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Seeking Transparency: Teachers' Understanding of Transgender Youth Within School District
#42 Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows

by

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Abstract

This research project explores teachers' understandings of transgender students' needs, support networks, and integration into the public high school system within School District #42: Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows. Specifically, research addressed the institutional expectations and personal and professional pre-conceptions teachers have with regards to creating an inclusive school culture for transgender youth. Qualitative interviews were conducted to ascertain educators' awareness of LGBTQ inclusive district and Ministry of Education policy and teachers' assessment of how inclusive their respective schools were, and an examination of the barriers impeding teachers from building safe spaces for trans youth. While most teachers acknowledged improvement in their schools' acceptance of transgender students, there are many gaps apparent in universal understanding. Teachers are unclear of how to best accommodate and include trans youth within the exhaustive and changing curriculum, classroom practice and parental involvement, and general framework of their institutional environment which places impetus on administration to lead inclusion directives. Celebration of LGBTQ youth was evident at all high schools; however, a move from celebration to full inclusion has yet to occur. The interview findings also revealed a lack of professional development for educators that specifically pertains to supporting transgender students. Teachers are left somewhat stalled in moving toward a truly inclusive school culture that honours transgender students.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

Background

The Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district in British Columbia, Canada, has six large secondary schools that meet the public educational needs of the community. Each school offers curriculum instruction from grade eight through to grade twelve. Building and maintaining positive school culture is an important goal for the school district; extensive time and resources are devoted to this initiative (School District 42, 2013, Section 4). In 2013, the school board passed a policy that specifically protects the rights and interests of LGBTQ youth (Corbett, 2013, para. 3). To ensure the enactment of the policy in schools (moving the policy off of the page) the district formed a sub-committee, *The Safe, Caring, and Healthy Schools Committee*, to oversee implementation (School District 42, 2013, Section 4). This group is comprised of teachers, youth care professionals, union representatives, and administration. Currently, I sit on this small committee as a member. Unfortunately, we have only met a few times over the past few years. It has proven quite difficult to get all committee members together given our collective district demands and positions. Moving forward, I am hoping that my research will be used to inform this committee.

Since the establishment of the Safe, Caring, and Healthy Schools' policy, some effort on behalf of senior management and elected trustees has gone into educating students and staff about the policy; however, the British Columbia Ministry of Education's revised commitment to diversity demands more immediate focus (BC Gov News, 2016, para. 1-4). On September 8, 2016, the Ministry announced that all British Columbian boards of education were required to reference sexual orientation and gender identity in district and school codes of conduct by December 31, 2016 (2017, SOGI 123). In addition to the formal announcement, the Ministry - in

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collaboration with the ARC Foundation, the British Columbia Teacher's Federation, and local, national, and international LGBTQ community organizations – created the SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) Educator Network and the web-based resource, SOGI 123 (2017, SOGI 123). Currently, the province acknowledges 51 out of 60 districts belonging to this network. Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district is an active member as the district policy on sexual orientation and gender identity was in place before the official mandate. Moreover, school district 42 has allotted teaching instructional time toward a part-time SOGI facilitator. While the Ministry's effort is admirable, there is a disconnect between the goals of SOGI and implementation within our schools.

In short, the high schools have yet to catch up to the demands of the policy. Many of the policy demands are not being met in entirety within schools. Currently, the district policy can be found on the school district website buried deep among countless other policies. All efforts to use the policy for social change – such as creating gender neutral bathrooms – have largely been student and teacher driven (Melnychuk, 2015, para. 16-18). Without the grassroots involvement and passion of these interested parties, the policy would likely be another derelict school board initiative. As outlined in the school district policy, it is vital that management offer its teachers opportunities to become educated on current LGBTQ issues in an effort to provide a more inclusive environment for students (School District 42, 2013, Section 4). Increasingly, there appears to be a large gap between students' awareness, acceptance, and advocacy of the LGBTQ community and that of the many educators with whom they associate. To address this disconnect, teachers need to be fully versed in the policy outcomes and educated about how to implement them.

Statement of the Problem

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More and more students are identifying with transgender identity; consequently, “transgender accommodation and inclusion” are needed in our schools (Peter et al, 2015, p. 11). What is not evolving as quickly as student expression of gender and sexuality is open understanding and practice of this new terminology by teachers (Peter et al, 2015, p. 33). Certainly, there are supportive counsellors, teachers, and advisors; however, the general teacher population seems to be lacking the impetus that students have in moving transgender issues to the forefront of the classroom (Peter et al, 2015, p. 36). In my research, I hope to address this gap by opening the dialogue surrounding transgender students and working towards more active engagement. To gain a broader understanding of the needs of trans youth and how inclusion can move forward within schools, teachers need an opportunity to engage in constructive conversation about their role in connecting with and including trans students in classrooms and schools.

The larger problem within the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district is the multiplicity of socio-emotional learning demands. Recent Ministry changes to curriculum and comprehensive inclusion initiatives have left teachers overwhelmed. In an effort to meet all of these institutional expectations, teachers are covering many goals thinly while meeting specific needs marginally. In my experience as a teacher and a teacher sponsor for a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA), I have noticed an increase in teacher anxiety with regards to fulfilling multiple agendas and goals. In creating an inclusive environment for transgender youth, many teachers are unclear as to what the expectations are or how to meet them. Moreover, the ambiguity of the LGBTQ spectrum (and lack of teacher training) further impedes clarity. As a result, transgender youth are not being adequately served within our schools. In staff rooms, large working spaces, and teacher preparation areas, I have observed many conversations

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between teachers about how best to address transgender students, implement pronoun preferences, create safe spaces, and source LGBTQ resources.

Purpose of the Research

This research project has the capacity to create a number of deliverables. This study should also aid in improved understanding of how best to move forward with the Ministry mandate regarding inclusion of students identifying as a sexual or gender identity outside of the norm. Information obtained can be used to inform district presentations, workshops, handbooks, and human resource policy. Moreover, this information may encourage further research in this area to better ascertain best professional practice. Throughout the school year, there are a host of days devoted to teacher professional development; presentations and interactive workshops could be held during this time with little cost to the school district. Most importantly, the research should encourage educators within the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district to open up the communication about the reality of transgender youth lived experience and compare this to institutional delivery of inclusion. Ideally, this research will start a much needed, and sometimes difficult, conversation about what is stopping educators from moving toward inclusion in an authentic manner.

Research Question

What institutional expectations and personal/professional pre-conceptions shape the response of teachers in creating an inclusive environment for transgender students in the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district?

