Gender Non-conformity in Elementary Schools: Learning from the Experiences of Children who do not Conform to Gender Stereotypes

by

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Abstract

This qualitative research study seeks to understand the educational experiences of elementary aged children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. The study explores the educational experiences of three children who have all identified as transgender while in elementary school. The study also embeds the experiences of the caregivers as they navigate through the educational system. All participants are from the Edmonton, Alberta, Canada area, and all documents are relevant to either the Edmonton or Alberta teaching contexts. Using a case study approach, the researcher first used each family's experience as a separate case and then brought the experiences together to represent a collective case. The data collected consisted of interviews, observation notes, personal narratives and educational documents. The data collected indicates that conceptualizing gender along the binary of male and female does not allow for the creation of inclusive educational environments for students who do not conform to this binary. Therefore it is necessary to expand the understanding of gender to create a new normativity that accommodates gender diversity. In order to create inclusive educational environments which accommodate gender diversity, those within the educational environments must recognize gender beyond the binary of male/female. To be able to break away from the dominant conceptualizations of gender, intentional support for students, caregivers and teachers must occur. Those close to the children who are part of this study have indicated that the challenges they have encountered with regard to understanding gender differently have created opportunities for significant, positive growth and change.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Alison Jaye Lewis. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board.

Project Name: Gender non-conformity in elementary schools: Learning from the experiences of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes

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Dedication

For my children and grandchildren:

Ashley, Kelsey, Kate, Mackenzie, Carsyn and Crosby.

May you always remember:

Today you are you! That is truer than true! There is no one alive who is you-er than you.
(Dr. Seuss, 1959, n.p.)

And may you always live your truth.

Acknowledgement

I am forever grateful to the families who opened their doors and their lives to me in order to conduct this research. I suspected when I chose my topic that it might be a little difficult to find families who would want to engage in this research. And I was right. However, the families I worked with were very eager to participate. I have felt so very privileged to work with each and every one of them. After reading the data presentation, one of the mothers wrote to me, "I am so proud to be part of this work. You have successfully given us a voice."

I share her comment only to preface the following idea:

This is a collaborative work. The different voices you read may have been penned by me, but together they truly represent the collective voice of the participants. Without their willingness to speak their truths, some of which are very personal, this work could not exist. And therefore, I am indebted to each of the parents and the children who participated in this research.

The writing of this dissertation has been one of the most fulfilling and challenging academic experiences I have faced. Without Dr. André P. Grace, my supervisor, it would have been even more challenging. Dr. Grace provided encouragement, advice, wisdom, clarity and patience, and he seemed to intuitively know when each was needed. I am sincerely grateful.

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Introduction

A Word About Language and Choice

Throughout my research, you will notice I use words that are sometimes debated within academia. I have endeavoured to explain the choice of language within the body of this text, but I wish to preface my research with a general explanation of the choice of language. Words, used as identifiers, change as we learn new words that can create open spaces that allow for movement as opposed to confinement within identification. For instance, steward and stewardess have been replaced by the identifier of flight attendant to be inclusive of all possible genders within the role. Although I have endeavoured to choose words to allow for open spaces, I have also endeavoured to choose words that are commonly understood by my prospective audience. After spending many years in public education, I have come to know some of the words and phrases that are commonly used by teachers when grappling with issues of gender in the classroom. I have adopted many of these words and phrases within my research to help support the accessibility of my research. I recognize the power of language, and I have made every effort to be respectful with the language choices that I have made. I will discuss this further as the thesis unfolds in relation to my resistance to the term gender variant and other language with particular connotations when it comes to discussing gender.

My Motivation: A Personal and Professional Narrative

As a researcher who has roots in feminist poststructuralism, my own positioning is key to the development of my research question and it is also key to

how others will be able to hear my research ideas and findings (Davies, 1999; Lather & Smithies, 1997). As such, I offer the following understandings of me as researcher.

I have been an educator for 28 years and have over 22 years of classroom teaching experience. Much of my teaching has focused on elementary education, and most of my teaching experience has been with children who are marginalized due to their specific educational needs that have included emotional and behavioural disorders as well as learning disabilities. During my 12th year of teaching, I began identifying as a queer person. This challenging period of my life involved the redefining of self as I had been entrenched in a heteronormative world with its hegemonic constructions of womanhood and parenthood. Living as a heterosexual wife and mother of three daughters, my roles were easily recognizable in our culture. Simply put, I fit the stereotype of being a woman.

Throughout this dissertation the word stereotype will be used. I have chosen to use the word for several reasons. The word is easily understood to represent a normative conception of constructs such as womanhood or gender, and it has always been important to me that my writing remain accessible to the audience it is intended for, which is K-6 teachers. The second reason for choosing the word stereotype is that the word is consistent with social constructionism (Outhwaite, 2006), which will be discussed later as a primary methodology being used within the research. The word stereotype is used to represent the normative ways of performing gender which are socially constructed and deemed appropriate within our society (Butler, 2004). The third reason for

choosing the word stereotype is because it aligns with understandings of stereotype knowledge and stereotype flexibility with regard to gender (Banse, Gawronski, Rebetez, Gutt & Morton, 2010). Gender stereotype knowledge is the information about gender that is gathered at a young age and is often considered resistant to change. Such things as the colour blue belongs to boys while pink belongs to girls would be gender stereotype knowledge. Gender stereotype flexibility is acquiring the understanding that the information gathered about gender may in fact be wrong. Learning that colours are genderless would be associated with gender stereotype flexibility. In the study by Banse and colleagues (2010), it was found that gender stereotype knowledge continues to increase as children get older and that the ability for children to adopt stereotype flexibility also increases as the children age. This would mean that children should be accepting of gender non-conformity; however, research has found that children have a lack of tolerance for gender differences (Egale 2012; Giordano, 2013; Grace, 2006; Grace & Wells, 2004; Renold, 2006; Slesaransky-Poe, Ruzzi, Dimedio & Stanley, 2013), which grows out of spontaneous gender stereotyping. When a child is presented with diverse understandings of gender meant to disrupt stereotype knowledge, stereotype flexibility becomes engaged (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013).

Going back to my story, as a queer individual, I was no longer fitting the stereotypes that were expected of me. I was no longer performing gender in ways deemed appropriate by my social surroundings. Moreover, the people in my surroundings did not have gender stereotype flexibility to allow the differences I

was presenting. I had spent my life living within the majority and conforming to many of the stereotypical expectations of being an adult female, which included heterosexual marriage, giving birth to children and entering into the acceptable career path of being a schoolteacher. I no longer fit in that community and yet, in the Edmonton gay community, I also found myself in a minority position where very few women performed gender in a stereotypical female manner. More succinctly put, I felt too feminine for the community. Butler (1993b) posits that gender is a performance and that the reality of gender is known culturally through the performance. Butler not only suggests that gender is performative, but also that "it is a compulsory performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment and violence" (p. 315). I continued to perform my gender in a gender-typical way—wearing makeup, dresses, and heels and keeping my hair long—and I would go out in the gay community and recognize that I did not fit in because I did not fit the expected gay woman stereotype. I felt ostracized, as Butler suggests happens, but I felt ostracized from both the gay and the straight communities because I did not perform as expected for either community.

Within a couple of years, the hair was cut short, the dresses were traded for cargo pants, and the heels were traded for hikers in my effort to belong. Virginia Satir (1992) suggests that the perception of wholeness is associated with how we view our value in society. It was not long before I began to see that I was masquerading in an effort to feel valued and whole. I had become comfortable with my queer identity, and now I had to be more authentically me within that

identity. As I grew into this authenticity, my dresses were hung next to the cargo pants, my heels and hikers were placed side by side in my closet, and my hair looked however I wanted my hair to look. It was through this experience that I realized that the way we come to express our gender is embodied and embedded in matters of being, becoming, and belonging as our authentic selves (Grace, 2006).

As I struggled with learning how to express myself genuinely in my queer identity (which I will discuss later), I became more aware of the people around me and how they performed their gender. I started observing these gendered performances. Since my world at that time was comprised mainly of adults, I was focused on observing and theorizing about gender performance in adulthood. It was not until I received a phone call from a teacher in central Alberta that I became acutely aware of the difficulties children might experience if they do not conform to gender stereotypes and regularly demonstrate this conformation by behaving and expressing themselves following age appropriate gender expectations. Ms. Culbert told me:

> She swaggered in to her first day of grade three in her Chicago Bulls' muscle shirt. Her ball cap was turned slightly to the side. Her head was shaved to a brushcut. Her black hightops were peeking out from under her oversized, baggy, low riding jeans. (C. Culbert, personal communication, December 5, 2006)

Ms. Culbert was calling because she did not know how to support this student who was not conforming to the gender stereotypes shaping societal

expectations around appearance and roles for little girls. Our society has constructed little girls around dolls and teddy bears, around long hair and dresses, around softness in interactions with others and the colour pink. Little boys have been constructed by our society around roughness and toughness, around tanks and trucks, around 'big boys don't cry' and the colour blue. The age old Mother Goose nursery rhyme speaks to the differences between boys and girls:

What are little boys made of?

Snips and snails, and puppy dogs' tails.

That's what little boys are made of!

What are little girls made of?

Sugar and spice and all things nice.

That's what little girls are made of!

The student in Ms. Culbert's class was being criticized and treated as an outsider by both the girls and the boys in the classroom, and the teacher did not know how to break down the barriers that this student was experiencing in order to create an inclusive classroom community. She did not know how to engage a sense of gender stereotype flexibility within her classroom. After the conversation with Ms. Culbert, I could not shake the thought of this young girl with her swagger and her muscle shirt sitting on the sidelines of life. Subsequently, I knew the direction that my doctoral studies would take.

Before I continue with my narrative here, I need to situate myself with the label 'queer' that I started using as an identifier for myself. For years I had fought the notion of labelling throughout my work as a special education teacher due to

the recognition that labels provided me with very little support for my teaching or for student learning. Labels provided a method for funding discussions in special education, but they did not provide accurate information on the student. For example, a student diagnosed with bipolar disorder was so much more than a bipolar student. Bipolar disorder has so many facets and variables that trying to represent a student with the label did not provide useful information and took away the key component that needed to be remembered in my classroom: above all else, the student was a student. This belief was well situated in me and although the forum may have changed from special education to self-identification, the belief was just as strong. This very belief is captured in the naming of my thesis. A common phrase used to refer to people who do not conform to gender stereotypes is gender variant (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2010). The phrase gender variant children is commonly used as an identifier in health and other related disciplines. I could write, throughout this thesis, about gender variant children. However, from my positioning, when an adjective is placed in front of the noun, I believe it is the adjective that gives life to the noun. For instance, when we talk about an apple we have an idea of the apple but when we talk about a shiny, red, juicy apple the apple becomes more vibrant and we have provided everyone with a richer description of the apple. To use an example that is perhaps more pertinent to the point I am making, in special education, we will often hear about the autistic child. This positions autism, and all of the clinical assumptions that come along with the disorder, in a dominant position in describing a child affected by characteristics of autism. You can see how

phrasing may change the assumptions we make when we talk about the autistic child versus the child affected by characteristics of autism. I do not want the adjective to be the focus of the noun when we are talking about children. I want the children to remain the focus of this study and it is due to this desire, I have chosen to write about *children who do not conform to gender stereotypes*, positioning the word *children* in the forefront. I will honour the language of others by using their terminology as I discuss this group of children through their lenses. However, my own wording will position the child before the descriptive categories. As discussed earlier, language is important. It may appear to be a game with words where modifiers are simply moved around and yet for me, as the writer, the positioning of words has been very important in my work and in my life. I recognize that my choice of language here is not consistent with some of the literature in academia, but the term gender non-conformity is certainly not absent from the literature. It is not meaning that changes but rather the reordering of the words provides an opportunity for the reader to focus on the child as opposed to the descriptor. Ehrensaft (2011) describes gender non-conforming children as "children who do not abide by the prescribed gender norms of their culture" (p. 9). In a study of the parental experiences of raising children who do not conform to gender stereotypes, Hill and Menvielle (2009) use both gender non-conformity and gender variant to discuss the subjects of the study. In reflections on the naming of this population, the Cuban Gender Team chooses gender nonconformity "as it has no implications of abnormality or disturbance" (WPATH, 2013, p. 89). When I talk about my research, the idea of conformity to

gender stereotypes is a common idea and one that most people can readily grasp because it centers on norms and acceptability in terms of being and behaving in the world. Our society recognizes gender stereotypes in many ways such as the way boys and girls are expected to dress and play, and in the gentleness of girls and the roughness of boys. I was careful about the phrasing when I first interacted with the parents of the children involved in my study. I wanted them to know that my choice of phrasing was deliberate in an effort to be respectful. I explained that for me, using the phrase *children who do not conform to gender stereotypes*, is about using a language that does not seek to pathologize but simply seeks to describe and to recognize their children first and foremost as children before recognizing them by their descriptive factors. The language is not burdened with clinical assumptions around disorder but rather it is a language of comfort. The phrase *children who do not conform to gender stereotypes* is not just an attempt to reject labelling but it is also an attempt to use language that creates comfort for those who will interact with this research. Each of the mothers I interviewed agreed that the phrasing was respectful of children because it left room for the child to choose his or her own identifier.

Another identifier that is commonly used is transgender child. However, it is important to recognize that my choice of phrasing is deliberate in that the children who become involved in my study may or may not identify as transgender. The literature defines a transgender child as one whose assigned gender at birth does not match the gender they wish to affirm and live (Ehrensaft, 2011; Luecke, 2011). Although children who do not conform to gender

stereotypes may eventually be identified as transgender (Ehrensaft, 2011; Luecke, 2011; Vanderburgh, 2009), "the vast majority of gender-variant children are not transgender; they are just gender-nonconforming" (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 3). Brill and Pepper demonstrate the separation that I am seeking when I identify the children in this study as ones who do conform to gender stereotypes. By utilizing the word 'just' before the words 'gender-nonconforming', Brill and Pepper have recognized that some students simply do not conform to gender stereotypes and yet they are not necessarily part of a group identified as transgender. When seeking research participants, I did not know if the children I would be working with would be transgender or would be gender non-conforming. For the purpose of this study, it was irrelevant. The label transgender does not add support to understanding the children who would be part of this study. For the purpose of this study, the children were identified by their performance of gender being outside of societal expectations for their biological gender, which may or may not mean they identify as transgender.

There are many ways that children who do not conform to gender stereotypes can be named in society (Ehrensaft, 2011; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010; Vanderburgh, 2009). "Language to describe gender variant identities is continually changing and keeping track can be challenging" (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010, p. 3). Ehrensaft (2011) uses 'gender creative' and 'gender nonconforming' as ways of naming children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. Gender creative appeals to me because it seemingly lacks the negative connotations that come along with many of the other ways of naming.

The term gender creative also allows for creativity within the expected boxes of gender, as gender creative is about colouring outside of the lines of gender expectations to recognize the many possibilities of gender expression. Ehrensaft (2011, 2012) also categorizes children who do not conform to gender stereotypes according to other characteristics of the child's gender expression by using categories such as Gender Taurus for someone who recognizes themselves as half boy/half girl or Gender Smoothie for someone who recognizes themselves as a mix of all aspects of gender to reach a blended sense of the gendered self. These and other such categorizations that Ehrensaft (2011) creates are an attempt to avoid "new ill-fitting boxes" (p. 10) that do not allow for an individual's uniqueness. Although Ehrensaft (2012) recognizes her categorizations as incomplete, and that they will likely change as she furthers her work as a gender specialist, the categorizations remain just that – categorizations. The boxes may not be ill-fitting, but they remain labelled boxes. My choice to name these children as children who do not conform to gender stereotypes is not meant to dismiss the work of others or to privilege my particular way of naming. The choice I have made in naming these children is wrapped up in my beliefs about the accessibility of language and in my history and worldview around labelling and privileging children above the label.

Now let me continue with my narrative. Although I had fought labelling in my professional life, I really had not paid close attention to it in my personal life. And now, all of a sudden, I was confronted with the labelling dilemma when I fell in love with a woman. I tried defying labels for a while by simply saying I was in

love with a woman, but people insisted that if I was in a relationship with a woman, then I was either lesbian or bi-sexual. As people attempted to figure out which label fit me, I was presented with a choice that emphasized a gender binary. Pansexuality, a label that rejects the gender binary and affirms that sexual attraction can be felt toward people of all gender identities, was not even considered, as it is not widely understood. Although labelling did not fit for me, I believed that without a label I appeared to be in the closet. Therefore I started using *queer* as a label for myself. Castells (1997) discusses the use of the word queer in relation to resistance identity. Sedgwick (1993) posits that the binary oppositions associated with heteronormative understandings of gender and sexual orientation limit freedom so she uses the word queer instead as a way to represent the fluidity of these categories.

> Queer can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made, (or can't be made) to signify monolithically. ... One possible corollary: that what it takes – all it takes – to make the description 'queer' a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person. (Sedgwick, 1993, pp. 7-8)

For me, using the label queer resists the known and understood boxes of gender and sexual orientation. Queer as a fluid descriptor rejects the traditional stories in order to accept an openness and limitlessness to other possible stories. Thus queer creates space and place for the diversity and complexity of sexual and

gender differences. Queer not only describes how I am in the world, but it is also allows for a "shifting and changing way of knowing the world" (Grace, Hill, Johnson & Lewis, 2004, p. 303). Therefore, identifying as queer is both a resistance of fixed identity and recognition that knowledge is never complete because certitude and finiteness are constructs that do not belong in a shifting and changing world (Grace et al., 2004). Identifying as queer therefore fits with my roots in feminist poststructuralism as well as social constructionism, which will be discussed later.

One of the most difficult things I have experienced as a queer teacher is the silencing. I was silenced by shame when the principal did not want the community to know there was a queer teacher on staff. I was silenced by fear when colleagues made homophobic remarks in the staffroom and I cringed, yet said nothing. I was silenced by disappointment when the librarian did not want to order queer inclusive fiction for the library. I was silenced by anger when a parent defended his son's homophobia by stating that it was "understandable." A poem by Uma Narayan (1988)—a scholar who studies working through difficulties exposed by difference—beautifully discusses the silencing:

It is so often easier not to speak
We draw behind the protective wall
Of silence, to regain our poise
To show our pain to you
Seems a second humiliation
And there is always the dread

Of seeing incomprehension invade your eyes

Or of hearing you attempt comfort

With unbearable remarks

About how we are over-reacting

And would be better off

If we did not let these incidents affect us

To such a great extent. (pp.101–102)

While I had initially thought that I would shape my doctoral program around researching ways of erasing the silencing experienced by so many Alberta teachers, the conversation with Ms. Culbert, the teacher from central Alberta who was struggling to support her student, motivated me to move in a new direction. I now wanted to focus on elementary-aged children who are silenced by differences in gender identity and expression. I felt drawn toward researching gender non-conformity and ways of creating supportive, inclusive school environments for these children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. Hooks (1994) reminds us that "students from marginalized groups enter classrooms within institutions where their voices have been neither heard nor welcomed" (pp. 83–84). Gender typing, the process of becoming enculturated into a specific gender culture, supports the child's knowing of gender stereotype knowledge (Banse, Gawronski, Rebetez, Gutt & Morton, 2010; Santrock, 2005). Since "gender perceptions and expectations take root at an early age" (Nelson, 2011, p. viii), students who do not conform to gender stereotypes can experience marginalization within schools from the day they start school. These students are silenced by the

heteronormative, genderist and sexist culture that speaks so loudly, and they are also silenced by their age and their inability to speak out for themselves in a way that would help create positive change (Brill & Pepper, 2008; MacNaughton, 2000; Mallon & Decrescenzo, 2009). Depression and other associated conditions may affect children who do not conform to gender stereotypes (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2011, 2012; Giordano, 2013; Lev, 2004; Mallon & Decrescenzo, 2009; Roberts, Rosario, Slopen, Calzo & Austin, 2013). Mallon and Decrescenzo (2009) posit that "systemic reactions – those of parents, schools, churches, peer groups, etc. – play [a role] in contributing to the presenting depression" (p. 79). They go on to contest that when systems change, so can the depression and other associated conditions. Working with children and working marginalized populations had always been the dynamic intersection of my work in public education, so this research direction fit for me.

My Research Questions

The basis for my research questions is explored in the literature review on gender, which includes discussion of the use of the male-female gender binary to delineate and maintain regulatory power. Through this research, I seek to explore gender as a category with infinite positions. If gender were conceptualized as infinite, I wonder how we might imagine new possibilities of acceptance of self and others. I want to know what can possibly happen if we viewed gender as gender infinite as opposed to the traditional views of gender that use regulatory powers to create binaries including man/woman, masculine/feminine, and boy/girl. I want to know if the inclusion of infinite with gender can provide us

with pedagogical positions to imagine other possibilities on how to best meet the needs of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

"The simplest questions are the most profound" (Bach, 1977, p. 47). I do not want to complicate my research question. "Stories lived and told educate the self and others" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42). I believe that we learn much from stories. Therefore my main research question is: What are the matters of context, relationship and attitudes that shape the educational experiences and stories of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes?

To help guide the exploration of this question, I asked these corollary questions:

1. How do children story gender?
2. How do children mediate living between gender conformity and gender non-conformity?
3. How do caregivers of children who do not conform to gender sterotypes experience educational environments in terms of degrees of inclusiveness, responsivenes and support?
4. How can an understanding of gender as *gender infinite* create opportunities for acceptance and inclusivity?
5. How might alternative classroom and school environments be imagined that would create safe, caring, supportive, and inclusive communities for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes?

Creating Acceptance in Early Years – The Possibility for Greater Impact

It should first be noted that there has been an increase in the number of clinical referrals for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes (Ehrensaft, 2013; Zucker, 2008), which also suggests that the number of children who comprise a gender minority in schooling will become more apparent. At present, it is estimated that approximately 10% of all children do not conform to gender stereotypes to the degree they would be considered at-risk for emotional and physical bullying (Roberts, Rosario, Slopen, Calzo & Austin, 2013). Schools must therefore be responsive to the needs of this population. Saufler and Gagne found that bullying among primary aged children can lead to increasingly more violent behaviour as the bully ages (as cited in Bullock, 2002). Parents of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes often seek support in order to explore the "social ramifications of gender non-conformity that may center on peers and school life or family life" (Menvielle, 2012, p. 357). The increase in bullying and emotional distress has been documented as a factor in the suicide of gender non-conforming youth (Friedmam, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr & Sites, 2006; Goldberg & Adriano, 2008). Giordano (2013) states, "[G]ender variance is invariably connected with suffering" (p. 142). Throughout the literature, there is strong recognition that children suffer when their birth gender is not aligned with their own sense of gender. If acceptance for gender non-conformity can be developed in the early years, this early acceptance can positively impact the later years (Brill & Pepper, 2008).

My research is not attempting to link children who do not conform to gender stereotypes with the general LGBTQ population. However, it is important to recognize that gender non-conforming children can be thought of as queer as defined by Sedgwick (1993) who recognizes limits within the heteronormative understandings of gender. Heteronormative understandings of gender easily recognize what it means to be a boy or a girl and when children do not express their gendered beings within the limits of these understandings, the label queer becomes one that could fit. With the recognition of the effects of bullying and emotional distress on youth who do not conform to gender stereotypes, creating acceptance in elementary schools for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes becomes vital.

A greater understanding of the educational experiences of elementary students who do not conform to gender stereotypes can open spaces for change. Learning how gender typical roles are confirmed or denied in our educational environments can support educational personnel and others to recognize ways to move beyond gender expectations in order to allow for freedom in gender performance (MacNaughton, 2000). Students who do not conform to expected stereotypes of gender and sexuality have found difficulty fitting into our educational environments (Egale, 2011; Grace, 2006, 2007; Grace & Benson 2000). Schools have always been places of gender identity instruction, some of which is intentional and some of which is unintentional, and this instruction has a heteronormative bias (Bryan, 2013). This bias leaves little room to find inclusive

educational spaces for those who do not fit the heteronormative expressions of gender.

Over the past 15 years, the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) has demonstrated its commitment to inclusivity and protection of all students and staff by creating supportive and protective policies for sexual and gender minorities. Today, both sexual orientation and gender identity are included in the *Code of Professional Conduct* (ATA, 2003) and the *Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers* (ATA, 2004) as protected ground of discrimination. As well, the ATA, has called on "Alberta school boards to develop district policies that specifically address the health and safety of sexual minority and gender-variant students, as well as those who are perceived as such" (ATA, 2006, Section 18.B.21). In 2004, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF) passed policy on anti-homophobia and anti-heterosexism that "advocates for educational systems that are safe, welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities" (CTF, 2004, Section 1). This policy states that "schools and school systems must adopt anti-homophobia and anti-heterosexism policies recognizing that homophobia plays an integral role in bullying and harassment in school" (CTF, 2004, Section 4.5). Even with the lead from the Alberta Teacher's Association and the Canadian Teachers' Federation, to date the Alberta School Board Association has not provided a policy position to Alberta school boards to encourage the writing of specific policy to meet the needs of sexual and gender minorities. Although school board policies on bullying often recognize that biases can occur related to gender and gender identity, this

awareness has not always been enough to create safety for these children (Brill & Pepper, 2008). This has created a current reality where most school boards in Alberta lack policy which specifically supports children who do not conform to sexual and gender stereotypes.

Still, change is on the horizon. In 2011, the Edmonton Public School Board created a policy specific to sexual orientation and gender identity, recognizing that there is a need to provide protection and support for students of sexual and gender minorities and that this protection and support goes beyond the general bullying statements. The regulation to support this policy followed shortly thereafter in 2012. The regulation stipulates responsibilities for leadership, staff, professional learning, teaching and learning resources and school-community partnerships as well as providing recommended practices that are supportive of alternative gender expressions and gender identities. Moves in Edmonton Public School Board parallel moves in other jurisdictions such as the Greater Victoria School District as they dealt with safety issues for students who identify as part of a sexual or gender minority. The rationale for the Greater Victoria School District's recommendations noted:

> [S]tudents and other school community members identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, intersex, queer, or questioning (LGBTTIQQ) face a unique set of challenges within our schools and communities. Individuals who are dealing with or are perceived to be dealing with issues of gender identity, gender expression, intersexuality or sexual orientation, as well as their families, are frequently the targets of

> homophobic, transphobic, or heterosexist behaviors. This often results in a struggle with a variety of profound social consequences including discrimination, harassment, physical and sexual violence, social and emotional isolation, substance abuse, homelessness, school truancy and drop- out, self-harm and suicide. (Greater Victoria School District, 2004, p.3)

This statement clearly identifies why general bullying policies are not enough to protect sexual and gender minority students. It is recognized in the research that social ostracism is a result of behaviour that situates a child outside of the gender role expectations (Steensma et al., 2014). Therefore, students who are recognized as outside of the norm for gender identity require more direct support than bullying policies can provide. Steensma and colleagues (2014) go on to suggest that it is likely important for teachers and other school personnel to receive training in strategies to reduce social ostracism and social isolation.

