Trans Forming Education:

An examination of the ways in which Teachers' construct gender and understand gender independence

in TDSB elementary school classrooms

by

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TRANS-FORMING EDUCATION:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE WAYS IN WHICH TEACHERS CONSTRUCT GENDER AND
UNDERSTAND GENDER INDEPENDENCE IN TDSB ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the ways in which teachers construct and understand gender and gender

independence in children. This study also explores the ways in which teachers strive to accommodate

and include children who are gender independent. Six elementary school teachers who were positive

space representatives or who self-identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered or Queer

(LGBTQ) advocates in their schools were interviewed regarding the ways in which they constructed

and understood gender identity and gender independence in their classrooms. The teachers, who taught

between kindergarten and grade eight, were questioned about their familiarity with the Toronto District

School Board (TDSB) *guideline for the accommodation of transgender and gender non-conforming*

students and staff. Teachers' experiences with children who were gender independent were also

examined. Interviews focused on examining the ways that teachers constructed gender in their

classrooms. Teachers were asked to identify barriers to inclusion, as well as the resources and supports

available regarding the inclusion of gender independent children. Teachers were also asked to identify

any additional resources they felt would be beneficial towards facilitating the inclusion of children who

were gender independent. A combination of theoretical lenses consisting of disability theory, queer

theory and feminist theory has been used throughout this study. Themes found include: Gender as

constructed, Gender as performed, teachers' roles in reinforcing or shaping gender performance,

constructing male and female gender independence, and creating inclusive environments. The implications of these results include suggestions for creating classrooms and schools that are inclusive to children who may be gender independent.

gender; gender identification; gender performativity; elementary school; children.

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my son Kai, and to all children. May you always be accepted, welcomed, and included.

Table of contents

Introduction

Research Purpose: Statement of the Issue

There is often a misconception that prior to puberty, children neither experience gender independence[1], nor understand their gender identities. Many researchers conclude that this is because gender independence, transsexualism and same sex preference are often inaccurately conflated (Biddulph, 2006; Kennedy, 2008). The idea that gender identity and sexual orientation are one and the same is problematic because while same sex preference usually becomes apparent at or around the age of puberty, substantial research has identified that gender independence can occur much earlier.

Research in the area of children and "non typical" gender identity has identified that children can begin experience gender independence as early as eighteen months of age (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2011; Dykstra, 2005; PFLAG, 2007; Orr & Pearson, 2011). A 2009 study conducted with adults who identified as transgendered, found that the majority of participants were aware that they were transgendered "well before puberty" (Hellen, 2009, p. 88). According to the World Health Organization (1985), childhood gender non-conformity (sic) is usually observed in children between the ages of two and four (as cited by Dykstra, 2005).

Despite this evidence, young children who are gender independent are frequently dismissed as being confused. Their gender independence is either ignored in the hopes that it may be a passing phase, or is denied due to the false belief that children who do not gender conform (sic) need to be taught how to "properly" gender identify (Orr & Pearson, 2011; Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999; Luecke, 2010). As a result, children who are gender independent are often pressured by adults to conform to "typical" gender roles by acting "more male" (i.e. playing more sports, wearing pants, or cutting their hair short) or by acting "more female" (i.e. wearing more dresses, playing with "gender typical" toys,

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1   The TDSB guidelines for the accommodation of gender non-conforming and transgendered students and staff, and much of the literature surrounding children who are gender independent use the terms "gender non-conforming," "gender variant," or "transgender." Throughout this paper, the authour has chosen to use the term "gender independent." The rationale for this choice is explained in the "evolution of the authour's language" section of this paper.

such as dolls, and wearing their hair long). The pressure on children to conform, though often well intentioned, can rob them of a central part of their identity, and can create or contribute to feelings of shame, guilt, and a loss of self-worth (Luecke, 2010; Kennedy & Hellen, 2010; Kennedy, 2008; Orr & Pearson, 2011). Some research has identified that adults in general, and teachers of young children specifically, are frequently uncomfortable with the idea of children and sexuality (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Biddulph, 2006). Many teachers feel that addressing issues such as gender independence with young children is inappropriate (Biddulph, 2006; Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999). Thus, the notion of gender independence in children remains controversial.

Western society largely operates from a heteronormative and often transphobic, or homophobic lens that understands and views gender solely in binary terms (Kennedy & Hellen, 2010; Dykstra, 2005; Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999; Butler, 1990; 2004). As a result, many teachers unconsciously perpetuate the notion of gender as a binary construct through the language they use, the ways they set up their classrooms, and the toys and materials that they provide for their students. One example of how teachers reinforce binary understandings of gender is through language. Often, teachers do not consider whom they may be leaving out when they use the common classroom greeting "good morning girls and boys." For this reason, it is integral that teachers take a proactive role with regard to changing their language and their instruction practices in order to actively include children who may be gender independent (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Dykstra, 2005).

Although it seems clear that inclusion must begin with teachers, research has identified that many teacher training programs either fail to address entirely, or provide very little training regarding children and sexuality and more specifically, regarding children who do not typically gender identify (Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999; Luecke, 2010; Biddulph, 2006; Hellen, 2009). The lack of knowledge surrounding gender independence can contribute to negative attitudes about gender independence from both teachers and students (Biddulph, 2006; Luecke, 2010; Grossman, Haney, Edwards, Ardon &

2

Jerrett Howell, 2009; Wyss, 2004).

Today, the Toronto District School board (TDSB) remains the first school board in Canada to have created and implemented a guideline document that describes clear accommodations for supporting and working with transgender and gender independent students and staff (Donkin, 2012; Jeffers, 2012). The major focus of this study is to examine the ways in which teachers construct and understand gender and gender identity, and to explore how teachers work towards creating classrooms that are more inclusive to children who are gender independent. Teacher's experiences with children who are gender independent, as well as their knowledge of the *TDSB guidelines for the accommodation of transgender and gender non-conforming students and staff*, will also be examined.

Because a major focus of this study is to examine the ways that teachers work towards creating classrooms that are inclusive of children who are gender independent, interviews with teachers who had access to resources regarding gender independence was essential. TDSB elementary school teachers were chosen because of the TDSB guideline document which specifically focuses on the support and accommodation of transgender and gender non-conforming students and staff.

Research Questions

This study will investigate the following questions:

a) How do TDSB elementary school teachers construct and consequently address gender in their classrooms?

b) What challenges or barriers exist regarding the support and inclusion of children who are gender independent?

c) How do teachers currently support and include students who are gender independent, and what further resources are needed?

This study will explore teachers' specific experiences and understandings regarding gender and gender identity. Teachers will be asked to discuss their individual understandings about, and

experiences with, gender identity and gender independence. Due to the individual nature of this study, flexibility is a key component. Data collection will follow an emergent approach and the research design will remain flexible. The individual and emergent nature of this study lends itself well to a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Theoretical Framework

Gender Matters: A discussion of the evolution of the author's language

Throughout my fifteen years as an early childhood educator, I have come across three different children who did not identify with the gender that matched their natal sex. I, along with my colleagues struggled to find ways to support these children. When I looked for resources to support young children who were gender independent, I found that they were scarce and difficult to access. My background in developmental theory first lead me to believe that these children must have had some sort of developmental "delay" because they did know seem to know their "correct" gender. However, my political leanings left me conflicted, as I had always placed great weight on people's rights to self-identify. When I began to review the research in this area as a graduate student, I was first drawn to articles from the medical community. I read works that spoke of "gender identity disorder," "gender dysphoria," "referral rates" and "therapy." The more I thought about this, the more I felt that something was inherently wrong with viewing a person's gender identity as a "problem." Something about this pathologisation of identity didn't sit right with me. I thought about how I knew myself to be female and I came to the conclusion that it was just something that I felt. Because my "feeling" matched my natal sex, I was never questioned. I thought about these children, and I felt that there was something very wrong with dismissing a person's feelings regarding who they knew themselves to be, so I continued to look. Through my reading, I came across the term "gender variant" I found that the literature surrounding gender variance did not pathologise gender identity in the ways that "gender identity disorder" and "gender dysphoria" had, but something about the deviant connotations that "variant" had

4

gave me pause, and I still wasn't happy with the terminology. Through further reading, I then came across "gender non-conforming" and "transgender" and while I felt much better about those terms, I felt that "gender non-conforming" still carried connotations of deviance, of being conspicuously placed outside of the "norm," and I felt that children should be able to just be- without having to fight to be. The term "transgendered" seemed too final for me, and because I was looking at this topic with regard to children, I felt that I needed something more fluid, more open to the changing identities that children carry with them.

At a parent panel for the families of gender non-conforming children, I first heard the term "gender independence" I felt that this term finally captured what I had been looking for. It did not presume any kind of identity, nor did it carry any connotations of "deviance." Coming from the field of Early Childhood Education, I place high value on the words we use with children, and I feel strongly that word choices matter. Children understand their world in literal ways and I feel that they absorb and internalize the words that we use to describe them. If we don't choose these words carefully, we can unknowingly cause great harm. I liked that the word "independence" carried with it connotations of positivity and strength, and that it was open to change. It is also important to note that within the theoretical framework of post structuralism through which this paper is positioned, it is understood that language is a major factor in the constructions of our realities. For these reasons, the term "gender independent" will be used throughout this paper.

<p align="center">**Conceptual Framework**</p>

This project proceeds from a framework of social justice. The purpose of my research is two-pronged; 1) to explore the ways in which teachers construct gender and understand gender identity, and 2) to highlight ways to create equal learning environments for all students regardless of their gender identification. Specifically, this project involves interviewing teachers regarding their constructions and understandings of gender identity and gender independence. This project will also examine the ways in

which teachers strive to create classrooms that are inclusive of children who are gender independent.

Disability theory, queer theory, and feminist theory all operate with a central goal of striving for autonomy, respect, and equality. By using a disability theory/ queer theory/ feminist theory lens, this project will highlight the ways that TDSB elementary school teachers construct gender and understand gender identity in their classrooms, as well as how they understand gender independence. This paper will be premised around the idea that gender is socially constructed and that when teachers are aware of these constructions, they can teach in ways that allow children to express their identities in multiple ways. Because a central theme of this project is social justice and social change, I will be working from the conceptual framework of critical theory, which pays attention to power differential and access to resources (Sherry, 2004; hooks, 2010).

Theoretical Perspective

The major focus of my research is to aid in the struggle for equity for gender independent children in TDSB elementary schools. The work of Eli Clare, Robert McRuer, Judith Butler and others will serve as a lens through which teacher's accounts of their experiences will be considered and analyzed.

Judith Butler (1990; 2004) argues that the notion of gender is socially constructed. She states that human beings both create and are dependent upon social norms, and that our understandings of these social norms create our identities. Butler goes on to argue that we must acknowledge that the gender binary exists as the dominant construction of gender. However, she makes the clear assertion that to acknowledge the gender binary does not mean it should not be challenged. In her 1990 work "undoing gender" Butler argues that the "terms of gender designation are constantly in the process of being re-made" (p. 10). This means that our gender identification is not, nor should it be, static. Rather, Butler views identity as being in a perpetual state of change, and thus, our *understandings* [emphasis mine] of identity must also remain flexible and open to change. Butler argues that rather than being

6

something that is biologically assigned, gender is something that we construct, through our language, our actions, our ways of categorizing ourselves and each other, and the ways in which we perform our gendered identities (Butler, 1990; 2004). Butler argues that we perform gender through the clothing that we wear, the ways we act, the "roles" we take on, and the ways that we present ourselves (Butler, 1990; 2004). Once we become aware of these social constructions and performances of gender, we can begin to push against these boundaries and begin to break open the binary. Through my readings, several parallels between Butler's theories regarding challenging dominant heteronormative social constructions, and critical disability theory's focus on challenging dominant ableist social constructions were identified.

The intersections between disability theory and gender independence

Critical disability theory centres on several perspectives of disability. The ideas of the social model for disability are a prominent aspect of the critical disability theory (Oliver, 2009). The social model for disability argues that the way that society responds to disabilities and fails to include disabled people is what creates the social exclusion of people with disabilities. This is contrary to previously held beliefs, which proposed that the physical impairment (sic) of disabled people was the cause of social exclusion (Oliver, 2009). For this reason, proponents of the social model would argue that disabled people are an oppressed minority. Similarly, Butler (2004) argues that social constructions of gender and the pervasive default to the gender binary, are the reason for the marginalization and oppression of people who are gender independent, gender fluid, or transgendered. She argues that it is not the fact that one is gender independent that places them outside of the "norm," but that the heteronormative perspective held by many, marginalizes and oppresses people thereby *pushing* them outside of the accepted idea of "normal."

Many of the issues that the disabled community face are similar to those that are faced by people who are transgendered, or gender independent. Two similarities that stood out to me were the

medicalization of both gender independence and disability, and the idea of parental guilt (Sherry, 2009; Zucker, 2009; Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2011).

The medicalization or pathologization of something that is a central part of one's identity is problematic because when aspects of a person become medicalized, the person can begin to be viewed as patient first, person second. This transference of roles creates a situation where power is taken out of the hands of the individual and placed into the hands of medical professionals. This deference to the medical field can negatively affect a person's self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, and reduce their capacity for autonomy (Ehrensaft, 2011; McRuer, 2006).

In his 2004 article, Sherry highlights an interesting point. Unlike people of colour, people who are disabled, (or are gender independent) are often the only disabled (or gender independent) person in their household. This can be difficult for the person who is "different," as well as for the rest of the family, in particular, the parents. According to Sherry, parents who have children who somehow "don't fit" have reported to have felt moderate to extreme guilt. He cites that the major reason for this guilt is a phenomenon through which parents feel that they must have done something "wrong" resulting in their being "punished" by having a child who has a disability (or is gender independent) (Sherry, 2004). This attitude is a both a result of, as well as perpetuates, a deficit model of thinking that needs to be addressed and challenged.

Presently, our society often views people with disabilities as people who need to be "helped." Often, "helping" is viewed as: Making decisions for, "taking care of", and pretending that people's differences are not noticed, rather than changing our environments and societal structures in order to support people as they are (McRuer, 2006; Asch, 2004). A substantial amount of time is spent trying to teach people with disabilities that they are "just like" people without disabilities, and to convince people without disabilities, that people with disabilities are "just like us" (McRuer, 2006).

The notion of understanding people with disabilities as being "just like us" is problematic,

because it presumes that "us" is what everyone should aspire to be (Kafer, 2003). The "us" this phrase refers to is largely, gender conforming or cisgender[2], non-disabled, non-racialized members of a hetero-normative society (Kafer, 2003; Butler, 1990; 2004; hooks, 2003; 2010). This attitude frequently contributes to and perpetuates an oppressive inaccessible society that favours those who are already faced with the least barriers.

Many theorists including McRuer (2003; 2006), Clare (1999), and hooks (2010) propose that rather than trying to ignore differences and striving to "fit," differences should be embraced and celebrated. It is important to understand that rather than deterring from who we are, these differences help to shape and define us. It is also important to understand that while differences may make people uncomfortable; this discomfort should not be avoided. Discomfort can bring about change, and should be embraced and utilized as a way to challenge rigid ideas, and to create new notions of "normal" (McRuer, 2006; Clare, 1999; 2001; 2003; hooks, 2010; Sherry, 2009; Butler, 1990; 2004).

