Smith, 2014). Many emphasized the “newness” of the issue, for which they attributed their uncertainty (Payne & Smith, 2014). They pointed to the failure of their university program to teach them about the gender binary, gender identity, the needs of transgender students and even the existence of transgender students in the school system at all (Payne & Smith, 2014). In short, they felt like they had not received the training necessary to work with these students and were unsure how to address the student’s transgender identity in the classroom (Payne & Smith, 2014). Thus, beyond simply feeling uncertain about how to address having a transgender student, it is clear that in these cases teachers only viewed gender diversity as having to be addressed once they were presented with a student who identified as transgender. As they
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considered trans issues to be “new” they were reactive and not proactive in their approach.

Despite anti-harassment policies at the school board level as well as government legislation protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination, teacher education has been slow to evolve (Ferfolja, 2007; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). Many teachers report receiving little or no exposure to LGBT issues in their pre-service teacher education (Ferfolja, 2007; Payne & Smith 2011; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). For many, LGBTQ content is still treated like an “extra” part of the curriculum and not a mandatory part of training (Payne & Smith, 2011). Furthermore, once immersed in the teaching profession, there are few professional development opportunities for teachers surrounding LGBTQ issues (Ferfolja, 2007; Payne & Smith, 2011). The end result is that most teachers do not feel comfortable teaching about LGBTQ topics (Schneider & Dimito, 2008). Instead, willingness to address diversity issues is most often a result of educator’s personal histories (Anagnostopoulos et. al, 2009). The Ontario Ministry of Education has decided to address these limitations. Starting in the fall of 2015, teacher education programs in the province of Ontario will be required to teach about diversity (Brown, 2013). While this is certainly a step in the right direction, it will require full participation by the school boards to ever completely change the culture of having LGBTQ issues treated as “extra”.

2.5 - Best Practices

Homophobia and transphobia are endemic in schools and this victimization is associated with high rate of negative psychosocial adjustment, including attempted suicide, among gender non-conforming students (Toomey et al., 2010). Below I will
review some recommended strategies that educators can use to prevent these negative outcomes and create gender-inclusive spaces for their students. First, I will look at the demonstrable protective effect of professional development on teachers’ willingness to intervene in cases of anti-LGBTQ bullying. I then assess at the impact of school anti-harassment policies as well as recommend changes that schools can make to their structural environments to be more gender-inclusive. Next, I will review strategies used in the classroom to discuss gender identity and gender diversity, including children’s literature featuring gender-creative characters.

2.5.1 Professional Development

Professional development focused on combatting anti-LGBTQ bullying has been shown to positively impact teachers’ behavior (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010). Results of a study of the New York City Department of Education’s Respect for All program showed that participating teachers not only increased their awareness and understanding of anti-LGBTQ bias in schools, but also increased their propensity to intervene in incidences of anti-LGBTQ bullying and to engage in safer schools efforts (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010). Other outcomes included teachers’ greater awareness of their own biases, greater participation in a GSA, and talking to staff and students about LGBTQ issues (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010). Thus, it is clear that professional development is an important avenue for change. Its impacts go beyond merely creating greater awareness but has been demonstrated to impact teachers’ behaviour, which contributes to a more inclusive school environment.
2.5.2 School Policies

School anti-harassment policies are important. Research shows that when there are specific policies in place that address homophobia and transphobia in schools that LGBTQ students felt safer, and were less likely to have suicidal thoughts (Clarke & MacDougall, 2012; Egale, 2011; Goodenow et al., 2006). This is due in part to the fact that with specific policies in place, teachers felt safer addressing LGBTQ issues in school, and students perceived their teachers were more likely to intervene in incidences of homophobic and transphobic bullying (Payne & Smith, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). When there are no policies in place, staff members fear reprisal for standing up against homophobic bullying because they feel unsupported by their administration (Mishna, Newman, Daley, & Solomon, 2009). Toomey (2012) asserts that it is not only the presence of these anti-harassment policies that matters, but also teachers’ knowledge of these policies. Research shows there is a significant association between staff training on sexual diversity and an improved school climate for sexual minority students, which highlights the importance of educating teachers about school policies (Szalacha, 2003). Thus, the research points conclusively towards the fact that LGBTQ anti-harassment policies should be implemented in all schools, as they have a demonstrated impact on the well-being of LGBTQ students.

A social support group, such as a gay-straight alliance or queer-straight alliance student group (GSA or QSA), often initiated by teachers, also predicts a safer school climate (Clarke & MacDougall, 2012; Goodenow et al. 2006). The presence of a GSA/QSA was associated with significantly lower victimization and suicide risk for sexual minority adolescents (Goodenow et al. 2006). This finding can likely be
extended to gender minority students as well. LGBTQ students also perceived their teacher support was protective (Goodenow et al 2006).

Changes to the structural environment of the school, can also help to foster a more inclusive environment of gender diversity (Toomey et al., 2012). Some of these changes include implementing gender-neutral bathrooms and avoiding gender segregation practices such as school uniforms, school dances, and extracurricular activities (Toomey et al., 2012). Two school boards in Canada have made particular strides to making changes to the structural environments of schools: the Vancouver School Board (VSB) and the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). In a landmark decision, the Vancouver School Board (VSB) approved a policy in June 2014, which creates greater institutional support for transgender students, such as providing gender-neutral washrooms and allowing students to choose their preferred gender pronouns (Robinson, 2014). This policy also allows trans students to join the sports teams that best correspond with their gender identity (Robinson, 2014). The Toronto District School Board (TDSB, 2011) has a similar policy to the VSB. The TDSB guidelines provide for the accommodation of trans students and protects their right to use the pronoun of their choice (TDSB, 2011). These guidelines also stipulate that there should be curriculum integration that acknowledges the existence of transgender people. Staff are expected to challenge gender stereotypes and integrate trans-positive content into their teaching (TDSB, 2011. p8). Unlike the VSB decision, however, the TDSB does not protect the right to trans students to use the washroom and change room that best corresponds to their gender identity (TDSB, 2011). These initiatives represent
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electrocuting steps towards fostering safer schools, creating a precedent for other school boards in Canada.

2.5.3 The Teacher as a Role Model

Students look to their teachers to model appropriate behaviour (McCormick, 1994; Pellegrini & Blanthford, 2000). A lack of adult intervention in student anti-LGBTQ remarks implies passive agreement with those remarks, and is one of the most common ways that educators participate in maintaining a hostile school environment (Adelman & Woods, 2006). Research has shown that when educators do not address LGBTQ issues, children come to form their own, often biased, opinions about LGBTQ people (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). Researchers have shown that even in school contexts where students were admonished for making homophobic comments, if they did not follow these reprimands with a meaningful discussion about sexual diversity, they reinforced the social exclusion of gay and lesbian students (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009). Thus, merely forbidding homophobic and transphobic comments is not enough; proactively and openly discussing LGBTQ issues is crucial to nurturing tolerance (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009).

Finally, educators must be mindful of gender-creative students who choose to transition in school. When transgender people choose to transition they are labeled based on their achieved gender, and not by the sex in which they were born (Stryker, 2008; Teich, 2011). For example, if someone transitions from male to female, and wishes to identify as female, the appropriate pronoun to call them would be “she” (Teich, 2011). For someone who identifies neither with “she” or “he,” the pronouns
“they”, or “Ze” would often be preferred. These are considered inclusive of she and he, in the same way that “Ms” is inclusive of “Mrs.” and “Miss” (Ehrensaft, 2011). It is important for teachers to affirm the chosen gender of a gender-creative student by referring to them by their preferred name and pronoun, and instruct other students to do the same.

2.5.4 Classroom Strategies to promote Gender-Inclusive Learning Environments

Due to the limited amount of research discussing trans issues in schools (Payne & Smith, 2014), we can gain useful insights by making comparisons with educators who have attempted to address homophobia in schools. Groundbreaking at its time, It’s Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in School (1996), is a film by Chasnoff and Cohen that addressed anti-gay prejudice in schools. This documentary showed it is possible for teachers to discuss gay issues even with elementary-age students in an age appropriate way, and that students are fully able to engage in and benefit from these conversations. Students revealed that they had formed their own biased opinion about gay and lesbian people from watching films and television. They also reported anti-gay slurs were a regular occurrence in the classroom (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1996). A powerful statement in this film came from one of the students who said, “If kids are too young to be taught about homosexuality, they’re too young to learn about heterosexuality.”

In the sequel, It’s still Elementary (2008), the filmmakers Chasnoff and Cohen returned to interview the students who were featured in the original film. The students reflected positively on their experience talking openly about gay issues and said that this allowed them to address their own biases. Most striking was that for the students
who later grew up to be gay themselves, they reported that this experience allowed them to better understand and accept their own identity, and learn the appropriate terminology. We can apply these principles to teaching students about gender diversity and transgender identity. Rather than forcing students to “question their gender,” addressing gender diversity in the classroom allows an opportunity for students to ask questions, and to learn the proper vocabulary. More importantly, for students in the classroom who are gender non-conforming, discussing gender diversity openly lets gender-creative students know that their identities and feelings are acceptable (Human Rights Campaign, 2012).

Trans advocacy groups have released key recommendations for educators who want to become an ally to gender-creative students. The Human Rights Campaign (2012, p.19) states “…messages about gender at school can either reinforce binary limitations of gender or validate students’ own understanding and expression of gender, as well as accepting those processes in their peers” (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Many of the recommended strategies for supporting gender-inclusion centre on deemphasizing gender as the primary way by which we describe and group students (Davies, 1989; Ehrensaft, 2011; Human Rights Campaign, 2012). In deemphasizing gender, this allows space for students who may be exploring their identity, and also strives to expand the possibilities of how students choose to identify themselves beyond traditional gender stereotypes (Davies, 1989; Human Rights Campaign, 2012). For example, instead of using gendered vocabulary such as “boys and girls,” gender-neutral terms such as “students,” “class,” and “everyone” are preferable (Human Rights Campaign, 2012; Bollow Tempel, 2011). Having multiple ways of grouping
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students - other than gender - is also important (Human Rights Campaign, 2012; Tempel, 2011). For example, one school chose to line up students by sneaker colour rather than by gender (Brown, 2006).

Researchers, such as Davies (1989) advocate for the importance of including classroom-teaching resources that stretch the possibilities of gender expression instead of reinforcing conventional gender expressions, as do many traditional fairy tales, which tend to feature gender stereotyped characters. However, the findings of her research, where she discussed gender with young children after reading non-stereotyped tales aloud to them, revealed that it is not enough to simply show texts that feature non-stereotyped tales (Davies, 1989b). The findings of her studies showed that children had already learned binary conceptions of gender, which meant that the non-sexist texts were often still read as stereotyped texts. Thus, the introduction of non-sexist content is not enough to free children from traditional conceptions of gender. Davies and Banks (1992) argue that non-sexist texts in literature class must not be presented alone, instead they need to be accompanied by discussions that explicitly examine gender roles and stereotypes. Students need to be given these opportunities to be guided in their critical interpretations of gender representations in stories. These findings highlight the importance of teachers creating an environment to explicitly discuss gender. What has not yet been investigated, however, are the outcomes observed in students and their reactions to these explicit discussions about gender.

2.5.5 Using Children’s Literature to Discuss Gender

Recently, there has been the emergence of children’s literature, which portrays gender non-conforming and transgender characters and approaches the topic of
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transgender identity explicitly in age appropriate ways (Epstein, 2012). Including stories that feature gender-creative characters in the classroom is important, because it validates a trans identity and shows gender-creative children that they are not alone or “abnormal” (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). The importance of ensuring the visibility of trans identity is emphasized by this quote from an American poet, Adrienne Rich:

When someone with the authority of a teacher describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.

Thus, the most important way an educator can support gender-creative students is validating their identity; however, beyond gender-creative students, it is important for all students to recognize that there are multiple ways of being.

