Relearning Gender: A Qualitative Analysis of Strategies to Support Gender Creative and Transgender Students in Elementary Classrooms

By

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**Abstract**

The safety and inclusion of gender independent and transgender children has been inequitable in elementary schools for decades (Taylor et al., 2011). The exclusion and harassment of gender variant individuals stems in part from society viewing gender as a binary classification of either “female” or “male” (Ehrensaft, 2011). The relearning of gender has involved breaking down these rigid expectations and stereotypes and implementing a broad spectrum of gender identities and expressions, where children are supported to trust their own unique voices. This research study aimed to identify strategies that elementary school teachers can rely on to integrate diverse gender identities and expressions into their classroom communities. This study was conducted using a qualitative research approach involving three semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest that teachers are committed to creating inclusive and safe educational spaces for all children, but when it comes to advocating for a child who experiences gender on the spectrum, teachers still need more tools, more familiarity with neutral language, and more proactive classroom approaches. The findings suggest a need for professional development for all educators to relearn gender and facilitate inclusive advocacy approaches.

**Key Words:** gender identity and expression, gender spectrum, inclusion, safe educational space, advocacy, gender independent children, transgender children, gender creative, relearning gender, classroom community
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Research Context

A primary objective that is instilled into teacher candidates is the need to create safe and inclusive teaching environments for all students. This perceived safe and inclusive school climate sits in contrast to the lived experiences of gender creative, gender independent, gender nonconforming, gender-fluid and transgender youth. These youth transgress the rigid binary concept of gender of two distinct options, either male/boy/man/masculine or female/girl/woman/feminine based on sex assigned at birth. Instead, they experience gender across a range of possibilities and expressions that are not limited to either total maleness or total femaleness. The options are endless and these gender-expansive youth experience gender in an authentic way. For example, a gender nonconforming person’s gender expression is perceived as being inconsistent with the cultural norms expected for that gender (Conant, 2017). Similarly, a gender creative person expresses who they are in creative and independent ways, without following limiting cultural or social norms or expectations. As such, a gender creative person is also a gender independent person by expressing outwardly their authentic self in unique ways. A gender-fluid person is someone whose gender identity or expression shifts between male/masculine and female/feminine or falls somewhere along this spectrum (Conant, 2017). A transgender person, sometimes referred to as ‘trans’, is an adjective used to describe a person whose gender identity does not match the biological sex they were assigned at birth (Conant, 2017). (Please refer to Definitions 1.0 in Chapter Two, for an additional detailed description of these gender identities.)

In the First National Climate Survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian Schools, 74% of trans students report being verbally harassed about their gender expression and 78% feel unsafe at school (Taylor et al., 2011). In addition, according to the
findings from a Boston-based study (Russo, 2016), transgender youth face “two to three times the risk of their peers for serious psychological issues, such as depression, anxiety disorders, self-harm and suicide” (p. 28).

These gender creative and transgender youth require urgent support. However, widespread documentation and research reports indicate a lack of pre-service teacher training in providing support for gender-creative and transgender students (Butler, 2010; Sherriff et al, 2011; Bowers et al, 2014; Janmohamed, 2010; Slesaransky-Pow, 2013; Vavrus, 2008). The current approaches to creating inclusive and safe schools are failing to meet the needs of transgender and gender creative youth, and educators need to better understand the lived realities of all children, including transgender and gender nonconforming students (Bowers et al, 2014; Sausa, 2005; The Gender Spectrum, n.d.).

Understanding gender diversity equips teachers to lead the way by speaking respectfully of LGBTQ people (Taylor et al., 2011). To give children the freedom for gender creativity, complex “unlearning and relearning” about development, psychology and health is required (Ehrensaft, 2011). This means, erasing what we used to think about gender, being more rigid and binary, and replacing this old thought with the evolved and deep understanding of the diversity of gender expressions and identities. What is reflected in the curriculum should affirm students’ identities and contribute to all students having equal opportunities to succeed academically and participate in school life (The Gender Spectrum Org, 2016). As such, this research study aims to uncover what educators can do to address this harassment of children, to convey awareness to the broad spectrum of gender identities and expressions, and to bring to the forefront experiences of children who go against the societal driven normative gender binary.
Attention around transgender and gender-creative people is steadily increasing in the media and popular culture (Conant, 2017; Rogan, 2016; Russo, 2016), but this increased exposure is not leading necessarily to acceptance of gender independence. Take, for example, Jazz Jennings, a 16-year old trans woman, an LGBTQ rights activist, with a huge positive social media presence; on the other end of the spectrum, Caitlyn Jenner, a retired Olympic gold medal winning decathlete, has embraced her true internal identity in her mid sixties. A buzz about gender diversity is happening, but it is unclear what it means. Although society is beginning to understand and accept trans and gender-creative people, helping children thrive with psychological support can help save a child’s life (Russo, 2016). The support provided by education is of paramount importance – the need to equip educators with the knowledge, the language, and the confidence to support gender creativity is high in demand.

Increasingly “a growing number of very young children do not settle in to the gender assigned to them at birth, and persist in insisting that the world has it wrong” (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 28). For these youth, gender is not binary or fixed at being either male or female; instead, gender, the internal sense of who you are, is experienced on a continuum, ranging or fluctuating on the gender spectrum. Understanding and supporting gender diversity is the topic for this research.

1.2 Research Problem

If there is a commitment to equity and social justice within elementary schools, then there needs to be adequate teacher education programs to prepare educators to teach gender in more complex ways (Rands, 2009). The learning environments for youth who deviate from society’s traditional gender expectations are often considered marginalized and oppressed (Airton, 2013; Sausa, 2005; Taylor et al, 2011). Transgender and gender-creative youth are exposed to violence and transphobia because of their unique expressions of their authentic selves. In contrast to the
female/male binary most often reflected in schools, the reality is, the experience of gender is unique and not binary (Bowers et al, 2014; Francis, 2010; Taylor et al, 2011). Every student who attends school is an individual and thus, will have a unique experience of their internal selves. As such, support for individuals to be who they are, and freedom to express themselves authentically, is vital for a safe learning environment for all students. The problem is that the lived realities of youth who transgress societal norms and expectations are not being supported in the current school system. The problem is persistent in the fact that transgender and gender-creative youth face huge challenges from all parts of the educational community (Russo, 2016).

This problem is manifested in three major ways. Primarily, the language of the modern school system supports the binary of gender, the view that there are only two, distinct, opposite genders. The rigid language that educators frequently use enforces the dichotomy of gender, limiting expression and diversity (Dykstra, 2005; Suasa, 2005).

Second, the structures within the modern school system support the binary of gender. For example, washrooms follow the gender binary make it difficult for youth that do not identify as female or male to feel comfortable and safe while at school. Their lived realities are not accommodated at school, and this problem contributes to their oppression and marginalization as a community (Bowers et al, 2014; Dykstra, 2005).

Third, all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or gender expression, deserve to have a mentor at school who they feel safe to talk to. As reported by Taylor et al. (2011), many teachers are silent when it comes to transphobia; this validates transphobia and ensures “the recirculation of fear by teaching students that they’re on their own on this issue and that adults won’t help them” (p. 11). This not only validates the insecurity that teachers have in accommodating and supporting transgender and gender-creative students, it
proliferates bullying on this population of the school community. This treatment is inequitable and unjust. The problem of teachers not having adequate knowledge, language, or confidence to support transgender and gender-variant youth is real and prevalent in Canadian schools (Taylor et al, 2011).

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The primary reason for this study was to identify teaching methods that help transgender and gender-creative students become more integrated into the school community. Through this qualitative research study, I examined ways in which the issues facing transgender and gender-creative students can be overcome. I conducted semi-structured interviews with experienced teachers where I hoped to uncover strategies and approaches that teachers can model to create inclusion for these students. In this way, I aimed to identify how teachers can help affirm transgender and gender-creative students to be comfortable in their gender identities and feel a sense of acceptance from their school communities.

The secondary purpose of this study was to bring awareness to authentic gender identity and the continuum of possibilities in an effort to advance the conversation around transgender and gender-variant people. The combination of opinions and experiences shared by participants, as well as academic research on gender independent children, will provide a balanced view of transgender and gender-creative students in today’s classrooms. This study argues that gender is not a binary concept, nor is grounded in a person’s physical anatomy. It is of great importance to expel the rigid dichotomy of gender, and introduce the gender spectrum – the range of possibilities that represents the authentic model of human gender (The Gender Spectrum Org, 2016).
1.4 Research Questions

The main research question guiding this study was: What are the teachers’ experiences and perceptions of teaching approaches and strategies that help accept and integrate gender-creative, gender-fluid and transgender students into elementary schools? Using this broad question as a starting point, I refined my research through the following sub-questions:

1. What are teachers’ experiences working with children who are gender-creative, gender-fluid, transgender, gender independent and gender non-conforming?
2. What teaching methods can help support children with gender-fluid, gender-creative and transgender identities to feel included?
3. What do teachers think can be done to assist these children to feel more accepted and included at school?

Although the following questions are a backbone, the questions probed during collaborative interviews with experienced teachers were not limited to those listed above. These interviews needed to bring attention to the strategies and language used by educators as well as the hidden gendered implications of school climate. I hope that findings from these interviews bring awareness about the need to create inclusive and accepting school environments that welcome all identities and expressions.

1.5 Background of the Researcher

My self-identity aligns with that of gender independent children. I do not fit the standardized gender roles as was assigned at birth. I identify as gender fluid, which I experience as a unique and dynamic internal sense of gender, that ranges on the gender spectrum. My gender identity and expression genuinely shifts between feminine and masculine or somewhere in-between. I would describe my identity as open, as opposed to closed or fixed. In this way, I
feel that I am well-equipped to understand and empathize with students who need support or struggle with accepting their authentic gender identity. In addition, my interest and intrigue with gender diversity has prepared me with the confidence to research, educate, advocate, protect, and practice gender-diversity education and inclusiveness. I see the teaching profession as a platform to instill a growth mindset into the students and fellow teachers in the community, one that is accepting of self and others.

Secondly, I have first-hand experience volunteering with the Queer and Trans community and these interactions serve as a mode to model my behavior for my future teaching practice. I volunteer at The Rainbow Community Centre (pseudonym) in the Queer and Trans Family Parenting Program, a place that celebrates diversity, values principles of inclusion, and works within an anti-oppression social justice framework. It is my goal to infuse this philosophy into my teaching practices, and my collaboration with the program is a means to prepare myself. Being an ally to gender diverse children and families has been an incredibly meaningful experience for me. As a person identifying with the LGBTQ community myself, I can relate to the experiences of oppression and marginalization some members of this community experience. I especially see the importance of normalizing this experience for children, as families and identities are diverse and not binary. In addition, as a gender independent person, I first-handedly acknowledge the importance of affirming your authentic self; being comfortable identifying oneself on the gender spectrum and not accepting the binary including gender norms and expectations put forward by society. As such, my fluid identity aligns with the values and principles within The Rainbow Community Centre and as much as I am becoming a contributing volunteer here, the breadth that I can continue to learn and grow through my volunteer role is substantial.
I am deeply invested in this topic and my experience reflects that in a wholesome way. As a Master of Teaching in Education candidate at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), my pedagogy is taking form. Not only has the literature I have reviewed informed my practice as an emergent teacher, the interviews with experienced teachers were significantly beneficial. I want to understand teachers’ experiences in classrooms with gender diverse children. One of my personal goals of conducting these interviews is to generate an awareness of the current school climate, the attitudes of teachers towards gender-variant children, and the approaches these teachers take (if at all) to integrate all students. In a way, I can better my preparedness by learning through the experiences of other teachers. As an emergent teacher, I will take this into consideration and use this information to influence my teaching practice of creating safe, inclusive and equitable classrooms for all students.

It is important to state that as a teacher candidate, I have completed four teaching practica. Throughout the course of these placements, I have created and implemented lesson plans and unit plans on gender identity and expression and diverse family structures for Kindergarten to Grade Six students. Willingness to engage, offer personal experiences and observations, and practice empathy were evident in the classes alike. I aspire to be a leader in this community with the goal in mind to reduce oppression of marginalized identities and increase their acceptance and understanding.