As school boards begin to recognize the need for protective and supportive policy and practice for students who are members of sexual and gender minorities, it will be important to remind them that the change must start in elementary schools. When young children are given the opportunity to learn about and create acceptance of gender variance, this acceptance can lead to more accepting and inclusive educational environments throughout the rest of schooling (Banse, Gawronski, Rebetez, Gutt & Morton, 2010; Brill & Pepper, 2008). Although it is not a focus of my study, it is recognized that creating a better understanding and acceptance of gender non-conformity in elementary years can potentially create a

ripple effect in the inclusivity within educational environments for queer students in later school years. Most prepubertal children who do not conform to gender stereotypes and are subsequently diagnosed through the DSM5 with Gender Dysphoria do not grow up to be transgender but are more likely to identify as gay or lesbian (Forcier & Haddad, 2013; WPATH, 2013). However, for the purpose of this research, the relationship between these populations is one based on gender expressions that differ from the norm and the potential ripple effect is based on the knowledge that attitudes and behaviours formed in elementary school serve to inform the attitudes and behaviours of adolescents in later years of schooling (Brill & Pepper, 2008). If attitudes of inclusivity and acceptance can be created early on in a child's life, these attitudes will inform the child when questions of difference come up in later years.

To date, there is little known about the school experiences of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes (Greytak, Kosciw & Boesen, 2013). Those in power – those in position to create policy and to reform practice – can benefit by hearing the stories of these young children and their caregivers. It is through our understanding of the experiences of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes that disposition toward these children may be impacted.

Gender: A Review of the Literature

For the purpose of the dissertation, a portion of the literature review is included in this section, while the full literature review is woven throughout the entire dissertation. As Locke, Spirduso & Silverman (2000) note:

> In some cases, the examination of supporting literature may best be appended or woven into another section of the proposal. … [T]he writer's task is to employ the research literature artfully to support and explain the choices made for this study. (p. 69)

Although gender is explored throughout the dissertation, this section of the dissertation allows a more focused exploration of gender.

Introducing Gender in the Context of this Research

When the primary caregivers and a nervous yet excited 5-year old walk into school on the first day of kindergarten, there is a certain trepidation coupled with exhilaration as the family holds hands tightly while thinking of possibilities for the child's future. When the caregivers leave that child in the care of the school, they are optimistic that the system and the teachers will encourage the child's hopes and dreams, facilitating his or her growth and learning. Sometimes, that anxious yet exuberant 5-year old does not adhere to typical, expected gender roles and subsequently finds himself or herself ostracized by the school's society (Egale 2012; Giordano, 2013; Grace 2006; Grace & Wells, 2004; Renold, 2006; Slesaransky-Poe, Ruzzi, Dimedio & Stanley, 2013). What happens then to the child's hopes and dreams? How does this child survive and thrive amid the marginalization and disenfranchisement that occur when he or she does not engage in the hegemonic performances of gender that culturally bind individuals to fit heteronormative expectations and limit their ways of identifying and expressing themselves? Children are not only aware of the gender discourses

around them, but they also use these gender discourses to create meaning about themselves and others.

> It is clear that young children take an active part in the social construction of gender. Not only do children understand gender discourses, but they are also capable of accessing them in order to regulate gender in their everyday lives. Young children and the gender discourses they take part in are not determined exclusively by biological factors, nor are they only a consequence of being socialized into particular ways of being; rather they are a result of how children make sense of and enact gender discourses every day. (Blaise, 2005, p.183)

Teachers and the educational environment play a considerable role in supporting the development of students' positive self-identities. Indeed, "schooling provides the contexts through which students' identities are constructed, refined, resisted, and altered" (Letts, 1999, p. 106), leaving educators in "a unique position to provide accurate information and facilitate thoughtful conversations about all the different aspects of self that children bring in to school every single day" (Bryan, 2012, p. 7). Besides creating space for all students to explore their sense of self , it is also known that educators are integral in creating supportive schools for LGBT youth (Greytak, Kosciw & Boesen, 2013). Indeed, it is often the schools that provide space for students to explore a sense of self that may not be aligned with what they have been learning at home. What is learned and taught at home will often replicate the home environment, perpetuating a heteronormative stance that sees gender in traditional ways. The school, however,

is an environment that can and should introduce alternatives to these traditional views. "A child's experience at school can significantly enhance or undermine their sense of self" (Brill & Pepper, 2008). When teachers encourage flexibility in gender role expectations, all children have the opportunity to build a strong sense of self and to feel a sense of belonging (Couchenour & Chrisman, 2011). This sense of self and belonging can be critical to a student's path through life. Moya (2006) stated that a student's perceived identity can affect school placement, friend groups, and/or teacher expectations which, in turn, "can have major consequences for the opportunities a person will have over the course of her life" (p.96).

Students need to have a space where it is safe to be, become and belong as their authentic selves (Grace, 2006). When there is a suspected problem within schools, there are generally two common ways to categorize responses: either the student is the problem or the problem is the problem. There is much written in both the field of education and the field of therapeutic practice to support the idea that the problem must be recognized as the problem as opposed to the person being the problem (Kerr & Nelson, 2006; Mercer & Mercer, 2005; Parry & Doan, 1994; White & Epston, 1990; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996). When we view the student as the problem, we hear stories such as the one of Taylor Pugh, the 4 year old student in Texas who was suspended because his long hair violated the dress code even though young girls were allowed long hair (Nelson, 2011). Students who do not fit into gender role expectations require support in order to create identities of self they can embrace and yet the need for support does not

make the student the problem. The problem is that gender identity that is outside of societal expectations, is often met by attempts to influence or change the emerging gender performances and these attempts can have long-term negative impacts on children (Ehrensaft, 2011; Meyer, 2010; Wilchins, 2004). Traditionally, the child who does not conform to gender stereotypes has been considered the problem (Ehrensaft, 2007; Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2009) and as long as the child who does not conform to gender expectations remains addressed as the problem, there is little support for the development of a positive self-identity.

There is much controversy regarding how gender identities that are outside of the norm are taken up within the health community. The use of Gender Identity Disorder (GID) has recently been replaced with Gender Dysphoria within the fifth and newest revision of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA, 2013). Since the DSM5 is a new publication, much of the literature written to date on gender non-conformity and children references GID as opposed to Gender Dysphoria. As such, I will use both terms. The term disorder, when found in the DSM, is recognized to be an ailment of the mind. The new diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria attempts to move away from the label of disorder to a recognition of discontent with the gender assigned at birth. Yet, Gender Dysphoria remains a diagnosis in the authoritative book on mental disorders. Any such diagnosis continues to recognize the child as the problem by pathologizing gender expressions that are not aligned with the natal gender. Ehrensaft (2011) stated that a diagnosis of GID "pathologizes what is normal and puts our gender-

nonconforming children in harm's way" (p. 99). There is a strong recommendation and movement to recognize that it is inappropriate to label children and adults with a psychological disorder due to gender variance and gender non-conforming behavior (CPATH, 2010; Ehrensaft, 2011; Vanderburgh, 2009; WPATH 2013). The World Professional Association for Transgender Health recognizes that a primary argument for the removal of GID from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders is that GID should not be viewed as a mental disease or disorder (WPATH, 2010). GID reform advocates call for "medical professions to affirm that difference is not disease, nonconformity is not pathology, and uniqueness is not illness" (GID Reform Advocates, n.d., ¶ 6). To even view some gender non-conforming behaviour as unique seems antiquated when we look at what has been labeled as gender non-conforming. Although there is still a perceived uniqueness to little boys engaging in typical female roles, play and dress, it is no longer unique for little girls to demonstrate typical boy roles, to engage in typical boy play or to wear clothing associated with the male gender (Menvielle, 2012). The feminist movements have opened space for females to legitimately take on aspects of male gender performance thus moving females into the more powerful gendered position. Yet it remains frowned upon for males to take on aspects of female gender performance, which would be viewed as choosing to be less powerful than what has been provided to the male through birth born gender. Moving away from gender non-conformity being viewed as a disease, disorder or dysfunction allows us to move away from the child being viewed as the problem.

If we can view the school and the classroom environment as the problem, then they might be socially and culturally reconstructed as places that can be adapted to support all children. With the diversity of Canadian society, it is imperative that schools create supportive environments for all students.

> Today, Canadian society is more diverse than ever before and educators, school administrators and other people involved with school-aged youth need to become informed of these diverse identities, including gender identities. The first important step for educators is acknowledging that gender variant youth exist in the school system and that expressing various gender identities is an acceptable way of living. (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010, p. 7)

To aid educators in acknowledging the existence of these youth, it is beneficial to listen to the stories of school and classroom experiences that children who do not conform to gender stereotypes and their primary caregivers tell (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2011). These experiences are not yet well documented (Beemyn, 2013; Greytak, Kosciw & Boesen, 2013; Hill & Menvielle, 2009). From these stories of experiences, school personnel have experiential data to help them frame school and classroom environments in ways that support the development of positive self-identity, enabling respect and accommodation of gender identity and expression.

As noted earlier, "[s]tories lived and told educate the self and others" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi). Stories of experiences provide excellent learning opportunities. We can also learn from the imaginings of the people most

closely linked to school and classroom environments as they consider how to revitalize these spaces as places of support for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. There are current existing realities about gender and gender roles that can be better understood through the stories of children and their primary caregivers. It is sometimes difficult to see beyond the current realities, yet imagining can help create alternative realities. Greene (1995) argued that out of "all of our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realties. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions" (p. 3). She added, "Not always but oftentimes, the extent to which we grasp another's world depends on our existing ability to make poetic use of our imagination" (p. 4). When it comes to creating change, Greene (1995) suggested:

> [I]t may be the recovery of imagination that lessons the social paralysis we see around us and restores the sense that something can be done in the name of what is decent and humane. … [It is] an idea of imagination that brings an ethical concern to the fore, a concern that, again, has to do with the community that ought to be in the making and the values that give it color and significance. (p. 35)

Using the power of imagination, one may begin to envision inclusive communities of support and caring for students who do not conform to gender stereotypes. Poet Emily Dickinson once said "The Possible's slow fuse is lit by the imagination" (Dickinson, as cited in Johnson, 1960, p. 687). Children's imaginative play is one way that we can support the deconstruction of gender at

an early age (MacNaughton, 2000). Ehrensaft (2011) suggests that imagination be called upon to allow for glimpses of what it might be like to be told you cannot play with your favourite toys or wear your favourite articles of clothing. The use of imagination can help us "grasp the oppressive culture that bears down on our gender-creative children" (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 18). The role of imagination is therefore essential in reconceptualising gender to create spaces of inclusivity for all. As we engage imagination to discover what is possible, the possibilities must be documented "to keep them alive and nurture their survival" (Weis & Fine, 2004, p. xxiv). Through the use of stories and imagination we may be more open to possibilities of how schools can best meet the needs of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

The Social Construction of Gender

"One is not born, but rather becomes, woman," Simone de Beauvoir wrote in 1949 in one of her most famous books called *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir, Borde, Melovany-Chavallier, 2011, p. 283). This quote introduces the idea that gender is a social construction. From the moment we are born, the practice of ascribing gender roles is evident. Research has confirmed that adult interactions with babies vary depending upon the perceived gender of the child (Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2009). Escaping the gendering that occurs around us would seem almost impossible. The unborn baby who has simply been called *baby* for the past nine months while developing inside the uterus, ceases to be *baby* after birth and is now referred to by gender. *Baby* becomes a descriptive word to let one know that the boy or girl is young. The baby, once born, is now known as *baby boy* or *baby*

girl. The birth announcement cards on the bassinets in hospitals announce to the world that the baby is a boy or a girl by associating colour with gender – little blue cards for the boys and little pink cards for the girls. If you pay close attention to the packaging on children's toys, then you are able to tell which toys are meant for boys and which are meant for girls – blue packaging, pink packaging, little girls shown in pictures with dolls in carriages and little boys shown in pictures with toy trucks. If you wish to shop for children's toys online, many online toy stores even allow you to shop by gender. Children's clothing tends to fall into gender categories as well. This not only occurs along the lines of gender typical colours, but also according to texture; it is very rare to find boy's clothing made with the softness of satin or velvet. The slogans and pictures on bibs and t-shirts for young children also confirm that little girls should be daddy's sweetheart or princess and that they should love ponies and want to be ballerinas. Little boys t-shirts and bibs remind us that they should be mommy's little rock star and love superheroes and big trucks while wanting to play sports. The way we speak to baby boys and girls and the pet names we use are also gendered. Both our verbal and non-verbal communications have an influence on how children socially construct gender (Gosselin, 2007). Our society continually reinforces that "children are either boys or girls, and those labels come with a long list of behaviors and ways of being that you have to do "right", especially in school" (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013, p. 84). Everyday little boys and girls, their caregivers and their teachers are reminded of what it is to be a little boy and what it is to be a little girl.

Constructing gender seems quite easy at first glance. However layers of complexity are added to this construction when psychological, physiological or anatomical ambiguities come into play. Children who do not conform to gender stereotypes or who are transgender or intersexed may not fit the label of boy or girl as it has been constructed by society. These widely accepted constructions of gender can be silencing to someone outside of what might be described as the boundaries of normal (Lester, 2007; MacNaughton, 2000; Mallon & Decrescenzo, 2009).

Gender roles as constructions refer "both to socially defined expectations about how females and males should behave and to the public expression of gender identity" (Lovaas, 2005, p. 364). Whereas gender roles are generally viewed as socially constructed, they are created based on expectations associated with biological sex (Butler, 1990). Women, as the bearer of children, are often viewed as the family nurturers, which places them central to issues around the home and the ensuing unpaid labor. Men are often viewed as the family providers, which places them central to issues around work. Butler (1990) posited that gender is "part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (p. 190). Men who don't provide and women who don't nurture find themselves outside of mainstream society. Although the social reconstruction of gender is becoming more accepting of what would be considered gender non-conformist behaviours such as males staying home to care for children while females work, these contemporary alterations on gender roles have not yet made a significant impact

on gender expectations (Bryan, 2012). Little girls and little boys continue to be socialized into gender roles from a very young age and yet some children do not fit these roles. Their behaviours and their identities do not conform to these gender expectations.

Gender identity is the inner sense of identifying with a particular gender. A child's sense of core gender identity is generally believed to be solidified between 18 – 24 months of age after which preschool works to socialize children into the normative ways of gender (Ehrensaft, 2011). This means that children can identify as being a boy or a girl prior to going to preschool. However, this does not mean that children always identify with the gender that was ascribed to them at birth.

If we take the statement "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman," (Beauvoir, Borde, Melovany-Chavallier, 2011, p. 283), through to a conclusive end, we can see that sex and gender are two distinct categories. Separating out these constructs allows us to recognize a baby born with a penis may not grow into the gendered category of male and a baby born with a vagina may not grown into the gendered category of female. Butler (1990) states that this "radical formulation of sex/gender distinction suggests that sexed bodies can be the occasion for a number of different genders, and further, that gender itself need not be restricted to the usual two" (p. 152). This opens up the possibilities to accommodate affirmed genders by transcending the limits of one or the other assigned gender.

Although gender roles and identities have not always been recognized as limited to two binarized types that are structured around the differences of biological sex, today, in western societies, this is certainly the case (Ehrensaft, 2011; Lovaas, 2005). "Most of us were taught, and most firmly adhere to, the concept that there are only two distinct categories of gender, male and female" (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. xiv). The male gender role is accepted as aggressive, active, competitive, objective and rational whereas the female gender role is acknowledged as submissive, passive, cooperative, subjective and emotional. It therefore becomes easy to see how these two gender roles become labeled as quite dissimilar and are held in opposition to each other when distinctions of gender are conflated with identities of biological sex. If we were to remove biological sex from the discussion of gender and simply looked at gender as performative, "then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured: there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction" (Butler, 1990, p. 192). If gender were simply constructed as performative and there were infinite ways to perform gender, then it would become impossible to step outside of gender roles because they would simply cease to exist. However, we do not construct gender as a performance. Gender is

> a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the

> construction compels our belief in its necessity and naturalness. (Butler, 1990, p.190)

As long as we continue to view gender as a "relatively permanent phenomenon" (Butler, 2004, p.81), the regulatory fiction of gender will remain alive and thriving in our society and continue to prescribe gender roles to children and adults alike.

Supporting Children Who Do Not Conform to Gender Stereotypes

Developmentally appropriate practice is an approach to early childhood development that attempts to normalize this development and, in the process, has limited the understanding of how differences in childhood development can be part of normalized childhood development (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006). Until recently, there has been a lack of discourse within the developmentally appropriate practice literature about the "representation of family difference, the development of gender identity, or the socio-political framing of queer rights" (Janmohamed, 2010, p 306). This lack of representation has promoted the idea that the only valid representation of boy or girl is the one that is constructed within a heteronormative framework (Janmohamed, 2010). This framework is one with which most people are very familiar. It is the one that children most often see in children's television and movies and the one they most often hear about in their bedtime stories. This heteronormative framework that surrounds most children provides conventional views on what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl. More recently, those who work with children are being challenged to think about what developmentally appropriate practice would look like with regard to

gender diversity (Slesaransky-Poe, Ruzzi, Dimedio & Stanley, 2013). However, it is recognized that without a common understanding of what is developmentally appropriate for certain age groups regarding discussions of gender it is difficult to determine what practice should look like (Bryan, 2012). This lack of congruency in understanding what could constitute as developmentally appropriate practice has been influenced through years of heteronormative practices and assumptions.

Earlier practices in supporting children who did not conform to gender stereotypes as well as their families and the schools they attended were "often premised on the idea that gender non-conformity signalled homosexuality" (Hill & Menvielle, 2009, p. 244). In the early 1980s, George Alan Rekers made it his mission to help parents and schools respond to ambiguities and challenges presented by gender nonconforming children mediating a heteronormative framework. In 1982, Rekers published two books, *Shaping Your Child's Sexual Identity* and *Growing Up Straight: What Families Should Know About Homosexuality.* Both of these books suggested that gender nonconforming children run a higher risk of becoming homosexual and that parents must respond to this threat by appropriate gender role modeling (Rekers, 1982). Operating within a simplistic and untenable rubric of choice with regard to gender, he further suggested that in severe cases of gender nonconformity, the schools may need to become active to help prevent these children from entering into a homosexual lifestyle and that schools may need to introduce treatment procedures. Rekers practices and recommendations stated that "boys needed to be coached patiently in learning proper athletic behaviors. And school workers

needed to model correct sex roles" (Blount, 2005, p. 162). Rekers also warned that homosexual teachers presented a threat by not being able to model appropriate sex roles (Blount, 2005). Rekers was suggesting that the social construction of gender required strong role models for children to be able to successfully grow into the roles that were ascribed based on normalized and binarized sex roles and the associated gender expectations and expressions.

Dobson (2001) has also provided guidance based on orthodox Christian beliefs for parents and teachers seeking his purported support to ensure that children do not suffer from a "sexual identity disorder" (p. 118). Dobson referred to a book entitled *Preventing Homosexuality: A Parent's Guide,* which he calls "the very best resource for parents and teachers" (p. 118). Dobson warned parents:

> [M]ost cross-gender behaviour occurs during the pre-school years, between the ages of two and four. You needn't worry about occasional cross-dressing. You should become concerned, though, when your little boy continues doing so and, at the same time, begins to acquire some other alarming habits. He may start using his mother's makeup. He may avoid other boys in the neighbourhood and their rough-and-tumble activities and prefer being with his sisters instead, who play with dolls and dollhouses. Later he may start speaking in a high pitched voice. He may affect the exaggerated gestures and even the walk of a girl, or become fascinated with long hair, earrings and scarves. (Dobson, 2001, p. 118-119)

The views of Dobson and Rekers, caught up in homophobia, oppose the notion that sexuality and gender are discrete and separate, as Butler (2004) points out in *Undoing Gender*.

Although the views of Dobson and Rekers seem dated, these views are still prevalent today. Consider the position of Dr. Kenneth Zucker who is the head of the Gender Identity Service in the Child, Youth, and Family Program with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, Ontario. He is also a Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto. Zucker is considered to be an authority when it comes to gender identity and children. Zucker (2008) believes that "biological factors may well predispose the development of GID, but because many youngsters with GID can resolve their unhappiness, this implies a malleability for gender identity differentiation" (p. 360). Zucker (2008) makes these assertions:

- Therapy, when started at a young enough age, increases the chances of reversing gender identity concerns.
- A mother's unhealthy psychopathology increases the risk of a son being affected with Gender Identity Disorder.
- Approximately 75% of children with Gender Identity Disorder have poor attachments with their mothers.
- Parents' tolerance for and reinforcement of cross-gender behaviour perpetuates the condition.

With these assertions about gender non-conformity, Zucker contends that it is appropriate and preferable practice to redirect a child's expression and

performance of gender to align it with acceptable gender expressions and performances as determined by the gender assigned at birth.

Although there is literature that asserts that treatment options aimed at redirecting a child's sense of gender are no longer considered to ethical (Coleman et al., 2012), there is also a recognition that "opinions differ regarding the questions of whether or not minimization of gender atypical behavior" is an acceptable treatment practice (Byne, et al., 2012). Between 2008 and 2011 a Gender Identity Disorder task force, appointed by the American Psychological Association (APA), was struck to review current literature on treatment of gender identity disorder. Several recommendations came from the work of this task force.

The task force recognized that there is a need for treatment recommendations to be developed (Byne, et al., 2012). "Recommendations from the APA would frame its position on what constitutes realistic and ethical treatment goals as well as what constitutes ethical and humane approaches to treatment" (Byne, et al., 2012, p. 768). With the wide variance in treatment options currently being used and literature supporting both sides of the variance, the task force suggests that there is a need to further explore treatment options.

The task force also recognized that decisions regarding children who do not conform to gender stereotypes are often made by caregivers and thus caregivers must be provided with accurate information. The task force went on to state that providing accurate information to caregivers "entails disclosing the full range of treatment options available (including those that might conflict with the

clinician's beliefs and values), the limitations of the evidence base that informs treatment decisions, the range of possible outcomes, and the currently incomplete knowledge regarding the influence of childhood treatment on outcome" (Byne, et al., 2012, p. 764). Although this recommendation does not provide further guidance to caregivers or professionals seeking to support children who do not conform to gender stereotypes by giving clear direction as to which treatment protocols are best, the recommendation does support the idea that the caregivers have the ultimate responsibility in making decisions for their children. This leaves the caregivers in a critical position of determining whether they should let their child's affirmed gender lead treatment or whether they should seek treatment in order to redirect gendered behaviour to be more aligned with assigned gender. Byne and colleagues (2012) assert that clinicians need to balance the caregivers values and wishes with the possibility that the caregivers may make therapeutic decisions based on the desire to normalize their child's gender non-conforming behaviour through premature transitioning or redirecting of gendered behaviour. The decision must be made in the best interests of the child as opposed to the desire to create a view of normalcy.

While I find the clinical stance of redirecting a child's sense of gender to be problematic and aligned with reparative therapy approaches that have been condemned by the American Psychiatric Association, some of the research conducted by Zucker provides a useful recognition of what others are saying with regard to sociality in addressing the needs of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. Zucker's research, with Steensma (2014) and colleagues,

recognizes that these children are impacted by social isolation and ostracism in higher rates than their peers who perform gender in socially acceptable ways. It is also noted that the quality of peer relationships for boys who do not conform to gender stereotypes is poorer than it is for girls who do not conform to gender stereotypes. Finally it is acknowledged that broad social acceptance (although in the writing this is referred to as social tolerance) of gender non-conforming behaviour can impact relationships with peers in the school environment. And yet, heteronormative expectations and regulations continue through "discouragement of non-normative expressions of gender and the ultimate silence around children's queer identifications, explorations, and performances" (Janmohamed, 2010, p 307). We can move away from these heteronormative expectations and regulations by following Butler's (1990) suggestion that gender be constructed as a social temporality that exists in relationship to performances of gender that align with a gendered self. This construction of gender opens up possibilities for infinite numbers of gender identities and expressions.

Elementary schools as gendering institutions: It is more than just the trouble with bathrooms

Traditional gender roles are affirmed and reaffirmed when a child turns on the television, plays a video game or reads a storybook. These traditional roles comprise acceptable roles in our schools where non-traditional performances of gender struggle to find a space where children are able to freely express gender creative roles and where they are free to be, become and belong (Grace, 2006). At a very young age, children begin to understand "adult perspectives about

acceptable and unacceptable public behaviours and feelings even when these youngsters do not fully understand the complexities, manifestations, and ramifications of these perspectives" (Lester, 2007, p.63). Ehrensaft (2011) discusses the concept of individual creativity as necessary to ensure the "true self get(s) launched and stay(s) afloat" (p. 77). In order to support children in their individual creativity, you must have a supportive environment, "one filled with people who can match who you are and follow your lead, rather than imposing their own ideas about who they want you to be and breaking your spirit in the process" (Ehrensaft, 2011, p.77). Schools must be supportive environments and yet children's lives within schools are heavily influenced by normative conceptions of gender (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013).

These normative conceptions of gender, loudly greet students, teachers, parents and guests as they walk up to the doors of Charlie Killam School in Camrose, Alberta. There are two entrances to the school: one clearly labeled boys and the other clearly labeled girls. Elementary schools, along with the family, are the first institutions for socializing children within the dominant discourses of gender, which reinforce the male/female binary and accepted gender performances (Bryan, 2012; McNaughton, 2000). With these two institutions being the ones where children spend most of their time, it becomes difficult for children to escape these stories of gender. Gender identities are shaped by social and cultural norms that are taught and reinforced through values and beliefs and the associated behaviours (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Giordano, 2013; Jacobson, 2011). Whereas homes tend to be homogenous, schools have the opportunity to be

quite diverse, which leaves them "uniquely poised to open the minds of students of all ages about gender diversity" (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 179). However, historically, schools have been about maintaining the status quo such as constructing gender within the limits of the male-female binary. Nevertheless, the opportunity to expose students to diversity leaves teachers with the responsibility of encouraging children to learn how to share space with people who are both similar and different from themselves.

In elementary years, children engage in heteronormative play that serves to legitimize socially constructed gender roles (Bryan, 2012; Giraldo & Colyar, 2013; Robinson, 2005). While it is considered natural and acceptable for children to display gender appropriate behaviours, the slightest display of behaviour that does not fall within gender role expectations becomes cause for alarm. Gender nonconforming children are teased and taunted in our schools for standing outside of the heteronormative expectations of gender (Egale 2012; Giordano, 2013; Grace 2006; Grace & Wells, 2004; Renold, 2006; Slesaransky-Poe, Ruzzi, Dimedio & Stanley, 2013). Girls who are not feminine enough often become known as the bullies, even though their behaviour is similar to what is expected from their male classmates. Boys who are not masculine enough often become known as sissies while their female classmates would likely be held up as being kind and gracious. Schools must challenge the "routine privileging of particular kinds of student identities while marginalizing others" (Schick, 2004, p. 252).

Theorists such as Halberstam (1998) and Rasmussen (2009) recognize bathrooms as places that routinely regulate expressions of gender and privilege a

particular identity through provision of space. Besides the gendering experience of bathrooms, children also encounter other ways that elementary schools reinforce the binary of boy/girl. Children are also gendered when their teachers call upon them to engage in an activity according to gender: Girls can line up first, or boys on this side, girls on that side. There is a "general perception that males do better than females in math and science" (Dyer, 2011, p. 179). Recess and play time are gendered by children knowing that in our dichotomous world "even toys are 'for boys' or 'for girls'" (Estola, 2011, p. 48). Centers in preschool and kindergarten can signal gender by the choice of colour used to draw children to the center – pink in the house center and blue in the train center (Giraldo & Colyar, 2013). Gendering in elementary school also occurs when teachers and peers police acceptable and unacceptable behaviours (Hill & Menvielle, 2009).

