"It was Trans Hell:"
Exploring the Schooling Experiences of Trans and Non-binary Youth in Alberta

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Abstract

This paper highlights findings from a qualitative research study exploring the schooling experiences of transgender and non-binary youth (ages 14-25) in Alberta. Given the unique legislative and cultural context of each Canadian province/territory, this study focused on the schooling experiences of TNB youth, specifically within the socially conservative context of Alberta and its provincial education system, which, historically, has lagged behind other Canadian provinces/territories in sexual and gender diversity inclusion. This study contributes to a growing body of qualitative research focusing on the unique experiences of TNB students in Canada by investigating the school-based experiences of TNB youth in Alberta to better understand their lived experiences and to inform educational policies and practices within the province. The research findings highlight four key thematic areas: (1) climate and culture, (2) supports, (3) education, and (4) safety, which participants identified as critical factors that influence their experience(s) in educational environments.

Keywords: transgender, non-binary, 2SLGBTQ+, education, Alberta.

Introduction

Canadian youth spend much of their formative years in school, and their schooling experiences vary widely based on numerous intersecting factors relating to their identity, such as race, culture, ethnicity, and ability, as well as actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE). Understanding the unique risks and protective factors that contribute to the school experiences of diverse young people helps ensure schools are better equipped to support their wellbeing and academic success. While all students deserve safe, supportive, and healthy school environments, this research study is concerned with the unique and understudied schooling experiences of transgender and non-bi-

nary (TNB)[1] youth in Alberta to better understand, from their unique perspectives, how educational environments and policies impact their everyday lives.

Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (2SLGBTQ+) youth experience many disparities in educational experiences in relation to physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing compared to their cisgender-heterosexual (CH) peers, with those disparities often being more pronounced for TNB students (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Peter et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2020; Wolowic et al., 2016). Several related factors have been found to influence these disparate experiences. One such factor is real and perceived school climate and culture, which can be produced through social factors such as bullying, harassment, discrimination, safety in school spaces (e.g., bathrooms), policies, and access to school-based supports (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2021; Day et al., 2018; Kelley et al., 2022; Kosciw et al., 2020, 2022; Peter et al., 2021). For example, a negative or unwelcoming school climate and culture may have prevalent gender- and sexuality-based bullying, harassment, and/or discrimination (e.g., transphobia, homophobia, lack of understanding of gender diversity), whereas a positive or welcoming school climate and culture may have 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive and supportive policies (e.g., access to preferred bathroom) and resources (e.g., SOGIE-inclusive curriculum, Gay-Straight Alliances/Gender-Sexuality Alliances [GSA]; Kosciw et al., 2022). Negative school climate and culture have been shown to be related to disparities in school outcomes and wellbeing for 2SLGBTQ+ students such as mental health and truancy from school whereas positive school climate and culture serve as protective factors (Day et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2020, 2022). School climate is particularly unwelcoming for many Canadian TNB students, who experience higher levels of harassment, hear more transphobic language, and feel less safe at school compared to their CH and cisgender LGBQ+ peers (Peter et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, they are also more likely than these peers to skip school due to feeling unsafe (Peter et al., 2021). Moreover, Albertan TNB students have been reported to experience low levels of emotional wellbeing and high rates of self-harm (Wells et al., 2017).

Another factor influencing disparities in school experiences is related to school climate and culture and involves the behaviours and attitudes of teachers, staff, and other students in the school. In their Montréal-based study, Kelley et al. (2022) found that attitudes and behaviours related to acknowledging and accepting gender diversity, identity, and expression as well as supporting and responding to TNB students' needs were either protective factors or barriers impacting the wellbeing of their TNB participants, depending on whether or not they were affirming and/or supportive, respectively. Examples of affirming/supportive behaviors included using correct name and pronouns, demonstrating an understanding of gender diversity, or intervening in instances of gender-based bullying. The Second Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Canadian schools reported that approximately 25% of TNB respondents were not able to use their chosen name or pronouns at school.

The final factor influencing disparities in school experiences for 2SLGBTQ+ youth and TNB youth in particular is school connectedness, which is also considered to be an important indicator of school climate (Day et al., 2018). School connectedness refers to the sense of belonging and engagement students have with their school and involves relationships with teachers and students, feeling safe, and feeling cared about, for example (Taylor et al., 2020). School connectedness has been found to be positively related to mental health for both Canadian and Albertan TNB students (Taylor et al., 2020; Wells et al., 2017). The Alberta-specific results of the Canadian Trans and Non-Binary Youth Health Survey (CTN-BYHS), reported that TNB youth in Alberta who had higher levels of school connectedness were twice as likely to report good or excellent mental health than participants with lower levels of school connectedness. Notably, the survey also reported Alberta TNB youth did not feel connected to their school, with lower ratings of school connectedness than the national average and from participants in several other Canadian provinces (Wells et al., 2017).

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[1] There is increasing global and national recognition that gender exists as a spectrum and that, for many people, gender identity and/or expression may not match the sex assigned at birth. These people may identify with terms such as transgender, non-binary, agender, genderfluid, genderqueer, female/girl, male/boy, and many more. In this paper we use the terms transgender and/or non-binary (TNB) as a term to broadly capture the diverse and varied ways in which the youth who participated in our study described their gender identity. We acknowledge using TNB as an umbrella category may not fit for all who participated, but our intent was to be as inclusive as possible.