As teachers are accountable for the well-being, care-taking, and exposure of progressive attitudes towards issues of social justice and equity, I am dedicated to becoming a “gender identity pioneer,” opening the minds of young members of our society. I realized, through the implementation of my gender identity and diversity lessons, the minds of children are incredibly malleable and as a whole they are very accepting of differences in individuals. As such, to match
this acceptance of children’s attitudes, adults and teachers need to become equipped with the tools and strategies to create an inclusive and accepting classroom environment, celebrating all of the lived experiences and identities within the classroom, the school, the community, and the world.

Lastly, I have taken my interest and passion to advocate for gender creative children and those who do not identify within societal norms and expectations to the next level, through my Master of Teaching Research Paper (MTRP). My fear, although within The Rainbow Community Center these children and even adults feel safe, accepted and comfortable, is that within elementary schools, practices are not in place to accommodate for these gender independent students. It is this fear for the students’ wellbeing that is driving my research to find and develop methods of inclusivity for all genders, be it fixed, fluid, or non-conventional.

The theoretical framework used in this study takes an anti-oppressive lens. Individuals who do not conform to their assigned birth gender are oppressed in Western society wherein gender expectations and messages are bombarding individuals. As such, gender non-conforming, gender-fluid, gender-creative and transgender children do not see their lived realities in school, community, media, religion, upbringing, culture, and through their peers. It is very important to combat this oppression and a starting point is through elementary education. By creating an equitable and inclusive environment, it is my belief children whose gender does not align with societies expectations, will begin to accept themselves, flourish, and be leaders in their communities. My thesis aims to uncover teaching approaches and strategies elementary teachers can implement in the classroom to foster inclusion and acceptance of gender independent, gender-fluid, gender-creative and transgender children.
1.6 Preview of the MTRP

To respond to the research questions, I conducted a qualitative research study that incorporated three semi-structured interviews with experienced educators in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. I aimed to learn through these exemplary teachers’ experiences with gender nonconformity in their educational spaces. The teachers I interviewed had at least ten years of experience in elementary education at the time of the study, were committed to creating positive and inclusive spaces, and were leaders in their own educational communities.

Chapter Two contains the literature review, which takes into account the scholarly literature related to diverse gender identities and expressions in children and youth and, synthesizes, analyzes, and critiques the findings. Chapter Three focuses on the methodology of the study, including describing and rationalizing the approach and procedures of this research, the instrument of data collection, participant recruitment, data analysis procedures, ethical review considerations, and strengths and weaknesses of the methodology. Chapter Four discusses the research findings and recurring themes that emerged consistently from semi-structured interviews. Chapter Five explicitly discusses implications of the educational research community and my professional identity and practice as well as recommendations and areas for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction to the Chapter

It is a powerful, momentous and complex time for the exploration of gender within the Canadian education system. The students who attend elementary schools consist of individuals identifying on a broad gender spectrum, including trans, fluid, gender-creative and gender independent pupils. The purpose of this study was to identify teaching approaches and strategies to integrate all students into our elementary education system in order to facilitate effective learning and development. It is the responsibility of education professionals to support, advocate for, and protect the safety of all youth. The reason for my focus on the trans and gender variant community is that this population is currently marginalized within the current school system (Sausa, 2005). As Rands (2009) stated, “Schools serve as a setting in which students come to understand gender, but transgender students (those who transgress societal gender norms) are largely left out of discussions of education” (p. 419).

Teachers are agents of social change and have the ability to influence perception, acceptance, and inclusion of trans and gender variant students. Through explicit and inclusive lesson plans, and the use of gender-neutral language, teachers are able to promote the breakdown of gender stereotypes (Conant, 2017). Gender stereotypes are pervasive in our western society in places like toyshops, on television, in clothing stores, and on the playground at school. This can be binding and restrictive; gender stereotypes can be detrimental to a student experiencing life outside of the gender binary.

If teachers are to accomplish an equitable classroom, they must possess the tools, the knowledge and the confidence to address issues faced by students outside the gender binary. This includes individuals not conforming to the stereotypical, ‘expected’ gender roles frequently
pushed out in our society. Current educators lack the confidence and pre-service training to advocate for trans and gender variant elementary school students (Sherriff et al., 2011). Some educators perceive gender creativity and gender fluidity as an illness, negatively influencing the equitable treatment of students in the classroom (Ehrensaft, 2011). The school system imposes the gender binary, creating an environment that is not conducive to spectrum-based understanding of gender. For example, the school system relegates trans kids to use the male or female bathrooms. However, they need to have the option of using a bathroom that is not designated for girls or boys, and is instead, gender-neutral. In this way, the school system coerces the gender binary, causing extreme agitation and stress for some children. As Dykstra (2005) explains “All kids need access to a bathroom that feels safe and comfortable to them” (p. 12). It is critical for elementary educators to create an environment that supports the option of gender flexibility during these early formative years.

The emergence of educational resources related to gender identity in elementary education is a new aspect of teacher training. This leaves a majority of the current long-standing teacher employees uninformed and inexperienced as to the teaching approaches and strategies available to help support the acceptance of trans and gender variant youth. The aforementioned themes will be explored throughout this literature review.

2.1 Definitions of Diverse Gender Identities

It is not uncommon for children to go against the grain of gender norms. In fact, prior studies suggest that “956,700 people living in the United States feel strongly that their biological sex does not correspond to their gender identity” (Russo, 2016, p. 28). Transgender children are defined as “children who declare, sometimes at a very early age, that the gender they are is not the one they were assigned at birth, but the opposite one” (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 9). Gender-
nonconforming children or gender independent children are defined as “children who do not abide by the prescribed gender norms of their culture” (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 9). Gender-fluid children are defined as “children who defy the norms of binary gender and either slide along a gender spectrum or weave their own intricate individual patterns along the gender web” (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 9). The gender-fluid child is frequently referred to as the “androgynous” child or the “tomboy,” or in more harmful and judgmental terms, the “sissy boy” (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 8). The gender-creative child is a “developmental position in which the child transcends the culture’s normative definitions of male/female to creatively interweave a sense of gender that comes neither totally from the inside (the body, the psyche), nor totally from the outside (the culture, others’ perceptions of the child’s gender), but resides somewhere in between” (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 5). Lastly, gender variance is defined as “behavior or gender expression that does not conform to dominant gender norms of male and female” (Tempel, 2011, p. 2).

The following literature review has been divided into relevant sections that emerged from reading and making connections within the existing research on this topic.

2.2 Educators’ Lack of Confidence and Training in Supporting Trans, Fluid, Gender-Creative, And Gender-independent Elementary School Students

The first theme of this literature review that will be explored is the need for emerging and existing educators to develop the knowledge and the confidence to speak to and advocate for the increasing number of students that are exploring their gender in creative and independent ways. Through the review of many qualitative studies, books, magazines, and guides, such as The National Geographic Special Issue on The Gender Revolution (January, 2017) it became clear that the resources are available, but the direction of action is unclear. For example, in The Gender Spectrum – What Educators Need to Know, The Pride Education Network states, “All
children, including trans, two-spirit and gender expansive students, need to see themselves and their lived realities reflected in the curriculum in order to affirm their identities and to enable them to imagine a bright future” (Butler, p.10). In order to satisfy the goal of creating a gender inclusive school, educators need to have a developed language and confidence to seamlessly accommodate for the vast expressions and identities of children. This lack of confidence and need for training is discussed in several different ways. One of the ways it is often referenced is in the “…expression of fear that emerged as an important concern for practitioners in approaching young people to talk about issues of sexual/or gender identity.” (Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore & Giambrone, 2011, p. 947). Additionally, “many of the practitioners we spoke to reported a desire for more training to help them effectively deal with the complex needs of young people in context” (Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore & Giambrone, p. 948). Furthermore, it is reported that confidence and training are positively correlated with positive attitudes towards transgender students (Bowers et al, 2014).

I would postulate that the answer is simple: the resources are available, and emerging educators have the forwardness to engage with, be sensitive to, and desire to support the needs of their students. What is lacking, however, is training and professional development for the educators who currently deal directly with these students, some of which are struggling immensely within our schools. With training comes the confidence to be assertive and ability to make tangible changes.

As frequently seen in the literature, “The silence of early childhood teachers when faced with children who do not fit gender norms is exacerbated by a lack of education about variations on gender development and by their own anxieties about what it means to be male and female” (Janmohamed, 2010, p. 312). Research indicates that in order for children to learn optimally, “all
students require a safe, nurturing, and relaxed atmosphere – one that is affirming of their multiple identities” (Slesaransky-Poe, 2013, p. 2). In order to create this safe and welcoming environment that affirms all identities, “...providing inclusive and comprehensive sex, gender, and sexuality education to the adults in schools” is imperative (Slesaransky-Poe, 2013, p. 2). This professional development, thus, leads to increased confidence and less anxiety of educators when teaching to diverse identities and needs.

A step in the right direction is Gender-Complex Education whereby, “the gender-complex teacher does not expect children to fit into a dichotomous classification of gender. Gender categories are acknowledged as fluid” (Rands, 2009, p. 426). Gender is constantly being socially constructed in the classroom, and as such, students can also be agents of social change. Teachers need to facilitate Gandhi’s teachings of “be the change that you wish to see in the world” and respect everyone as unique while embracing emerging identities (Gandhi, 1969).

2.3 The Misguided Practices that Treat Gender Creativity and Gender Fluidity as a Disease Rather than a Healthy Condition

The need to educate teachers stems from a history of harassment, a lack of support and accommodations for students that do not fit into their assigned gender expectations or the binary gender box. The term gender identity emerged from “Gender Identity Disorder” in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980. “This conception of those who do not follow the dominant model of gender identity as ‘disordered’ is a manifestation of and has contributed to the oppression of transgender people” (Rands, 2009, p. 420). This misinformation has significantly contributed to the ongoing oppression that treats trans and gender creativity as a disease rather than a healthy condition. For example, “Boys who sew and dress in frilly outfits and girls who would not be caught dead doing either,” when brought to a clinic have to be
diagnosed with or without gender dysphoria (Russo, 2016, p.29). “In this condition, people suffer distress because of a mismatch between their gender identity they experience and their biological sex as determined by chromosomes, gonads, and genitals” (Russo, 2016, p. 29). Gender dysphoria has been the acceptable term since 2012, in contrast to “gender identity disorder,” a term now viewed as stigmatizing (Russo, 2016, p.29).

Ehrensaft (2011) states, “There are mental health professionals whose aim is to make gender-nonconforming children gender normative – that is, to force them to accept the gender associated with their genitals rather than with what their mind and heart tells them” (p. 11). This is a counter-productive approach and can harm a child’s development. Instead, the proposed idea of following the child’s lead is greatly recommended, keeping their spirit and flexibility intact (Ehrensaft, 2001, p. 12). Allowing space for the creativity of children’s gender requires a “complex unlearning and relearning to do – about development, psychology, and health” (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 23). This need to relearn arises from the need to counter the traditional ideology that “if you clearly placed yourself in one or the other box, based on the gender stamped on your birth certificate, you were normal. Otherwise, you were an aberration” (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 23). Educators need to replace outdated theories of gender identities and expressions with an “understanding that there is more than one healthy gender outcome and that many children will go through a fluid process that extends well beyond their fifth or sixth year” (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 40).

In the same way, “early childhood education needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed to reveal how heteronormative values frame queer-identified families or children and to provide infrastructures that will support these families and children in early childhood settings”
As such, learning extended to more inclusive values will assist educators in supporting all children, incorporating the perspectives of diverse gender identities.

The society we live in, despite appearing somewhat backwards, shows sign of progression in this area:

Doctors, some of them from the top pediatric hospitals, have begun to advise families to let these children be ‘who they are’ to foster a sense of security and self-esteem. They are motivated, in part, by the high incidence of depression, suicidal feelings and self-mutilation that has been common in past generations of transgender children.

(Brown, 2006, p. 1)

Further support for transgressing traditional gender roles is supported by Schreier (2006), who thinks of gender variance as a naturally occurring phenomenon rather than a disorder, as he states “These kids are becoming more aware of how it is to be themselves” (p. 2).