Gard (2002) has found gyms to be school spaces where behaviours that do not conform to acceptable expressions of gender signal an alarm for potential abuse. In the gym, if a female student shows too much interest in sports, she quickly becomes known as unfeminine. If she succeeds at excelling at sports and shows abilities greater than her male classmates, the male classmates can feel demasculinized. Boys that enjoy the social dance lessons and dislike the rough and tumble sports such as football are quick to be labeled as sissies. Girls who enjoy the rough and tumble sports and dislike social dance are looked on as jocks. As elementary children grow, they learn new words to attack those who do not fit in; words such as dyke and faggot become commonly applied to youth who do not fit the gender stereotypes in physical education (Gard, 2002). The other inherent

difficulty with gym class is the unsupervised gym locker room. When the students leave the gym and enter the locker room, the words of abuse can change to physical abuse that can often go undetected. Students often stay quiet about the abuse they are enduring because they have long ago recognized that it is believed by others that they bring it on themselves (Wells, Roberts, & Allan, 2012).

Children, at a young and impressionable age, can be "exposed to gender-related messages in classrooms run by competent, caring, and conscientious teachers who seem to be unaware of sending these messages" (de Groot Kim, 2011, p. 245). When teachers fail to support students who do not conform to gender typical behaviour, a message is being sent. A teacher's silence is not a neutral position but rather it is a position that can further hurt children (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013; Schrader & Wells, 2007). Classrooms, playgrounds and other educational spaces "create powerful environments that can positively or negatively influence a child's perception, understanding of, and attitude toward gender roles" (Nelson, 2011, p. viii). "Many educators mold children into curriculum cookie cutter identities" (Sears, 2012, p.5). Many students receive messages that their behaviour is unacceptable and that they are different and less than normal. These students are already learning that they do not fit in with the expectations of society. When teachers do not speak out to support these students, to disrupt the heteronormative expectations of gender, these messages are further embedded into the identity that is being created about self within the student.

Recognizing the Self in Others and Environments

Being recognized is about the importance of being known. Being recognized is not simply about seeing another but rather it is "a process that is engaged when subject and Other understand themselves to be reflected in one another, but where this reflection does not result in the collapse of the one into the Other" (Butler, 2004, p. 131). Students who conform to gender stereotypes need not look too deeply or too far away to find reflections and role models for their performances of gender. These role models can generally be found in their homes, in their families and in popular media. Teachers, through their work with students, continually provide narratives about what it means to be a member of society. Students expect schools to act as environments for socialization (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Dorais & Lajeunesse, 2004) and schools do act in this manner. However, a gender closet has been constructed by heteronormativity as a response to gender expressions that do not fit with societal expectations (Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010).

> The notion here is that the closet keeps non-conforming individuals hidden from the public realm. It is worth noting that at early childhood ages children both enact and are often allowed more blurred parameters around what constitutes being a boy or a girl. But as children grow older, society may feel less relaxed, and the closet becomes more rigidly walled and more difficult to open. As children with non-conforming interests and behaviors enter elementary school, it is very clear to them that their

> behaviors, once acceptable, are no longer so. (Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010, p. 248)

The lack of role models and the darkness of the gender closet leave children who do not conform to gender stereotypes unable to see themselves reflected in others, a condition that Butler (2004) asserts is essential to being known.

Environments that are inclusive of all people allow everyone representation within the environment and remove the barriers that exist with closets. Dei (1996) suggested that inclusivity "means ensuring representation" (p. 176). As representation is recognized as an essential lead-in to inclusivity, it becomes important that children who do not conform to gender stereotypes find representations of themselves within the school and classroom environments. There are many ways that children can find representations of self within educational environments. Representation can be found in the books that are read to students and in the assignments they complete. A teacher who seeks to ensure representation of gender non-conforming students will read books such as *The Princess Boy* or *Sissy Duckling* and will have students complete assignments that address gender non-conformity.

The home environments for most children are heteronormative and gender conforming, so a child who does not conform to gender stereotypes might not find representation within the home environment. Research found that two year old children identify the gender binaries of male and female based on outward appearance (Brill & Pepper, 2008). If a young male at this age has long hair, a two year old is likely to think of him as a girl. It is during the ages of 4 – 6 that

children link gender to specific performances and roles (Brill & Pepper, 2008). It is within this age range that children view men as doctors and women as nurses. "However, early childhood research shows that when 4 – 6 year olds are given enough examples through books, storytelling, or repeated exposure to real persons, they can adapt their constructs" (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 63). This enables students to enact gender stereotype flexibility (Banse, Gawronski, Rebetez, Gutt & Morton, 2010). Schools are one of the places where children can experience difference from their home environments and where their initial constructs of gender can be challenged (Schick, 2004). Schools can be places where children learn about different races or cultures from those that are experienced at home. Schools can be places where children are introduced to languages or foods that might otherwise remain foreign. Schools can be places where children find friends from constructions of family that might be different than their own family construct. Schools can be places where children hear stories of same gendered relationships and stories where the characters break free from the gender typical roles. Schools have an abundance of opportunities to create spaces where it is safe for a child to present as a unique individual. When a child may already be feeling different because of the heteronormative and gender conforming representations in the home environment, it is beneficial for the child to find representation within the school environment that can affirm and confirm the child's identity (Brill & Pepper, 2008).

To create a safe, caring, supportive, and inclusive school environment, "pupils' individual identities need to be reflected in the school environments and

the curriculum, and the diversity of students' lives and cultures celebrated as an enriching resource for schools and communities to which they belong" (Clifton, 2004, p. 77). Students remain silent when they do not recognize themselves in a community of others or see themselves reflected in their environments. This silence can be devastating to students as they try to position themselves in a heteronormative society (Jackson, 1992; Kissen, 1993; Russ, Simonds & Hunt, 2002). There is an expectation that schools act as environments for socialization (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Dorais & Lajeunesse, 2004). However, this process of socialization should not be about conformity; rather, it should be about recognition and respect for the individual identities each child brings to the educational community. When individual identity is recognized and respected, dignity is preserved.

It is easy to *say* that children should find their identities represented in the school environments, and yet it is not always easy to ensure that this happens. Canada has a long history of discrimination against sexual and gender minorities, which has been legally recognized over time from the fight for homosexuality to be decriminalized to the fight for same-gendered marriage (Grace, 2007). With this history casting a shadow on the beliefs and behaviours of our society, "the transformation of Canadian K-12 education into a fully inclusive institution remains a slow, incremental process" (Grace, 2007, p. 31). Children, by themselves, lack the capacity to create the transformation of our currently fragmented educational spaces into inclusive educational spaces. Those people in positions of power within the educational system, such as administrators, teachers

and librarians, have the capacity, but not always the will or the means to create the necessary inclusive spaces (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe; 2010; Luecke, 2011; Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson &Diamond, 2013; Sears, 2009; Slesaransky-Poe, Ruzzi, Dimedio & Stanley, 2013). The slow transformation of K-12 education into inclusive communities makes it difficult for anyone to step away from the norm to support children who do not conform to gender stereotypes so they have representations of self in accommodative education. For example, Goldberg and Adriano (2008) tell the story of Jazz, a young girl's acceptance among her kindergarten community. There was a struggle for acceptance. However, the hurdles that needed to be overcome and the walls that needed to be broken down occurred before Jazz even entered into kindergarten. By the time Jazz entered into the school system, the authorities within the system were prepared. The teachers accepted her as a girl knowing that biologically she was a male. There were unisex bathrooms and activities that did not exclude children based on gender. The school Jazz attended had made the transformation into an inclusive community and were ready to welcome Jazz.

The 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, noted that when children sense they may be inferior, their motivation to learn is negatively impacted (Strauss, 2005). This is a historic case for many reasons. For the purposes of this study, it is historic because it became widely recognized that learning can be impacted due to discrimination. Decades later, Brill and Pepper (2008) note that children who do not conform to gender stereotypes "frequently are the targets of teasing and bullying" (p.154). They go

on to specifically declare that "a child cannot feel emotionally safe, and will most likely experience problems in learning, if they regularly experience discrimination at school" (p.154). Whatever the cause of the discrimination, it is now commonly understood that discrimination likely has an impact on learning. A safe and inclusive learning community would allow students who do not conform to gender stereotypes to recognize their value in the community, thereby offering these individuals a sense of belonging and equality.

The dramatic change that resulted from the Brown decision helped build a more inclusive society for Black people in the United States. As Black people began assuming different places in society, racial tensions and racial discrimination could slowly begin the process of fading. For children who do not conform to gender stereotypes, the order of acceptance differs from the desegregation experience in the United States. While schools led the change in attitudes toward Black people, the Surrey Teachers' Association notes that "schools remain one of the last bastions of tolerated hatred toward GLBT [gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender] people" (as cited in Grace & Wells, 2004. p. 289). In 1999 Gerald Mallon asked, "[W]hy are gender variant children so disturbing to people?" (p.55). Although homophobia, heterosexism, transphobia and expectations around gender seem to be changing in our society, the changes in schools have been notably slow (Egale, 2011; Grace, 2007). Children who do not conform to gender stereotypes are still disturbing to people. In education, this discomfort impedes possibilities for ethical and inclusive practices that would accommodate them (Wells, Roberts, & Allan, 2012).

Thompson (2006) suggests that there is a need to recognize oneself in others "in order to create and sustain human identity" (p. 20). Being able to recognize yourself in others within your environments supports a strong identity. Childhood can already be a difficult time for students as they attempt to individuate. The terrible twos, filled with *no* as the answer to many questions and temper tantrums as the answer to many disappointments, are often the first outward signs of individuation. Attempts to individuate continue as children age and move through childhood, pre-adolescence and adolescence. As students seek to come to know who they are, they look around for appropriate role models (Brill & Pepper, 2008). Our society is very much structured around heteronormative ideals which are demonstrated through the majority of the population's opposite gendered, two parent families and the media. As students who do not conform to gender stereotypes seek to find role models, they often come up empty. This lack of connectedness and positive affiliation with others, along with normal pre-adolescent and adolescent difficulties can make this period of life even that much more difficult.

The struggle for recognition has been around for a very long time. As long as there has been one group that has dominated over another, there has been a struggle to become recognized on the part of the marginalized group. "Since some parties resist others' attempts to gain recognition, struggle is inevitable" (Thompson, 2006, p. 160). Children should have a voice and their experiences of becoming part of the school community should be heard. The responsibility of the adults in the school community is to create safe and inclusive spaces for all (ATA,

2006; CTF, 2004). This research bridges a gap between the children who do not conform to gender stereotypes and the adults in the school community by bringing forward the voices of these children.

Methodology

Social constructionism: My starting point

I remember working with an educational assistant who referred to one of our students as the autistic student. Later, in a private conversation, I suggested that a better way to bring attention to that particular student might be to refer to the student as the one affected by aspects of autism. We went on to discuss how this would be less labelling and perhaps more helpful in getting people to recognize that a person cannot be described by their label and that all aspects of autism did not fit all students. There is little room for individuality within a label and therefore a label packed with meaning and variables should not be used as an adjective to describe a student. To me, it was an innocent remark made early in my teaching career and repeated several times throughout my career. But because the phrasing was so curious to others, I was regularly asked to explain *the why* behind the remark, which had me grappling with questions around my own philosophical assumptions. I don't believe that I came to this understanding all on my own. Early in my life, grade two to be exact, I decided I wanted to be a special education teacher. I likely didn't even know what that entailed, but I definitely wanted to be one. With that decision firmly made, I can remember being attracted to books, people, conversations, television shows and movies that had something to do with people who have been marginalized. I believe that all

of these experiences, as well as others, influenced the beliefs that I hold around honouring the uniqueness of individuals.

It was much later that I was able to name my belief about how we come to know as social constructionism. As a social constructionist, I am convinced that our beliefs, habits, and interpretations of experience are drawn out of our social relationships (Parry, 1997). In the earliest work on social constructionism, Berger and Luckmann (1966) contended that "all human "knowledge" is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations" (p. 3). They go on to state that "society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product" (p. 61). In an extensive review of social constructionism, Burr (2003) contended that key writers in the area of social constructionism do not all attest to the same characteristics. Instead she claims that there is a family resemblance that seems to link together the ideas of several writers through recurrent features as opposed to an exact match. Burr (2003) explained that a social constructionist approach can be claimed if its foundations are based in one or more of the following four assumptions:

1. A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge (p. 2)
2. Historical and cultural specificity (p. 3)
3. Knowledge is sustained by social processes (p. 4)
4. Knowledge and social action go together. (p. 5)

All four of these assumptions fit for my research. I take a critical stance toward the taken-for-granted way of conceptualizing gender around the binary of male and female. I recognize that the ways in which we have come to understand

gender is burdened with historical and cultural contexts that are not the same throughout the world. For instance, there is a broadening of gender roles in our society as more men take up primary care giving roles. I strongly believe that our social interactions construct our knowledge. The basic premise of knowledge being developed, transmitted and maintained through social situations leads us to understand that a girl has become a girl and a boy has become a boy as each has been respectively discussed and described. And finally, I believe that as we create new knowledge, old ways of being and doing must shift. In order to support this necessary shift, it is often necessary to invoke social action.

As a researcher within the social constructionism paradigm, I understand gender to be a social construction that is impacted by many variables such as time, space and others (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). It is through discourse that objects are constructed and meaning is made (Foucault, 1972; McRae, 2010). "It is our texts, our discourses, our descriptive practices, that bring their objects into being. At least they bring them into being as the objects of our understanding" (Edwards, 1997, p. 45). It is generally understood that a boy or a girl is known because of genitalia – a material aspect of being a boy or a girl. However, a boy or a girl is also known because of symbolic aspects such as power, poise and presence. Edley (2001) suggested that "the realms of the material and the symbolic are inextricably bound up with one another and it is a pretty futile task to try and tease them apart" (p. 439). Although a futile task, it is sometimes a necessary task. When a child does not conform to gender stereotypes, the material aspects of gender and the symbolic aspects of gender may not be aligned.

For example, Jazz, an 11 year old transgender girl, explains that she has "a girl brain but a boy body" (Oprah Winfrey Network, 2011). Materially, Jazz would be recognized as a boy. However, the symbolic aspects of gender; power, poise and presence, leave Jazz identifying as a girl.

What does all of this mean for this discussion on gender? "Gender is a social and political construct, and it reflects normative ideas of how society should be organised. In any given society, individuals almost continually testify their gender belonging through language, behaviour, and social roles" (Giordano, 2013, p. 12). It is social action that constructs our everyday realities (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). This does not mean that the knowing of what is a girl or what is a boy cannot change but rather that either can change through further social constructions. Essentially, individuals can testify their gender as it aligns with their sense of self. This also does not mean that 'girl' and 'boy' fail to exist outside discourse. Of course, they do. They exist and they are tangible and visible and available to our senses. What we know about being a girl and what we know about being a boy are social constructs that have been created and recreated over time as we gather more and more information from our social surroundings.

Another aspect of social constructionist thought is that "realities are organized and maintained through narrative, and there are no essential truths" (Freedman & Coombs, 1996, p. 22). "To see that all knowledge is a construction and that truth is a matter of the context in which it is embedded is to greatly expand the possibilities of how to think about anything, even those things we

consider to be the most elementary and obvious" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, p.138). Gender is such a construction. By studying gender non-conformity, my research uncovers counternarratives to the socially accepted narratives of what it means to be a boy or a girl. Although these counternarratives might not yet be known or well understood, St. Pierre (1997) contends that we welcome "the provisional and contingent and recommend confusion as a playful site of possibility" (p. 280). It is here that we can begin to see how social constructionism with its resistance to singular truth and feminist poststructuralism with its position on the boundaries of possibilities can be linked together to bring a sense of freedom from the dominant stories that structure our lives.

Social constructionists are not bound by essential truths; rather, they recognize the impact of discourse on what is known. "Language, it is claimed, is productive rather than (merely) reflective. 'Reality' isn't so much mirrored in talk and texts as actually constituted by them" (Edley, 2001, p.435). So, although a girl is constructed as a girl and a boy is constructed as a boy, this does not mean this is the truth or reality, but rather it is *a* truth or *a* reality. The meanings that we hold for 'girl' and 'boy' have been created and influenced by our social relationships. Since we all share different social relationships in different cultural contexts, the meanings of 'boy' and 'girl' can be quite diverse. It is vital that we are inclusive of the many meanings. Dei (1996) asserted that "inclusivity requires pedagogies that respond to the social construction of difference in the school system, and also in society at large. … [It] requires spaces for alternative, and sometimes oppositional, paradigms to flourish in the schools" (p. 176). While Dei

is specifically grappling with issues of race, issues of gender can be troubled by similar implications as well as moral implications that may not be found with issues of race. Therefore the social constructions of difference with race and gender have similarities in their political connotations. The works of Lyotard (1993) and Derrida (1997) urged us to approach what seems like singular truth and reality with reservation and scepticism. Through social constructionism, we begin to move away from the positivist methodology of scientific inquiry that is bound in finding truths and laws to a feminist poststructuralist practice of honouring the subjective as valid knowledge and creating dynamic truths that privilege a person's lived experience.

Feminist poststructuralism: The bridge.

My social constructionist beliefs are rooted in feminist poststructuralism. For most of my life I have identified as a feminist. Growing up in the Canadian military allowed for many moments of reflection where incidences of sexism and heterosexism pushed against my feminist perspectives of equality. In 1986 I came across a book called *Women's Ways of Knowing* which helped to shape my feminist beliefs about power in a male dominated society where "men have constructed the prevailing theories, written history, and set values that have become the guiding principles for both men and women alike" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, p. 5). Although not a key text in feminist poststructural thinking, it was the text that gave voice to my thinking. My feminist beliefs around inequality were well formed, but at that time I didn't have a system of thinking that provided answers to the problems that were being

uncovered by my feminist thinking. Feminist poststructuralism provides answers by offering counternarratives based in resistance and social change (Tisdell, 2001). These counternarratives provide us with possibilities that come from the "radical critique of the categories of identity" (Butler, 1990, p. xxxii). Feminist poststructuralism recognizes that systems of power and privilege have played a major role in the social construction of identities and that these identities are not fixed, but rather they shift as our understandings of the systems shift (Tisdell, 2001). The social constructions of gender identities are not immune to the influences of power and privilege. For instance, what it means to be a boy can shift as we integrate systems of power and privilege. Heteronormativity is a system of power and privilege that is "enforced through rewards for appropriate gendered behaviors and punishments for deviating from the conventional or "normal" ways of being either a girl or a boy" (Blaise, 2009, p. 453). Feminist poststructuralism offers a "powerful theoretical position from which to understand children's gendering [and] to re-evaluate gender in early childhood education" (MacNaughton, 2000, p.3).

Earlier, I wrote about representing the uniqueness of the individual through the resistance to labelling. As I return to that idea now, in the context of feminist poststructuralism, I recognize that my development of this paradigm did not happen quickly. This recognition is aligned with my social constructionist thinking, and my belief that understandings are developed over time through social interaction and feedback (Edley, 2001). When I started to trace back where I might have begun to form my understanding and belief about the uniqueness of

individuals and about the need to resist labels, I was once again brought back to grade two. At the age of 8, I was likely quite unaware that I was gathering information and feedback to inform my beliefs as I listened to my teacher read aloud Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. It was not until much later in life that I became acutely aware of the impact the book and its themes had on me at such a young age. The young boy in the novel had been repeatedly told that he was sick and would die early in life. He overheard people talking about his illness and his fate, and he came to believe these stories to be true. When he was provided with an alternative story and a different reality, when he was no longer *sickly Colin*, he was able to shift from his former fate and create a new path for himself. As I reflected on this story as an adult, with many years of life experiences behind me, I was able to see how Colin created a story about himself and about his life based on his experiences within his own unique cultural influences. Colin's reality was socially constructed and this reality was able to change as new social constructs were added to his framework and as he was able to resist the labels that he had come to believe were true.

That there is no one reality that is constant and unchanging is attributable to the "general flow of constantly changing narratives" (Freedman & Coombs, 1996, p. 26). As stories change, so does the meaning we make of them. There is recognition of the reciprocity in the social construction of the social experience: the individual impacts the social experience and the social experience impacts the individual (Norrick, 2008; Parry & Doan, 1994; Schrauf, 2000; Stockburger, 2008). The meaning that is created out of stories fits at that particular time with

all the influences of that time. That particular meaning has an impact on the individual that impacts further experiences. There are times when the meanings of the social constructions are ones that we wish to support, and there are times when we wish to disengage from the meanings and possibly seek ways to create new stories or new meanings. Disengaging from popular social constructions can be difficult. For instance, our society has constructed the male figure in the household to be the one who mows the lawn. A walk around a suburban neighbourhood during the summer confirms this. Our society has constructed the role of administrative assistant as being one occupied by females. Families are still popularly constructed as a mother, a father, and children. Resisting these constructs as the only valid constructs, essentially disengaging from them, situates one outside of the familiar.

Feminist poststructuralism asks us to think outside of these popular constructs and the language we know and to ask different questions that might lead us to new ways of thinking. We are asked to disengage from the popular constructs and open up to possibilities (St. Pierre, 1997). Britzman (2000) states, "[P]oststructural theories raise critical concerns about what it is that structures meanings, practices, and bodies, about why certain practices become intelligible, valorized, or deemed as traditions, while other practices become discounted" (p. 30). With this thinking, we can begin to look away from the popular constructs of gender, opening up our thinking to the possibilities for gender if it were represented as infinite.

Children are immersed in the social constructions that exist in our society. Disengaging from these constructions can be very challenging for them until they become old enough to deconstruct the hegemonic constructions that bind them. Therefore, by proxy and ideally, the adults in children's worlds, parents, teachers, relatives, neighbours or others, should have responsibility for ensuring that the social constructions within which children are immersed are inclusive and supportive.

Social constructionism and feminist poststructuralism open spaces for possibilities and multiple truths that are needed in open discussions of gender non-conformity. By asking questions about the experiences of caregivers and children, my thesis investigates the systems of power and privilege that are enacted as the heteronormative social construction of gender is challenged.

Queer theory: The other side of the bridge.

Sullivan (2003) recognized queer theory as a "discipline that refuses to be disciplined, a discipline with a difference" (p. v). However, he cautions against endowing queer theory with "some sort of 'Tinkerbell effect'; to claim that no matter how hard you try you will never manage to catch it" (p. v). Queer theory has been "heavily influenced by poststructuralist theory, emerging primarily from humanities-based cultural studies and tied somewhat loosely to a confrontational, antinormative 'queer' politics" (Gamson, 2000, p. 354). Simply put, Jagose (1996) stated that queer theory is the use of "analytical pressure" (p. 100) to uncover the "multiple and even contradictory sites signified by queer" (p. 99). Dilley (1999) asserted that "queer theory, then, comes from queered perspectives

of the researcher and the researched" (p. 461). Queer theory resists the hegemonic binaries that often define and certainly limit sex, gender and sexuality (Letts, 2002; Plummer, 2005). Through the lens of queer theory, binaries such as male/female or gay/straight would be viewed as processes to regulate performances and assert power. Queer theory contests the binaries, which leaves in its wake the concept of *the other*. This *other* requires comparison with the norm in order to become intelligible; without the norms around gender, the *other* ceases to exist (Luhmann, 1998). Through the lens of queer theory, *the other*, often associated with binary thinking, is not actually viewed as an *other* but rather it is viewed as part of the all-encompassing whole (Goldman, 1999). For instance, a child who does not conform to gender stereotypes no longer is viewed as *the other*, as compared to the child who fits gender expectations. Rather, this child is simply viewed as one of the children who vary in many different ways and who does not need articulation. Queer theory, as the complementary side of my theoretical bridge, has "built on the insights of constructionism and Foucault, but moved poststructuralist and postmodernist concerns to the forefront" (Gamson, 2000, p. 354). Queer theory, "at its core… is about questioning the presumptions, values, and viewpoints from those positions (marginal and central), especially those that normally go unquestioned" (Dilley, 1999, p. 462). When we begin to open doors to such questions, we begin to move away from the essential truths that social constructionists refute. Queer theory aligns nicely with social constructionism and feminist poststructuralism in that all three are supportive of possibility thinking.

Queer is a malleable positioning, performance and/or way of being which can be viewed in opposition to the fixed heteronormative positioning, performance and/or way of being. "Queerness should challenge and confuse our understanding and uses of sexual and gender categories" (Doty as cited in Gamson, 2000, p. 355). Sedgwick (1990) began charting the territory for discussions to challenge and confuse the otherwise predictable discussions of binaries including male/female, gay/straight, feminine/masculine, normal/abnormal: Where the fixed and dominant discourses of heteronormativity function to define these binaries, queer is fluid and recognizes the endless possibilities between and around these binaries. A few years after writing *Epistemology of the Closet,* Sedgwick (1993) wrote *Tendencies* in which she discusses queer as an open and fluid construct the resists defining gender and sexuality. Fuss (1991) contended that queer does more than simply blur the binary lines between homosexual/heterosexual, but rather queer is an attempt to collapse the binary altogether. Where gay and lesbian studies challenged binaries and the associated normal/abnormal that comes with binary thinking, queer emerges as the "chosen term for many who have become dissatisfied with the assimilation politics associated with the terms gay and lesbian" (Pinar, 1998, p.3). Jagose (1996) appears to agree with Pinar, contending that there is no clear definition of queer but rather that the inflection of queer proven most disruptive to understandings of identity, community and politics. This disrupts normative ways of thinking about sex, gender and sexuality. Perhaps Butler (1993a) said it best when she claimed that identity is a "necessary error" (p. 21).

Theoretical understandings of queer have risen out of feminist poststructuralism as a way to understand sexuality and gender as separate constructs. Queer theory comes from the desire to recognize identity as something beyond labels and social constructions. It rejects categories as limiting and recognizes them as expressions of dominant power structures (Kirsch, 2000). It calls for the deconstruction of these binaries to "subvert the processes of normalization" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 151). For the purpose of this research, queer theory enables identity categories characterized by gender – boy/girl, man/woman, masculine/feminine – to be deconstructed and destabilized. The normalization that occurs around these categories is tossed aside to make way for the fluidity of gender. "Queer theory makes much of the clarity and insight provided by a queer perspective: acute understandings of difference stem from disengaging oneself from the heteronormative assumptions that 'work' for the majority" (McNinch, 2004, p. 316). Through queer theory we begin to see differences outside of heteronormativity and recognize them along a structure very different from the structure that supports binary thinking and opposition with another. As we gain understanding in one area, it supplies us with further information that can be used to deconstruct ideas, thereby creating new understandings and new influences on our original thoughts. We are able to revise and expand our understanding of concepts like gender. When we begin the process of deconstructing gender, we begin to create a ripple effect on all ideas to follow, thus allowing the possibilities to be limitless. Queer theory allows us to engage in the social construction of thinking about possibilities instead of thinking

in positional, categorical terms. Here we question "the presumptions, values, and viewpoints from those positions (marginal and central), especially those that normally go unquestioned" (Dilley, 1999, p.462).