The Alberta Context

Given that legal jurisdiction over education in Canada falls within the responsibility of the provinces and territories, school experiences can, and often do, vary regionally. Legislation, policy, curriculum, availability of resources, and school culture are often region-specific and influence students' experiences. These aspects of education are shaped by the social and political context of the province/territory. This context is especially pertinent when considering the school experiences of TNB youth in Alberta due to the historical domination of socially conservative[2], heterosexist, and cisnormative politics and policies within the province (Filax, 2006). Alberta's conservative political majority has negatively impacted the lives of queer and TNB youth in those conservative parental voices, aiming to prevent SOGIE-inclusive education, often have superseded students' rights to access information regarding gender and sexuality (Johnson, 2023; Surette, 2019). Accordingly, school administrators and teachers often experience stress and pressure within their schools to avoid any classroom discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity (Wells et al., 2017). This pedagogy of negation has profound consequences on the physical, emotional, and mental health and wellbeing, and educational attainment of 2SLGBTQ+ youth in Alberta's schools via the creation of unwelcoming school climate and culture as was discussed in the previous section (Peter et al., 2021; Wells et al., 2017).

Making matters worse, in February 2024, Premier Danielle Smith introduced a series of 10 proposed policies, including four that stand to further marginalize TNB students through additional barriers to SOGIE-inclusive education and gender-affirming practices (Egale, 2024), putting already vulnerable TNB students at even greater risk for educational disparities. The new policies propose to change from an opt-out to an opt-in approach for any lesson covering sexual health education, sexual orientation, or gender identity; would require educators to obtain pre-approval from the Ministry of Education for any materials used to teach these topics; would require parental consent for name and pronoun changes for students under the age of 16 years; and would require parental notification of requests for name and pronoun changes for students aged 16 and 17 years. The policies pertaining to curriculum are more restrictive than current policies, which only require parental notification of the topic of human sexuality, default to student attendance in such lessons in the absence of parental objection, and do not require materials pre-approval. The policies pertaining to school gender-affirming practices create additional risk for TNB students by creating delays or barriers to accessing gender-affirming accommodations and outing students who do not feel safe disclosing their gender identity at home. Being able to live in one's felt gender, including using a chosen name and pronouns, has been identified as a protective factor for school and mental health outcomes, whereas delays or barriers to accessing such gender-affirming supports have been negatively associated with school outcomes and wellbeing (Kelley et al., 2022; Peter et al., 2021; Wells et al., 2017). Together, these policies will undoubtedly inhibit both access to relevant information for TNB students and conversations about 2SLGBTQ+ identities, cultures, and communities, thereby contributing to the creation of more negative school climates and cultures for the youth they claim to protect.

School Experiences Within Canada and Alberta

The CTNBYHS (Taylor et al., 2020), seeks to understand the current health, educational, and social experiences of TNB youth across Canada as well as report on the changes (or lack thereof) since the original survey publication in 2014 (Veale et al., 2015). The 2019 CTNBYHS included 1,519 youth ages 14-25 who self-identified as TNB and included 281 survey respondents from Alberta. One of the main subject areas covered by the CTNBYHS was school experience. In summary, the majority of respondents indicated they felt connected to their school; were attending school at the time of the survey and had plans to pursue post-secondary education; and had not changed schools due to lack of support. Although these results are positive, given the known associations between school connectedness and the wellbeing of TNB students, the results demonstrate an improvement since the previous survey. The responses still were not unanimous. A percentage (7-41%) of survey respondents continued to report negative school experiences in these areas.

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[2] In the context of this paper, the term 'conservative' refers to social and political ideologies that uphold traditional values and social institutions such as family structures, gender roles, sexuality, and religious traditions, amongst others.

In contrast, the Second National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia in Canadian Schools (Peter et al., 2021), a survey of 1,519 self-identified TNB youth aged 14-25 from across Canada, found that negative schooling experiences of TNB youth continue to be pervasive and widespread. The report highlights continued negative school experiences and outcomes, including worsened feelings of safety for TNB students compared to the original survey completed in 2008 (C. Taylor et al., 2011). The report found that TNB participants were most likely (i.e., more likely than CH and LGBQ+ participants) to report experiencing harassment and victimization at school, based both on their gender (identity and expression) and real or perceived sexual orientation. Twenty out of 25 participants said school staff were ineffective in addressing this harassment.

The report also highlights the influence of school climate on students' mental health and wellbeing, with TNB respondents reporting languishing mental health at rates that were approximately 1.5 to almost 4 times higher than their LGBQ+ and CH peers, respectively. Amongst the more than 1500 2SLGBTQ+ students in grades 8-12 who participated in the survey, 62% felt unsafe at school compared to only 11% of CH participants, and 64% of all survey participants reported regularly hearing homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic comments. Of note, the risk factors and negative outcomes (e.g., low levels of school connectedness and feelings of safety, school absence) were notably worse in Catholic schools, in smaller population centers, and for TNB Indigenous youth. Overall, lack of school staff support, the ongoing presence of discrimination and harassment, and feeling unsafe at school were all related to negative mental health outcomes.