2.4 The School System Enforces Binary Gender Categories

The research presented in this literature review finds that the school system reinforces the binary gender categories: modern schools support the view that there are only two, distinct, opposite genders. An example of this is that “elementary school teachers often divide students into groups based upon traditional notions of the gender binary (i.e., girls and boys) due to the lack of knowledge or preparedness to handle the needs of students at other points on the gender continuum” (Bowers et al, 2014, p. 4).

Trans youth have reported that the language educator’s use reflects the traditional binary boxes of girl/boy (Sausa, 2005). Language that is “too rigid and not inclusive of experiences that extend beyond the dichotomy of male/female or man/woman” contributes to the oppression and marginalization of this population (Sausa, 2005, p. 18). Again, this lack of teacher’s knowledge
and evolution of their language to match trans’ youths ‘continually evolving language’ hinders the school climate and detriments the children’s safety (Sausa, 2005).

Research indicates, “According to the results of the most recent biannual National School Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 80% of transgender participants reported feeling unsafe in school because of their gender expression” (Bowers et al, 2014, p.3). According to The Final Report on the First National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian Schools (EGALE) (2011), “The heightened sense of lack of safety at school experienced by trans youth is likely due to the rigid policing of gender conventions (male masculinity and female femininity), which can make trans youth highly visible targets for discrimination and harassment” (Taylor & Peter in ‘EGALE’, 2011, p. 23).

The research bears out the perception that the school climate is not supportive of students not conforming to the gender binary, especially when “…teachers, administrators, and other adults in schools contribute to hostile school climates for transgender students either through their own transphobic remarks or their inaction in addressing bullying and harassment when they occurred” (Bowers et al, 2014, p. 3).

Early childhood educators are resistant to challenge the heteronormative climate that shapes their pedagogic practice (Janmohamed, 2010, p. 304). It is postulated that this opposition stems from the fact that “…heteronormativity is implicit in early childhood studies” (Janmohamed, 2010, p. 305). As a result, educators emerge from their training with a heteronormative mindset that subsequently reinforces the gender binary. In addition, “dominant assumptions of universality in early childhood training in turn limit and control program curriculum, professional learning, and practice” (Janmohamed, 2010, p. 305). This limited
curriculum has not evolved to reflect students that identify outside of the gender binary. However, with the “current blossoming of transgender life, more and more of us are concerned that children not be educated in an environment that harms or maligns transgender individuals” (Dykstra, 2005, p. 12). Transgender and gender-creative students need to see their lived realities, beyond the gender binary, reflected in their learning environment.

Educators seem to be failing to create an inclusive climate for all identities in that, “further discouragement of non-normative expressions of gender and the ultimate silence around children’s queer identifications, explorations, and performances and the failure of some early childhood educators to challenge the use of heterosexist and/or homophobic language in the classroom are further examples of heteronormativity” (Janmohamed & Campbell, 2009, p. 307). Teachers are thus contributing to the silencing of diverse identities; instead they should be “teaching queerly” by “exploring taken-for-granted assumptions about diversity, identities, childhood and prejudice” (Jahmohamed, 2010, p. 309).

Teachers need to challenge heteronormativity by “providing opportunities to explore safely the fluidity of gender roles and how normal it is for children to explore this” (Janmohamed, 2010, p. 313). Instead, what is prevalent in elementary schools is “the inability of the educator to support the child by advocating through early childhood development knowledge that in fact exploring gender fluidity is perfectly normative” (Janmohamed, 2010, p. 313). An imperative goal for emergent teachers is to create a more just and welcoming classroom, one that supersedes the hierarchical gender system. This system is harmful to everyone, with “males and their gender sanctioned activities considered superior, and females and their gender sanctioned activities inferior” (Dykstra, 2005, p. 9).
2.5 Creation of an Educational Environment that Supports the Option of Gender Flexibility and Acceptance in the Early Formative Years

The literature is consistent in recommending the creation of a trans-positive early childhood education environment, which is necessary for the safety, comfort and optimal learning of trans and fluid students (Dykstra, 2005, p. 7). Trans and gender fluid children, as well as children from trans families “attend preschool and kindergarten, and they need educational settings that reflect and affirm their lived experience” (Dykstra, 2005, p. 8). It is simply not enough for classrooms, teachers, and schools to be ‘open’ or ‘non-judgmental’; they need to actively create a classroom environment that is trans positive (Dykstra, 2005, p. 9). The educational practice of coming out can reduce homophobic and transphobic prejudice, build empathy among students and teachers who belong to dominant groups, and provide a place for isolated students to turn to (Goldstein et al., 2007). This trans positive initiative within the classroom is one that encourages kids to question their assumptions, to point out gender benders, to talk about bullying and difference and to encourage questioning and exploration of feelings openly (Dykstra, 2005, p. 10).

It is widely accepted that, the early childhood years are undeniably an incredibly important time in life to expose children to a variety of life options that should not be limited to dominant ways of knowing, thinking, and being (Janmohamed, 2010). “The objection that preschoolers are too young to deal with gender issues is simply false” (Dykstra, 2005, p. 7). In a case where “a 15-year-old trans woman successfully sued her school district so as to be able to attend school dressed in traditionally feminine attire, the Judge wrote: “exposing children to diversity at an early age serves the important social goals of increasing their ability to tolerate differences and teaching them respect for everyone’s unique personal experiences”” (Sausa,
This reinforces the responsibility of educators to support, advocate for, and protect the safety of trans youth, especially as “many experience transphobia and violence based on their gender identity and expression” (Sausa, 2005, p. 15). The minds of children are malleable, constantly being shaped by social experiences and by education. It is important to note, “young children do not see gender as a significant aspect of a teacher’s function, hence their rejection of ‘gender matching’” (Skelton, 2009, p. 195). In this way, children are open-minded and not so bound to norms and expectations. Educators can begin to teach and instill the attitude of acceptance when it comes to not adhering to the traditional binary boxes of boy/girl very early on in the educational system.

2.6 The Emergence of Educational Resources Related to Gender Identity in Elementary Education is a New Aspect of Teacher Training

Resources, such as books on the fluidity of gender and the complexities of gender-nonconforming children having to live in a society that still subscribes to a binary system of gender, are emerging and with great enthusiasm (Ehrensaft, 2011). Other educational resources, such as ‘The Gender Spectrum – What Educators Need To Know’, provide excellent lesson plans for all grades on challenging stereotypes and accepting individual variances, as well as professional development and practical definitions for emerging and existing educators (Butler, p.22). This publication from the Pride Education Network aims to assist educators in the creation of safe and inclusive schools for all students and families – whatever their place on the gender spectrum. Changes to the educational environment are going to happen from the grassroots up – we need educators that take on leadership roles and set the example of inclusive and affirming educational spaces for students and teachers to follow.
An applicable depiction of a person’s identity is shown in Figure 1, through The Genderbread Person, whereby the many parts including their gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation, are illustrated. Each individual attribute of one’s identity is on a continuum, and any individual person can find themselves sliding up or down on it, meaning each person’s identity is truly unique (Killermann, 2013, p. 2).

Figure 1. “The Genderbread Person v2.0,” adapted from Killermann (2013).

The image in Figure 1 has been curated to increase understanding on gender. This depiction shows gender is not binary, not either/or; instead gender can be both, ranging on the gender spectrum scale.

If teachers were to see their pupils as individual ‘snowflakes’ they may be better able to advocate for “…those who transgressively and creatively define themselves as outside the
traditional binary boxes of boy/girl” (Ehrensafe, 2011, p.4). The resources are out there; educators, parents, and peers, can possess the readiness to practice inclusion and acceptance, however children who deviate from the gender dichotomy are still susceptible to social exclusion and bullying (Menvielle, 2011, p. x). As a result, this places the responsibility on educators to learn to support, advocate for, and protect the safety of fluid and trans youth as they “walk through social minefields, figuring out their own steps (Menvielle, 2011, p. xi).

Lesson plans that are “designed to expand understanding of gender” must gain momentum for educators in the classroom (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). This provides opportunities for students to look at the qualities all children share and understand the limitations of stereotyping. An interesting lesson plan idea that is called ‘Masks We Wear: Challenging the Idea of a Fixed Identity’ is one that really challenges the gender binary (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). “In this unit, I will be helping my students to discover the fluidity of their identities and helping them to label some of the masks that society has tried to pin on them and masks that they have pinned on themselves” (Vavrus, 2009, p. 388). This educator seems to be making use of the inclusive resources and is providing meaningful learning experiences for their students.

Another pedagogy that encourages students to disrupt gender stereotypes is detailed through Kathleen Pendleton Jimenez, *Tomboys and Other Gender Heroes - Confessions from the Classroom*. This is an impactful resource that helps teachers to create accepting environments for gender diversity. One particular lesson encourages students to address gender through drama by creating improvisational plays about gender. “They explore their responses to gender, consider the responses of others, and think about ways to combat gender policing and bullying” with the learning goal in mind: alternative gender expressions and identities should receive the same
rights and respect as anybody else (Pendleton Jimenez, 2016). By taking on the role of a Gender Destroyer, Gender Police, Gender Bystander, and/or Gender Bender/Defender, students are exposed to identities that get harmed for being who they are. Discussion following this dramatic activity encourages students to think critically about how to combat bullying and gender policing (Pendleton Jimenez, 2016).

Another interesting resource for elementary classrooms is the story of *William’s Doll* by Zolotow (1972), where William longs to play with a doll, but his father denies him this joy because he thinks dolls are for girls and insists William play basketball or with train-tracks instead. This pigeonholes William into liking something that society deems as ‘correct’ for your designated sex from birth. Geraldine Van de Kleut (n.d.) explored gender roles within *William’s Doll* and the study demonstrates, “reading *William’s Doll* and asking students whether William should have had the doll does little but engage students in the ‘right’ answers provided by liberal humanism and implied or given by their teachers” (Van de Kleut, p. 7). The author concluded that, “unless we bring the lived lives of our students to the table of our discussions, very little that is critical in either sense of the word can occur” (Van de Kleut, p. 7). Thus, the importance of learning to “lead more democratic, more equitable, and more just lives, in my classroom, on the playground, and in the future,” is disclosed (Van de Kleut, p. 7).

Perhaps another window of opportunity is to explain to students “people in our society, including toy companies, hold ‘stereotypes’ (oversimplified generalizations about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences)” (Anti-Defamation League, 2013, p. 3). What must follow is a discussion that “challenges that assumption by asking why that is, explaining that both boys and girls can take care of dolls in the same way that both men and women can take care of babies” (Anti-Defamation League, 2013, p. 3). With all of these
emergent resources and plans related to gender identity, there seems to be little excuse for teachers not to adopt them, and contribute to the expansion of their student’s minds beyond societies depiction of the gender dichotomy.

Another interesting method of learning about the fluidity of gender is through role-playing and ‘casting gender’. According to Davies (1993) there are “many different ways of being male and female and, in an ideal world, we would have access to many or all of these possible ways of being. Children have the capacity to create those ideal worlds in their oral and written fictions as well as to negotiate and navigate non-ideal worlds” (Anderson, 2002, p. 397). This literacy event successfully explored the attitudes, opinions and thoughts of children role-playing and challenging the dichotomies of gender as biological sex. The acting out of this play, with children taking on opposite gender roles (of their biological sex) or “sex role switching” was an example of literacy work as one avenue for competing representations, interactions, and ideologies at the site of social interaction (Anderson, 2002, p. 399). This is an avenue for change and improvement on the gender binary that is typically instilled in the elementary classroom setting.

2.7 Conclusion

As indicated by the reviewed literature, it has been reflected that new and existing educators need to develop the language, confidence and tools to support, advocate for, and protect the safety of trans and gender variant youth in elementary schools. The need to integrate all students and challenge the gender binary, as well as society’s stereotypes of gender, is imperative for students’ acceptance, understanding and inclusion of all peers, whether trans, gender variant, or those that creatively explore the gender spectrum. Experience has shown that children’s minds are elastic, suitable to handle questioning society’s tight grip on individuals,
leading to a more equitable and just classroom experience for all students to thrive. This propels gender creativity and non-conforming identity in a healthy way, moving away from the backwards idea that transgender and gender variant individuals are a pathological way of being.