Queer theory recognizes the impacts of social ignorance and fear and it calls for accommodation of previously marginalized groups who have not fit with normative and dominant societal values (Grace, 2005). This resistance can come from self-reflective power that is enacted by refusing to accept these normative and dominant positionings (Tisdell, 2001). Children tend to perform gender in a manner that feels right to them without immediately recognizing that normative and dominant societal values may be in contradiction with their performance. A "child is an active player in gender identity formation, but not a free agent" (MacNaughton, 2000, p.28). Once the contradictions have been pointed out to the child, the free agency within which they have acted becomes less free. Using feminist poststructuralist theory, MacNaughton (2000) has suggested that there is not one single, fixed gender identity to be learned by a child and that the child creates a gender identity by paying attention to the many messages that they receive about being gendered. Queering this idea would allow a recognition of the fluidity of gender. Here the creation of gender identity is about transgressing the limits of binary male or female spaces to open up the possibility of occupying multiple spaces. Butler (1990) suggested that "constraint is … built into what … language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender" (p. 12).

Starting out on the bank of the river, firmly planted in social constructionist thought, I approach my research with the understanding that we

"make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). As I continue to explore my own methodological thinking, and cross the bridge of feminist poststructuralism, I am able to abandon the "traditional concerns or criteria of empirical science" (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000, p. 1056). This abandonment allows me the freedom to explore the possibilities of how gender might be constructed. Social constructionism, feminist poststructuralism and queer theory are "postdevelopmental perspectives that take a critical stance toward taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world, including sex, gender, and sexuality" (Blaise, 2009, p. 452). As I land my feet on the opposite bank of the river, having successfully integrated social constructionism and feminist poststructuralism, I find myself engaging with queer theory. The addition of queer theory to my methodological stance recognizes that the voices of all must be included in order to ensure representation (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). Moreover, it recognizes the "queered perspectives of the researcher and researched" (Dilley, 1999, p. 461). My methodological stance thus integrates social constructionism, feminist poststructuralism and queer theory to allow me the opportunity to engage in deep exploration of the experiences of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

Research Methods

Plummer (2005) asserts "[The] queering of qualitative research is not so much a methodological style as a political and substantive concern with gender, heteronormativity, and sexualities" (p.369). The queering of my research comes through the focus on undoing assumptions around gender, heteronormativity and

sexualities as I learn from the stories of school experiences told by children and their parents when these children do not conform to gender stereotypes.

There are several methods of research that seek to create understandings through experience. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) asserted that narrative inquiries are best used to capture the detailed stories or life experiences of a few. Although I have used narrative approaches to capture the stories of experiences, I have also used other approaches to gather data in this study. Therefore, this study uses some of the principles of narrative inquiry, but is not deemed narrative in the totality of its approach. Another approach to research that shares similarities with my research method is a phenomenological study. A phenomenological study "describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p.57). Again, my approach involves making meaning of the lived experiences of children and their caregivers when the children do not conform to gender stereotypes. However, it also includes data from other sources. Although my study methods bump up against other methods, I have chosen to use the case study method, which allows me to engage in "data collection involving multiple sources of information" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73) and to honour the lived experiences of my participants. Since I did not solely rely on the lived experiences of the children and needed other data, a case study approach provided a good fit for my research.

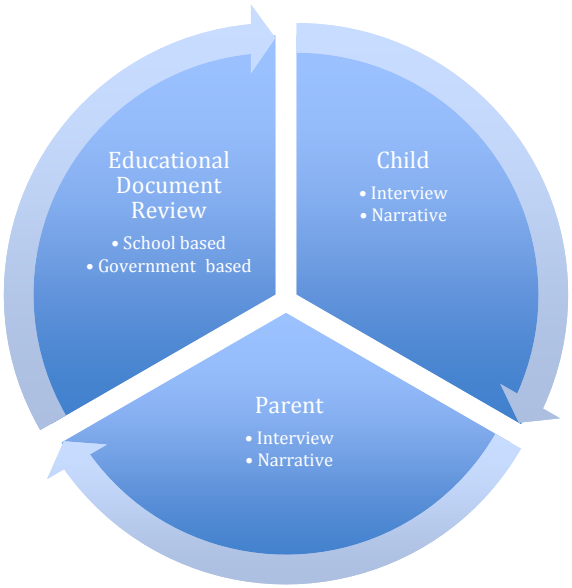
The "case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events" (Yin, 2009, p. 4). The case study "is both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry" (Stake,

2005, p. 444). Stake (2005) suggests a case study is used to "provide insight into an issue" (p.445). He states that a case study is to be "looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized and its ordinary activities detailed, but all because this helps us pursue the external interest" (Stake, 2005, p.445). For the purposes of educational research, a case study is thought to be an appropriate approach to create knowledge and understanding of a phenomenon and also to create standards of practice (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe, 2010).

Although I intended to work with four children who do not conform to gender stereotypes, as well as with their respective caregivers, I was unable to secure participation from four children. The population proved to be too small, and therefore I had three children as participants. Therefore, in my research I worked with three children who do not conform to gender stereotypes, as well as with their respective parents. I also used educational documents related to their school contexts within my research. Each one of these research scenarios, consisting of the child, the caregivers and the school documents represented a case study and together the three case studies represented a collective case study. For this collective case study, I was purposeful in my selection of participants to "show different perspectives on the issue" (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). For my study, the reason behind using a collective case study approach lies in what may be important differences among children not conforming to gender stereotypes. I wanted to research the experiences and stories of children who are biologically identified as male at birth and children who are biologically identified as female at birth. This meant that I sought participation from two participants who were

biologically identified as males at birth, but do not conform to the gender stereotypes expected of a male. I also sought participation from two children who were biologically identified as female at birth, but do not conform to the gender stereotypes expected of a female. I was able to find two children whose assigned gender was female, but whose affirmed gender is male and one child whose assigned gender was male, but whose affirmed gender is female to participate in the study along with their parents.

As the main participants in this research, the children and the parents answered the core research question: What are the matters of context, relationship and attitudes that shape the educational experiences and stories of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes? Other data sources included documents, searchable on the Internet, which the schools used to support gender non-conforming students. The following diagram illustrates the groupings and how data were collected:



Within each case study, I wish to learn from the stories of school experiences told by children and their parents when these children do not conform to gender stereotypes. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that "narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience" (p. 18). As I enter into these case studies, I am doing so with the belief that I will not find one single truth from the multiple stories. I am coming to the research understanding that "realities are socially constructed…. [R]ealities are organized and maintained through narrative and there are no essential truths" (Freedman & Coombs, 1996, p. 22). Each storyteller has a truth that belongs to the storyteller, and belongs to that moment in time. How we learn from the stories of others is through our own interpretations of their stories, which is influenced by our own stories. It is accepted that developing a grand narrative has not been provided by this research and indeed it was not the goal. The encompassing goal has been to "offer readers a place to imagine their own uses and applications" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42) and to allow each reader to create their own *sense* of meaning. Both Lyotard (1993) and Derrida (1997) suggest that we should approach what appears to be knowledge and claims of truth with suspicion. I have not made claims of truth with this research, but rather I have told stories of experiences and provided meaningful themes that have risen from these stories.

In order to organize the case study, I first identified issues that helped guide the study: "Issues are complex, situated, problematic relationships. They pull attention both to the ordinary experience and also to the disciplines of

knowledge" (Stake, 2005, p. 488). Prior to engaging in the research, I identified the following issues to guide the case study:

- The child's view of gender non-conforming behaviour;
- The parental understanding and view of gender non-conforming behaviour;
- The parental support for the child;
- The parental involvement in the educational contexts; and
- The extent to which the educational environment accepts and creates safe and supportive space for the child who does not conform to gender stereotypes.

The child participants were asked questions to create representations of their experiences in elementary school as a student who does not conform to gender stereotypes. The children were interviewed about their experiences as gender non-conformists in their schools. Interviewing the children about the issues and experiences related to gender non-conformity allowed "them to give voice to their own interpretations and thought rather than rely[ing] solely on our adult interpretations of their lives" (Eder & Fingerson, 2005, p. 181).

The parents were asked a series of interview questions about their understandings of gender non-conformity and about their experiences in working with school personnel to support their children. The questions also sought to illuminate the caregivers' understanding of the child's experience as someone who does not conform to gender stereotypes.

All of the interviews were semi-structured, which allowed me to explore experiences with certain phenomena as they emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Although interview questions guided our conversation, the actual interview was "active, reflexive, and reflective" (Kong, Mahoney & Plummer, 2005, p.241), allowing for what can be recognized as an approach to *queering the interview*. Using qualitative interviewing fits with my worldview as a social constructionist. In qualitative interviewing "participants are more likely to be viewed as meaning makers, not passive conduits for retrieving information" (Warren, 2001, p. 83). As a social constructionist, I recognize that how we come to know something is through the varied ways the object has been constructed by society. The interviews I conducted sought to provide an account of the educational experiences of children and their caregivers when the child does not conform to gender stereotypes. The interviews not only asked the participants for accounts of experiences, but also to describe the impact that those experiences had on the individuals and the meanings that were created through those experiences.

Finally, parents were brought together in an unstructured focus group. In a structured focus group the conversation is limited to the questions of the researcher, and the participants generally do not address one another. In an unstructured approach the participants' interests lead the conversation to where it naturally needs to go. Unstructured focus groups work best "when the participants themselves are just as interested in the topic as the researcher is" (Morgan, 2001, p. 149). Since the parents have high interest in this topic of research, the unstructured approach best suited this study. My role in the

unstructured focus group was to ask questions to help guide the discussion while working to ensure that the questions did not predetermine the path of the group. Unstructured focus groups allow for new paths to be explored as they are uncovered (Morgan, 2001). A critique of focus groups remains that they are short-cuts in gathering information that should be done in a interview format (Agar & MacDonald, 1995, as cited in Morgan, 2001). While the individual interviews allowed the illumination of the individual experience, the focus group promoted a synergy that allowed us to interact with one another to uncover information that had not come out in the interviews (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). As I secured the participants and determined that a focus group would be used, I recognized that a benefit of using the focus group is that the parents can hear other voices, concerns, stories, and experiences, which in turn can create a space where they may choose a more active role in supporting one another. In this research, due to the small population and community, the parents already knew each other. The focus group ended up being a conversation between two of the parents and myself which limited the number of voices, yet still provided rich dialogue and data as they compared and discussed school experiences and dreams for the future for their children.

As the researcher in the focus group, it was imperative that I remained sensitive to the issue of gender non-conformity being one that can impact the family in significant ways while being aware of the emotional safety of the participants. As the researcher I was also aware that a focus group can bring about opposing views and tensions among participants, and I needed strategies to ensure

participant safety. One strategy that I employed was to inform the participants that they could disengage at any time from the focus group or from a question during the focus group. We also met in a private setting that was neutral from either of their own environments. Since the participants knew each other, but had not seen each other for some time, I also allowed them the opportunity to *catch up* prior to starting with the questions. The catch-up period quickly evolved into discussing their children and the school experiences, which indicated a level of comfort that they were ready to begin with the focus group questions.

Although much of the data has been reported as the story of the case (Stake, 2005), excerpts from the interviews with the children and the adults have been used to create poetic accounts of the experiences. These poetic accounts constitute found poetry by using the words of the participants to create the poetry. It is understood that "for some forms of knowledge, poetic representation may be preferable to representation in prose" (Richardson, 2001, p. 877) since it can create room for meaning making. Richardson goes on to recognize that poetry has the benefit of not deluding "the researcher, listener, or readers into thinking that the one true story has been written, which is a temptation attached to the prose trope, especially in a research context" (p. 879). This is an important aspect of this research as the intent of the research is to convey the experiences of the children who do not conform to gender stereotypes and the adults who care for them while allowing the reader of these experiences to create meaning. Poetry has a "culturally understood role of evoking and making meaning, not just conveying it" (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p. 21). The found poetry therefore

serves as a method to broaden thinking as opposed to limit thinking with specifics and/or generalities.

Selection of the Participants

Gender non-conformity in elementary aged children has not been a commonly studied phenomenon (Wells, Roberts & Allan, 2012). In selecting the cases for this study it was important that the cases chosen, while particular in details, are representative of the phenomenon being studied (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Thus the cases were chosen based on three criteria. The first criterion was that the children were identified as not conforming to gender stereotypes by their caregivers. There is diversity in nonconforming individuals. There may be young girls who would rather play soccer at recess as opposed to skipping. There may be young boys who dislike sports and prefer to read. Although these kinds of behaviours are generally viewed as gendered, they could indicate non-gendered characteristics. By themselves, they do not offer the kind of cases that would allow for a rich study of gender non-conformity with elementary aged children. Therefore it was important that the children who are part of the cases are easily viewed as not conforming to the gender stereotypes of the boy-girl gender binary. The performance of gender by the children in the study was not to be aligned with the gender assigned at birth, but rather is aligned with "the psychological core sense of self as male, female" (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 34). This affirmed sense of a gendered self does not match the assigned gender identified on the birth certificate. Although the children in this study have all identified as transgender, it

was not mandatory that they had chosen that label. The label that they carry was much less important than the expression of their gendered selves.

The second criterion was that the children must be in elementary school. As it turned out, two of the participants in the study had just completed elementary school. When I worked with them, they were in their summer transition between elementary school and junior high. They met my criterion because their only school experience at the time of the data collection was from elementary school. Studying the earlier years of schooling is important in order to provide the experiences and stories of the children before too many home or school socialization and culturalizing processes have impacted their behaviours (CPHO, 2011).

The third criterion was that two of the children be identified as biologically female and the other two as biologically male according to the gender assigned at birth.

The selection of participants was more difficult than anticipated. I used the listserv operated through the Institute for Sexual Minorities Studies and Services (iSMSS), and I posted on their FaceBook page. I sent my research invitation to Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and sought their support in seeking participants.

My first participant came to me from a teacher who saw my request for research participants on the iSMSS listserv. The teacher contacted me to inform me that she knew of a student who transitioned from female to male during elementary school. I asked the teacher to send my research information to the

parent, and the parent immediately contacted me. My second and third participants came to me after being given the study information from the first participant's mother.

The target population proved to be too small to find four child participants. I therefore went ahead with three child participants. As well, the children did not all have two caregivers participate in the research. Two of the children were under the primary care of their mothers. Therefore their mothers were the only caregivers who participated.

Ensuring Ethical Research

The children in the study provided informed assent and their caregivers provided their informed consent. Informed assent and consent provided the participants with the following information:

- Background of the research study including:
    - The title of the project as *Gender non-conformity in elementary schools: Learning from the experiences of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes;* and
    - A statement indicating that the research is part of my doctoral studies, and that I may use the research to publish in academic journals or present at conferences.
- An outline of the purpose of the research so that participants understood that this research will strive to inform the present body of knowledge around elementary-aged children and gender nonconformity and envision better ways to meet their needs within an openness to possibility.

- Details of the study procedures being used including:
    - Semi-structured interviews with adult participants;
    - Focus groups with adult participants;
    - Personal narratives from the children and caregivers;
    - Semi-structured interviews with the children; and
    - Review of school-board policies and procedures as well as other related documents used to support children who do not conform to gender stereotypes.
- Focus group participants were informed that the focus groups would be unstructured, and therefore comments from other participants may cause distress or discomfort.
- All participants were informed that participation is voluntary and that they can opt out of the study at any time.
- The participants were informed that a transcriber would be used to transcribe focus group and interview data and that the transcriber would sign a confidentiality agreement.
- The adult participants were informed that they would be involved in reviewing the findings of the research to ensure accurate representation.
- All participants were assured that standards of confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy would be strictly maintained by:
    - Ensuring the use of pseudonyms;
    - Password protecting the data on my computer and locking hard copies of the data in a locked cabinet;

- Destroying all data 5 years after it has been collected; and
- Ensuring any identifying information, such as school names, are changed.

All of the participants are represented with the use of pseudonyms, and school names have been omitted from the research. School documents were used in creating a collective case. For additional information on the ethics of this study, please see the Appendix.

Analyzing the Data

In building a database, I reviewed the field texts collected throughout the investigation, including the narratives that were provided by the mothers, the transcribed interviews, my observation notes and the notes from the reviews of relevant educational documents. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) recognize the role of the "writer-as-interpreter" in the process of moving from field texts to research texts. After each interview, I would create a research text by interpreting the interview, drawing out key themes, and relating the themes to the literature. Following Clandinin and Connelly (2000), in the early stages of engagement with the field texts, I created a summarized account of what was found in the field texts. The summarized account helped me to generate broad themes. In the later stages of engagement with the texts, I worked to create a richer description of the data. The coding that I used emerged from my reading and re-reading of the data. I went back and forth from the literature review and the data to generate a code for analyzing the data. I added to the literature review, including recent significant additions to the rapidly emerging field of gender creativity and

nonconformity in children. Since I used a case study approach in this research, it is important to note that, with this approach, "issue development continues to the end of the study, and write-up begins with preliminary observations" (Stake, 2000, p. 453). Therefore, although coding was a process that I engaged in more fully after all of the field texts had been gathered, and as the field texts were recreated as research texts, the coding process was ongoing throughout the inquiry. I would read my field texts and my research texts to help guide my interviews and to help me determine the questions I would use in the focus group. After the field texts had been written as research texts, I used the research texts to create an interpretive document relating the story of the case. The interpretive document was shared with the research participants to confirm the "accuracy and credibility of the findings" (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p. 99). I colour coded the research text within the interpretive document so that the participants would be able to easily find their voices through the use of colour. I then created and incorporated found poetry as a means to introduce each of the themes that I had uncovered and as an attempt to make sense of what I learned through the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Guba and Lincoln (2005) recognize that there is no definitive answer to the question of how to know when the research is complete enough to act upon, but there are markers that can be used to support the researcher in knowing when a qualitative inquiry is "faithful enough to some human construction that we may feel safe in acting on them, or, more important, that members of the community in which the research is conducted may act on them" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p.

207). I adopted a method of ensuring fairness to know when the research is complete enough to act upon by ensuring the voices of all participants are represented reasonably equally in the final research document (Guba & Lincoln). The colour coding supported a fairly easy assessment of fairness by looking for an even representation of the colours. I also ensured that this was done through the process of member checking. Member checking also ensured accuracy of the research by ensuring authentic stories of the particular cases have been told.

As a researcher coming from a social constructionist paradigm, I took up the role of learner as opposed to the role of tester when I was analyzing the data. Thus I was not looking to determine if valid truths existed based on the data, but rather I was learning about possibilities that the data suggested. As I was seeking to learn about possibilities, I used the concept of crystallization proposed by Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (2005). Richardson and Adams St. Pierre have moved away from the ideas of triangulation as a way of seeking validity and instead have suggested crystallizing the data. This image for validity is based on the metaphor of the crystal, "which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimentionalities, and angles of approach" (p. 963). The role of learner as opposed to tester is perhaps best described by the following discussion of crystallization:

> Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of "validity"; we feel how there is no single truth, and we see how texts validate themselves. Crystalization provides us with a deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic.

> Parodoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously, we know there is always more to know (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963).

Crystalizing the data honours the voices of the children and the caregivers as "separate and distinct" (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963). It is through the sharing of the research texts with the research participants that the data became crystallized. While the cases being researched are familiar, belonging to each participant, through crystallization they are refracted through "different professional eyes, gender, sensibilities, biographies, spiritual and emotional longings" (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2005, p. 963). The sharing of the stories crystallized the gathered data by allowing the research texts to become relationally and contextually rich as the refractions occurred. Consequently, my research has helped to inform the current body of knowledge around creating safe and inclusive educational spaces for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. As a political and pedagogical engagement, it explores five different constructs:

1. how children story gender;
2. how children mediate living between gender conformity and gender non-conformity;
3. how caregivers of children who do not conform to gender sterotypes experience educational environments in terms of degrees of inclusiveness, responsivenes and support;

4. how an understanding of gender as *gender infinite* can create opportunities for acceptance and inclusivity; and
5. how alternative classroom and school environments might be imagined in order to create safe, caring, supportive, and inclusive communities for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

Through these explorations my research uncovered matters of context, relationship and attitudes that shape the educational experiences and stories of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes as well as the experiences and stories of their parents.

Presentation and Interpretation of Data

As I analyzed the field texts and research texts along with my observation notes and the educationally relevant documents that were used, nine constructs emerged that were common in the data. Although the constructs may have been presented using different words, the meanings and understandings appeared the same. As I further analyzed these constructs, I was able to distil them into three distinct themes under which the constructs could rest. The three themes and their constructs are:

- We can conceptualize gender differently.
    - Gender is not found between your legs.
    - There are tell-tale signs of gender nonconformity.
    - Disrupting personal understandings and redefining familial relationships is part of (re)conceptualizing gender.

    - Challenging societal understandings is also part of (re)conceptualizing gender.
- We cannot do it alone.
    - Parents need support.
    - Children need support.
    - Teachers need support.
- There is change afoot.
    - Personal growth is involved.
    - Social activism is part of the change process.

The data will be presented according to these themes and the constructs that make up the themes.

Meet the Families

Prior to engaging with the themes, I would like introduce you to the families who opened up their doors and their lives to me in order for this research to occur.

In a TedTalk, iO Tillett Wright (2012) calls familiarity the gateway drug to empathy. We recognize that empathy is a necessary component in compassion, and that it is compassion that often removes the barriers that may exist in creating change. It is for this reason that I present to you the following narratives written by the mothers of the children who are part of this research. I would like the reader to come to know the children and their families and to develop an understanding of their stories. Through these narratives, I hope the reader can develop a sense of familiarity with the families, as I have done.

Nico's family. On October 19th, 2001 my husband Blake laid our first child on my belly. He had asked earlier if he could catch our baby and his request was granted. I was amazed at how heavy the baby felt on me, and although I was weak and could barely hold the baby, I was in awe. Blake and I just stared and cuddled our new child. We had made this human, and it felt a little surreal. After about 10 minutes a nurse said, "Well, what did you have?" As I write this story 12 years later, the answer to that question, which seemed so simple at the time, is really more complicated than many of us have ever thought about.

I responded to the nurse's question by looking between my baby's legs, and I announced that we had a little girl. I was delighted, just as I would have been if I had a baby boy. I really hadn't cared about what gender of child I had, nor did Blake. We took Nico home and although we were exhausted, falling in love with this child downplayed the fatigue. I adored taking care of Nico.

It was wonderful that Nico and I were able to be together for the first year, having taken advantage of the newly implemented year parental leave option. Blake worked outside of the home, but any chance he could, he would try to get home early and he devoted himself to Nico on the weekends. After the year was finished, I went back to work as an x-ray technologist part time. We found a day home for Nico near my work, and I was able to see Nico on my lunch break. At that point I was still nursing, so it was special that I could go to the day home for lunch and nurse before Nico napped.

Nico was a sensitive, bright and affectionate child and was very cognitive even before language developed. Nico would easily nod yes or no, or use baby

sign language to communicate. It was close to one year old when Nico started to speak as well. Blake and I both adored Nico and loved seeing the choices and preferences that Nico would make during play. At around 2 years old Blake and I noticed that Nico was a little bit different than other little girls. Nico preferred t-shirts and jeans, to the sea of other more feminine clothes in the dresser and closet. During play however, Nico did choose toys of all kinds, and loved imaginary play. She particularly liked super heroes and couldn't pronounce Spiderman, so instead said 'peedoman,' which we thought was so cute. We were invited to a costume party and Blake purchased a Spiderman costume because he was getting such a kick out of Nico's fascination with the hero, but when he tried the costume on, it was so real to Nico that she was scared silly and so he ended up not being able to wear it.

I found out I was pregnant in July 2003 and Nico was turning two that October, which would make the siblings 2.5 years apart. Nico was so sweet and inquisitive and liked to talk to my tummy. I immediately began to think about the birth and how I really wanted Nico there. I always became heavy with worry when I thought about having to leave Nico for the birth, so it was decided that we would have a midwife and have the baby at home. It was around this time that Nico would sometimes say she was a boy or ask when she would get to be a boy.

Nico's sister Alex was born on April 2, 2004. My mom came and slept with Nico until 5 in the morning when we decided to wake them up so they could be there when the baby was born. I remember Nico rubbing my back and saying,

'You're doing a good job mama.' Now we were a family of four and although Nico enjoyed Alex she was a bit disappointed that Alex couldn't exactly play yet.

Nico started a three-year-old playschool in the fall and this is the time that we became even more aware of the difference in Nico's choices compared to the other little girls. We had watched the movie *The Incredibles* and Nico completely loved this super hero family. In particular she really identified with the character named Dash and became a bit obsessed. Nico started calling herself Dash and demanded others do the same. The schoolteacher thought it was important to respect the preference, and we even have kept artwork with the name Dash signed at the bottom.

Sometimes the insistence to be a boy was emotional for Nico. There were some angry times when it didn't matter how we tried to explain the benefits of being a great or powerful female, we could not easily persuade Nico. We also told Nico that there wasn't really anything we could do to change the body parts she was born with. I even said to Blake that we needed to be certain that any clothing and toy offerings were choices that Nico had made because I wanted to make sure that we weren't influencing these typical male preferences. For example, in kindergarten, Nico was the only girl dressed as a male superhero. She went as 'The Thing'. She was adorable; however, I remember being worried a little that Nico could end up not quite fitting in with either gender of peers. It was a needless worry because Nico always had friends and was quite well liked.

Between kindergarten and grade 3 Nico's emotions and preferences would surface and retreat. It was really sad to see Nico so upset about not being able to

be a boy, and also have her be so angry because, as she said, we had made her wrong. There was a period at the end of grade 3 where Nico tried out more feminine clothes and wore her hair in a ponytail. In the summer she even requested a bikini. Blake and I thought that maybe she had passed through a phase and that she was now identifying as a girl. We thought perhaps she was kind of happy having the label of tomboy at school. However, this didn't last long.

In grade four, during the second semester, Nico had been experiencing difficulties falling asleep and would need to start her sleep in our bed. One night while I was tucking in Alex (who was now 6.5) she told me that Nico really wanted to be a boy and that Nico had asked her to tell me. I was a bit defensive and said that I knew Nico wanted to be a boy to which Alex replied, 'No mom. He really is a boy.' I thanked her and then went in to Nico. I told her what Alex had said and she immediately started sobbing and saying that she knows she is different and she couldn't be happy anymore living as girl. She said that was why she had been having trouble sleeping and she needed us to know. I felt terrible that I hadn't realized it was more serious and real. In some ways I knew, but I didn't want it to be true. In that moment I held Nico and said that I loved the person Nico and that I didn't care if Nico was a boy or a girl but I cared if Nico was a good person.

The very next day, Nico gave all her feminine clothing to Alex with such relief. I believe she was really trying to fulfill the role that she thought everyone expected of her, and that's why she tried out living as a girl. After what Nico had said to Alex and me, and seeing her give away these clothes that didn't fit, Blake

was prompted to research how we could help Nico in our city. It was Blake's Google search that led us to the Institute for Sexual Minorities Studies and Services (iSMSS) and Kris Wells who helped us to help Nico transition to living as a male. It wasn't easy and there was a lot of learning and educating of others, but we have had sincere support from all of our family and friends. The schools that Nico has attended have been incredibly understanding and supportive. Surprisingly, we have had a reasonably easy time, but Nico is just starting junior high so there may be some issues in the future. We just don't know, but we are prepared to help educate and change perceptions and opinions.