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Background

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While school district policies are aligned with the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, recent studies indicate that schools are neither safe nor respectful for sexual and gender minorities (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 275). There is a disconnect between official public discourse on diversity rights and the lived experience of LGBTQ youth (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 279). Findings indicate that school climates are governed by a “toxic discourse system in Michel Foucault’s (1980) sense of language practices that both legitimize, and are reinforced by, established social and institutional practices” (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 305). As such, LGBTQ youth report being victimized more frequently than heterosexual youth with transgender students reporting even higher levels of harassment; such victimization can compromise school attachment, social connectedness, and personal safety (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 283). Porta et al. posit the impact that school culture can have on youth where the “infrastructure of a school can foster or inhibit a positive, health-promoting climate (2017, p. 489).

The Every Teacher Project, a cross-Canada report on K-12 youth and educators within publicly funded schools, acknowledges the “effectiveness of policy when coupled with training” (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 46). Notably, educators who felt they had sufficient training in transphobic harassment reported a decrease in negative comments and actions (2015, p. 47). Comments such as reporting that a boy was “acting too much like a girl” or a girl “acting too much like a boy” decrease in school environments where inclusion training is higher (2015, p. 44). This report highlights British Columbia as reporting the lowest levels of homonegative behavior and comments; however, with a likelihood of harassment at 11%, there is still work to be done (2015, p. 48). All high schools in the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district have active GSA’s (Gender and Sexuality Alliances), and Porta et al. acknowledge that youth interpret the presence of a GSA as a “significant marker of safety” (2017, p. 495). While this is a positive

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step towards inclusion, better education on sexual orientation and gender identity for all educators would help push inclusion initiatives beyond the margins of GSA impetus. GSA's within the school district are primarily driven by students with minimal teacher involvement. As such, their current reach remains more limited than is needed to meet the inclusion mandate.

Institutional Influence

As an agent of the public, educational organizations are a frequent target of governmental policy (Rowan, 2006, p. 17). Even with policies in place to protect students from victimization, “educational institutions do not generally help to dissolve social inequalities (Windzio, 2013, p. 3). Schools remain a focal point where social problems are concentrated, and institutions exist to help structure behavior and have an impact. With new educational guidelines, high schools are in a sound position to enact real change. In short, they are an ideal place to tackle social problems (Windzio, 2013, p. 3). Porta et al. note that for schools with a GSA (all high schools in school district #42), it is recommended that school administrators, health professionals, and staff support their presence. This recommendation is only being met marginally within the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district. Moreover, schools are encouraged to adopt programs and policies that make the school more comfortable and safe for LGBTQ students (2017, p. 496). Certainly, policies have been put in place; however, efforts to practice the policy have been stagnant.

Modern publically funded schools are sources of multiplicity and carry a “heavy burden” with regards to social reform, and this can lead to inefficiency (Windzio, 2013, p. 13). Formed along lines of subsystems, many schools are faced with task overload that can disrupt organizational routine (Windzio, 2013, p. 8). Moreover, educational institutions are social artefacts that evolve over time, and are subject to moving at a halting and inconsistent pace in the

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face of many competing demands (Windzio, 2013, p. 10). Certainly, this is an argument for focusing on interindividual equality in terms of gender, but the school system, in its current form, will need to re-evaluate its system for promotion of equality (Meyer, 2001, p. 155). Indeed, Meyer asserts that we need to examine more closely the relationship between norms and realities noting that the equality of “individuals takes precedence over several collective principles” (2001, p. 155). Unfortunately, transgender inclusion initiatives have not taken precedence in school district #42; they have been placed at the back of the queue behind curriculum demands and parental appeasement. Moreover, changing school culture takes time. Professional development for teachers must be comprehensive and ongoing as “teacher learning requires time” and must encompass collective participation and coherence (Meyer & Leonardi, 2017, p. 3).

School culture is impacted by institutional influences. In an examination of gendered harassment in a Canadian urban school district, Elizabeth J. Meyer conducted in-depth interviews with six teachers. Her findings offer clarity on the impact of institutional demands on teachers (2008). School organization includes: administrative structures and responses, provincial curriculum demands and teacher workloads, teacher education and training, and written policies (Meyer, E. J., 2008, p. 559). Often, teachers address micro-structures of their classrooms without addressing the macro-structures of their school. This, in large part, is a product of teachers feeling overwhelmed with increasingly complex curriculum and social demands (Meyer, E. J., 2008, p. 560). Additionally, many teachers are stymied by finding a professional development balance between their area of instruction and training in socio-emotional realms. Teachers who pursue training in gender and sexual orientation often do so on their own initiative (Meyer, E. J., 2008, p. 561). Furthermore, while many teachers are aware of

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specific school board policies, a clear understanding of these policies is not present (Meyer, E. J., 2008, p. 561).

Transgender Youth Within the Institution

Transgender students struggle within the high school institution. Many studies showcase high rates of transgender students experiencing verbal and physical harassment (Graham, 2014, p. 275). Their experience in schools and their interactions with peers and educators form influential messages about acceptability of their gender identities and sexualities (Graham, 2014, p. 278). Also, beliefs and actions within a school environment either limit or facilitate transgender youth access to “instrumental, informational, and emotional support” (Graham, 2014, p. 278). Social enforcement or regulation of gender expression and expectations occurs at school, and poor handling of this task can result in a transphobic and homonegative response. Promotion of contemptuous attitudes towards transgender youth harms the mental and emotional health of transgender students (Graham, 2014, p. 278). Ultimately, students are denied access to inclusive education.

Transgender reality for youth does not always neatly fit into “fighting school homophobia campaigns” (Airton, 2013, p. 538). Airton argues that we need to “make space for queerness” and cautions against viewing queerness as non-heterosexuality as this implies a shared common form (2013, p. 541). Indeed, queerness is nebulous while homophobia is concrete (2013, p. 543). Educational institutions need to move away from a singular perspective and understand that there are “no particular queers with always-already knowable needs and desires (2013, p. 548). To do so would involve a clear understanding of the difference between gender and sex: sex is generally conferred by medical personnel at birth and commonly refers to the genital anatomy of an individual whereas gender refers to an individual’s sense of self and their expected

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behavioural gender roles within their sociocultural context (Broussard et al., 2017, p. 607).

Cisgender students' gender identity matches their label assigned at birth, transgender students' gender identity does not match the label assigned at birth, and non-binary students' gender identity does not conform to the female/male gender dichotomy (2017, p. 606). Understanding the gender and sexuality spectrum would assist teachers in making more space for queer youth within schools.

Chapter 3 – Methodology and Findings

Research Design

To examine teacher understandings of transgender students' needs and positive integration into the institutional high school environment while examining their personal/professional pre-conceptions, qualitative interviews were conducted with 11 high school teachers. Employing purposive sampling, practical and pragmatic considerations in seeking information rich participants were made (Emmel, 2014, p. 2). Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to explore in-depth study to inform the purpose of the research with detailed insight (2014, p. 5). Participants were selected as representatives of the sample as a whole and for their ability to illustrate specific insight. I sought out insight that illuminates both variation and significant common patterns (2014, p. 6).