The paternalistic lens that exists as a result of the idea of "helpfulness" or striving to make others "just like us" contributes to patronizing attitudes and behaviours towards people with disabilities and can create situations where people are pitied, and infantilized, rather than respected and accepted (McRuer, 2006; Asch, 2004). Children and youth who are gender independent are frequently faced with many similar issues. When children are gender independent, they are often told that they "must be confused." Children who are gender independent are also frequently diagnosed with "gender dysphoria" or "gender identity disorder," both mental illnesses identified in the DSM IV[3] (Vanderburgh, 2008; Zucker, 2010). Children who come out as gender independent are often not trusted to be able to self-identify, and are told that how they feel is wrong. They are often told that they should "act more male" or "act more female" in order to be "cured" (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2011;

2 The LGBTQQ community prefers the use of the term "cisgender" to describe a person whose biological sex matches their affirmed gender. This terminology is preferred because the terms "transgender" and "cisgender" do not imply one or the other being "normal" or "expected" vs. "abnormal" or "different.

3 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, fourth edition

Vanderburgh, 2008; Dykstra, 2005).

When a transgendered or gender independent person "passes," that is, conforms well to the gender they identify with, they are more likely to be accepted into society. However, if one remains gender fluid, or gender ambiguous, many people will respond in ways that visibly display their discomfort. People who are gender fluid or gender ambiguous are often pressured to "choose a gender" or to "make up their minds." In short, they are pressured to be "just like us" (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2011; McRuer, 2006).

Feminist theory, Queer theory, and disability theory all centre on the idea that all people are capable individuals and as such, are entitled to respect, autonomy, and dignity (McRuer, 2006; Asch, 2004, Freier, 1993; hooks, 2010; hooks, 2003). These theories are also centred on the ideas that "the personal is political" (Sherry, 2009; hooks, 2003) and that all parts of a person are integral to their identity (Butler, 2004). As Sherry states in his 2004 article, all discrimination is about access, therefore, lack of support for gender independent students can and should be classified as discrimination. All of these theories are premised on the idea that the notion of who "fits" needs to be broadened rather than expecting those who "don't fit" to change in order to gain equal access (Sherry, 2009; McRuer, 2003; 2006; hooks, 2010; hooks, 2003; Butler, 1990; 2004). Thus, we can draw clear parallels between disability theory, feminist theory, and queer theory.

Through an examination of teachers' constructions of gender and understandings of gender identity, this study will explore the ways in which teachers' constructions of gender and understandings of gender independence help to create inclusive or non-inclusive environments for the children in their classrooms.

Review of Literature

What is Gender Independence?

Brill and Pepper (2008) describe gender independence as being "behaviours that fall outside of

what is considered normal for a person's assigned biological sex" (p. 5). The authors go on to describe gender independence in terms of play preferences that are generally typical for children of the opposite sex, such as boys who prefer dolls, and girls who prefer trucks. Brill and Pepper also describe the desire to wear clothing that is generally associated with the opposite sex to be an indicator of gender independence. Ehrensaft (2011) describes "gender creative children" as being children who

> transcend the culture's normative definitions of male/ female to creatively interweave a sense of gender that comes neither totally from the inside, nor totally from the outside, but resides somewhere in between (5).

Kennedy and Hellen (2010) take the definition a step further, to describe apparent and non-apparent gender independence, discussing children who feel safe to express their gender independence as apparent and children who do not, as non-apparent. Kennedy and Hellen (2010) state that through their work they have found that more than 80% of transgendered people become aware that they are transgendered before they leave primary school (p. 27). Substantial research has revealed that the majority of transgendered adults disclose that they knew between the ages of 2 and 5 that their natal sex did not match their affirmed gender identity (Luecke, 2010; Vanderburgh, 2009; Kennedy & Hellen, 2010; Kennedy, 2008; Brill & Pepper, 2008).

The Conflation of Gender Identity and Sexual preference

Although substantial research has identified that children begin to express their gender identities early in their lives, there is a misconception that children do not experience feelings of gender independence prior to puberty. Many researchers conclude that this is because gender independence and same sex preference are often inaccurately conflated (Biddulph, 2006; Kennedy, 2008).

The conflation of same sex preference with gender independence often leads to the presumption that children who are gender independent come to realise their gendered identities in similar ways to children who develop same sex preferences (Hellen, 2009). Since many people assume that same sex preference usually becomes apparent at or around the age of puberty, gender independent children who

have not yet reached puberty are often dismissed as being "confused" (Kennedy & Hellen, 2010; Kennedy, 2008; Hellen, 2009). The understanding of sexual preference and gender identity as conflated often causes adults to dismiss or ignore children's gender independence in the hopes that these feelings will "go away." As a result, children who are gender independent are often pressured to act "more male" or "more female" (Luecke, 2010; Kennedy & Hellen, 2010; Kennedy, 2008). Pressure on children to behave in ways that correspond with natal sex rather than affirmed gender can create a climate where children feel that they must hide their gender independence, leading to feelings of shame, guilt, inadequacy, or pathology (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Kennedy & Hellen, 2010; Grossman, et al, 2009; Biddulph, 2006; Luecke, 2010).

Hellen (2009) proposes that gender independence is frequently understood as transsexualism because a transsexual person (one who identifies with the opposite gender to their birth sex) can still fit into the confines of the gender binary. He suggests that this could be a possible reason for the lack of information regarding supporting children who are gender fluid, or do not identify as either male or female, but perhaps as both, or as neither (Hellen, 2009). This conflation of sexuality and gender identity is also problematic because many people find the idea of children and sexuality to be a great source of discomfort, and thus avoid the topic of gender independence all together (Biddulph, 2006).

Gender Independence in the Classroom

Due the discomfort surrounding sexuality and childhood, many teachers feel that addressing issues such as gender independence with young children is inappropriate (Biddulph, 2006). Research conducted in the UK has also identified that there is a lack of information available to teachers regarding children who are gender independent (Hellen, 2009). When children who gender independent do not see themselves represented in their classrooms, and their feelings are either denied or ignored, perceptions of gender independence can be negatively influenced for both cisgender[4] children and

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4As previously stated, the term cisgender refers to a person whose birth sex and affirmed gender match.

gender independent children. A lack of knowledge about, or the refusal to acknowledge gender independence, can create a classroom climate where the shaming or teasing of children who are gender independent is accepted. The refusal to acknowledge gender independence in the classroom can also contribute to the perception that gender independence is something that is "abnormal" or "problematic." This kind of thinking can reinforce a negative sense of self in children who are gender independent, and can reinforce and contribute to transphobic and homophobic behaviour in cisgender children (Biddulph, 2006; Luecke, 2010; Grossman et al. 2009). A 2004 study conducted by Wyss identified that many gender independent students were severely abused and/or sexually assaulted while on school property without any intervention from teachers. Wyss' study also identified that fifty percent of gender independent youth died by suicide, and that students who disclosed that they were victims of bullying were treated as though they "brought it on themselves" by "pushing the boundaries" (Wyss, 2004; Orr & Pearson, 2011).

Research surrounding teachers' understandings and perceptions of gender in the classroom has largely focused on creating classroom environments that support equality between female and male students (Hellen, 2009). Although these initiatives are well intentioned, the focus on creating an equal environment between girls and boys reinforces the idea that gender identity always exists within the confines of a binary construct (Butler, 2004). This can be problematic, because the consistent reinforcement of gender as always and only binary, can marginalize and unintentionally exclude children who do not identify themselves within the context of the gender binary (Hellen, 2009; Butler, 2004). A study on seven and eight year old children and their relationships with teachers identified that teacher's expressions, understandings and constructions of gender affected children's constructions of their own gender identities (Skelton, Carrington, Francis, Hutchings, Read, & Hall, 2009). Brooker and Ha (2005) argue that the cultures that exist within schools and the ways in which teachers construct gender and address gender identity can either reinforce children's constructions and understandings of

gender or challenge them. This finding is significant because it suggests that if we begin to actively challenge the notion of gender as only binary in our schools, we could effectively create school climates where all children feel welcome regardless of the way that they identify.

Supporting Gender Independent Children in Our Schools

Some people may argue that that the numbers of children who are gender independent represent a tiny minority, and many people wonder if research in this area is even necessary. According to Kennedy (2008) approximately 1% of children in the UK can be classified as transgender or gender independent. However, it is important to remember that due to the binary constructs of gender that exist in our schools and in our society, and due to high levels of transphobia, many children may not feel safe to express their gender independent identities openly (Hellen, 2009). For this reason, it may be difficult to accurately assess the number of gender independent children in our schools. Therefore, it could be argued that gender independence may be far more common that it would initially appear. It is also important to note that all children have the right to a safe and healthy learning environment, no matter how "tiny" a minority to which they may belong.

Qualitative research with transgendered and gender independent children and youth has identified links between unsafe or unwelcoming learning environments and poor academic performance (Grossman et al., 2009; Hellen, 2009; Kennedy & Hellen, 2010). Two major factors that contributed to unsafe or unwelcoming learning environments included: requiring children to participate in gender segregated gym classes, and requiring children to use washrooms that corresponded with their natal sex rather than their affirmed gender (Luecke, 2010; Grossman et al., 2009). Consequences of these requirements included some children acquiring bladder infections from holding their urine until they arrived home from school, reports of children feeling unsafe in gym classes (and change rooms), and feelings of shame and internalized transphobia (Lucke, 2010; Grossmal et. al., 2009; Kennedy, 2008; Kennedy & Hellen, 2010; Hellen, 2009). Smaller classes, the use of washrooms and

14

change rooms that correspond with affirmed gender rather than with biological sex, free access to single stall all-gender washrooms and change rooms, and the changing of student records to correspond with affirmed gender rather than natal sex, are all appropriate measures that can lead to the inclusion and safety of transgendered and gender independent children (Orr & Pearson, 2011; Wyss, 2004; Brill & Pepper, 2008; Learning rights, 2012).

In 2011, the TDSB became the first school board in Canada to implement a guideline document that identified clear accommodations for supporting and working with transgendered and gender independent students and staff (Personal communication, Jeffers, 2013). However, outside of the TDSB, children who are gender independent must rely on the knowledge and understanding of individual school boards and in some cases, individual teachers in order to access accommodations and support. This can be problematic in schools and communities where gender independence is not understood, environments where it is not safe for a child to express their gender independence, or for students who are placed with teachers who have transphobic ideas, or lack knowledge regarding the appropriate ways to support transgender and gender independent students. Since the majority of teacher training programs do not address "non-typical" gender identity, there is frequently a lack of knowledge about how to support children who are gender independent, as well as a lack of knowledge about gender independence itself (Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999; Luecke, 2010; Biddulph, 2006).

According to Orr and Pearson (2011), children who are gender independent and who are not supported at school often experience anxiety attacks, frequent complaints of stomach aches and head aches, oppositional behaviours, poor social skills and frequent absences from school. These issues often become more pronounced once school activities become more sex segregated, such as in the case of sex segregated gym classes (Orr & Pearson, 2011). It has been shown that many of these behavioural and mental health issues become less apparent, and in some cases disappear altogether once accommodations have been made (Orr & Pearson, 2011).

Today, gender independence and LGBTQ rights are becoming more frequently included in anti-bullying and safe schools guidelines and policies (Hellen, 2009; PFLAG, 2007), but we still have a ways to go. Recently, an Ontario school became a prime example of just how far. In November, 2012, *The Toronto Star* covered the story of "James" a female to male transgendered boy who was forced to choose between the use of a washroom with a keyed entry (which required him to find a staff member and ask for a key every time he needed to use the washroom), a washroom off site in a nearby restaurant, or the woman's washroom at his school. These options denied him the right to use the washroom freely and without hassle. In this case, the burden fell on "James" to call attention to the inequity his school rules were creating and ultimately to take the steps necessary for these rules to change (Alamenciak & Green, 2012). An event such as this can cause a child to feel extreme amounts of stress, as well as exclusion from peers, social isolation, and mental exhaustion.

Methodology

Scope of the Research and Rationale for My Study

The majority of research that I reviewed focused on negative teacher attitudes and a lack of knowledge about gender independence. Biddulph (2006) cites Ellis and Hill (2004), who state that teacher values and attitudes are a key aspect towards achieving the inclusion of LGBTQ students in school environments. Biddulph (2006) also cites Douglas, Warwick, Kenmp and Whitty's 1997 study, which found that 44% of teachers reported "having difficulty meeting the needs of LGBT students" (p. 17). According to a 2010 study conducted by Luecke, the majority of teachers interviewed reported that they did not receive any pre-service training or professional development regarding gender identity or gender independence (Luecke, 2010). Biddulph (2006) and Hellen, (2009) reported similar findings. The majority of research that I reviewed also focused on adolescents and young adults who were gender independent, rather than on young children. The education systems in the United Kingdom and the United States were also frequently examined. However, I found little research that focused on

elementary school aged children (kindergarten to grade eight), and little research that examined the Canadian education system. For these reasons, as well as my goal to extend the thinking beyond the TDSB guidelines, my research will focus on TDSB teachers who are either the designated positive space representative for their school, or are LGBTQ advocates who teach in Toronto elementary schools.

Ethical Considerations

In preparation for this study, I submitted an application to the ethics board at Ryerson University, as well as an application to the ERRC (TDSB board of ethics). I submitted an application to the ERRC because I planned to conduct research with teachers from TDSB schools. Both applications were approved**.** Throughout the process of data collection, transcription, and the writing of this paper, I have made every effort to protect the privacy and maintain the confidentiality of my participants. Because I held face to face interviews, anonymity of the participants was not possible; however, every effort has been made to maintain participant confidentiality. None of the teachers names, the grades they teach, nor the names of their schools were included in either the transcriptions, or in the paper itself. Throughout all transcriptions and throughout this paper, all of the teachers have simply been referred as "the teacher." I provided all of the teachers with written consent forms and a copy of the interview questions via email prior to meeting, and provided each participant with two additional written consent forms prior to the beginning of each interview. Each participant signed two copies of the consent forms, one copy was kept by me, for my records, and one copy was kept by the participant, for their records. All of the consent forms were kept separate from the data, in a locked filing cabinet at my home for two months following the completion of this paper. All identifying documentation was then shredded.

All of the interviews were digitally recorded and then transferred onto an encrypted USB key. The USB key is only accessible through a code, and only I have access to that code. All transcripts

were kept on the same encrypted USB key; however the audio recordings of the interviews and the transcriptions were kept in separate files. Although the number of teachers who are actively doing work with LGBTQ students is relatively small, every school in the TDSB is required to have a positive space representative. As a result, there are over 600 potential positive space representatives within the TDSB, and I am confident that I have not included any information in this paper that might identify any of the participants.

Sample

The participants in this study were elementary school teachers, who taught between kindergarten and grade eight at mainstream and alternative schools within the TDSB. All of the participants had either attended or facilitated TDSB[5] or ETFO[6] workshops regarding children and gender identity and LGBTQ issues in TDSB schools, or were the designated positive space representative for their school. In June of 2012, a new policy was implemented that required each TDSB school to have a positive space representative on staff. The positive space representative is a teacher on staff who receives training regarding ways to support LGBT students (www.tdsb.on.ca). Although this training is available to all teachers, positive space representatives are expected to lead the way with regard to attending workshops and disseminating workshop information.

