

# Transphobia and Cisgender Privilege: Pre-Service Teachers Recognizing and Challenging Gender Rigidity in Schools

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## **Abstract**

Our study provides examples of how critical curricula and social justice education can be brought together to inform teacher education. Building upon our ongoing longitudinal study, which investigates the impact of an integrated LGBTQ awareness program, we focus in this article on five pre-service teachers who identified critical incidents in schools related to transphobia and gender construction, and who were concerned about the enduring gender binary that presents itself in schools. Their experiences highlight the

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ways in which gender surveillance, both overtly and covertly, reinscribes heteronormativity, and that homophobia, transphobia, and gender stereotypes need to be continuously challenged.

*Keywords:* pre-service teacher education, transgender, gender, LGBTQ youth

## **Résumé**

Notre étude montre comment des cours axés sur la pensée critique peuvent être intégrés à une sensibilisation à la justice sociale dans la formation à l'enseignement. À partir d'une étude longitudinale toujours en cours sur l'impact d'un programme intégré de sensibilisation aux questions LGBTQ, nous nous concentrons ici sur cinq étudiants en pédagogie qui, ayant identifié, des incidents préoccupants liés à la transphobie et à la construction du genre lors de leurs stages, s'inquiétaient de la conception binaire du genre en milieu scolaire. Leurs expériences mettent en lumière comment la surveillance, déguisée ou non, du genre réinscrit l'hétéronormativité et à quel point il est important de remettre continuellement en cause l'homophobie, la transphobie et les stéréotypes liés au genre.

*Mots-clés :* formation initiale à l'enseignement, transgenre, genre, jeunes LGBTQ

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## Introduction

The opportunity for teacher candidates to understand how to incorporate anti-discrimination work in their teaching practice is a key component of school and education reform. Social justice policies and procedures exist in many school settings, but unless new teachers have the opportunity to explore and apply knowledge learned from professional development, these well-meaning policies are often neglected or ignored. Building upon our ongoing longitudinal study, which investigates the impact of an integrated Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgendered, Two-Spirited, Queering and/or Questioning (LGBTQ) awareness program (Kearns, Mitton-Kukner, & Tompkins 2014a, 2014b; Mitton-Kukner, Kearns, & Tompkins, 2015), we focus on five pre-service teachers who identified critical incidents related to transphobia and gender construction. These incidents, which happened during their first practicum, caused great concern over the enduring gender binary that presents itself in schools. Their experiences highlight the ways in which gender surveillance, both overtly and covertly, reinscribes heteronormativity, and contributes to genderism, homophobia, and transphobia.

### LGBTQ and Gender in Schools and Society

Shaped by heteronormativity and rigid gender expectations, LGBTQ youth in schools and society have been vulnerable to harassment (Taylor et al., 2011). In such hostile climates, LGBTQ youth are unlikely to learn and may avoid schools (Palmer, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2012). Indeed, many learn that discrimination against the LGBTQ community is acceptable (Gender Public Advocacy Coalition, 2006; Haskell & Burtch, 2010), as transgender and gender non-conforming students experience ongoing acts of aggression in schools with little adult intervention (Guasp, 2012; Reis & Saewyc, 1999; Taylor et al., 2011, Wright-Maley, David, Gozalez, & Colwell, 2016). In the midst of increasing recognition that more supports are needed to fully include LGBTQ youth and their families in schools, is the topic of gender. Schools often serve as contexts where students come to narrowly understand gender roles and expectations, which limits the gender expression of all youth, since those who do not conform or perform their gender roles are vulnerable to harassment and bullying (Rands, 2009; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013).

With this as the backdrop of teacher education in North America, teacher educators need to prepare pre-service teachers to understand their role in the development of inclusive spaces for sexual minority, transgender, and gender non-conforming youth in schools. Anti-oppressive work (Kumashiro, 2002) in teacher education that aims to support learners who challenge prevailing gender norms in school is complex and necessary (Clark, 2010; Goldstein, Russell, & Daley, 2007; Stiegler, 2008), yet largely under-researched in terms of how programs might proceed. For example, scholars note the lack of explicit LGBTQ education in teacher education programs (Grace & Wells, 2006; Kitchen & Bellini, 2012; Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008; Schneider & Dimito, 2008), as well as the resistance demonstrated by pre-service teachers to LGBTQ education as part of diversity work and curricular inclusion (Jennings & Sherwin, 2008; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2002, 2008; Wright-Maley et al., 2016).