These teachers represent all 6 high schools in the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district. Four male teachers and seven female teachers were interviewed. Teachers selected for interviews range in teaching experience from two years to twenty years. Moreover, candidates represent a breadth of teaching experience including: English, Social Studies, Mathematics, Home Economics, French, Leadership, Science, Global Studies, Social Justice, and Technology. Every teacher interviewed expressed involvement with extra-curricular activities including:

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Students' Council, Coaching, Maple Ridge Teachers' Association – BCTF union stewardship, District Committees, Gender and Sexuality Alliances, and School Planning Committees. In my opinion as an educator with 17 years of experience, I have found that teachers involved with their school's culture, outside of teaching curriculum, have a broader understanding of the school's study body and the intricate needs of students. These educators observe student behaviour both within and outside the classroom environment. I specifically chose these teachers for their rich understanding of students.

Qualitative interviews were conducted in person at respective schools in a private and locked interview setting. All interviews were recorded on a password protected device to ensure accuracy in transcribing notes for data sorting and review, and privacy and confidentiality of the data. Teachers were contacted via inter-office district mail through a letter of invitation, and follow-up phone calls were made to set up interviews. Selected teachers were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time and that all information would be kept private and secure. Furthermore, each teacher signed a letter of consent form outlining their right to privacy in the presence of the researcher. Prior to interviews, teachers were given a package of background information and interview questions for their perusal.

Methodology

I used a semi-standardized interview format to generate a space where teachers' input could be dominant since Putney et al. posit qualitative interviews allow for a "multivocal community of practice" where voices can be heard (1999, p. 369). Specific questions were posed to participants which allowed room for further questions and discussion. Teachers in school district 42 have had little opportunity to engage in discussion surrounding transgender students; this research attempts to "make visible the voices of the particular individuals, participants,

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groups, and communities” that have not been heard (1999, p. 369). Thus, I chose this methodological approach which allows participants to “create a narrative to account for their experiences of the world” (Sheppard, 2004, p.138). All interviewees noted that this was their first opportunity as educators to reflect on their personal and professional viewpoints with regards to transgender student inclusion in their schools.

Thorough interview investigation allows participants to see themselves from a fresh perspective. By engaging in conversation that is often pushed to the sidelines, teachers gain clarity as they work to create meaning. The qualitative approach in this research sought to define the interconnectedness between learning communities with the six high schools. Moreover, the approach enabled an exploration and understanding of the “local and situated nature of classroom life and how that life is consequential for particular members or groups” (Putney et. al, 1999, p. 374). Through interview queries, the research aimed to analyze the discursive construction of “everyday life” within a high school setting and deconstruct membership and clarify the equity surrounding knowledge and societal resources (1999, p. 375). This additional insight and reflection allows teachers to be more effective as they identify and discuss the institutional expectations and personal/professional conceptions shaping their response to building an inclusive environment.

This research aims to inform school district groups and committees interested in creating an inclusive environment for transgender students. The over-arching objective is to gain more clarity on teachers’ perspectives on transgender inclusion within an institutional framework. The research addresses the following research question:

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What institutional expectations and personal/professional pre-conceptions shape the response of teachers in creating an inclusive environment for transgender students in the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district?

To address this research question, interviews focussed on five areas of query: District Policy, The Ministry Mandate, Understanding of Transgender Students, The Institutional Environment, and Goals for Inclusion. In addressing each area, I examined how teachers' personal pre-conceptions shaped their professional output in building an inclusive school environment for transgender students.

Interview Findings

Understanding and Knowledge of the District Policy

Every participant was aware that a district policy existed; however, only one teacher was cognizant of the district committee that was developed to oversee implementation. Furthermore, none of the teachers shared an understanding of the history of the policy – that it was a grassroots movement of teachers and students who championed the school board to create a policy that specifically addressed the concerns of LGBTQ youth. One teacher noted that “when it came to the policy that was passed in 2013, not a lot was done the first year because everyone had more pressing priorities.” Another teacher expressed heightened student involvement from “seniors” following the announcement of the policy, but she also noted that after graduation, “meetings and events were not occurring as often.”

With regards to better representation of LGBTQ youth following the policy implementation, all participants were able to point out positive examples within their schools. Interviewees saw representation as LGBTQ students and allies proudly expressing their gender and sexual

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orientation at school events. For example, many teachers referenced pride flags, buttons, patches, and t-shirts being sported by youth as a clear indicator of positive representation. For most interviewees, this public showing of celebration equated to their schools being inclusive. Many teachers commented positively about school Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSA). One male Mathematics teacher stated that “our GSA club is back after having stopped for a while,” and a female Humanities teacher noted that their school finally had an active GSA as something that has “definitely changed over the last couple of years.” Additionally, an English teacher at the largest high school in the district commented on her school’s GSA “being very prominent in the school.” Having an active GSA within a school was a source of pride for all participants. In fact, there was not a single negative comment with regards to these clubs. Furthermore, all interviewees viewed these events as a positive step toward better inclusion. Notably, however, with the exception of one participant, interviewees did not express interest in taking on a leadership role in a GSA.

While every teacher could comment on positive LGBTQ events within their schools, it was very apparent that most of these events were student driven (along with the assistance of one or two teachers). One teacher posited that teacher sponsors are “there for support and providing a venue, but students set the direction.” Another teacher acknowledged the assistance of teachers and counsellors but followed this up with the notion that “our GSA is primarily student driven.” Over four teachers discussed brief student presentations to staff; however, one teacher noted that “we didn’t really go anywhere in terms of how, as a staff, we could better support these kids.” Surprisingly, not a single participant commented on administration involvement in LGBTQ initiatives following the adoption of the policy. Meyer and Leonardi assert that teacher learning must be interactive, ongoing, and critically self-reflective; without administrators participating in

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the collective learning community, the “culture of conversation” is compromised (2017, p.9). Also noteworthy was teachers’ understanding of where to find this policy on the district website – with exception of one participant, none of the teachers had ever viewed the 2013 policy. Again, more advocacy from administration could assist in teacher knowledge of the policy and learning as a school community.

The Ministry Mandate

On September 8, 2016, the Ministry of Education announced that all school districts must include sexual orientation and gender identity in their codes of conduct to uphold the BC Human Rights Code. While school district #42 had a policy in place, this new mandate took the option of “choice” off the table. This ground-breaking mandate received little attention at all six high schools. One teacher noted that “it wasn’t a forefront thing” and was only “mentioned in passing.” Another participant mentioned, “a possible district all staff email that may have been sent,” but that the mandate had “not been made clear” in that email. All participants shared a similar observation that the mandate was not discussed at staff meetings nor were there any directives on meeting the requirements of the mandate. A participant disclosed that “up until this moment right now, I was unaware of this mandate.” Additionally, he noted that the mandate was “not well advertised.” Indeed, all participants disclosed their lack of clarity surrounding the Ministry of Education’s mandate.