It's been hard to understand, but when you are around Nico, and see how content and complete he is as a male, it's easier to grasp that gender and sex are separate and just because a baby is born and we see what's between the legs doesn't necessarily mean the gender and sex will align. It's ultimately more complicated than many of us know and although it's not common, it is something that parents would benefit from knowing about before they have children, and teachers would benefit from knowing about before they taught school.

Sage's family

> *All their nervous figits combined-- the toe tapping, the pen clicking, the nail biting, the rapid flipping of the pages of a magazine--were powerless against the weight of waiting. After an immeasurable eternity, the stifling silence was shattered with the openings of the double doors, and a bellowing voice filling the room with exuberance, 'it's a BOYYYYY!!!!!!' Shrieks of joy joined the man's announcement in chorus and a wave of excited hugs broke out. 'A son! I have a son to carry on my name! And he looks just like me!' A few months earlier in a dimly lit room, this father-to-be was given this same information through a computer monitor, but it wasn't until the day of birthing that his expectations were validated.*

> *His first born child was in fact a son.* (Tempest wrote this recollection in an italicized format.)

In April of 2004, I gave birth to this child named Sage, and whom we believed would be our son. Sage's father was brimming with pride and over the next 3 years, our family photo albums were filled with photos of a beautiful blond haired boy with soft green eyes, dressed in rough-and-tumble clothes and suspenders. He looked like a tough little hooligan, or rather that is the way we all chose to see him. In May of 2007, our perceptions began to shift when Sage showed an intense attraction to the Cinderella-esque shoes I had purchased for a wedding, which were unlike anything in my practical, conservative wardrobe. Barely able to speak, upon seeing the sparkly shoes, Sage began to flap his arms and excitedly shout, 'My shoes! My shoes!' His enthusiasm was almost comical in its demonstration, and took imprint in my mind. I could say this is truly where our story begins.

Many children, if not all, love to play dress-up. It gives them a safe way to try out different ways of presenting themselves, and in turn, experiencing the world. Older sisters are renowned for dressing up their little brother in girls' clothes, somehow hoping that the clothing would be enchanted and transform her little brother into the little sister they so desperately had been hoping for. To the older sister's disappointment, the transformation typically only lasts as long as she can keep her brother entertained. Once his mind moves onto something else he would rather do, their play moves on to the next activity and little attention is given to the boy left awkwardly wearing a dress.

As Sage was my first born, he didn't have an older sister playing dress up with him, but when a family friend made a mistake and dropped off a bag of hand-me-downs that were intended for a family with girls, Sage got his first exposure to a very different selection of clothing than we had been dressing him in. Like a magician pulling scarves from a hat, Sage pulled every single article of clothing from the bag, until it surrounded him like a giant nest. Sage sat in the middle of the nest grinning upon the pink and yellow fabrics and especially the lacy dresses. I cleaned up the clothes and put them back in the bag and left them in the corner of the room. The next morning I was in the kitchen when Sage came in wearing a frilly salmon coloured dress adorned in lace. I remember being somewhat amused, but not making a big deal about his clothing choice. It was probably a week or two later that I began to take notice that the only clothing Sage wanted to wear was that frilly salmon dress.

At first I persuaded him back into his regular clothes under the pretence of the dress being impractical for playing at the park. In reality, I just didn't know how I would explain to his preschool that he was wearing girls' clothes. I suppose I didn't want them to think that I was clothing my son in dresses because I had really wanted a daughter or something equally strange. It wasn't long before Sage began to call my bluff on the reason I was prohibiting him from wearing his dress to school. On the weekends he was able to play at the park perfectly well in his dress! He became increasingly stubborn about wearing it to school and after some reflection, I really couldn't come up with a solid reason why he couldn't wear it.

Hand in hand, we approached the old brick schoolhouse one sunny June afternoon, the frills of his beloved dress kicking out behind him. As I was bracing myself for a barrage of judgements and questions from other parents and his teacher, he wiggled his hand out of mine and started to spin until his dress formed a perfect circle. He was so happy.

Sage's teacher was shockingly dismissive of Sage's choice to come to school in a dress, and her only feedback was, 'It doesn't matter what my students are wearing as long as their private parts are covered.' However, it seemed that not everybody at the school felt the same way. The next week the teacher discreetly informed me that two families had decided to pull their children from the program in response to Sage's clothing choice. One family vocalized that their son had come home and wanted to wear a dress to school too because Sage did. I was not prepared for this aggressive response and my head flooded with questions. Sage was set to start kindergarten in a couple of months and if he was going to insist on wearing dresses to kindergarten, I did not know how to address the school. Would others pull their children from the school out of the concern that my son's preference for dresses was somehow contagious?

Around the same time Sage first saw my glass slippers, he was also diagnosed with Severe Language Processing Disorder. What this meant is that it was very difficult to communicate with him verbally, so asking him questions about why he wanted to wear a dress or trying to reason with language were ineffectual at getting to the heart of the issue. All I knew was that he wanted to wear dresses and I didn't know how to tell that to the world. I made the decision

to homeschool Sage until I felt he was mature enough to express his choices in his own words and be able to share that with inquiring parties. I have never been sure that Sage has an answer prepared that would satisfy those who would interrogate, but regardless of his preparedness, in April 2010, he started school.

By the time it came for Sage to enrol in school, it was pretty obvious his affinity for all things girlie wasn't letting up. He had also begun to express his feelings about being a girl, and saying he was a girl. Due to his learning disabilities, he was placed in a specialized school which had a team of professionals involved with the students, including a psychiatrist. Upon meeting the psychiatrist, Sage was given a diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder in the DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] IV, or more politely, transgendered. At this time, we made the collective decision that Sage would be registered in school as a female, and all staff and students would refer to her with the female pronoun and she would be given access to a private bathroom stall. Sage presented very feminine and the immediate assumption was that she was a regular 7-year-old girl. Over the next 2.5 years, the fact that she was born male was considered private information and only revealed to teaching staff on a strict need-to-know basis.

"I don't like it. I don't like it at all, all this girl stuff. Girls' clothes, girls' toys. I don't like it." Sage's father had immigrated to Canada from a conservative Eastern European country entrenched in traditional heteronormative customs. Boys were boys; girls were girls. End of story. Any individual presenting variation on the gender binary expression was called a freak, and though we were

on the other side of the world, his son was wearing dresses, which was a source of embarrassment and humiliation. Without any experience or information to counter this idea, the best I could offer was this: “Look at it this way - if it is a phase, don’t pay attention to it and it will eventually pass; if it is not a phase, well, this is your son and I know you will love him just the way he is.” Today we know that if this is a phase, it is a very, very long phase and has yet to pass. As it stands, Sage’s father still uses the male pronoun and is a loving parent.

Near the end of her grade 3 year, I received a phone call from Sage’s teacher that started with the words, “I am calling you to tell you about a sensitive incident that happened with Sage today at school, but before we go any further, I also want to tell you that everything turned out ok.” I exhaled the breath I had been holding and the teacher proceeded to recreate the events of the day. What the teacher had come to understand is that Sage had told another student, a boy, that she had ‘boy parts,’ and then immediately tried to recoil her words. The teacher was made aware of this conversation and was able to run interference. She asked Sage why she had said that to the other student, and Sage said, ‘Because private parts are funny.’ In debriefing with the other student, the other student had brushed off the comment by saying, ‘It is not like it is true anyway.’ Intentionally or not, Sage had outted herself, but her secret was rapidly covered up and no other similar incidents were reported that year.

A message on the answering machine from Sage’s principal at the beginning of the school year asking me to call her back concerning an issue with Sage started the engine of my “what if” generator. I was relieved to find out the

call was unrelated to Sage's gender. I took the opportunity to ask her about her observations of Sage in school, and how she seemed to be doing. The principal shared that in the schoolyard Sage appeared to take a leadership role and was quite forward in her social interactions. This brought me some relief and I felt I could relax a little knowing that the Sage I know - a friendly, outgoing, generous child with a strong sense of self - is still finding the space to be herself at school. Although she will say she "hates school," it seems to be the structure and expectation of school work that is the source of her dislike, rather than social complications.

"Do you want other people to know you have a penis?" In preparation for writing this narrative, I realized I had not yet asked Sage that important question. My question was an earnest one, as I had no idea what her answer would be. Without hesitation, she answered with a simple "Yes." After a moment's pause, she continued, "I do want people to know but I don't want them to laugh at me."

I was somewhat taken aback, as her words sat beside the unspoken ones in my mind: "I want people to know, too, but I am afraid they will hurt you." She wriggled her body into her blankets and made it quite obvious she did not want to talk further at this time. I gave her a hug and a kiss, tucked her in, told her I loved her and said "goodnight." After 9 years of being her mother, I can say that I know Sage well enough to know that you can't push her to talk about things she doesn't want to talk about. As it stands today, this is the last conversation Sage and I have had on the topic of deciding if her private parts should become public knowledge.

In Sage I see an example of a child who understands that gender is not something as cut and dry as society would have us believe. I also see a child on the verge of wanting to come out and tell the world who she is. As her mother, I am still not entirely sure how we will navigate this, but I must remember we have made it this far and the world hasn't collapsed upon us yet. When it comes down to it, Sage's journey isn't that much different than the rest of us. She is a young person, growing into herself, knowing that she wants to be true to herself and share herself with the world, but not be ridiculed for it. Maybe what is behind that journey are just details. I was talking with my partner the other day and expressing my anxiety about her coming out. He responded with a relaxed, 'I'm thinking it's going to stress you out way more than her.' It brings me some relief to relax into these words a little and know they probably hold true.

Thomas's family. I remember the day I found out I was pregnant. It was a few days away from my wedding day. I don't know how I knew that I was pregnant, but I just knew. For some reason I also knew I was carrying a girl. Maybe it was because I was experiencing the same kind of early pregnancies signs that I had experienced with Kerri and so I assumed I would be having another girl. Or maybe it was because my dad had three girls, his brother had three girls and his sister had two girls. Girls run in our family. It doesn't really matter how I knew or even that I knew, I just knew. And I was very excited at the idea of having a little girl with long red curly hair. I had ringlets and brown eyes when I was a baby girl and everyone loved me and thought I was so cute. I

already had a beautiful blonde daughter and I just knew this one would have red hair. And, I was right.

Little red-headed Hayley was born on May 1st, 2001. My sisters were with me during the birth and it was Sherri who first knew the baby was a girl. She announced the birth and gender by asking, 'Is the cord supposed to be wrapped around her neck?' This was probably not the most reassuring way to introduce the new arrival to the mother. But Hayley was perfectly fine as she curled up in her bassinet with her beautiful brown eyes wide open. She was absolutely alert and you could tell even then that nothing was going to get past her. It has been that way ever since. Kerri was so excited and proud to have a new baby sister. She was six at the time and so the novelty wore off fast as she reassumed her life of playing with her friends during the warm summer days that year. But on the day she came to the hospital to meet Hayley she wore her new "big sister" dress to welcome her new little sister into her world.

Hayley was three years old when we moved to Kamloops. We had lots of family in Kamloops and they all doted on Hayley. But then of course, how could you not? Hayley was a beautiful mixture of sweet and calm and rough and tumble. Kamloops has wonderful weather and Hayley would be outside all day long in her t-shirt, panties and rubber boots playing with swords.

Her favourite colours were pinks and purples, and her favourite toys were weapons and remote control trucks. It seemed like a bit of a contradiction, but I had been a tomboy when I was little, and so I actually found it easy to accept Hayley for whoever or however she wanted to be. I remember trips to

MacDonalds, as most busy families remember, and from the backseat of the car I would hear, 'Boy toy please, Mom.'

After a couple of years in Kamloops, we came back to Edmonton. Pinks faded to blues. Her long hair was always tied back. And she would play dress up in daddy's army gear. Her girly look was slowly transforming. We would go shopping for clothes and she would want to go into the boys' sections. This often ended in a fight where I would stand firmly in the girls' section and Hayley would stand firmly in the boys' section. My first attempt at a compromise was giving in to boys' t-shirts. It was too stressful to stand my ground on clothing choices, and I didn't want to fight with my daughter. It was stressful on both of us. Not long after the boys' t-shirts came boys' hoodies and then boys' pants and shorts. And underneath all of this she still wore panties. Maybe that was my little victory in the clothing battle.

When Hayley turned ten, she decided she wanted her long beautiful red curls cut off. I remember that day quite clearly. I wanted her to keep her long red hair. It was perfect. That long red hair symbolized the daughter I had dreamed I was carrying ten years prior. But I also knew not to argue with Hayley. If I did, she would just turn to one of her aunties and they would convince me. Hayley also told me that she wanted to donate her hair to Kids with Cancer. How can a mother possibly argue with that? Hayley would be able to grow her hair back but there were so many little girls out there that couldn't grow their hair and my daughter wanted to help them. When they cut long hair short, they first put it in a ponytail and then they cut off the ponytail. It can be quite traumatic. Everyone

thought I was going to cry, but I didn't. Hayley was so happy to trade in her long hair for short hair. But she was less happy when the cut they gave her ended up being a girl's cut. But she soon learned to style it more like a boy's cut. At this time, Hayley was still a girl but very much expressing as a boy. Everything had slowly become boyish: the pants, the shirts, the ball caps, the glasses, the haircut. I had become accustomed to the idea that Hayley was an extreme tomboy, and I really didn't think anything of it. As I mentioned, I was a tomboy growing up as well. This was familiar territory for me.

I look back now at pictures of the transformation and I am sure Hayley knew she was a boy but didn't know how to say it. At the age of eleven, Hayley started to suffer severe anxiety. At the time I related the anxiety to her father leaving. Her father had been her buddy. They wrestled and played and horsed around all the time. And all of a sudden he was gone. Anxiety was understandable. I think back now and I know that some of the anxiety was probably related to feeling that she was supposed to be a boy, but not knowing what to do with those feelings. I remember one night Hayley crawled into bed with me. I didn't really think anything of it because her anxiety would often lead her into my room. But our conversation this night was different. We had previously had lots of talks about Hayley looking like a boy and acting like a boy but on this night, when Hayley crawled into bed, there was more on her mind than boys' clothes and more than video games with shooting and violence. This night Hayley followed her statement, "Mom, we need to talk" with "Mom, I want to be a boy."

I wasn't quite sure what this meant. In my head I said, "Oh, wow. This is big. I probably shouldn't over-react." I knew in that very moment that this was different than when we found ourselves standing in the girls' section of the store as Hayley stood in the boys' section. I knew it was going to be different than watching her pick up a sword or a toy truck at the toy store. I knew in that moment that I had been watching the slow transformation of my daughter becoming my son. I don't remember exactly what was said, but I do know that at one point I told her that it was ok to feel this way and that we would make this work so that she was happy.

I didn't have a clue that there was such a thing as transgender. Immediately the next morning I called my sister and said, 'Lee, what do I do? Hayley wants to be a boy.' Lee had suspected this a lot earlier than I had. Maybe I just didn't want to see it because Hayley was my baby girl. I wasn't upset though. I was just confused and worried that I wouldn't know what to do to support my child. But because I loved her to pieces, it was actually easy to accept. I wasn't losing a child. My daughter was just becoming my son.

I knew I needed to figure out how to support Hayley in being a boy. Hayley was able to guide me a bit on this. She had obviously given this some thought and her first step in becoming a boy was to change her name. My sister also was able to guide me a bit on this. It was through my sister's contacts that I was introduced to the Institute for Sexual Minorities Studies and Services. This was the beginning of a journey that I never expected I would be taking on that beautiful warm spring day when Hayley Jane, who unbeknownst to me was

actually Thomas Michael, my beautiful red-haired, brown-eyed baby made his entrance into this world.

The Themes and Constructs

How do you extract themes from the lived experiences of people? At first it seemed too analytical, too sterile, and too impersonal. I struggled with this. I read and reread the field texts. I read and reread the research texts and themes I had created during the interview process. I thought and rethought about how I wanted to present the data. I clustered ideas and then took apart the clusters. I started writing many times and deleted it just about as many times. I have felt honoured and privileged to interact with these families and now that it was time to bring it all together and wrap it up neatly, I was feeling intimidated and nervous. I wanted to do them justice. I wanted to ensure that how I represent them is with the same grace and integrity as they represented themselves. I knew I needed to blend the personal with the theoretical. I knew I would share my interpretations with the families, but even that felt intimidating. I was acutely aware that as they read what I had written, they would also come to know me differently. After what seemed like a never ending cycle of writing, researching, revising, reading and sharing, this is the final document.

As you read through, you should note that the gender used to discuss the children is the gender that they are today, their self-affirmed gender, which is different from the gender they were assigned at birth and the gender you were introduced to them as in the narratives by the mothers. Nico and Thomas are both males and Sage is a female.

We can conceptualize gender differently.

I am a girl
(Pink bows
Fancy dresses
Crafts and Barbie dolls)
With a penis.

I am a boy
(T-shirts and hoodies
Swords and army trucks)
With a breast binder.

Don't box anything in anymore.
Try to leave it open.
No labels.

I don't know.

Long hair.
Short hair.
Fashion.
Voice.
Rough and tumble.
Quiet.

Just people.

Our bodies.
What we are given at birth.
Our parts.
Doesn't mean our gender.

I want to be who I am.

Me.

Gender is commonly understood as a male/female binary construct. Gender is also commonly understood as something that is detectable at birth: a penis signifies the birth of a boy and a vagina signifies the birth of a girl. In order to create inclusive educational spaces for children who do not conform to gender

stereotypes we must move beyond the commonly understood conceptions of gender.

Gender is not found between your legs. The concept that gender identity is known at an early age is not new (Blaise, 2005; Coleman et al., 2012; Ehrensaft, 2008; Nelson, 2011). According to Ehrensaft (2008), "[I]ndividuals are the experts of their own gender identities and while gender expressions may vary over time, gender identities show more temporal consistency" (p. 339). The child participants interviewed, each acknowledged that they knew very early on that their gender assigned at birth, according to what was found between their legs, did not match their internal sense of gender. It was at the age of three that Sage was diagnosed with Gender Identity Disorder. Although Sage's gender expressions can vary, when asked at the age of 8 if she *wanted* to be a girl or if she *feels* like a girl, Sage answered assuredly as an expert on her own gender identity: *"I am a girl."*

Sage no longer needed to think about whether being a girl is about *wanting* to be a girl. And she is no longer thinking about whether being a girl is about *feeling* like a girl. Instead, her answer is indicative of simply who and how she is in this world. She *is* a girl. Self-affirmation of gender had already occurred and at that moment in time, Sage knew herself as a girl. Ehrensaft (2011) recognizes that self-affirmation can occur and re-occur over a period of time as children come to know their gendered selves. More recently, at the age of nine, Sage's mother reports that Sage has begun to verbalize her gender a bit differently:

> *"I am half girl and half boy." These are the words I overheard Sage say a little while back to her siblings. I didn't catch the context of their conversation, but the words were clear. Language challenges aside, Sage was not in denial about her dual gendered nature, and on her own she had found a way to express to others who she is. Unfortunately, "half and half" is not a box you can check on the form that asks you to pick one: male or female.*

Sage's assertion that she is half and half is consistent with Ehrensaft's (2011) categorization of *gender hybrids*: children who assert themselves to be both boy and girl. Ehrensaft goes on to provide the narrower category of a *gender prius*: a child who considers their gendered boy/girl combination to be half boy and half girl.

Another one of the participants, Thomas, when asked the age he knew he was a boy and not a girl as was determined at birth, answered with ease: *"I just always knew."* Thomas does not remember a time where he did not think of himself as a boy. His mother, Donna, reports that early on, she simply thought of her son as a tomboy. She now recognizes that her son was well aware of his sense of gender, but at a young age he lacked a way of expressing his knowing to the rest of the world: *"He believed that he was a boy, but he didn't know how to tell us."*

It is easier for these parents to understand gender differently now as compared to how they used to conceptualize it. From the moment a baby is born, we generally understand the gender of the infant to be determined by genitalia:

> *So Blake laid Nico on my chest and the way he did it Nico's body was sort of tucked up under my arms so no one saw. For ten minutes we just had a baby and we didn't need to know. It didn't matter. It was somebody in the room, I think a nurse, who asked what we had. We looked to see and from that moment on we knew we had a girl.*

Sam, Nico's mother, identifies what each one of the parents in the study did to see if they had a baby boy or girl; they peered between their baby's legs. This is not shocking or uncommon. Doctors, nurses and parents all check between the baby's legs to discover a penis for verification of a boy or a vagina for verification of a girl. It is understood, and rarely challenged in our society, that children are born with a sexual identity that leads them into gender roles (Blaise, 2009). It is rare that a baby is born and gender is not one of the first attributes assigned. While pregnant, the word *baby* is the noun used to identify the being growing inside the mother. Once the child has left the womb, the word *baby* becomes an adjective to describe the more important noun: *boy* or *girl*. The baby is no longer simply a baby, but has officially become a *baby boy* or a *baby girl*. One of the children in the study suggests that everyone should just be born a person and that we should let go of attributing gender to a newborn: *"Let's just say you were born a 'person'. Then later you could choose which gender suited you and what you wanted."*

The now quite famous couple in Toronto, Ontario who chose not to divulge the gender of their newborn baby three years ago was reported to have sent out an announcement that read, "We've decided not to share Storm's sex for

now — a tribute to freedom and choice in place of limitation" (Poisson, 2011, ¶9). This choice was met with mixed responses, although most were unfavourable claiming that a newborn should not be used in a social experiment (Poisson, 2011).

Although the reframing of how we come to understand gender has not necessarily been an easy process for the parents, there is recognition among them that gender is not found between your legs. As one of the fathers discusses, gender is a performance of what is already internally known: *"Gender is an internal sense. It's part of your outward projection of who you think you are in the world. It has been referred to as your sense of 'male-ness' or 'female-ness'."* Some children have this internal sense quite early in their lives (Ehrensaft, 2011). Prior to entering into the school system; prior to determining whether to line up in the boys' or girls' line when the teacher commands *"Girls line up here; boys line up there";* prior to standing in front of the bathroom doors trying to figure out which bathroom to use, these children have already developed a sense of who they are as gendered beings (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Dykstra, 2005).

There are tell tale signs of gender nonconformity. When I asked the adult participants of the study to discuss the emergence of their child's gender, they all told me stories of their child that depicted gendered behaviour that could be viewed as contradictory to their child's assigned gender. I heard stories of the gender assigned girl wanting to shop in the boy's department and wanting to play with toy trucks and cars. I heard stories of the gender assigned boy wanting to be

the princess. Tempest, the mother of Sage, the only girl in the study, noted that her daughter's gender became evident at about the age of three:

> *The initial stages of her transgender identity were demonstrated with an attraction to stereotypical female clothing (pink, bows, fancy dresses) and toys (crafts, Barbie dolls, aesthetics). In June 2007, I had brought home a pair of 'Cinderella style' shoes to wear as a bridesmaid. When Sage saw those shoes, even though she was not yet very verbal, she started flapping her arms excitedly and shouting, "My shoes! My shoes!!" Shortly thereafter someone dropped off a bag of hand-me-downs, and Sage pilfered out all the girlie clothes and would wear them until they were ragged. She would often refuse to take the dresses off at night, and I had to make a deal to wash them while she was sleeping.*

Donna noted that her son was about the same age when she first recollects that he began demonstrating gender in a manner that would be more aligned with boy behaviour:

> *From the age of 3 or 4 years old, he was playing with the "boy" toys. He didn't want dolls, he wanted swords and he wanted trucks. At McDonalds, he would request the boy toy.*

Sam said that they experienced an ebb and flow between behaviour that conformed to the gender assigned at birth and behaviour that did not conform. She noted that at times the ebb and flow was confusing to her even though his typical choices were aligned with choices that would normally be ascribed to boys:

> *As time went on Nico showed us that what we believed wasn't necessarily true for him. His identity, although being raised and socialized as a female, what we expect females to choose or like or feel an affinity for, that wasn't really what he felt. He would choose typically boy toys. He would vocalize that he was a boy and he would ask when he gets to be a boy. He wanted to know when it would be his turn to be a boy.*

We know what it means to have a boy and what it means to have a girl. When this normative conception is disrupted, as Sam noted, it can be very confusing. Hill and Menvielle (2009) have confirmed that it is likely not the child who is confused; rather, it is the parent. This makes sense. Parents, as well as others, can be left feeling very confused in a world that has adopted a "socialization model that promotes gender conformity as normality and vilifies parents who defy this model" (Ehrensaft, 2011, p. 47).

Disrupting personal understandings and redefining familial relationships is part of (re)conceptualizing gender. The fact that we all have ideas of what it means to be a boy or a girl, is the direct result of the normative gender socialization model being alive and thriving. We know what it means to have a son and what it means to have a daughter. We are socialized to understand what it means to be male and what it means to be female. What is less known is what does it mean to have a biologically gendered male who is your daughter or a biologically gendered female who is your son (Hill and Menvielle, 2009). Where past supports for families have been based in reparative approaches that attempt to align the child's gender expression with birth gender, Lev (2004) proposes a four-

stage model that moves a family through disclosure to discovering a new way of being a family. The final stage in the model recognizes that one must balance the needs of the children and the family at the same time. This final stage recognizes that when a child does not conform to gender expectations, familial relationships shift. Finding the new familial relationship can be difficult when an understanding of gender nonconformity is absent:

> *We saw that we had this female child and there's a whole lot of gender expectations that go along with that. We definitely tried to influence some choices at times, but it was always Nico who would bring us back. He was persistent. He would say I don't want to wear that outfit or I don't what to wear that shirt or I'm not interested in that toy or these books.*

Even when the children do not ascribe to the gender expectations and the parents have provided a safe place for the child to demonstrate gender that is aligned with the child's sense of gender, parents still noted that they struggled to break free of the new gendered expectations. Tempest spoke of Sage stripping her shirt off, like her brother, to engage in play. Tempest informed Sage that one of the rules that society has placed on girls is that they do not play without their shirts. This left Tempest questioning her decision: *"I am wondering if I am not also perpetuating the gender binary by correcting her on modesty."*

Our personal understandings of what it means to be male or female are often acted upon in action and voice (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2011; Kane, 2012). The parents noted that they changed how they referred to their

children. This change was not just in name or in choice of pronouns, but it was also in terms of endearment. For one family, sweetie became buddy.

> *I think our language shows the way we see gender. Language is different for the feminine and the masculine. It just kind of floods you just the way you think of a girl. I know already since Nico has changed, since Nico is a boy and we know, that we talk to him differently.*

Each of the parents spoke about believing certain things about their gendered child and that these things needed to shift as they came to know their child differently. It is not easy to make these shifts (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2011; Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson & Diamond, 2013). What we know about gender is layered with personal and societal expectations. Therefore the shift takes time. It requires unpacking much of what has been learned about gender through years of indirect and direct gender training. Sam speaks about how she gently prepared herself for acceptance by easing herself into being able to speak about Nico being a boy: *"I would say, 'I think maybe she is a boy'. Or, 'I think Nico's a boy.' Even for myself to hear it in preparation."* Sam needed to say it cautiously at first, and still with the female pronoun or no pronoun, in order to prepare herself to say it with the firmness and exactness that was going to be required in future conversations.