2.6 - Conclusion

In my review of the literature, the research problem is clear: those who do not conform to normative conceptions of gender are vulnerable to harassment in school, and school is a particularly traumatic environment for them (GLSEN, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011; Toomey et al., 2010). Despite legislation protecting against anti-LGBTQ discrimination, many teachers feel unprepared to meet the needs of trans students and are hesitant introducing LGBTQ-positive curriculum proactively, unless supported by specific policies and their administration (Bellini, 2012; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Schneider & Dimito, 2008; Payne & Smith 2011). This is unfortunate, because research has shown that when educators do not address LGBTQ issues, children often come to form their own, often biased, opinions about about gender and LGBTQ people
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(Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007; Davies, 1989b; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). It is not enough to simply show representations of non-stereotyped characters; explicit discussions and gender are integral to counteracting binary conceptions of gender (Davies, 1989b). Furthermore, teachers are receiving little training to support them in this work, despite research which shows targeted professional development has been shown to positively impact teachers’ behavior and willingness to intervene in instances of anti-LGBTQ bullying (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010).

What we do not know are other factors that contribute to teachers’ willingness to proactively teach about gender diversity. While anti-harassment policies that combat homophobia and transphobia and the presence of a GSA/QSA create a safer school climate for students, there is very little research on how teachers facilitate meaningful discussions about gender and sexuality diversity in their classroom teaching and pedagogy and the outcomes they notice from students as a result. Teachers fear parental reprisal but it is unclear how they can mitigate this challenge, or if parental objections are indeed frequent and a true cause for concern. Lastly, the literature raises questions on how educators can find ways to connect to the school curriculum so as not to render LGBTQ issues “extra”. Through my interviews, I wanted to learn from teachers who are committed to this work and demonstrating leadership in this area. In my next chapter I will be discussing the methodology of my study.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this project I explored the methods being used by four educators who are dedicated to fostering gender-inclusive classroom communities that validate their students’ own unique understandings and expressions of their gender. In this chapter I describe the research methodology. I begin by reviewing the general approach, procedures and data collection instruments before elaborating more specifically on participant sampling and recruitment, and including bios of my research participants. I explain data analysis procedures and review the ethical considerations pertinent to my study. Relatedly, I identify a range of methodological limitations but I also identify the strengths of my methodology. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a brief summary of key methodological decisions, and my rationale for these decisions, given the research questions and purpose.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach involving a literature review and semi-structured interviews with teachers. I explored the shared experiences of teachers committed to promoting the acceptance of gender diversity in their classrooms and their approaches to their practice. I decided to use a qualitative approach as is best allows the researcher to interpret people’s perspectives in naturalistic settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In this case, I learned about teachers’ perspectives on their practices through the use of interviews. This was a phenomenological study, as it focused on describing what all these participants have in
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common, in order to develop a composite understanding of “what” and “how” these educators experienced creating gender-inclusive classrooms (Creswell, 2013).

I approached this work with the intention of better understanding how educators can promote gender-inclusive spaces, a qualitative approach oriented to social justice, and therefore social change (Creswell, 2013) best suited the objectives of this study. The hope is that information gained from this research will inform other educators about their own practices in creating gender inclusive spaces.

3.2 Instruments and Data Collection

The primary instrument for data collection is the semi structured interview Protocol (see Appendix B). The interview consisted of approximately 20 questions, ranging from semi-structured to open-ended, which allowed participants to provide relevant details throughout the interview. Each interview was approximately 45-60 minutes in length, and was conducted at a time and location convenient for my participant. All interviews were taped to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions. Based on the findings from my literature review, the interview questions were organized into the following four categories: background information, teacher beliefs, teacher practices, and challenges and barriers. Sample questions include: “How do you create opportunities for students to learn about gender inclusion and transphobia?” and “Can you tell me more about what personal, professional, and educational experiences informed your interest in and commitment to this topic, and helped prepare you for the work that you currently do in this area?”

Semi-structured interviews give the opportunity to hear about participants’ lived experiences (Creswell, 2007) and gain a more in-depth insight into a given topic
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(Denscombe, 1998). Using the semi-structured format allows for the interviewer to design and plan an interview which guides the participant to speak to the research questions, while leaving room for them to elaborate on areas unforeseen to the interviewer; thus, allowing the interviewer to discover new insights into complex issues (Denscombe, 1998). A semi-structured interview has another value: in attempting to be as unobtrusive as possible, the semi-structured interview complements an anti-oppressive approach to research, where teachers’ perspectives are privileged as expert knowledge (Potts & Brown, 2005).

3.3 Participants

Here I review the sampling criteria I established for participant recruitment and I review a range of possible avenues for participant recruitment. I have also included a section entitled “participant bios” wherein I introduced each of the participants.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

Study participants were chosen based on the following characteristics:

- An educator at the primary/junior level,
- Has at least 5 years teaching experience,
- Teaches in the province of Ontario,
- Demonstrates leadership in the promotion of acceptance of sexual and gender diversity in the classroom,
- Present or former participation in a Gay-Straight Alliance/Queer-Straight Alliance (GSA/QSA) would be desirable, though not required.

I decided to focus my research at the primary-junior level, as too often teachers avoid speaking about gender and sexual diversity to young children. The assumption is
they are “innocent” and “too young” to start talking about these subjects. Young children, however, are still trying to make sense of their world, and are actively learning gender stereotypes and roles, whether teachers directly address these subjects or not (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009). By avoiding openly discussing these topics, children learn stereotyped ideas about gender, and learn that these topics are “taboo” (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009). As I detailed in my introduction, gender-based bullying is common in schools, for transgender and cisgender students alike (Taylor et al., 2011).

To combat this widespread transphobia, it is necessary for teachers to acknowledge gender diversity and proactively address transphobia in their classrooms starting from a young age.

Due to the recent changes in the Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum, I have decided to recruit participants from the province of Ontario. Having taught for at least 5 years assured that teachers had gained sufficient experience and had the opportunity to demonstrate leadership in their schools, as well as the opportunity to observe the impacts of the changes in policy priorities related to equity, inclusion, and gender identity. I stipulated that present or former participation in a GSA/QSA would be desirable, although not required. As is often the case of the primary/junior setting, GSA/QSAs are rarely present; therefore, this was not be a requirement of this study.

3.3.2 Sampling Procedures/Recruitment

I found my participants in two ways, using convenience and purposive sampling. As a current student of the Master of Teaching program, I am fortunate to be immersed in a community of teacher candidates and education faculty. Therefore, I used the recommendations from those in my network to recruit participants for my study. I also
contacted organizations, which advocate for greater acceptance of those of diverse
genders and sexualities, to ask for interested educators who might wish to participate in
this study. Such organizations include the Gender-Based Violence Prevention Office at
the TDSB, the Centre for Women and Trans people at U of T, the 519 LGBTQ Centre,
and the Triangle program (for LGBTQ students) with the TDSB.

3.3.3 Participant Bios

The following teachers participated voluntarily in my research. All individuals
were given a pseudonym to protect their anonymity.

3.3.3.1 Tamara

Tamara was a female Science Technology Engineering Math (STEM) coach in a
public school board in the Greater Toronto Area. Prior to being a coach, Tamara was a
classroom teacher for 10 years in grades 6/7/8 and taught a range of subjects including
core subjects, special education and also taught students with mild intellectual
disabilities (MID). She attended a teacher education program in the Greater Toronto
Area that focused on equity in STEM subjects. While a classroom teacher, Tamara
founded and facilitated a GSA in her school and has been involved in numerous
LGBTQ organizations in the Greater Toronto Area.

3.3.3.2 Sioban

Sioban was a female grade 2 French Immersion teacher in a public school board
in the Greater Toronto Area. Sioban had been teaching for 6 years and had taught
grades 1-4. Siobhan had an education background in French and Psychology, and prior
to completing her teacher education program, completed a Master’s Degree in French.
She was committed to teaching for diversity.
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3.3.3.3 Lydia

Lydia was a female grade 1 teacher in a public board in a small town in Southern Ontario. Lydia had been teaching for 11 years and has taught everything from JK to grade 8, with the exception of grade 6. She began her career working in a public school board in the Greater Toronto Area before moving to a smaller town to find a permanent teaching position. Lydia was an advocate for LGBTQ students in her school and had unfortunately faced parental opposition in some of the schools she had previously worked in. She had attended several professional development opportunities related specifically to gender diversity.

3.3.3.4 Rose

Rose was a female full-day kindergarten French immersion teacher in an inner city school within a large school board in the GTA. Rose had been teaching 8 years and during that time had taught core French (grades 4-6), French Immersion split 4/5, and resource work for students with IEPs. She had a background in radio and television, and spent several years in that industry before moving into education, specializing in emotional behavioral difficulties in the classroom.

3.4 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and then each transcript was coded individually. I assigned codes based on the salient and “essence-capturing” elements of the text, using either descriptive or “In Vivo” codes (Saldana, 2008, p. 3) After all the interviews had been coded, I compiled all the codes from all the transcripts into one master file, so that the interviews could be compared. First, I organized codes into categories based on my interpretation of the data and then from these categories I looked for themes. The themes
that emerged from this study reflected the questions of my study. I paid particular attention to divergent answers between participants, and examined the null data, or what is not said, noting who or what may have been excluded (Creswell, 2013). I elaborate on the overall themes in my discussion.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

All study participants participated voluntarily. Participants were presented a consent letter, which explained giving their consent to participate in the study and to be audio recorded (see Appendix A). The consent letter spoke to purpose of the study and specified the expectations of participation. Participants were also notified of their right to withdraw at any time during the study. Following the completion of the interview, participants had the opportunity to review transcripts and to clarify any statements.

To ensure participant confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym prior to data analysis. Furthermore, any other aspect of the participants’ identities will remain confidential including identifying markers such as school names. All data was stored on my password-protected phone or computer and will be destroyed after 5 years. Only my course instructor and myself have access to the data.

There were no known risks to participation in this study. However, there was the possibility that minimal risks could be incurred due to the sensitive nature of my research topic, which revolves around gender diversity, sexual diversity, transgender identity, gender violence and bullying. These topics could have been triggers for my participants, who may have a personally experienced the above or have a personal connection to the topic. Furthermore, as these topics can be considered controversial, some of the questions could have triggered an emotional response, making participants...
feel vulnerable. I minimized these risks by notifying participants that they may withdraw at any time or choose to refrain from answering any question during the interview.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

Given the ethical parameters of MTRP, which only involves interviews with teachers, or surveys and classroom observations, I was limited in what I could learn through this research. The small number of participants meant that my phenomenological research examined only specific schools and specific circumstances which, therefore, cannot be generalized. As I recruited participants from the province of Ontario, it meant their experiences only related to the Ontario curriculum. Further, the requirements of the ethics approval meant that I would only learn the teachers’ perspectives and not the students’ perspectives directly. Instead, I hoped to learn about students’ perspectives through their teachers.

As noted previously, there are many advantages to using a semi-structured interview protocol. By asking both open-ended and specific questions, researchers can gain a more in-depth insight into complex issues (Denscombe, 1998). In this study, I had the opportunity to validate teacher voices and make meaning from the lived experiences of exemplary teachers. For the participants of this study, this was an opportunity for them to reflect on their own practices, and learn from other teachers who are also motivated to address gender and sexual diversity in their classrooms.

Despite some of the risks associated with participation in this study there were also benefits. For the participants, these teachers will be given opportunity to think of the rationale for many of the decisions that they make, and they will be given the
opportunity to articulate how they conceptualize particular issues in theory and in practice. Upon completion of the study participants will have the opportunity to learn from the other educators who participated in this study, thus contributing to their own professional development.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I described the research methodology of my study. I began by discussing the rationale for using a qualitative research study, employing a semi-structured interview protocol, which allowed a more in-depth discovery of complex issues and also validated teacher experience. I spoke to my participant criteria, namely that they displayed a demonstrated leadership in their aims to create gender-inclusive spaces for their students. For my recruitment, I intended to both use recommendations from my networks and contact relevant organizations to find interested participants. Data analysis involved interpreting themes, with particular attention paid to divergent and null data. While limited to four semi-structured interviews in this study, which limited the ability to generalize the data, this type of interview also allowed a more in-depth analysis into the lived experience of these teachers and allowed them to reflect on their experiences. Next, in Chapter 4, I report my research findings.
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Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction (Chapter Overview)

In this chapter, I present the findings gleaned from committed educators’ reflections on their work creating gender-inclusive classrooms that aim to recognize and celebrate the creativity and diversity of all students. The following themes will guide this discussion: 1) educators’ personal identities and professional experiences influenced their commitment to teaching about gender diversity; 2) educators’ beliefs about transphobia and the nature of prejudice influenced both their commitment and approach to teaching about gender diversity; 3) the spectrum of willingness to directly and explicitly discuss gender diversity in the classroom among educators who have a stated commitment to teaching gender diversity; 4) The pedagogical methods and materials, such as gender-neutral language and toys, teachers employ to create gender-inclusive classrooms and the strategies they use to facilitate meaningful discussions about gender and gender diversity that lead to gender-inclusive learning environments; 5) the outcomes from educators’ work included positive responses from parents, students and colleagues, as well as reductions in gender-stereotyped play; 6) the factors that challenged and supported teachers in this work included administrative support, teacher discomfort and government legislation; 7) the barriers to introducing content about gender diversity included teachers’ lack of knowledge, fear of parental backlash and time constraints.