The topic of gender and its role in the classroom has gained attention over the last decade. Creating an equitable learning environment that allows all students, including trans and gender variant youths, the opportunity to learn is required. The need to create a trans-positive education environment is vital, and the advancements in this field are becoming increasingly mainstream. Existing research has found that there is a need for modernized educational resources, lesson plans, guides, procedures and policies to support this evolution of the education system. With the emergence of these new resources there is also a new responsibility placed on educators to understand and utilize the tools and strategies provided to them, allowing them to reflect and affirm the lived experiences of trans and gender variant youth. In conclusion, this review has indicated that although there is much to accomplish in the way of establishing an equitable and just education system through the development of educator tools and strategies, we are making leaps in a positive, proactive and influential way.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction to the Chapter

This research paper brings to life the lived realities of gender-fluid, gender-creative, and transgender students in the school context. Although the Health and Physical Education curriculum in Ontario has been updated in theory, as of 2015, the practice of understanding and describing diverse gender identities is still weak. For example, it is not until grade six that the impact of stereotypes and assumptions are brought into the curriculum, and not until Grade 8 that discussions of gender identity and understanding of self are brought to attention (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). These shortcomings in the curriculum directly affect gender independent children because their internal realities are seen to be not real or reflected throughout elementary school. This contributes to the misunderstanding of self, perhaps anxiety and depression, and often bullying by their peers. If educators were to have explicit gender-identity training, then this would prepare them to teach and support gender-diverse student populations. It is through this research paper, that I uncover key strategies and approaches that elementary educators can use to integrate gender-creative, gender-fluid, and transgender students into the everyday school community, to enhance inclusivity, acceptance, and foster effective learning and development.

This chapter describes the research methodology of this study. First, it reviews the overall approach, procedures, and instruments of data collection. It then takes a deeper look into participant sampling and methods of recruitment. Data analysis procedures are explained as well as a review of ethical considerations relevant to this study. Methodological limitations and strengths are identified. The chapter is concluded with a brief summary of the key
methodological decisions and rationale for these decisions when the research purpose and questions are taken into consideration.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This is a qualitative research study that involves reviewing relevant literature and existing research, as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers. Qualitative research is inclusive of useful rules and guidelines, that help researchers learn, practice and perfect (Tracy, 2010). Tracy notes that excellent qualitative research is consistent with the following criteria: a worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence. When qualitative means, practices, and methods follow the aforementioned criteria, qualitative research promotes respect from power keepers, who often misunderstand and misevaluate the value of qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). Instead of assessing generalizability of results through a quantitative study, the measures of utility of results in a qualitative study are transferable (Marshall, 1996). Due to the sensitive nature of my research area, following this rich set of criteria and applying transferability of results is a suitable approach given my research purpose and questions. It is my hope that educators read this research paper and transfer what they learn into their teaching practices, creating inclusion far and wide. Qualitative research is the means to answer questions and understand complex human issues through the flexible collaboration of ideas and experiences during semi-structured interviews (Marshall, 1996).

The time is now to develop inclusive strategies to integrate gender independent children into the school-wide community. For this to be achieved, teachers need to understand and make meaning, a key component of qualitative research, of the experiences and social interactions of gender-creative and transgender students (Merriam, 2002). This research topic is certainly
worthy, in that it is relevant, timely, significant, interesting, and evocative (Tracy, 2010). This research challenges societal ideas of the gender-binary and questions taken-for-granted assumptions about gender-nonconforming and transgender students. As such, the qualitative protocol is a suitable approach, as it provides a platform to inquire into real experiences of a small sample of teachers, and seeks to answer the humanistic ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions (Marshall, 1996). In addition, this qualitative study includes the practice of self-reflexivity, considered to be “honesty and authenticity with one’s self, one’s research, and one’s audience” (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). Adequate self-awareness and introspection is evident throughout this research paper, honesty about methodological strengths and shortcomings throughout, as well as own biases and motivations. I am intrinsically motivated and ready for this study, and as a Masters of Teaching in Education student, am a credible candidate to significantly contribute to research in this qualitative study.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

Given the parameters of the Masters of Teaching Research Paper (MTRP) from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), the primary instrument for data collection is a semi-structured interview protocol. To increase the validity of findings from interviews, documents and relevant literature are also considered (Merriam, 2002). The researcher is the key instrument in this qualitative protocol by interviewing participants using open-ended questions (Creswell, 2007). This semi-structured interview protocol combines collaboration with research participants with both inductive and deductive reasoning (Creswell, 2007). This mode of data collection is appropriate given that experiences and strategies already implemented from teachers contributes greatly to developing effective approaches for integrating gender-fluid and transgender students into the school community. While the focus is on the research question, this
semi-structured open-ended interview design provides autonomy, flexibility, and responsiveness for the interviewer and participant (Jackson II et al., 2007). Although a plan is intact, digression from the planned protocol and re-direction towards relevant areas of interest and importance may produce more meaningful data as it aligns with the participants’ knowledge and interests (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This emergent design guarantees that the researcher learns about the problem or issue from the participants’ perspectives and multiple subjective views (Creswell, 2007). There is immense value in semi-structured interviews given that research around social and human science is emergent, and ever changing itself. The research questions and protocol pertinent to this study is located in Appendix B.

3.3 Participants

This section reviews the established sampling criteria for participant recruitment. A review of the variety of possible options for teacher recruitment is explored. Also, a section is included whereby I introduce each participant and provide a brief biography. In the following sub-headings, I address all methodological decisions related to the research participants.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

A broad scope of teaching experience will strengthen this research study, and as such one teacher participant criterion was to include both relatively new teachers (those in the field for ten years or less) as well as very experienced teachers (those in the field for 15 years or more). A second criterion was to include two or more teacher participants that have had gender independent, gender fluid or transgender students within their classroom, with the intention to reflect real experiences of gender-diverse students. A third criterion was to broaden the scope of research from teacher participants into the community, focusing on community needs, and interviewing a child, youth and family program coordinator at The Rainbow Community Centre.
(pseudonym) located within the Gay Village of Toronto. A fourth criterion was to interview participants of diverse gender identities, in order to increase the richness of data obtained from this small sample of participants.

3.3.2 Recruitment procedures

To recruit participants, I used a unique combination of both purposeful and convenience sampling. Purposeful (or judgement) sampling is a ‘rich’ sample that aims to reach the most productive participants who are likely to provide a deeper insight and understanding of the subject matter (Marshall, 1996; Merriam, 2002). Purposeful sampling is demonstrated in this qualitative study through the following examples: having taken an elective Masters course in Anti-Homophobia and Anti-Transphobia Education, I developed a rapport with some of the teaching professionals within the course, and as such I opted to select a graduate student from within this course. In addition, I used my involvement with The Queer and Trans Family Parenting Program at The Rainbow Community Centre in Toronto to serve as an influential partner in recruiting like-minded participants. Through my collaboration with this centre, I have generated quite a few contacts that work within the inclusion and gender-diversity framework, and as such I used these connections to generate contacts with the teaching community to increase the richness, insight, and validity of my participants. Participants who fit the aforementioned purposeful criteria meet the defined criteria and thus provide the richest possible qualitative data. As a second choice, I broadened recruitment through convenience sampling, which is the least challenging method of sampling, whereby the researcher selects the most accessible participants (Marshall, 1996). By communication with principals in schools, relaying an overview of my research study, and providing participant criteria to see if any teachers fulfill the criteria. As I am immersed within a community of mentor teachers and teacher colleagues, I
also relied on this network I have developed to recruit participants. All forms of recruitment followed ethical standards – I provided my information upfront to these individuals and schools. This helped to ensure volunteering of teachers to be involved in the study, as opposed to teachers feeling pressured to participate.

3.3.3 Participant biographies

Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to reflect the experiences of the participants and institutions they work at. I interviewed three educators: Anna, Sandra and Brody. Anna was an elementary school teacher, who had been working in the field for twenty years. She had taught Kindergarten, Grade one and two, and Special Education. She received her Early Childhood Education certification first at a community college, then her BA at a university in Ontario, and finally her B.Ed from Teachers College. Her motivation for pursuing a career in teaching came because she did not want to be bored and loved children. Similarly, Sandra had her Early Childhood Education certification from 1993, but then went on to further her education by completing a Social Service Worker degree at a community college in 2013. In contrast to pursuing a career in elementary school education, Sandra instead works at a non-profit organization, The Rainbow Community Centre. She was a program coordinator in the Family Resource Centre and organized programming for the Queer, Trans and Ally community. Her motivation to work in community services was to help others. Her personal mission statement was, “each one, reach one, teach one.” My last participant, Brody, was also an elementary school teacher, but was pursuing their PhD at a large research university in Ontario. Brody taught within the Toronto District School Board for ten years and graduated from the same university from the B.Ed program. They were fortunate enough to get a teaching position immediately upon graduation and for the next ten years taught from Kindergarten to Grade Six. They taught at five
different schools, including an alternative school that focused on equity and had a “Gender Splendour” program.

3.4 Data Analysis

The preliminary step in data analysis was to transcribe the audio-recorded interviews. From there, I began to compare units of data (words, narratives, phrases) looking for common patterns (Merriam, 2002). These patterns were categorized in code, and then after reviewing all interview transcripts, the information was redefined into major themes (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). After identifying themes within categories, I read the categories and themes of all transcripts and synthesized themes where possible. Later on, I engaged in interpreting the data and making meaning, wherein I analyzed what mattered about these themes or findings when the already existing research in my literature review was taken into consideration (Creswell, 2007).

Interpretation of the data began with developing codes, the formation of themes from codes, and the organization of themes into larger units of abstraction to make sense of the data (Creswell, 2007). I identified and made significance of any discrepancies in the findings and any null data.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

A detailed consent form was provided to each individual participant, explicating the purpose and objectives of the study and the ways in which I will use the data to support my research. See Appendix A for a copy of the consent form. I informed each participating individual that I would be referring to them with an assigned pseudonym and that they had the right to withdraw from participation in the study at any point in the research study. I also acknowledged participants’ identities will remain confidential and any identifying markers related to their schools or students will not be included in the studies’ write-up. Communicating standards of trustworthiness are of paramount importance to the ethics behind this study (Jackson
II et al., 2007). I informed participants that there were minimal risks of participating in this study. However, given the sensitive nature of the research topic, an intense emotional reaction may be provoked, thus making participants feel vulnerable. As such, a concise list of all the research questions was sent via email to all research participants ahead of time to reduce this emotional risk. Again, similar to the right to withdraw from the study, participants had the right to refuse to answer any question(s) they weren’t comfortable answering. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to review, clarify or retract any statements in the transcript before I moved ahead into data analysis. I informed all participants that all data including audio recordings would be stored in my password protected safe devise and would be destroyed completely after five years.

For the safekeeping of participants involved in the study, both the participant and the researcher had a copy of the signed consent form. The consent form not only addressed the aforementioned ethical implications, it specified expectations of participation and an overview of the study.

### 3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

A primary limitation of this study, given the ethical parameters the MTRP has approval for, lies in the fact that only interviews with teachers were permitted, excluding any empirical data from students, parents, surveys, or classroom observations. Unfortunately, without interviewing students, and in particular students that identify as gender-fluid or transgender, the lived realities and experiences of these students within the school community will not be first-hand incitements; instead, the experiences will be second-hand, from teachers observations and interactions with these students. Due to the fact that this study follows a qualitative protocol, the validity of the findings may be weakened by not including any quantitative measures of
generalizability, such as conducting a survey (Jackson II et al., 2007). Quantitative measures have the potential to increase the number of teachers reached, and provide a broader scope of teachers’ experiences with gender-nonconformity within the school. Another limit results from the researcher’s individual interpretations of data and any resulting biases or shortcomings in data (Merriam, 2002).

Although only interviewing teachers is a limitation, the significance of interviewing teachers and gaining in depth perception and experience is also a methodological strength. These semi-structured interviews not only validated the teacher’s voice and experience, but also created an open forum for teachers to speak about what matters most to them. Data was analyzed after-the-fact and was “custom-built, revised, and ‘choreographed’” (Creswell, 2007, p. 182). An asset in analyzing qualitative data is that insight, intuition, and impressions all have the ability to influence research findings (Creswell, 2007). Another strength of this methodological prototype was the opportunity for the interviewer and teacher participant to reflect on teaching practices, allowing room for a growth mindset.