I chose to interview teachers who had a prior understanding of LGBTQ advocacy, since previous research primarily addressed the lack of knowledge among teachers generally. In my view, teachers who had thought about gender independence and LGBTQ concerns could offer a unique perspective on the remaining challenges.

My initial sampling strategy was snowball sampling. When recruiting participants through snowball sampling, the researcher selects a core group of acquaintances to assist in recruiting participants for the study. The core group of subjects is given information regarding how to contact the

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5   Toronto District School Board
6   Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario

researcher in order to participate in the study, and they pass this information along to other potential participants. Each participant refers another participant to the study. This process earns its name due to its similarities to the process of a snowball gathering snow while rolling down a hill (Heckathorn, 2011). However, upon further review of the literature, and following conversations with members of the equity commission at the TDSB, I felt that the perspectives of teachers who had an interest in LGBTQ issues would be most beneficial. For this reason, a combination of snowball and purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. Purposive sampling is the process through which participants are deliberately chosen based on the fact that they meet predetermined criteria that has been identified by the researcher (Sandelowski, 1998).

An email containing my contact information (Ryerson email address) and a brief description of my study was sent to a contact that I had at the gender-based violence prevention committee at the TDSB equity commission. Only one participant responded to my call and that participant commented that she anticipated that finding additional participants for my research may be difficult because "people are afraid to talk about this" (interview field notes, April, 2013). A copy of the email was then sent to three of my colleagues who were elementary school teachers within the TDSB, I asked these teachers to pass on my contact information to teachers who were their school's positive space representative or, who were involved in advocacy regarding LGBTQ issues at their schools. A copy of the interview questions and the consent form were sent to all potential participants prior to the interview and a second consent form was provided upon meeting. All teachers who consented were interviewed.

The gender of the teachers was not included in the sampling criteria, however, due to the high numbers of female teachers in the elementary school system, the majority of the teachers were female (five female, one male). Three of the teachers taught at mainstream schools, and three taught at alternative schools.

Setting

Teachers were given the option to either be interviewed at their school (outside of school hours), or in a neutral setting, such as a public library. Flexible locations and times were used in order

to meet the needs of busy teachers, and in order to increase convenience for participants. Interviews were held outside of school hours so as not to disrupt routines or infringe on children's learning. Interviews were between thirty (30) and fifty (50) minutes and were audio recorded and then transcribed. Due to the conversational nature of the interviews, many participants continued the conversation after the interview had ended. For this reason, field notes were taken with the permission of the participants and later added to the data. Five participants chose to be interviewed in their classrooms after school, while one chose to be interviewed at a public library.

Data Collection Process

According to Rubin and Rubin (1995), qualitative interviews should be "flexible, iterative and continuous" (p.43). Flexible, meaning that interview questions, or the trajectory of conversations may change depending on the perspectives and experience that participants bring; Iterative, meaning that the general structure or "bones" of the interviews must remain similar in order to facilitate repetition; And continuous, meaning that questions must have a natural flow in order to ensure that conversations between the interviewer and the participants proceed smoothly. In order to maintain consistency and repetition, yet still allow for flexibility, conversational flow, and individual perspectives, semi structured face to face interviews were used (Kvale, 1996).

In order to elicit specificity, descriptive responses, and to create a positive experience (Kvale, 1996), each participant was sent a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview. Allowing teachers to have prior knowledge of the interview questions permitted teachers to think about their responses in advance, and gave them time to recall specific examples of their experiences with children who were gender independent. Gender independence is a topic that can cause discomfort to teachers (Biddulph, 2006), and having some time to process and think about the subject prior to the interview can help to increase comfort levels. Thus, providing interview questions in advance reflects researcher sensitivity (Kvale, 1996).

Interviews were held with teachers from three TDSB alternative schools and three TDSB mainstream schools. The length of the interviews fluctuated between thirty and fifty minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Both the audio recordings and the transcriptions were kept on an encrypted USB key for two months following the completion of this paper. All six interviews followed the same general structure; however, questions were added or omitted based on individual participant responses. Because my interview criteria specified knowledge of LGBTQ issues, or experience as a positive space representative, but not necessarily experience with children who were gender independent, I used two sets of questions. One set of questions was provided for teachers who had identified having an experience with a child who may have been gender independent, and one set of questions was provided for teachers who identified that they had not. All teachers identified having had at least one experience with, or anecdote about a child who was gender independent. Due to the conversational nature of the interviews, field notes were kept. These notes were compiled by me on the way home from interviews. Notes were also kept in order to increase the practise of reflexivity (Guba, 1981).

Data analysis approach. As stated earlier, my goal was to examine how teachers understood and constructed gender and gender independence. My interests lay in exploring teacher's experiences, ways of thinking about gender and gender identity, and the ways that teachers communicated these meanings to their students. For these reasons, I determined that the flexible and open ended nature of a thematic analysis would be most appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke state that thematic analysis can be either essentialist, or constructionist. They describe a constructionist thematic analysis as examining the way societal discourse effects the ways in which meanings are made, realities are constructed, and events are perceived (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Because I was examining the notion of gender as socially constructed (Butler, 2009) a constructionist thematic analysis was the clear choice.

21

Prior to analysis, I engaged in extensive reading in the areas of queer theory, disability theory, and feminist theory. Through the lens of these theories, I read and re-read the transcripts looking for participant responses that were contrasting or that were similar. Following close readings of the transcripts, the following themes emerged:

1. How teachers construct and understand gender and gender identity

2. The intersections between gender independence and disability

3. Barriers to the inclusion of children who are gender independent

Using these themes as a guide, I coded the data manually, using a system of charts. I sorted data into three main charts consisting of three columns. Column one contained the interview participant number, column two contained the quote, and column three contained a theoretical analysis of the quote, or notes from the theory that were applicable to analysis. Following the creation of the charts, the data was reviewed again and was further analyzed for sub-themes. These sub-themes were imputed into new charts, and quotes were sorted again, until they were placed in the most appropriate chart. Following the analysis of the second set of charts, data was coded a third time. This time, data was sorted into major themes and sub themes, and theoretical notes were used to analyze the data. This process can be referred to as *code-re-code* and will be discussed later in this paper in order to assess trustworthiness (Krefting, 1990).

According to Wellington and Szczerbinski (2007) the process of analysis should follow a set of stages. They list these stages as *Immersion, Reflecting, Analysing, Recombining, and Relating and Locating data* (pp. 101-102). I began by listening to the audio recordings of the data and manually transcribing them. Once the data had been transcribed, I read the transcriptions again, highlighting themes that appeared across the data. I left the data alone for a short period of time, and when I returned to it, I manually separated the data into thematic sets (see above). I then analyzed the thematic sets for overlapping quotes and I examined whether the quotes were more appropriate in one set, or

another, or in all three. I then analyzed the data a third time using a theoretical lens of Queer theory, disability theory, and feminist theory, in order to examine themes that were common to both the literature and the interview responses (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007).

Findings:

This section will highlight the major findings of this study. The findings in this study are representative of six thirty to fifty minute one-time interview sessions with six teachers. All of the teachers interviewed in this study were teachers from TDSB elementary schools who taught between kindergarten and grade eight, and who were either positive space representatives for their schools, or, who were LGBTQ advocates at their schools. All of the teachers were between thirty (30) and seventy (70) years old. Five (5) of the teachers identified as female, and one (1) of the teachers identified as male. All of the teachers had been teaching for more than five (5) years. It is understood that these findings are representative of the six teachers who were interviewed.

Upon analysis of the interviews several major themes emerged. These themes were as follows: Teacher's knowledge about the guideline for the accommodation of transgender and gender non-conforming students and staff, the construction of gender "norms" in the classroom, the notion of gender as performed, gendered toy and play preferences, pathologising gender identity, the ways in which teachers support inclusion, and barriers to inclusion. Throughout this section, major theme groups will be broken into sub groups and discussed in more detail.

Teacher's Knowledge About The Guidelines

Prior to the start of each interview, teachers were asked if they had ever heard of *the TDSB guideline for the accommodation of transgendered and gender non conforming students and staff.* Most of the teachers responded that they had not heard of the guideline, while two teachers responded that they had. Of the two teachers who identified that they had heard of the guidelines, one teacher reported that she had "looked through it", but didn't "know it well"

" I've looked through it, yeah. I don't know it well, but I've looked through it."

While the other teacher responded definitively that she "knew it already."

"Yup, I know it already, I'm also the positive space rep, I'm not sure if you know what the positive space rep is?"

However, when I asked her about her experiences with children who were gender independent or gender non-conforming, she responded by asking if I was enquiring about sexual preference.

"So in relation- I- sorry, do you mean in relations to whether it's heterosexual, or... like any preference?"

Although the teacher seemed confident that she "knew the guideline" and seemed to consider herself quite knowledgeable around LGBTQ issues, as evidenced through her words "I'm actually a positive space rep", she showed a lack of understanding about gender independence, and appeared to be conflating gender identity and sexual preference. The notion of sexual preference and sexual identity as part of "non-normative" sexuality will be addressed in more detail in a later section. This teachers assertion that she "knew the guideline" in combination with her displayed lack of understanding regarding gender independence brings into question other teachers' interpretations of the guideline. Although all of the participants were LGBTQ advocates for their schools, the majority of them reported that they had not heard of the guideline. These findings call into question the guideline's effectiveness and the frequency of its use.

Constructing gender "norms" in the classroom

In her work, Judith Butler (2004) argues that gender is a social construction. Butler contends that self-identity should be the sole measure of gender; however, she also acknowledges that we are dependent on social norms in order to claim our own identities (Butler, 2004). For example, in order to transgress or transcend beyond the boundaries of the "norm," one must first acknowledge that a "norm" exists. It is through these constructions of gender "norms" that we begin to understand, describe, and

express our gendered selves.

All of the teachers identified a clear understanding of the idea of a "gender norm." Teachers articulated these norms through their discussions of gender boundaries, roles, and binaries. Teachers described the idea of gendered "norms" with words that conveyed boundaries such as "box," and "line." For instance, one teacher used the words "crossing over" to express the idea of a boy choosing a gendered activity that was frequently associated with girls (playing with dolls).

"I think [...] we're in a far healthier society when we have that crossing over so it was a welcome decision that they were making."

This teacher highlights other interesting ideas, first, the idea of a "healthy society" and what that means, and second that "crossing over" or transgressing gender lines is a "choice."

Another teacher employed a metaphor regarding gender "boxes" while describing an activity intended to problematize gender in which children were asked to draw pictures of themselves "inside the gender box" and "outside the gender box."

So that's why I created that activity about stepping into the box and stepping outside of the box and recognizing that it's OK [...] to be a boy who likes playing aggressive games at recess, that's Ok. And it's also OK to step outside of the box and be a boy who likes to cuddle and you know [...] play with dolls, because that's OK as well.

This teacher raises several different issues. First, she displays an understanding of gender as being constructed with clear boundaries by referring to a "gender box." Second, she identifies gendered "norms" such as boys being "aggressive" and girls being emotional and nurturing (like to cuddle; play with dolls) as being socially accepted markers of masculinity and femininity, thus providing insight into how the boundary divides gender activities.

A third teacher talked about gender identity in terms of "gender roles"

"If you have long hair and you're a boy, is that considered to be- you know, defiant of your gender role?"

25

This teacher's reference to "defiance" of gender roles illustrates that he has a clear notion of what constitutes a gender "norm" and of what it means to adhere to, or to "defy" gender regulations. His reference to "roles" highlights the idea of gender as being "performed." Interestingly, he identifies that although his colleagues view long hair as a feminine trait, he does not agree that this is the case. The idea of visual cues to describe gender identity will be discussed later when we examine gender as performed.

The binary construction of gender. In her 2004 work "undoing gender" Judith Butler challenges the notion that gender only exists within the binary framework of male and female. She states that

> To assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of the coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance (p. 42).

What Butler addresses in this statement is that the exclusive understanding of gender as binary leaves people out. She speaks of this binary assumption as "coming at a cost" and makes the point that people who do not fit into the binary have just as much claim to their gendered identities as those who fit within it. In short, Butler is not proposing that the gender binary should be eradicated entirely, instead, she is highlighting the need to expand our notions of gender to include more than just the notions of 'male' and 'female'.

The previous examples suggest that the majority of the teachers understood gender to be constructed in binary terms. This means that they understood that regardless of their natal sex, children could present as male or that they could present as female. Only one teacher expressed gender identity as being something other than male or female. Her understanding of gender identity as something that exists outside of the binary construction of male and female is evident in her use of the words "male, or female, or something in between."

"The kids seem to be very open to talking about gender and [...] these ideas of how we know

ourselves to be boys, or girls, or something in between."

Although they displayed positive attitudes toward "transgressing gender lines," or "crossing over" the

majority of the teachers still described gender identity in binary terms. One teacher identified a boy

playing with dolls as being practise for when he grew up to be "a daddy."

> If so and so said 'oh, well why is he playing with the babies?' [I would say] 'why wouldn't he
> play with the babies? He's going to grow up and he's going to be a dad and he's going to have
> babies, and I hope he knows a whole lot about how to play with babies'

This quote illustrates this particular teacher's understanding of gender and of gender independence.

This teacher's explanation of gender independence as a boy who plays with dolls could suggest that she

views playing with dolls to be a marker of femininity. Her language suggests that it is okay for a little

boy to play with dolls, and that the action of playing with dolls will not take away from a boy's

masculinity. However, the presumption that this child identifies and will always identify as male is

present. This teacher's prediction that the child will "grow up to be a daddy" implies that this child will

grow up to perform a gender specific role (being a daddy), and this presumption unwittingly reinstates

the gender binary.

Another teacher described a student who may have been gender fluid in terms of the male/

female binary by recounting a conversation the student had with the other children in her class

regarding their questions surrounding whether the student" was a boy or a girl."

> And there were some conversations in her [...] class about 'are you a girl or are you a boy?' and
> she basically said 'I don't really know what I am right now, I'm this- you know- I haven't
> decided that yet. I guess I'm a girl.'

This student's language is significant. She begins her response with "I don't really know what I am right

now, I'm this- I haven't decided that yet," which signifies that she does not see herself in terms of the

binary. However, her concluding statement of "I guess I'm a girl" suggests that she feels she must

identify as either male or female. This finding could suggest that the school climate, her home life, or

the media she consumes has created a space in which the gender binary is strictly reinforced. The teacher's consistent use of the pronouns "she" and "her" when describing the student could also signify a reinforcement of the gender binary.

Another teacher described a student who's "parents identified [the student] as a boy," but who she identified as presenting in stereotypically feminine ways.

> What was really interesting with him is although we weren't sure if he was a boy or a girl, but we knew that [...] his parents identified him as a boy- he was in full make up, glitter, clothes from grade three- and still is.