In discussing professional development with regards to LGBTQ inclusion, all participants noted a lack of direction. Teachers were unclear of how to proceed as administration did not offer any suggestions or commentary. Usual practice with formal Ministry mandates has administration taking the lead with implementation. Also, participants acknowledged little professional development opportunities relating to this new mandate. A teacher shared that “I

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have had no formal training at all about this. Most of what I know is through informal conversations with colleagues.” Another teacher recalled a provincial workshop she attended that dealt with inclusion but noted that participation was “definitely optional.” A Social Justice teacher made positive reference to a union-driven workshop she attended; however, this workshop was only available to union staff representatives and was not mandatory even for them, thus covering a very small portion of District #42’s teaching staff. Summarizing the consensus of participants, a teacher stated that “there hasn’t been any training offered. The training that I have is from my own interest.” With little direction, many of the interviewees viewed the Ministry mandate as something that should be adopted on an individual teacher basis as opposed to a Provincial overhaul in creating inclusive schools.

Interestingly, in discussing how the Ministry mandate has impacted schools, every participant pointed to the evolution of the school’s gender-neutral washroom and how this greatly benefitted transgender and non-binary students. Again, the positive accounts largely focussed on students driving the initiatives. One teacher believed the idea of a gender-neutral bathroom was “district driven,” but the successful implementation was “all kids.” A long-standing teacher shared some information around signage of the gender-neutral bathroom at her school. With the assistance of an Art teacher, a transgender student created his own unique sign stating, “Whatever! Just Wash Your Hands.” She noted that this initiative was well-received by both staff and students. While the Ministry mandate was not widely publicized within teaching circles, the implementation appears to correlate with every high school developing a gender-neutral bathroom. Notably, the participants’ understanding of SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) implementation and the resources available was minimal at best. Most participants were unfamiliar with the SOGI initiative.

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Understanding of Transgender Students

Dress

All participants recognized transgender students in their schools; however, this only referred to trans students who were 'out' about their gender identity. None of the interviewees recognized that there may be transitioning students they were not aware of. This revealed the onus that transgender students face in advocating for themselves by revealing their gender identity. Grace and Wells hold that in the context of schooling, "sexual minority students have learned that they must be change agents of their own liberation because many teachers and school administrators tend not to support them" (2006, p. 55). Many participants pointed to trans students' manner of dress. For example, one teacher commented that "two that I can specifically think of dress more as women. One graduated last year and wore heels to grad." Another teacher acknowledged a transgender student by noting how "he preferred to do her nails and hair. . .and just to change over." From one high school, three teachers referenced an openly trans student who was chosen as valedictorian of his class. These teachers all shared the opinion that this student was chosen, in part, because of his open gender advocacy and transition from female to male. There were concerns that this student may not have been chosen by staff for academic excellence, but more to showcase "inclusivity" by making this trans student a veritable "poster child" for acceptance. It is important for teachers to take the lead in trans student advocacy. Otherwise, these vulnerable students are placed in a precarious position of leading the charge with little support from educators within their schools.

Pronouns

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All participants addressed pronoun usage in their interviews. One teacher commented on how “confusing” correct usage can be “particularly with non-binary students.” Another teacher revealed how he had to correct an Education Assistant’s pronoun choice. This EA was new to the school and “was using neutral and actually the person preferred male pronouns.” A long-standing English teacher noted the grammatical conflict of using “they” as singular. Significantly, the singular they/them is in current grammatical usage to refer to non-binary identifying individuals. Also, rapid accommodation of the singular they/them pronoun still allows for they/them to preserve the semantics of plurality (Sanford & Filik, 2007, p. 171). This English teacher stated that “that’s the toughest issue because you want to be respectful, but you also don’t want them to suffer stylistically. It’s a fine line between being respectful and not understanding how pronouns work.” Notably, this teacher was unclear on how pronoun usage has evolved to include they as singular. Summarizing the thoughts of many interviewees, one teacher noted the importance of trans students being “comfortable in understanding that we will make mistakes and that it’s a learning process.” Another teacher noted how a trans student’s friend let her know the appropriate pronoun to use in class. She stated that “from then on, I would refer to the student by the male pronoun and name.” Interestingly, correct pronoun usage was not an administrative directive in any school. All teachers addressed student pronoun choice on an individual level. Many teachers would lean on each other through informal teacher chats to best meet the needs of the student. All interviewees indicated that they would appreciate a mandatory educational session on how to best address transgender students in the classroom.

School Culture

All participants indicated that they make efforts to welcome transgender students in their classrooms. Many teachers indicated how they address homophobic and transphobic language

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within a classroom environment. One teacher disclosed how he uses humour to build rapport but was expressly clear about “not using gender or sexual orientation humour.” Multiple teachers referred to their classrooms as “safe spaces” for LGBTQ youth. In a moment of candour, one teacher commented on addressing hateful language by noting that “I absolutely lose my shit if kids make jokes about anything putting down gay or transgender students. I absolutely lose my shit, and I don’t lose my shit over much, but I do over that.” Another teacher referred to her classroom dynamic as a place where “no one seems to bat an eye” with regards to transgender students, but she noted that “the reality in the halls may be very different.” Indeed, in a culture still largely operating with a binary conception of gender, “transgender people easily become invisible and stigmatized” (Burdge, 2014, p.357). Also, there is documentation of widespread harassment and verbal abuse transgender people experience (2014, p. 357). Furthermore, another participant commented on how the majority of teachers “try to be accommodating and non-judgmental.” Echoing this sentiment, another interviewee noted that “most teachers are doing everything they can to be inclusive, but there hasn’t really been much about the code of conduct and enforcing the school culture piece.” Without formal administration direction, teachers can feel confident that they are doing all that they can to meet the needs of their students.

While all interviewees described an inclusive classroom, there was variation on how this inclusion extends into the larger school culture picture. For example, one teacher addressed transphobic “name calling” that occurs in the hallways. Another participant addressed a lack of education for certain teacher perspectives noting, “I think there are actually quite a few teachers who are really confused about what the new terms mean. You hear some teachers address new terminology with ‘That’s not even a real thing.’” One teacher noted that “there’s a lot of gray

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area” with regards to enforcing inclusive language. Also, this teacher commented on the school’s initial response to a gender-neutral bathroom: “There was some resistance not only from some teachers on the staff, but also administration because we didn’t want to rock the boat.” Again, all participants addressed learning from students as opposed to administration or professional development. Interestingly, 10 of the 11 participants incorrectly used the term “transgendered” to refer to transgender students indicating further need for education – especially around terminology.