In Canada, education is a provincial jurisdiction and the inclusion of LGBTQ in schools is widely varied; specifically, we found there is little legislative agreement about transgender learners in schools. For example, in Nova Scotia, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has released new guidelines to support transgender and gender non-conforming students and to affirm students' rights within the Canadian Human Rights Act (Willick, 2014). In Saskatchewan, the Ministry of Education has created a document to support LGBTQ students at a curricular and policy level: *Deepening the Discussion: Gender and Sexual Diversity* (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015). In contrast to these examples is the battle in Alberta, where a bill that allows students in schools to form Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) was put on hold ("Gay youth bill delayed," 2014), voted down ("Gay-straight alliance bill for schools," 2014), and finally passed ("Alberta passes bill," 2015), although there is still much controversy and public pushback surrounding the bill (Parents for Choice in Education, n.d.). Given the evidence to show that GSAs are essential aspects of safe school environments for LGBTQ learners (Taylor et al., 2009), the lack of agreement across Canada is startling, although we note the Trudeau government's efforts to legally guarantee human rights protection for transgender people across the country (Mass, 2016). So long as the debate around LGBTQ youth and their families continues, the climate remains toxic.

## Gender, Transgender, and LGBTQ in Teacher Education

In a review of social justice literature, Airton (2014) identifies the predominant “hope” that anti-homophobia teacher education (AHTE) can “prepare teachers to contribute to the well-being of gender and sexual minority students” (p. 388). In our work, we have come to see LGBTQ issues and trans issues, in particular, through the lens of gender. The gender binary continues to enforce the identities of all youth in school, with the prescription of rigid gender roles. Men and women are also divided into highly gendered cultural, social, economic, and political roles. In schools, boys and girls are equally divided with little room for fluidity or a range of behaviours on a spectrum of socially constructed roles and behaviours. There is often resistance, and constraints are often imposed on each categorical binary. Trans identities do not easily fit boy or girl categories; trans stories are diverse and require a separation of gender and sexual orientation (Wright-Maley et al., 2016, p. 5). DePalma (2013) notes that trans itself is used as an umbrella term that “encompass[es] discomfort with role expectations, being queer, occasional or more frequent cross-dressing, permanent cross-dressing and cross-gender living, through to accessing major health interventions such as hormone therapy and surgical reassignment procedures” (p. 2, quoting Whittle, 2006).

In considering the diverse identities of LGBTQ people, one needs to be mindful of gender. DePalma states:

Recognizing the links between gender normativity and heteronormativity requires us to address the extent to which policing of sex and gender functions to construct gender anxiety and cissexual privilege (the assumption that the sex assigned at birth is somehow more natural and genuine, see Serano 2007), to propagate genderism (the pervasive and systemic belief in the naturalness and superiority of gender normative, see Airton 2009, 132) and to marginalize gender variant and transgender people (Whittle, Turner, & Al-Alami 2007). (DePalma, 2013, p. 2 )

There are several challenges associated with thwarting genderism, homophobia, and transphobia. Savage and Harley (2009) note that obstacles impeding safe and inclusive school environments and queer positive curricula in the United States range from fear, laissez-faire attitudes, and a feeling that negative attitudes are challenging to disrupt. In two different universities, one in the United States and the other in Canada,

Wright-Maley and colleagues (2016) found that a large majority of Catholic elementary teachers affirmed the principle of inclusive school spaces for trans and LGBTQ youth; however, many were fearful of students, parents, and administrators, and not sure if they would include such topics in their curricula. Keddie, Mills, and Mills (2008) noted that one teacher in their study had to “tread cautiously” (p. 203) because she was trying to “change familiar, comfortable and very deep-seated ways of being” (p. 203).

Some teachers simply do not see the complicity that schools play in supporting the gender binary system. These teachers have accepted “the naturalness of the gendered status quo” (Keddie et al., 2008, p.198). Early schooling, too, often accepts the family and community gender expectations that are imposed upon children. While many teachers do see how genderism and sexism manifest themselves in school, they are unsure about what can be done to challenge this. Webb, Schirato, and Danaher (2002) suggest that “we become complicit with gender injustice or ‘dominant vision[s] of the world not because we necessarily agree with [them], or because [they are] in our interests, but because there does not seem to be any alternative” (p. 92). In response to such conditions, scholars suggest new teachers require education if they are to challenge the gender status quo (Bellini, 2012).

Airton (2014), working with pre-service educators to help facilitate and support anti-homophobic social justice work, proposes a highly nuanced engagement of social justice work, including the examination of oneself and one’s own understandings of homophobia. Anti-homophobic work requires seeing the challenges and moving beyond the notion that teachers must formulaically address, affect, and vanquish all instances of homophobia “in order for something to be done” (p. 397). Airton suggests conversations that support the complicated and messy work of social justice advocates. DePalma’s documentation of elementary teachers’ engagement in trans pedagogy at the elementary level, shows just how nuanced anti-homophobic education can be:

While gender variance is often socially constructed in school contexts as deviance or even pathology, members of the No Outsiders project have tried to resist prevailing victim discourses of marginalization and powerlessness that threaten to diminish the subject to someone who needs to be rescued, or at best, tolerated (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). (DePalma, 2013, p. 13)

Although there are challenges to this work, narratives that show a large variety of experiences around not only adversity, but support for LGBTQ youth and families offer hope.