4.1 Educators’ personal identities and professional experiences influenced their commitment to teaching about gender diversity

Educators interviewed were asked about which personal and professional experiences had the most profound impact on their commitment to creating gender-
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inclusive classrooms. The following categories of experiences were expressed: 1) educators’ childhood environments which included positive representations of LGBTQ identities and focus on equity issues; 2) attending education programs that had explicit training related to LGBTQ issues and/or attended professional development specific to gender diversity and/or LGBTQ issues; 3) teachers’ self-identified their identity as deviating from traditional gender boundaries.

4.1.1 Educators’ childhood environments were supportive of diversity and LGBTQ identities

The first theme I identified reflects findings from the literature: willingness to address diversity issues is most often a result of educator’s personal histories (Anagnostopoulos et. al, 2009). For the most part, the teachers in this study who were committed to creating gender-inclusive classrooms grew up in family environments that were accepting and interested in topics related to social justice and LGBTQ issues. For example, Lydia reported growing up in a family where many friends of the family and immediate family members were openly gay and accepted:

I guess we just always had, I don’t even want to say ‘acceptance,’ but it was just a ‘normal’ thing for us, and we had parents who just really modelled… ‘people are who they are.’

Tamara shared her experience of growing up in a house that talked extensively about issues related to equity: race, class, gender, and sexuality, among others. For example, Tamara’s father was particularly interested in the Civil Rights Movement in the US:

My father used to … play, like, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X speeches on the record player but it would be blaring throughout the house. So this is kind of the environment I grew up in…

These examples both speak to a theme of the importance of one’s childhood in forming opinions and value judgments about certain groups. Thus, it is unsurprising that those
educators who are most committed to addressing gender diversity in their classrooms grew up in environments where they were largely exposed to supportive views of diversity, including gender diversity, from a young age. One exception was Rose, who described her upbringing in a small conservative Roman Catholic community and explained that her awareness grew later as an adult in the television industry and through colleagues in school. These examples, taken together, point to the importance of showing positive representations of LGBTQ identities, in particular starting from a young age.

4.1.2 Educators participated in teacher education programs and professional development that explicitly discussed equity and/or gender diversity

Another theme that emerged was that these educators had often attended education programs that explicitly taught about gender diversity and other topics related to social justice, and/or attended professional development specific to gender diversity. Sioban and Lydia attended teacher education programs that had explicit training related to LGBTQ topics, and Tamara attended a program specific to teaching with an “equity lens in everything”:

I was part of their Math-Science-Technology class, which was [part of] an Equity focused teacher’s college

Lydia had attended a professional development conference through the Center for Diversity that focused on gender diversity and offered a conference for educators about the Safe Schools Act, or Safe and Accepting Schools Act. These educators’ experiences were contrary to what is often found in the literature: that teachers often have limited exposure to LGBTQ issues in their training (Ferfolja, 2007; Payne & Smith 2011; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). While this finding clearly indicates that these educators were sufficiently committed to these issues to have sought programs to further develop
their knowledge about teaching for equity, it also speaks to the value and importance of including topics related to diversity into teacher education, as it may show that with sufficient training, teachers were more likely to incorporate these topics into their practice.

4.1.3 Educators’ personal identity with having non-traditional gender expressions influence their commitment to teaching about gender diversity

Two teachers in this study, Lydia and Tamara, volunteered that part of their motivation for teaching about gender diversity was that they personally identified with expressing their gender in ways that are considered non-normative. For example, Lydia, who identifies as a woman, had the following explanation of her gender expression:

I’m not a very stereotypically …’girly’…I’m hesitant to use that word, but you know like a ‘frilly’, girly, you know what’s something? - like a ‘pink’ kind of – ha – I don’t know. I don’t really fit into that mold.

Tamara, similarly said that she did not present herself in ways that would be considered typically feminine and she would speak openly about her feelings regarding her gender expression with her students when asked:

Because kids look at you – they start to ask you questions: ‘Why don’t you ever wear a dress?’ You know, ‘…you always wear these types of clothes – ‘Why do you do that?’ And so I would have open conversation with them about why I never wore dresses, you know, ‘I don’t like them’ – haha. I don’t know, ‘I feel uncomfortable in them.’

Understandably, having a personal experience with gender expressions that fell outside of the traditional gender boundaries motivated these teachers to include these topics in their teaching. This is a finding that is reflected in the literature, where educator’s personal histories have the most profound impact on their willingness to address diversity issues (Anagnostopoulos et. al, 2009).
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4.2 Educators’ beliefs about transphobia and the nature of prejudice influenced both their commitment and approach to teaching about gender diversity

Educators’ were asked to share their beliefs regarding transphobia and the nature of prejudice and how this impacted their commitment to and approach to gender-inclusive teaching. Three sub-themes emerged from the analysis: 1) having a strong personal commitment to LGBTQ and/or equity issues as well as a willingness to stand up for beliefs despite protests; 2) educators’ beliefs that proactively addressing diversity prevents prejudice and the importance of affirming gender-creative and transgender students’ identities in the classroom impacted their commitment to gender-inclusive education.

4.2.1 Educators conveyed a willingness to take a stand for LGBTQ issues despite protests

One theme that emerged amongst these committed educators was not only did they have an obvious strong personal commitment to LGBTQ issues, but they were willing to take a stand for LGBTQ issues despite fear of protests from parents or others. Educators would often refer to this in terms of their personality as being either someone who doesn’t need “to seek outside approval,” (Lydia) or being, “kind of a ‘shit-disturber’” (Sioban). These teachers also reported being willing to endure social exclusion in order to stand up for their beliefs. This is exemplified from Lydia’s account:

…it wouldn’t bother me in the least if someone didn’t want to be my friend because... You know, because I support LGBT issues.

Lydia, an educator working in a rural board who reported receiving little administrative support in her aims to include topics related to gender diversity in her classroom, eluded to the loneliness of doing this work unsupported: “it can be hard to feel like
you’re a “one-woman warrior…”’. Of particular interest, Sioban said she viewed parental complaints in response to teaching about gender diversity positively; to her these responses indicated that the work she was doing to promote the acceptance of gender diversity was effective:

You can’t make changes without ruffling some feathers, and so you just kind of – you do a little bit here and a little bit there, and if somebody pushes back then you go, “alright, what I did was different enough to…to have it be worthwhile and have it be noticed…

This finding is particularly noteworthy, as this is not something that has been studied and is not reported in the literature. Most research indicates that despite sympathetic views towards LGBTQ issues, most teachers will not intervene or include topics related to diversity unless they feel supported by specific policies and their administration (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Mishna et al., 2009). Thus, this finding shows that teachers who are willing to take a stand despite a lack of support are those who are either sufficiently motivated, or perhaps are less sensitive to social ostracism, or both. A discussion of the implications of this finding for future research will follow in the next chapter.

4.2.2 Educators’ beliefs that proactively addressing diversity prevents prejudice and the importance of affirming gender-creative and transgender students’ identities in the classroom impacted their commitment to gender-inclusive education

Educators’ beliefs about the nature of prejudice profoundly impacted their approach towards gender-inclusive education. Most notably, teachers affirmed that students are often be exposed to negative stereotypes about gender non-conformity in the school system indicating the pervasive nature of transphobia there, a finding reported widely in the literature (GLSEN, 2012; Taylor et al., 2011). These teachers’ belief was that by introducing students to positive views of gender diversity, that this
early exposure could counteract the development of later prejudice. Sioban shared her views on the nature of prejudice:

Um, they are for sure … going to encounter gender non-conformity in a negative light at some point, and more often than in a positive light, I think.

Furthermore, all teachers had a strong belief in the importance of early intervention, and “normalizing” diversity. Sioban, a grade one teacher, expanded on this:

…at that young level, they’re all sort of they haven’t internalized … all of those stereotypes yet, so for the most part it just sort of ‘nipping that stuff in the bud.’

Tamara, placed particular value on openly talking about gender diversity:

It makes a difference you know? Like if you talk about it, it no longer becomes a taboo issue.

Similarly, Rose also spoke to the importance of making topics related to gender “as approachable and normal” to discuss in the class, and not to make these topics taboo.

Research supports these educators’ views, where when not openly addressed, children will often passively absorb biased opinions about LGBTQ identities and stereotypical representations of gender and consider these topics “taboo” (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007; Davies, 1989b; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009).

Relatedly, another motivation identified reflects the recommendations of experts: validating and reflecting the unique identities of gender-creative students in their teaching (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Including representations of non-normative identities in the classroom helps gender-creative students better understand and accept their own identities (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Lydia explained her reasoning behind her approach to gender-inclusive classroom teaching:
I would hope that regardless of...how you identify, of wherever you see
yourself on the gender spectrum that you feel supported and valued... [in my
classroom]

The educators interviewed also reported that they were motivated to address gender
diversity because they believe that students need a space where they can discuss gender
issues at school. It is noteworthy that all teachers reported that they felt particularly
responsible for addressing gender diversity if they felt students weren’t having these
opportunities at home:

If they’re not having those discussions at home, we need to make sure that there’s
a space for them to have those discussions at school. (Tamara)

With families that ... don’t expose their kids to non-stereotypical genders – gender
roles. I feel like, “if you’re not going to do it then I’m sure as heck going to do
it!” (Sioban)

Therefore, these educators’ motivations for proactively addressing gender diversity are
twofold: preventing prejudice against students who do not conform to normative
expectations about gender, and validating gender-creative students that may be in the
classroom.

4.3 Among educators who have a stated commitment to teaching gender diversity
there was a spectrum of willingness to directly and explicitly discuss these topics
in the classroom

As a researcher, perhaps the most striking finding was that amongst the
participants in this study there was a wide-range of willingness to directly and
explicitly discuss gender diversity and actively include these topics into lessons.
Below, I will articulate the following four sub-themes: 1) educators in this study
expressed uncertainty about teaching about gender diversity and discussing
transphobia; 2) they varied in their willingness to teach about gender diversity
explicitly in the classroom but all agreed that students should be exposed to a wide
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variety of representations of gender; 3) these educators reported varied experience with and beliefs about the importance of GSAs (Gay-Straight Alliance) at the elementary and middle school level ranging from starting their own GSA to not believing a GSA was necessary; 4) educators in this study had a tendency to conflate gender and sexuality in subtle and varied ways; and 5) educators ranged in their willingness to include lessons related to gender diversity across the curriculum with some believing connections across the curriculum were possible and others believing connections were limited to social studies or health and physical education.

4.3.1 Educators expressed uncertainty about teaching about gender diversity and discussing transphobia

One finding in the literature is that when confronted with transgender students, teachers often felt that they didn’t have the confidence to address topics related to gender identity and emphasized the “newness” of transgender students in the school (Payne & Smith, 2014). In this study, even teachers with a stated commitment to teaching and gender diversity did not feel confident discussing the term transphobia. When asked about her beliefs about proactively addressing transphobia, Lydia answered:

I don’t know… I don’t know, I’m sure I’m totally off-base. What is it? Just tell me the answer!