3.7 Conclusion

The research methodology, described in this chapter, followed a teacher-centred view through qualitative inquiry. Participants were intended to be purposefully recruited, while also drawing on teacher mentors and the broad teaching community as additional modes of participant recruitment. Ethical considerations, such as anonymity, trustworthiness, and the right to withdraw or refrain from questioning, were explicitly laid out, and attached was a consent form. Limitations of this study were discussed, focusing on the fact that the only mode of incoming data was from a teacher’s individual perspective. Although this is the parameter from which this research study was conducted, teacher’s deep accounts of student’s experiences
provided rich rigor and strength to this research paper. The following chapter will report the research findings.
Chapter 4: Research Findings and Discussion

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter presents the major themes that emerged through the data analysis of three semi-structured research interviews. This research project has aimed to uncover teaching approaches and strategies that help accept and integrate gender-creative, gender-fluid and transgender students into elementary schools. The data revealed a wide range of perspectives on strategies to support and integrate gender independent children into elementary school classrooms. While some of the findings from this research are relatively new to the discipline of the diversity of gender identity and expression, some connections are made between the participant’s experiences with gender creativity inclusion and the Chapter Two literature review. The findings are organized into three key themes:

1. Building classroom community and integrating gender-creativity by giving every student a voice helps to eliminate the stigma of not conforming to gender expectations,

2. Teacher’s perception of accessibility and utility of resources ranges greatly amongst teacher populations and as such confidence in delivering evolved content and curriculum and providing support for gender independent children is not made consistent by teachers in every classroom,

3. Increasing awareness of the surrounding community population outside of the classroom builds understanding of diverse identities in society and increases tolerance of individual differences in gender identities and expressions.

The major themes have significant sub-themes that support the findings in greater detail. For each theme, findings from the data that emerged from the three participants’ interviews are compared and contrasted. Links to the existing literature are made and significant findings are
correlated. Finally, a summary of the key themes from this research is outlined, with brief recommendations for next steps.

4.1 Building Classroom Community and Integrating Gender-Creativity by Giving Every Student a Voice Helps to Eliminate the Stigma of Not Conforming to Gender Expectations

One of the major themes that emerged from the data is that supporting gender independent children lends itself to building a successful community in the classroom. First, strategies to create an understanding and inclusive community will be discussed. Next, an outline of the benefits of community building is provided. Then, the commitment and patience required to build community into a classroom routine is described. This section concludes with an examination of the value that ally-ship and coming out to your class has on understanding diversity within community.

4.1.1 Strategies to create an understanding and inclusive community

Each participant revealed strategies that they used in their classrooms to create an understanding, supportive and inclusive classroom community. Many of the strategies that the participants incorporated have the same end goal of creating inclusion. For example, Anna frequently engaged her students in conversations about individuals’ similarities and differences. Her intention following this practice was to be a proactive teacher in order to eliminate un-inclusive behavior at its onset. This strategy reveals the participant’s evident open-mindedness in order to create inclusive spaces for all of her students to engage in learning.

Anna’s proactive teaching philosophy was revealed when she said, “A lot of teachers let a lot of things go until it becomes a problem. You really have to set the foundation of a supportive environment, otherwise, for a lack of a better word, you are screwed.” Anna also frequently asked her students, “How full is your bucket?”, which is a metaphor for how uplifting
positive experiences can be and how draining negative ones are. She checked in with her students again later in the day, asking about their bucket. She reported hearing parents use this method as well, during sibling quarry, “Are you filling your sister’s bucket or are you emptying it?” Anna made an educated assumption that teachers are becoming really evolved in how we teach children, by really influencing students to think about how their actions make other people feel.

Similarly, Brody shared that they engaged their students in daily check-ins with the learning goal of working on how to care for one another actively in community. According to Brody, checking in with students at the beginning of every school day can be as simple as asking students to express how they are feeling using an adjective and then expanding to ask why they are feeling that way. These check-ins are conducted in a community circle, whereby each student has the chance to express themselves individually. In addition, Brody’s practice of having intentional conversations in community circle about how the whole class shares space together allows everyone’s voice to be heard and is thus inclusive. This practice is similar to that proposed by Diane Ehrensaft, whereby joy is found when “gender-creative children find a safe haven in which to truly express themselves” (Ehrensaft, 2011). Especially given that students who transgress societal gender norms are largely left out of discussions of education, these strategies put forth by the participants are reformed and inclusive of all genders (Rands, 2009).

Ehrensaft also found that when it comes to the treatment and socialization of gender-creative children, adults’ main job is to listen, respond and understand that there is more than one healthy gender outcome (2011). Similarly, Sandra “creates an environment where people can ask questions” and “embraces the conversations.” An unassuming strategy of displaying a sign in The Rainbow Community Centre asking what your pronoun is embraces the fact that not
everybody knows your pronoun just by looking. Anna, Brody, and Sandra have adopted interactive approaches that aim to influence an understanding of peer’s feelings, differences, and identity.

A number of inclusive strategies were brought up by all three participants to increase student’s engagement in their learning. For example, Anna created opportunities for boys and girls to have access to all learning centers in Kindergarten because she noticed that boys dominated the block center, and she wanted to make it inclusive and open to all students, regardless of gender. This strategy seemed to increase the range of students participating in play-based learning activities through equitable exposure to learning centres. Meanwhile, Sandra implemented singing songs in all cultural mother tongues to include a range of cultures in her programming. She also hosted potlucks at community events to promote diversity and sharing where everyone is invited to bring a dish representative of their culture.

Sandra also encouraged student exploration of gender and self-identity by dressing up in diverse clothes. She encouraged a dress code for her staff, students and volunteers to “be as creative as you can be” because the children want to see their creativity. As a researcher, I can infer increased creativity in expression of children participating in programming at The Rainbow Community Centre, when the staff and volunteers creatively express themselves too. Brody also reflected on engaging their classroom community in an activity with metaphor stories, whereby every child used metaphors to tell the story of an emotional experience. While this writing activity is an individual endeavor, the sharing of one’s story with the class community during read-alouds allows every student’s voice and experience to be heard.

Another notable strategy for creating an understanding and inclusive community that emerged from this research is student-centered. While Sandra suggested following children’s
interest when designing programming, Brody related classroom content to the lives of the people in the class. These approaches seem to suggest the value of daily activities that are reflective of the lives and interests of the students within the classroom community. This research paints the aforementioned teachers’ efforts quite colourfully in this study by facilitating inclusive learning environments that are beneficial to all students. This data is aligned with the existing research, in that the aforementioned infrastructure supports students outside of the heteronormative binary, in support of reconstructing early education (Janmohamed, 2010).

4.1.2 Benefits of community building

The main reasons participants build community in their classrooms is because communities foster understanding of others and encourage acceptance of differences. The two participants, Anna and Brody shared that they had proactive and intentional conversations with students in the community about students’ similarities, differences, and sharing the space. Anna appeared to display characteristics of an equitable teacher, when she explained to her students that, “everyone has different needs” and had a sign on her classroom door that reads: “No one is good at everything but everyone is good at something.” Anna’s approach was to make sure every student was on “even peel and that no one has that opportunity to think that they are better or worse.” Although Anna stated that “kids tend to focus on the kids that are having a difficult time”, Anna’s inclusive and equitable teaching approach benefited the self-esteem and self-concept of every individual learner by respecting differences.

Brody presented herself as a community conscious teacher who strives to build community as the foundation for a safe, positive and inclusive classroom environment. Brody described the daily community circle routine whereby each student gets the chance to “let their words be heard” and it is “non-negotiable that you are listening to everyone else.” According to
Brody, this approach benefited the whole class community because peers began to understand each other’s thoughts and feelings better, through attentive listening. Brody further stated that when students share personal insights in a community circle it “expands their ability to understand who they are in relation to other people and their community” and have patience for their peers. Brody affirmed, “Eventually they get how good it is to be listened to and that trickles into everything else. Their respect for one another and their willingness to hold back whatever they want to say and wait is amazing.”

In addition to the above benefits, learning how to voice opinions and feelings can be justified across all aspects of the language curriculum through listening, talking and writing. Brody was proud that their class was among the 95th percentile for EQAO. The teacher inferred that it was because “they [students] knew how to justify something, explain it, and just sit back and think it through.” Community building, as Brody revealed in the interview, directly encourages active listening, thinking critically about self and others, generating respect and understanding for individual differences, and appreciation for being in it together. Brody appeared to be a role model for their students to learn respect and listen to one another because they actively shared insights and checked in with their students during community circle as well. This approach of community building in integrating understanding of all genders is relatively new to existing research and as such, no connections to existing research were drawn.

At the Rainbow Community Centre where Sandra, my other participant, worked everyone was welcome, as she stated. Sandra wanted to make everyone who came into open programming “feel like they belong and are important.” Sandra’s description of The Rainbow Community Centre revealed individuals sense of belonging in this space. The Rainbow Community Centre approach of “creating that space where the children and the families feel that
they can come and be themselves” spoke to its inclusivity and being a space where the children and families were encouraged to embrace who they are. This concept of diverse gender identities coming together in community was a reality; diverse community members interacted, shared the space and welcomed everyone in. The Community Centre appeared to be a beautiful, accepting and nurturing community environment that is an asset to experience. Prior literature also emphasizes the goal for children to be well-adjusted, healthy, and have good self-esteem, and these goals are motivated and actualized through community building and acceptance of diversity (Brown, 2006).

4.1.3 Community building takes time and commitment to become a routine

Sandra showed commitment to creating gender inclusive environments by setting the stage of inclusion “right away”:

At the Rainbow Community Centre, we prep the space by saying the program at The Family Resource Centre (FRC) at The Rainbow Community Centre are designed for LGBTQ families and their children and are open to all families who are committed to creating safe, affirming, equitable space for everyone.

Although Sandra showed commitment to creating welcoming and affirming spaces for children and families, she also recognized that it took time for educators to gain the knowledge on how to provide support for students that struggle with their gender identity:

So we have to have the backing of our managers and directors to give us opportunity to take this time to learn, if they really want us to be able to address and work with and provide resources for, they have to give us the time to gain this knowledge. It is not a one-off. It can’t just be a one-off.
Sandra understood that the support required for the integration of diverse gender identities demanded educators to familiarize themselves with new information, and that process was timely. In referring to the existing literature, educational practitioners lack LGBTQ youth training to provide support, but are willing and open to this training (Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore, & Giambrone, 2011). Brody also appreciated that attaining an inclusive language repertoire cannot be fast:

It can’t be, here’s a fact sheet, here’s all these things and expect change. People might be willing to do it on a surface level, but when it comes to the emotional content of what it means to discuss something that is sensationalized and considered controversial, you can’t just make that go away by giving somebody the correct terminology.

What is implied in the above quote is that in order to provide genuine support, educators need to commit genuine time in order to understand their diverse students. Brody also added that although it seemed to take teachers longer to accept student’s authentic gender, “kids are genuinely okay with it”. Brody further stated, “It is usually teachers who don’t get on board with their gender, it is not the kids. And when the teacher leads, the other kids are going to follow. It is not the kids who have the problem.” Significantly, existing research has found that young children tend not to see gender as a meaningful aspect of a teacher’s function, given their rejection of ‘gender matching’ (Skelton et al., 2009). Moreover, children are open and accepting of teacher’s gender expressions and identities that are outside of the gender binary.

4.1.4 The value of ally-ship and coming out

The philosopher Aristotle once said, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The participants in this study expressed a positive impact that cooperation, teamwork and ally-ship has on achieving an inclusive and safe school environment. For example, the staff at Anna’s
school strategized collectively about how to address bullying on the playground and together, as allies, created a plan. Anna asserted, “If everyone takes care of their own classroom, then the school is taken care of. There is no tolerance. There should be zero tolerance for bullying.” In discussing being open about your identity with students, Anna noted, “You can’t possibly hide that from your students – whether its sexuality or religion.” Anna felt that if students weren’t going to learn gender diversity at school, “where else are they going to learn it? You have to learn that at school.”