This teacher's description of her student suggests that she views and understands gender in binary terms. She identifies that the student's male name and female clothing choices created a situation where the staff at the school were not "sure if he [was] a boy or a girl," however, the possibility that the student is both, or neither is not explored. The teacher's assertion that the student had a masculine name, but enjoyed wearing makeup, glitter, and "girls" clothing suggests that she has categorized some aspects of this student's identity as male and some as female. It is also pertinent to note that the teacher shares how student's parents identify the student (as a boy), but does not mention how the student identifies them-self.

Reinforcing and reiterating the gender "norm" through "teacher talk." As humans, we rely on language in order to understand and communicate our world. The words "girl" and "boy" are used as descriptive nouns and the term *"girls and boys"* is frequently used to address groups of children in elementary school classrooms. This can be problematic when children do not identify as male or female, and can make children feel like they must chose to belong to one category or another. Butler (2004) argues that idea of 'sex' is a linguistic concept rather than a scientific category. The notion of 'sex' as a linguistic tool, rather than a biological category will be discussed in this section.

Most of the teachers claimed that they personally tried to avoid the use of the terms "girls and boys" but suggested these terms were frequently used by *other* teachers when addressing their

28

classrooms.

"I think other barriers are around how we, you know, the language that we use to talk to kids. I mean over and over teachers will use the words 'girls and boys, girls and boys, girls and boys'."

This teacher's description of the use of the term "girls and boys" as a "barrier" suggests not only that she does not view gender solely in binary terms, but that she feels that this default to the gender binary is a barrier to inclusion. Another teacher identified that the knowledge of her participation in the interview for this study challenged her to examine the language that she used in her classroom.

[...] and for instance, [...] I say 'girls and boys' and 'ladies and gentlemen' to my class- and it wasn't until I started thinking about this interview I realised- I'm really not actually openly addressing everyone then [...] so I started thinking about that and thinking that I need to be more aware of that.

This teacher's assertion that by addressing her class as "girls and boys" or "ladies and gentlemen" she's "not really actually openly addressing everyone" demonstrates that she has begun to exhibit an understanding of gender as not being solely expressed in binary terms. Her assertion that she's "not actually openly addressing everyone" suggests that she has begun to understand that by defaulting to "girls and boys" she is leaving people out.

Another teacher expressed his understandings of identity by facilitating an activity that encouraged his students to look at identity in ways that challenged their stereotypical notions of gender, race, ethnicity, age, and ability.

[...] I told the kids to close their eyes and [...] picture a truck driver and what they look like, and the kids would explain to the class, or tell me attributes of the truck driver. And then we would talk about you know [...] they would say 'Oh he's male, [...] he's white, he's got a beard, he's got a hat' and all these very stereotypical notions of a [...] truck driver [...] and then we would talk about in reality, what [...] could a truck driver be? It could be a woman who's black, or Hispanic, who's in her early twenties, who [...] has kids at home, or anything- it could be completely different.

This teacher's activity challenged not only children's understanding of gender roles, but also of race, age, and class. The teacher's final statement "it could be completely different" allows for the possibility

of "difference," without defining what "difference" might be. Additional strategies for inclusion will be discussed in a later section.

Constructing male and female gender independence. When discussing gender independence in children, some teachers identified that they perceived it to be "easier" for female children to transgress gender lines, than for male children.

> I suppose [there could be] a few girls who would want to do more of the boys thing I guess. But not as much as boys wanting to do the girl's thing. It seemed maybe it was a little bit more acceptable for the girls to do the boys things.

This teacher's assertion that "it seemed it was a little bit more acceptable for the girls to do the boys things" could suggest that she believes that gender regulations are less rigid for girls than for boys. Another teacher also identified that he felt like the girls were "more mature and more open about these [LGBTQ acceptance] ideas"

> Um, I'm going to say this- merely as an observation- a generalization- but I would say that- I would say the girls in my classroom tend to be more- more mature, and tend to be more open about these ideas- and they tend to be uh, more accepting of the differences in people. The boys in my classroom are- are more likely to use terms like 'fag,' or 'queer,' or 'gay' in a derogatory sense.

This teacher's observation that boys were "more likely to use terms like 'fag' or 'queer' or 'gay' in a derogatory sense" could suggest that he feels that boys uphold each other to more rigid gender boundaries than girls do. Later in the interview, when talking about gender segregated sports teams, the same teacher noted that you can have "a girl on the boy's team, but vice versa, I don't think that works"

> "so you have to have it [sports teams] labelled as a boy or a girl team, - you're free to have a girl
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> on the boys team, um- vice versa, I don't think that works."

This quote suggests that not only are rigid gender regulations self-imposed by male children, but that they are externally imposed (in this case by TDESSA[7]) as well.

While the preceding quotes may suggest that transgressing gender lines is "easier" for girls than

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7   Sports sanctioning committee for TDSB

for boys, the following quotes suggest that this may not be the case. When discussing boys who were

gender independent, the teachers used positive, affirming language.

> "I saw him on the streets [dressed in woman's clothing] and like ah! you know, applaud him,
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> he would be in grade eleven now."

Another teacher disclosed a similar incident regarding a child who she perceived to be male.

> There was one in particular that I thought was a boy- and this was quite a long time ago and
> um, one day "he" showed up with nail polish on and I said 'oh! That's great that [...] he's really
> comfortable wearing nail polish'- he wasn't a preschooler, he was a bit older. And uh, the
> teacher said 'oh, actually, that's a girl.'

The teachers' use of the words "applaud," "that's great," and "he's really comfortable wearing nail

polish" suggest that the teachers felt that a male challenging the gender regulations was something to

be proud of, or to celebrate. However, when discussing girls who were gender independent, teachers

used words that conveyed worry, stress or fear.

> "[...] but right now we have a student who I'm quite concerned about, because I think she is
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> struggling with her identity."

This teacher's use of the words "concern" and "struggle" suggest that a female self-identifying in

masculine ways may be seen as worrying, or problematic. Another teacher described her student's

masculine presentation as "alarming."

> "So she was a girl. Um, she would also provide me with information that were somewhat
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> alarming in that she had convinced a girl on facebook that she was a guy."

It could be inferred from these quotes that it may be socially acceptable for females to engage in

"masculine" behaviours as long as they continue to identify as female. However, when females begin to

self-identify as male, the notion of "concern", "worry", or "alarm" becomes apparent.

> This section has highlighted the ways in which teachers reiterate and reinforce the gender

binary. We have seen that although all of the teachers were accepting of children engaging in gender

performance that was not typical to their natal sex, all but one seemed to still be operating from a perspective that viewed gender as a binary construct. The concept of performative gender will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Gender as Performed

Butler (1990; 2004) argues that one of the ways in which gender is constructed is through performativity. She states that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler, 1990 p. 33). Butler's references to the "stylization of the body" and of "highly rigid regulatory frames" can be seen in the ways that the teachers in this study have been shown to understand gender identity. All of the teachers described gender in performative ways. This means that they described children's gender identity in ways that reflected children's external expressions of themselves. The teachers identified clear repeated patterns of clothing choices, hair styles, the choice to wear or not wear makeup, children's choices regarding toy and clothing colours, and toy and play choices as markers of either masculinity or femininity.

     Boys who wear dresses and girls who wear pants. When asked "have you ever had an experience with a child who was gender non-conforming or gender independent?" responses regarding "boys" who were gender independent largely focused on boys who "wore dresses and skirts."

     "The biggest issue for him is 'I don't want to wear pants, I would like to wear skirts.'"

     "I've seen the boys in kindergarten classrooms who wear dresses to school."

The repetition in the preceding and forthcoming quotes regarding "boys wearing dresses" as a marker for gender independence in natal boys outlines a clear understanding that dresses are a socially accepted marker for femininity. Two of the teachers exemplified the understanding of gender as performed in a more explicit way when they discussed two students who "used to be" gender independent.

     I've heard of a boy in the school here that, just anecdotally, that when he was going through

kindergarten, he displayed a lot of- like he would come to graduation dressed up in a dress and like a princess [...] he doesn't really display any of that stuff now

This teacher's assertion that the student is no longer gender independent because he no longer wears dresses shows a clear understanding of gender as performed. He concludes that because the child no longer "display[s] any of that stuff," he is no longer gender independent. This teacher's use of the word "display" in this sentence is also interesting, because it could be representative of the idea that gender independence is a "spectacle" or something that is "on display."

Another teacher describes a former student as moving from a feminine presentation to a masculine presentation by stating that *"he was a male child and he wanted to identify with male children."*

> The one situation, that we had at [name of school] was where a little boy came to school he was the son of two mums, […] and the mums had taken him to a variety of schools explaining that he liked to wear girl's dresses, and she was told at those other schools that he couldn't wear the girls dresses- but when he came to our school, we saw no reason why he couldn't wear the girl's dresses [...] I think he was very comfortable with it, but what we found was that within about six weeks, he'd changed over to wearing- you know- to wearing pants and stuff. [...] and I don't- I- I don't think that that was because we were unsuccessful, I think that he hadn't been with other children before, [...] he was a male child and he wanted to identify with male children

In this quote, the notion that gender is performed is identified in two distinct ways. First, the other school's reluctance to allow the student to wear "girls' dresses" shows a clear rigid social regulatory structure that defines dresses as "girls' clothing" and therefore not appropriate attire for boys. This is in line with Butler's (1990) argument that gender performativity is a way that society "police[s] the social appearance of gender" (p. 35). Second, the teacher's statement that "he was a male child and he wanted to identify with male children" presumes that the child's gender performance was synonymous with his gender identity i.e., dressing in "masculine" clothing is equal to identifying as a "male" child.

Another teacher exemplified Butler's theory regarding gender performativity as a way to police social appearances of gender when explaining how his school was an inclusive environment for children who may be gender independent. This teacher displayed his understanding of gender identity

in terms of performed markers of masculinity and femininity by describing some positive space posters at his school.

> There are these posters [...] in the hallway over here- there's one just down the hall, I'll show it to you. It's um- it just says it's a positive space- you can be what you want to be- and it has pictures of kids dressed- a boy dressed as a girl, and you know- vice versa.

This teacher's explanation that the poster conveys that the school is a "positive space" and that children have the freedom to "be what [they] want to be" indicates an understanding of gender identity in performative terms. His use of the words "a boy dressed as a girl, and [...] vice versa" suggest a clear understanding, not only of the social regulations surrounding gender, but also of his understanding of gender in binary terms. In other words, children are free to "be what [they] want to be" as long as they "choose" to be a "boy" or a "girl."

Butler (1990) argues that gender performance exists when social regulations around gender become viewed as descriptors of that gender. This can be seen in the ways that teachers described girls who were gender independent.

> "She very much looked like the typical little boy"

> "So this young girl who was dressing as a boy"

The teachers' repeated references to their gender independent natal female students "looking like boys" signify that they feel that the meaning behind the phrase "looking like a boy" will be understood by others. They demonstrate a shared understanding of the social regulations surrounding perfomative gender expression and communicate these ideas in terms of "looking like a boy" or "looking like a girl." One teacher takes this notion a step further and describes how she felt that she had a connection with a student because they both "looked like boys"

> "I kind of had- I guess a bit of a connection [with the child] probably just because I looked a
>
> little bit more like the traditional boy than a girl in teaching [.]"

This teacher's use of the qualifier "traditional" in reference to "looking more like a boy than like a girl"

demonstrates that she may have a more cognisant notion of gender as performed than the previous teachers. Her use of the term "traditional boy" could suggest that she understands that because both she and her student are consciously pushing against gender lines, they share a connection. The teacher's description of simultaneously adhering to gender regulations and "altering" or "contesting" them (Butler, 1990, p. 218) by dressing "like a boy" yet identifying as a "girl" is a clear example of this teacher's "performance" of gender and of her blurring the binary gender lines.

"Pink is for girls." When talking about their experiences with male children who were gender independent, all of the teachers mentioned boys who "liked pink."

"Ah, you know, girls in my classroom [...], sort of behave in that sort of "tom boy," um you know, boys who like pink"

This finding suggests that there is a shared understanding of the colour pink as a way to perform feminine identity. However, one teacher suggested that the notion of pink being "for girls" was beginning to change.

There's no, 'you can't wear pink'- there's none of that. That slowly is leaving the school system. You know everyone accepts that boys can wear pink, boys can wear purple. Part of that is the fashion world has created that.

This teacher's assertion that "everyone accepts that boys can wear purple" and that "there's no 'you can't wear pink'" suggests that she does not necessarily view pink as an identifier of femininity. However, in a later quote, when talking about an intersexed individual who identified as female, the same teacher stated that "[the student] liked to wear pink all the time" and that she "identified herself with that."

And um- what was interesting with her, is although she had strong facial hair features she very much looked like a girl and saw herself as a girl [...] and very obsessed with how people were beautiful and she liked to wear pink all the time- that very- she identified herself with that

This might suggest that although this teacher doesn't appear to consciously understand pink to be a marker of femininity, she holds an unconscious association between femininity and pink that may be more deeply ingrained than she realises. The teacher's notion of "wearing pink" and "looking beautiful"

35

as ways through which one identifies, exemplifies that she may be thinking of gender in performative ways. If gender identity is understood in terms of gender performance, the rigid gender regulations that our society has put into place (in this case pink as a marker for femininity) must be acknowledged. The teacher's reference to the dichotomy of having facial hair and liking pink call attention to the idea that this student is blurring gender lines and exhibiting simultaneous performances of both masculinity and femininity.

It is important to note that the notion that pink is a marker for femininity is not unique to children or to teachers. In the following quote, one teacher identifies that children's books that she has seen which address gender independence refer to "boys who like pink."

"[...] it's stuff like that that's talked about [in books regarding gender independence], you know- the boy who liked to wear pink"

The children's book's reference to crossing gender lines as being exhibited by "boys who like to wear pink" demonstrates that the idea that pink as a "girl's colour" is a widely held social belief. Another teacher acknowledges the socially accepted notion that "pink is for girls", by noting that some boys "feel comfortable in pink and some boys feel very uncomfortable in pink"

"on think pink day, you have some boys that feel very comfortable wearing pink to school, and some boys who still feel very uncomfortable wearing pink to school [.]"

This teacher's mention of "discomfort" regarding wearing pink to school is significant because it suggests that there are strong social regulations that govern gender "norms" and the performance of gender. Even though this teacher welcomes boys wearing pink, and in fact has facilitated experiences where all of the children are encouraged to wear pink (think pink day), some of the boys still experience discomfort when faced with the prospect of wearing pink to school.

Boys will be boys and girls will be girls: gendered toy and play preferences. Teachers also described the performance of gender through toy and play choices. They identified that playing with

36

dolls was a marker for femininity and that driving or playing with trucks was a marker for masculinity.

> I must say, I've had situations where the little boy has wanted to do the "girlish" things and [...] fortunately he has been in an environment where that was absolutely fine, you know- to always want to go to the doll centre, or, [...] it would be mainly doll centre play

This teacher is making a clear connection between "doll centre play" and being "girlish." Her statement that the child was "fortunately" in an environment "where that was absolutely fine" suggests that boys playing with dolls may not be "absolutely fine" in other contexts.

When gender independence in female children was discussed, several teachers discussed girls playing sports, or playing with boys as markers of masculinity.