Another educator, Tamara, seemed surprised when asked about transphobia and also spoke to the “newness" of transphobia:

Wow, its um, transphobia is so interesting right, because its such a trendy word now – its such a trendy concept.

Afterwards, she elaborated further about the recent increased representations of trans role models in Hollywood and on television in recent years, and that this is making
trans issues more visible. Tamara also said that she has noticed more students who are openly identifying as trans or gender-creative in schools. Both of these teachers describe a lack of comfort discussing transgender students and transphobia. Thus, despite a commitment to gender inclusion, this finding is a clear clear indication of the barriers to approaching these topics in the classroom and to attaining adequate training to confidently discuss terminology on these topics.

4.3.2 Educators varied in their willingness to teach about gender diversity explicitly in the classroom but all agreed that students should be exposed to a wide variety of representations of gender

Tamara, Lydia and Rose discussed the importance of explicitly talking about gender diversity in the class and creating explicit lessons. These teachers believe that these were topics that students were grappling with and it was important to provide students opportunities to discuss the complexities of gender. Tamara noted that “gender is as a big issue” for kids, and feels that they need opportunities to discuss this at school. Recounting an example where she created a math unit that connected to toys and gender stereotypes, her stated reasoning to choose these topics rose from her observation of their play and the subsequent realization that “I think they need something on this…” Thus, Tamara’s decision to include explicit lessons related to gender had its foundations in responding to student needs and creating lessons that are age-appropriate.

However, some teachers reported that they were hesitant to explicitly address gender and gender diversity in their classroom teaching: “I don’t know that I would…plan a lesson about gender,” (Lydia). Some of the reasons cited were teachers
believed addressing gender diversity explicitly was less effective because it was embarrassing for their students:

I think that when it comes up casually, then its much easier for them to just sort of integrate it and sort of move on, as opposed to sort of be embarrassed by it and push it away. Um, so having it be like, the topic of a lesson doesn’t work nearly as well as having it, having to be integrated into other things in a very subtle way. (Sioban)

She also believed that addressing these topics related to gender in a subtle manner would be more effective than having explicit discussions.

This finding is significant in light of the fact that research points overwhelmingly to the negative implications for not overtly addressing LGBTQ topics: if educators do not create opportunities for meaningful discussions about gender and sexual diversity, children will often form biased opinions about LGBTQ identities (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007; Davies, 1989b; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). Children need opportunities for these types of discussions at school. Later in this chapter I will report the teachers’ observed responses of students when they facilitated lessons that explicitly discussed gender.

4.3.3 Educators’ reported varied experience with and beliefs about the importance of GSAs at the elementary and middle school level ranging from starting their own GSA to not believing a GSA was necessary

While the literature shows that GSAs clearly have a strong positive impact on school climate and the mental health of LGBTQ students (Clarke & MacDougall, 2012; Goodenow et al., 2006), teachers in this sample had varied beliefs about the value of GSAs. Educators in this study had varying experience with and beliefs regarding GSAs at the elementary level and middle school level: one educator had started a GSA in their school, one had created an "informal safe space", one was aware of a GSA in their school, and the last didn't believe that GSAs were necessary in
elementary schools. For example, Lydia, who had created the “informal safe space” was unsure about creating a “formal GSA” in her school:

I’ve never advertised it as a formal, you know, ‘safe space’? Or a formal GSA or… so that’s the, that’s the carnation-incarnation that its taken right now. I would love to see a GSA at our school but… I have mixed feelings…

Tamara started a GSA in their elementary school after gaining inspiration from attending a high school GSA workshop:

And so I came – it was all high school – and I started to listen, went into the workshops and listened to the students and I thought “why don’t we have this in elementary school?” Like, “this would be great for the kids!”

Rose had a GSA in her elementary school, and noted that even the kindergarten students were aware and asked questions about the GSA posters. Conversely, Sioban indicated having limited knowledge of GSAs in the elementary school setting: “I don’t know a lot of elementary schools that have them, um, in an organized fashion.” She elaborated and said this was because elementary students are still “unaware” of LGBTQ issues and that these hadn’t “occurred” to them. It was interesting to note the variety of opinions towards GSAs in elementary schools as a finding: not all teachers in this study committed to gender-inclusive teaching were in agreement about the role and importance of GSAs in elementary schools.

4.3.4 Educators in this study had a tendency to conflate gender and sexuality in subtle and varied ways

It is widely accepted that gender and sexuality are separate constructs. Part of living in a heteronormative society, however, is that we conflate gender expressions with sexual preference (Stryker, 2008). In this study, one finding is that teachers in the study had the tendency to conflate gender and sexuality in subtle and ranging ways. For example, Tamara, when discussing an instance of a student question arising
regarding the meaning of the term “transgender,” she elaborated that, “…they asked me something about sexuality.” Lydia, when discussing her gender identity as being not excessively feminine, conflated this with her sexuality when discussing her gender identity:

I mean I identify as a girl, I’m married to a man, have a daughter – you know? – but I, I’m not a, you know, somebody that would…I’m not a “Barbie” kind of person…

Relatedly, teachers had a tendency to conflate transphobia and homophobia. Sioban, when asked about the existence of transphobia in her school, responded that no, “I’ve never experienced a kid being openly negative about something like having two moms or two dads or anything…” These are typical responses among teachers and highlight the widespread tendency to conflate sexuality and gender. This finding has significant implications: if self-identified exemplary teachers committed to gender-inclusive teaching are conflating these two concepts, then the general public is likely having difficulty with these two terms. I will discuss further the implications of this finding in the final chapter.

**4.3.5 - Educators ranged in their willingness to include topics related to gender diversity across the curriculum with some believing connections across the curriculum were possible and others believing connections were limited to the Social Studies or Health and Physical Education curriculum**

In undertaking this study, I was particularly interested in the ways Ontario educators were able to connect to the provincial curriculum and their willingness to make connections across the curriculum. Educators found multiple ways of making connections to the curriculum when integrating topics of gender diversity, but all the participants agreed that the Social Studies or the Health and Physical Education curriculum were the most natural and “easiest” to connect (Lydia). Tamara spoke to
the new ‘inquiry’ model of the Social Studies curriculum lending itself to the
incorporation of topics such as gender diversity:

…So social studies, has changed, it has changed, and its inquiry-based,
inquiry-based learning. And that’s really good because it gives you sort of the
overall themes and big ideas and leaves some good questions and…because of
that openness kids can take it in any direction that they want. (Tamara)

Nonetheless, most, but not all, also called for the importance of making connections
across the curriculum:

We should start looking for ways to …to bring in, that perspective I think in
other curriculum areas, it shouldn’t just be a “let’s teach about this in health”
and then that 30-minute block is over, then, the end. (Lydia)

Tamara elaborated on this further:

…because its all social justice themed and you can connect that to absolutely
any subject area.

The difference between these educators was that some looked for and found openings
in math, science, language, and the arts, whereas others teachers felt that no curricular
connections could be made for gender diversity in math or science. Sioban, for
example, believed that Social Studies was “the only place where [LGBTQ issues are]
remotely close to being included in the curriculum.” Tamara, a STEM teacher who
attended an education program dedicated to integrating equity topics into STEM areas,
was able to make these connections with ease. She shared an exceptional example of a
grade one class that integrated gender diversity into their math curriculum:

We started a whole math thing around toys and gender because they were very
much about “these are the girl toys and these are the boy toys” and they were
in grade one so it was a really good place to start. And so in this room I would
have like a toy on one side and a toy on the other and some were very
explicitly “girly” and some were boy toys and so we asked the kids “so if you
could pick any toy you wanted to play with right now which one would it be?”
and so they separated off, and we started to collect data.
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Clearly, far from being limited to the health curriculum, with adequate motivation and imagination, teachers can find openings to discuss gender diversity in multiple subject areas. I will discuss in the next chapter the implications of this finding and the methods that could be used to make educators more aware of these possibilities.

4.4 The pedagogical methods and materials teachers employ to create gender-inclusive classrooms and the strategies they use to facilitate meaningful discussions about gender and gender diversity which contributed to gender-inclusive learning environments

These committed educators were asked to share which methods and materials they used to create classroom spaces that were inclusive of gender-creative and transgender students. Six themes were identified: 1) explicitly and openly addressing homophobic or transphobic comments made in class; 2) removing some elements of free-choice in their class to remove the tendency to make gender-stereotypical choices and increase students' comfort working with peers or materials that were not gender-normative; 3) drawing on a range of resources that they accessed from community organizations and found online, through ETFO (the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario), or through departments within their school board; 4) believing in the importance of student discussion; 5) including personal narratives, either the teacher’s own or their speakers, to introduce topics related to gender diversity.

4.4.1 Teachers explicitly and openly address homophobic and transphobic comments

All educators reported that they believed in explicitly and openly addressing homophobic and transphobic comments in their classrooms. This is significant because literature supports adult intervention in students’ anti-LGBTQ remarks, where teacher inaction is interpreted as passive agreement and contributes to maintaining a hostile environment (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Ferfolja, 2007). For example, Lydia
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indicated her belief behind openly addressing anti-LGBTQ comments: “that’s going to be denounced in front of everybody, not by a one on one conversation.” Tamara also spoke to the importance of teachers addressing homophobic and transphobic language in schools:

…when you’ve got a kid, they’re using, you know, language like “fag” and “dyke”, like, you’re going to have to address that.

These findings are consistent with research in best practices for creating safe school environments (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Ferfolja, 2007; Human Rights Campaign, 2012).

4.4.2 Teachers use classroom strategies and resources that do not reinforce conventional gender norms such as gender-neutral language and toys

In line with most expert recommendations, another theme found was that teachers reported using classroom materials, resources and language that were gender-neutral as well as taking efforts to represent non gender-stereotyped exemplars in their classrooms (Ehrensaft, 2011; Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Lydia, echoed this when she stated succinctly that her commitment was to “making sure that everything is presented as an option for everybody.” Teachers also made special efforts to remove stereotyped objects and toys from their classroom:

I don’t have, don’t have a lot of toys in my classroom – I don’t have a “house” centre, I don’t have, um, you know, dinky cars, I don’t have I guess “gender-polarizing” things. I have blocks, and building materials, you know wooden blocks, or you know, neutrally coloured things. (Lydia)

All educators in this study spoke to the importance of creating a gender-neutral classroom space, avoiding labelling items, such as book bins, based on gender, and avoiding gender-stereotyped colour choices. For example, Rose, a kindergarten teacher, said she worked hard to create a classroom environment that was “non-gender
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specific,” taking actions such as removing the pink and blue objects in her room, and removing the gender signs on her bathroom stalls. The use of books that presented non-typical gender roles was also cited as important. Sioban emphasized: “making sure that you have stories about people who don’t necessarily conform to stereotypes.” Similarly, Lydia had a practice of inviting guests to her classroom to talk about their roles in the community and would specifically select speakers that didn’t conform to traditional gender roles:

I tried to deliberately choose …people who were doing kind of ‘atypical’ roles…for their genders. So I had a woman who was a doctor, I had a male nurse come in, and a female engineer.

Avoiding gendered language was also considered important:

I just try to avoid a lot of … you know, those binary kind of “girls line up, boys line up”, “girls do this, boys do this.”

Clearly, making careful decisions about the materials and resources used in the classroom to ensure that all types of people are represented, is an important aspect of a gender-inclusive classroom.

4.4.3 Removing some elements of free-choice to encourage a gender-inclusive classroom environment

Among the educators I interviewed, a theme from the primary teachers’ accounts was their practice of removing some elements of students’ free-choice in order to remove the tendency for their students to make gender-stereotypical choices. Their goal was to increase students' comfort working with peers or materials that would not typically be associated with their gender:

I actually try to balance that choice though with…not-choice, with me telling them what centre they’re going to. And the reason is because, um, I would often find, even if some of my girls wanted to use things, like the blocks, if the boys gravitated there and got there first – they wouldn’t join in. (Lydia)
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Rose referred to this as giving “enough structure” while giving them “room to be creative”. This finding is of particular interest because this is not a strategy found in the literature. While student choice is important, these teachers clearly believe that most students are not in fact making choices completely voluntarily. By removing some of their students’ choice, these teachers estimate that they are in fact creating more opportunities for their students. I will later report on the outcomes that teachers reported as a result of these practices.