Certainly, some successful gender and trans education projects exist. Having seen the power of the *No Outsiders Project*, DePalma (2013) calls for gender work at the elementary and secondary levels, and agrees with McQueen (2006), who affirms that “transgender awareness can work to break down those rigid [gender] stereotypes” (McQueen, as cited in DePalma, 2013, p. 11).

### **Situating the Positive Space Program within our Bachelor of Education**

We have written elsewhere (Kearns, Mitton-Kukner, & Tompkins, 2014a, 2014b; Mitton-Kukner, Kearns, & Tompkins, 2015) about the design of our two-year, four-term Bachelor of Education and the accompanying mandatory Positive Space Program, which provides LGBTQ education for pre-service teachers. As seen below, the program is woven into each campus term. Levels 1 and 2 are situated in mandatory courses, and Levels 3 and 4 are optional. The course Sociology of Education in term one explicitly and intentionally aims to build a safe and democratic learning space focusing on discussions about power, privilege, equity, social justice, race, class, gender, and sexuality. We believe that nesting the LGBTQ awareness program in core mandatory courses in Year 1 contributes to the positive uptake we have by the pre-service teachers in Year 2 to attend workshops for Levels 3 and 4. Our students’ enthusiasm for this training led us to develop Levels 3 and 4 as further professional learning. Table 1 provides a visual of how the training is embedded across the two years.

**Table 1.** Positive Space training over the two-year BEd program

Year 1 Term Compulsory	Year 1 Term 2 Compulsory	Year 2 Term 1 Optional	Year 2, Term 2 Optional
<b>EDUC 433 Sociology of Education</b>	<b>EDUC 435 Inclusion 1</b>	<b>Students take a range of courses</b>	<b>Students take a range of courses</b>
<b>Positive Space 1</b> (2.5 hours)	<b>Positive Space 2</b> (2.5 hours)	<b>Positive Space 3</b> <i>Exploring Curricular Possibilities</i> (2.5 hours)	<b>Positive Space 4</b> <i>Train the Trainer</i> (4 hours)
<b>Field Experience</b> (5 weeks)	<b>Field Experience</b> (6 Weeks)	<b>Field Experience</b> (5 weeks)	<b>Field Experience</b> (6 weeks)

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## **Bridging Sociology and Inclusion: The Critical Incident Paper**

One of us had completed a critical incident paper in her pre-service education program and found it to be a transformative experience. She brought this idea to our Sociology/Inclusion teaching team and it has become the linking assignment between EDUC 433 Sociology of Education and 435 Inclusive Practices 1. As pre-service teachers prepare to leave EDUC 433 Sociology of Education to head into their first field placement they are asked to look for a student or groups of students who are placed on the margins of the classroom or the school. They are simply to observe what is happening around these students. When they return from the field their experiences are unpacked as a class. They also read the article “Teacher Research as a Way of Knowing” (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992), in which Lytle and Cochran-Smith discuss how a researcher stance can both inform and sustain social justice teaching. The pre-service teachers then research the subject, issue, experience, and/or exclusion they witnessed during their teaching practicum to see what is known about this phenomenon in the literature so as to deepen their understanding.

They are also encouraged to consider actions that could be taken by one individual teacher, by teachers and administrators, and possibly community members to create greater inclusion and belonging. They may further identify board or system level supports that could support these students and possibly their families. In response to this endeavour, we have observed that pre-service teachers tend to notice the many different ways that students become placed on the margins of schooling and what might be done to address such situations. In this way we bring forward a key concept that we have attempted to develop in Sociology of Education—that of teacher agency. We hope to show that educators who are critically conscious, working alone, but more often in collaboration with others, can and do make a difference in classrooms. The reaction from our pre-service teachers to this linking assignment has been overwhelmingly positive. In addition to writing a paper on a topic of their choice, pre-service teachers share their findings with their peers using different strategies such as talking circles or a human library. The intent underlying the activity is to foster their understanding about how teacher research can increase their agency in the classroom.