"[...] she only played sports and she only wanted to play with the boys and everything was cool" This teacher's assertion that the child "only played sports" and "only wanted to play with boys" suggests that this teacher views playing sports and playing with boys to be ways that children perform masculinity. Another teacher identified that a female student who was gender independent wanted to play soccer on the boys' team.

"[...] she- during soccer practice, preferred to practice with the boys and play with the boys." In this section, I have addressed the ways in which gender is performed. In my next section, I will shift my analysis to focus on the intersections between disability and gender independence.

The Trouble with "Normal": Pathologising Gender Identity

The pathologisation of gender identity remains a controversial issue. Butler (2004) argues that the debate surrounding gender independence as pathology centres on the struggle for autonomy. She points out, that access to diagnosis can both provide autonomy, and stifle it. Butler uses the example of gender reassignment surgery to illustrate how a diagnosis can help to provide autonomy and rights. She states that many (U.S) insurance companies will not pay for gender reassignment surgeries without the diagnosis of gender identity disorder, or gender dysphoria. For transgendered individuals who don't have the financial means to pay for surgery, access to a diagnosis could mean access to resources that

would otherwise be unavailable. Conversely, Butler proposes that the act of pathologising identity can be detrimental, especially to young people, because of the negative sense of self that understanding one's identity as "disordered," "abnormal," or "deviant" can create. She goes on to note that the negative sense of self, and consequently the loss of self-worth, and self-esteem that is frequently the result of such thinking is a major contributor to the high suicide rates among gender independent youth. Like Butler, Eli Clare (2001) discusses the social implications of pathology. He frames disability within the context of three models. He refers to *the medical model*, which frames disability as "a disease that is curable and/ or treatable;" *The charity model*, which frames disability as something that is a tragedy or a misfortune, and disabled people as "helpless;" And *the supercrip model*, which holds the patronizing view point that people with disabilities are heroes for simply living their lives (p. 360). The quotes in this section evidence some clear parallels between the patholgisation of gender identity, and the pathologisation of disabled identity. The first and most obvious parallel is the intersection that exists between non-typical gender identification and mental illness.

Many of the teachers identified that suicide and depression were common issues pertaining to children and youth who were gender independent.

"Like I found that the two that really I dealt with, there was a lot of suicide attached [.]"

"Because the statistics are staggering for our [...] our queer youth, who [...] are experiencing verbal harassment, physical harassment, you know, suicide rates are high"

The first quote makes reference to "a lot of suicide" which implies that suicide attempts and death by suicide are prevalent with regard to the students this teacher has worked with. The second quote exemplifies how viewing gender independence as a pathology can affect both how gender independent children view themselves, and how cisgender children view children who are gender independent. The teacher's reference to physical and verbal harassment towards children who are gender independent, as well as her mention of "high suicide rates" exemplifies the dangers of not addressing topics such as

38

gender fluidity, homophobia, and transphobia in the classroom.

One teacher discussed a student who had been seen by the centre for addiction and mental health. She alludes to the fact that his gender independence was a contributing factor in his depression.

"[...] the kid that I was a mentor to, it was not so easy. He landed himself in CAMH[8] a couple times, uh- depressed, um, suicidal, attempted twice"

The teacher's use of the words "landed himself in CAMH" place the burden of her student's depression on himself, rather than on the society that views his identity as pathology. Although this teacher describes making significant efforts to provide support to gender independent children and youth, her choice of words shows an underlying perception of gender independence as a "problem" to be "solved." This statement exemplifies how deeply engrained these notions of gender independence as "abnormal" or "problematic" can be.

In the following quote, the same teacher identifies that she perceives her student's mental health issues to be connected with her gender independence.

"She also got transferred because of her mental health issues. She couldn't function in a regular environment. [...] I would assume that all of it is combined."

This teacher's mention of "issues" and "ability to function" again display an understanding of the child's gender independence, as well as her mental illness as the problem, rather than looking at the barriers that are in place that impede her ability to "function" in the context of her school. This quote also clearly exemplifies Clare's (2001) medical model. The teacher's mention of the student being "transferred" because she "couldn't function in a regular environment" suggests that her mental health and cognitive issues could not be "fixed" at her home school, and so she needed "special care."

Although the majority of teachers identified that there was some crossover between disability (specifically mental health issues) and gender independence, there were some cases where a clear

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8   Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

distinction was drawn between the child as gender independent, and the child as a person with a disability.

> "Now there was actually another little girl in a DD[9] class [...] which is severe [...] she was
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> sixteen years old, but acted like she was in grade- maybe one or two?"

This teacher describes her student's cognitive impairment as "severe" and shares that although the student was sixteen years old she "acted like she was in maybe grade one or two." She also shares that the student was in a segregated "DD" classroom. The teacher has identified that her student has a developmental delay, highlighting the mismatch between her chronological age and her perceived "behavioural" age. Her statements might suggest that she views her student's gender independence to be a "symptom" of her disability (Kafer, 2003) rather than her disability and her gender identity being two separate parts of her identity. These statements create a picture of a child who has "issues" to be "fixed" and is very much in line with Clare's (2001) medical model. The same teacher identified that the other teachers in her school also viewed the student's gender independence as being separate from her identity as a disabled person.

> "The special education teachers didn't want to deal with her, other than her education [...]"

The use of the words "deal with her" and the separation of the student's gender identity from her identity as a disabled person suggest that the other teachers view the child's educational needs as separate from her gender identity. This separation of person from disability or gender identity could suggest a line of thinking that centres around "fixing" the disability, and "fixing" the gender independence, rather than working to support the whole child. The school's failure to view the child from a holistic perspective, rather than as a child with "the problem" of disability and "the problem" of gender independence is evident in this statement.

> Another noteworthy finding was the distinction that this teacher made between the mental

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9   Developmentally Delayed class

health issues that she perceived to be a result of being gender independent and the mental health issues that she perceived to be pre-existing.

> "So she had mental health issues. [...] it was legitimately mental health issues, not because she
>
> didn't know her sexuality, there was a combination of things"

This teacher's use of the words "legitimate mental health issues" and her mention of the student "not knowing her sexuality" are noteworthy for many reasons. First, her distinction between "legitimate and illegitimate" mental health issues implies that there is a hierarchy to mental illness. This statement calls attention to an earlier teacher's comments regarding living in a "healthy society" and begs the question, what constitutes a healthy society? Second, her statement that the child "didn't know her sexuality" is a projection of the teacher's understanding of gender identity as a binary construct and could suggest that she views gender identity as a cognitive process. This idea will be discussed in the following section.

Gender Identity as inherent: exploring the notion of biological essentialism

According to Bem (1983) children begin to understand and express their gender identities in terms of play choice, clothing choices, and other culturally defined markers of masculinity and femininity between the ages of four and five. She states that children begin to understand these gendered differences through a cognitive processing function called a schema, and describes schematic processing as the process of sorting information categorically in order to understand it. According to Bem, young children begin to create gender schemas that are shaped by the societal norms that they observe. These gender schemas help children to learn, and to understand and exhibit gendered behaviour such as which toy or play choices are "for boys" and which toy or play choices are "for girls." Bem would argue that all children go through the same phases of cognitive processing and will create their own gender schemas based on what they view as societal norms. This means that Bem might agree that gender is socially constructed to a point. However, her specific emphasis on cognitive processing and of universal developmental stages, leads the reader to consider an innate biological

41

aspect to gender identity. When asked "how is gender addressed at your school?" One teacher

responded that:

> So, [...] I've come to learn that kids form their identities very early, their gendered identities-
> uh- even before they walk into our classrooms. So [...] the research shows that by the time kids
> are in preschool [...] they already have an understanding of what it means to be a girl or a boy.

As Bem is a major contributor to the research surrounding gender identification and early childhood,

this teacher's reference to "the research" could suggest that she understands gender identification in

children in terms of Bem's (1985) gender schema theory. Her choice of the words "*understanding* what

it *means* to be a boy or a girl" acknowledges that there are societal norms that one must grow to

"understand", while also acknowledging that there is an inherent shared meaning regarding what "a

boy" is and what "a girl" is.

Another teacher exhibited similar thinking when she discussed children's play and colour choices:

> "And it happens early on. This and even around the colours, can you imagine? You know [...]
>
> pink is for girls and- you know, they've got it all worked out."

Within the field of early childhood education, there tends to be a focus on cognitive theories as well as

frequent references to providing children with opportunities to "work things out" or "figure things out."

This teacher's reference to children exhibiting gendered behaviour "early on" and "having it all worked

out" could signify that she may be thinking about gender identification through the lens of Bem's

theory. Her choice of the words, "worked out" might suggest that she is thinking about gender identity

in terms of cognitive processing, and with regard to gender schema theory. Conversely, the following

teacher describes how children are "fluid on so many levels":

> "You know, kids aren't just fluid sexually, they're fluid on so many other levels as well. So um, I
>
> think we need to encourage people to be individuals and to be themselves."

This teacher's reference to "encouraging individuality" and "letting children be themselves" shows a

clear understanding of the social regulations regarding gender. She does not allude to any prescribed

notion of what "it means" to be male or female, and clearly chooses the words "individuals" and "fluidity", which show that she is not thinking of gender in purely binary terms. Her mention of "letting children be themselves also acknowledges the social pressure that children may feel to "fit" into prescribed gender roles, without presuming that this "desire to fit" is a developmental stage.

Gender identity and Sexual Preference: Not two sides of the same coin

The notion of gender independence as part of "non normative" sexuality was touched upon in the introduction to the findings section. In this subsection, the conflation of sexual preference and gender identity will be examined further.

In her 2004 work, Judith Butler explains that sexuality and gender identity must be viewed as separate from each other. She states that "to have a gender does not presuppose that one engages in sexual practice in a certain way and to engage in a given sexual practice [...] does not presuppose that one is a given gender" (p. 54).

Butler makes the point that to presume that sexuality and gender identity are the same is to reduce gender identity to nothing but anatomical parts. She explains that to do so, negates the multifaceted nature of identity and oversimplifies the complexity that gender and gender identity entail. This is a particularly salient point when speaking about children, because prior to puberty, children are often thought of as asexual. When gender identity and sexuality are conflated and children are thought to be asexual beings, their expressions of their identities may be ignored or dismissed. When asked about supports for children who are gender independent, one teacher showed a clear line of thinking that conflated sexuality and gender identity.

> [...] but we don't have anything like that [gay/ straight alliances/ resources for gender independent students] at the elementary level because pretty much just at their age- there's a lot of their identity that they haven't figured out yet. And they haven't hit puberty, and that's where a lot of – a lot of these issues come out.

This quote exemplifies several patterns of thinking. First, this teacher's words may signify that he

believes that sexuality and gender identity are at least, connected, and at most, the same thing. His reference to children who "haven't hit puberty" suggests that he holds the notion that gender identity is something that is connected to sexuality, and thus "comes out" or is "figured out" after puberty. Second, his reference to children's "issues" suggests that there may be something problematic with identifying as gender independent. This statement displays clear heteronormative thinking, as children who adhere to prescribed gender norms are typically not thought of as having to "figure out" their gender identities.

A second teacher recounts her experiences with the parents of male children who were engaging in non-typical play choices (playing frequently with dolls and in the dramatic center).

> [on] Interview night, you'd have the parents say 'well, you know, what is he doing?' or whatever, and you'd [tell them that he's making 'non-traditional' play choices] [and the parents would say] 'oh really!' [...] and I think mainly the parents would be concerned that they'd been ridiculed, or they- was it- or ah- the other thing would be 'are they gay?'

This teacher's account of parents' reactions to their children's play choices highlights several noteworthy details. First, she identifies that parents are concerned about their children being "ridiculed" for playing with dolls. This fear highlights a clear understanding of "gender norms" and calls attention to a discomfort with "blurring the lines" or "stepping outside of the gender box." Second, the parent makes the assumption that if their child is engaging in gender "a-typical" play choices, their child must be gay. Third, the teacher does not attempt to "correct" the parent, nor does she suggest that a-typical play choices need not be a marker of same sex preference. This might suggest that she may on some level also view gender independence as conflated with sexual preference.

One participant referred to the understanding of gender identity as separate from sexual preference as being a "skill":

> "Ah, I see. So when I think about teaching grade one- [many years ago] I'm not sure I
>
> would have had the skills enough to think that they weren't anything other than gay."

44

This teacher's reference to "skill" with regard to understanding gender identity might suggests that she views gender identity at a micro level; as a problem in the classroom that can be supported (or not supported) through skilful (or learned) interactions. This understanding is contrary to the notion of supporting gender independence at a macro level; that the only way to include all people regardless of where they fall on the gender spectrum is to widen our sociological and political views of gender at the societal level, rather than just in individual classrooms.

The same teacher disclosed that children who were gender independent were often referred to her because her son was gay.

I mean literally they said '[teacher] because your son is gay you'll be able to openly handle her' [student who was gender independent].

This statement was significant for multiple reasons. First, the other teacher's assumption that this teacher would know what to do because her son was gay displays a clear notion of sexual preference as being conflated with gender identity. Second, the choice of the words "handle her" in reference to supporting the student show that the teachers viewed the student's gender independence as something that needed to be "handled" requiring special "skills" or "training." Third, the presumption that this teacher would "know how to handle" this student because of her experiences with her gay son, shows a presumption that all people who fall into "non normative" sexual categories are the same and need to be supported in the same ways. The teachers' presumption that the parent of a gay child could better support this student than they could is also interesting. Two other teachers disclosed after the interviews (in field notes) that they had also experienced other teachers referring gender independent children to them because they were lesbians and that there was an expectation that they would know what to say, or do to support these students. This comment suggests a clear divide between the students that teachers felt they could support and students that teachers felt that they couldn't support. The implication that teachers who had same sex preferences, or a teacher who had a son with same sex

45

preferences, are better able to support a gender independent child could signify heteronormative thinking that positions gender independence and same sex preference as "outside of the norm." This finding might also signify that the other teachers feel that "they don't know what to say," but that a teacher with same sex preference would "know what to say." This finding might further exemplify an understanding of gender independence and same sex preference as conflated, and exemplified a simplistic understanding of the complexity of both sexuality and gender identity.

Supporting Inclusion and Barriers to Inclusion

Throughout the previous sections, understandings of gender as constructed and gender as performed have been discussed. This section will explore the ways in which teachers reiterate or reinforce the gender binary through language and actions, as well as how teachers work to deconstruct the notion of the gender binary. This section will also discuss barriers to inclusion, such as teasing or taunting from other children, resistance from parents, teachers and administration, and the perception that gender independence is insignificant because it is experienced by "so few students."

Breaking down the binary through language. The majority of the teachers displayed a conscious awareness of the importance of language. In an earlier section, I discussed the use of the terms "girls and boys" in classrooms. In this section I will discuss the ways that teachers work to consciously break down the gender binary through the language that they use.

When talking about ways to provide a more inclusive environment, one teacher mentioned the use of books that address gender independence, but stated that unless teachers change the language that they use in the classroom, little will change.

> [...] like read the book [about gender identity], have a discussion about it and then say 'girls and boys' for the rest of the day [laughing] [...] and then you know 'oh- [...] that kid, he's so active, [...] he's a typical boy'- like we still use all of those phrases. So I think that we need to be a little bit more open about it too.