4.4.4 Teachers drew on a range of resources that they accessed from community organizations or found online, through ETFO, or through departments within their school board

Teachers drew on a range of resources that they accessed from community organizations or found online, through ETFO, or through departments within their school board. This finding is of particular interest as the research did not speak to how teachers could access resources, only the difficulties in finding them (Davies, 1989b). Tamara spoke to the importance of contacting community organizations: “there’s always an organization you can call on to help you and provide that information.” In this case most educators said that the easiest place to find resources was online, and websites such as Amazon were seen as helpful. The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) has also been releasing numerous resources to support teaching topics related to diversity, and many of the teachers noted this. For those that taught in the TDSB, the Equity Departments and the Gender-Based Violence Departments were also cited as useful resources. Later, when I discuss the barriers to teaching about gender diversity, I will relate the difficulties teachers expressed in relation to acquiring classroom resources.
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4.4.5 Teachers value student-led conversations and “teachable moments” when discussing gender

A clear theme that emerged from all educators is the value they placed upon student discussion and the power of peers’ opinions for students. Open discussions about gender and sexual diversity are integral to creating safe school environments (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Davies, 1989b). In the example of homophobic comments, simply admonishing these comments with no meaningful discussion about sexual diversity, has been shown to reinforce the social exclusion of sexual minority students (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009). In this vein, teachers see themselves as facilitators and use “discussions launchers” to initiate conversations which allow children to discuss gender issues amongst themselves:

You really are a facilitator, you’re really making sure that you’re asking the right questions in order to go off and learn something. (Tamara)

Lydia, a grade one teacher, had a particularly interesting questioning strategy which she referred to as “deliberate oaf” questions where she would feign a lack of knowledge on a topic to encourage students to correct her. She explained her reasoning for this strategy:

And that I find, its much more effective because, then I get, a student or students in the class who are like “What?! No! Of course they can!” And I think that’s much more powerful for kids to hear that coming out of the mouth of another student, then if I sit there and tell them or ask them.

This belief likely has merit, as research shows that simple teacher admonishment of homophobic and transphobic language is not sufficient to create an inclusive environment (Anagnostopoulos, 2009). Students need to believe and understand the reasons why the words they use may be hurtful to others, and it may be more powerful to hear this from their peers and not only their teachers.
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Tamara also pointed to the importance of creating a safe environment for these conversations to take place: “everybody needs to feel safe in order to have those discussions.” To create a safe environment, Tamara spoke to the importance of creating clear guidelines for student behaviour in class:

Set that tone from the beginning, like set that tone with your students. Have those discussions around what discussions are going to be like in your class and how you’re going to do controversial issues.

Thus, it is clear that introducing these types of discussions cannot take place meaningfully without careful forethought. Instead, deliberate actions by teachers to create safe spaces with clear expectations of behaviour are necessary for these discussions to be meaningful and safe for students.

Relatedly, teachers believed the most meaningful lessons related to gender came as responses to student questions or comments that arose naturally in class. Many teachers referred to these "teachable moments." Lydia spoke to this phenomenon in recounting when she corrected a student's misunderstanding:

I didn’t plan for that – it was a great teaching moment – but... You know, I think gender issues sometimes come up in ways like that as well, but you just can’t plan for it.

Sioban also spoke of the importance of this experience:

Any time a kid sort of opens the door you have to take that opportunity to have it be a discussion, or to have it be …even just a comment from you about, “well, sometimes girls wear blue and sometimes boys wear pink” and, you know?

These educators also spoke to the ability to respond to a variety of topics that would come up in class. While they believed many educators would feel uncomfortable if questions related to gender diversity came up in class, these teachers felt it was important to clearly address students’ questions, as this was something that children are
exploring. Tamara expanded on this: “to me everything is a teachable moment, like I have no discomfort about any topic in the classroom when I teach.” Thus, responding to student interests, and their queries as they arise, is of key importance to these educators, as they believed these were particularly meaningful learning experiences.

4.4.6 Including personal narratives: teachers would either invite outside speakers or include their own narratives when introducing topics related to gender diversity

Teachers also spoke about their practice of including personal narratives when they discussed topics related to gender; either they would invite outside speakers or speak personally about their own experiences and feelings;

And I would talk about myself, like, a lot – without, you know, being too personal with them – I would talk about my feelings about things and how I felt. (Tamara)

In another example, Tamara invited a transgender teacher to discuss the concept of a transgender identity with students, and noted that their students – who had mild intellectual disabilities – were not only capable, but fully engaged and eager to participate in these conversations. Lydia spoke about inviting guests into her classroom who occupied professions that were not typically associated with their gender, such as a female doctor and a male nurse. One particularly poignant example she shared was inviting her own husband as a guest to discuss being a dad:

My husband actually came in as a guest to talk about being a dad. And you know, having to change diapers and having to …and it was interesting because a couple of the kids were like: ‘What? My dad doesn’t do that!’

Judging by the reaction of the students to this encounter, these students had perhaps never been exposed to fathers participating in childcare. While this is a strategy that did not surface in the literature, it seems clear that including personal narratives may
make it easier for students to relate to and visualize these non-stereotypical gender roles.

4.5 Outcomes from educators’ work included positive responses from parents, students and colleagues, as well as reductions in gender-stereotyped play

As I noted in my review of the literature, while classroom methods related to de-emphasizing gender have been well documented (Bollow Tempel, 2011; Ehrensaft, 2011; Human rights campaign, 2012), what has not yet been thoroughly investigated are the outcomes that teachers observe from students as a result of the implementation of gender-inclusive teaching strategies. Therefore, it was of particular importance to report committed educators’ observations about students’ outcomes as well as the types of responses they received from students and others in the community. I will discuss each of the following sub-themes in turn: 1) positive reactions and active engagement observed from diverse groups of students; 2) the use of gender-neutral toys and the practice of removing some elements of free-choice reduced traditional gender play; and 3) minimal negative responses to the introduction of LGBTQ-positive curriculum and starting GSAs in their schools were reported from both students and others in the community.

4.5.1 Positive reactions and active engagement were observed from diverse groups of students

An important theme was that teachers observed active engagement from a wide array of students, from students with mild intellectual difficulties (MID), to grade one students, and students in middle school to explicit discussions about gender and gender diversity. Tamara spoke about how she included discussions about transgender identity
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in her MID classroom with the help of a transgender teacher who spoke about his own
life experience. Tamara noted the following:

And they were MID kids, you have to understand, these kids were 1-2%
percentile of intelligence, right, when they do the tests …and they’re having
these huge discussions around gender.

Far from being the only discussion they engaged in related to gender, Tamara would
discuss a wide variety of topics with her MID students. Over time, she noted: “it
became normal to have these discussions and talk about it, and they were really
comfortable.” Rose, a kindergarten teacher, also said that her students were keen to
participate in these types of discussions, especially when she related this to their own
experience, such as clothing and family routines. In particular, she recounted a story of
a boy in her class who liked sparkles and pink, and through classroom discussions she
“created an environment where he was allowed to feel comfortable enough to express”
himself, that by the end of the year many other boys in the class also felt comfortable
to express themselves that might not normally be considered typical for their gender
(i.e. “rocking sparkly bracelets”). Tamara also shared an example of a middle school
math lesson where she asked people to place themselves in the room based on how
they felt about their gender. One MID student put herself in the middle – something
that shocked Tamara – and felt comfortable enough to explain to the class why she
made that choice. Clearly, students were interested and seized these opportunities to
discuss their feelings about their gender.

Tamara also spoke to the learning outcomes from these types of discussions;
notably, students were able to think critically and engage in complex discussions about
gender. Citing the earlier example of the grade one students who engaged in a math
inquiry unit about gender stereotyping and toys, Tamara noted the “huge evolution”
that she witnessed in these grade one students’ thinking. Tamara mentioned that she was particularly motivated by her observations of one student who she described as “sexualized”. When the unit ended, students were asked to share their learnings and it was the student Tamara observed to be particularly “sexualized” that shared the following: “Well I learned that nobody is the boss of telling me what I should like.” This is significant outcome and represents a huge paradigm shift in the life of a six-year-old. Thus, these examples highlight the capability for a wide range of students to engage in complex and meaningful discussions about gender.

4.5.2 Removing some elements of free-choice de-emphasized gendered play

As I mentioned in the section dedicated to teaching practices, some teachers opted to remove some elements of student choice in order to encourage them to engage with peers or classroom materials that would not normally be dictated by their gender. These teachers reported that the use of gender-neutral toys and “must-do” centres de-emphasized gendered play in their classrooms. Two main findings emerged. First, students were more likely to play with toys that weren’t labeled as being “for” their gender. For example, one teacher noted that incorporating “must-do” centres meant students were more likely to move to centres not typically associated with their gender:

… they would just kind of do whatever they wanted to do more naturally, as opposed to “well I’m going to gravitate to whatever … I guess I should go to that centre because that’s where the girls go and I’m a girl.” (Lydia)

A second outcome noted by teachers was a decreased tendency for students to only play with same-gender peers. Lydia also noted that students in her class tended to play and “interact much more fluidly with each other.” Lydia elaborated that this trend extended to free-choice time:
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… if I look at my, even kind of ‘free-choice time,’” very rarely see groups of boys groups of girls; they just play with one-another.

She believed that this was due to her choice of materials. I will discuss its implications in the next chapter.

4.5.3 Teachers reported minimal negative responses to introducing LGBTQ-positive curriculum and starting GSAs in their schools

Despite having an initial fear of parental pushback, teachers working in urban settings reported minimal negative responses to introducing LGBTQ-positive curriculum and creating GSAs in their schools: “its a minute, minute minority” (Rose).

In fact, educators reported receiving mostly positive community and parental response, and the few parental complaints that were received were often minimal:

I’ve never had anybody…confrontational about it. I never, I’ve never had anybody do anything more than, sort of, as an aside say, “oh, you should have done…””. (Sioban)

Tamara noted a mostly positive reaction to starting a GSA in her school:

It was very well received. That’s not to say that it didn’t have parents that voiced their, uh, opinions about what I was doing.

Perhaps surprisingly, Tamara mentioned that some parents were even vociferous in their support of the GSA, volunteering that the presence of a GSA in the school had influenced their decision to choose to send their child to that school. This is an important finding because it highlights that despite fear of parental objection, “most teachers are scared to dickens” (Rose), a lot of parental feedback tends to be neutral or positive. Rose said that part of mitigating protests from parents was being proactive in communicating with parents starting from “the beginning of the year,” and being “sympathetic and addressing” any issues that did arise. This came as a surprise to myself, the researcher, and begs the question: “why has this reality not been better
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publicized?” Perhaps if teachers were aware of the discrepancy in anticipated and actual feedback, and the possibilities for mitigating these protests, this knowledge could change teachers’ willingness to proactively include LGBTQ-positive curriculum in the classroom. This finding is particularly notable in light of the fact that parents are the most frequently cited barrier to proactively introducing LGBTQ-positive curriculum (Bellini, 2012; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). The findings from this study, however, points to the possibility that these fears are exaggerated, and the fears themselves are the barrier. I will discuss in the next chapter the implications, and future avenues of research required to discover the causal relationship of this finding.

4.6 Factors that challenged or supported teachers in this work included administrative support, teacher discomfort and government legislation

Teachers reported multiple factors and resources that challenged or supported them in their work. The following topics will be discussed: 1) teachers reported support from administration, colleagues and others outside of the school to feel supported to teach LGBTQ topics; 2) teachers also reported that they felt legislation supported their inclusion of LGBTQ-positive curriculum; 3) teachers expressing feeling uncertain about how to address diversity and inclusion in their classrooms and how to best support their students; 4) teachers reported finding difficulty locating resources that address gender diversity; 5) they also reported a challenge to addressing gender diversity is that many teachers feel discomfort and/or embarrassment discussing gender with students.
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4.6.1 Support from administration and others was considered integral for teachers who want to address gender diversity in their classrooms

One theme found reflects research about LGBTQ supportive teaching in schools: teachers need the support of their administrations (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009). Teachers in this sample reported a wide variety of degrees of support that they had received from administrations. For example, Lydia, said that she had left a school because she said she felt “powerless to …to do what you think is the right thing,” in response to an unsupportive administrator. Conversely, Tamara reported having an actively supportive administration that would attend meetings and workshops and call parents who were unsupportive of their children attending GSA events. This type of support she described as instrumental to the positive gains that they were able to see in that school as a result of implementing the GSA. Tamara elaborated on some of the ways that administrations could support their teachers to implement LGBTQ-positive curriculum:

It’s a challenge when your administration is not supportive…it’s a challenge because you need their support, you need money, you need them to, um, back you up if something happens, you need them to buffer the parents or buffer the communities so that you can do your job – so if you don’t have a supportive admin that can be very challenging. You can feel very exposed, right, and unprotected.