School Sports

While the interview questions did not specifically address transgender students and sports, a theme emerged that school athletic communities were not as progressive in transgender inclusion. In fact, while all participants felt confident that their schools were accepting places, all participants noted that this inclusion did not extend into organized school sports. This incongruity shows that the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district has many hills to climb in meeting authentic inclusion. One teacher addressed having a female student (who later transitioned to male) as experiencing some bullying on a school hockey team. He described an “undercurrent of a bit of blatant hostility” and unhealthy “locker room culture.” Another teacher addressed how “traditional gender roles are affirmed through school sports.” Additionally, another interviewee addressed a transgender student absence in school sports: “When it comes to sports, I don’t think any of them participate in any athletics – organized sports. Many educators have not thought about the implications of someone who is transgender.” Another participant noted that transgender representation in school athletics was “almost non-existent.” Interviewees were quick to acknowledge that school athletics were behind in building inclusive environments for trans youth; however, many observations came from an outsider perspective. Only one

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interviewee acts as a sports coach within his school. As such, some of the commentary is based solely on perception as opposed to factual representation. Further research conducting qualitative interviews with athletic representatives would be beneficial in accurately determining how the district's sports community is implementing the inclusive Ministry mandate.

The Institutional Environment

Every participant acknowledged feeling over-taxed with meeting school curriculum and general day-to-day obligations. Summarizing the feeling of many participants, one teacher commented, "I never feel like I'm doing enough. I just wish I had more time." In building a safe and inclusive classroom environment, all teachers pointed towards "relationship building" but acknowledged that there was little time to do so amidst teaching large classes, marking, and delivering new curriculum. Another teacher noted that teacher obligations seem to "be getting harder" and feeling as if she "is always missing the mark." Aptly, one teacher described Ministry expectations: "It's been pile it on top of the pile that's already starting to sway one way." All participants indicated that the new Ministry curriculum has taken centre stage and left little room for other initiatives. Echoing findings in McCormick and Barnett, participants in my study experienced high levels of occupational stress resulting from administrative workload, student indiscipline, and intra-personal differences (2011, p. 279).

Over five participants noted the increase in parent involvement at the high school level. Notably, these participants pointed toward teacher accountability and unrealistic expectations from many parents. One teacher commented that "parents have this expectation that we're not only going to teach them curriculum, but that we're also going to teach them life skills: money, manners, how to be a good human." Teachers often experience emotional discomfort when being criticized by parents and are concerned about "being thought badly of" (Bernard, 2016, p.

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214). This inherent need and pre-conception to “do well and win approval” with parents can cause immense stress; not all teachers possess a “high frustration tolerance” to deal with parental demands (2016, p. 222). As a result, teachers may attempt to avoid school initiatives that might rouse more parent involvement and complaint. Also, teachers may lean toward initiatives that are more traditionally parent-approved with low criticism rates. Every participant expressed an emotional response in wishing they had more time to devote to their students thus echoing Bernard’s notion of teachers taking their successes and failures inherently “personally” (2016, p. 222). Participant frustration at effectively meeting students’ needs was palpable.

Goals for Inclusion

Universally, participants felt that their schools were moving in the right direction; however, every teacher expressed the importance of mandatory professional development for teachers – with especial attention on transgender students. One teacher suggested the need for “training around language and behaviour and how to steer inappropriate behaviour in our classroom the right way.” Many teachers pointed to mandatory “school planning days” as a solution to finding time for professional development. Furthermore, one teacher acknowledged that better training would encourage teachers to “get involved as opposed to walking away.” All participants expressed the need for practical professional development. Too often, the ever-increasing curriculum and socio-emotional expectations can be overwhelming and diminish the real needs of students. One teacher described trying to “keep up with everything. . .it’s exhausting. At some point, you just feel like throwing your hands in the air.” These teachers are looking for meaningful tools and skills that they can take into the classroom and build a more inclusive school. Better scaffolding for creating inclusive school environments would assist in decreasing stress and frustration.

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Discussion

All participants were actively engaged in the interview process. As such, they gave meaningful and candid responses to questions. To “discover and report things as faithfully and honestly as possible,” I made great efforts to get to “what is the truth of the matter” (Denscombe, 2009, p. 62). Participants, in offering informed consent, were advised that all information was to be kept strictly confidential. I employed a “lock and key” mentality for data and made sure that participants were aware of their right to withdraw at any time (Denscombe, 2009, p. 65). Also, while participants did not exhibit outward distress or adverse effects, I exhibited sensitivity to this possibility. For example, I offered brief breaks in the interview for participants to collect their thoughts and not feel overwhelmed. Moreover, adequate background information was supplied so interviewees felt comfortable in discussing lesser known policy and school district information. As a result, participants were very comfortable during interviews in private and locked educational settings. This, further, allowed for authentic and organic communication with regards to the interview questions.

I noted “specified reactions” which led to “theoretical propositions” by addressing the research question through qualitative interviews (Graue, 2015, p. 8). I also employed grounded theory technique, allowing categories to emerge out of the data. From there, “hypotheses about relationships between categories” were developed (2015, p. 9). I was able to note nascent phenomena through coding. Participants “illuminated the phenomenon as a lived experience” that was based on “thickly contextualized materials” (2015, p. 12). In examining institutional expectations and personal/professional pre-conceptions shaping teachers’ responses towards transgender inclusion, three prominent themes/categorizations emerged from the collected data:

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The Need for Professional Development, A Better Understanding of Transgender Students, and The Need for Workplace Balance in Teachers Creating Safe Spaces for Transgender Youth.

The Need for Professional Development

Every participant indicated a need for more professional development regarding LGBTQ students. Moreover, every participant acknowledged that more involvement from administrators would be valuable in building a safe school culture. Teachers hold personal and professional pre-conceptions that administration should take the lead on changing school culture. Without administration direction, teachers are likely to remain inactive. While marginalization in the Canadian context is being countered significantly, Grace and Wells posit exclusion is still evident (2006, p. 51). Participants acknowledged positive steps their schools were taking, with regards to transgender youth; however, a shift from tolerance to acceptance has yet to come to complete fruition. As Grace and Wells indicate, schools have an “obligation to eradicate tolerated hatred toward sexual minority students” and must be aware of “the perennial disenfranchisement of sexual minority students in school settings that replicates the historical sociocultural positioning of these individuals as sex, sexual and gender deviants,” and while all participants indicated their participation in creating safe spaces for trans youth, they also indicated that not all teachers and administrators were actively engaged in the same process. As such, school culture in the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows district still “lags behind despite the progress” demanded by Grace and Wells and the Ministry mandate (2006, p. 53).