It can be inferred from this statement that this teacher is challenging the gender binary by focusing on

46

the language that is used with children. She not only addresses the use of the words "girls and boys", she also identifies the trouble with conflating gender performance and gender identity when she problematizes the notion that being active is a masculine quality, and calls into question the notion of gender regulations when she challenges the use of the phrase "he's such a typical boy." Another teacher gave some concrete suggestions regarding what language teachers could use in place of "girls and boys."

> I mean, I still hear 'girls and boys it's time to line up" and that language, and it drives me up the wall because [...] even if there's one kid in sixty- you say girls and boys- if we use another term, it's not going to matter to the fifty-nine kids, if we say folks, or people, or students, but when we constantly say 'girls and boys' that is going to matter to that one kid. Right?

This statement highlights several salient points. First, the teacher reiterates the idea that many teachers frequently address their students in binary terms (girls and boys), and it could be argued that this reinforces gender lines. Second her statement "even if there's one kid in sixty" suggests that some teachers may use the argument that addressing children as girls and boys isn't harmful because there are "so few children who are gender independent." Third, by suggesting the use of the words "folks" or "people" the teacher illustrates some concrete suggestions that address not only the inclusion of all students, but facilitate ways to break down the gender binary in the classroom.

Another teacher challenges our ideas of gender and labelling even further when she suggests that rather than assuming gender based on performance, we should teach children to ask people how they identify.

> [...] even within the transgendered community [...] ah- there's a lot of diversity about what pronouns feel uh- most appropriate, so what we're trying to encourage kids to do, is just ask people how they'd like to be referred to and how they self-identify as opposed to um, labelling with pronouns that work for us.

This quote speaks to Butler's (2004) argument that rather than focusing on "celebrating difference" in the ways that we are frequently taught as teachers of young children to do, we should work towards

47

"actively establishing more inclusive patterns of living" (p. 4). This quote also speaks to the central theme of Butler's work, that self-identity should be the sole measure of gender. This is evidenced by the teacher's assertion that we need to respect how people self-identify rather than "use pronouns that work for us."

"Sticks and stones may break my bones": Teasing and the reactions of other children.

Most of the teachers identified that children who were gender independent were frequently victims of bullying and harassment. One teacher shared a story of a student who was bullied so much that he stopped attending school regularly.

> He was actually at our school as a transfer because he was being bullied and teased at another school. So we took him on but that bullying and that teasing continued at our school. So for him not to be able to [...] come to our school regularly [...] didn't allow me to connect as much as I was hoping.

This teacher's assertion that the bullying and teasing that her student was experiencing was precluding him from attending school is consistent with Orr and Pearson's (2011) findings regarding gender independent children in schools. She notes that the teasing continued at the new school, but doesn't address any potential reasons for the teasing, and doesn't describe what the school did to address the teasing.

Another teacher discussed teasing based on children's choices regarding sports teams. He describes a boy and girl who were teased because they wanted to participate in gymnastics and competitive biking respectively. He recounts how the children were teased to such an extent that they stopped participating in the sports of their choice.

> One boy wanted to do gymnastics and he [...] didn't do it. He started, and then he stopped. He actually stayed away from gymnastics, [...] something that he loved, for years. Because he was taunted and teased. [...] Or the girl who liked [...] competitive biking [...] but she stopped because people made fun of her. It's [...] because of the gender norms.

This teacher's account of children who were bullied out of pursuing sports highlights several patterns of thinking. First, there is the notion that certain sports are appropriate for girls (gymnastics) and certain

sports are appropriate for boys (competitive biking). Second, that clear gender lines exist for children and that they are aware of and fiercely adhere to them, and third, that this teasing occurs because of the strong notions of gender that tend to be reinforced in our schools. The teacher's final statement "it's because of the gender norms," identifies that this teacher may be thinking in terms of working towards breaking down these gender norms and creating more inclusive spaces for the children at his school. When asked about transphobic or homophobic teasing of boys versus girls, the same teacher identified that both girls and boys are in danger of being teased "if they're not following those norms."

> These heterosexual boys- they [...] can be really nasty to one another. You know, when they find out one of their pack is interested in something that they're not interested in. So- you can see the exclusion beginning. But I also see the same thing with girls; I know that they can be excluded if- if they're not following those norms.

This teacher's use of the term "heterosexual boys" is significant because it highlights an assumption about who is doing the teasing and why. The specific use of the term heterosexual with reference to the boys is also significant because it could suggest a conflation of sexual preference and gender independence. The use of heterosexual with reference to boys and not girls is also significant because it could highlight a line of thinking that proposes that girls are more accepting of "non normative" sexuality than boys are. However, the teacher's statement that girls (and boys) can be "excluded if they're not following these norms" reiterates the idea that children uphold and adhere to very rigid gender regulations.

Although the majority of teachers identified that they felt that children upheld rigid gender regulations and had difficulty transgressing or allowing their peers to transgress gender lines, one teacher identified that she felt that children were more comfortable talking about gender than adults were.

> "The kids seem very open to talking about gender and these ideas about how we know
>
> ourselves to be boys, or girls, or something in between"

The same teacher also described "think pink day" and how it came about out of an initiative from students who were upset about the homophobic teasing that their friend endured because he wore pink to school.

> So 'think pink' day is a day that started a few years ago [...] in Nova Scotia, when a boy, a grade nine student went to school wearing a pink T-shirt. [...] he was, I believe, an out student- a young gay man. And he got teased for wearing a pink T-shirt and [...] there were homophobic comments thrown at him. His friends overheard this incident and were quite upset and decided to organize a group of students to show up the next day wearing pink T-shirts. So, when this bully showed up at school, he was surrounded by a huge community of allies, all wearing pink, all sending the message that it wasn't Ok to bully someone for wearing pink [and] it wasn't Ok to bully someone for being gay.

This story is noteworthy for multiple reasons. First, it reiterates an issue that was highlighted in an earlier section that pink is seen as a "girls" colour and as such, a boy wearing pink falls outside of "gender norms." However, the reaction of the student's peers (wearing pink to school) refutes the position that was suggested earlier in this section- that children adhere to and uphold rigid gender regulations and boundaries. The fact that the *students* initiated the action of 'think pink' day could signify that children and youth may have *less* rigid notions of gender than their parents and teachers. All of the teachers identified that they made a conscious effort initiate conversations regarding gender identity and sexual preference with their students.

> [I work towards] unpacking with the kids, [...] the challenges of [...] how do we relate to each other if we think one thing and you know?- how do we create space for people to self-identify? And how do we challenge our own ideas about people when they don't match up with what we think they should be?

This teacher's word choices seem to be quite deliberate. She identifies that we need to work towards changing the way that we think about the world. This is evidenced through her use of the words "unpacking," "creating space," and "challenging ideas." The teacher seems to have a clear notion that these changes will take active work, but that change is very possible. Her assertion that this work needs to be done "*with* kids" rather than *for* kids is also important to note. It could be inferred that this teacher views these issues as societal issues, rather than school, or classroom issues.

Another teacher identified that he actively discourages homophobic and transphobic comments and that he will "call out" children for using such language.

> The kids in my class know- and I call them out if I hear any kind of negative talk about LGBT issues. If I hear any bad words, or derogatory words, I stop and I make a teachable moment out of it. Because I think it's something kids should know. Especially when we're trying to teach kids to be tolerant, and respectful of others.

While the teacher in the first quote spoke of breaking down barriers *with* her students, this teacher seems to hold the opinion that children need to be taught how to respect each other. He seems to view the homophobia and transphobia in his school as a school issue, or a classroom issue rather than a societal issue. Later in the conversation, the same teacher identified that he frequently engaged in restorative practice circles where children were invited to "sit as a community and talk about things that bother [them]."

> We try to do these restorative practice circles, [...] where we are able to sit as a class, as a community and talk about things that bother us and that way we can understand each other a little bit better? And we open the discussion up for questions and understanding. And I think that that's a good way to get any questions or ideas out, and feelings as well. It's actually very helpful.

This teacher seems to hold an understanding that acceptance and tolerance come out of a process of understanding. He works towards creating a space where children can talk about their feelings and ask questions in a supportive atmosphere and he allows students the space to challenge the status quo.

When asked if they noticed any differences in the acceptance levels of children who had engaged in discussions that centred on breaking down gender binaries and challenging transphobic and homophobic ideas, all of the teachers stated that they did.

> Yeah. I have seen it. I feel I can think of a number, actually, of situations- [...] compared to about nine years ago- when we had a particular student here who certainly was gender independent and was not treated well. So I have seen a change. I've seen a change in hearing language- like language I used to hear out in the school yard, [...] I can't say I've actually heard anything in the last little while. So I do- I do think I see change. For sure.

The teacher goes on to discuss the importance of consistently addressing these ideas with children and

states that it can't be done through "a one off workshop, or a guest speaker that you have come in" she states that "It has to be addressed and looked at- in all the literature that we do, books that we read, media we see." This teacher's assertion that "it has to be done consistently" highlights an interesting point. Rather than finding ways to "accommodate" student's differences, we should look at finding ways to change our viewpoints and our classrooms in order to include all students.

Another teacher highlighted the importance of using language as a tool with regard to breaking down oppressive barriers.

> I mean, I think, yes. I think that when you give kids language to identify and describe what's happening outside, or inside the classroom- I think that's really powerful. So you have kids now, whenever there's an issue of exclusion, you know- based on gender- kids will step up and say 'you can't say boys can't play' or 'you can't say girls can't play'. [...] and when I asked them to set a [play or toy] goal outside of their gender comfort zone, that was really powerful because I think kids need to be encouraged to try new things before they discover that they don't like it.

This quote suggests that the children in this class have begun to challenge gendered play choices and gender barriers. The children's assertion that "you can't say boys [or girls] can't play" suggests that they are beginning to open up their ideas of what "it means" to be a girl or a boy. The teacher's active problematization of gender roles (asking children to choose a toy or play area that challenges their ideas of gender roles) creates a situation where children must confront their thinking and look at the world in new ways. This quote suggests that by consciously inviting the children in her class to think about gender in ways that challenge their normative views, this teacher has been able to influence the ways in which the children in her class construct gender and understand gender identity.

Between a rock and a hard place: Administration, Funding, and Parent reactions.

 Although the majority of teachers noted that they found the administration to be supportive of their work with children who were gender independent, many teachers still identified administration and funding to be a barrier to inclusion. Some of the teachers claimed that although they felt that *their* particular administration was supportive, they did not feel that this support was universally available

across the TDSB. One teacher identified that she felt "lucky to have a supportive principal" and the she didn't "think every school [had] that"

Another teacher identified that although her current administration was supportive of her work with children who were gender independent, her previous administration had not been.

"I had an administrator- not our current administrator question why we needed to do it [provide workshops regarding LGBTQ issues] every year?"

Both of these quotes address a similar issue. In the first quote, the teacher identifies feeling "lucky" that her administration is supportive, and in the second quote the teacher identifies that her former administrator viewed LGBTQ inclusion as something that is "extra." The idea that the first teacher is "lucky" to have a supportive principal could suggest she feels that inclusion of LGBTQ students may not be a priority board wide. The second quote makes a similar point, as evidenced by the fact that the administrator seems to think that workshops regarding supporting the LGBTQ community are not seen as a priority and therefore do not need to be offered frequently.

Two teachers explicitly identified that they did not feel supported by their administration and one teacher stated that she felt the school community wasn't as "open as it could be."

"Um, I don't think that we have a very a- open minded school community, um- that would support a kid who needed those accommodations."

This quote suggests that a gender independent child who needed support may not receive the support that they are entitled to due to biases that the school and surrounding community may have regarding gender independence. Another teacher identified that she felt so unsupported by her school that she didn't want them to know that she had participated in this study.

"[...] this is something that bothers me. I don't want my school to know [about my participation]."

The preceding quotes bring to light serious issues regarding the possible inclusion of children who are

gender independent. These quotes also highlight the importance of publicizing the TDSB guidelines for the accommodation of transgendered and gender non-conforming students and staff.

Some of the teachers identified that their administration was focused on student's "academic needs", rather than on supporting children who were gender independent.

> [...] my administration is wholeheartedly focused on the needs of the students and progressing them academically and making them feel comfortable [...] I would never see any issue arising out of my administration or- or preventing- or ignoring any kind of ah- issue that I might have with that [supporting a child who was gender independent].

This teacher has identified that he feels that his administration would be helpful and supportive with regard to supporting children who were gender independent. His specific reference to the students being supported regarding their academic performance is something to take note of. A second teacher highlighted a similar issue when she disclosed that she has received a lot of pressure to ensure that her work around breaking down gender barriers "fits into the curriculum."

> I felt resistance from my principal who has on more than one occasion said 'well, you better make sure that this fits into the curriculum' and I've had to justify and work really hard to show her that it fits into the curriculum.

These two quotes could signify that the administration is viewing the student's academic performance and their gender identities as separate. However, we can infer from the research that children's comfort levels and acceptance levels have a great impact on their academic performance (Orr & Pearson, 2011; Wyss, 2004; Kennedy, 2008). Only one teacher explicitly stated that her school viewed the children in a "holistic way."

> "I think that they would be pretty positive. That's what I've seen from the administration. Yeah,
>
> they're very um, child focused in a holistic kind of a way. It's a- it's a very good environment."

The administration's separation of children as students and children as gendered or sexual beings is consistent with the view of children as a "collection of labels" that was discussed in an earlier section.

Funding. A major barrier to the inclusion of children who were gender independent was a lack

of funding for supports such as all-gender washrooms, social workers, or specialized training for teachers and administration.

> As far as resources in the school goes, there's- it's always a struggle [...] to accommodate kids because of a lack of resources. And whether they're medical, or, or like a social worker [...] so providing support in a time where they're cutting back, is- is um- just even someone to talk to? You know, it's- it costs money.

The reference to a lack of funding for "resources" suggests that the teachers may assume that all resources for supporting children who are gender independent cost money. One teacher identified that training workshops had been "called off" due to a lack of funding.

> "Yeah- the [LGBTQ workshops] unfortunately have been cancelled. They've been pulled off because of funding."

Another teacher identified her school no longer had access to a social worker due to funding cuts.

> "But within our school, because of cutbacks, we don't have a regular social worker. We don't have people at our fingertips quickly."

All of the preceding quotes identify similar lines of thinking. First, more than one of the teachers identified access to social workers as a necessary resource. The suggestion of social workers as a resource for children who are gender independent could signify that teachers are viewing gender independence as an "issue" or as a problem, and speaks to the pervasive practice of viewing childhood gender independence as a pathology. Second, this line of thinking suggests that support for children who are gender independent will cost money. Third, the lack of funding for support and resources for children who are gender independent could suggest that the inclusion of children who are gender independent is not considered a priority for the TDSB.

Two teachers suggested that they considered the physical the layout of their schools to be a barrier to inclusion. One teacher asserted that her school did not have an all-gender washroom, which is an accommodation that is stipulated in the TDSB guidelines for the accommodation of transgender and

gender non-conforming students and staff.

> Um, well yeah- I mean, we don't even have a gender neutral bathroom on our floor for staff. [...] I think [...] a barrier would be just the logistics of which washrooms can you make gender neutral? [...] and how far would you have to send that kid in order to find a gender neutral bathroom?