Sandra recognized that The Rainbow Community Centre was a “safe haven” for gender creative and transgender individuals as well as their allies. Sandra noted that she knew that same environment was not necessarily the case in some schools outside of “this bubble”. She stated, “If that same support system is out there in our schools, out there in our government run facilities, then it wouldn’t be a bubble.” As such, society needs to do more to support individuals that go against the societal norm. Brody, an out transgender teacher, had experienced violence, homophobia, threats, and very little staff support teaching at a school. Having experienced working in such an unsafe environment with no ally-ship, Brody shared that they knew the difference that a supportive working environment could have on “someone’s psyche.” At one school Brody taught at, they noted that:

The parents of the kids that I taught were so awesome, and the kids were so awesome that I felt so much less tired there. The people had my back all the time, so I knew that parents would be awesome allies and I didn’t have to think about it as much. The staff there were good too.

Brody stated that the best allies are the people who understand ally-ship, follow through with action, and know what it means when you are in a position of power. This caliber of
ally-ship, according to Brody, stems from being authentic in a supportive community about your identity with students, staff, and families.

Existing research has found that the educational practice of coming out to your students functions to reduce homophobia and transphobia, thereby reducing oppression (Goldstein et al., 2007). Coming out can reduce homophobic and transphobic prejudice, build empathy among students and teachers who belong to dominant groups, and provide a place for isolated students to turn to (Goldstein et al., 2007). Similarly, Brody asserted that:

Being out is definitely important for kids. There has got to be community around that because especially being trans or gender-queer there often isn’t, and people expect that queer identified teachers, gay and lesbian teachers, will step up and do that but often they are the least willing to do that because it points them out. Being out is important and it helps kids.

Research also shows that being out at school makes the space more safe, positive and inclusive for kids, thereby disrupting heteronormativity, promoting tolerance and affirmation (Goldstein et al., 2007). According to Brody, having allies at school can make a big difference. Brody stated, “It was like a model that other teachers could follow, there was this other person that wasn’t me that was asking for this and it was important.” Brody experienced both the benefits of ally-ship and the absence of support and thus was able to genuinely speak to the merit that ally-ship has on their self-esteem and overall wellbeing.
4.2 Teacher’s Perception of Accessibility and Utility of Resources Ranges Greatly Amongst Teacher Populations and as such Confidence in Delivering Evolved Content and Curriculum and Providing Support for Gender Independent Children is not Made Consistent by Teachers in Every Classroom

This theme centers on the participants’ perception of accessibility to resources and their inherent confidence level in delivering renewed curriculum, and providing support for gender independent children. The literature reviewed is consistent in portraying teacher’s lack of confidence and anxiety in supporting gender creative and transgender students (Janmohamed, 2010; Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore, & Giambrone, 2011). What follows is a discussion of findings that relate to the need for professional and personal development in order to create safe, positive, and affirming spaces for students of all identities. Finally, a discussion on the use of evolved language and the subsequent difficulty that some teachers experience in retraining the brain to reflect inclusivity is outlined.

4.2.1 The range of confidence and comfort in delivering renewed subject matter and supporting gender independent children

The level of confidence and comfort in delivering renewed subject matter and providing support for gender independent children varies amongst the participants. For instance, Anna felt confident in providing support for students that struggled with their gender identity, but wouldn’t be confident talking to parents about it. Anna expressed that she would not know anything formal or how to help the parents understand or be “okay” with it. However, when it came to the bullying issue, Anna stated, “it doesn’t matter if they are black, white, transgender, yellow – bullying is bullying.” Anna shared that she would be confident talking to parents around this issue. Anna stated that she needed resources and would implement changes in her teaching
If someone gave me a binder as part of health and said ‘this is part of the curriculum’, I would totally teach it. I would integrate it, but I don’t have it.” This shows this participant’s willingness to make improvements and a need to create accessible, user-friendly resources for teachers to integrate into curriculum. Just as Anna would feel comfortable incorporating new resources if she had them, the literature correlates positive attitudes towards transgender students with training and confidence (Bowers et al., 2014). Anna also felt that with increased exposure, comfort in content would rise too, “I think you have to be really comfortable with what you’re teaching and believe in it. Otherwise it doesn’t come through.”

In contrasting Anna’s confidence with that of Sandra and Brody’s, one can see a big difference, which leaves teachers a space for improvement. Sandra’s experience working with the LGBTQ community has equipped her with inclusive strategies that she integrates without hesitation. Sandra’s lack of confidence, however, isn’t about her delivering inclusive support. Instead, she feels discouraged by public health and society. Sandra felt that “society needs resources that mirror our community. We need resources that support the inclusion statement that we want to make as a community.” Similarly, Brody stated that they “haven’t experienced kids having problems being gender independent in their classes because that space is safe because they need it to be safe for themselves.” Brody shared that they did “a lot of work all the time on just like, who you are is fine and there is no such thing as ‘this is for this person’ and ‘this is for this person’”. Brody appeared confident in creating inclusive and affirming spaces for holistic child development. It can be argued that this high degree of comfort around providing support for gender independent children and diverse identities in general, stemmed from their vast experience with accepting who they were, knowing that they have struggled for respect and
equity in their past. Brody was confident about creating anti-oppressive educational environments so that all of their students could thrive academically and socially.

4.2.2 Need for professional and personal development

With the aforementioned gap in confidence the participants’ sense they have, the research suggests a need for professional and personal development in order for educators to provide equitable support for all students. Having been a teacher for twenty years, Anna did not recall any pre-service training or education on gender diversity and the marginalization of transgender students. Anna admitted, “It should be taught to teachers that gender and sexuality are two different constructs.” Evidently so, Anna stated that she needed some professional development in order to understand gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation more thoroughly. Whilst at her current school, Anna noted that, “We’ve had training on inclusive environments, but not specifically on gender inclusive school environments.” While Anna indicated that she would integrate new resources if she had them, Brody took the standpoint that the culture of education more generally needed a big reform:

I honestly believe that in order for ally-ship and community around gender independence to be able to happen, we need to change the culture of teaching. Whether it’s in pre-service education or as professional development, where teachers re-learn how to do their own work. Right now, there is a huge culture of fear around what you are allowed to do and what you are allowed to say.

Brody also reported that a lot of teachers were lacking training about sex-education and gender, and thus were doing their own research on how to create cultural change around pre-service teacher education, “My interest in personal development with a lot of people would be ‘who are you in relation to gender and identity and change’ and ‘how do you take care of
yourself and deal with things that make you uncomfortable’.” Thereafter, as Brody elaborated on their approach to training, they would build on this by “talking about how we care for one another in our community,” just like they do with their young students. Afterward, Brody would facilitate educators to “get into homophobia and transphobia and racism and oppression, once people have the understanding of themselves that if something is uncomfortable, they can deal with it, they are not going to shatter.” It is Brody’s belief that although the health curriculum has finally been updated, educators can’t expect the words on paper to make the change. As a result, Brody was actively working to create substantial transformation in pre-service education culture. Brody’s intention of education reform seems to be aligned with the existing research that posits that auto-ethnographical explorations help future teachers feel more comfortable and confident about facing the pain young people regularly experience by working through their own experiences of guilt, shame, and anger (Vavrus, 2008). This supports the idea that teachers need to do their own work individually and collectively to gain self-knowledge and resolve to counter and deconstruct hegemony and heteronormativity (Vavrus, 2008).

4.2.3 The use of evolved inclusive language and difficulty retraining the brain to communicate inclusion

The literature is consistent in that gender needs to be relearned and substantial unlearning needs to take place (Ehrensaft, 2011). As with learning anything new, the more you practice, the better you’ll become. Ongoing evolution in understanding is necessary to grasp that “gender identity formation does not end at a point in time, but is a fluid process that might extend over the course of a boy or girl’s childhood or even into adulthood” (Ehrensaft, 2011). Sandra feels that with adequate resources to learn from, fluency and comfort with inclusive and affirming language will arise:
If what children are living in right now is not enough for them to thrive, and feel like they belong and that they are engaged and their well being is being taken care of, then I have to find a way to get resources into their home and into their lives. You can only do that if you are plugged in, if you are having the conversations with the families.

Sandra further stated that these conversations and links to helpful resources are necessary in order to “retrain that brain to be comfortable providing equitable support for the diversity of all children”. Sandra sensed that consistent inclusive language will increase children’s sense of belonging, and she stated, “If you don’t feel like you belong, you’re not ever going to be comfortable in that environment.” Sandra was aware of not making assumptions and asked children and families what their preferred pronoun was showing respect and integrity of individual expression. Although the evolved language came naturally for Sandra, that was not the case for Anna, who stated, “Yes, we try and change the language from firemen to fire-people, we try and change that, but it is very difficult even for educated teachers.” Anna further elaborated, “Even if it is not foreign, it is still new: people still use mailman, fireman, policeman, postman. It is very difficult to stop and retrain your brain and say police-person.”

As the above examples show, Anna struggled with the inclusivity of language and was trying to avoid making assumptions. Although Anna addressed her Kindergarten class as “boys and girls” or interchangeably “girls and boys”, she was reluctant to address her class with a gender neutral and inclusive welcome greeting, such as “learners.” An inclusive welcome greeting would integrate gender independent children more effectively, because not all children identify with the binary of being a boy or a girl. However, Anna still remained steady with anti-bullying activism, when she noted:
I would use the same language that I would always use with every kid who is being bullied or who is confused or who doesn’t understand what is happening. It is not really different for me. I am always inclusive. Always – it doesn’t matter to me what their issues are.

For Brody, language evolved from just being present in the community, “The language comes from people being able and willing to sit down and be uncomfortable with one-another a little bit and just knowing that that’s okay.” Brody trusted the process and dedicated time to community building to allow inclusive language to develop. In community circles, Brody worked with their class to “develop our own language for it and community building is a huge part of my philosophy of teaching.” With actively caring for one another in community, peers gained trust and openly asked what they needed to know. As Brody explained, “The language just came from them being in an environment that we created together where they felt safe enough to ask.” Brody noted that such a process could not be fast, and thus the use of evolved and equitable language could develop if given adequate attention and time. Prior research shows that because gender is constantly being socially constructed in the classroom, gender-complex educators actively work on not expecting children to fit into a dichotomous classification of gender (Rands, 2009). Instead, these teachers who are evolving with the times, similar to what Brody stated, acknowledge gender categories as fluid, which is an equitable teaching framework (Rands, 2009). This approach is portrayed by Brody’s willingness to facilitate inclusive understanding with their classroom community and unpack privilege and oppression.
4.3 Increasing Awareness of the Surrounding Community Population Outside of the Classroom Builds Understanding of Diverse Identities in Society and Increases Tolerance of Individual Differences in Gender Identities and Expressions

Another theme that emerged from the data is how important it is for educators to get to know where their students come from and understand the vast community and society that surrounds us. Sandra reports boldly:

I think the teachers need to come out of the classrooms and go into the community and see what the community needs. And one of the ways they can do that is by coming to places like The Rainbow Community Centre, linking up and coming to visit organizations that have programs that are focused on children of gender independence. They can’t do that from a textbook, it is not going to be the same. You need the hands-on learning. You need to see the environment. You need to see what is trending now.

Even though Ontario schools are protected with the Equity and Inclusive Education Policy, a large number of transgender youth still face marginalization and oppression within the school system, and as such being aware and getting involved with external additional modes of inclusive support in the greater community can be beneficial for students (Ontario, 2014; Taylor, 2011). If students feel they are not being supported adequately by the staff at their school and need additional advocacy, reaching out to community support for additional programming and mentorship could increase students’ self confidence and positively transfer into school life.

First in this section a sub-theme on breaking down societal boundaries with an emphasis on appreciating diversity is explored. Next, I discuss findings that relate to how bringing in a variety of experienced and knowledgeable guests to talk to students at school increases their exposure and understanding of a variety of people. With increased exposure to different views
and experiences, participants recognize an increasing appreciation for differences in individuals. Last, a discussion on open communication with parents is explored through the participants’ voices.

4.3.1 Diversity and breaking down boundaries

The participants in this study agreed that the school environment can be isolating and removed from the diversity of society. Therefore, it is important for educators and students to know that outside of the school bubble exists a diverse society. Sandra articulates this as follows:

It is up to us as educators to go and find out more about what’s changing in our world. And in this case, what is changing in our world are the rights and privileges of gender independent children and trans individuals. That is changing. It is changing to where there is more rights, there’s more privileges, and barriers are being broken down and that is a good thing. If everyone gets equal rights, we could move forward. If people are lagging behind, we are always going to have mental health in our society, we are always going to have poverty in our society, but it is how we address these things.