Conversely, positive mental health outcomes were more prevalent when protective factors were present in schools, such as 2SLGBTQ+-specific policies and supportive school climates and cultures. For example, the positive impacts of supports such as Gay-Straight Alliances/Gender-Sexuality Alliances (GSA) or Queer-Straight Alliances (QSA) on school experience and creating a supportive school climate for 2SLGBTQ+ students have been well-documented in the research literature (Day et al., 2019; Kelley et al., 2022; Marx & Kettrey, 2016; McGuire et al., 2010; Porta et al., 2017; Poteat et al., 2013; Russell et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2016). The positive outcomes associated with these types of student groups include less prevalent victimization, fewer homophobic comments, and reduced safety fears (Li et al., 2019; Marx & Kettrey, 2016). The inclusion of 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive curricula also has been associated with similar positive outcomes (Greytak et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2010). Other protective factors include 2SLGBTQ+-specific anti-harassment policies, professional development for educators focused on 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive education, availability of information about 2SLGBTQ+ issues, and intervention on the part of educators and staff in response to bullying and harassment (Domínguez-Martínez & Robles, 2019; McGuire et al., 2010; Omercajic & Martino, 2020; Russell et al., 2010).

Focusing on Alberta specifically, the study by C. Taylor et al. (2015) found that school districts in Alberta were less likely than other provinces/territories to have 2SLGBTQ+ visibility and inclusivity in schools (e.g., inclusive events like Pride Month events, posters, etc.); fewer 2SLGBTQ+-specific interventions; little to no 2SLGBTQ-inclusive curriculum; a lack of GSAs or 2SLGBTQ+-specific clubs; lack of administrative support for TNB teachers to be open with their students about their gender identity; and fewer 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive policies, especially within Catholic schools (C. Taylor et al., 2015, 2016). Moreover, school districts in Alberta were the most likely to have none of the four most common 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive policy components in place (i.e., policies on harassment, curricular inclusion, professional development for staff, and GSAs). In contrast, school districts in other parts of Canada, except for Québec, had policies pertaining to some or all of these components (C. Taylor et al., 2016).[3]

Finally, in addition to reporting low levels of school connectedness and emotional wellbeing and high rates of self-harm, the Alberta-specific CTNBYHS (Wells et al., 2017) also reported that TNB youth only felt moderately safe at school (i.e., rated 5.0 on a 10-point scale), rated their emotional distress at higher levels than the national average, and were attempting suicide in alarmingly high numbers (~40% of younger youth had attempted suicide in the previous 12 months).

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[3] It should be noted that provincial legislation has been introduced since the time of data collection for those studies, which has likely impacted the school experiences for TNB youth (e.g., Bill 24, An Act to Support Gay-Straight Alliances, passed in 2017 under the NDP government and Bill 8, Education Amendment Act, passed in 2019 by the United Conservative Party government, which rolled back GSA and school board policy requirements), making it even more important to capture the current experiences and climate for TNB students in Alberta.

These studies draw attention to the importance of recognizing the unique experiences and needs of TNB students as separate from their CH and 2SLGB+ peers as well as the critical need to capture the current Alberta experience for these youth prior to any potential educational policy implementation.

Purpose

Although Canadian studies such as the CTNBYHS (Taylor et al., 2020) and the Second National Climate Survey (Peter et al., 2021) provide valuable information on the educational experiences of TNB youth across Canada, these quantitative reports had limited capacity to elaborate and discuss participant responses and experiences. Moreover, while more Canadian-based research studies are beginning to examine the specific experiences of TNB youth (Airton, 2023; Greey, 2023; Kelley et al., 2022; London-Nadeau et al., 2023; Martino et al., 2022; Navarro et al., 2021; Peter et al., 2021; Sinclair-Palm, 2023; Taylor et al., 2020; Travers, 2018; Travers et al, 2022; Veale et al., 2015; Wright-Maley et al., 2016), there is a paucity of research focused on Alberta's unique context (Maine et al., 2024, 2025; Wells et al., 2017) and the research that does exist is in need of update.

As such, the purpose of the present study was to extend upon these quantitative findings by capturing more in-depth, qualitative descriptions and explanations in order to provide a more contextualized understanding of the school-based experiences of TNB youth living in Alberta, counter the discrimination they may be experiencing, and inform future inclusive educational policies and practices within the province.

Methods

Study Participants

This study included twenty-five TNB youth (14-25 years of age) recruited from across Alberta using open convenience sampling (i.e., non-randomized sampling from places in the community convenient for the researchers) in combination with snowball sampling (i.e., non-randomized sampling in which individuals who have participated in the study are asked to share the information with other people they know who may be interested in participating). To support this research, we worked closely with our community partners, including the MacEwan University Centre for Sexual and Gender Diversity (Edmonton) and the Skipping Stone Foundation (Calgary). We also used purposive sampling (i.e., intentional recruitment of participants with specific characteristics) to include participants from specific backgrounds or geographic locations to help reach a diverse range of identities, voices, and experiences. Recruitment methods utilized social media, email announcements, 2SLGBTQ+ community youth groups, GSA networks, health clinics, and word of mouth. Participants were compensated with a $50 honorarium following participation in the study in keeping with current guidelines and the practices of our community partners (Bauer et al., 2019; Taplin et al., 2019). The overarching study received ethical approval from MacEwan University (file number: 101794) prior to participant recruitment.

Participant Demographics

Participant socio-demographic information was gathered via a short questionnaire before commencing the research interview. The mean age of the participants was 19.64 years. Twenty-four out of the twenty-five participants were Canadian citizens and born in Canada; therefore, immigration status was not an intersecting factor influencing the experiences of most of the participants. The minority (16%) of the participants identified as racialized while 84% identified as White. Six participants (24%) identified with more than one ethnic or cultural background, one of which was White. Ethnic or cultural background categories used in the demographic questionnaire were the same as those used in the CTNBYHS (Taylor et al., 2020) and often included multiple countries or groups as examples. For example, "white" included British, French, Italian, Portuguese, Ukrainian, and Russian and South Asian included East Indian, Pakistani, and Sri Lankan.