This finding brings to light important issues regarding accessibility. First, having an all gender washroom in only one part of the school poses problems for children who are gender independent, including safety, peer isolation (having to use the majority of recess or lunch time to travel to the all gender washroom), and prolonged absence from class due to travelling to washrooms. Second, having all gender washrooms only in one area of the school might indicate a line of thinking that suggests that children who are gender independent and children who have mobility issues will not intersect. This finding is consistent with the theories of Samuels (2003), Kafer (2003) McRuer, (2003), and Clare (2001) that a person's disabled identity takes over all other parts of their identity and that their sexual identity and gendered identity are no longer considered. One teacher posits that school facilities are old, and that there isn't the infrastructure for all gender washrooms and other accommodations for children who are gender independent because "these issues weren't around" years ago.

> "Well you know, you've got- your facilities are old. Most of these schools are old. So something
>
> that this- these issues weren't around- well they weren't prevalent years ago so- you know."

This teacher's statement is consistent with Butler's (2004) argument that society holds a heteronormative view that gender fluidity, or gender independence is "new."

Parent resistance. All of the teachers identified that parents who held transphobic or homophobic beliefs were a barrier to the inclusion of children who were gender independent. A number of teachers stated that they had experienced situations with regard to parents who would keep their children home during educational workshops dealing with LGBTQ issues. One teacher noted that parents had been "unhappy" and had questioned the rationale for providing workshops that dealt with

gender identity or same sex preference.

> Yeah, there's been in the past- there's been parents who've not been happy about that. Especially when [TDSB social worker] and his team would come in, some parents would question that. [...][there have also been] parents who have not sent their children to school the day workshops were happening.

Another teacher noted that a lot of teachers "will avoid those controversial issues" because they

are worried about how parents might respond.

> A lot of times teachers don't want to... a lot of teachers will avoid those... controversial issues? Because of blow back from the parents and...especially if you have traditional families where they're religious, or it contravenes their beliefs. Parents have a strong voice in the community- and can really um- make... your life miserable if you... do something they don't like. So you as a teacher have to kind of balance that out- and- it can be difficult. It can be difficult.

This teacher's statement could be indicative of several lines of thought. First, he has used several terms

that identify a clear notion of "within the norm" and "outside the norm." His use of the term

"controversial issues" places gender independence outside of the norm, and positions it as "subversive"

or "problematic" (causing controversy). This displays a heteronormative view of gender independence

and same sex preference. Second, his use of the term "traditional families" introduces the notion that

there is an idea of "traditional family" and "non-traditional family" further evidencing a culture of

heteronormativity. The teacher's statement that he "needs to balance out" the need to include all

children, and the need to "keep parents happy" was echoed by another teacher.

> We've also had some resistance from parents. Last year, I had a parent who didn't feel comfortable with a few of our workshops and wanted to pull their kids. And that was a difficult moment for me because I felt like I didn't know how to support the family and support and honour the work that we were doing. Because what I realised is that sometimes people just need a little bit of time, but that they will arrive at that moment where they accept that this work is important. Especially when they see it within the broader context of human rights."

Although the sentiment in the two previous quotes is similar, it is clear that the teachers view gender

independence and same sex preference in very different ways. This teacher's assertion that "people

need a little bit of time" and that "they will arrive at that moment" suggests that breaking down our

heteronormative views of sexuality, and our binary notions of gender is possible, but that it will take

work. This teacher exhibits a clear line of thinking that centres on social change, when she states that people will begin to change their views "especially when they see [them] within the broader context of human rights."

Professional peer resistance. All of the teachers identified homophobia and transphobia from other teachers to be a barrier to the inclusion of children who were gender independent.

"Part of it is that we have some homophobic teachers in our school"

"Some teachers have felt [...] that, you know, that this work kind of comes into conflict with their own beliefs about homosexuality and [...] that they haven't been given the option to opt out."

Some of the teachers also identified that other teacher's discomfort or lack of knowledge about gender independence was a factor in the lack of support for children who were gender independent:

Um, teachers are less comfortable talking about these issues because, uh- they tend to feel that conversations about homosexuality will be about sexual- sexual identity and um, there is a lot of teachers that feel like these kinds of conversations are not appropriate for kids at the primary level.

The majority of teachers identified that they felt that training for staff and administration would be helpful with regard to minimizing homophobia and supporting gender independent students:

I've spent a lot of time over the last three years focusing on "how do we support teachers to engage in courageous conversations with their students because it's clear that the students are ready, they just need to be [...] given the space to talk about these ideas [...] in a safe environment [...] and also be given tools so that they can respond.

However, some of the teachers identified that they had had experiences with teachers feeling threatened when they were asked to attend training regarding supporting transgendered and LGBTQ individuals

[...] because the training we got last year, was I thought, excellent- but I would say fifty percent of the staff wanted nothing to do with it. They were insulted that they even had to be part of this training.

So, last year- we had um, a transgendered teacher on staff. [...] And he did some ah- professional development with both schools and [...] many teachers from the other school went to the office to complain afterwards. They said they felt ambushed, that the felt ah- like yeah,

that they didn't appreciate the [...] tone. And when I offered at that staff meeting to share curriculum resources, um, more than one teacher went to the principal to complain about me and they told me- they told the principal that they felt that [I was] better than they were- which was upsetting, because I was just offering to share.

Discussion

Gender identity in the context of Early Childhood Education

The field of Early Childhood Education places a large focus on developmental psychology and cognitive development. Practitioners in the field of early childhood education frequently learn about children's gender identity through four major theories. These theories are: *Psychoanalytic theory, social learning theory, cognitive-developmental theory, and gender schema theory* (Bem, 1983). Introduced and influenced by Sigmund Freud, psychoanalytic theory centres around the idea that children pattern themselves after their same sex parent and posits that anatomical sex is equal to and should be the sole measure of gender. Social learning theory focuses on learned gender behaviours that are either discouraged or reinforced by the positive or negative reactions children receive from society. This theory provides some space for the notion that gender is socially constructed, however, it assumes that children are "genderless" until they "learn" how to gender identify. Cognitive-developmental theory argues that all children go through the same universal stages of cognitive development. Cognitive-developmental theorists argue that children begin to categorize themselves and each other as either male or female by acknowledging and adopting gender norms such as play and toy preferences and same gendered peers from an early age. This theory argues that gender identity is stable and fixed rather than unstable and fluid. Gender Schema theory proposes that children understand their gendered identities through observing and understanding societal constructions of gender. Gender schema theory centres on the idea that children create schemas or categories in order to understand the world around them. This theory suggests that all children pass through the same universal stages of cognitive development in the same order and that their use of schemas help them to learn about and understand

their world and their identities (Bem, 1983). All of these theories are premised on the idea that gender is binary, and that all people "figure out" what gender they are through similar cognitive processes.

The findings in this study illustrated strong connections between teacher's training in developmental theory and their understanding and constructions of gender identity. Although all of the teachers were supportive of gender independent children, all but one of the teachers discussed gender independence in the context of the gender binary. This was evidenced several ways. One teacher identified a boy who liked to play with dolls as growing up to be "a daddy." The notion that male children will grow up to be "daddies" can be attributed to an understanding of gender identity that is shaped by the psychoanalytic theory and the social learning theory. The idea that a child will grow up to be a "daddy" presumes that "a daddy" is a specific masculine role and that male children will learn what it is to be "male" through observations of their own "daddies" and of "daddies" in society. Other teachers discussed gender independence in terms of "boys who dressed like girls" or girls who "played sports." These constructions of gender can be clearly linked to developmental theories regarding how children come to understand their gendered identities. The notion that playing with same gender peers (in the findings, the example was a natal girl who only played with the boys), and engaging in "masculine ways" (playing sports, or playing with trucks) was consistent with the cognitive-developmental perception that children seek same gendered peers, and the gender schema theory that children categorize activities into schemas as either "for boys" or "for girls" in order to achieve "cognitive consistency" (Bem, 1983).

It would appear then, that in order to break down the gender binary, and actively include children who are gender independent, we must review and critique the ways in which we teach our teachers. According to a study that examined teacher training programs in the United Kingdom, the majority of education regarding gender independence in children either focused on working towards eliminating homophobic bullying, or positioned gender independence as indistinguishable from a

60

transsexual identity. Hellen (2009) cites a definition of gender independence from "teachernet" a

support and education web site for teachers in the UK stating:

> Some young people come to realise that their biological gender is not the same as the gender with which they identify, that is, they are born a girl, but feel like a boy, or are born a boy, and feel like a girl (p. 81-82).

This quote clearly positions gender independence within the context of the gender binary. Through this

lens, teachers may view children as either male, or female, but never as both, or neither. This

interpretation of gender independence as an extension of the gender binary was evident in my findings

and can be seen in the ways that TDSB teachers constructed and understood gender identity. Butler

(1990) also addresses this phenomenon when she discusses gender performance. She identifies that

many people tend to understand gender independence as an inverted expression of the gender binary

(boys who present as female, and girls who present as male), rather than challenging the hard "lines" or

"boxes" of gender that our society has constructed.

Gender identity and disability

Throughout this paper, several links between gender independence and disability have been

established. First, links were drawn between the societal "disabling" of people with disabilities and the

marginalization of people who are gender independent. The social model for disability which argues

that it is the society, not the disability that disables people, was developed in the late nineteen-

seventies and came out of a publication written by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against

Segregation (UPIAS) (Oliver, 2009) called *Fundamental Principals of Disability.* The document states,

> In our view it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded by full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society (Oliver, 2009 p. 42).

The social model proposes that rather than viewing a person with a disability as a person that needs to

be "fixed" through intervention, like proponents of a medical model would believe (Clare, 1999), it is

society that needs the intervention and "fixing" (Oliver, 2009). A clear parallel can be drawn between the social model, and Butler's (1990; 2004) theories regarding the social construction of gender. Butler argues that societal perceptions of gender and the power structures that are upheld in our societies reinforce and in fact create the idea of "normal." Both the social model, and Butler's social construction theories argue that the only way to create a more inclusive, egalitarian world, is to challenge our notions of "normal" (Butler, 1990; 2004).

A second link between disability and gender identity can be seen with the overlap of mental health and gender independence. There is substantial evidence that supports the idea that transgendered and gender independent people are at very high risk for suicide and depression (Wyss, 2004; Orr & Pearson, 2011; Brill & Pepper, 2008). This can be understood in multiple ways. First proponents of the medical model would argue that gender independence is a disorder (gender dysphoria, or gender identity disorder) that must be "cured." They would argue that the depression and high rates of suicide experienced by gender independent children and youth are symptomatic of their "disordered" perceptions of gender (Kirk & Belovics, 2008). This view is contrary to the views that proponents of the social model hold. Proponents of the social model would argue that the depression and suicidal thoughts experienced by gender independent children are a result of the oppression gender independent children are faced with, and that it is society who needs to be "cured" rather than children who are gender independent. The results of this study suggest that while some teachers seemed to support the medical model, most of the teachers understood that the high levels of oppression and transphobia that exist in our society and in our schools are the major factor in the high levels of depression and suicide in the trans community (Clare, 2001; Butler, 2004; Kafer, 2003).

Judith Butler (2004), Alison Kafer (2003) and Robert McRuer (2003) take this argument a step further. They discuss notions of "compulsory heterosexuality" and "compulsory able bodiedness" respectively, and highlight the point that our society holds a view that there is a shared notion of

"normal" and that we are positioned in spaces where we are presumed to be "normal" until it is discovered that we are not. This notion regarding the consensus of "normal" creates a line of thinking that presumes that those who do not "fit" into socially accepted notions of normal wish that they could. (Kafer, 2003; Clare, 2001; Butler, 2004). Butler, McRuer, Clare, and Kafer propose that we should re-evaluate our notions of "normal." All of these theorists propose that we must examine not only how we categorize people, but why we feel the need to categorize them at all.

This need to categorize was evident in the findings of this study. Teachers expressed clear understandings of gender categories throughout the interviews by referring to "gender roles," "gender boxes," and "gender norms." They identified that children who were gender independent were exhibiting "cross gendered" behaviours (Kirk & Belovics, 2008) by dressing or acting in ways that were commonly seen in the opposite gender. Some of the teachers challenged this inherent categorization by facilitating activities that challenged children to question their notions of "normal." One teacher invited children to think about why sports activities (such as track and field) were gender segregated, and one teacher facilitated an activity through which children were asked to actively challenge their stereotypical thinking.

A plan for change: Accommodation vs. Inclusion

According to Brill and Pepper (2008), gender independence should be viewed as a special need and as such, accommodations towards the inclusion of children who are gender independent should be expected and provided. Education is listed as a service under the Ontario human rights code and as such, all children have the right to access equitable education (Ontario Human Rights Code, s. 17(2)). For this reason, the inclusion of all children should be seen as both a human right, and a social justice issue (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996; Darragh, 2007; Swenson, 2000). Upon review of TDSB guidelines and policies, it appears that the TDSB shares Brill & Pepper's opinion regarding the inclusion of children who are gender independent.

The guideline's focus on "accommodation" rather than "inclusion" and its focus on "accommodation based on request" seem to follow a special education model. A special education model can be described as a model that views children with special needs as separate from "typically developing children." This model, operates from the perspective that "typically developing" or in this case "typically gender identifying" children are the "norm" and consequently views children who do not fit within this "norm" as needing "accommodations" or "modifications" to the existing program rather than tailoring the program to meet the needs of all children proactively (Keefe Hendrick & Davis, 1998; Fisher, 2012). A special education model can be problematic for a number of reasons including, children becoming stigmatized as a result of being perceived as not included in the regular classroom, and children needing to be identified as having special needs, or being "different" in some way in order to receive supports (Lieberman, Lytle, & Clarcq, 2008; Goodley & Ruswick-Cole, 2010).

Universal design comes out of the field of architecture and is premised on the idea that spaces should be created in order to provide the most functional environment for everyone (McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006). This ideology comes out of a philosophy that views diversity as the expected norm rather than seeing diversity as something that exists outside of the norm that needs to be accommodated (McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006; Liberman, Lytle, & Clarcq, 2008; Hehir, 2002; Goodley & Ruswick-Cole, 2010). As noted earlier in this paper, due to high levels of transphobia, lack of support for, and understanding of, gender independence, and the pervasive understanding our society holds regarding gender as always and only binary, it should be assumed that many children who are gender independent can be classified as "non apparent" (Hellen, 2009). This means that children may hide their gender independence in social settings (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Kennedy & Hellen, 2010). For this reason, an accommodation system that operates from a special education model may leave many gender independent children without support.

All of the teachers that I interviewed identified that they had witnessed changes in the ways that

64

children responded to gender independence and the inclusion of LGBTQ children and families after the teachers had actively addressed these issues through their curriculum and in their classrooms. It seems clear then, that teachers are beginning to take the steps to create more inclusive environments. However, we must challenge teachers, administrators and school boards to widen their thinking to include more than just binary constructions of gender. We must critically examine developmental theory and teachers should be encouraged to begin to look at gender as a point on a spectrum, rather than as a categorical binary. In order to do this, we must be conscious of the materials we provide in our classrooms, the people we represent, and the language that we use.