Implied in the quote above is the idea that it is the teacher’s role to inform themselves about our changing society, and address social justice in their class. It is important for students to be informed, especially if they are struggling in school. Furthermore, it would be helpful to know that there are programs, resources, and people out there that will understand and help. Sandra further affirmed:

When you are dealing with a child who is going through gender independent behaviours, that may or may not fit the peer group or social group that they are in, it would be nice to know that there is somebody out there that knows what you are going through.
At The Rainbow Community Centre, as Sandra shared, during the drop-in programs on Saturdays, families can come together and experience a sense of community without that fear of being judged or put down. Sandra believed that many children were fighting the battle of inclusion on their own and hoped that these children could reach out to community programming to gain a sense of belonging. Brody also found that taking their students outside of the classroom helped expand their understanding of the diversity that existed in the greater community. Brody stated that they “wanted to actively work on breaking down boundaries on who is a teacher” by working hard to bring in other people from the community. Moreover, as literature shows, if gender independent and trans students are in educational spaces that do not reflect and affirm their lived experience, then it is the teacher’s responsibility to expose their students to that diversity in the outside community, and integrate that diversity back into the classroom community (Dykstra, 2005).

4.3.2 Bringing in a variety of experienced guests to talk to students at school increases students’ understanding of diversity

By working to have representatives from the “arts community, activists, people that represented their own backgrounds and their own languages and other trans and gender independent people who also had other intersessions in relation to race,” Brody actively worked on breaking down the boundaries on “who is a teacher.” Brody facilitated a variety of experiences for their students, “We had people come in to teach them dance and one dance instructor used the pronoun they, so from that, they learned what gender neutral pronouns were.” The participant noted that by exposing students to diversity in their own classroom, students gain a broader scope of who makes up society and the surrounding community in general. Brody encouraged their students to ask questions, and through clear, open, and respectful conversation
that ensues, trans-positive education can commence (Dykstra, 2005). Brody stated that he knew that the power of the collective was more impactful for students than teaching alone, “You as a teacher cannot give them everything and should not give them everything.” They believed that there was great value in exposing students to a variety of identities and expressions, as “it is eye opening”. Anna took a similar viewpoint on the value of exposing students to a variety of educators:

I really believe that books on the subject in primary grades are really huge. Just to be available. Obviously, at some point, to have speakers come in, to have plays. The way to break everything, stereotypes, racism, whatever it is, is to have exposure to that. That is the key.

The participants Brody and Anna both see the value of exposing their students to diversity and facilitating open communication, where students are encouraged to explore, question and think critically.

4.3.3 Communication and openness with parents is integral to supporting students’ success

Getting involved with the surrounding community also includes open communication with parents, as participants noted. Anna felt that the most challenging aspect of integrating gender independence and inclusion was dealing with the parents. Anna further elaborated, “Toronto is accepting, but I am not sure the parents are.” In contrast, Sandra was optimistic and respectful about her communication with parents and families, adding that “families define themselves – whatever that configuration is, they are a family.” Sandra asserted:

However, we can support that family to feel more safe and included in the community and in the program, we do. The only way we can know what those individual families’
needs are, is by asking them, is by finding out what they need. It is by creating that professional relationship.

Sandra also acknowledged that not all parents know how to support their gender independent child, but “they come to the community centre to learn how to support and that is very positive.” Unfortunately, Brody had a disheartening experience whereby a parent pulled their kid out of their class because the parents did not feel the content was appropriate. At the time of the incident, the staff did not know how to deal with it. Brody stated that with the publication of the updated health curriculum and the equity policy, inequitable situations like these could be avoided. Existing literature indicates that clear, honest and respectful communication with parents about the respect and acceptance of their child is the simplest form of advocacy (Dykstra, 2005).

4.4 Conclusion

Throughout the process of data analysis, three major themes emerged. The concept of community building was identified by the participants in this research study as a standout strategy to supporting gender independent students in elementary classrooms. Through building a classroom community, every student is encouraged to use their voice, and this builds understanding of peers feelings, individual differences, and empathy. There are a number of benefits to building community, including an inclusive classroom environment that gives every individual a sense of belonging. Participants perceived benefits of community building are discussed, as well as ample time and dedication to routinely implement community circle time for students. There was limited literature dedicated to community building as a helpful strategy to support gender creative and transgender children and as such, this specific research is timely and relevant. The data reveals the benefits of ally-ship for transgender and gender independent
youth and teachers as well as the educational practice of coming out in reducing homophobic and transphobic oppression.

The second theme that emerged from the data was teachers’ accessibility to resources and the effects that such access has on teaching to a diverse student community. Congruent with the existing literature, findings show lack of confidence and anxiety in delivering updated curriculum and supporting students who identify and express themselves outside of the dichotomy of gender. However, findings provide insight into a particular teacher’s approaches that displayed pronounced levels of confidence, and fluid integration of inclusive education. Moreover, although data reveals some difficulties accessing accurate and inclusive resources, it also shows extensive and inclusive support from the surrounding community, and accessibility for all children and families. The participants also discussed the need for professional and personal development and related implications for future teachers: in order to do their own work on unpacking power and privilege, there is a need to encourage and create anti-oppressive educational spaces for all children. With the increasing understanding around gender and the changes in society as well as educational policy, participants see a need “to retrain the brain and unlearn pre-existing ideas of gender”. This practice could help move educational spaces towards more equity and inclusion, and away from heteronormativity.

The third theme that emerged centered on the awareness of and involvement with the surrounding community outside of the classroom to build understanding and tolerance of individuals’ differences. Participants believed that such an approach helps expand students’ understanding of diverse identities and breaks down boundaries while helping to dismantle the dichotomy of gender. The participants in this study discussed the benefits of bringing in a variety of experienced guests to talk to students in order to provide meaningful experiences. As a result,
students begin to see diversity in their society, and expand their understanding of diverse identities. Teacher’s communicating with parents, the ally-ship and advocacy work within the school, are also integral to the success of this process.

The following chapter discusses the implications of this study’s findings, recommendations, and possible areas of future research. Given the scarcity of the research findings in the area of supporting gender independent children, specific suggestions for future teachers are explored in depth.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

This research project has aimed to uncover strategies and approaches that elementary school teachers use to create inclusive classroom communities that affirm diverse expressions of gender identity. These inclusive approaches aim to integrate gender creative and transgender students into the classroom community validating their existence and creating understanding and acceptance around diverse gender identities. The findings from this study can be applied to create inclusive classroom communities for all intersections of diversity, although this study has a particular focus on the spectrum of gender identities.

In this chapter, I summarize what this research project found and speak to the significance of these findings for integrating and accepting students of all gender identities into school and classroom community. Then I discuss the implications of my findings. First, I will address the broad implications for the educational community stakeholders, such as The Ministry of Education, school boards, and school administration. Then I will consider the narrow implications for my own practice as a future teacher and a researcher. Thereafter, based on what I have learned from my research participants in this study, I will articulate recommendations for teachers, administrators, school boards, Ministries of Education, professional associations, professional development, and teacher education. Next, given what this study uncovered, I identify important areas for future research and potential improvements to the research design.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

The findings from this research project indicate common themes and are significant in supporting gender independent students. In this section I will briefly summarize the relevant research findings from the three educators I interviewed juxtaposed to the literature review. First,
building classroom community and integrating gender creativity by giving every student a voice to express their thoughts and feelings has a strong correlation with positive, affirming, inclusive educational environments. The qualities of being an open-minded, proactive educator that checks in with students and models caring, supporting, understanding behaviour are a few strategies expressed by the research participants. Exploring and reflecting a diverse range of learning material from various cultures and perspectives will contribute to the diversity of learning within the classroom. This opens the door to inclusivity and understanding of similarities and differences. We get first-hand reports that community building sets the foundation for a safe, positive, and inclusive classroom environment. Students who work on attentive listening, mutual respect, and patience to allow every student to be heard contribute positively to inclusive classroom community (Gibbs, 2014). Community in the classroom fosters a sense of belonging because students feel supported and confident being who they are. Community building is a process and the success criteria have to be re-affirmed with students on a regular basis. Worthiness is expressed by keeping with the process of integrating community circle time for students to reflect, share, and express their thoughts. We also see the merit teachers bring to students when they are authentic about their identity. Coming out, for example, for being gender fluid and gay, shows confidence about identity, and students feel safer being authentic too. This is an approach a teacher can take to further develop unity, cohesion and openness within the classroom community, encouraging others to replicate this behaviour.

Secondly, let’s face it – The Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum is updated and new (2015) and our society is becoming increasingly aware we are in a Gender Revolution (National Geographic, 2017). Significant relearning needs to take place in order to communicate knowledge confidently and accurately to students of all identities and create that
inclusive affirming learning environment. Vast numbers of resources and policies exist in support for gender creative and transgender children; teachers can prepare themselves to teach inclusively to the whole child, they just have to be willing (Pendleton Jimenez, 2016). Although teacher preparatory schools are currently including gender diverse identities and expressions, as well as many other layers of diversity in the course content, this has not always been the case, as revealed by the research participants. As such, professional and personal development may be required to have all teachers understanding the same inclusive objectives. Gender neutral and inclusive language needs to be learned and practiced; as such measures do not stand alone working in theory. The use of evolved inclusive, equitable language that actively communicates caring for one another in community can develop if given adequate attention and time. Because gender is constantly being socially constructed in the classroom, educators need to work on not fitting children into dichotomous classifications of gender.

A final theme that emerged from this research project emphasizes the importance that place and surrounding community has on children’s overall understanding and tolerance of differences in others. The rights of gender independent and transgender people are changing and schools need to reflect this evolution of understanding and accepting differences in identity. Experiential learning outside of the classroom and in the surrounding community functions to increase student’s understanding of diverse identities, gender identities included. In addition, bringing in a variety of people to educate students on their life experiences opens their minds to a variety of ways of being, increasing tolerance. We also see the benefit of open communication with parents, keeping all lines of communication honest, open, and equitable for the student at the centre.
5.2 Implications

What follows is a discussion of the implications of my research findings. First, a look at broad implications for the educational community at large; second, a look at the narrow implications for my continually emergent teacher practice and research.

5.2.1 Broad implications

Due to pre-existing marginalization and oppression of gender independent and transgender individuals, I urge for educational reform. Broadening the way educators should see community building can lead to finding ample links to the curriculum to incorporate students’ expressions of self, substantially increasing peers’ understanding of diverse identities. In broad strokes, this study should serve as a vital reminder to educators to allot sufficient time to incorporate inclusive community building into the school day as a vehicle for collaborative learning and creating space for student identity. This study also provides insight into the issue of relevant up-to-date professional training for educators to access, both within the Ministry of Education and school boards. The present study has three specific implications for teachers working with diverse identities – a reality in all Toronto Ontario based schools, one of the most diverse and progressive cities in the world.

First, teachers need to scaffold opportunities within the school day need to allow for collaborative learning wherein students voice themselves and feel supported when communicating their interests and lived realities. We know how diverse the student body is - reflective of culture, religion, orientation, gender identity, and race. The Ministry of Education respects this through policies and documents; now educators need to understand how to create equitable learning environments that validate all human beings for who they are. A very notable strategy of creating classroom community, understanding and respect for differences – both
invisible and visible – has been revealed. It is now the responsibility of educators to create this supportive, collective, community and facilitate learning about diverse gender identities; the Ministry of Education has your back. Educators have identified many cross-curricular ways of integrating classroom community to satisfy many needs of the curriculum. The cross-curricular (math, literacy, drama, social studies) benefits of building an understanding student community are reflected in students’ adaptability and acceptance of differences.

Second, the findings from this study implicate necessary professional and personal development when it comes to understanding The Gender Revolution, the notion that gender (much like all aspects of identity) is situated on a spectrum, ranging differently for each individual. We see a strong correlation with educators relearning gender and providing affirming support for students that identify as gender creative or transgender. Equitable learning environments mean educators all need to be on the same pedagogical page – in order to create an inclusive safe space for all students to thrive in. Professional development implemented from school boards are required for all teachers to understand gender diversity, and therefore be able to provide understanding support for their students. Relevant resources and accessibility to training are initiatives school boards can embrace. It is not enough for educators to idle, we need to see active effort to relearn and understand gender diversity. The relearning will be reflected in equitable, inclusive gender-neutral language, where students feel a sense of belonging while being true to their identity.