Most of the participants were city-dwellers with 76% reporting living in a large population center (i.e., 100,000 people or more), 8% residing in medium (i.e., 30,000-99,999 people), and 16% in small (i.e., 1,000-29,999 people) population centers. No participants lived in First Nations Reserves.

Youth participants described their gender identity in a variety of ways, with 40% providing multiple gender descriptors for themselves. Forty-four percent identified as non-binary, 16-20% identified with masculine identities (i.e., Boy/Man; Female-to-Male; Trans Boy/Man), and up to 20% identified with a feminine gender (i.e., Girl/Woman; Male-to-Female; Trans Girl/Woman). A small minority of participants identified as straight or heterosexual (4%), and the remainder of the participants identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer.

Data Collection & Analysis

Data collection was accomplished via semi-structured interviews. The one-to-two-hour interviews were conducted and recorded virtually between July and August 2020. Participants' consent for recording was obtained before initiating the recording, and consent to participate in the study was obtained in writing before the scheduled interview and/or verbally at the beginning of the meeting after information sharing was completed. Participants under 18 either provided assent in addition to parental consent or provided their own consent if they were deemed to have the capacity to consent.

Completed interviews were transcribed using a professional transcription service, then verified, corrected, and de-identified manually using the original audio-visual recordings as reference. Completed and de-identified transcripts were uploaded to NVivo for subsequent data analysis. Interview data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as described by Clarke and Braun (2006, 2013). RTA is a recursive process in which researchers continually reflect on their choices and assumptions and most typically involves six phases: familiarization with data and identifying items of potential interest; generating codes; generating initial themes; reviewing initial themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Progression through these phases is not linear, as researchers frequently move back and forth between phases until data analysis is complete and a set of representative themes is generated. Data for the overarching study were used to generate codes and then themes. The present research focuses on themes from the education domain.

Theoretical & Philosophical Frameworks

The theoretical framework is impacted by trans scholars, specifically Stryker and Whittle's (2013) articulations of the importance of centering TNB people's understandings of their lives and experiences. Stryker and Whittle write of trans de-subjugation, where the experiential knowledge of TNB people is as legitimate as any other knowledge source, and argue that it is "necessary for understanding the political dynamics of the situation being analyzed" (Stryker & Whittle, 2013, p. 12). The TNB youth in this study are experts in their embodied life experiences in relation to institutions and societal structures, and their self-understandings are essential to understanding the state of education in Alberta.

Critical realism (CR) was employed as a philosophical framework to guide data analysis. CR is not associated with any set of methods and can use a variety of theories to help understand the mechanisms driving social events, activities, and/or phenomena in an attempt to analyze social problems and suggest solutions for social change (Fletcher, 2017). In CR ontology, reality is divided into three levels: empirical (events as we experience them), actual (events occurring without the filter of human experience), and real (inherent properties in objects/structures that produce events at the empirical level). The primary goal of CR is to explain how social events occur through these three levels of reality. Therefore, this study is committed to highlighting the empirical, actual, and real (Fletcher, 2017) ways that the TNB participants are impacted by educational policies, systems, and environments.

Research Findings & Discussion

The reflexive thematic analysis resulted in the identification of four key areas: (1) climate and culture, (2) supports, (3) education, and (4) safety, which are explored below.

School Climate and Culture

Research has shown that environments free from bullying and discrimination reduce adverse mental health outcomes for TNB youth (Wittlin et al., 2023). Creating a climate and culture in schools where TNB youth can thrive is imperative for their wellbeing. Participant Jordyn (18, non-binary) shared:

I knew it would be so much better on my mental health and wellbeing to be somewhere where I was accepted and embraced because that's a big difference. You can be accepted and respected, but if you're not embraced, you will not grow.

As Jordyn illustrated, affirmation is vital to trans students thriving in schools. As Jones (2023) suggested, 2SLGBTQ+ youth are "shaped and potentially shifted, by their surrounding systems" (p. 63). When 2SLGBTQ+ youth are embraced and given space for recognition and happiness, they are more likely to experience other "euphorias" by creating community connections and changing institutional structures, as well as feeling safer, and thereby increasing trans visibility (Jones, 2023). In other words, when trans youth feel embraced and affirmed, their happiness can expand, and they can grow and thrive.

The research identified two sub-themes as factors that influenced whether school climate and culture were inclusive and affirming to TNB youth in Alberta. The first sub-theme focused on the attitudes and behaviours of others (e.g., administrators, teachers, and students). When school personnel exhibited welcoming and affirming attitudes and behaviours, TNB students felt safer and more embraced. This included seeing overt affirming signs, symbols, and behaviours (e.g., posters, pride flags, sharing pronouns), which Jones (2023) identified as key supports that contribute to queer and trans euphoria. As Chrissy (23, transgender woman) shared, "Symbols are important. If the university were to be more clear about where it stands and what kind of support it offers, I would feel a lot safer and a lot more supported by the institution."