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## Methodology

As researchers, we embrace thick, rich descriptions and understandings that emerge from qualitative research, and we appreciate its ability to capture the nuances and complexities of teaching (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This research grew out of observations by two of us who were teaching EDUC 435 Inclusion Practices 1 in Winter 2015. Since implementing the critical inquiry assignment, there have been over 600 papers written on a variety of topics, but this was actually the first year that five pre-service teachers identified critical incidents in schools related to transphobia and gender construction. These papers highlighted concerns about the enduring gender binary that presents itself in schools. We saw these critical incidents as giving us insights into what is happening in schools with regard to social justice, and also as important artefacts that could be used to inquire more deeply into how pre-service teachers understand their emerging teaching practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Reading the critical incident papers piqued our interest; in response, we invited all five students to participate in a focus group with us once course work and evaluations had been completed. The five pre-service teachers accepted. The participants reflect the rural university's demographic, as they identified as white, female, heterosexual, and middle class. The participants' ages ranged from the early twenties to early thirties. Of the five, one was a parent. Ethics had been previously obtained as part of the larger ongoing longitudinal study on the impact of the positive space program interwoven in our program, for which we have the approval to use focus groups and documents generated by participants to understand the program's impact. Students were formally invited to participate with letters of invitation and informed consent was obtained. Data consisted of the five critical incident papers (1,200–1,500 words in length) submitted to the research team and the follow-up focus group interview. During the focus group interview, we engaged the participants about the ways in which gender presented itself in schools during their first practicum. The focus group interview enabled us to hear the opinions of a smaller group with the understanding that the opinions expressed by the focus group might resonate with others from the same community (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The focus group conversation was approximately 90 minutes in length. It was recorded and transcribed by a research assistant. The focus group was held in January 2016, when these pre-service

teachers were in Year 2 of their program. At the time of the focus group, the pre-service teachers had completed Levels 1, 2, and 3 of the LGBTQ awareness program.

Each researcher read the critical incident papers individually and coded the recurring ideas. We then met to see where our initial analysis overlapped, which enabled us to develop themes that guided the development of our focus group questions and interview (Merriam, 2009). We read the transcripts individually, and then as a group, to look again for common patterns to inform the development of larger themes. There was overlap between the patterns that emerged in the analysis of the critical incident papers and the focus group interview, which allowed us to identify three major themes: (1) policing gender and responding, (2) unpacking gender through writing, and (3) identifying challenges associated with re-teaching gender.

## Findings

### **Pre-Service Teachers Identifying and Problematizing Gender in Schools**

Our study provides practical examples of how critical curricula and social justice education can be brought together to inform teacher education. By embedding Positive Space training into the formal curriculum of two compulsory foundations courses, we are able to model to pre-service teachers how to disrupt, disturb, and de-privilege heteronormativity, and trouble gender. The critical incident paper provided a deep way for our pre-service teachers to reflect upon their experiences. They identified that writing the paper was important, as it gave them permission to critically inquire into what they felt was not present in schools in the form of gender education. Additionally, through the research literature, their feelings were validated that more can be done to create safe and inclusive spaces for transgender students, beginning with gender education for all students. The focus group conversation provided an additional layer to unpack the complexity of social justice work and its ongoing tensions. As the nature of social justice teaching is often complex for beginning teachers, our participants appreciated the opportunities provided by our program to critically reflect upon and share their experiences, learning, and possibilities for their future practice.

## Theme One: Policing Gender and Responding

Schools, like society, find ways to police gender overtly and covertly. Although many have rallied against the notion of “sex as destiny” or some “essence” prescribing fixed gender roles to males and females (like de Beauvoir, who wrote *The Second Sex* in 1949), the gender binary persists. Our pre-service teachers were deeply troubled by gender regulation and policing at the schools. Foucault (1979) explored how various levels of surveillance regulate people’s behaviours; people are expected to perform a variety of roles, and people perform them due to external and internal regulation for fear of social sanctions or other consequences. The regulation of gender may be similarly seen by the social sanctions and conflicts that can arise when people do not perform and conform to gender roles and expectations. Concerns around the policing of gender by educators, peers, and parents were touched upon by several participants; here, we highlight all three levels of regulation. We also note that our pre-service teachers did try to support youth who were expressing aspects of themselves outside of gender norms. However, the complexity of resisting the pressure to conform to gender stereotypes and the expectations around gender performativity are real, and the tension between resistance and regulation is ongoing. These tensions can often be challenging to navigate, as pre-service teachers themselves are situated in different power positions in the education system in which they seek employment.

***Educators policing gender.*** In Janice’s school experience, she was encouraged and discouraged by how her two cooperating teachers (CTs) interacted with a particular youth. Janice explained during the focus group interview how her CTs responded in very different ways to a transgender male student:

So I walked into my first practicum...and somebody’s female name was scratched out with the new male name he wanted to go by and my first CT was phenomenal. It wasn’t a big deal, this is what you call him [the student]; end of story...down to another classroom...the teacher [CT 2] wouldn’t even acknowledge the existence of this human being...it just like suck[ed] the air right out of the whole classroom... (Janice, Focus Group Interview, January 8, 2016)

Janice initially wrote about this incident in her paper, and explained that the first CT treated the youth and the change of this person's identity and name as normal. In contrast, the second CT would not even call this youth by name, and simply called the youth "you." In the critical incident paper, Janice shared her first interaction with the second CT and her discomfort in what she witnessed. In one instance, the second CT had asked all the other students in the class by name to read aloud, and when it came time to call upon the transgender student, all the CT could muster was "OK, YOU, your turn!" Janice watched as the student "trembled through the reading and when he was finished he put the book away, head down and continued to doodle on his sheet" (Janice, Critical Incident Paper). What struck Janice was how powerful educators are in their ability to affirm or belittle the existence of youth in their classrooms.