Donna shares a similar story about adopting new language with regard to her son: *"His transition has been so strong in that sense, he's asked me not to refer to his past. 'When you talk about me don't say when you were a girl,' he*

says to me." For Donna this has not been easy. Her son was born Hayley and for many years Donna raised Hayley:

> *Now I say, "when you were a child" or "when you were little," or "when you were 3." I have to take gender out of my comment when I'm talking about when he was a baby, or I have to say "he" or "when Thomas was born". This is really hard for me to say because it wasn't Thomas that was born. It was Hayley that was born. But I'm getting better at that.*

We have learned much of what we know about being parents, about raising children, about gender from the stories that are presented to us. These stories are presented in many ways. Sometimes they come to us through the media, through our reading or through our own families. Breaking away from these stories requires considerable effort and can be equated with the process of grieving. The literature supports the idea that parents can have feelings of loss and bereavement (Ehrensaft, 2012; Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Menvielle 2012; Vandenburgh, 2009). These feelings were discussed by Sam:

> *You grieve the loss of something that you didn't even know you had because we don't know what our children are going to be. We have this idea, but mine wasn't a fully formed idea of what Nico would be. I just thought I had a girl and that's all I knew. And I thought that I had two daughters because I had a baby, too. I thought that there was something special about sisters. I have a sister. When that is taken away from you, you feel like you're floundering. It's kind of like you had this person and now the way that they are showing you how they are going to move*

through life, the choices that they are making, it's not what you thought. There were a lot of feelings around that grief.

Nico's father discussed the disruption to their personal understandings of what it meant to have a daughter who transitioned to become a son. Their story, which has become quite public, has been portrayed to the world as quite a simple journey. He asserts that, although to outsiders it may appear as though the transition has been smooth and everyone has been accepting, it has not been all sunshine and roses. He has also experienced a sense of loss. The loss has not necessarily been about losing a daughter, but rather it is a loss of security. There is security in the known, and the path they are travelling is still quite unknown. Therefore the feelings of security are not as strong:

Everyone, especially in media, are like, "easy transition, no problems, no issues." Well it's tough. You have to really wrap your mind around it and that doesn't come without some tears shed, some very real gut wrenching emotion about 'is my kid gonna be okay?'

What Blake is expressing has been found to be quite common among parents of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. Parents worry about their child's safety and about how their children will fit into mainstream society (Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Menvielle, 2012). The parents worry that the social surroundings will be intolerant of the gender nonconforming choices that their child is making and that this intolerance would impact the child's sense of self. Research also confirmed that what Blake has felt about Nico with regard to

future opportunities is not uncommon (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Hill & Menvielle 2009).

While at first the construct of familial relationships may seem distant from the thesis topic of educational experiences, it is not. Familial relationships enter into schools and can be bound in the construction of gender. Parents can have different expectations for the schooling of their daughters or sons. For instance, sons may be guided toward hard sciences and technologies while daughters may be guided toward the social sciences. It may be expected that sons engage in competitive sports at school while the same expectations may not be held for daughters. Blake may not have had ideas about what his birth born daughter should do as a female in our society. But when the daughter transitioned into a son, he was initially concerned about what his transgender son would be able to do*: "I'm thinking, 'what can Nico be when he grows up? What jobs are available?'"*

Besides parental expectations, familial relationships also enter into schooling when brothers and sisters attending school together. Brothers and sisters can share a bond regardless of gender, and they are often there to support their siblings throughout life. The literature has suggested that siblings may experience difficulties in supporting their brother or sister who does not conform to gender stereotypes or personal difficulties because of their brother or sister (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2011). According to the parents in this study, the siblings have been fully supportive. The support offered by Sage's younger brother, Rowan, during a playtime activity exemplifies acceptance: *"Sage was*

told, 'No, you're not a princess, you're a prince.' Rowan quickly backed her up with 'No, she's a princess.'" This kind of loyal support for siblings, as shown here by Rowan, is noted in the literature (Ehrensaft, 2011). Tempest adds:

> *In our home, all friends and family members refer to Sage with the female pronoun. Both of her younger siblings refer to her as their sister, and even though they know she has a penis, there is never any challenge of her gender. For the most part her gender is a non-topic.*

Another family demonstrated sibling acceptance to the point where it was the younger sibling who urged her parents to rethink their views on their daughter simply being a tomboy:

> *Alex was going to sleep. We always tucked them in, sung them goodnight, that kind of stuff, and Alex said, "Nico wants me to tell you that he's actually a boy." We were like, "Yeah, we know that" because he had been kind of expressing that. And Alex said, 'No. He really is and he really needs you to know.'*

These kinds of stories of the relationship between siblings are not just stories confined to the four walls of the family home. A sibling's story spills into the school and onto the playground. The story can permeate all aspects of their lives: *"Alex needed to tell her class that her sister was really her brother"* since Alex and Nico went to the same school. Nico's open transition left Alex feeling the need to let her class know about Nico being a boy. With the support of her teacher, Alex successfully spoke to her class on her own.

Brothers and sisters are often our most long lasting relationships and without being able to trust your sibling and experience their acceptance, the world can start to feel bleak (Ehrensaft, 2011). For whatever reason, the siblings in the study have been reported to demonstrate early and quite easy acceptance of the gender nonconforming behaviours of their brothers and sisters who are lucky, as this is not always the case.

Challenging societal understandings is also part of (re)conceptualizing gender. Everywhere we go, we are bombarded by the stereotypes of what it means to be a boy or a girl. Research indicates that knowledge of gender stereotypes often becomes known automatically and does not require direct teaching (Banse, Gawronski, Rebetez, Gutt & Morton, 2010). We grow up knowing that boys like blue and girls like pink. We learn quickly that boys like to play with trucks and girls like to play with dolls. We even have brainteasers that clearly point out society's thinking about men and women. Brainteasers such as:

> *A boy is injured in a car accident while driving with his father. His father is instantly killed. The boy is rushed to the hospital. When he reaches the operating room, the surgeon takes one look at him and says, "I can't operate. He's my son." How is this so?*

Many people are dumbfounded. Many people can't understand how it is possible since the father was reportedly killed instantly. Many people see the word surgeon and automatically think of a male.

Subtly and not so subtly, society teaches us what it means to be a boy or a girl. "It is often assumed that one role of communities is to help children learn to

fit into their expected gender roles and that in failing to do so the children will be the subject of ridicule, hostility and even ostracism" (Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services, 2012, p. 4). This assumption is based on the child being the problem as opposed to society's lack of acceptance of difference being the problem. There is a recognition that societal understandings of gender must shift in order to create space for diversity of genders (Riley, Clemson, Sitharthan & Diamond, 2013). The participants in the study discussed societal understandings of gender and how these understandings impact them in their daily lives. Thomas summed up his views on societal understandings of boys and girls with the following:

> *Some guys will look at a girl and think, 'Oh they talk a lot. They are crabby all the time. They are just constantly talking about shoes or fashion or the latest boy band.' And the guys are just like, 'Hey. What's up.' Some people think that and then some girls will look at a guy and think he probably won't express his feelings or won't want to play with girls. It's just labels and people shouldn't put labels on other humans—they're just humans.*

Labels are difficult to disengage from because they provide us with information. The label on the food product can tell us about our sodium intake or caloric intake. The label on a house, also known as an address, can tell us where to find the house in a city. The label on the car can tell us about the driver's income. We live in a society of label readers, and that makes it even more difficult to disengage from labeling people.

Tempest struggles to know when to impose societal expectations and when not to impose. In her narrative she discusses the day she allowed Sage to wear a dress to school and the struggle she experienced in making that decision. Tempest further illustrates this struggle by sharing the following exchange:

> *'Sage, you NEED to put a shirt on, even just one of the sports bras I bought you,' I expressed with frustration, yet again, as she came upstairs for a bedtime snack in only pajama bottoms.*
>
> *'Why?'*
>
> *'Because girls need to keep their nipples covered.'*
>
> *'But it is itchy!'*
>
> *Sage went downstairs and reluctantly submitted to my request. Her three letter word retort catalyzed an unexpected thought reaction in my mind. Why did she have to wear a garment that interfered with her comfort when her brother did not? Her chest was just as flat and would not be developing breasts like the other 9 year old girls in her class, and yet I was being very insistent that she adhere to the societal expectations of other girls her age. The raw truth is, however, that she is NOT like other girls her age and never will be. I think I had somehow been overlooking this, delaying the inevitability of the day her classmates learn that she is distinctly unique. She is getting to the age where others will begin to start picking up on it, as they all begin to enter puberty. Until now, my approach to Sage's clothing and pronoun choice had been very hands-off, so why had I suddenly become so adamant about her*

> *maintaining her clichéd femininity? The answer is simple: because I am deeply concerned for her safety. As an awkward girl, she may still be susceptible to bullying, but as an M-F transperson, the risk of violence towards her statistically increases dramatically. These are my struggles today.*

These fears are understandable. "Children who have nonconforming gender identities and expressions or who are lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender or questioning/queer (LGBTQ) are common targets of bullying and harassment" (Slesaransky-Poe, Ruzzi, Dimedio & Stanley, 2013, p. 30). Indeed, this is indicated in a 2009 survey of Canadian schools:

> [It] has provided statistically-tested confirmation of what LGBTQ students and their allies have known for some time: that despite Canada's leadership on human rights for LGBTQ people, a great deal of verbal and physical homophobic harassment goes on in Canadian schools, that they are more likely to be aware of it than are other students who are not its main targets, and that the response has more often than not been inadequate. (Youth Speak Up, 2009, para. 37)

A survey conducted in the United States confirms that, even in elementary schools, children who do not conform to gender stereotypes feel less safe than their gender conforming classmates (Slesaransky-Poe, Ruzzi, Dimedio & Stanley, 2013). In a national climate survey on homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in Canadian schools, it was reported that "school climates for bisexual and trans students are equally – and in some ways even more – hostile" (Egale, 2011, p. 19)

than they are for gay and lesbian students. Even though the parents in my research expressed fears about how the gender non-conforming behaviours would affect their children in schools, they have acknowledged that to date, their fears have often been unfounded. There were sometimes anticipated problems based on their own personal understandings of what it means to be a birth assigned boy presenting as a female or a birth assigned female presenting as a male, but their experiences in the schools thus far have been encouraging. They cannot know for sure if that will continue to be the same as the children continue through schooling.

As Tempest noted, when societal understandings are challenged, safety can often become a focus of concern. Whereas many parents will worry about the safety of their children, Tempest commented that the lens of gender nonconformity confounds discussions of safety:

> *I keep holding my breath thinking that something terrible is about to happen. I would think that when Sage comes home in a bad mood, it must mean that she has been bullied or something happened. But it's not. She just doesn't like school! She's just a normal kid!*

Although Sage is not public as a transgender child in the school, Tempest worries about what will happen if the story gets out there.

Blake and Sam have lived through the 'outing' more than once with their son because he changed schools. The last time Nico came "out" at school was in grade six. Initially, Nico had purposefully decided not to be public as a transgender male in the school. He wanted to just be a boy. But that proved to be

too difficult and he needed people to know - know why he didn't change openly for phys-ed, know why his first crush was more complicated. He didn't need to explain why, he just needed people in his circle, his school circle, to have a greater context. Blake wanted to navigate the coming-out process similarly to what had been successful in grade four:

> *And there was a family fight about it. I'm not afraid to say that, you know, he was mad. He was angry. My wife was siding with him openly and in front of me and in our family dynamic, I can't stand when the kids see us divided. So there was a big fight about it and at the end Nico did cry and he was upset. I did come to him after and say, 'I'm not upset that you want to be open about it, I just want you to understand that you have to give us time. You have to help us. You have to give people in the world the best opportunity to act appropriately. And when you just spring something on them, that might not be the best route to success.'*

Blake coached Nico to recognize that safety, both emotional and physical safety, could be impacted by his choice to reveal his gender identity. Blake's choice to navigate the coming-out process more strategically has nothing to do with hiding or being secretive. He believes that secrets can be destructive and may not allow society to grow into new understandings. However, he also believes that there is a need to orchestrate the telling of personal truths to allow for personal safety. Blake is proud of his son and his willingness to step into territory that has not been well tread. Poking holes in the societal understandings is not an easy position to be in, let alone when you are in elementary school:

I think the world is lacking people with the courage to make the world a better place. We talk about the pride that we have in him as being courageous, as being a leader, as being a trailblazer. He certainly has a role to play in making life better for other people in general and people like himself specifically.

Most parents have expectations of their children and these expectations often conform to the expectations that we have come to know through our interactions with society. Society often dictates how we interact with the expectations. In a study that Hill and Menvielle (2009) conducted it was found that parents may choose to police their child's choices around gender. Sam talks about her experience with policing as she struggled with disapproval when Nico would make choices that more closely aligned him with his sense of being a male prior to her understanding that Nico is male:

As Nico got older and was in grade school he would sometimes come out dressed, ready for school, and I would have a frown or would just have a disapproving look. I would say, "So, this is what you're going to wear to school?" It was still giving him a choice, but it was really disapproval.

Blake did not appear to have the same difficulties with Nico's choice of clothing and Sam helped Blake to see the societal influences that were also impacting his way of thinking:

I asked if it was the other way around would he be doing the same for a son. Would he be taking a boy to the girl's section and picking out clothes. It's obvious in our society that that's not okay. There is

> *something about a girl wanting to be a boy and it being okay. We don't even really think about it. We just know that there is a naturalness to it and that not as much is going to hit the fan if this little girl is trying out boy stuff. My intuition told me that in most cases it wouldn't be as favoured for boys to choose feminine things.*

Here Sam is speaking out loud, reflecting what has been written about in the literature. It is often easier for people to accept a girl who does not ascribe to the typical gender stereotypes for females as opposed to accepting a boy who does not ascribe to the typical gender stereotypes for males (Menvielle, 2012). Research has found that there is an increase in bullying experienced by boys who do not conform to gender stereotypes as opposed to girls (Roberts, Rosario, Slopen, Calzo & Austin, 2013). Society has many female role models who have not been overtly feminine, but much fewer role models of males who have not been overtly masculine. In Sam's response to Blake she was recognizing that she wanted to create a space where Nico could freely express who he is as a person regardless of how he expressed his gender:

> *I don't want that pressure put on him that he needs to be some kind of societal idea about what a man is. I'm cognizant of that because just as I had all those ideas about what a daughter means, we have all those ideas about what it means to be a man. Right now it's almost unfair to Nico because he was socialized female so there are lots of things that happened to him from birth to age nine when he fully transitioned. Those things*

> *might not have formed in him and it's okay that he wouldn't have those ideas about what a man is or what a boy is.*

Nico had come up with an idea of what it meant to be a boy. He had constructed a boy identity that was quite strict in how he would express himself, and he held this boy identity in opposition to a girl identity. His parents helped him and continue to help him to see that society does not need to dictate what it means to be a boy:

> *When it was really imminent, and he needed to transition, at the beginning it had to be very black and white about what a man is and what he thought men did and what boys do. It was us saying, 'Not all boys like to play sports.' And he's one of them. He is not a typical athlete, but he likes comics. And he likes pink and purple. He picked a bunch of purple typical kinds of things for school, whether it is a binder or a notebook and he doesn't care. There was a time he would not pick those colours because they were associated with being a girl.*

Nico came to understand societal expectations of gender quite differently: *"It's just labels and people shouldn't put labels on other humans. They're just humans."* Nico has been able to move away from what society expects of him as a boy and embrace his own preferences regardless of their association with genders.

As noted earlier, societal expectations impact our way of thinking about safety and gender. Tempest is aware that she is more alert to Sage and her expression of gender than she is with her other children. This can be equated to the secret of Sage's gender and the desire to protect Sage from consequences

should someone discover her birth gender when she is engaged in behaviour that society generally attributes to females:

> *It has been brought up that she shows more physical affection than what is appropriate for her age. If Rowan (Tempest's son) was the same age and he kissed someone on the bus, I wouldn't have developed the same level of anxiety as I did for Sage. I know that there could be bigger repercussions, but everything has been okay.*

Although most experiences have been good with the school population, Tempest notes that it has not been without a few bumps along the road:

> *Initially, when Sage was still in preschool, it was reported that two families pulled their children from the school because they were uncomfortable with Sage's cross-dressing. It was said that one boy had asked his mom to wear a dress to school because Sage did, and the boy's mother did not approve of this request.*

These kinds of responses are similar to those that were commonly experienced by people identifying as members of the LGBTQ population when people first starting to openly identify as members of this population. There were others who tried to distance themselves so as not to be impacted by this person. It was as if you could *catch* LGBTQ or *catch* cross-dressing: *"That's what that story is about. It's about the thought of those parents fearing somehow that this child's influence could really spread."*

When presented with the opportunity to (re)conceptualize gender, the parents and children agreed that new ways of thinking about gender could have a

profound impact on how society creates gender(ed) expectations. After discussing gender continuum that runs from strong male influence to strong female influence, I presented the parents with an infinity symbol and asked how such a symbol could influence our thinking about gender. Garcia and Slesaransky-Poe (2010) suggest, "[T]here are infinite ways of being a boy or a girl and these ways change over time and space" (p. 249). Butler (1990) states that if "sex does not limit gender, then perhaps there are genders" (p. 152). The infinity symbol thus is a way to conceptualize to the multiplicity of gender and it serves as a visual reminder that we should not be "restricted by the apparent duality of sex" (Butler, 1990, p. 152). We discussed the infinity symbol as a symbol that allows an infinite positioning and, because of the multiple positions and the flow of the lines, it also allows for movement along the symbol. When asked to think about gender represented by the infinity symbol, Tempest replied:

> *Obviously, I think that would be an enormous breakthrough for our society. It would be naive not to think that it would take a long time for society to accept that shift in thinking. Beyond creating a more welcoming environment for those who do not fit into the gender binary, I feel it would present a safer arena for all individuals to explore the diversity of gender expression beyond what is dictated by our reproductive organs.*

Notwithstanding the time it would take for a societal shift in thinking from a system that views gender as a binary to a system that views gender as a malleable infinite, the infinity symbol was also recognized as an inclusive symbol of gender for more than just the exploration of gender expression. Blake related:

It actually works on a couple different levels. Certainly there's an infinite amount of possibilities, accommodations of you're straight but you're masculine, you're straight but you're feminine, you're gay but you're super macho, you're gay but you're super girlie. These can all be as an identified male and then the same for someone who identifies themselves as female. Then on top of that you can move around; your gender isn't necessarily a static. There are times when you're maybe more masculine and times when you're maybe not as masculine but doing maybe stereotypical masculine things. You can think of it almost in the three dimensional perspective. Binary is clearly a two dimensional concept, its either one or the other. They have improved upon the binary by saying, it's a spectrum, and you can move towards one end or the other and back and forth on that straight line. But if you think about that infinity symbol and you turn it on its side a little bit and look at it in the 3 dimensions, there is a lot of room to play. I like that idea, it's an interesting concept.

Sam recognized the infinity symbol as a representation of gender as an opportunity for people to choose where they view themselves on any given day at any given time.

I think that it would change how we think of humans period. If you can learn at an early age that sex and gender are separate but gender moves and it doesn't matter, then it's more about you as a person choosing how you want your gender to be viewed.

One of the children in the study backs up this idea of choice by saying it would be ideal if persons could just announce their genders to the world:

> *If they say that they are girls and if they feel like they are girls, then they're girls. So if one day someone came into the classroom and said, 'I'm a girl and my name's Sofia' or something like that, then that makes them a girl. If they want to be a girl and if they act like a girl, then they are a girl.*

The idea of self-affirming one's own gender seems simple enough and yet this idea becomes quite complicated when we think of the very simple act of using a public washroom and how this behaviour is controlled by society (Brill & Pepper, 2008). Using a public bathroom is an everyday occurrence for a child in the school system. In most cases, society regulates where we urinate. For children who do not conform to societal expectations of what it means to be a boy or what it means to be a girl, the regulations around bathroom usage create difficulties. The trouble with bathrooms was a strong common element that emerged in the research and was discussed by both the parents and the children. Children reported that there were times that they felt uncomfortable with the choices that were presented to them. Thomas expressed a sense of disapproval:

> *There was a problem before I became Thomas. I was going to the girl's washroom but I looked like a guy and everyone thought I was a guy. So I would go into the girl's washroom and I would get a really dirty look from one of the students. Her classroom was right across the hall from the washroom. I would just kind of shake my head and walk away. I hated*

having to say, 'I'm not a guy'. Because that didn't feel like I was saying the right thing. That's not what I wanted to have to say.

When Nico first transitioned, he was asked to use a staff washroom. Although he appreciated the cleanliness of it, he still expressed a sense of exclusion from his peers:

Before I transitioned I wanted to go into the boys' bathroom, and even after I transitioned I sometimes wanted to, but was asked to use a teacher bathroom. People who know, they're not mean or anything, but I guess sometimes it might feel awkward to them or to their parents.

The parents also reported on the problems that their children experienced with school bathrooms. At the most extreme, the parents reported that their children would choose to not use bathrooms at all at school because of a discomfort with the choices that they were given:

- *Thomas just stopped going to the bathroom. He would just hold it all day.*
- *I think that kids should be able to use whatever bathroom they are aligned with. This is tricky for Nico. He feels aligned with males, but has been socialized as a female. He's very use to clean bathrooms and male bathrooms have been a problem for him. Now that he can use the washroom he is aligned with, he is still sometimes holding it in.*

The experience of holding in urine is common for children who do not feel comfortable in a binary bathroom system (Brill & Pepper, 2008). For most

people, the use of the bathroom does not instigate an analysis of self. However, bathrooms "tell us who we are, where we belong, and where we don't belong" (Rasmussen, 2009, p. 440). When these spaces provide us with a story of self that is negative, the result can be deeply troubling. These kinds of troubles extend beyond bathrooms into the locker rooms. Physical education is a mandatory class in Alberta, until completion of Physical Education 10, which is typically completed in grade ten. Changing clothes for physical education classes is often recommended for the younger ages and generally becomes mandatory as the children move into junior and senior high school. As Blake notes, changing for physical education classes can be a problem:

> *There are no stalls in the locker rooms. Nico came to me and made a happy comment: "I'm going to just do gym in my regular clothes because there are not stalls." He was kind of happy about that, but immediately I knew that even though he's acting happy, he's not. Because it is bothersome. There's that constant reminder that you don't have the right parts. That's why the washroom, the change room and the locker room are all issues.*

At Thomas's school, there are stalls available in the locker rooms. However, even with the availability of stalls in the locker room, Thomas points out that the need to use the stalls still demonstrates difference:

> *I usually just go into one of the stalls or sometimes, like today, I just change my pants. It was nice because I didn't have to use one of the*

stalls. But I didn't change my shirt because of the binder. It is see through a bit.

The solutions do not seem that difficult to the parents or children:

- *So I think that a solution would be to have gender-neutral washrooms. Then there is no worry. And maybe if men and women were all together, hopefully everyone would be really clean.*
- *I would change boys' and girls' bathrooms into unisex bathrooms, and the locker rooms. It would just be a bunch of stalls with toilets.*
- *Appropriately discrete washrooms and change rooms are an imperative.*

There was also acknowledgement that although this seems like a simple solution to a problem that they believe everyone in this community experiences, this kind of change does not come without a price tag for the necessary renovations. However, as new schools are being constructed or renovated, gender neutral washrooms should be considered as the norm.

We cannot do it alone.

Safe, inclusive environments for all children.
How?

You sometimes feel like the crazy parent.
The over protective parent.
You're coming at them with the bathroom thing.
The pronoun change.
It is nice to have someone who is not part of your life.
Not part of your family.
Who can say:

"This is how we do it."

Educate younger children.
"My child isn't ready!"
"They're never gonna be ready!"
Can't shelter. Can't hide.

Talk to the principal.
Talk to the teacher.
Talk to the counsellor.
Educate the staff.

Not knowing how to deal with it.
Not being given the tools.
Then all they can do is maybe be silent.
And hope they can come up with a game plan.

Between
Now
and
Next time.

For children to come out openly as transgender is still considered new in our society and therefore many people are still unaware of how to support these children. It is not only the children who require support; all of those who will be working with these children require education (Riley, Clemson, & Sitharthan, 2013). Children require the support of their caregivers and yet what was evident from the parents in this study is that they were in very new and very unknown territory. They did not know how to support their children. Therefore, they also needed support. And in order for the children to have the kind of supports that are necessary for them to find space to be, become and belong (Grace, 2006) in the safety and security of school systems, the people within the school system must also have support. Genny Beemyn (2013) acknowledges:

> Rare is the week when I am not contacted by someone – a college administrator, high school counsellor, or parent – who is looking for advice on how to support a transgender or gender-nonconforming child or youth. Sometimes it is the young trans people themselves who reach out to me, seeking support resources or ways to educate their families or school administrations about their experiences and needs. In witnessing this tremendous demand for practical assistance for and from trans children and youth, I am not alone. In the past few years, the number of openly transgender and gender-nonconforming students in K-12 schools and colleges seems to have grown exponentially, which has forced many previously trans-oblivious institutions to have to scramble to find ways to become more welcoming and inclusive. (p. 1)

Parents need support. Another major construct that repeated itself with each of the parents interviewed was the idea that they could not have done this alone. These parents were walking on new ground; ground that they had not imagined that they would be walking and that they could not prepare themselves for. There were books and authorities that could support raising all kinds of children - the child with an abundance of spirit, the child affected by autism or anxiousness, the child deemed emotionally intelligent or gifted child, the child who exhibits depression and the list goes on. Yet "the experience of being a parent of a gender-variant youth is not widely documented" (Hill & Menvielle, 2009, p. 243), which results in fewer opportunities to create resources to support these parents. Without understanding the experiences of these parents it is

difficult to imagine what kinds of supports would be valuable. Since the child's gender variance has been looked upon as a problem, resources to support raising a child who does not conform to gender stereotypes have been resources that spoke of correcting this anomaly in order to have the child conform and fit in to the societal expectations of what it means to be a boy and what it means to be a girl (Ehrensaft, 2007; Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2009). Although there are more resources showing up now for parents, at the time these parents felt very alone in figuring out the next steps. Blake recalls his experience:

> *Probably what I was really looking for is, "Here's The 10 Steps to Becoming a Parent of a Successful Transgendered Child." But obviously nothing exists because every child is completely different. Their background, culture, school environment, their immediate family, their broader family, their group of friends, all of that is so variant.*

Parents have been reported to find support by searching out relevant literature (Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson & Diamond, 2013). The parents in this research were no different in that they found themselves searching the Internet and reading books to support their understanding of their children's needs. Sam stated:

> *You do a lot of reading. You spend hours. You look on the Internet. There was a time that I had to just stop. I was reading everything and I read awful stories of ostracizing. The children were outcast. Just really abusive acts by other children and parents just behaving ridiculously.*

In recognition guidebooks that could support the parents and recognize the individual needs of the children are often hard to find, and in recognition that the literature available often sheds light on the horror stories of rejection, parents looked for the support of a knowledgeable person who could work with them as individuals and as families. Although learning can occur from the horror stories of rejection, the parents wanted to support their children by working from a model of strengths as opposed to a deficit model. The parents commented on the support offered by the Edmonton Public School LGBTQ Liaison Officer and/or by staff at the Institute for Sexual Minorities Studies and Services (ISMSS). For example, Donna stated, *"There were people that were able to help us and steer us in the right direction; where we needed to go and what we needed to do."*

The parents commented that having support available actually helped to ease their own feelings of ineptness as a parent. Sam recalled:

> *It is really nice to have someone as a support. You can go into this sometimes feeling like you're the crazy parent or over-protective parent of your kid. You're coming at them with the bathroom thing or the pronoun change.*

These kinds of specific supports for sexual and gender minority persons within educational systems is not common and leaves a need for education to be provided for those within the system (Egale, 2011; Luecke, 2011; Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson & Diamond, 2013; Slesaransky-Poe, Ruzzi, Dimedio & Stanley, 2013).