Participants also expressed how teachers play a significant role in school climate and culture alongside visible signs and symbols. There was a clear distinction between those teachers who worked hard to be supportive and affirming and those who failed to move beyond institutional policies and statements. For example, 60% of the research participants reported being referred to by their chosen name and pronouns by at least some school members, but this usage was not always consistent across or within students or staff, as described by Noah (17, transgender boy): "People who knew me in middle school as one thing, and they weren't really willing, or they didn't try at all to change. Maybe they would say the right name, but they just didn't use my correct pronouns." Similarly, Storm (19, transgender man) described how the staff at his school did not understand the individual nature of pronoun usage, stating:

They were saying basically if we call you by Storm and he/him, when we meet with your parents we might accidently slip up and then we might accidently out you. So, then their middle ground, I guess to that was to single me down to just calling me S…Basically their solution was to single me down to the letter S and then just use they/them pronouns and I was explaining to them I'm more than I'm more than just a single letter. And although they/them pronouns are gender neutral, they're not my pronouns. And they just never understood that. But that was what they went with.

Maverick (17, gender-fluid & non-binary) described how a teacher continued to use gender-normative language despite the school's instruction to avoid doing so:

Every once in a while, I would have, especially an older teacher, make a joke or say something, or even just walk in and go ladies and gentlemen, even though I know for a fact the day before all the teachers had a meeting in which they were told not to do stuff like that… It just made me feel uncomfortable. And a lot of the time, not very supported.

From these youths' experiences, an apparent disconnect emerges between overt symbols and the internal work that teachers must engage in to support TNB youth. When administrators or staff members were not equipped with information and education surrounding the specific barriers and needs of TNB youth, or when the lessons taught did not reflect TNB realities, the overall school climate suffered.

The second sub-theme that impacted school climate and culture was curricular content. Gender-inclusive or SOGIE curricula were key areas participants identified as contributing to a more inclusive school climate. More than half of the participants indicated they or their fellow students wanted their

classes to include 2SLGBTQ+ content, but 88% of participants shared how this was not happening at their schools. A few participants shared how gender diversity, if mentioned at all, was only briefly included in specialized or non-mandatory classes (e.g., psychology, film history, sexual health education). 44% of the participants also noted how certain programs or classes seemed more inclusive than others. For example, arts and humanities programs and classes (e.g., theatre, band, English) were identified as more likely to engage with or include 2SLGBTQ+ content. In contrast, physical education classes and teachers were found by some participants to be particularly non-inclusive and cisnormative. Noah (17, transgender boy) described gym class as *"trans hell,"* and Sean (17, transgender man & non-binary) shared how "gym teachers as a whole seem to not understand gender as a construct and that it shouldn't be divided, and that change rooms are a problem and actually incite a lot of violence." Notably, in a significant 2004 study (Wyss, 2004), trans participants also referred to their schooling experiences as "trans hell," highlighting the persistent and pervasive struggles that TNB youth continue to face in schools, even 20+ years later. With the possibility of more restrictive educational policies being put in place with respect to SOGIE-inclusive education in Alberta, the struggles may continue for years to come.

When faced with experiences such as "trans hell," it is not surprising that students desired and needed more inclusive and supportive school environments. Notably, the study found the burden and responsibility for this inclusion primarily fell on the TNB youth themselves, often to the detriment of their own social and emotional wellbeing. Frohard-Dourlent (2018) expressed how the primary burden of educating teachers typically falls on marginalized students, noting that "students are being tasked with making decisions within an institution whose established norms work to erase trans and gender-nonconforming subjectivities" (p. 338). Rather than school staff and administrators working to eliminate "trans hell" environments through policies and actions, 68% of participants shared experiences in which the work of creating gender-inclusive spaces and securing gender-related supports fell upon them directly.

Andy (20, non-binary) recalled, "I remember when I was in high school, it was like we as students had to initiate everything in informing the teachers, which was like not the responsibility we should have had." The participants also described having to educate school staff, administrators, other students, and even parents regarding gender diversity and how best to support TNB students. Participants described this educational burden as both unwelcome and misplaced. They also described having to ask for specific TNB supports (e.g., using correct names and pronouns, gender-neutral bathrooms, and gender-inclusive rooming options on trips), often doing so continually and to multiple individuals. Frohard-Dourlent (2018) highlighted a similar phenomenon, where "educators often continue to be unsure about what supporting trans students looks like, even accessing education on gender diversity" (p. 335). Self-advocacy and persistence were often required to ensure supports were implemented correctly or at all, even after teacher training, as Sean (17, transgender man & non-binary) relates:

> I was like the first out trans person there, simultaneously with Liz. We were kind of introducing my school to what trans kids are like. They had theoretical knowledge and yet zero clue of what to do. They were very wanting to seem like they knew what trans people were and how to deal with it and, 'Yes, we're all-inclusive and fine.' Holy wow, there was a lot of work to do there.

Overall, the youth in the study suggested that although some work has been done to create more inclusive environments and systems, schools need to remain committed to ongoing and meaningful change, which cannot be implemented by only the students. As Frohard-Dourlent (2018) poignantly asks, "What if trans students did not have to advocate for themselves because schools are already set up to recognize their existence?" (p. 338).

School Supports

The participants discussed the ongoing need for TNB-specific support in their schooling environments, explicitly highlighting the importance of accessing gender-affirming care and services. Although there was variability concerning the types of support available, many participants shared how their school offered some form of gender-affirming support or assistance. The most frequently described gender-af-

firming supports were all-gender bathrooms/change rooms or access to affirmed binary bathroom/change room; GSAs or other 2SLGBTQ+ safe space(s); and, in some cases, the ability to change names and pronouns on class lists and school records. Some schools also offered gender-neutral gym uniforms, online options for physical education, and mental health or counselling services to assist with accessing and navigating medical and social transition (although these were more commonly available in postsecondary institutions).