Notably, all participants pointed toward students leading the change in an inclusive school culture. Of course, it is positive that students feel comfortable to advocate for themselves within a school setting; it suggests that they feel their schools will be receptive. There is, however, a danger in having students take the lead as opposed to teachers. Students are placed in a

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vulnerable position with “youth taking up roles of social activists” (Grace & Wells, 2006, p. 52). For many transgender youth, social activism often occurs with them being visibly ‘out.’ In a binary adhering high school setting, this can place trans students at risk for being tokenized. A reverse authority dynamic occurs where sexual minority students run the risk of being “left stranded in the sociocultural life of schools” (Grace & Wells, 2006, p. 55). Too often, much pressure is placed on these socially active students to be experts in their field and provide education to the masses.

Moreover, teachers may not feel the need to fully engage in policy implementation if students are taking the lead. When teachers can visibly ascertain that transgender students are being celebrated, they are more likely to sit back as observers of inclusion initiatives as opposed to actively getting involved in changing school culture. When teachers take a secondary role in building inclusive environments, a distance between policy development and its full implementation occurs. This stalls schools from fully actualizing the intent of policies. Inclusive educational policymaking is then not translated into full access and accommodation for sexual minority students (Grace & Wells, 2006, p. 55). Within the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district, Grace and Wells’ notion of full access and accommodation is only being partially met.

Many participants indicated a reluctance on the part of teachers to fully engage in policy implementation. In addition to students taking on much of the actual movement, “inclusive performativity based on queer inclusion cultural ethics is often impeded by a politics of fear and caution” which was echoed by my participants (Grace & Wells, 2006, p. 55). Participants acknowledged that not all teachers feel comfortable in addressing LGBTQ issues and concerns. There is an underlying fear of being targeted for retribution that exacerbates anti-queerness in schools (Grace & Wells, 2006, p. 55). Many interviewees commented on teachers’ personal

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preconceptions that inhibits some educators from advocating for inclusion. For example, many teachers do not feel it is their place to be addressing sexual orientation and gender identity – their job is to teach the curriculum.

Certainly, participants were aware of some policy making, but a lack of mandated professional development left them uncertain of the specific goals of these policies. Again, teachers' institutional pre-conceptions (whereby, their job is to follow specific directives and professional development plans) inhibits them from challenging the heteronormative status quo. As a result, teachers are participating in implementing policy, but more so on a surface level. More work is needed to move away from what Payne and Smith describe as “solidifying a civil distance between marginalized and privileged groups (2012, p. 266). Indeed, this would be an excellent teaching point in professional development.

Without a clear understanding of policy expectations, some educators continue to “let personal moral beliefs interfere with their professional responsibility” (Grace & Wells, 2006, p. 56). Teachers are the preservers of the status quo in school culture. If teachers are not addressing both the larger and intricate minutia of LGBTQ policy, meaningful change for transgender inclusion remains stagnant. All participants indicated that teachers “lack the training needed to handle issues related to sex and/or gender identity” (Grace & Wells, 2006, p. 56). Without adequate teacher training, schools are not truly challenging heteronormativity and cis-normativity. All high schools in the district can point to examples of celebrating LGBTQ youth as a nod toward what Payne and Smith call “improved school climate” (2012, p. 268). However, when schools engage in celebration only, they fall victim to perpetuating the marginalization of LGBTQ youth. Notably, all interviewees viewed their schools' events of celebration as diversity in action without looking deeper into how these events may contribute to marginalization.

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Professional training for staff would assist schools in moving from “celebrating diversity” to “educating equity” (Payne & Smith, 2012, p. 269). Furthermore, better professional development would challenge teachers to think about the ways heteronormativity is institutionalized in schools. For example, when we focus on safety for trans youth, we are painting these students as victims in need of protection. Better training would allow schools to acknowledge the limitations of tolerance, awareness, and celebration and move toward equality (Payne & Smith, 2012, p. 279). Interviewees’ perceptions about trans inclusion within their schools was shaped more so around tolerance than true acceptance.

Progressive moves in Canadian law and legislation provide a framework for developing institutional supports and cultural practices, but without proper training, school wide efforts occur on a surface level. As such, schools may not properly acknowledge barriers to inclusion such as administration and parents (Grace & Wells, 2006, p. 56). Moreover, teachers may not be fully aware of how they are protected in teaching LGBTQ material. In the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district, there is a need for understanding how privileging heterosexuality marginalizes gender non-conforming youth (Payne & Smith, 2012, p. 283). Mandated professional development for teachers is direly needed to better meet the goals of the policies in place. Indeed, all interviewees expressed frustration in not fully understanding the Ministry mandate and how that relates to their teaching practice. There are safe-guards built into school policy to protect teachers who champion LGBTQ initiatives, but my participants were unaware of this fact.

A Better Understanding of Transgender Youth

While all participants felt they had a sound understanding of gay youth, many admitted to having little knowledge of transgender youth. Additionally, all teachers welcomed more training

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in building an inclusive school culture for trans students. Meyer & Leonardi posit that all educators need better professional development in working with trans youth “whether they are aware of it or not” (2017, p. 2). Moreover, they acknowledge limited research on teachers’ perspectives and experiences working with and supporting trans youth (2017, p. 2). Meyer & Leonardi found that two main points of interest arose for teachers in gaining a better understanding of trans students: exposure to transgender and gender nonconforming people, and conversation about gender diversity (2017, p. 4). There is a real danger placing too much focus on transgender students and exposing these children to public scrutiny; essentially, these “out” students become catalysts for institutional change – whether they take on this role or not. However, exposure to trans youth helps educators become more aware and inclusive around gender diversity (2017, p. 5). It is vital that we do not place trans youth in the position of being a “sacrificial lamb” for trans awareness – this can be harmful to both students and school culture. Instead, schools should “till the soil” by creating safe spaces that “assume gender, sexual and family diversity are always present. (2017, p. 7). Schools should make efforts to recognize and affirm “a diverse population of students and families through curriculum, norms and everyday practices” so as to avoid singling out specific trans students for instigating change (2017, p. 7).