In witnessing such dramatically different responses to gender and name changes, Janice reportedly had the confidence and insight to affirm the child. In our classes and Positive Space training, we talk about power at the individual, institutional, and systemic level. While different strategies are needed to challenge power at different levels and in different ways, it is possible to act. Janice shared how she responded and tried to support this youth:

So after having some training...[I was assured that I could] just to go up to the student afterwards, [so I said,] "Hi Jamie, how are you? I see you're drawing, you are really good at drawing," just to acknowledge their existence. That's all it took, like it wasn't a big thing, but to see [a teacher] say "you" and then watch Jamie have to read out loud in a second language and just crumble...it still shakes me... then to just go afterwards [to the student] and say, "Wow, you are a really good drawer Jamie, how did you learn to do this?"...[you could] just see a weight lift. (Janice, Focus Group Interview, January 8, 2016)

While the pre-service teacher is mindful of the power imbalance that exists between herself and the CT, she, reportedly, was able to affirm the youth. Her efforts did not challenge the teacher's attitude, the power imbalance, or gender performativity and regulation, but it did affirm the child.

Another student teacher reported how she was horrified by the lack of compassion and the negative comments and judgements made against the children of a trans parent. Susan explained:

In my practicum experience, there was a little boy in my school (in Grade 2), who enjoyed wearing pink, carried a purse, wore necklaces and most of all, loved wearing his sister's clothes. I, personally, thought nothing of it—my CT on the other hand had much to say on the topic. When his sister, who was in my primary classroom would “act out,” my CT would say things to me like “She’s just doing it because Dad recently became Mom,” and “This family will do anything for attention.” (Susan, Focus Group Interview, January 8, 2016)

While Susan did feel empowered by researching this incident and was committed to being an ally, she was visibly troubled in class during the talking circle in 2015, and still noticeably shaken in the focus group discussion in 2016. Social justice work is heartfelt work and sometimes there is no easy resolution. Time and opportunities to shape different attitudes is the hope that lingers.

***Students policing gender.*** In a different school, another pre-service teacher, Rena, had an encounter in the classroom with students policing gender. She explains:

Well my first practicum I did encounter a trans student, she [was] identified as a female, but she was in the process, I believe, of identifying as male. But she never told me “call me this or do this”...the other students in the classroom, were kind of negative about it. [For example, students would say,] “I don’t want to work with her”; stuff like that... (Rena, Focus Group Interview, January 8, 2016)

The power of peers in school and their ability to regulate the behaviour of many is not new. In this case, though, students identified a gender difference as a reason and justification to not only be uncomfortable, but a reason to not work with another classmate. This was said overtly and publicly.

Yet, in response to the expectation of gender performativity as a norm governing social and classroom behaviours, Rena was able to act. When confronted by this situation, she explained:

That’s when you have to become the ally, that’s when the Positive Space training did kick in and you’re like why, why is she any different than you?... I think it boosted my confidence a bit just to be able to speak about it and talk to the kids

and tell them the right way to think of things in that sense. (Rena, Focus Group Interview, January 8, 2016)

Rena did not let the regulation of another student go unchallenged. In anti-bullying training, and other social justice work, we are learning that to not challenge, to remain silent, especially if one has some power in the situation, is to covertly affirm the overt negative remarks. By interrupting the narrative around gender rigidity and trying to reteach gender to the peers of the emerging trans student, the pre-service teacher tried to change the unsettling conversation to a teachable moment. It is these moments that educators often encounter. The unplanned, unrehearsed, but often powerful moments and opportunities to help youth be critical and potentially open their ideas to different possibilities, especially in regard to gender and identity.

***Parents policing gender.*** The multiple levels on which youth receive messages about gender are profound. The gender messages young children received are shaped from a very early age. This is how the gender binary continues to hold so much power; there is fear of not conforming and performing due to the censure of others. In this example, Susan explains:

I had a kid in my class and we were in the playroom...he was in the house centre, he was assigned to go play house...and he said, "Well I can't go [to the] play house" and I said, "Well, why not?" And he said, "Well if my mom finds out that I played with dolls I will get in trouble." (Susan, Critical Incident Paper)

A young male was afraid to get into trouble for playing house. He is already aware of stereotypical gender roles. These are so deeply engrained that even generations of women and men performing different gender roles cannot alleviate his fear of being in trouble. The student teacher tried to affirm his ability to play in a space he worried about going into. In the focus groups, Susan described telling the student:

"Your mom is not going to find out, go play with the dolls!" And he was so happy, he came up to me after and was like "Thanks Ms. for letting me play with the dolls today" and I was like "You are welcome, you can play with them whenever you want" and that was all it took, right? But just the confirmation that I wasn't

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going to go tell his mom he played with dolls because he was so scared of getting in trouble. (Susan, Focus Group Interview, January 8, 2016)

Whether or not the fear remains concerning what a child can or cannot do when a parental or other authority figure is watching her or his gender performance is not clear, but in the classroom, the freedom the child had to play was certainly appreciated. Again, gender is complicated and messy, and our “in the moment” reactions to situations that arise can be complicated and messy as well. All in all, the policing of gender presently continues in our classrooms, school, and society. Whether or not the incident is explicitly trans or gender, these are all powerful examples that enable us to see the regulation of gender and the gender binary at play in social dynamics.

