**Teachers' professional learning to affirm transgender, non-binary, and gender-creative youth: Experiences and recommendations from the field**

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**Abstract**

This article critically examines the professional learning needs called for by educators working to support transgender, non-binary, and gender-creative (trans) youth and makes recommendations for practice. Interviews were conducted with 26 educators (preschool to secondary) who have worked directly with trans students (any child whose behaviour does not match stereotypes for their sex category assigned at birth, or who identifies with a gender different from their sex category assigned at birth). We examine two new concepts related to professional learning and educator preparation that emerged from theorising the data and related literature: *pedagogies of exposure* and *culture of conversation*. The limits and possibilities offered by these approaches are critically examined through the research base on teacher learning.  Recommendations are made for teacher preparation, professional development and related practices to better create and sustain learning environments that affirm gender diversity.

**Introduction**

Transgender, non-binary, and gender-creative young people are increasingly visible in schools. Educators are being challenged to improve their practice in order to be more affirming of this expanding expression of gender diversity. Most professional educators receive little to no formal instruction on topics related to gender diversity during their preparation programmes (Jennings 2014; Kearns, Mitton-Kükner, and Tompkins 2017), and few have received formal learning opportunities during their career (Greytak and Kosciw 2010; Meyer, Taylor, and Peter 2015; Marx, Roberts, and Nixon 2017).

   In this paper, we share findings from interviews with educators about their experiences working with transgender, non-binary, and gender-creative (hereafter referred to as trans[1]) youth, who we defined as any child whose behaviour does not match stereotypes for their sex category assigned at birth, or who identifies with a gender different from their sex category assigned at birth. Here we focus on what these participants shared about their own experiences with and perceptions of related professional learning opportunities. We aim to provide recommendations for supporting the professional learning needs for educators working with trans youth – which we argue is *all* educators whether they are aware of it or not.

   In this study, we use critical (Freire 1970/1993; McLaren 1995) anti-oppressive (Kumashiro 2002) and queer pedagogies (Britzman 1995; Bryson and De Castell 1993) as frameworks for design. Specifically, our analysis builds on efforts to create social justice-focused school environments that welcome and support gender diversity and the professional learning that is required to make these shifts. Trans students are not the focus of the study; instead, school environments and the professional and institutional practices therein are the key sites of examination. Our aim is to better understand the experiences of educators who have worked directly with trans students and their families to make recommendations for positive change. This project is part of a multi-disciplinary action research study that included work with parents of trans youth and political organising around trans children's rights. Findings from this study are documented elsewhere (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, & Airton 2016; Meyer & Pullen Sansfacon, 2014).

**Understanding the problem**

As the guest editors of this special issue of *Sex Education* point out, there is a dearth of research on transgender youth, and the studies that exist are primarily focused on the negative and dangerous experiences of LGBTQ youth – with a historical emphasis on gay and lesbian youth -- in schools. This work mostly emerged through large-scale student surveys in the USA conducted by GLSEN (GLSEN and Associates 2005; Kosciw et al. 2016), which document pervasive transphobia in secondary schools and which has also been noted in Canadian research by Taylor and colleagues (Taylor and Peter 2011; Peter, Taylor, and Campbell 2016). This article contributes to an emerging body of research that informs how educators understand and provide supports for trans youth in schools (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, & Airton 2016; Kearns, Mitton-Kükner, and Tompkins 2017; Marx, Roberts, and Nixon 2017; Pendleton Jimenez 2016). There remains limited research on teachers' perspectives and experiences working with and supporting trans youth.