Brooke (17, transgender girl) described the importance of being able to use her chosen name at school without first having to obtain a legal name change:

> The name change specifically… is really, really important, and I wish more people knew about it because very few school systems that I know do that. So, to have something like that major sort of change in the school system, is really important and a really big step forward.

If the provincial government moves forward with accepting the proposed policy changes surrounding gender-affirming name changes, students may face additional barriers to accessing this support.

Access to all-gender bathrooms and change rooms was also identified as one of the most common gender-affirming supports available at school. Many of these all-gender bathrooms were found in inconvenient locations, far away to be used in the short breaks between classes, or in a place that felt exposed or unsafe. Participants identified how these bathrooms were often repurposed staff or ability-inclusive bathrooms, which meant they did not always meet the needs of TNB students or created additional accessibility barriers. They described being unable to access all-gender bathrooms because they were occupied by others or kept locked by staff. Keeping the bathroom door locked required TNB students to out themselves to gain access (i.e., ask for the key). Sean (17, transgender man & non-binary) said:

> I spend 20 minutes walking back and forth between the two bathrooms because one is either locked or both in use. So, I don't know. I can do that during lunch if you want, but it's outing me again. And I can do it during class time, but then I'm losing class instruction time.

Omercajic (2022) highlighted how simply having an all-gender bathroom does not erase the overall system of oppression that prioritizes CH students. While important to have at school, this inclusion does not negate how TNB youth continue to face barriers their CH peers do not experience.

The participants had many suggestions for ways that schools could be more supportive, which included using desired forms of address (e.g., chosen name and pronouns) and making course content more 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive. While participants found chosen name and pronoun usage to be affirming, they also wanted to see more consistency in the availability of supports (e.g., from all members of the school community, alongside the normalization of asking for a person's name and pronouns). Other suggestions included having 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive forms, computer systems, and class rosters (such as up-to-date and accurate attendance sheets) and gender-neutral uniforms and athletic activities. They also emphasized the importance of providing adequate and ongoing education for teachers regarding 2SLGBTQ+-inclusion, which included mechanisms for accountability and exposing students to gender diversity in earlier grades.

Finally, whether it was seeing changes throughout their tenure at school or noticing different experiences and supports for younger family members or students, the participants also described various ways that schools have become more gender inclusive and supportive in recent years. Chrissy (23, transgender woman) noted, "spaces [like GSAs] exist today in a way they didn't when I was in high school." These positive changes included more availability of supports dedicated for 2SLGBTQ+ students that are increasingly not limited to binary options (in particular, GSAs and name/pronoun changes and usage); knowledge of gender diversity at a younger age; youth coming out earlier; freedom to explore gender and gender expression at school; teacher education regarding gender-inclusive practices; and more inclusive curricular changes. Sam (19, non-binary) shared:

> I do notice more now than when I started high school how things are changing, and they're adding – they are implementing things to make it easier to be an LGBTQ youth in high

school. But when I was there, there wasn't much.

Similarly, Blue (16, non-binary & agender) stated, "I know there has definitely recently been a lot of changes with having the option of a non-binary identity when you're registering into the school and stuff like that, which has been good. I didn't have that." Likewise, Ian (18, trans-masculine & non-binary) also shared, "I think it's better for people coming out now than it was when I came out back in 2010. I don't know there's a huge difference, but schools are definitely better now."

Providing and having access to various gender-affirming supports for students helps close the gap in disparities between CH and 2SLGBTQ+ students' mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing (Goetz & Arcomano, 2023; Olsavsky et al., 2023). Ensuring these various supports are implemented is essential for the wellbeing of TNB youth in Alberta.

Education

Despite students describing the importance of SOGIE-inclusive education, so-called "parental rights" advocates are increasingly vocal and active in Alberta, frequently targeting schools and communities in an attempt to erase all public signs and symbols of 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion. In effect, trying to push 2SLGBTQ+ individuals back into a proverbial closet (Martino, 2022; Wearmouth, 2023). This erasure occurs through public protests against drag or rainbow story time events, vandalizing rainbow cross-walks and pride flags, and positioning schools as hotbeds of a sinister "gender ideology" that targets impressionable children suddenly causing them to change their pronouns and transition genders.

The participants in the study identified and highlighted the pressing importance of educational systems and policies that teach all students about gender and sexual diversity starting at an early age. The participants also expressed how schools have a significant role to play in helping students understand and explore their own gender, which can occur through the provision and normalization of gender diversity through course content, classroom materials, and visible representation. Several participants related how they didn't even know being TNB was a possibility until they were in junior high or later and, even then, did not necessarily learn about gender diversity at school. Sam (19, non-binary) commented how "it was hard to explore and explain how I was feeling and what I was feeling." Maverick (17, gender-fluid & non-binary) noted how schools "really need to catch up on that whole thing because kids can understand that stuff. And teaching them early is super imperative, especially for trans kids who don't understand why they feel like that." Lyra (22, transgender woman) echoed this sentiment, "I think it would be good to sort of explain in more detail what trans people's experiences are and sort of realizing that they're trans… I would have never known because I was never taught that." From these comments, it becomes clear that access to and implementation of SOGIE-inclusive education is vital to ensuring all youth can access accurate and nonjudgmental information about their identities and communities rather than being met with a pedagogy of silence and neglect.