Rose similarly said that having a supportive administration as a “role model” at the school meant that the school environment was much more inclusive and “open” to discussions about diversity. While these findings support what is currently known about the impact of having a supportive administration, Tamara also mentioned the mitigating effect of colleague support on having an unsupportive administration:

I’ve had admin that wasn’t so supportive, and then … at that point I had grown such a support system within that school that …it was okay.
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These are valuable insights and highlight that despite having an unsupportive administration, teachers are still able to find support in other ways - namely from finding others in the school. In particular, Tamara explained that it was vital for her to find at least one other person to support her in her school. In her mind this person “didn’t have to show up to everything,” but Tamara needed at least one person to support her creating a GSA in the school.

4.6.2 Educators feel supported to address gender diversity in their classrooms by legislation

One recurrent theme from teachers’ accounts was that they reported feeling supported by legislation to teach about LGBTQ topics: “in terms of… legislation that’s in place now, I feel like I’m supported…” (Lydia). In Ontario, the Ministry of Education implemented the *Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (2011), which explicitly states that all educators in the province must teach students LGBTQ topics to prevent stereotyping and homophobia. Thus, it is now the law that teachers in the province must include these topics in their teaching. This is important because despite parental protests, teachers are legally mandated to include these topics in their curriculum. Lydia shared her response to parental protests: “I didn’t feel like there was a…they didn’t really have a…stand on it in terms of… legally or whatever, so I wasn’t worried.” Sioban also echoed this statement: “there’s nothing that they can do about it.” This finding reflects past research, which has shown that despite fear of losing their jobs for discussing LGBTQ topics in the classroom, teachers thought that legislation would at least somewhat protect them (Schneider & Dimito, 2008). This is encouraging and shows that legislation can have an impact on school climate in that it
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supports teachers so that they feel comfortable including LGBTQ-positive curriculum in their classroom (Payne & Smith, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011).

4.6.3 Teachers expressed feeling uncertain about how to address gender diversity and inclusion in their classrooms and how to best support their students

One of the educators interviewed, Lydia, expressed that she felt unsure about how best to create safe, gender-inclusive environments for her students. In particular, Lydia expressed that it was difficult to know if what she was doing was best for her students: “I’m wondering, am I doing the right thing here or am I just making things worse? … that’s my worst fear.” This is a finding reflected in the literature where in schools in which educators had experience working with transgender students, they expressed high levels of fear and anxiety over effectively providing a supportive environment (Payne & Smith, 2014). I will elaborate on the implications for teacher training and professional development in the following section regarding the barriers to creating gender-inclusive classrooms.

4.6.4 Educators report finding difficulty locating resources that address gender diversity

Finding access to appropriate resources to address gender diversity was reported by educators to be extremely difficult and “not very easy to find” (Rose). This was a finding that resounded with all the educators interviewed: “…the biggest challenge is not having the resources” (Sioban). This lack of resources reflects the more general trend that lack of knowledge of how to educate students about gender diversity, including knowledge about where to find resources, is a significant barrier: “…its difficult to find that information so you really have to consciously look for it and ask” (Tamara). While the literature shows that there are more and more resources available that discuss gender-creative students all the time, the reality is that speaking
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openly about gender diversity in the classroom often remains a taboo topic, and this is reflected in the fact that few resources are available.

4.6.5 Teachers report that a challenge to addressing gender diversity is that many teachers feel discomfort and embarrassment when discussing gender diversity with students, particularly older students

The perception that teaching students about gender diversity is uncomfortable or “embarrassing” remains a barrier to teachers. Research shows that teachers often shy away from openly discussing LGBTQ issues in the classroom because they are considered “taboo” (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009), the teachers interviewed in the project helped to illuminate some of the nuance. Among the teachers interviewed, two teachers, Tamara and Sioban, reported that it was particularly with older students that teachers felt uncomfortable discussing gender diversity:

It’s the kind of thing that, once kids start to hit puberty, it’s the kind of thing that’s embarrassing for them to talk about with teachers, right? (Sioban)

Referring to discussing gender in the classroom, Tamara reported that some teachers will “avoid that completely.” Interestingly, Sioban argued that teaching about gender diversity could be “…more overt and the topic of the lesson in primary grades because …it doesn’t make them awkward or embarrassed.” Thus, this has clear implications for teaching practices, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

4.7 Barriers to introducing content about gender diversity included teachers’ lack of knowledge, fear of parental backlash and time constraints

Participants identified some common barriers to introducing content about gender diversity as well as how they addressed these barriers: 1) teachers’ lack of knowledge and comfort addressing gender diversity with students’; 2) teachers’ lack of education and professional development about gender diversity; 3) teachers were
fearful of parental backlash, particularly religious parents and parents in rural areas who are associated as being unsupportive of LGBTQ issues; 4) teachers don't address homophobia because they are afraid of being perceived as gay or because they are homophobic or transphobic themselves; 5) teachers don't address gender diversity due to time constraints and gender diversity is seen as unessential and not a curriculum requirement; 6) Many teachers only address gender diversity overtly when there is a student who does not conform to normative gender expectations, instead of having a proactive approach.

4.7.1 Teachers’ lack of knowledge and comfort addressing gender diversity with students

Educators interviewed in this project reported that a barrier to discussing and addressing gender diversity was that many educators did not have the requisite knowledge. Sioban noted: “…some people, it just doesn’t even occur to them.” Participants noted that if teachers don’t understand why it is important to discuss gender diversity they will not discuss these topics:

If the teachers themselves don’t understand what it means to be transgender… if you don’t have that knowledge, they feel like, ‘well how can I address the issue?’ (Tamara)

The literature suggests that even for teachers who have some understanding of gender diversity, many do not feel confident facilitating discussions about gender and gender diversity in their own classroom (Payne & Smith, 2014). This was brought up amongst teachers interviewed: they felt they needed to have deep understanding about trans issues in order to facilitate discussions about gender. Tamara believed this focus was misplaced, however, instead she believed the focus should be about the students and about creating a safe environment to discuss all types of issues:
When really, it’s just a conversation, and making that person feel comfortable. They don’t really need to know, they don’t have to have the experience.

It is clear that a lack of knowledge and a lack of comfort are a barrier for teachers to address these topics in their classroom.

Relatedly, Tamara reported a lack of awareness amongst many educators that students are able to engage in complex discussions about gender, even at a young age. As a coach, Tamara assisted teachers with infusing equity into their classroom curriculum. She reported that many teachers are reluctant:

Everyday I go into schools and I say, ‘Ok, I have this great idea for you,’ and they’ll say, ‘my kids can’t do it; they don’t have the ability to think that deep.’

Thus, it is clear that a barrier is that teachers do not feel comfortable including topics related to gender diversity in their classrooms and do not realize that their students are fully capable to engage in these types of discussions.

4.7.2 Teachers report a lack of training, education related to the inclusion of gender diversity in teaching

Teachers overwhelmingly reported a lack of access to education and professional development related to teaching about gender diversity, something which is well-documented in the research (Ferfolja, 2007; Payne & Smith, 2011; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). While two of the teachers interviewed had attended diversity-training both in their teaching training and as a part of their ongoing professional development, Lydia reported it was difficult to find professional development opportunities that focused on gender diversity:

But, to me [Professional Development] is a big issue. Like I say, like I, as someone who’s interested I’m having to seek out those opportunities; I’ve found one conference in eleven years to attend...if you’re not super passionate about those issues, you’re probably not going to do that right?
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Lydia’s account highlights the lengths to which educators must go in order to engage in professional development. Furthermore, educators reported that professional development is typically only offered as the reaction to an “issue” in a school, such as the transition of a transgender student in the school:

I think importance needs to be placed on…giving that [professional development], and providing it, not waiting to be… asked for it, or waiting until an issue arises. (Lydia)

This is a finding that gender diversity is typically only taught as a reaction to transgender students in the school, echoes what other researchers have found (Payne & Smith, 2011). This despite literature which points to the imperative of proactively teaching about gender diversity: if educators do not create opportunities for meaningful discussions about gender, children will likely form biased perceptions (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007; Davies, 1989b; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). I will elaborate on the significance of this finding in further detail in the following chapter.

4.7.3 Teachers felt that fear of backlash from parents, particularly religious parents and parents in rural areas who are associated as being unsupportive of LGBTQ issues

Another barrier identified through the analysis reflects findings from previous studies: teachers felt a fear of backlash from parents for including an LGBTQ-positive curriculum (Schneider & Dimito, 2008). In the accounts from teachers in this study, an additional finding was that they noted that they were particularly fearful of religious parents and parents of students living in rural areas; these groups were associated as being particularly unsupportive of introducing LGBTQ-positive curriculum and gender-inclusive teaching. For example, Lydia, who works in a rural board reported that in her board “in general teachers are generally viewed with hostility,” because they
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are seen as the “higher-income earners in [the] area.” Lydia reported teachers were fearful:

There are teachers that would like to be doing more, that would like to start a GSA or who would like to, you know, fully explore these things in their class, but they’re scared – right?

Thus, even teachers who may be supportive of LGBTQ students can be discouraged by the threat of parental objection. However, as mentioned in the outcomes reported in students, most teachers interviewed in this project reported minimal negative interactions with teachers as a result of teaching about LGBTQ topics, with the exception of Lydia, who works in a rural board.

4.7.4 Many teachers in the education system don’t address homophobia or transphobia because they are afraid of being perceived as gay, or because they are homophobic or transphobic themselves

Findings from the research indicated that gay and lesbian educators reported being fearful to address homophobia because they were worried about being “read” as homosexual and considered a sexual predator or pedophile (Ferfolja, 2007). In this study, one finding identified in the analysis was that even for non-LGBTQ-identified teachers, there is the fear of being perceived as gay if they address LGBTQ issues in the classroom:

They didn’t know how, and then they’re might be the perception of, ‘Well, why?’ ‘You don’t want me to use the word ‘fag’ - are you a ‘fag’?’ (Tamara)

I think the teacher feels like if you speak – like anyone – if you speak up, well then you much be- you must identify with it. (Tamara)

Furthermore, “some teachers are just homophobic…and transphobic” (Tamara). In comparison to the barrier of lack of knowledge, Sioban said the following:

I’m sure there are a lot of teachers who themselves hold very stereotypical views of gender and don’t …feel positive about addressing it in a more inclusive way. But for the most part I think it really just doesn’t occur to them.
Thus, while the fear of being perceived as gay is a barrier for some teachers, their lack of knowledge may be the primary barrier.

4.7.5 Many teachers in the education system don't address gender diversity due to time constraints and gender diversity is seen as unessential and not a curriculum requirement

Another finding was that teachers felt that because gender diversity wasn’t explicitly included in all areas of the curriculum that they couldn’t afford the time to address the topic in class. This reflects research which shows many teachers view LGBTQ topics as an “extra” and not mandatory (Payne & Smith, 2011). Sioban spoke of feeling like there was not enough time to include explicit discussions about gender diversity:

So when you’re trying to include something like this that’s not actually in the curriculum, you’re sort of like, ‘ok well…’ you know? There’s not even time to cover what ‘s in the curriculum, so to make this, to make it more of a focus topic, something else has to be cut, right?

This finding is interesting in light of the fact that gender diversity is currently explicitly included in the Health and Physical Education curriculum. I will discuss the implications for teacher training in the next chapter.