Providing teachers with more opportunity for meaningful conversation around trans youth can have a significant impact on school culture. Meyer and Leonardi assert that this conversation should be interactive, ongoing, and involving critical self-reflection (2017, p. 9). It is important that this collegial conversation move beyond “one-off conversations that take place in workshops” and into daily practice and teacher intentionality (2017, p. 9). Currently, this practice is not occurring on a formal level within the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district. For this practice to be successful, it is important that educated individuals help facilitate these

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conversations so that dissonance can remain productive (2017, p. 10). By moving beyond exposure to trans youth as a catalyst for change, a culture of conversation can create a richer understanding for teachers. Through discussion, teachers can better understand their own biases and historical indoctrination into heteronormative culture. Certainly, during the interview process, participants commented on how “eye-opening” it was to simply talk about LGBTQ inclusion. All interviewees acknowledged that this type of engaging conversation about inclusion is something all teachers should experience. Also, when teachers can acknowledge their own limitations and knowledge, they are better equipped to take responsibility for their own learning and improving professional interactions (2017, p. 11). Importantly, all stakeholders within a school should be included in a culture of conversation in learning about gender and sexual diversity. This important conversation will assist in better implementing trans-affirming policies (2017, p. 12). Without a mandated directive to engage in conversation, however, teachers are not inclined to step out of their comfort zones.

In better serving transgender youth within the high school environment, it is important that teachers understand some of the unique challenges these youth face. In celebrating diversity and equality, many schools are glossing over the specific needs of this vulnerable population. Barb J. Burdge asserts that “transgender people make up a social group that is disadvantaged in most contexts (2014, p. 357). In school district 42, most high schools still follow the binary norm, and this can leave trans students isolated and disincluded. It is important for educators to understand that the “threat of discrimination is very real for transgender people,” and often, transgender students face “familial rejection” (2014, p. 357). In addition to discrimination and familial isolation, trans students are more likely to experience widespread harassment, verbal abuse, and violent victimization; this leaves these students in an incredibly vulnerable position (2014, p.

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358). In finding and expressing their true selves, trans students are boldly stepping inside school doors that traditionally adhere to the gender binary. Teachers need to have a better understanding of this resiliency to create meaningful and equitable change in high schools.

Adolescence is a time when students discover their identity in the world. Certainly, this can be anxiety provoking, but in the case of trans students, they may “feel their difference more deeply” (Pazos, 1999, p. 66). Without proper training, there is a risk of educators treating these students as “dysfunctional” or experiencing mental illness (Pazos, 1999, p. 66). As high school is generally the time when students go through puberty, trans students face new challenges. Puberty can force students out of a safe mental place as they develop secondary sexual characteristics. This development can leave trans youth experiencing feelings of “betrayal, shock, and disgust” (Pazos, 1999, p. 70). As such, these students can be found leading lives of deception and investing energy trying to conform to social norms (Pazos, 1999, p. 73). For a school culture to become more inclusive, staff need to be aware of the myriad of unique challenges that trans youth face. In the interest of personalized learning, teachers will need to move away from the notion of blissful ignorance and towards self-education to better understand trans youth.

The Need for Workplace Balance in Teachers Creating Safe Spaces for Transgender Youth

Every participant indicated workplace stress, workload, and teacher burnout as an obstacle toward building a truly inclusive space. As a caring or human service profession, teachers are particularly at risk for burnout. Coined by Herbert J. Freudenberger, the burnout phenomenon has three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (McCormick & Barnett, 2011, p. 280). Emotional exhaustion can be characterized by not being related to physical activity, depersonalization refers to a “diminishing concern for the well-being of other persons,” and the personal accomplishment dimension relates

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to “being effective and making a difference” (2011, p. 280). All participants expressed feelings and concerns related to these dimensions. These professional stressors get in the way of teachers better advocating for transgender students.

Furthermore, all participants used the term role-model when discussing their teaching practice. Many found it difficult to be a successful role-model with so many expectations in a performance-driven profession (Carroll, 2007, p. 81). Coupled with burnout, teachers experience the “very idea of a profession with ideals about a vision of quality” thus placing pressure on teachers to conduct themselves in a moral manner befitting an educator (2007. p. 85). Simply put, teachers have large shoes to fill. Every day, teachers are modelling professional dispositions and generating a moral community (2007, p. 86). Often, teachers enter the profession with preconceptions about how a teacher should behave, and (as seen in all participants) these early preconceptions stay with teachers throughout their career. If teachers had more opportunity to develop in communities of practice, burnout and stress might likely diminish. One participant duly noted with expressive aplomb, “We just need to talk more. A lot more.” Unfortunately, the nature of the profession often finds teachers in isolation (2007, p. 87). Collegial communication opportunities can be limited when one is managing a diverse and challenging classroom. This isolation can certainly lead one to feeling overwhelmed. Despite good intentions, all participants felt that they could not effectively meet the needs of all their students. As transgender youth often exist within the margins of school culture, it is more likely that their needs may not be fully attended to. In creating an inclusive environment for transgender students, more attention needs to focus on workplace balance for teachers.

Conclusion

Discussion

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Great strides have been made toward better inclusion for transgender youth in the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district. The Ministry mandate and creation of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity network and resources have allowed schools to move forward in building a healthy school culture. Ahead of the learning curve, the district adopted a comprehensive policy specifically protecting the rights of LGBTQ youth. The formation of the *Safe, Caring, and Healthy Schools Committee* is further evidence that the district is committed to creating an inclusive school district. Moreover, changes in the DSM- 5 with regards to transgender people is indicative of a clearer understanding of the challenges trans youth face. What was once referred to as gender identity disorder (GID) has now been replaced by gender dysphoria (Burdge, 2014, p. 377). This new diagnostic category moves away from mental illness while still recognizing some of the distress transgender people may experience when their physical bodies or assigned gender identities do not align with their personal sense of self (2014, p. 378). Certainly, within the province of British Columbia, there is a movement afoot to challenge heteronormativity by increasing awareness and understanding of LGBTQ students.

The larger problem is that the policies, mandates, and good intentions are ahead of the reality of day-to-day high school existence. The participants in this study all showed a hearty aptitude for creating inclusive classroom environments; however, these teachers all acknowledged a lack of training and awareness around issues pertaining to LGBTQ youth. When discussing transgender youth, the waters muddied further. While these participants are open-minded to professional learning, the offers for education are simply not there. As a result, the best school district efforts toward trans inclusion have been led by students and a small group of passionate educators. To truly meet the outcomes of the Ministry mandate and policies,

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mandatory professional development is needed. Furthermore, the district needs to make a commitment to ongoing collegial communication with regards to LGBTQ youth.

The participants in this study show that teacher response to creating inclusive school environments for transgender youth in the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district is grounded in personal and professional pre-conceptions that are inhibiting a move forward. Teachers are somewhat stymied by their lack of knowledge around trans youth, unrealistic expectations for classroom excellence while managing numerous educational and socio-emotional initiatives, and administration that is not invested in LGBTQ inclusion. Moreover, as teachers have not received specific professional development with regards to transgender students, they lack the confidence to champion initiatives while remaining fearful of societal and parental criticism. As a result, like-minded teachers tend to converse with each other in an informal way. While this can have a positive impact in individual classrooms, this conversation does not fully translate into changing school culture at large. The overwhelming institutional expectations – trying to meet the personal learning needs of all students while championing diversity and inclusion – are exhaustive in scope. As a result, teachers are unable to fully offer an inclusive environment for transgender students. In juggling all the inherent demands on teachers, trans youth are not being adequately served in an environment of inclusion.