The research study also revealed a significant emphasis on access (or lack thereof) to comprehensive sexual health education (CSHE). Similarly, researchers in New Brunswick have highlighted the need for teachers to have professional learning around sex, gender, and sexuality to be able to provide specific and practical information that is inclusive for all students (Burkholder & Keehn, 2023). Experiences in CSHE often varied considerably between participants; however, all 25 of the participants indicated how the CSHE they received in school did not fully meet their needs (Maine et al., 2024). Only 5 participants commented on how they felt their school provided somewhat adequate CSHE. This inadequacy was even more pronounced in faith-based schools, with nearly a third of participants commenting that less or worse sexual health information was provided within these school environments. For example, River (22, non-binary), who attended a Catholic school, shared:

I had no experience, no knowledge, did not understand how sex worked. I knew all about the diseases, though and all the horrible things that can happen to you and all the things about pregnancy, but didn't understand – they also said that condoms don't prevent against HIV. Like a bunch of just straight up incorrect and misinformation was given the entire time.

Similarly, Jordyn (18, non-binary) described how:

> [I] feel like the Catholic system has kind of cheated us of sexual education because we don't even get like we don't get taught about how to put a condom on. We get taught what contraceptives there are, and we got taught the different types, but we didn't get taught where to buy them, we didn't practice how to use them, we didn't get samples, we didn't see them in real life.

The most common inadequacies identified by participants focused on how CSHE was not SOGIE-inclusive and how content was limited in scope (i.e., focusing only on CH reproduction, abstinence, and limited exposure to the variety of contraceptives available). Several participants also identified how teachers' lack of training and discomfort or embarrassment contributed to the ongoing problem. Finley (17, transgender boy) noted, "My health teacher said, 'I'm not teaching you that; it's your responsibility to find out for yourself. I'm not teaching that to a class of teenagers." Jordyn (18, non-binary) related, "I just think there's a lot of embarrassment and shame attached to it. And the whole point of sexual education is to get rid of the shame."

The barriers and shame the participants discussed were emphasized by their desire not to have to find relevant information independently. As part of their schooling experiences, these youth wanted their teachers to provide more specific and practical information about sex and sexual health (e.g., local resources and practice with or exposure to different contraceptives) and the ways those can vary for different bodies, genders, and attractions. Some scholars have emphasized shifting from a deficit or shame-based approach to one that centralizes queer joy and pleasure (Burkholder & Keehn, 2023; Wright et al., 2023). For example, the Queer Sexual Joy project focuses on "centering queer sexual joy for improving sexuality education, and specifically for creating new models of consent education" in order for all students to have more "safe, just, and joyful sexual experiences" (Wright et al., 2023, p. 6).

School Safety

Twenty-three out of the twenty-five participants felt safe in at least one of the schools they attended or at least in one school context; however, a majority of participants (18 out of 25) also shared experiences when they did not consistently feel safe at school. Some participants noted how they felt safer in post-secondary school environments, for example, rather than in junior or high school. Others commented on how school was unsafe, and they only felt safer once they changed schools. The participants focused on four key factors that contributed to their overall sense of school safety: (1) attitudes and behaviours of others; (2) the climate, culture, and structure of the school and education system; (3) 2SLGBTQ+ representation and visibility within the school; and (4) safety found with(in) specific people and places at school.

Overall, TNB students felt safe(r) when teachers, administrators, and other students demonstrated gender-affirming attitudes and supportive behaviours, the school culture reinforced that TNB students were valued, and when gender-affirming support(s) and safe spaces were available. Conversely, when attitudes and behaviours towards TNB people were discriminatory or cisnormative, and the school lacked support or had a conservative school culture, TNB students often felt unsafe. For example, Noah (17, transgender boy) stated, "My school was pretty conservative in terms of the student population. So, there were some reports of kind of negative incidents towards other LGBT people. So, it was kind of frightening even if I wasn't [directly targeted]."

Other participants described how class structure contributed to a sense of safety. For example, being in the same classes with the same classmates every day (as in middle school) could feel unsafe if those classmates were not affirming. In those cases, participants made comments about feeling stuck or powerless to do anything to improve their sense of safety. In general, people familiar with or known to be affirming or inclusive, as well as designated safe spaces (e.g., GSA room) or classrooms (e.g., of affirming teachers, band room), were identified as safe contacts or places. In contrast, bathrooms/change rooms and people who were known to be non-affirming or generally aggressive were all identified as unsafe. 2SLGBTQ+ visibility and representation also greatly impacted participants' overall sense of safety. TNB students felt safer when they knew of other TNB/2SLGBTQ+ students or staff and when there was inclu-

sive representation in the curriculum or visibility at school.

A major ongoing occurrence that contributed to a lack of safety was the presence of gender-based bullying. At times, bullying behaviours were overt, such as transphobic comments and jokes and inflicting physical harm, as described by Kas (16, transgender boy): "I had a girl walk up…she jumped at me and scratched my arm so bad that I had marks down my arm for more than a month." Bullying was more frequently identified as covert and often occurred outside of school time; as described by Jamie (18, gender queer & agender), "There's not a lot of open public bullying at the school that I went to. The bullying mostly happens online." Although some participants expressed how they could go to teachers for help if needed, and some, like Andy (20, non-binary), had teachers who would "hold students accountable if they're disrespecting a student for being as – like any sort of identity," the participants more often described feeling that teachers and administration were not concerned with bullying or did not do anything to intervene or intervened in a way that was ineffective or misguided. As Jamie (18, gender queer & agender) highlighted, "They didn't really care about bullying, like whatsoever. Because I had pop dumped in my locker, and my head got slammed in a door."