Because we aim to contribute to the literature on professional learning, we need to start with what we know about what kinds of professional learning experiences have an impact on educators' practices and what elements are central to engaging, informative and transformative learning experiences. For example, in an article on impact studies of teachers' professional development, Desimone explains that, "understanding what makes professional development effective is critical to understanding the success or failure of many education reforms" (2009, 181). Desimone identifies five core features of effective learning experiences: "(a) content focus, (b) active learning, (c) coherence, (d) duration, and (e) collective participation" (183) and notes that teacher learning increases when teachers engage in active learning opportunities, which include feedback, reflection, and discussion. Duration is also a key feature the literature emphasises. Teacher learning requires time, "including both span of time over which the activity is spread (e.g., one day or one semester) and the number of hours spent in the activity" (184). Another component is collective participation; teacher learning increases through interaction in sustained small groups. This is consistent with what Smylie (1989) reported: namely, that teachers view their own classroom experiences and interactions with colleagues as their most effective sources of learning.  Studies also revealed that "coherence" is an important feature of effective professional development, in that teacher learning increases when the focus is consistent with teachers' own knowledge and beliefs. This last point is an important one to explore as research indicates that there are some educators who do not believe that it is their job to support and affirm LGBTQ youth (Taylor et al., 2016) or address topics related to gender and sexual diversity in schools (Meyer, Taylor, and Peter 2015).

While Desimone's research focused on instructional practices and curriculum-focused professional development opportunities, there are other studies that examined Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and the potential they have to apply the elements noted above. PLCs are sources of meaningful development for educators. Hirsh and Hord (2010 identified key elements of successful social justice PLCs which noted that learning in community, building relationships, and sharing power and decision-making were important elements that led to meaningful and sustainable changes in a school's culture. Nehring and Fitzsimmons also talk about the potential power of PLCs to "counter the culture of conventional schooling" (2011: 513) and note the importance of group facilitation as a crucial skill to effectively cultivate an engaging PLC experience since these are designed to have features that are not typically found in conventional public school settings including a "reliance on dialogue, reflection, and experimentation" (515). Watson (2014) builds on these ideas in her article and pushes back on the importance of shared values in the group, or "coherence" to note that this can "produce silence" that masks difference and allows hegemonic structures to remain in place and can inhibit organisational change (22-23). Watson (citing Stark 2009) suggests striving for "productive dissonance" instead. This stance is important to keep in mind when developing professional learning that addresses topics related to gender and sexual diversity.

In 2010, Adrienne Dessel, wrote about using intergroup dialogue to address teachers' attitudes, feelings, and behaviours toward LGB students and parents. She reported on an Intergroup Dialogue intervention that had positive impacts for the participating heterosexual educators which links closely with the findings that will be presented later in the article.  A second study focused on developing school personnel as "allies for trans and gender nonconforming students" (Marx, Roberts, and Nixon 2017 1). The authors found that many

participants expressed a new commitment to becoming an ally, however there were limits in the concept of "allyship" that positioned trans students as in need of "altruistic allies" (6). The authors challenged the approach to being an ally as "one who cares for the trans student in front of them, rather than one who acts to dismantle the structure that allows the continued oppression of trans students" (14). These insights align with our belief that in order to create school environments that honour the identities of trans students, the soil of the school must be "tilled," and the focus must move beyond individual students. Other elements of these studies will be revisited in the findings and recommendations below.

## Methods and data sources

For this project, the research team[2] conducted interviews with educators who had direct experience working with trans students. Participants were recruited via emails to personal and professional networks of educators and GLBT advocacy groups in Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia. Each educator was interviewed in-person or via Skype for 60-120 minutes using a flexible interview guide[3]. Data analysis was ongoing and exploratory as the research aimed to uncover common themes between teachers' experiences that might help inform future studies and school interventions (Maykut and Morehouse 1994). The themes in this article emerged from analyses of the coding category named "professional development," which was used to identify any utterances that included a participant giving advice, examples, or ideas about how educators and schools might be able to learn more or improve their practice.

The participants were 26 educators from various contexts including: 11 early childhood or elementary, 12 secondary and 3 district-level "diversity mentors". The mean age was 43.9 (range 31 – 63), and mean years of teaching was 10.4 (range 4- 24). 23 educators identified as European-Canadian, two Chinese-Canadian, and one Métis. They represented diverse genders and sexual identities: 10 identified as gay, lesbian or queer, 8 identified as straight, "straight-ish" or "straight for now" and 8 chose not to state their sexual identity; 15 identified as women, eight as men, and three as genderqueer or chose not to state. Four agreed to be named as key informants due to their extended work and leadership in this area: Steve M., Vancouver School Board Anti-Homophobia Mentor; Angela, Vancouver School Board Anti-Racism Mentor; Steve S., Toronto District School Board, Anti-Homophobia mentor; and David, Toronto District School Board, teacher and father of 'Baby Storm' (Ostroff 2016).