4.7.6 Many teachers only address gender diversity overtly when there is a student who does not conform to normative gender expectations, instead of having a proactive approach

Unfortunately, this study found that many teachers were unlikely to proactively address gender diversity in their classrooms “…unless there’s a student in their class who causes them to have it come up” (Sioban). This finding reflects the research literature which showed that teachers only viewed gender diversity as having to be addressed once they were presented with a student who identified as transgender (Payne & Smith, 2014). Teachers in this study pointed to the importance of not
“waiting until an issue arises,” (Lydia) and addressing these topics proactively and openly. Next, in the following chapter, I will review other parts of the literature which discuss the evidence highlighting the importance of avoiding reactive responses and how this effects the classroom climate for gender-creative students.

4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I reported the full analysis of my research findings. I began by discussing the factors that influenced teachers’ commitment to teaching about gender diversity, namely their childhood environments and educational experiences. I reviewed educators’ beliefs that transphobia is the result of early and prolonged exposure to negative views of gender diversity influenced teachers’ commitment to exposing children to positive representations. Next, teachers shared the methods and materials they used in class, which focused on de-emphasizing gendered language and the use of gender-stereotyped toys. To facilitate meaningful discussions, teachers shared that they relished the use of “teachable moments” and believed that student-led discussions were the most powerful. Educators also shared observed student outcomes, which focused on the overwhelmingly positive and active responses from a range of students, and the observed reduction in gender-segregated and stereotyped play. Teachers reported that challenges included a lack of resources, their own discomfort, as well as lack of administrative support. Factors that were most supportive were legislative support and administrative support. Lastly, I reviewed the myriad of barriers that still exist to introducing gender diversity in the classroom: a lack of knowledge, a lack of professional development opportunities, a fear of parental backlash, teachers’ fear of being perceived as gay, teaching about gender diversity being seen as
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unessential, and a reactive approach to teaching about gender diversity, where this
topic is only addressed when “an issue arises.”

The findings from this study contribute to existing literature about the barriers
to creating gender-inclusive classrooms. In this sample, teachers reported a spectrum of
willingness to explicitly address topics related to gender and gender identity in their
curriculum, although literature indicates explicit discussions about gender are integral
to challenging traditional gender norms and preventing bias (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007;
Davies, 1989b; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). The fear of parental reprisal was the most
frequently cited barrier to explicitly teaching about gender diversity. Significantly,
teachers in this study working in urban areas reported minimal negative responses to
introducing LGBTQ-positive curriculum and starting GSAs in their schools. This
finding suggests that these fears of parental reprisal may be exaggerated and that
teachers may be more limited by their own fears than by the parents themselves.

Next, in chapter 5, I speak to the significance of my findings as a beginning
teacher, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also identify areas
for future research, given my findings, and make recommendations based on my
findings for the Ministry of Education, for teacher education and professional
development, and for educators’ classroom practices as well as parents.
Chapter 5: Implications and Recommendations

5.0 Introduction

This research project was designed to learn from self-identified exemplary teachers who are dedicated to fostering gender-inclusive classroom communities that validate their students’ own unique understandings and expressions of their gender. The findings from this study highlight the barriers to gender-inclusive teaching, where even amongst teachers committed to gender-inclusive practices there is a spectrum of willingness to explicitly address topics related to gender and gender identity. This key finding reaffirms what we know about the barriers to addressing gender diversity in the classroom: our school systems and teacher education need to change so that all of our students can feel safe and validated in our classrooms.

In this chapter I discuss the implications of my findings. I first address the broad implications for the educational community at large, such as school boards, teacher education, and the Ministry of Education. I also consider the implications for my own practice as a researcher and future classroom teacher. Based on what I have learned from the educators interviewed in this study, I then articulate my recommendations for the following groups: teachers, school boards, ministries of education, professional development and teacher education. Next, given my findings and the questions raised through this research, I identify areas for further research. In my concluding comments I summarize what I found and speak to the significance of these findings not only for gender-creative and transgender students but for students of all genders.
5.1 Overview of key findings and their significance

I have grouped the findings of this study into the following: the experiences that influenced educators’ commitment to gender diversity, the instructional methods that they use to promote gender-inclusion and the outcomes they notice from students as a result, as well as the challenges and barriers to promoting gender inclusive spaces in the classroom. Below, I give a brief overview of the key findings in this study.

5.1.1 Educators’ influential experiences

First, I discussed the experiences of the educators in this study and their beliefs. The factors that influenced teachers’ commitment to teaching about gender diversity, included their childhood environments and educational experiences. Further, two of the educators reported that they expressed their gender in ways that fell outside of traditional norms. This echoes literature that shows that educators’ personal experiences are the biggest predictor being willing to intervene in instances of gender-based bullying (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009). Educators’ beliefs that transphobia is the result of early and prolonged exposure to negative views of gender diversity influenced their commitment to presenting positive representations to children.

Another important aspect of the educators in this study was their expressed willingness to stand up for their beliefs despite fear of protests. This confirms research that shows that teachers’ attitudes towards LGBTQ identities predicts their willingness to address these topics (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Bellini, 2012; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). Perhaps the most striking finding of this study was that even among educators who had a stated commitment to teaching gender diversity there was a wide spectrum in their practices and their willingness to explicitly discuss gender identity in the classroom. Some educators did not feel comfortable discussing terminology and felt that students
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would be embarrassed by these conversations. This finding is significant in light of the fact that the literature points overwhelmingly to the negative implications for not explicitly addressing LGBTQ topics: if educators do not create opportunities for meaningful discussions about gender and sexual diversity, children will often form biased opinions about LGBTQ identities and maintain binary conceptions of gender (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007; Davies, 1989b; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). Thus, there is clearly a gap in terms of how teachers’ practices are informed as they are not fully aware of the importance and connection between creating inclusive classrooms and the role of explicit conversations about gender.

5.1.2 Instructional Methods and Student Outcomes

Next, teachers shared the instructional strategies they used to promote gender-inclusion and the outcomes they noticed from students as a result. They described the methods and materials they used in class, such as de-emphasizing gendered language and using of gender-stereotyped toys, which aligned with expert recommendations (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Another strategy revealed was limiting some elements of free-choice to promote exploration outside of traditional gender roles. Teachers shared their relish for using “teachable moments” and noticed that student-led discussions were the most impactful for students. This finding is significant because it shows that conversations about gender arise naturally in the classroom and building off students’ interests may be the best way to engage students in meaningful discussions. Educators also shared their observed outcomes, reporting that a wide array of students, from students with mild intellectual disabilities to grade one students, were able to engage in and benefit from discussions about gender. Significantly, teachers in urban
areas reported minimal negative responses to introducing LGBTQ-positive curriculum and starting GSAs in their schools. This is an important finding in light of the fact that fear of parental reprisal is the most frequently cited barrier to proactively teaching an LGBTQ-positive curriculum (Bellini, 2012; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). This finding also points to the possibility that fears of parental reprisal may be exaggerated and present less of a barrier than initially imagined.

5.1.3 Challenges and Barriers

Teachers reported a myriad of challenges and barriers to including gender into their classroom teaching. These challenges included lack of resources, their own discomfort and the perceived discomfort of their students, as well as a lack of administrative support. Conversely, factors that were most supportive were legislative support and administrative support, a finding supported by research showing that legislative support impacts teachers’ willingness to include LGBTQ-positive curriculum (Payne & Smith, 2011). Further, these educators all reported a lack of access to educational resources and professional development related to teaching about gender diversity, something which is well-documented in the research (Ferfolja, 2007; Payne & Smith, 2011; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). This was significant because even amongst this motivated, dedicated sample of teachers, they spoke to the difficulty of finding professional development opportunities, and the lengths to which they had to go to in order to find these types of learning opportunities. Lastly, I reviewed the many other barriers that still exist to introducing gender diversity in the classroom: lack of knowledge, teachers’ fear of being perceived as gay, the topic being seen as unessential, and the prevailing view that this topic need only be addressed reactively.
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when “an issue arises.” This is significant because the literature points overwhelmingly to the imperative to proactively teach a LGBTQ-positive curriculum: if educators do not create opportunities for meaningful discussions about gender and sexual diversity, children will passively absorb biased perceptions of LGBTQ identities (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007; Davies, 1989b; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009).

As previously stated, the fear of parental backlash reflected in these teachers’ comments and supported by findings in the literature presents a perceived barrier to proactively teaching an LGBTQ-positive curriculum (Bellini, 2012; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Schneider & Dimito, 2008). Not insignificantly, findings from this study suggest that these fears may be exaggerated and teachers may be more limited by their own fears than by the parents themselves as teachers were able to mitigate parental complaints. Understanding whether these hesitancies are supported by reality is an important avenue for future research. Knowledge of whether parents will truly protest, and how to mitigate their concerns, may increase teachers’ willingness to teach proactively about gender diversity.

5.2 Implications

Below I will discuss the implications of my research findings. First, I will address the implications more broadly for the educational community. Next, I will focus on the implications for myself as a beginning teacher and researcher.

5.2.1 Education Community

The findings of this study have broad implications for the following stakeholders: the Ministry of Education, teacher education and training, educators, and parents. In the following points, I will delineate some of these implications.
5.2.1.1 The Education Community and the Ministry of Education

- There are many societal forces that challenge teachers’ work to fostering gender-inclusive environments. A key finding of this study was that even amongst teachers committed to gender-inclusion and to representing many interpretations of gender, there was a spectrum in their willingness to address these topics explicitly.

- Many teachers are only addressing these topics on a superficial level and are not going deeper into more difficult, but important, conversations. These findings indicate that teachers are struggling with barriers, and show that there is a long way to go before teachers will be able and comfortable addressing these topics more openly in the classroom.

- While teachers in this study did indicate that they felt that legislation protected them in proactively discussing gender diversity in their classrooms, they still felt pressure from other, more proximate sources, such as parents, school administrators and colleagues, that limited their willingness to discuss these topics.

- Most importantly, while parents were constantly cited as a barrier to proactively including LGBTQ-positive curriculum, many of the teachers in this study revealed that they had not experienced any serious confrontations, and instead reported few complaints, often minimal in nature. However, it is of note, that this was not the experience noted an educator teaching in a rural setting.

5.2.1.2 Teacher Education and Training

- The finding that even amongst educators committed to discussing gender diversity, there was a tendency to conflate gender and sexuality, is a sign of the continuing confusion and misunderstanding about the relationship between these two concepts. Teacher education programs will need to take a deeper, less
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superficial approach, and commit to untangling these concepts in order to adequately prepare educators.

- Another barrier cited by teachers in this study was that many educators feel completely unprepared to discuss gender and gender diversity, or do not understand the importance of addressing these topics. This finding highlights that teacher education programs are not taking sufficient steps to adequately prepare teachers to feel confident addressing these topics once in their own classroom.

5.2.1.3 Educators

- This study found that the methods these teachers used in their classroom to de-emphasize gender had an impact on student behaviour and students’ willingness to try activities that may not typically be associated with their gender. This finding supports using gender-inclusive teaching strategies to impact student behaviour and contribute to a gender-inclusive learning environment.

- Another clear finding was that teachers reported that students of all ages and abilities, such as young students and students with mild intellectual disabilities, were able to engage in and benefit from explicit conversations about gender.

- All of the educators in this study spoke to the importance of “teachable moments” or responding to students in the moment and allowing these students to discuss amongst themselves. This indicates the importance of responding to students’ needs, and alludes to the fact that the most powerful lessons are often related to questions that students are already asking.

- While fear of parental complaints limited teachers’ willingness to explicitly address gender in the classroom, a finding from this study is that the teachers teaching in urban settings reported that they received minimal parental complaints. Furthermore, they reported that these complaints were often easily mitigated. The implication, of course, is that fear of parental backlash may be exaggerated, and this perceived barrier may be the real limit to teachers’ implementing gender-inclusive practices.
Curricular connections are possible across the curriculum and discussions about gender should not be limited to the health curriculum. Instead, opportunities are possible in diverse subjects such as math, science, literacy and drama.