When discussing seeking support for herself, Donna commented that what goes around comes around. She knows that her story and the story of her son is not over. There is still a road that must be travelled, but she also knows that she is more firmly planted in a place of knowledge and has her circle of support. Remembering what it felt like to not have support and to not know where to turn, she continues to attend Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) meetings with her sister in order to offer support as opposed to gain support:

> *Well, we do go to PFLAG once a month, which is a great support because we get to hear everybody else's story about what they're going through. But really, we don't need to go for our own support; we go to help others now. Now we're just going to share the stories of what's happening with Thomas and everything that so good. We make other people cry. In the beginning, I would cry.*

Crying is not something that is isolated to this mother. Parents can feel at a loss with their children. Their children need support and they aren't sure what to do. In most cases, when children turn to their parents for support, parents can act. But in these uncharted lands, the parents often didn't know what to do to reassure their children. The best they could do was to be honest and supportive as Blake explained to his birth assigned daughter who had just assured his parents that he was not simply a tomboy: *"I don't know exactly what to do but we are talking to people who are experts, who have seen this before."* In this case, Blake was referring to the staff of iSMSS. He had done a Google search looking for support and the Institute came up as an avenue of support. Even with support, the

emotional turmoil that parents experience is high. As Sam explains, the questions that they ask themselves are plenty:

> *How am I going to explain to people? How will this be perceived? How will I tell my parents? How will people react? Even in the simplest sense, why is this happening to me? Why is this happening to us? It was very scary for Blake and I.*

The doubt and the questions only persist until the lived experience teaches otherwise. The same mother goes on to reassure:

> *I am so careful when I say all that because from where I am at right now, it sounds so silly. But I want to be honest because I think anyone who is going through it will probably go through that stuff in the beginning. I think that it can be very helpful to them to know that I felt it all.*

Support came to the parents in many forms. As mentioned already, parents were supported by organizations such as PFLAG and iSMSS. Parents also spoke about support from the medical system, although it was not always easy until they found the right doctor:

> *Our paediatrician would not give us a referral to Dr. Warneke. He blocked a referral to Dr. Warneke. It was really interesting because our paediatrician wasn't terrible. He wasn't saying things that were going to hurt Nico. He just felt strongly that this was just a phase.*

Dr. Warneke is an Edmonton-based psychiatrist who has worked with patients diagnosed with what has been considered a mental-health issue in the DSM-IV: Gender Identity Disorder. This diagnosis has been replaced with what is perceived

as the less pathological diagnosis Gender Dysphoria in the new DSM V (APA, 2013). According to the parents, Dr. Warneke has supported families in seeking the care of other necessary health professionals.

Other support came in the way of school personnel. Each of the parents had at least one school success story regarding a teacher who made a difference in his or her child's life. Even though the teachers themselves required support to navigate through the unknown, they still managed to find ways to demonstrate support for the parents and the children. Sam recognizes that the teachers did not always know what to do. They didn't always know how to support the children or how to be respond to the needs of the child in class. This is common. It is acknowledged that supporting teachers to understand the issues means not just educating the pre-service teachers but also providing education for in-service teachers. Luecke (2011) states, "[I]t is not enough to focus on the next generation; work needs to be done with the personnel in the schools now" (p. 150).

When describing her school experiences of parenting a child who do not conform to gender stereotypes, Sam stated*, "You build a little tiny army around you, kind of protecting you and the same with the teachers."* The image of an army, although generally viewed as playing a role in battle, can also be viewed as playing a role in peacekeeping. The stories that the parents shared demonstrated the role of the army aligned with both battle and peacekeeping.

Children need support. Throughout the literature it is documented that schools can be unsafe places for students who do not conform to gender

stereotypes or who are transgender (Beemyn 2013; Egale, 2011; Greytak, Kosciw & Boesen, 2013; Institute of Sexual Minority Studies and Services, 2012; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey & Russell, 2010; Roberts, Rosario, Slopen, Calzo, & Austin, 2013). In order to create a safe educational space for students, they too require an army for battle and peacekeeping. However, unlike the parents' sense of awareness, the children seemed blissfully unaware of the army built around them. The children just want to live their lives as who and how they are. On a day to day basis, most of a child's time is spent with a teacher, other children or the parents. As noted in the discussion of parental support, these people are not always equipped to support the child. At times, the people who provided support did so after researching and seeking out the necessary supports and resources that would enable them. There is recognition that knowing what to do in order to offer support to the children is not always inherently known (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). Donna asserts*, "I did my best. I didn't know what to do, but I did my best."* While Blake assured his son that they were going to learn and that they were seeking help from many resources:

> *We are going to help you be who you need to be and who you really, truly are. What you have to understand is I don't think anyone knows 100% what the right thing to do is. But we will be with you, no matter what. We love you no matter what.*

The statement "We will be with you no matter what" is actually more profound than one would first imagine. In a recent study, parents listed unconditional love and supportive parents as strong needs for their gender

nonconforming children (Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson & Diamond, 2013). This statement, said to a child very early in the process of moving from being a birth born girl to a boy, assumes a supportive role. The statement could have easily been more along the lines of an assumed leader role: "But we will figure things out for you, no matter what." When this was discussed further with Blake, he explained: *"You have to let the child lead. You have to listen to your child. You have to listen to the student."* Letting the child lead is aligned with Ehrensaft's (2011) gender-affirmative therapy model which emphasizes the child as the expert and the need to listen to the child. The closest authority figure on the child is the child. When the lead is not given to the child, there is a stronger chance that the support offered will not be aligned with the support needed to enable the child's gender-identity affirmation (Ehrensaft, 2012; Ehrensaft, 2013; Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Luecke, 2011).

The children discussed the kinds of supports that they found most beneficial. One immediate change the children identified would be for school personnel to call them by the name of their choice. We have long had gender neutral names or crossed gender names. One of the children in the study did not need to change her name because it was already gender neutral. Another needed to adapt his name because it was close to his birth name and he had long been carrying the adapted name as a nickname. Although he was called by his nickname, his birth name was still on record. The third child had to choose a new name.

Nico notes that, even though he is listed as a male at school, the name is not always changed:

> *There are records at school on all my PATs (provincial achievement tests) that say male, but is does say the name that I was given at birth and I don't really like that name.*

Thomas also notes that he is still sometimes called Hayley:

> *The teachers will correct themselves if they name a mistake. Like if they say Hayley instead of Thomas because Hayley is still on the attendance sheet. They try and remember as much as possible to say Thomas instead of Hayley. Which I find is nice.*

These two children who had to change their names have found that the teachers are doing their best with the records the way that they are, and yet it calls into question why the records are the way they are. Names are important identifiers of a person and, as such, should identify the person in a way that they wish to be identified (Brill & Pepper, 2008).

Of the other supports that were mentioned, certain organizations were named. One that two of the children noted was Camp fYrefly. According to the camp's website, Camp fYrefly is:

> an educational, social, and personal learning retreat for sexual and gender minority (LGBTTIQ) and allied youth. It focuses on building and nurturing their leadership potential and personal resiliency in an effort to help them learn how to make significant contributions to their own lives and to their schools, home/group-home environments, and communities.

> The Camp is designed for sexual and gender minority and allied youth between the ages of 14 and 24 (Camp fYrefly, 2013)

During 2013, in recognition of the younger children who also require support and community, Camp fYrefly hosted a Camp fYrefly for Littles. This one-day event focused on children aged 10 – 13. As Thomas explained, *"I went to Camp fYrefly for the day, for the Little's Camp, and loved it."* And Thomas' mother confirms, *"He had the time of his life."* What the camp offered these children was the opportunity to interact and discuss their experiences with other children as well as youth there for the regular camp. There are similarities about the children and youth who attend the camp and a social sameness that they generally do not find in their homes or schools. This sameness can create a sense of belonging and a sense of comfort that comes from being known.

The children also named other services that iSMSS offers. They were able to access the support of a counselling psychologist who works with the Institute, and the Institute provided direction to the children and parents in order to help guide them in their next steps. Two of the children noted that an individual from ISMSS came to the school to help pave the way. Research indicates that students have appreciated the professional support of others when dealing with school systems (Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson & Diamond, 2013). As Nico describes, the support of ISMSS helped to ensure his safety: *"They talked to my teachers and they made sure it would be safe to come out to the class that I was in."*
Although the teachers may not have known exactly how to support these children, it was noted that they are key in creating an inclusive educational environment.

As Sam related: *"Nico had a good strong group of friends and he had this great teacher. She was fantastic and she really supported him and just went above and beyond trying to educate everybody in that class without them even knowing."* Again, since this is a fairly new arena for educators to be involved in, the support that teachers offered to the students was co-constructed with the students and parents and with the help of others such as iSMSS. As Sam pointed out, *"When Nico explained how he was feeling, the teacher responded, 'Oh, that's no big surprise to me.' She kind of knew. We worked together to come up with a plan as to what they needed to do at the school."* In keeping with Ehrensaft's (2011) perspectives on gender-identity affirmation, this plan placed strong emphasis on collaborating with the child as next steps are determined and letting the child be the authority.

Recognizing that children need support is not simply about the child who does not conform to gender stereotypes. In order to create an inclusive educational environment, it is also about classmates and schoolmates who need to become knowledgeable about children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. It is important for education to take place for all students in the environment (Luecke, 2011; Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013). When Blake was discussing his son's acceptance in the school community, he noted that broader education would be beneficial: *"There is a need for much earlier education to all children, specifically about the LGBTQ community."* Schools are spaces of diversity and yet we cannot expect the children within the schools to understand the faces of diversity without being taught. As Blake adds, *"Teachers should present general*

facts around diversity and around gender variance in the school. They can present general information."

It is the school's legal responsibility to create safe spaces for all students. Section 45 of the *Alberta School Act* indicates that it is the responsibility of the school board to ensure a safe and caring environment for all students. The Alberta Teachers' Association urges teachers to address the needs of sexual and gender minority students through the *Code of Professional Conduct* (ATA, 2003) and the *Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers* (ATA, 2004). Edmonton Public School Board has both policy and regulation to guide the action of staff members and hold them accountable in efforts to support gender minorities. The policy recognizes that the Edmonton Public School Board is committed to:

> establishing and maintaining a safe, inclusive, equitable, and welcoming learning and teaching environment for all members of the school community. This includes those students, staff, and families who identify or are perceived as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirit, queer or questioning their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression (Edmonton Public Schools, 2013a, ¶ 1).

The Edmonton Public School Board regulation is more specific in what is required to ensure inclusivity and safety for gender minorities with regard to naming, school records, gendered activities, school spaces and conflict resolution (Edmonton Public Schools, 2013b). However, in a search of school documents, including school handbooks and student codes of conduct, in the schools the children attended (both past and present schools), the board policy nor regulation

had been interpreted as a school policy or guideline for the student code of conduct. In fact, the websites for the schools were lacking any mention of gender diversity with the exception of one website which quoted Edmonton Public School Board's approach to a respectful learning and working environment that recognizes biases may occur related to gender identity and notes that members of the school community must model respectful behaviour.

Although the Edmonton School Board policies and regulations have not been interpreted at the school level, it is recognized that these kinds of policies and regulations make it the responsibility of teachers to support children who do not conform to gender stereotypes by educating classmates and others about gender identity. It isn't always easy for other children to accept difference. Therefore the concept of difference is one that needs to be discussed and grappled with in the school environment through educational activities that support inclusivity. With "carefully scaffolded lessons over time, gender diversity, like many other social issues, can be taught appropriately and effectively in elementary schools" (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013, p. 101). These lessons begin to build an accepting classroom and school community to support gender diversity. Both children who do not conform to gender stereotypes and their peers need a considerable network of support (Ludeke, 2009; Luecke, 2011). For example, as Sam indicates, Nico's best friend struggled with the changes Nico was making in his life: *"It was a little troubling for him at first. He asked, 'Why does she have to change?' His mom explained to him that Nico has always felt this way. That Nico isn't changing but rather we have to change."* For those who

struggle to accept the reality of difference, oftentimes it is because there is a lack of information available. When Nico's best friend was presented with information, he was better able to accept the changes in Nico. To date, they remain best friends.

There are children who can accept difference, even in the absence of information, as demonstrated by Nico's younger sister Alex who was one of the first persons to accept Nico as a boy. Alex was attending the same school as Nico, which left her needing to let people know, including her classmates, that her sister was now her brother. As Nico explains, it was the teachers who supported Alex by *"talking to her class with her."* One of Nico's classmates also easily accepted the changes Nico was presenting her with, and took it a step further in order to see immediate potential benefits. Sam relays the following exchange between her son and his classmate:

She said, 'So you have girl parts?'

He's like, 'Yep.'

And she said, 'Well maybe you could sleep over then!' She just saw the bright side of it.

The parents all spoke about a time when they were not able to hear what their child was repeatedly telling them. Being heard is a need of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes (Ehrensaft, 2011; Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson & Diamond, 2013). For each of these parents, the lack of ability to hear the child was not based in homophobic attitudes; rather, it was based in a lack of knowledge. The parents of the birth born girls were able to accept that their

daughters may be tomboys, but they had no other conceptualizations of what their daughters may be telling them beyond the concept of tomboy. Although I do not consider Richard Green an authority or a voice to be listened to with regard to gender nonconformity because he privileges heterosexuality, his view that being a tomboy is "more common and more accepted socially that sissiness" (Green, 2011, p. 9) is one that the parents also supported. Regardless of the reasons why the parents could not provide support, the children were still affected by the lack of support. Many children feel a sense of fatality, especially as puberty approaches and they realize that the changes they wish to make may not happen in time (Ehrensaft, 2009; Luecke, 2011). When children are not provided with the support that they require, the effects can be heartbreaking. Nico's father explains: *"Nico confided in Sam that he'd been crying himself to sleep. We'd noticed for about 6 months before that, there were absolutely no more sleepovers."* Sam remembers the days before they were finally able to hear Nico telling them that he is not simply a tomboy: *"He was losing sleep and at that time Nico's marks weren't so good. He was saying things like, 'I'm not ever leaving this room.' He was closing down and not ever wanting to be around people."*

Thomas's mother recalls her daughter choosing to sleep with her. She believed that the stress her daughter was experiencing was related to her father leaving the family home. It was not until one night, as she lay curled up with her daughter in bed, that Donna heard exactly what her then daughter had been trying to tell her: *"He laid in bed with me and said, 'Mom, I want to be a boy.' I just thought he was an extreme tomboy."* As soon the parents understood what their

children had been saying, they were able to find ways to offer support. Yet in the absence of truly understanding they could not know how to support their child.

Once Nico made the decision to let his parents know what he was feeling, he felt a sense of relief. There is often a sense of relief and a sense of calmness that a child experiences after they have disclosed their true gender self to their parents (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2009; Luecke, 2011). For Nico, there was a noticeable shift in the home environment. He even went as far as to take all of his girl clothes and give them to Alex the morning after he spoke to his parents. Clothing communicates gender (Brill & Pepper, 2008) and the shedding of all girl clothing was a means of shedding the girl identity.

The sense of acceptance needed to happen in the school environment as well. Nico needed to live more congruently which meant that people in the school also needed to know about the changes that were going to happen. While Nico's parents sought support and guidance on how to best bring the information to the school, Nico became frustrated with the wait. As Nico's mother explains:

> *Nico said, 'I'm doing this now. I want to be who I am.' I think we went back to Dr. Warneke just to check in and say we're thinking about transitioning at school. I think he went to school feeling a bit nervous, but so ready. He just couldn't wait anymore. He couldn't wait.*

Children, as do all people, need to live their lives with a feeling of congruency. Although the process was nerve wracking for someone as young as Nico, he knew it needed to happen:

> *I was nervous the day that it happened. I was just sitting there holding on to my pencil. I think I broke that pencil just from being nervous. I think they started out with a video of some other little transgender kid, and then I remember everyone told everyone and it was good. Everyone was accepting. Some people had questions and I answered some and the teacher answered some.*

Nico needed to be who he is, living his affirmed gender both in school and at home. Since he had been presenting as female at school, this now meant that he needed to enact a *coming out* within the school environment.

As with Nico, Thomas also made a transition while in school. When Thomas decided it was time to transition at school, he knew that this would be a significant change for him. The change would allow him to experience school in a way he had not really experienced school in the past:

> *Being a boy kind of means fitting in, being able to have the life I have always wanted. And ya, pretty much fitting in and feeling comfortable more. Feeling like you can accept yourself as who you wanted to be.*

When one aligns their gender expression with their sense of self, they experience a sense of inner peace (Ehrensaft, 2009; Luecke, 2011). A concern that arises when children make the transition in the school environment is, of course, safety. When asked who was responsible to ensure his safety at school while going through this process, Thomas answered, *"The teachers. It's their job to make sure that the students stay safe, but the students can't stay safe if they aren't going to make an effort to try and be safe."* With this statement, Thomas acknowledged

that safety is a shared responsibility and that he can play a role in being safe. When this was explored further, both Thomas and Nico said that they must be willing to report harassment in order to help maintain safety. They also both noted that to date, they had not had to report harassment because it had not occurred.

While Nico and Thomas both experienced transitioning in the school environment, Sage's experience has been different since she has not needed to *come out* to her educational community. Sage began public school as a female and therefore has not had to make a transition while in the school environment. School personnel were made aware of Sage's birth gender on a strict need to know basis:

> *When she entered public school at the latter part of her Grade One year, she registered as a female. She was dressing exclusively in girl clothes. We decided for the time being it would be the simplest way to keep awkward questions to a minimum until she developed the language skills/understanding to answer the questions herself.*

Previous to this, Sage had been in an isolated school environment for a severe language processing disorder. As Sage is now gathering language skills, Tempest is beginning to wonder when the time is right to allow Sage to be exactly who she is – a birth born male who has transitioned to a female. There is much controversy around whether secrecy is best (Brill & Pepper, 2008). Although all believe that it is a personal decision and many factors should be considered, Ehrensaft (2011) has suggested:

> [T]he problem with "right to privacy" within a family of young children is that although from the transgender or gender non-confirming child's point of view it provides a circle of care, it simultaneously can be transformed into a ring of fire. Family secrets are rarely healthy for family life. (p. 175)

The language processing disorder has left Sage at a disadvantage in being able to discuss being a girl, and this has confounded the decision making for Tempest with regard to disclosing the secret. Tempest acknowledges that without others knowing that Sage was born a male, there could be potentially difficult situations, even dangerous situations, that arise and she wants to set her daughter up for the most success:

> *Under what circumstances do transpeople become victims of violence? As mammals, it has been suggested that being surprised will factor into responsive violence. If this is the case, is my adhesion to the expectation that Sage meet the external requirements of a girl actually working against her safety by perpetuating her secret? As a parent, what should my role be as far as nurturing a protective space around my child and what does it look like to enact that role? If I give arena to my fears, in no time, I will find myself in a paralyzing, gut-wrenching, nightmarish headspace animated by the worst cases of 'what ifs…'. Those thoughts won't get me anywhere. I am beginning to think that the only safe place I can help create for Sage is inside her relationship with me, and as an extension, inside herself.*

Many parents ask themselves questions about how to best parent and how they can best support their children's needs. However, this raw emotional display epitomizes a theme that was apparent in each of the interviews with the parents. It is encapsulated in this question: *How can I best support my child's success in a world that may not be ready for him or her?* Tempest is currently seeking the support of iSMSS to determine how to best walk through these next stages.

Of course, we cannot speak about supporting children without addressing the issue of the bathroom. Although this issue has already been addressed under the construct of social change, it bears repeating here under the construct of supporting children. Two of the children mentioned the issue of the bathroom, relating it was the only experience they had at school where they felt excluded. Bathrooms are a necessary space for all people and quite firmly signal belonging or exclusion for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes (Rasmussen, 2009). The students needed the support of teachers and the school system to use the bathroom with which they feel most aligned. When Nico first started attending school as a boy, he was invited to use a teacher's bathroom. When he switched schools at the end of the year, he was able to use the boy's bathroom. For Thomas, the issue of the bathroom became quite important. He discusses feelings of embarrassment going into the girls' bathroom because he did not feel like a girl. When given the opportunity to use the boys' bathroom, his mother reports that it became a topic of personal research: *"Thomas researched bathroom protocol before he even started using the men's washroom."* Now that he is using the boys' bathroom, he states:

> *It is actually going really well because no one suspects anything and no one is talking about me. At least I don't think they are. I just go in, use the bathroom and leave. If you're a guy and you go into the bathroom, it is tunnel vision. For girls, you will start a conversation. But for guys, it is tunnel vision. No talking. You just do what you need to do.*

For those people who do not have to consider which bathroom to enter into and experience a sense of belonging and safety once they are in a public bathroom, there is no issue. For children who do not conform to the expectations signalled by the picture of the female in a triangular dress or the male standing at attention in what is assumed to be pants, bathrooms are a significant issue. For these children, the support that is most required is around education. They need people to have the skills and knowledge to act in a way that supports them in being able to be who and how they are. They need the people in their environments to know that not conforming to gender stereotypes may be something that is unique and uncommon, but that doesn't make it unacceptable. As Nico says, in order to create safe and inclusive environments for children like him, teachers need to *"educate the children that attend the school about being LGBTQ and how it's different but different is okay."* Educating children and others within school environments is the first step toward creating a more inclusive community that can accept children who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

Teachers need support. Thinking about gender diversity and how this can and should impact teaching practices is not at the forefront of teachers' mind as

they begin their school year (Beemyn, 2013). "Most elementary schools, in particular, have not addressed issues of gender diversity – and only do so when confronted by students who identify or present as genders different from the genders assigned to them at birth" (Beemyn, 2013, p. 6). In order for the teachers to provide the kind of education and support that is required by students who do not conform to gender stereotypes, they must be prepared to do so. Yet resources for educators often fail to provide specific information about this population, giving preferential treatment instead to providing information about LGBTQ as an aggregate population (Greytak, Kosciw & Boesen, 2013). At present, the preparation of teachers to provide the necessary support occurs generally after a student comes into the class who fits into the gender nonconforming population (Beemyn, 2013).

A scan of the University of Alberta Education courses for pre-service teachers in the elementary stream shows a lack of courses where the topic of inclusivity would allow for teaching about gender minorities. The mandatory courses in most faculties of education focus mainly on the processes and methods of teaching as opposed to understanding the persons that they will be teaching (Sumara, 2007). This means that teachers are not prepared to support students who do not conform to gender stereotypes until the student is sitting in a desk in the classroom, which means the approach taken is going to be a reactive approach. This also means that by the time the school is reacting, the student has possibly endured months of education in an environment that does not support his or her needs. The parents recognize what the literature is already telling us: it is not a

matter of *'if'* a gender nonconforming student ends up in their class, it is a matter of *'when'* and therefore teacher preparation is key (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013).

With Sage coming from a specialized school environment into a public school environment, she had the benefit of staff who could support her transition and support the teachers in the new school:

> *The previous staff and psychiatrist did an excellent job of preparing the next school. I kept an open dialogue with Sage's teachers and checked in with Sage regularly to gauge if she was on the receiving end of any gender-specific bullying. My role has been to keep all lines of communication open and to be available to the staff to participate in problem solving any concerns that may arise.*

In the case of Thomas and Nico, the families sought the support of iSMSS to help guide the teachers and school on what needed to happen to provide a safe and inclusive educational environment for their sons. Teachers must be provided with accurate information in order to support children who do not conform to gender stereotypes; moreover, this information is best provided by an external expert (Luecke, 2011). Donna, Thomas's mom, says that she met with the school prior to Thomas starting grade six to help determine what needed to be done to support him:

> *We talked to the principal and his teacher at the beginning of grade 6. They were still reserved and wouldn't allow him to do certain things and be an actual boy in the school. For instance, he wasn't allowed to use the*

boys' washroom. He had to use the staff washroom, which was very obvious because it was at the front entrance of the school. He was also told not to have any physical contact. He couldn't be hugging the girls or the boys. There were things like that. They were a little bit more strict on him.

The following year when Thomas attended his new school, Donna approached the school somewhat differently. She sought the support of the Edmonton Public Schools LGBTQ Liaison Officer who called the school to speak with the assistant principal prior to her meeting with the principal and assistant principal:

I emailed the liaison officer about a week before school started and he called the assistant principal and spoke to her. He basically said, 'You know, this is who's coming to school,' and told her all about Thomas. The assistant principal then contacted me and I went into the school and spoke to her and to the principal as well. I was welcomed with open arms. They said, 'We are going to love having Thomas here. As far as we're concerned, he's a boy. He's already signed up for the boy's phys-ed class. He's allowed to use the boy's washroom. We think it would be awkward if he used the teachers' washroom.'

They asked if it was alright if they let all of the teachers know about Thomas and his background and his story. I said, 'Definitely! The more people that have the full knowledge of what's going on inside Thomas the better they are able to deal with him and to help him.'

School administrators are key in setting the tone of the school, so having their understanding, acceptance and support is key to a child's experience in the school (Vandenburgh, 2009). When Nico moved schools at the end of grade five, Nico's parents met with the assistant principal, the guidance counsellor and a team member from iSMSS:

> *We were sort of pushing any potential ignorance back and creating sort of a buffer, at least some sort for Nico so that he's understood. You're running in advance of the invasion and you're creating a little bit of special ops [operations]. You're creating a little bit of an awareness.*

The analogy of the army has appeared again under the heading of support. The idea is still to support the student, but the army also includes informed teachers:

> *So I think that the school personnel would say that after talking with the liaison officer, they did change a lot. For instance, I think they were purposeful about not dividing by gender and they bumped up their library with lots of resources that would fit with all kinds of families.*

With the recognition that knowledgeable and informed teachers are an asset to these children, the matter becomes about how teachers can acquire the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to support the children. The parents discussed the need for all staff to access education surrounding LGBTQ issues. Again, it was voiced that it is not '*if*' but rather it is '*when*' a child who is gender nonconforming is going to walk into the classroom. As already discussed, courses on inclusive practices for gender minorities are generally not included in

the bachelor of education degree for elementary students. However, the parents agreed that this kind of educational support for pre-service education teachers would be beneficial to all children as well as the teacher:

> *There ought to be a course that should be mandatory. I'm sensitive to singling out the community and having only them, because there is more than just this community that needs to be understood and appreciated. I think that the LGBT community should be a part of the course. I think that the Christian religious community should be in there. I think that people of color should be in there and people with disabilities should be in there and etcetera. It needs to be a wholesome course.*
>
> *That training up front, that sensitization to the issues, would be helpful. That would be first level training. And then when teachers start with their schools, that general level training about the school and the school dynamics should be there to create more awareness. That's the second level training. The third level would be the specific training for the specific teacher about the specific student. 'Oh. Okay. You have a queer kid in your class. This is what you have to know about this kid specifically.' That would be ideal.*

The second level training, as indicated by Blake, aligns with what is suggested by Slesaransky-Poe, Ruzzi, Dimedio and Stanley (2013). They suggest that during the training that occurs in the school it is important that the person doing the training is well versed about the school. Being able to use documents such as school rules or vision and mission statements in the training offered can

often serve to remind those within the school context that they are bound by their own statements and the values of the school to support all children.