## Findings

Two terms emerged repeatedly as educators talked about what they felt would help their colleagues and themselves be better prepared to create classrooms that affirm gender diversity: namely, *exposure* and *conversation*. As we theorised participants' use of these words, we explored the tensions in these ideas of the need for more 1) exposure to transgender and gender nonconforming people and 2) conversation about gender diversity. In this section we examine the following questions: What are the various meanings of exposure? What are the limits and possibilities of the concept of exposure? And what kinds of conversations might support the development of deeper understanding and affirming practices regarding gender diversity in schools?

Although the focus of this research was framed around educators' experiences working with trans youth, we found that responses to our questions about gender included information about sexual and family diversity as well. Eleswhere, we have discussed how many participants and their colleagues conflated gender diversity with sexual diversity and how out gay and lesbian educators were often sought out as local experts on transgender topics, whether they had any formal education or experience with the subject or not (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, & Airton 2016). Whereas many families of trans children might prefer to focus their advocacy and activism on issues of gender and avoid links to the LGBQ community, we argue that these all include elements of queerness that disrupt the dominant cisgender heteronormative paradigm and we can not educate about gender diversity without also addressing sexual and family diversity.

We start by examining the issue of teachers stating that they need more exposure to the topic of gender diversity by having more visible, or "out" trans kids in schools. However, teachers also discussed the dangers involved in *exposing* children to public scrutiny, relying on them as catalysts for institutional change. We discuss the tensions and possibilities of what we call a "pedagogy of exposure" by examining the concept of exposure through four different lenses: (a) exposure as education, (b) exposure as vulnerability, (c) exposing kids: sacrificial lambs, and (d) critiques of exposure.

### Pedagogies of Exposure

The concept of *pedagogies of exposure* emerged from early analyses (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, and Airton 2016) where the term "exposure" came up repeatedly in the data and was simultaneously an issue in public discourse about how ethically to report and share stories about transgender youth in mainstream media. It seemed that the only way to get schools to change was to educate professionals and communities through exposure to the topic, which often also meant exposing vulnerable youth. This is exemplified in the documentary film, *Growing up Coy* (Juhola 2016), when the parents of Colorado kindergartener Coy Mathis describe making the strategic choice of taking their story to the popular media in order to ensure their transgender daughter had access to appropriate support and facilities at her school.

The first theme we will discuss in this respect is exposure as education. A few participants said that their own education about transgender people and gender diversity came through knowing trans people or queer families. They described how these interactions helped them be more aware and that more exposure would help them and others to be more inclusive around gender diversity. One elementary teacher described her own learning while working with a trans child in her classroom, "that's been my eye-opening experience and my exposure in talking to [their family] and the one mom" (Millicent). Another elementary educator, explained that in his large urban district it is easier to proactively address gender and sexual diversity topics because of the diversity that is inherent in being situated in a large urban area: "But the [school district] … given the amount of exposure and the concentration of people in [large city] with different sexual and gender identities … there seems to be a lot more exposure and knowledge and possibilities about what can be" (Wolfgang). A secondary teacher advocated for more exposure to the topic in pre-service teacher education programmes stating

that, "having teacher candidates … have to be exposed to equity-diversity training, anti-oppression training" would better prepare them (Jayne). Several participants recommended having speakers' bureaux available or other opportunities for educators to learn from members of the transgender community.

> One participant explained how her own advocacy efforts created more exposure to gender and sexual diversity topics for students and colleagues at her school.

> I have to be really honest with you, since I've come to this school, I think there's been a shift in thinking because I don't know that they've ever had any-- first of all, I'm an out queer teacher, which is completely new for this school, A), and B) I just don't know that they've ever been exposed to the books. When I came to this school, there was absolutely nothing. There [were] no books that had same gendered families, there was nothing, there was nothing about gender independence at all and after I arrived, now our library is full (Gertie).