## **Theme Two: Unpacking Gender through Writing**

The ability to identify overt incidents of homophobia and transphobia in schools is a key underpinning of anti-oppressive pedagogy, and informs our practice. The critical writing assignment was designed to enable pre-service teachers to apply theories learned in course work to practical moments in schools. As previously described in this specific set of critical incident papers (January 2015), it struck us that there was an increase in the number of incidents in relation to gender and experiences with transgender students and families. During the focus group interview, participants discussed the importance of not only having the opportunity to think and write critically about moments lived in school following their first practicum (January 2015), but also the opportunity to return to these moments and reflect upon what they had written a year later in the focus group interview (January 2016).

Pre-service teachers explained that one of the key components informing the writing of such papers in term two was the trust they had built with their instructor in term one. For example, Janice, reflecting upon the act of writing the critical incident paper a year later, commented:

I did think it was helpful to write it [critical incident] out on paper. My poor husband had to hear everything so he was glad when I got to put it all down on paper because you really don't know [who to talk to]; I don't know if trust is the right word, but you don't know who you can confide in when you are in that situation,

especially when you are a pre-service teacher. Who do you go to talk to that is not going to affect what you are trying to become?... You want to be the advocate but at the same time you want to be accepted in the school system so where is that line, you know? And you know I want to stand up and be that person, and I also want to pay the bills, right? So what do you do and who do you trust? So to be able to write it out on paper [was good] and know I could trust Laura-Lee [course professor]. (Janice, Focus Group Interview, January 8, 2016)

We note the importance Janice placed upon being able to share such a moment with an instructor whom she trusted, as she seemed to experience some very real tensions about who she might confide in. This was a particularly tricky issue for Janice to navigate as it directly involved one of her cooperating teachers.

Another pre-service teacher noted how writing the critical incident paper allowed her to identify what was not present in schools. Thea commented:

I thought it was really helpful to write the paper... I just wrote about having the conversation [about gender] starting in elementary schools. So as helpful as it was to write the paper, I still feel like it [gender] is not a thing [in elementary schools]... I don't feel like it's a topic that's on the radar... A lot of people say it's too young to start [teaching gender] any time before Grade 6, which is completely ridiculous in my opinion. I think it should start in primary because even something as simple as gender stereotypes, it doesn't have to be this big elaborate conversation, it can be something as "no, pink is not a girl colour"; "no blue is not a boy colour." (Thea, Focus Group Interview, January 8, 2016)

We note some frustration in Thea's discussion of her critical incident, as she explained that while it was important to write about the lack of gender education in schools, for her, it seemed to further emphasize the work that needs to happen at the elementary level around the explicit teaching and disruption of the gender binary.

While the critical incident paper enabled pre-service teachers to identify challenging experiences, we found the opportunity to validate their experiences as problematic through the established literature was also important for pre-service teachers. For example, Gina explained:



I found it was good to be able to do research based on our experiences...so I found it was really helpful to look at it [gender] a bit more from like an elementary perspective because I think a lot of what you do in elementary is...helping children develop their values of acceptance and also seeing themselves. If they are feeling that way that that's okay that they don't necessarily need to be doing anything right away about it [gender and how they identify/express] but they feel that they could...I think it [writing and analyzing] makes it a bit more real for us. (Gina, Focus Group Interview, January 8, 2016)

In this moment, Gina explained how searching through the literature helped her to affirm what she had lived as troublesome and provided her with new understanding about what gender education might look like in elementary classrooms. Overall, we note the importance of the Positive Space training program as situated within compulsory course work, particularly a writing activity that enabled them to think critically about moments lived in school in relation to educational research.

### **Theme Three: Identifying the Challenges Associated with Re-Teaching Gender**

Of all the human diversities, gender is the one we encounter earliest in our lives. At birth, most of us are assigned a gender identity based on a biological sex, and from that moment, gender expectations are placed upon us. Families and communities articulate and enforce those expectations, and schools and teachers often assume an uncritical stance supporting the rigid gender binary system that declares there are only two “opposite” genders. Beginning in early childhood learning centers, many educators, often unconsciously, have failed to see the social construction of gender and the need to critically examine it. Similarly, the idea of “rethinking” gender in a critical way is not on the radar of many in-service teachers. Our pre-service teachers have begun to examine genderism and sexism in their foundations of education courses, and Positive Space Levels 1 and 2 communicate the need to re-teach gender in schools and some of the barriers that prevent that.