It became quickly apparent through the conversations how current methods for dealing with bullying in schools are often ineffective and can even be harmful to the victim, for example, requiring the bullied student to confront their bully, causing them further trauma, or punishing the victimized student for an outburst precipitated by chronic, unaddressed torment by peers. Storm (19, transgender man) noted how interventions in his school did not target the bullying behaviour: "It's really funny how schools don't actually deal with the bullying; they just try to find solutions for the other person who is actually getting bullied, to stop whatever they're doing to provoke the bully."

Conclusions & Recommendations

Educational Interventions to Support TNB Youth

This qualitative study contributes to growing Canadian-based research investigating the lived experiences of TNB students who face higher rates of adverse social, mental, and emotional outcomes than their cisgender and heterosexual peers in schools (Peter et al., 2021). By bringing forward four key thematic areas: (1) climate and culture, (2) support, (3) education, and (4) safety, we hope the qualitative approach will contribute to research and educational policy development focused on the lived experiences of TNB youth in Alberta.

This research is crucial for educators, community advocacy organizations, and policymakers to hear directly from TNB youth in the province, especially at a time when conservative provincial governments across Canada (i.e., Saskatchewan and Alberta) have instituted discriminatory policies framed under the guise of so-called "parental rights" that are ideologically motivated to restrict access to inclusive supports, curriculum, and classroom resources for TNB students, which could have drastic consequences on their mental health and wellbeing (Bai, 2023; Stechyson, 2023).

While many schools have increased TNB support over the past decade, there continues to be a lack of consistent, affirming, and supportive spaces for TNB youth in Alberta at all educational levels. Based upon the research findings, we recommend three key educational interventions to help better support TNB youth in Alberta: (1) Inclusive Practices, (2) Visibility and Supportive Environments, and (3) Comprehensive Policies and Legislation.

Inclusive Practices

As identified by the participants, inclusive practices include recognizing and properly utilizing chosen names and pronouns on school forms, attendance and class lists, and in school communications and information systems. Schools should also actively work to de-binarize institutional practices to recognize gender diversity beyond the male/female binary (e.g., gender-neutral uniforms and attire and non-sex-segregated activities) and provide visible and accessible all-gender bathrooms and change rooms. Educational staff should also work towards utilizing inclusive language (i.e., saying "students" vs. "girls and boys").

Visibility and Supportive Environments

Supportive environments should include educators as visible allies who advocate for 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion through both their words and actions. Identifying schools and classrooms as safe and supportive environments needs to happen proactively through affirming signs, symbols, and actions, rather than reactively after an incident of hate, prejudice, or bullying has already occurred. Recommended examples of visible signs of support include rainbow crosswalks, pride flags, and celebrating Pride Week and 2SLGBTQ+ events in schools. Visible statements and signs of support are critical in interrupting the overwhelming hetero- and cisnormativity that young people reported as pervasive within their educational environments. Given the recent introduction of discriminatory policies, public protests, and attacks against 2SLGBTQ+ visibility, institutional signs of support are perhaps more important than ever.

Additionally, over the past decade, one of the most significant advances in Canadian education has been the rapid rise and success of gender and sexuality alliances in K-12 schools. The majority of students in most regions of Canada report having a GSA in their school (Peter et al., 2021). For example, 78% of students surveyed in Alberta reported having a GSA in their school. The presence of a GSA was linked to schools that were reported to have supportive sexual orientation and gender identity policies. Student groups such as GSAs not only bring visibility to and education about 2SLGBTQ+ issues into schools; they also help to create spaces of safety and refuge for students to be themselves and to find supportive teachers and allies.

Comprehensive Policies and Legislation

The participants spoke eloquently about the importance of focused and specialized training on 2SLGBTQ+ issues as part of professional competency and how 2SLGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum can play a significant role in creating respectful, safe, and welcoming environments for TNB youth and allies. Providing additional, ongoing SOGIE training and education for school staff can help reduce the amount of education that TNB students have to provide to their teachers, which majority of participants noted as a concern. Overall, ensuring that teachers are up to date on TNB inclusivity and/or best practices can help make all students feel safer and more supported. Suggestions for learning include having professional development days dedicated to TNB inclusion, providing additional training to teachers for specific subjects (i.e., sex education), and seeking and providing resources from local/provincial/national 2SLGBTQ+ educational organizations for all educational staff.

According to Alberta's Human Rights Act (Government of Alberta, 2024), all educational institutions in the province must provide safe and discrimination-free environments based on SOGIE. These responsibilities need to be made explicit in school policies and procedures. In turn, these policies need to inform student codes of conduct, meaning, students and staff should be aware of the policies and procedures, and the consequences for not following them. Clearly communicating inclusion policies and procedures is important for their effectiveness. There are several excellent examples of comprehensive standalone sexual orientation and gender identity K-12 school board policies in Alberta, including the Edmonton Public School Board, which was the first in the province to pass such a policy in 2010 (Edmonton Public School Board, 2023).

Ultimately, all participants wanted nothing more than basic respect and the ability to feel safe, affirmed, and supported within their educational institutions. For many, they simply wanted to go to school without fear. Having policies and protections that prioritize the mental and emotional wellbeing of students is crucial to ensuring that all Albertan schools are safe and affirming for TNB youth.

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