Finally, a third-grade teacher described how her awareness of her own teaching practice changed after having a boy she described as "very effeminate" in her class:

> I think I just became more aware of how important that was in the case where there's a student to whom that maybe applies directly. So as an example, before Day of Pink[4], we were reading *My Princess Boy (Kilodavis 2010)*, and we were having the discussion about that and I was reading that-- I was just more conscious of the fact that it was important for this student to hear that that's okay from the teacher. And I was also more conscious of the fact that other kids would be hearing me say, this is okay so that when they responded to or interacted with the student, there would hopefully be less of an impulse to be mean or, that kind of thing. So I don't know if I did anything differently specifically for him. I think I was just more aware of that choice I was making and its impact on him. (Jill)

> These quotes illustrate how many educators believe that merely providing contact with trans people or books about trans lives will be an improvement in helping teachers be more prepared to support trans youth. In addition to the concept of exposure as a route to educating others, several participants acknowledged how exposure is linked to vulnerability, our second lens within this category.

> Jayne described how more educators might be willing to affirm gender and sexual diversity in their classroom if they knew how their behaviours negatively impacted on their students. She gave an example of heteronormativity in schools. She said, "I think if [other educators] could have that student [with GLBQ parents] in front of them standing there saying, 'This is how I feel when you do this.  Here's how you excluded me when you said, 'Take this home to your parents, get mom and dad to sign it,' you excluded me.'" The example Jayne provides is that of a student exposing themselves and becoming vulnerable to teachers by sharing a non-apparent aspect of themselves and having the language skills and maturity to explain to adults how their behaviour was harmful and exclusionary.

One early childhood educator talked about how some children feel when their queer families become visible at school. Logan explained, "It is so terrifying. And it is so exposing… they feel exposed and they feel freaked out [when multiple moms arrive at pick-up]". Even though these examples were not specifically about transgender students, they relate to sharing a hidden part of one's identity that marks one as a member of the queer community. This experience has much in common with the theoretical work done around the epistemology of the closet (Sedgwick 1990/1993) and coming out in the LGBTQ community. This expectation to be out places an undue burden on children to expose themselves to ignorance, hostility, and be responsible for the learning of others. The combination of using exposure as education and exposure as vulnerability leads to the third theme of sacrificial lambs, or exposing trans kids.

There is a common belief that one needs to personally know a person who is transgender before making changes to be more affirming and supportive. This emerges from studies in anti-racist and anti-homophobia work that indicate negative biases can be reduced by developing personal relationships with members of the marginalised group (Dessel 2010; Nagda and Zúñiga 2003) and has been reported by GLSEN as well (Kosciw et al. 2016; Greytak and Kosciw 2014). This approach places the focus of the problem on the transgender body, not on the teachers or schools embedded in a culture of cisnormativity.

This theme was represented in several interviews. For example, Ms Erin, explained how she wished her school administration had announced the presence of an incoming transgender student. She said, "So I think if the teachers had been told [that a new student was transgender]… I think it would have been an opportunity for us to do some professional development and discuss how we should be educating all of the students and making everybody feel included" (Ms. Erin). In another example, Wolfgang, a special education resource teacher explained how he responded when he was told a first-grade student was experiencing bullying from his classmates due to his gender expression (wearing nail polish and head scarves):

> That student prompted the school team, which prompted me, to put together material... We developed some more resources and a plan of action and [a consultant] came and did some PD. We also had one person from his team, [who] went in and actually did some activities with the class around acceptance and that sort of thing. The kids didn't know there was a problem at the time, but we were sort of trying to be pre-emptive, right? Because they were starting to notice things and complain…which then led to starting to get our school involved in the Pink T-shirt Day in April.

A third example came from an educator who was working in an out-of-school setting that partnered with school groups for experiential education opportunities. Elke explained how a school outed a transgender child to the school community:

> A couple of years back we had a student from one of our schools who I believe was Filipino… the child presented as male and was referred to as male by his peers.  At some point the teacher came in and said, "well the office staff pulled me aside and explained to me that actually he was registered as a girl." This was probably the

hardest thing that I ever had to hear or deal with…and I was really at a loss for how to deal with.  What the school decided to do… or what the teacher decided to do at that point was… when that child was not there tell the other children that actually he was a girl. And these were Grade 4s or 5s, not quite old enough to be really, really taunting but old enough to be like something's really weird and I don't know how to interact with this person who I thought was just my friend.  And kind of outed him without his permission and consent or knowledge. (Elke)

In the first two examples, the idea of the "sacrificial lamb" was used as a motivating factor to try and educate and address institutional limitations in the school community that were made more visible by the presence of a trans student. In the last example, it was the school officials who chose to out the student and make them vulnerable to their peers without their "consent or knowledge".