*Fear of parents intersecting with societal norms.* Rena, during the focus group interview, described her understanding of gender identity as something that is socially

constructed and that the norms around it and the gender binary can be opened up, troubled, and retaught at every grade level. Rena noted that things had changed but challenges remain in schools:

It's not as bad as it was 20 years ago, but there is still the societal norms and this is how this should be and this is how this should be... And again, the parents... I find that's a big, big issue because the parents, that's the wrath, that's who schools get now...if you...say something to a kid the wrong way, you are going to get a whole lot of crap from someone. Either admin or the parents who contacted the admin...it is also like dealing with a lot of different views and beliefs. (Rena, Focus Group Interview, January 8, 2016)

Rena understands that, while schools officially espouse the development of critical thinking, challenging societal norms in schools is not easily done. Rena believes that troubling family and community norms can have consequences for teachers. The overall effect on teachers means that many will avoid any efforts to re-teach gender in schools.

***Interrupting the gender binary.*** Schools have traditionally been constructed with the gender binary in mind. This assumes that there are only two possible genders, they are opposite to each other, and they are defined by biological sex. In older school buildings, we can still see evidence of separate entrances for boys and girls. Separate sex washrooms continue to exist in most schools, necessitating the need for separate lines—one for girls and one for boys. Thea noticed,

In elementary we are always dividing them as boys and girls. What if they are gender neutral? Or they don't know where they fit in, then what do you do? So then I started going if you have brown hair, go line up... That was just something I really noticed in my last practicum especially [teachers] saying...“all the boys do this” and “all the girls do this”... (Thea, Focus Group Interview, January 8, 2016)

Right from the first day of school, the physical structure of a school further imposes the gender binary on students. Added to this are the ways in which the adults in the building organize the everyday rituals, practices, and language around what is involved in constructing gender identity. Re-teaching gender means breaking apart the gender binary systems and seeing gender as a fluid continuum of identity possibilities. It means that if

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educators are conscious of the myriad of ways gender presents itself, they can interrupt genderism and sexism on a daily basis. To do so, however, involves a critical re-examining of everything, from taken-for-granted organization of the classrooms, hallways, bathrooms, and change rooms, to curriculum materials and offerings for students in the form of literature choices and LGBTQ representation in books.

***Lack of resources.*** Educators who are aware of the need to re-teach gender in schools do need classroom resources to support their teaching. In an elementary classroom, this could be finding and having the funds to purchase children's books with diverse representations of gender fluidity. Gina provides an example of how the lack of teacher resources can be problematic. As a French immersion teacher outside of Quebec, she found resources that trouble the gender binary system hard to find. She explains:

I found it hard to find books...this year in French immersion, it's really hard to find French resources... I know personally I have been trying to start collecting books that have a really good story you can just use for a read aloud. Because we are reading all the time for our students and it's so easy to kind of fit [the topic] in lessons without making it an official lesson...just like teaching them right away that it [gender as fluid] is okay. (Gina, Focus Group Interview, January 8, 2016)

On a hopeful note, Gina shows determination to not let the lack of resources stop her from engaging in social justice teaching. She sees the informal curriculum as a powerful place of challenging social norms. However, we know that not all teachers will have this level of commitment. If we are to re-teach gender in schools, we need to not only change attitudes but also provide the systemic supports necessary for teachers to do so.

## **Discussion: Challenging Genderism in Schools**

The discrimination trans and gender non-conforming youth and their families experience overtly and covertly in schools, staffrooms, classrooms, and hallways is witnessed by our pre-service teachers. The findings of our ongoing work (Kearns, Mitton-Kukner, & Tompkins, 2014a, 2014b; Mitton-Kukner, Kearns, & Tompkins, 2015) point to the importance of explicit LGBTQ and gender education in teacher education. While the literature tends to emphasize the importance of using curriculum as a means to address LGBTQ,

transgender, and gender non-conformity issues and concerns within teacher education (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2011; Rands, 2009), few studies explicitly identify how this might be pragmatically achieved (Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013). Rands (2009) suggests that at its very foundation, teacher education must consider the importance of a “gender-complex perspective,” one that “question[s] the ways in which gender is operating and what the consequences are” with considerations of “the complex sets of privilege and oppression that students and teachers experience based on their gender categories, gender expressions, and the gender attributions others make of them” (p. 426).