Third, the experiences shared in this qualitative study revealed the value that learning about place, the surrounding environment, culture and community has on students’ understanding of others. Differences exist in society, in the surroundings that every school is located. We see the implication of diverse student identities and the relatedness that surrounding
community has. Classes are diverse, much like the surrounding community. The vast community that surrounds every school presents a meaningful learning experience for all children. The findings implicate increased understanding of individual differences when teachers and students engage in experiential learning, I urge educators to invite this into their school day. We can learn to appreciate differences and contribute to everyone’s growth in self-confidence and self-concept. We learn about different intersectional identities and how different oppressions intersect. Another way to learn about others is to bring in educated guests for the students to get to know and learn from their experiences. Important stakeholders of this implication are parents – they need to trust the learning experience and provide permission, and the school administration and school board – they need to approve this experiential learning.

5.2.2 Narrow implications

The findings of this study have implications for me as a teacher and researcher. First, I have learned how important it is for students to find their inner voice and to co-construct a supportive class community. As such, my teacher practice incorporates community building, providing a positive and safe space for all students to be heard and understood. I have learned that I have the power to create a positive, safe, supportive environment for students. I have learned that students’ attitudes about diving deep into gender diversity and inclusion are strongly correlated with teacher’s attitudes. What stood out to me is the fact that children are sponges, absorbing cues from their teachers and surroundings – it is our job as educators to inform, educate, expose and provide moments for critical thinking and inclusion. As a result of this research, my future teaching practice will incorporate critical conversations that explore differences, oppressions, marginalizations, power, privilege, and all the intersections of identity. I will inspire other teachers to model gender diversity inclusion by creating awareness and ally
ship. I will empower young students to embrace who they are, and be supportive of others who do the same.

As a researcher, I know that information is always evolving, and I am thus committed to continuing my quest for knowledge, keeping an open mind, an inquisitive mind, and a creative mind. I am committed to learning with my students, to tackling questions head on, and to continue inquiring and questioning if I don’t understand something. I have learned as a researcher, that people, in this case, educators appreciate being asked about their practice and appreciate opportunities to develop their teaching practice towards inclusive spaces for all students. I believe the future is looking bright, educators and students are ready for conversation and progress.

5.3 Recommendations

The implications of the present study point specifically to several recommendations for teachers, administrators, school boards, Ministries of Education, professional associations, professional development, and teacher education. First, for teacher education programs, I recommend courses that link equity, diversity and inclusion as an overriding theme in all courses. A positive example of a progressive measure at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education is the Master’s Anti-Discrimination course that encourages educators to unpack their privilege in society and create inclusion for all diverse individuals. I urge teacher educators to take advantage of the cross curricular connections that gender has in all courses, addressing how gender plays a role, as with other intersections, such as race, culture, sexuality, expression, primary language. Addressing gender through drama improvisation workshops, documentary viewings and written reflections, as well as reflecting on the rights of transgender individuals in history and social studies aids children’s depth of understanding gender and becoming an ally.
Teacher education can act to prepare future teachers to be proactive in their support for individuals that exist on a range of spectrums. Gender identities are unique and inclusion needs to be created around this. Creating collaborative learning through community around peers’ differences, and modeling empathy and understanding are strategies to be learned; I recommend teacher education courses integrate collaborative community learning to improve future teaching practices. Teachers learn how to foster inclusiveness, facilitate students in learning empathy, understanding and respect contributing to the safe, positive and affirming space that necessitates all students to thrive.

Second, I recommend school boards to take a proactive approach to facilitating professional development of all staff members on the gender spectrum, the variety of expressions and gender identities. Attending workshops, such as The Rainbow Community Centre’s *Creating Authentic Spaces: A Gender Identity and Gender Expression Inclusion Workshop* is a great place to start. Moreover, I advocate for an overarching theme of professional development to be around inclusion, respect for diversity, and equity. If the school needs help in creating programs and community around gender inclusion and respect for individual differences, I recommend reaching out to bring in members of the community to help with professional development. I also encourage personal development, and this means educators are advised to be ready to talk about what their students are ready to talk about. If this means learning needs to take place, it is essential for educators to take that time to educate themselves on renewed curriculum that aligns with the Gender Revolution.

Third, I recommend that teachers and administrators learn about their school’s surrounding community and take their students out into the community for meaningful experiential learning. Teachers can take their students out into the community and city to observe
many intersections of diverse identities. Teachers can then encourage their students to critically analyze their position in society, relative to some of the identities they observed and assess their positions of power and privilege; this can contribute to understanding oppression and being empathetic. I also recommend that school boards encourage educators to invite educated members of the community to speak to students to continue developing their empathy, understanding, and respect for diversity. I recommend that educators keep an open line of communication with their students’ parents, as being transparent with parents is always the answer. With a positive approach, the support of school boards and the Ministry of Education, educators can respectfully represent and educate their students on gender diversity, and build community and understanding around respecting diversity.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Different research questions that my research raised could be addressed to more fully substantiate my present study. Such questions include, asking children to participate in different gender splendour workshops, and assessing their respect for differences, diversity and inclusion both before and after the inclusive gender diversity workshops. I do believe that this research is about children and therefore including children’s perspectives authenticates the research findings. The research question I suggested above does go beyond the present study’s research parameters and guidelines. As such, the present research design is somewhat limiting, given that children were not included in interviews and no quantitative methods of gathering information were utilized. In addition, the sample of educators I interviewed is really too small and with more participants the results could hold more value. More data collection tools would further validate this research, such as surveys with children and staff, increasing the scope of perspectives. Educational research scholars could administer online surveys to teacher candidates on attitudes
and perspectives towards teaching to diverse student identities, and inspire change through positive future studies.

I think it is important that future research about gender diversity education include assessing the progress that current teachers are experiencing in creating equitable inclusive classrooms by finding cross curricular links for educators to turn into teachable moments. I think the bulk of the research should focus on continuing to make positive changes in school environments. Existing literature and research on this topic tends to focus heavily on the marginalization and discrimination of gender diverse individuals. Educational research scholars should aim to direct their attention in assessing the evolvement of educator’s efforts to foster inclusive classroom communities that respect and understand gender diversity. We can learn from strategies that work in real classrooms. Why is this important? Educators need to ask themselves if there is a problem within their classroom and their school? If there is a problem, there is a solution, and it is up to educators to teach students strategies to learn through problems.

5.5 Concluding Comments

This research paper aimed to uncover strategies and approaches that elementary school teachers use to integrate and accept gender creative and transgender students into the class community. The results of the study implicate diverse student identities and the initiative educators need to take to harness teachable moments and reflect inclusivity. Due to the updated curriculum and advanced recent understanding of gender diversity, it is implicated that relearning gender will ready all educators and administrators to model respect and inclusion for diversity in identity. It is implicated that real world experiential learning increases students’ understanding of individual differences and positions of privilege and marginalization. The results suggest that inclusive, positive, affirning classroom spaces exist, and that it is possible
for educators to create one too. Thus, what does this research mean for future teachers? I recommend that teacher accreditation courses link equity and inclusion into all aspects of education, identifying cross-curricular links to teaching gender diversity. I also recommend school boards require their staff to complete professional and personal development on gender diversity and inclusion. Lastly, I recommend educators to take their students out of the classroom and into the surrounding community to experience diversity in the real world. These valuable learning opportunities are accessible to every educator, I urge educators to take advantage. This research provides meaningful strategies for educators to develop their practice and close the gap between uneducated anxious educators and proactive confident teachers that support students of all gender expressions.

The results of this study are important for educators, school boards, and The Ministry of Education to know because the solution to creating respect for diverse identities is within educators themselves. There was an absence of solutions in the literature to creating affirming positive spaces for gender creative and transgender students. This research uncovered accessible approaches that are waiting for educators to implement into practice. With the support of the curriculum, open communication with parents, funding from the Ministry, educators can create inclusive classrooms that allow students to have a voice; to create a classroom community that is affirming of diverse gender identities and diversity in general. Understanding, empathizing and communicating with peers in the classroom is fundamental to students thriving at school. The good news is that we can all make this happen, we just need to do some relearning of evolved subject matter and model respect for diverse identities to our students. We have the power to create real change around respecting differences and empowering gender creative and
transgender students to be who they are. We have the power to think critically and think creatively when it comes to supporting gender diversity.
References


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Appendix A: Letter of Signed Consent

Date: _______________________________

Dear _______________________________,

My name is Jessica Reznek and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research focuses on identifying teaching approaches and strategies that help integrate gender-creative, gender-fluid and transgender students into the standardized elementary education system in order to facilitate effective learning and development. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have had experience teaching students who do not identify with the male/female binary, and express themselves somewhere along the gender spectrum. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for 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. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my research coordinator, Angela Macdonald. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
Jessica Reznek

Full Name: Jessica Ruth Reznek
Phone Number: _____________
Email: jessica.reznek@mail.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 from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Jessica Reznek 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/Questions

Introductory Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn about the experiences of gender-creative, gender-fluid, and transgender students for the purpose of implementing strategies and approaches that elementary school teachers can integrate to create inclusive and safe spaces. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on teaching experiences with gender-creative and transgender students, the implications of gender stereotypes within the school, incidents of bullying with regard to gender expression, and perceived attitudes and teaching approaches with these students. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information

1. Can you tell me your job position and responsibilities? Have you taught different grades throughout your career?
2. Can you talk about your teacher training – where and when you got certified and how long ago you got your teacher certification?
3. What motivated you to pursue your career in teaching? Did you have experience working with children prior to teacher’s college?
4. Are you familiar with the surrounding community make-up near the school you teach at? If so, can you speak to the needs of the community? Core-values of school community? (Demographics, neighbourhood, diversity)
5. Do you know of any community organizations or programs in the area? If so, what relationship, if any, is there between these centres in the community and your school? Is there a way to get involved?
6. What are some of the challenges of working at your current school? Previous school? Any challenges with gender-nonconformity?

Teacher Perspectives/ Beliefs

1. What is your teaching philosophy?
2. What moral principles and values guide your teaching practices?
3. Would you say you foster an inclusive environment within your classroom? What constitutes an inclusive classroom in your opinion?
4. How confident are you in your knowledge of gender identity, gender expression, and the gender spectrum?
5. Do you believe children that are gender-creative, gender-fluid, or transgender are given the same opportunities as students who are cis-gender or “gender-normative”? Different opportunities? Can you speak to the variation or discrepancy?
6. What are your attitudes towards gender non-conformity and transgender individuals?
Teacher Practices

1. What are your teaching experiences with gender-fluid and transgender students?
2. How many children that fit the gender-non-conforming criteria you have taught in your career?
   Can you speak to any differences you have experienced in teaching a gender-creative or transgender student compared to gender-normative? Your reactions?
3. Did knowing that you had a gender-creative or transgender student in your class change your teaching practices? In what ways did your teaching approach change? In what ways did your teaching practices stay the same?
4. What approaches, if any, do you take to bring about the discussion of gender stereotypes, bullying, fairness, inclusion, and accepting others regardless of differences? What does your school do in this area?
5. What challenges has your school encounter with regards to gender-diversity education and inclusiveness? Are any teachers not supportive of the idea? Parents?
6. How can teachers create an inclusive environment for gender non-conforming students so that they feel safe and free to be themselves? What teaching methods support children with gender-fluid and transgender identities to feel included?

Supports and Challenges

1. During your teacher training was there any pre-service training or education on gender diversity and the marginalization of gender-creative and transgender students?
2. What do you think needs to be done in teacher training to educate the upcoming teachers on inclusion of gender-creative and transgender students?
3. Within the school that you currently teach at, has there been any formal or informal training to educate the teachers on how to create a gender inclusive school environment?
4. A number of alternative or private sector schools are inclusive of gender diversity, and it seems to be starting around conversation and reflecting, writing and working collaboratively with peers. A team mindset is really important, so is inclusion and growth mindset. Does this sound like the initiatives going on in your school? I am trying to get an idea of the school climate and community.

Next Steps

1. If you have any advice for upcoming teachers on this topic, and if so, what would it be and why?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.