Although the last example feels more obviously harmful than the former two scenarios because we believe that outing an individual without their consent is a violation of privacy and an act of violence, we also suggest that work that is done solely due to the presence of an 'out' transgender, non-binary, or 'apparent' gender-creative student can also cause unintended harms. These harms can result because new training, policies, curricula and practices may then be linked solely to the presence of the newly visible trans person as opposed to being something beneficial for all students. We argue that schools need to "till the soil," (Leonardi 2014) that is, to create spaces that assume gender, sexual, and family diversity is always present and therefore make efforts to recognise and affirm a diverse population of students and families through curriculum, norms, and everyday practices so that ongoing efforts are not "blamed" on or land on particular students more intensely. Schools and educators have a professional and ethical duty to educate themselves and to be affirming of all students whether they know a certain group is represented in the school or not. Maintaining the *status quo* by not: offering professional development, diversifying the curriculum, or creating inclusive policies is harming students now. Waiting for children or families to expose themselves before updating policies and practices not only has the potential to position trans students as sacrificial lambs, but also leaves educators scrambling to support individual students because there are no institutional supports in place. While there are cases where communities have come together to support out trans students (Luecke 2011; Slesaransky-Poe et al. 2013), making changes in response to the presence of a particular individual can potentially subject that person to judgement, exclusion, and hostility in the school and community.

The final subcategory of pedagogies of exposure that emerged from our data was critiques of exposure made by our participants. Several of them recognised the limits and challenges of educating professionals just by exposing them to a student they know or having a single workshop on the topic to expose them to the information. For example, Wolfgang discussed the limits of single day events, "But what I want to happen is for this to move beyond a one-lesson thing on Pink Day in April, to ongoing. Because it's no good the way it is now, at least we've started something, I guess, but it's no good. It doesn't even begin to touch the issues. … It raises awareness with teachers." Here, Wolfgang presents another argument for tilling the soil and allowing professionals and students to have more in-depth and ongoing learning about gender and sexual diversity topics.

Two key informants also spoke about the limitations of exposure. These individuals were in the role of Diversity Mentors and tasked with reducing racism and homophobia in their school districts. Angela explained

> I think that that would be important, but I would frame it as just an awareness session in general. I wouldn't frame it that we are now going to have a new student at our school because we don't announce special needs students in that way; we don't announce a refugee in that way. You know, we're teaching in diverse school communities, so that should include everyone. And it isn't, you know, let's fit this person in but we're creating new spaces for everyone.

In his call to till the soil, Steve M. also emphasised this universal approach to diversity education with specific attention to education and learning around gender diversity:

> To give them some professional develop[ment] on the topic of gender so that they can start to see gender as a spectrum rather than a binary. And to know that those kids are out there and that they won't always know when they're in their class and won't always know if they're struggling, … And that was always my message with teachers, was just to approach it as if you will have these kids in your classes. You may not know who they are, so it needs to be a universal approach for everyone.

Steve M.'s expertise on understanding gender more expansively made him a valuable resource to his colleagues. He is a local expert who provides "lunch and learn" opportunities for teachers throughout his school board as well as workshops for school communities.

Each of these professionals recognised the challenges and limitations of a pedagogy of exposure. They argued for approaches that would enable educators to think about more universal changes in their practice and be affirming of various forms of diversity whether they were aware of their presence in their classroom/school or not. While we argue that using a pedagogy of exposure is not the preferred or the only approach to supporting the professional learning of educators, we recognise that it may have some productive possibility when done ethically, intentionally, and, when appropriate, in partnership with the child or the family seeking more rapid and increased supports and change in their school community. We take up how to balance this approach in the discussion section.