In our review of the data, we found pre-service teachers overwhelmingly noticed the lack of gender education in schools, particularly within the elementary school contexts in which some of them were situated for their first field placement. We acknowledge that preparing pre-service teachers for the kinds of gender rigidity that may be found in elementary schools is challenging in the sense that their own assumptions about what can be taught to elementary-age children must be disrupted first. It takes considerable effort to remain awake to a force as pervasive and as normalized as genderism. Butler, Osborne, and Segal (1994) remind us “it is a collective struggle to rethink a dominant norm” (p. 5). In their struggles, our pre-service teachers referred to the lack of gender education and the need for more awareness of trans and LGBTQ issues in school as problematic, as it limits the gender expression of all youth and creates heteronormative, homophobic, and transphobic school climates.

Building upon the possibilities of explicit gender education in teacher education as suggested by Rand (2009), we reflected upon our program and its emphasis on equity and social justice, which, in turn, has informed the development of courses like Sociology of Education, Diverse Cultures, and Inclusive Practices to support the development of pre-service teachers who are capable of meeting the multifaceted needs of students in 21st-century schools. In our program, problematizing gender and expanding understandings of gender is sequenced across the two-year program, with specific emphasis on interlocking forms of oppression (Sociology of Education) and inclusive instructional practices (Inclusive Practices 1), complemented by explicit Positive Space training regarding the inclusion of the LGBTQ community in schools. The course Sociology of Education, alongside embedded Positive Space training Levels 1 and 2, introduce year one pre-service teachers to the terminology associated with the LGBTQ community and

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aims to raise their awareness about the presence of heteronormativity and heterosexual and cissexual privilege in school contexts. In term two, the course Inclusive Practices 1 problematizes the term inclusion as it used in educational contexts across a continuum of philosophies, policies, and classroom practices with the aim of fostering critical thinking about biases in school texts, and practical understanding of differentiation of instruction and assessment as part of effective teaching practices. Within the context of course work and explicit training, gender is viewed as a social construct, which helps pre-service teachers be mindful of their relational and instructional interactions with students. The participants in our study credited the program and the Positive Space training to raising their awareness about the presence of genderism in schools and providing them with some insights into how they might proceed reactively as moments emerge and, hearteningly, how they might proactively create curriculum spaces that formally and informally trouble narrow conceptions of gender.

We acknowledge that preparing pre-service teachers to disrupt gender rigidity in schools is challenging. Our own study is limited in that the sample size is small and specific to our education and training program. However, there is much to be shared from the experience of recognizing interlocking forms of oppression and explicitly creating a space to train and increase the awareness of pre-service teachers. In sharing what our students have encountered in classrooms, we see there is hope for agency, and the need to support and help future teachers create change. Teacher research is also about cultivating agency for our pre-service teachers. Encouraging pre-service teachers to investigate issues of concern and have a critical practice does help them commit to systemic changes and challenge inequities in the educational system. In recognizing and sharing practices we can all create better classrooms and schools for all our youth. In interviewing elementary and secondary pre-service teachers, we recognize there is a need to help future educators question and recognize how and when the gender binary inserts itself in schools.

Teacher education programs can help foster a sense of agency to redress transphobia and genderism in schools by explicitly talking about the gender binary and the importance of challenging gender norms. An excellent example of how gender education may occur in elementary classrooms is demonstrated in a study conducted by Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar (2013). In an innovative, long-term, inquiry into a Grade 3 teacher's curricular practices, the researchers found that the teacher's proactive efforts enabled her and the students she taught to become "independent problem solvers who had confidence to stand

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up as allies for classmates and community members who were being bullied or treated unfairly” (p. 103). In terms of knowing when to introduce an examination of gender in schools, it appears that it needs to be at every level. For example, Keddie and colleagues (2008) describe how two teachers in rural Australia used “pedagogies of subversion” (p. 194) to challenge the status quo. Courageous teachers, armed with critical thinking skills and a sense of social justice are leading the way, showing us what can be done. Educators talk about change and hope in troubling gender (Webber, 2016). They talk about shifting the conversation about gender, and doing so in small ways each day. In discussing gender, we found it is important to focus on the T in LGBTQ, and differentiate between gender and sexuality. We need to further trouble genderism and heteronormativity at the elementary and secondary levels. Small interruptions, ally work, affirming the child—all these tactics make a difference.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The power to be *seen* in the world is intricately linked to one’s sense of possibilities. Educators who can interrupt the gender binary can allow spaces for a diversity of genders to be seen. Overall, social justice, anti-homophobia, anti-transphobia, and gender work need to continue to evolve and respond to the complexity of the human condition. At a school and society level, so long as debate around LGBTQ identities persist, and the gender binary is reinscribed and policed, it will be hard for all youth to thrive, in particular trans youth, who embody gender complexity and resist a simple identity-labelling system. In our study, trans identities require the highly nuanced and complicated school, gender, and social justice advocacy discussions that embody social change. We hope the experiences of our pre-service teachers, as they journeyed to being educators capable of research and social justice advocacy, helped to further inform the field in this critical area of teacher-education.

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