5.2.1.4 Parents

The experience of the educators involved in this study pointed to the importance of a person’s childhood environment in forming the foundation for the lens through which they will view the world as adults. In this case, the educators committed to fostering gender-inclusive classrooms spoke about their childhood environments which included positive representations of LGBTQ identities.

5.2.2 Implications for me as a beginning teacher

The implications for me as a new teacher focus mostly on developing a framework for my own practice. As a researcher, the implications centre upon my approach to educational knowledge and research.

5.2.2.1 As a Teacher

As a teacher, this research points to the implication that, as an educator, I have the power to positively impact my students and create spaces that are more inclusive of gender diversity. Through hearing these educators’ perspectives, I have learned that as a new teacher I must think carefully about my classroom practice, being reflective, and understand that every action and every choice I make (or do not make) in my classroom, can impact my students’ well-being.

Another important learning for me as a teacher, is the revelation that most teachers are likely not committed to gender inclusion; most teachers I will meet will not be focused on these practices. This is an important realization of the necessity to create a community for myself and find a network to support me in my commitment to this work.
5.2.2.2 As a Researcher

- I have learned through this project that educators are often fearful of admitting what they do not know. The implications for myself as a researcher are that I have learned that it is important to ask questions, be curious, and maintain an open mind. I will bring this researcher’s lens with me into the classroom, where I will remember that learning is life-long, and that it is important to refer to the research before making final conclusions.

5.3 Recommendations

In order to positively impact the educational landscape for students of all genders, changes will need to be made at the levels of the education community and the Ministry of Education, teacher education and training, educators’ classroom practices, and parents.

5.3.1 The Education community and the Ministry of Education

- Teachers need more support to enable them to foster gender inclusive classrooms without fear of reprisal. Support can come from many places but cannot be limited to legislation; key stakeholders include administrators, colleagues, the curriculum, and school boards.

- Teachers need to avoid addressing gender diversity on a superficial level and go deeper to have those difficult conversations. Instead of merely showing cursory representations of LGBTQ identities, openly discussing how gender is portrayed in a story, or in marketing, would allow students to build a critical lens with which to deconstruct the stereotypical representations of gender that permeate our society. This is an integral part of creating gender-inclusive classrooms where students feel safe to explore their own gender identities and expressions.
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5.3.2 Teacher Education and Training

- Teacher education programs need to avoid taking surface-level approaches to teaching about LGBTQ topics. Teachers need more in-depth training from education programs and professional development to feel better prepared to explicitly discuss gender diversity and understand how this contributes to a gender-inclusive learning environment. Specific examples of cross-curricular lessons and learning goals will allow educators to feel more confident teaching to these topics.

- Further, to combat the tendency to conflate the terms gender and sexuality, the content of teacher education programs needs to change. Teacher candidates need training and an opportunity to untangle gender and sexuality, and understand the significance of the distinction between these two concepts.

5.3.3 Educators

- Educators need to be reflective of how their actions, or lack of actions, in the classroom can either promote or hinder the creation of a gender-inclusive environment. Educators need to limit their use of gendered language such as addressing “boys and girls,” and encourage students to explore many types of activities, instead of limiting themselves to activities that would be traditionally associated with their gender.

- Educators need to understand that their students, of many ages and capacities, are capable of having explicit discussions about gender. Furthermore, not only are they able, they are often eager, to discuss this as gender is something students are often contemplating.

- Educators need to be responsive to their students and realize the value of “teachable moments,” especially in the discussion of gender diversity. These findings point to the fact that the most powerful lessons about gender diversity are often in response to students’ comments or queries that may arise in class.
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• Educators need to place less emphasis on their fear of reprisal when deciding whether or not to include topics related to gender diversity in their classroom. As noted in this study, teachers in an urban setting reported minimal complaints, and this perceived backlash may be exaggerated.

• Educators need to recognize that curricular connections are possible across the curriculum and discussions about gender should not be limited to the health curriculum. Instead, opportunities to discuss gender and gender diversity are possible in diverse subjects such as math, science, literacy and drama.

5.3.4 Parents

• Parents need to understand the impact of early exposure to positive representations of LGBTQ identities and recognize the foundation of acceptance starts in childhood. Furthermore, children need spaces where they can talk about issues that are important to them, such as gender, and feel accepted and validated by their families.

5.4 Identified areas for future research

A number of questions were raised through this research project. I will explore some of the important areas requiring further research attention, given my findings.

First, while many of the barriers to including topics related to gender diversity have been clearly elucidated from this study, what we do not yet understand is which barriers are the most significant, and which types of support best mitigate these barriers. Some questions that require further study include: Which of these barriers is the most significant? What makes some teachers feel more supported in their work than others, and which types of support are the most powerful? Apart from personal commitment, what other factors inform a teacher’s willingness to address controversial issues in their classroom?
The dominant narrative maintains that parental backlash is a major barrier to proactively including an LGBTQ-positive curriculum and addressing gender diversity, however there is little research studying parental backlash. This study gave the distinct impression that perhaps teachers are overestimating the likelihood and severity of reprisal from parents, and media likely exaggerates this barrier. More research needs to be done to find out: What are the rates of parental backlash? What types of complaints are being drawn and how severe is this backlash? Which topics most incite parental objections?

A key barrier to including topics related to gender diversity is the finding that most teachers feel unprepared, or do not understand the value of including these topics. Thus, more research needs to be conducted in order to discover which types of knowledge and training would most help teachers to feel prepared and confident discussing these issues. For example, is the major barrier understanding how to make curricular connections or is this more a question of theory, where teachers need more time to untangle the distinction between sex and gender? Furthermore, do teachers need classroom strategies for how to discuss controversial issues? Clearly, more research needs to be conducted to best understand how to overcome teachers’ feelings of a lack of preparedness, and how to most effectively improve teacher education to rectify this barrier.

5.5 Conclusion

The intent of this study was to gain insights into the ways that educators work to create gender-inclusive classrooms and the types of outcomes they notice as a result. When I began my research I knew that bullying was a major concern facing gender-
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creative and transgender students, that transphobic bullying is endemic in schools and
the majority of trans students felt unsafe at school, but what I did not realize was how
gender-based bullying affects students of all genders (GLSEN & Harris Interactive,
2012; Taylor et al., 2011). The negative implications for not overtly addressing
LGBTQ topics are clear: if educators do not create opportunities for meaningful
discussions about gender and sexual diversity, children will often form biased opinions
about LGBTQ identities and maintain binary conceptions of gender (Chasnoff &
Cohen, 2007; Davies, 1989b; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). Nevertheless, a key finding
of this study was that even amongst teachers committed to gender-inclusion and to
representing many interpretations of gender, there was a spectrum of willingness to
address these topics explicitly. Despite the fact that inclusion of LGBTQ topics is
legislated at the provincial level, and the fact that the literature overwhelmingly
supports proactively including LGBTQ-positive curriculum (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2007;
Davies, 1989b; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009), educators reported being fearful of
potential parental backlash. However, findings from this study point to the possibility
that these fears may be overblown, as all the urban teachers in this sample reported that
parental complaints were infrequent and minimal. Further research needs to be
undertaken to understand the type and severity of parental complaints, to better inform
teachers of the validity of these fears.

The findings of my study reaffirms what current academic discourse states
about constructions of gender in our society: we live in a society profoundly shaped by
binary conceptions of gender, which are conflated with sexuality, and teachers are
struggling to overcome these barriers in the classroom. Teacher education can help.
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The content of teacher education needs to change to go more in-depth to untangling concepts such as gender and sexuality and provide teachers with the understanding and strategies needed to confidently include LGBTQ topics in their classrooms. The findings also revealed that students of all ages and capabilities were able to engage and benefit from discussions about gender, and that topics related to gender could be included across the curriculum. My research provides an opportunity for teachers to learn strategies to create gender-inclusive learning communities, to facilitate discussions about gender in the classroom, and to gain insights into the positive classroom outcomes that are the result. Such insights include students feeling safer in exploring their own gender identities and expressions and students of all ages and abilities being able and eager to engage in discussions about gender.

I am committed to heeding Leelah’s call to the education system: I want to encourage educators to transform their practice and create gender-inclusive classrooms that validate their students’ own unique understandings and expressions of their gender. Through insights gleaned from this paper, we can change ways of thinking and approaches to gender and gender diversity in schools and create learning environments that affirm and validate the diversity and creativity of all students.
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Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date:

Dear ____________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching student. I am studying how teachers create opportunities to discuss gender diversity and proactively address transphobia in the classroom for the purposes of a graduate research paper. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this topic as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for this assignment this year is Dr. Angela McDonald-Vemic. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 45-60 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you, outside of school time.

The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,

Researcher name: Sarah Clarke
Phone number, email: 416.897.5225, sarahelizabeth.clarke@mail.utoronto.ca

Instructor’s Name: Angela McDonald-Vemic 
email: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Sarah Clarke and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________

Name (printed): __________________________

Date: __________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in this research. The aim of this research is to learn from educators who are committed creating opportunities to discuss gender diversity and proactively address transphobia in the classroom. This interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes and I will ask you a series of questions on the topic of your background, your teaching beliefs, your teaching practices any challenges or barriers you may face and how you address these. I want to remind you that you may choose to refrain from answering any question and that you may choose to stop at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section 1: Background Information
1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What grades and subjects have you taught? Which do you currently teach?
3. What did you study in University?
4. Can you tell me more about the school you currently teach in? (size, demographics, program priorities)
5. As you know, I am interested in learning about teacher practices for discussing gender diversity and transphobia in elementary school classrooms. Can you tell me more about what personal, professional, and educational experiences informed your interest in and commitment to this topic, and helped prepare you for the work that you currently do in this area? *Listen and probe as necessary for the individual components of this
6. Are you currently, or have you previously been involved in a GSA/QSA in your school? What has been your experience with this? What is/was your role? Were you a member of a GSA when you were a student?

Section 2: Teacher Beliefs
7. What does the term “gender-inclusive classroom” mean to you? What key indicators do you associate with a gender-inclusive classroom?
8. What role, if any, does addressing transphobia play in your vision of a gender-inclusive classroom and why?
9. What does transphobia mean to you?
10. In what ways, if any, have you seen transphobia manifest in schools?
11. What are some key aspects that you believe are important for combatting transphobia in schools?
12. In your experience, what are some of the reasons why teachers have not commonly (to date) taught about gender inclusivity and transphobia with their students?
13. How do you think the school system could respond to those reasons? How well do you think the education system, as it stands, is responding to these reasons?

14. In what ways do you see the topic of gender diversity and transphobia aligning with the curriculum priorities, policies, and expectations? Where do you see these topics fitting within the subject-area curriculum?

15. What do you believe are some of the greatest challenges confronted by gender minority students in schools?

Section 3: Teacher Practices

16. How do you create opportunities for students to learn about gender inclusion and transphobia?
   - What topics do you address and why?
   - What are your learning goals for your students with regard to promoting acceptance of sexual and gender diversity?
   - What opportunities for learning do you create? What kinds of things are students asked to do? *discuss, participate in simulation, visit community organizations, listen to guest speakers, read texts, formulate questions, connect to their own identities…
   - What curriculum expectations do you typically connect to?
   - How do students typically respond? What outcomes do you observe from them?

17. Can you please give me an example of a specific lesson that you have conducted concerning gender inclusion and/or transphobia?
   - What topics did you address and why?
   - What were your learning goals?
   - What opportunities for learning do you create? What kinds of things did students do? *discuss, participate in simulation, visit community organizations, listen to guest speakers, read texts, formulate questions, connect to their own identities…
   - What curriculum expectations did you connect to?
   - How did students respond? What outcomes did you observe from them?
   - How did you assess their learning?

18. Can you give me an example of how you incorporate opportunities for meaningful discussions about gender and sexual diversity?

19. What types of resources do you use in the classroom to facilitate discussions about gender and sexual diversity? What resources do you use to teach about transphobia? What are some of your favourite resources and why?

Section 4: Challenges and Barriers

20. What challenges, if any, have you encountered when teaching content about gender diversity in your classroom? How did you respond to these challenges? How might the education system further support you in meeting such challenges?

21. What advice, if any, do you have for beginning teachers who are committed to creating opportunities for elementary students to learn about and discuss gender diversity?