School district 42 prides itself on its inclusive initiatives. Admittedly, the district has championed some great initiatives and district events. Events such as queer prom, speaker's nights, poetry slams, and fundraisers all point toward an interest in being inclusive. Many teachers are making small changes within their own classrooms that have a far-reaching impact. Acknowledging correct pronoun usage and using gender neutral language are fine examples. Unfortunately, many of these important events were produced on a grass roots level and directed

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by students and minimal teaching staff. Pre-conceptions teachers have about honouring inclusivity for transgender students are met when educators witness celebratory events; however, these largely student-driven events have an adverse effect in letting teachers off the hook. The interviewees acknowledged these LGBTQ events as a positive step towards inclusion within their schools. Unfortunately, the participants felt that these events were indicative of their schools being truly inclusive spaces for trans youth. There was little motivation to step in and become more involved as inclusion leaders. Personal preconceptions about the importance of honouring diversity in students tended to stop at participants' classroom doors. As long as the interviewees felt that their classrooms were inclusive for transgender students, impetus to channel this acceptance beyond their classrooms was quite limited.

In moving forward, it is important to take a 'top-down' approach where school administrators and senior staff take a more active part in role-modelling inclusivity. Personal and pre-conceived notions that administrators should be leading the charge with regards to inclusion initiatives allows teachers to remain in the background. Teachers can safely conclude that they are doing all they can while placing blame on administration for not being more directive. Sadly, transgender youth lose out in this scenario. The institutional power dynamic in high schools is one where directives are administered by administration for teachers to follow. If directives are not being given, teachers can feel confident that they are fully meeting the needs of what has been asked of them. To truly offer trans inclusion, administration will need to take the lead and provide clear directives, instruction, and professional development for teachers. This could have a positive ripple effect throughout the high schools. As trans students are already marginalized, it is important to move their concerns beyond the borders of school culture.

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It is important to note that while the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district has experienced positive feedback in their effort to champion sexual orientation and gender identity, a neighbouring school district has decidedly not. The Chilliwack school district has received considerable blow-back in initiating SOGI initiatives. Reflecting the views of school board members and local constituents, MLA Laurie Throness weighed in on the controversy surrounding SOGI in the local newspaper, *The Chilliwack Progress*. She claims to “serve the transgendered in our community with compassion and respect,” but undermines the Ministry mandate as “predisposing impressionable children and youth to make decisions they will later regret” (Throness, 2017). She notes that “I think of our gender as a resilient plant, rooted in the soil of our biological characteristics” (Throness, 2017). This mentality does not align with SOGI. Unfortunately, her views are being shared around the province. An organization, Culture Guard, has been campaigning to remove SOGI from schools. Through social media and a comprehensive website, they have gained many followers in their crusade to stop SOGI. They view SOGI as “a threat to free markets and freedom of conscience and religion” (Culture Guard, 2017). Their aggressive campaign is ongoing.

The Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district has yet to receive such negative attention; however, with neighbouring school districts such as Chilliwack, it is not out of the realm of possibility that school district 42 may receive similar reaction. If anything, the local vitriol around SOGI is further proof of its need in schools. If teachers are going to be put in a position to defend SOGI, they will need adequate education and support. Moreover, teachers will need concrete directives from administration to practice inclusion within their classrooms and school communities. Quite simply, it is unreasonable to place this weight on a few shoulders of self-educated teachers and passionate youth. As much of the negativity is around gender (and the

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potential for students to develop “mental illness”), transgender youth are particularly vulnerable (Throness, 2017). Sound sexual orientation and gender identity professional development is in urgent need to address those individuals and institutions who wish to move away from an LGBTQ inclusive school model. Furthermore, sound education for teachers would allow for greater culture change.

In short, institutional expectations and teachers’ personal and professional pre-conceptions are inhibiting a fully inclusive environment for transgender students. Indeed, all participants felt they were fulfilling the Ministry mandate while simultaneously acknowledging shortcomings preventing true inclusion. As teachers are used to ‘top-down’ directives from administration, they are looking for professional instruction and guidance. Without this, teachers can safely feel that they are doing all that they can for trans youth. Moreover, teachers are conditioned from early career development to work with parents and not against them. This pre-conception can halt efforts on behalf of teachers to challenge the heteronormative status quo. Also, when teachers witness celebratory LGBTQ events within their schools, they may be further buoyed by the notion that their schools are inclusive. Currently, teachers within the Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows school district seem comfortable to rest on their laurels with regards to transgender inclusion. More concrete direction from administration would encourage teachers to dig deeper with regards to building safe spaces. Direction coupled with mandated professional development would highlight the unique needs of trans youth and allow schools to move beyond surface level acceptance initiatives.

Suggestions for Further Research

This research solely focussed on the high school experience through the lens of teacher understanding. Further research conducted with elementary educators within school district 42

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would be beneficial to gain a broader understanding of how transgender students are being included from the onset of their educational experience. Moreover, it would be worthwhile to conduct research with administrators within the district. As they are not part of the teachers' union and are held to a different set of standards, their understanding of SOGI initiatives may vary greatly from their teacher counterpoints. Also, it would be worthwhile to better understand what institutional expectations and personal/professional pre-conceptions shape their view toward transgender inclusion. There appears to be a large disconnect between administrative directives and the need for teachers to follow suit. A better understanding of the power dynamic between teachers and administrators would shed light on why inclusion initiatives are being stalled.

Indeed, similar research projects could be conducted with numerous educational communities within the district: counsellors, teaching assistants, coaches, and clerical staff. Of course, extensive research could be conducted focussing entirely on the lived student experience. Comparisons between educators and students would offer more clarity on school inclusion. As many teachers have pre-conceived notions on how to deal with parents (namely, not to 'rock the boat'), better communication networks between teachers and parents should be investigated. A three-fold approach towards transgender inclusion should involve students, educators, and parents.

It would also be beneficial to conduct similar research in neighbouring school districts. As Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows is considered a rural district, interesting comparisons could be drawn with districts such as Abbotsford, Mission, and Chilliwack. Researchers may also be interested in looking at transgender inclusion in urban school districts such as Burnaby and Vancouver. Additionally, research findings could compare and contrast urban and rural school

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districts within British Columbia. It would be of interest to examine how public perception and media representation of SOGI is impacting school culture. For example, is the media representation having an adverse impact on teachers? Finally, as SOGI is relatively new in implementation, it would be valuable to examine its impact after two or more years.

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