"We've come a long way, but we've still got a ways to go": Recommendations

Gender inclusive language

The use of language that reinforces the gender binary is exclusive and is a barrier to the inclusion of children who are gender independent. Some of the teachers identified the use of gender inclusive language, such as the terms "folks," "people," "everyone," or "friends" to be a more inclusive way of addressing classrooms than the use of the terms "girls and boys," or "ladies and gentlemen." It was also identified that teachers should be aware of, and avoid the use of language that reinforces heteronormative views of masculinity and femininity, such as "he's such a typical boy," or "she looks so beautiful today." Teachers also identified that children should be challenged regarding their notions of activities that are "for boys" or "for girls," as these notions can be oppressive and tend to reinforce hegemonic heteronormative views of the world.

Representations of gender independence and gender diversity

The TDSB guideline for the accommodation of transgender and gender non-conforming students and staff (2011) outlines several suggestions towards the inclusion of gender independent children. Included in these suggestions is the recommendation that school libraries carry books that portray children and adults who are gender independent or transgendered. The guideline also

65

recommends that school boards actively work to employ teachers and administrators who are transgendered. I would also recommend that all classrooms be required to have pictorial representations of people who fall on various points on the gender spectrum. It is also my thought that all teachers and all classrooms should have books and other materials that engage with the subject of gender as points on a spectrum regardless of whether there are known gender independent children in the class.

Sex segregation: Washrooms and sports teams

A major barrier that came up both in the literature and in my study was the issue of sex segregation. The most common circumstances for sex segregation in schools were found to be sports teams and washrooms. While the TDSB guidelines stipulate that children who request accommodations will receive access to opposite gender teams, or washrooms, or if they prefer, access to a single stall all-gender washroom, the burden is still placed on the child to request these accommodations. The findings of this study identified that most schools did not have all-gender washrooms, and that if they did they were inaccessible, due to being located in infrequently used areas of the school. It was also identified that sex segregation was a common issue with regard to sporting events, such as track and field, and sports teams. As I noted in my findings, the majority of the teachers were not familiar with the guidelines. It is fair to assume then, that many students may not be aware of the existence of the guidelines either.

Two recommendations that I would make towards the inclusion of children who are gender independent would be, a move toward sports teams and sporting events that were not gender or sex segregated, and the inclusion of an all gender washroom on every floor and in every school. Following a universal design model rather than a special education model would aid in the creation of schools that are inclusive to all children without requiring children to request "accommodations."

Education and training

The TDSB guideline and many of the teachers interviewed made reference to workshops

regarding gender identity and support for LGBTQ children and youth. However, all of the teachers identified that these workshops were only available upon request. This may be problematic as the teachers who request the workshops will likely be teachers who already have some understanding of the need to support and include children who are gender independent. I would recommend that all teachers be required to attend at least one workshop per year regarding gender identification and supporting children who are gender independent. This training should be addressed in similar ways to the anti-bullying training that is already in existence within the TDSB.

<div align="center">**Trustworthiness**</div>

It is understood that qualitative research is not intended to be generalizable and is meant to be representative of a specific group of participants from within a specific context (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Because the results from qualitative studies are gained through the interpretation of participant's words, rather than quantifiable means, the life circumstances and theoretical background of one researcher may yield results that are slightly different from those of another (Kvale, 1996). For these reasons, ensuring reliability in qualitative research must be done in different ways than in quantitative research.

In the 1980s, Guba and Lincoln identified four criteria for assessing validity and reliability in qualitative data. They were listed as, credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Krefting, 1990; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002; Guba, 1981). In this section, I will address validity concerns through these four criteria.

Credibility

In her 1990 work, Krefting describes multiple strategies for ensuring credibility. She states that since qualitative research is focused on individual perspectives, not all strategies will be applicable to all qualitative research. This section will discuss two strategies from Krefting's work for ensuring credibility that I employed. First, peer examination was used. Krefting describes peer examination as

the process of discussing interview responses and transcripts with a colleague in order to identify potential biases, and to allow the researcher to gain additional perspective. In the case of this study, transcripts from the interviews were shared with my advisor, and private discussions regarding the data, and analysis of the data were held. A second strategy for credibility that Krefting identified was theoretical triangulation. She describes theoretical triangulation as the process of analyzing the data through diverse or conflicting theoretical frameworks. In the case of this study, theoretical triangulation was used, as data were analyzed using a theoretical framework that consisted of feminist theory, developmental theory, disability theory, and queer theory.

Transferability

The results from this study are not intended to be generalized and therefore, transferability is not an integral aspect with regard to the validity of this study. However, according to Krefting (1990) transferability can be achieved when findings can be positioned into a context that is outside of the study situation, and transferability can be achieved when sampling is obtained through *nominated sample*. A n*ominated sample* can be described as "the use of a panel of judges to help in the selection of informants representative of the phenomenon in the study" (Krefting, 1990, p. 220). Because my initial call for participants was sent out through the TDSB equity commission, and my participants were purposely chosen based on specific criteria (positive space representative, or received training regarding supporting LGBTQ children), some degree of transferability can be confirmed.

Dependability

Krefting describes *code-re-code* as a strategy to ensure dependability in qualitative research. She describes *code-re-code* as a process through which data is coded and then left for a period of time before being re-coded. In the context of this study, dependability was achieved through a process of *code-re-code*. All of the data were first read as full transcripts in the order that the interviews took place. Then, coding charts were used in order to address themes that emerged from the data. Initially,

some quotes were placed in more than one chart. After some time, the data were re-coded, with quotes being moved into the chart that was most appropriate. The data were then coded a final time before being represented in the findings.

Confirmability

Guba (1981) describes confirmability as the process of ensuring neutrality and objectivity in qualitative research. She identifies that while the nature of qualitative research precludes the researcher from ever being completely objective, there are measures to increase researcher objectivity. One measure Guba suggests is *practising reflexivity*. Guba describes *practising reflexivity* as the process of engaging in constant self-reflection, and employing transparency when conducting interviews. Two ways that Guba suggests that this be achieved are through keeping a field journal, and through "intentionally revealing underlying epistemological assumptions" (Guba, 1981. p 89) to the research participants. In the context of this project, practising reflexivity was achieved through both a field journal and through transparency in interviews. Prior to the start of each interview, I gave participants a short explanation of my professional background and a rationale for why I had decided to conduct research in this area. All interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed, and field notes were kept in a field journal which was reviewed by me periodically. Review of the field journal and transcripts allowed me to engage in reflective practice by evaluating and re-evaluating the data during different points of my research (Guba, 1981).

Limitations

The aim of this study was to ascertain the *specific* ways in which teachers understand and construct gender and gender independence in their classrooms. Because my goal was to examine individual perspectives and understandings, qualitative research was clearly the most appropriate choice for this study. However, it is important to acknowledge that the nature of qualitative research brings with it several inherent limitations. First, when conducting qualitative research, the researcher

69

must be aware that the data they collect is representative of only the specific participants interviewed and the context in which the interviews took place. Therefore, it must be understood that results cannot be generalized (Morse et. al., 2002). Second, in contrast to quantitative research, which relies on "proving" a hypothesis, qualitative research relies largely on the interpretation of data from the perspective of the researcher (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The theoretical lens, personal background, and lived experiences of the researcher can impact the way that the researcher interprets and analyzes data. Therefore, similar data interpreted by different researchers may yield slightly different findings. Third, because qualitative interviews use open ended questions, interview responses can sometimes yield ambiguous or conflicting responses (Kvale, 1996). It is the job of the researcher to employ rigour when analyzing data in order to ascertain whether ambiguity is the result of a lack of clarity on the part of the researcher, a lack of understanding on the part of the participant, or due to idiosyncrasies within the subject itself (Kvale, 1996). For example, in this study, many teachers identified that their school communities were open to all children and that children who were gender independent were welcomed in their schools. However, when asked about barriers to inclusion, almost all of the teachers noted that children were engaging in teasing, and that there were some parents who refused to allow their children to take part in activities that focused on LGBTQ issues. In this case, I can infer two possible interpretations of the data. First, I can infer that I may hold a different notion of what the term "school community" entails than the teachers that I interviewed. Another possibility is that due to the subject matter of the interviews, participants were thinking about the ways in which gender independent children were supported in their schools, and thus, the notion of barriers did not come up until participants were specifically asked.

While transcripts are a fairly accurate form of record keeping with regard to recording interview responses, they are not one hundred percent reliable. Nuances such as facial expression, voice tone, and intonation are lost in this process and these factors may affect the way that responses are interpreted.

70

For this reason, transcriptions and audio recordings were considered together when analyzing the data.

Researcher transparency and reflexivity can help to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research (Guba, 1981). In the case of this study, I disclosed my personal history, and my theoretical framework in the opening sections of the paper. With this information, readers can clearly see the theoretical line of analysis that I used and it becomes clear how my data were analyzed.

Future research

All of the teachers in this study identified that broaching the subject of gender independence was the source of some stress, due to resistance from parents, administration, and other teachers. As an early childhood educator, I have felt the stress of trying to broach a "controversial" subject in a context where I might not be supported. Unfortunately, I feel that many teachers avoid these stressful situations and simply do not broach these subjects for fear of the "push back" that they might receive.

In the interviews, one of the teachers identified the importance of having "courageous conversations" with the parents, families, teachers, students in her classroom. She asserted that these conversations were absolutely the source of some discomfort for her, for the other teachers, for parents and families, and for the children, but that without discomfort, there can be no change. For future research, I would like to examine how teachers broach these "courageous conversations" and what supports exist regarding the support of teachers who do. I would approach this subject via face to face interviews with teachers, parents, and children.

Final thoughts

This paper has highlighted the ways in which gender is constructed in TDSB elementary schools. While the TDSB's guideline for the accommodation of transgender and gender non-conforming students and staff appears to be ahead of other school boards with regard to the inclusion of children who are gender independent, the majority of the teachers that I interviewed identified that they had not heard of the guideline until my study. The teachers identified that they had not seen the

71

guideline being used in their schools, or in their classrooms. The teachers who identified that they had heard of the guideline displayed a lack of understanding regarding what was meant by gender independent. This finding identifies a clear need for the promotion of the guideline, as well a need for teacher training that specifically focuses on supporting and including children who are gender independent (Hellen, 2009). This study also found that although there are many teachers who are actively working towards the inclusion of children who are gender independent, our schools and our teachers still construct and reinforce clear notions of gender as a binary construct. According to Butler (1990; 2004), it is necessary that we work towards opening up our notions of gender in order to include more than just the notion of male and female. Until this happens, the inclusion of children who are gender independent will not be fully realised.

Throughout this paper, the notion of "non-apparent" gender independent children has also been identified (Kennedy & Hellen, 2010; Hellen, 2009; Kennedy, 2009; Brill & Pepper, 2008). Because we have no way of knowing who in our schools are having feelings of gender independence, it is imperative that we begin to examine the language that we use with children and the practices that we employ in order to ensure that we are actively inclusive of the children in our care.

Appendices

Appendix A: Consent form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Trans Forming Education: Teacher perceptions on accommodating for gender non-conformity and gender independence in elementary school classrooms

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this Consent Form so that you understand what your participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions necessary to be sure you understand what your participation will involve.

INVESTIGATORS

This research study will be conducted by Jessica Phillips, from the Early childhood studies department at Ryerson University. The information collected through this study will be used as data for a master's level major research paper (MRP). This study is sponsored by Ryerson University.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Jessica Phillips at j3philli@ryerson.ca**, or contact Dr. Esther Ignagni at** eignagni@ryerson.ca**.**

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine elementary school teachers' perceptions of, and experiences with, accommodations for children who are gender non-conforming, or gender independent.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR PARTICIPATION

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

4. You will be asked to participate in a short (30 minute) interview at a time that is convenient for you.
5. If you consent, your responses will be recorded via an audio recording device. All recordings will be transcribed by the researcher at a later date and only the researcher will have access to the audio recordings.
6. Upon completion of the study, you will be given a copy of the final paper "*Trans Forming Education: Teacher perceptions on accommodating for gender non-conformity and gender independence in elementary classrooms.*"

Research will consist of one (1) thirty (30) minute interview at a neutral location and time that is convenient to you, such as a private study room at a local library. You will be asked questions about your experiences with gender non-conforming behaviour or gender independence, as well as how gender identity (in general) is addressed at your school. You will also be asked to identify what resources you have found helpful, as well as what resources you feel would be helpful, toward the inclusion of children who are gender non-conforming or gender independent.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The potential risks of harm involved in this study are very low and include potential emotional risks. Some respondents may feel embarrassed when speaking about gender non-conforming behaviour in children, or may feel unsure of what to do when encountering a child who appears to be gender non-conforming or gender independent. This risk will be mitigated by

the information provided in *the TDSB guidelines for the accommodation of transgender and gender nonconforming students and staff* , and through open dialogue between the researcher and the respondent. You may choose not to answer any particular questions, and can withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

This study hopes to raise consciousness about *the TDSB guidelines for the accommodation of transgender and gender nonconforming students and staff* and the importance of providing and allowing for accommodations for transgender and gender non-conforming children. This study hopes to identify teachers' positive experiences with, and perceptions of, accommodating for gender non-conformity and gender independence.

Once the research has been analyzed, all participants will be given a copy of the final report. No personal information about participants, such as, names, ages, or names of schools, will be included in the study, and confidentiality will be maintained.

I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

You will not be paid to participate in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your response to this study is confidential. Your name will not appear anywhere in the data and all audio recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the study. A number will be assigned to your name and that number will be used for coding purposes. The only information that will be collected about you will be the grade you teach. No personal information, such as your name or the name of your school will be collected and all results will simply refer to "teachers from TDSB elementary schools."

Audio recordings will be used in order to ensure that interview transcriptions are accurate and will only be heard by the researcher during transcription. A new audio file will be used for each recording. Recordings will be kept on an encrypted USB key in a locked box in the researcher's home and all files will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

You have the right to review or edit the recording prior to transcription, if you so choose.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. If you choose to withdraw from this study, you may also choose to withdraw your data from the study. You may also choose not to answer any question(s) and still remain in the study. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your future relations with Ryerson University, or Jessica Phillips.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY

If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact:

Jessica Phillips
J3philli@ryerson.ca

This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board.   If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, please contact:

Toni Fletcher, Research Ethics Coordinator
Research Ethics Board

Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, Ontario M5B 2K3
416-979-5042 or toni.fletcher@ryerson.ca

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT/LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study "Trans Forming Education: Teachers' perceptions on accommodating for gender non-conformity and gender independence in elementary school classrooms" as described herein. Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction, and you agree to participate in this study. You have been given a copy of this form.

_____
Name of Participant (please print)

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____
Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)

Your signature below indicates that you consent to your interview being audio recorded. All recordings are confidential, your name will not appear anywhere on the recording and all recordings will be destroyed upon completion of this study. You have the right to review or edit the recording prior to transcription, should you chose to do so. If you chose to withdraw from the study, your audio recording will be destroyed and your interview data will not be used in the study.

_____
Name of Participant (please print)

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

_____
Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)

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