The second theme is the call for conversations around topics related to gender and sexual diversity. In the next section, we explore why conversation is a tool that teachers see as more productive for learning and growth than other forms of professional development and what elements should be present to ensure these conversations are educative and transformational rather than just talk.

### *Culture of conversation*

Throughout the interview data, participants recognised conversation as a necessary tool for teacher learning and growth. Beyond simply talking, and consistent with what the literature

says about teacher learning, participants saw these conversations as interactive, ongoing, and involving critical self-reflection. Woven throughout their reflections was evidence that these "Courageous Conversations" (Singleton 2005) were often difficult to have, that they were "intense," and sometimes "contentious" (Angela, Gertie). Sharing her experiences as an "out queer teacher," Gertie said, "I think that I shook things up a little bit and I know I've had some contentious conversations with some teachers quietly behind closed doors because of remarks I've heard and language that they've used." Gertie's perception, and experience, relates to another theme, which is that conversations can both spark and are integral to ongoing learning and self-reflection. Angela shared,

> I say [Courageous Conversations are] a springboard to further dialogue and discussion and reflection and self-examination. And that they have ongoing discussions with friends and peer groups and family members and colleagues…, so I say to them that this is sort of one snapshot and they will continue their journey.

Conversations that focus specifically on complex issues of social justice, as both the literature and our participants suggest, require continuous engagement and a commitment to building accountability and alliances. Leonardi (2014) found similar trends in teachers' perceptions in her study. In a year-long study on professional learning around gender and sexual diversity, she found that teachers at one middle school called for a "culture of conversation." She explained,

> There was explicit attention, not only on the need to talk, but also on *how* to talk. … staff recognised that issues of gender and sexuality, … diversity in general, were often difficult to talk about. They also recognised that in order to create a 'culture of conversation' school-wide, that is, with students and parents, which they aimed to do, they had to first cultivate this culture within their own staff community (67).

Elements of a "culture of conversation" were similar to Singleton's (2005: 58-65) "four agreements" for having "Courageous Conversations,": staying engaged, speaking your truth, expecting non-closure, and experiencing discomfort. Similarly, a "culture of conversation" is a process in which people "come as they are," in which they acknowledge and work with their biases and assumptions through critical self-reflection, with vulnerability, and alongside of one another. This culture extends beyond one-off conversations that take place in structured workshops, and into daily interactions, curriculum decisions, and teachers' intentionality.

Participants in the study alluded to these components as central. Jayne spoke to theme of "coming as you are." She said,

> I think teachers should have these conversations more often where they say things like, … we're not always going to get it right, and if you're afraid to speak, you're not going to learn.  So let's accept right now that we'll probably make mistakes when we're talking but I'd rather you make mistakes and come to the table knowing that you don't know everything and being ready to learn how to talk better … about these issues.  But if you're paralysed by the fear of offending someone, you're never

going to hear the conversation and you're not going to have the conversation. And I remember as a student myself feeling very intimidated, surrounded by all these equity people, being like I'm going to offend someone by saying the wrong thing.

The space that is created when people engage in these conversations is not an easy one, oftentimes making it difficult to navigate participation. Angela centred the discomfort that arises and the vulnerability involved in staying engaged and in examining and changing her practice. She shared,

So, these experiential learning activities really focus on self-examination of the educator and ones' own biases and assumptions and prejudices and how that's implicated in their teaching. And really to think about what they can change and what they can do on a daily basis to contribute to a more equitable school community or an equitable class community, so what are you doing each day, and to make it intentional. I think it's difficult to understand without experience and you can't, I think it's challenging to open up that topic without being in a place of vulnerability or feeling like you've been moved emotionally.

Angela drew attention to the different lived histories that participants bring to these conversations. In Leonardi's study, staff acknowledged the distinct and consequential ways in which larger societal forces (e.g., heteronormativity, racism) impacted their lives and how those relationships affected their ability, and willingness, to engage. While sharing biases and assumptions served as catharsis for participants owning their privileges, minoritised participants often experienced microaggression (Sue 2010) and shared strong emotional responses. This necessarily complicates the space and even the "agreements" around which participants might have organised; it also speaks to the potential for "productive dissonance" that Watson (2014) noted in her study. We all come to conversations about equity and diversity with different experiences, knowledge, and assumptions. If the intention in schools is to provide safe, affirming spaces for all students, it is likely that we as educators have work to do interrogating our own privileges, understandings of the ways things are, and "unlearning" common sense notions of what counts as normal or normative (Britzman, 1998, Kumashiro, 2000). This involves: deep listening, attributing the best intentions, recognising and owning the important differences between intent and impact as we engage in dialogue, and centring and honouring voices that have long been marginalised in education.

We will often want to hold on to what we "know" rather than move into what Kumashiro calls "crisis" as we learn that we are often complicit in the oppression of others, even our students. Productive dissonance looks like working through those crises together and holding space for the growing pains that we will all experience. Dissonance becomes unproductive when participants close down, choose not to engage, believe that these conversations don't apply to them, or when harmful ways of engagement, such as microaggressions, go unchecked. What is critical to consider then, as Nehring and Fitzsimons (2011) point out, is the "crucial skill" of facilitation that these conversations demand. Learning to have productive and sometimes "contentious" conversations takes practice and modelling.

Working with effective facilitators will not only serve to cultivate productive dialogue and associated practices in professional learning spaces but will support educators to engage in those practices beyond particular conversations, thus creating a culture of conversation throughout their school communities and, importantly, in their classrooms. By working towards a culture of conversation, school communities have the opportunity to weave affirmation for gender, sexual, as well as other forms of diversity into the fabric of their schools. In this way, when students, staff, or families expose aspects of who they are, they are seen as part of that fabric.

**Discussion and Recommendations for Practice**

In this paper, we have examined two approaches to professional learning around gender diversity in schools. The participants in this project contributed to the development of two concepts we present here: pedagogies of exposure and a culture of conversation and their possibilities for transforming the understanding and practice of educators to be more prepared for and affirming of gender diversity in schools.

It is important to understand the limits and possibilities of pedagogies of exposure and when and how to use exposure in ways that support other change processes in school communities. If a school or educator is looking for a starting place to open the conversation around gender and sexual diversity in their school community, starting with some form of exposure can open the door to additional, sustained efforts. However, we believe it should be viewed as one step in establishing a culture of conversation around this and related topics. With regard to professional learning, we argue that exposure is insufficient for educators to be knowledgeable and make meaningful changes in their everyday practices.

Addressing topics that often have not been a part of educators' formal training may make some people vulnerable as they work with and expose to themselves and others their limited knowledge or unconscious biases. We believe this aspect of the pedagogy of exposure is important; making explicit the limitations of one's own knowledge and expertise is a helpful first step to be able to take responsibility for deepening one's own learning and improving professional interactions. Educators should be ready and willing to expose their ignorance on various topics of diversity so that families do not feel compelled to expose their child's identity in order to be a catalyst for change. Educators should also be ready and willing to share their strengths, what they do know, so that they can learn together with colleagues and families to cultivate affirming practices. When schools and educators are proactive in diversifying their curriculum, seeking out resources, and making changes that provide policies and curricula that are inclusive of trans students' needs and identities, schools can become spaces that affirm and support the development of all students and the pressure can be taken off of families and students to lead the way. Schools should be places that offer frames and models for everyone, including trans students, to understand and explore many aspects of their own families and identities. It is important to also note that there may be students who feel ready and willing to be public about their trans identities and this can be a source of strength, empowerment, and identity confirmation for them. When students are given support to fully express themselves on their time and on their own terms, it can be a productive learning opportunity for those around them, but again, this type of exposure should not be relied on as the sole source of information

or the only reason a school community engages in learning and dialogue around gender diversity.

Where a pedagogy of exposure can be a productive starting point, it must be followed by continued exploration, dialogue, and change. There is much strength in a culture of conversation. It encourages open and honest communication. It is both personal and relational -- in that educators both deeply reflect as well as collaborate to make sense--in this case, of gender and sexual diversity and their roles and responsibilities in creating affirming schools. It is context-specific; what is created is organic and situated, focused on the immediate needs and interests of local stakeholders. It allows for people to "come as they are;" for some participants, this might mean engaging in self-reflection and conversation that challenge their deeply held beliefs and assumptions. While some literature suggests that teacher learning increases when the focus of the learning is consistent with their knowledge and beliefs (i.e., "coherence" Desimone, 2009), evidence also suggests that beliefs sometimes follow action (McLaughlin 1987). In the case of building a culture of conversation, in which staff members engage together in reflective and proactive ways to interrogate and change their practices, this is encouraging.

The relational aspects of a culture of conversation must also extend to students and families. Creating affirming schools necessarily involves engaging all stakeholders in conversations and learning about gender and sexual diversity. Doing so will till the soil for trans-affirming policies and practices so that individual students will not be sacrificial lambs bearing the burden of teaching the professionals who are responsible for the learning and development of all students in their care. When it does come to individual trans students, it's crucial to follow their lead, not encouraging social or public transitions unless/if they are ready/desire to come out. There is much diversity within individuals who identify as trans; educators should get to know their students and respond to individual needs and requests. While some trans students and families are clear on those needs, others might appreciate support.

Creating a culture of conversation around gender and sexual diversity takes effort and, importantly, should be initiated regardless of whether trans students make themselves known in your community. School administrators are key to this process; organising intentional time and space for deep, continuing, and connected conversation is essential. It should be noted, however, that administrators have likely had little support around topics of gender or sexuality and/ or creating cultures that embrace vulnerability and on-going dialogue (Leonardi and Staley 2017). Teachers and administrators need opportunities to practice engaging in and leading Courageous Conversations so that they are prepared to support their school communities toward a culture of conversation.

This support must start in principal and teacher licensure programmes. Universities and other educator preparation programmes should be sure to integrate topics related to gender and sexual diversity in coursework: professionals need vocabulary, deep respect for diversity, and practice discussing these topics. Because this has often not been the case -- until very recently and in only isolated pockets -- schools should reach out for outside expertise when needed and universities should seek to establish and deepen partnerships to offer that support.

**Conclusions**

There is a body of research on professional learning around social justice and diversity issues that we build on here with the intention of encouraging more schools to change the way they approach the education and development of their staff. We build on this knowledge base by focusing on concepts of exposure and conversation and presenting key aspects of each that should be addressed in order to promote more affirming and inclusive school environments for all students, and trans students in particular. We know that trans students are among the most vulnerable populations in school communities and experience disproportionately higher rates of bullying and harassment, truancy, suspension, and dropping out. If schools are serious about improving their school climates, these students are like canaries in the coal mine. They are sounding the alarm about toxic elements in the school community and will be most sensitive to early changes and efforts to promote respect and affirmation for gender diversity and students' identities writ large.

We conclude with three reminders based on the analysis of interviews with participants in this study paired with the scholarship on professional learning:

(1) Pedagogies of exposure are limited in impact, but can be a helpful place to start when done ethically, intentionally, and in partnership with trans individuals and communities.
(2) School administrators and educator preparation programmes must till the soil by creating cultures of conversation around topics of gender and sexual diversity.
(3) Meaningful and sustained change -- individual and institutional -- will not come through didactic presentations. Collective, ongoing interaction built upon critical self-reflection and productive dissent must be a part of the change process.

We advocate for a shift away from traditional stand and deliver formal professional development programmes often characterised by binders, checklists, and data-driven accountability. We want to help educators get into the practice of continuous critical self-reflection, engaging in productive dissent, and building cultures of conversation in order to think beyond the trans child as the site of the problem and focus the examination back on transforming school environments into spaces that recognise and celebrate creativity and diversity of all kinds.

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[1] In keeping with the language in the call for this special issue, "We use the term 'trans' as a way to acknowledge, describe, and include the multiplicity of trans experiences, including, but not limited to, transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, and non-binary" (Gilbert & Sinclair-Palm, 2017).

[2] The research team was comprised of Elizabeth J. Meyer, Anika Tilland-Stafford, and Lee Airton. Bethy Leonardi contributed to the analysis and writing of this article using the data collected by the aforementioned team members.

[3] The methods for this project are explained in detail in a prior publication (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford, & L. Airton 2016)

[4] Day of Pink is a national effort in Canadian schools to address bullying, homophobia, and transphobia. More information is available at: http://dayofpink.org/