The parents also discussed the ideal educational environment. Although they all commented that the environments that their children have been in have been quite supportive, they recognize that there is room for improvement. Tempest stated:

> *In the ideal educational environment, I would like to see any gender binary practices removed from the classroom to create a more inclusive environment for fluid gender expression.*

These gendered practices still occur in the school environments. Some examples of easily recognizable gendered practices that still exist would be the bathrooms that are marked for boys and girls, physical education classes that are segregated by gender or the way teachers call upon students. Examples of more difficult to recognize gendered practices would be the choices of literature used or people studied. Our schools have not yet escaped gendered practices.

Lack of intervention at the school level is generally understood to be about the teachers' not knowing how to respond to gendered harassment and sometimes not recognizing it as harassment because of the biases and assumptions they carry about gender (Garcia, Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Meyer, 2008; Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013). Still when it came down to it, the parents reported that when confronted with difficult situations, even in the midst of a knowledge gap, the teachers are doing their best. As Sam indicates:

> *I can see that they are coming from a place of good intention but they may not be able to follow through on everything. If they have not been given the tools, then all they can do is maybe be silent and hope that they can come up with a game plan between now and next time.*

Within the parameters of this research, the teachers discussed do not appear to be afraid of the changes or resistant to the changes when a student comes into their class who does not conform to gender stereotypes. The students who are part of this research have had the benefit of engaging with teachers who embraced them for who they are and did what they could, with what they knew, to create space for them to be, become and belong (Grace, 2006). Sam discusses her experiences with her son's teacher:

> *Nico's teacher has done wonderful education pieces about gender. So I think that they are all interested in it and open. This is in our world and they want to know the best way to move through this with any students coming forward. They all said this was such a gift for them to have had Nico and know that it's not a matter of 'if'; it's a matter of 'when' the next child comes through. I think about how helpful it will be for maybe a parent who's in denial, or a parent who's not okay with it, that a teacher could say, "Well, you know, kids can have gender fluidity or gender creativity and this is what it means."*

Sam recognizes that perhaps it would be the teacher that supports the family in paving the way toward acceptance and understanding.

There is change afoot.

That's so gay!
I suppose that was inappropriate.

Homophobia.
I suppose that was inappropriate.

I just want people to be tolerant.
I suppose that was inappropriate.

It almost made me cry.
It was inappropriate.

It's important that we are learning.
Being a leader?
Being a trailblazer?

I see myself more as a guide.
Willing to stand up and help others.
With the courage to make the world a better place.

When the thought of this research project first began to take shape, there was very little written about children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. Over the past few years, the topic is becoming more pervasive, but it is not yet commonplace. What remains commonplace are binary understandings of gender as well as associating gender with biological sex, which marginalizes those who do not fit normative male-female understandings. The research data indicates that personal growth occurred in order for the parents to reconceptualize gender in a manner that supported their child's affirmed gendered self. The data also indicates that the development of these new understandings of gender can lead to social activism in the hopes of others being able to make similar shifts in beliefs and assumptions about gender.

Personal growth is involved. The parents have noted that to date, throughout their journeys, they have grappled with ideas, concepts and questions that they never thought that they would grapple with as parents. Parents need to continually educate themselves and acquire new wisdom when it comes to parenting children who do not conform to gender stereotypes (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). The questions that these parents are asking themselves don't stop. As new answers are learned, new questions emerge. As Sage began public schooling, Tempest had the opportunity to enrol Sage in school as a female as opposed to enrolling her as a birth born male. This was not an easy decision because it meant that there was a level of secrecy and hiding. Although she believes it was the right decision at the time, the question that Tempest is now grappling with is whether it is still the right decision: *"Perhaps we have been putting too much emphasis on 'keeping her secret safe' and maybe there would be no marked difference in her treatment if her peers knew her to be transgendered."*

These kinds of questions, in the realm of perhaps and maybe, require deep reflection, including reflection on what it means to be safe. "Transgender children from a very early age learn to read safety in a situation and use this information to decide how much to reveal, and how much to keep private" (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 138). Tempest acknowledges that when she worries about safety for her other children, she is worried about such things as crossing the street. The parents of the children in the study note that their concerns have been impetus for their own personal growth. Questions that we do not normally ask

require thinking in ways in which we might not normally think (Hill & Menvielle, 2009).

There is also an understanding that since there is not a lot of information out there to guide the parents on a path toward understanding and enabling their children who do not conform to gender stereotypes, they are, in many ways, making the path while walking it. Blake talks about the learning journey and acknowledges that as long as he is heading in the right direction, he is happy with that. He can continue to grow and learn as he continues to move forward:

> *I get onto the ledge and then that allows me to start climbing the rest of the mountain. I do mix up things and I get things wrong, but directionally I am appropriate. I'm moving in the right direction.*

He also recognizes that he has an advantage over some. As with the other parents in the study, there was never a time where transphobic attitudes interfered in supporting their children. They are not blind to the transphobia and homophobia that is out there. Some of the parents even go as far as to recognize that they went through periods where they engaged in homophobic behaviour. However, they all report that they abandoned homophobic behaviour prior to finding out that their child did not conform to gender stereotypes. As Blake indicates, *"The people that come out with things that sound negative in some ways, I don't blame them. I remember being that person."*

As reported earlier, Sam knows that it is important to tell the truth about her own growth. She believes that being honest will support the growth of others and will help others recognize that the questions you ask yourself and the 'why

me' attitude is part of the journey. She concludes, *"I think anyone whose going through it in the beginning will probably go through that stuff and I think that it can be very helpful to them to know that I felt it all."*

The parents reported that they have developed an openness to ideas that were foreign to them in the past. Tempest reported:

> *I don't want to box anything in anymore. I wonder if one day we will simply accept people for what they are and what they choose. I think moving forward I would simply think of every person just as a person.*

Donna reported:

> *I think having him transition has completely opened up my mind to the possibility that gender might be infinite.*

All of the parents noted personal growth. It is not uncommon for children to teach parents important life lessons when they do not conform to gender stereotypes (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). Parents have described the opportunity to raise a child who does not conform to gender stereotypes as an opportunity to provide them with "an open mind or opening up their world" (Hill & Menvielle, 2009, p. 264). The personal growth for parents has sometimes been for the sole purpose of supporting their child, but at other times the growth has led them to the desire to make a greater impact.

Social activism is part of the change process. Social activism does not require one to fly a flag or march in parades. Sometimes social activism is the willingness to tell one's truth out loud to allow others the opportunity to learn from that truth. In that sense, all of the parents and the children in this study are

social activists. As parents develop a more enriched understanding of gender and gender non-conformity, many of them use their newly developed understandings to help create change in the world (Brill & Pepper, 2008). Sometimes this may be looking at their own contexts such as forms at work or language choices and sometimes creating change may means stepping out of your own contexts to a wider arena.

Within this study, Blake is likely the parent who has used his voice, knowledge and influences the most to create social change. He has been interviewed and been a spokesperson at different LGBTQ events. He and his family have become public about their story in the effort to support other children and other families who may be going through similar circumstances as he and his family. Blake believes that there is a role that he must play to help the world become a better place. This is not a new position for Blake to be in or a new belief for him to have, as this is well entrenched in his worldview. What is new for Blake is using a remarkably personal story to exercise his belief that he has a responsibility to better our world. He isn't just recycling or fundraising or teaching his children to be good citizens, all of which are valuable and worthy endeavours. Importantly, he is also opening his life up to scrutiny so he can hopefully make a difference:

> *I think sometimes with the questions that come, you have to be courageous and accept them. I've answered all of those questions by explaining that I wouldn't ask that of their children. And then I do answer the question. I answer it so that it helps them frame it. And then, hopefully, they'll never*

> *ask that question of another family with a transgender child. And they will also now understand, when you say 'transgender boy' that just means the child was born with female genitalia but then has made the transition to male.*

Through such engagements as resistance for transformation, Blake has become an advocate for the LGBTQ community by sitting on committees and by being present to support the development of policy and regulations that protect children like his son.

There is strong recognition that policy, which includes specific mention of gender minorities, is beneficial to the community (Greytak, Kosciw & Boesen, 2013). Yet many school districts have not yet identified this community in their policies, opting instead to have a general or generic policy that covers all students. While it has been found that policy does not reduce the transphobic bullying that occurs in schools, it is noted that policy provides other substantial benefits (Greytak, Kosciw & Boesen, 2013). Policy which provides protection for students who are within a gender minority is a way to clearly state support for this group of students and demonstrate the inclusive values of the school (Greytak, Kosciw & Boesen, 2013). With this kind of support for students, students who are within a gender minority become more vocal about the harassment they experience, which enables the staff to hold students more accountable for transphobic behaviour.

Although Blake recognizes that he is playing a role in a picture that is greater than his son's school and home environment, he is also very aware that in

order to play that role, he must also ensure that he is authentically living his words at home:

> *Every journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Well, the single step is often, "Okay, what do we do now to make the world safe and make it better today?" We will help Nico get down the road and get things sorted out. How do you do that? Reality is that it's really no different than for any other kid. Work your ass off in school, pick up your clothes, treat your sister nice, don't be a jerk. It's all those things that you say to your kid.*

This final quote leaves us with the recognition that these children are first and foremost, simply children. They have gender differences like other children have their differences. Our educational systems must discover and implement ways of creating inclusivity that honours the gender differences presented by these children in order to "make the world safe and make it a better today" (Blake, personal communication).

Recommendations for Gender Inclusive Schooling

In recent Canadian research, it has been found that out of all students represented within the LGBTQ acronym, the school situation for trans students is worse than it is for the others (Taylor, Peter, McMinn, Schachter, Beldom, Ferry, Gross & Paquin, 2011). The statistics in this study cry out for something to be done to create supportive and inclusive environments for these students. The survey also found that "the heightened sense of lack of safety at school…is likely

due to the rigid policing of gender conventions…which can make trans youth highly visible targets for discrimination and harassment" (Egale, 2011, p.14).

As the Chief Public Health Officer's 2011 report on the state of the public health of Canadian youth and young adults indicates, there is a growing emphasis on gathering contextualized statistical evidence of the family, school, healthcare and other social experiences of LGBTQ youth in our country. The Canadian context for LGBTQ citizens is purportedly inclusive, as evidenced by our acceptance of gay marriage and our history of liberal politics and anti-discrimination, with individual differences protected by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Grace, 2007). Still the evidence provided by the 2011 Egale survey has demonstrated that although we may be more inclusive in legal and legislative terms, everyday experiences within the schools can still not be viewed as accepting or safe. This evidence should spur schools into action on policy and practice fronts in order to provide the necessary supports for LGBTQ students in curricular, instructional and school climate contexts.

The research, conducted by Dr. Catherine Taylor and her team for Egale, spanned December 2007 to June 2009 and included over 3700 students. Trans youth in this study reported the following:

- 90% of trans youth hear transphobic comments daily or weekly from other students and almost a quarter (23%) of trans students reported hearing teachers use transphobic language daily or weekly. Almost three quarters (70%) of trans students reported being verbally harassed about their gender expression.

- One quarter of trans students reported having being physically harassed (25%) or have had property stolen or damaged (24%) because of being LGBTQ. Trans students were much more likely than sexual minority or non-LGBTQ students to have been physically harassed or assaulted because of their gender expression (37% compared with 21% for sexual minority students and 10% for non-LGBTQ students).
- When all identity related grounds for feeling unsafe are taken into account, including ethnicity and religion, more than three quarters (78%) of trans students indicated feeling unsafe in some way at school. 44% of trans students reported being likely to miss school because of feeling unsafe and 15% reported having skipped more than 10 days because of feeling unsafe. (Egale, 2011, p. 14)

The survey also found that one in four heterosexual students reported being verbally harassed due to their gender expression and more than 10% reported being physically harassed or assaulted due to their gender expression (Egale, 2011, p. 17).

Society has come a long way in showcasing lesbian and gay people in a positive light. People recognize themselves as gay friendly because they *'love that Ellen show'*. We have healthy lesbian and gay role models in popular media and in fiction, yet we lack effective role models who express gender in ways that do not align with their gender assigned at birth. At present, with the lack of positive role models and comfortable environments to be open about gender nonconformity, many students may be choosing to remain in their gender closet,

leaving unknown the number of students affected by lack of inclusivity and acceptance (Beemyn, 2013). What we do know is this: While some elementary schools have become more inclusive of this population in their practices, most "continue to provide limited, if any, support or resources to help ensure that transgender and gender-nonconforming students feel a part of their school community and do not experience intentional or unintentional bias" (Beemyn, 2013, p. 6).

I chose to study the experiences of elementary aged children with the belief that if we could create change in attitudes and behaviours with young children, these changes would prevail throughout schooling and life. It would seem that this is possible with the understanding of gender stereotype flexibility (Banse, Gawronski, Rebetez, Gutt & Morton, 2010). The education system must play a role in creating these changes and to that end, I offer these recommendations.

Engage in Policymaking

As Egale (2011) noted in the recommendations following the national survey, LGBTQ inclusive policies have had significant and positive impacts on the educational climate for gender-minority students. Within the Alberta context, the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) will engage in writing policy positions to support member school boards in writing policy specific to their boards. These policy positions are often developed when independent boards recognize a need for policy and make a recommendation to ASBA. In April

2012, the Edmonton Public School Board proposed the following resolution as a member of ASBA, only to have it defeated later on the floor:

> That all member school boards are committed to establishing and maintaining a safe, inclusive, equitable, and welcoming learning and teaching environment for all members of the school community, including sexual orientation and gender minority students, employees and families. Research has shown that sexual minority youth experience more bullying, harassment, alienation, and suicide ideation than do their heterosexual peers and therefore, boards are encouraged to counter pervasive cultural biases against sexual minorities through proactive and specific policy, and regulation to ensure that all sexual orientation and gender identity minority individuals are welcomed, respected, accepted and supported in all of their schools. (Edmonton Public Schools, 2012)

Had ASBA accepted this policy as its position, it would have encouraged school boards throughout the province to include such policies within their frameworks.

While policy at the school board level is vital, it is not enough. School board policies need to be interpreted within school documents and school codes of conduct, and these interpretations must become commonly known and understood within the school environment. Students need to recognize themselves as protected within their schools. After such a long history of violence toward the sexual and gender minority population, even with anti-bullying policies, stand-alone policies are also needed. For example, gender minorities must be specifically named in order for the students to begin to believe they will be

protected. When they are explicitly named, minority students are more likely to feel a sense of safety, and are therefore more likely to step forward and speak up for support when experiencing or witnessing acts of discrimination. Parents have also noted that inclusive policies that are specific to gender minorities are helpful in providing support for their children (Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson & Diamond, 2013). Policies can also provide the parents with an appropriate and powerful framework that they can use to have difficult conversations within the school environments. Egale (2011) notes that speaking up is a positive step in creating change, and yet the first step must be in creating a safe space where people are encouraged to speak up.

Create Multi-disciplinary Teams

The principal of a school is key in creating an inclusive and accepting environment because the principal sets the tone for the school (Luecke, 2011; Vanderburgh, 2009). However, the principal alone cannot create the kind of environment necessary for the inclusion and accommodation of gender minorities. It is widely understood that it takes a village to raise a child, and Ehrensaft (2011) acknowledges that it is also necessary to employ a village to raise a child who is gender nonconforming. Although treatment controversies remain (Byne, et al., 2012) among the supporting disciplines, there is a recognition that the "allied disciplines, and specialists in gender identity issues, need to take the lead in providing exemplary care for these children and youth and their families" (Zucker, Bradley, Owen-Anderson, Kibblewhite & Cantor, 2008). These allied disciplines should be comprised of many nurturers, advocates and caring

professionals, including parents, mental health and other healthcare professionals, school personnel, community educators, and lawmakers and judges as well as government officials. This acknowledgement of the school as a member of the village aligns with the research conducted for *Every Class in Every School.* This research notes the importance of involving a variety of experts in determining ways to create safe and inclusive educational environments for LGBTQ youth.

The role of the school in bringing together these experts is key when it comes to creating safe spaces. Experts can provide education to "support teachers' ongoing development of their knowledge about gender diversity" (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013, p. 102). Knowledge is power and without appropriate knowledge teachers remain powerless and silent. These multi-disciplinary teams, with individuals across many caring professions, can be assembled by the schools and can be called upon to provide support in a timely manner as opposed to a reactive manner. These kinds of teams are utilized in education and therefore should not be difficult to enact in a context that provides support for trans students. Currently, multi-disciplinary teams are widely used to support educationally challenged students who benefit from the collaborative work of experts in fields such as speech and language pathology, mental health, occupational therapy and rehabilitation therapy. A multi-disciplinary team with a focus on gender minorities could provide inclusive education about gender diversity for all students. It could also provide specific education and supports to meet the particular needs of gender-minority students.

Ehrensaft (2011) repeatedly encourages people who work with children who do not conform to gender stereotypes to recognize the child as the expert and to allow the child to take the lead. In most cases, this is appropriate. Sometimes when multi-disciplinary teams are grappling with issues that are more complicated than can be addressed by a young child, it may be necessary to allow the lead position to shift to the parents. As well, a child who is delayed may need the parent to take a lead position. This was the case with Sage and Tempest due to Sage's language delay. However, in all cases it is still the child's affirmed gendered self that leads although the parents may need to be the voice.

In my work as a teacher of students experiencing severe emotional and behavioural issues, I used a multi-disciplinary team approach to support both the parents and the students. One strategy that proved helpful was to engage members of the team to speak to parents in a support group setting. Menvielle (2012) suggests that support groups for parents and children are beneficial. He goes on to discuss the benefit of online groups as being an extension of the face-to-face group and an opportunity to provide support for families who are more socially isolated. A support group offers parents the opportunity to be themselves and to have space and time with others who are engaged with the same or similar educational issues (Menvielle, 2012).

Luecke (2011) suggested that within a multi-disciplinary team it is appropriate for one person to have the lead and serve as a resource to others. The parents within the study found this to be true using the Edmonton Public Schools' LGBTQ liaison as the person in the lead. However, this lead person must

recognize the child as the expert and provide ample space for the child to inform the processes and the practices of the team.

Engender Intentional Curricular Inclusion

Fifteen years ago Sears (1999) stated that the "timidity of curriculum developers and the lure of the closet mean that today's queer youth still experience the feeling of being "the only one in the world" (p. 3). Today, the lack of curriculum inclusion can signify that teachers are still nervous about including potentially controversial materials or topics in their teaching and curriculum. Educational decisions must be based on the needs of students, the vision and mission of the school and school district and the policies that are at play (Bryan, 2012). When vision, missions or policies are provided that creates safety and inclusion for all students, it becomes necessary to support the school population in their interpretations and enactments of the visions, missions and policies. This would require specific teaching about gender, gender diversity, safety and inclusion. By teaching about marginalized populations, the curriculum itself becomes policy (Ryan, Petraw & Bednar, 2013).

The Canadian Teachers' Federation states that curriculum must include positive images and accurate information about history and culture that reflects the accomplishments and contributions of BGLTT people (CTF, 2004, section 4.3). Where there is a lack of role models within educational communities, literature can become a place where children can make connections to others (Ryan, Petraw & Bednar, 2013). This does not mean that only gender-minority

children can make positive connections through literature. Children in the majority can also connect with literary figures leading to acceptance.

There are many areas of the curriculum where issues of gender could be included. For instance, in elementary school there are units on family, self and others, communities and cultures, jobs and learning about stereotypes. At my granddaughter's school winter concert in December 2013, they had two different concert numbers that included dancing. One of the numbers was with the kindergarten class and the other with the grade-three class. Both numbers did not have matching numbers of boys and girls. Instead of having boys dance together and girls dance together, the dancing numbers had the extra children dancing alone. The hegemonic and heteronormative constructions of gender are so prevalent that the teachers in these classes were unable to re-vision the concert numbers to allow the students to dance in same-gendered pairs. "Such early indoctrination, even unconsciously, impacts young minds quickly learning the parameters of what is deemed socially and morally right and wrong" (Lester, 2007, p. 57). Our gendered practices in education are strong.

Resources that are used in school and built into curriculum have been known to have positive benefits for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes and trans youth (Greytak, Kosciw & Boesen, 2013; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey & Russell, 2010). Including diverse curricular resources is therefore the first step a classroom teacher can take in creating safe spaces for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. Practices such as reading *10,000 Dresses* or *The Paperbag Princess* can and should open doors to take the

second step toward creating safe spaces for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

The second step in creating safe spaces would be ensuring classroom discussions challenge the heteronormative and hegemonic constructions of gender. Although teachers may not yet be prepared for such discussions (Luecke, 2011), elementary students are known to have a readiness for classroom discussions about gender and gender diversity (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013). Young students can learn how to "question the restrictive social systems around them and think more inclusively about gender expression and identity" (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013, p. 86). Taking these steps toward creating inclusive curriculum is both necessary and appropriate.

Develop Education for Pre-service and In-service Teachers

The gender identity disorder task force, appointed by the American Psychological Association, completed a comprehensive review of the literature in this field of study and made several recommendations. One of the recommendations spoke to the school environment. The task force suggested an assessment of "school and community environments in terms bullying and stigmatization related to gender atypicality, and to address suitable protective measures" (Byne, et al., 2012). Suitable protective measures would require training to teachers in inclusivity with specific attention paid to inclusivity for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. Although some will and many have inclusivity training, the majority will not. This leaves far too many classrooms without teachers who can affirm the lives of our students who do not

conform to gender stereotypes. The Canadian Teachers' Federation provides guidance for pre-service teaching programs by stating that "teacher preparation programs must include knowledge, awareness and affirmation of those who identify as BGLTT; [and] strategies, lesson plans and curriculum that assist teachers in addressing BGLTT issues in classrooms and schools" (CTF, 2004, section 4.7). Pre-service education programs are the second opportunity for students to become enculturated into what it means to be a teacher. Their first opportunities have already occurred from the other side of the teacher's desk as they sat in classrooms as students. Often those first opportunities are ones that do not provide strong models of inclusive practices for gender minorities. Therefore, it is left to pre-service education programs to provide teaching that can redirect students to view classrooms as sites where transformative action can occur. "Those who teach teachers must start sharing voices from a range of inclusive classrooms so pre-service teachers know this work is possible and so they can see how their students may react to lessons they try" (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013, p. 102). Appropriate role modeling and lessons in pre-service education programs provides a rich foundation from which pre-service teachers can begin to grow their practice.

For those practicing teachers, the Canadian Teachers' Federations states that "educators must have access to professional development programs, which provide assistance in addressing BGLTT issues in classrooms and schools." (CTF, 2004, section 4.8). At present there is a gap in teacher preparedness, both pre-service and in-service, which adequately addresses issues of gender identity and

gender variance (Luecke, 2011).

Appropriate teacher preparation is not simply about providing the teachers with an understanding of gender variance and gender identity issues. Teachers must take also take a philosophical approach to their teaching and student learning. When it comes to teachers' abilities to teach about and around issues of gender they must begin by engaging in "deep self-reflection and interrogation of their own childhoods, their personal experiences, and the beliefs they hold" (Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010, p. 251). In order for teachers to be able to have discussions with students about gender in a way that resists normative thinking, they must first think critically about the assumptions and biases they carry or routinely encounter (Ryan, Patraw & Bednar, 2013; Sears, 1999; Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2009). Elementary teachers are in a position to either confirm or disrupt the routine reinforcing of gender conformity practices at a very early age (Gosselin, 2007). This disruption can lead to flexibility in the way young students think about gender stereotypes (Banse, Gawronski, Rebetez, Gutt & Morton, 2010), which in turn can lead to students being able to be more inclusive with their peers who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

In the absence of formal education and professional development, "educators must accept their responsibility to educate themselves and to reflect upon their own attitudes and behaviours in modeling respect, understanding and affirmation of diversity (CTF, 2004, Section 4.1). Specifically, "educators have a responsibility for the elimination of homophobia and heterosexism in the working and learning environment" (CTF, 2004, Section 4.2). With these clear statements

from the Canadian Teachers' Federation, there should be no excuse for teachers to be ill prepared in their support of gender non-conforming students.

Have Non-gendered Public Bathrooms

It may seem redundant to repeat this here as a recommendation when it has shown up throughout the thesis as an area of discussion. Redundant or not, I would be doing the students who agreed to work with me a disservice if I did not mention the need for inclusive bathrooms. To these students, bathrooms have become a signifier of inclusion. Using the bathroom is a non-issue for so many people, but for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes, using the bathroom can be an emotional and a physiological issue. Use of public bathrooms in schools becomes an emotional burden when children find themselves not fitting in either bathroom according to their own understanding of their gendered self. The issue becomes a physiological burden when children hold their urine for the entire school day, unable to move past the emotional burden, which has created a solid, impassable barrier leading into the bathroom.

It is not enough that a private bathroom is provided for these students. A private bathroom can further alienate and signal difference and exclusion. Bathrooms must become spaces where children can have the privacy that may be required and still experience inclusion. Gender neutral bathrooms can provide such spaces (Wells, Roberts & Allan, 2012).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

There are several limitations associated with this research. First a limitation involved with using a case-study approach is the small number of

students. While a case-study approach allowed me the opportunity to do in-depth interviews with the students and parents, at the same time it limited the number of interviews I could successfully weave into an interpretive text. Having only three student participants leaves many school experiences untold. In this regard, although themes have been recognized throughout the research, the themes and supporting constructs are not based solely on the stories from the children and their parents. The themes and constructs are also based on the stories and corroboration from related literature.

A second limitation is that all of the parents were supportive of their children who did not conform to gender stereotypes. This limitation meant that the themes and constructs that emerged were from those who fully supported their children. Stories that may have been told by parents who did not support their children who do not conform to gender stereotypes may have significantly altered the themes that were drawn. Related to this limitation is that all of the children interviewed came from these supportive families and therefore their stories were also informed by their experiences of familial support.

The final significant implication is that the study is based only in one city: Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Each of the families and students come from this narrow context with its unique political, social and cultural aspects. Although some of the uniqueness that Edmonton and Alberta are known for can lead one to experience the city as conservative in views and in action when it comes to LGBTQ issues, Edmonton and Alberta can also be viewed a quite progressive. The Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) has a long history of support for

LGBTQ issues. Edmonton Public Schools took the initiative to hire an LGBTQ liaison officer to support LGBTQ students and build awareness within its schools. The University of Alberta has the Institute for Sexual Minorities Services and Studies (iSMSS), which provides guidance and education to pre-service education teachers as well at the ATA. iSMSS is also well known for impacting political policy across Canada and internationally. These supports within Edmonton would provide a different educational context compared to an area that lacks the same or similar kinds of supports.

Much of the research on children who do not conform to gender stereotypes does not exist outside of LGBTQ research. The evidence shows that experiences and needs of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes and the broader trans community are different than the experiences and needs of the lesbian, gay or bisexual communities (Egale, 2011; Greytak, Kosciw & Boesen, 2013). "Transgender youth experience negative school environments and may not benefit directly from interventions defined to support Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) youth" (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey & Russell, 2010, p. 1175). Although there is still work to be done for the entire LGBTQ population, transgender children and those who do not conform to gender stereotypes would continue to benefit from research that specifically focuses on their experiences and needs.

The children in this study have all transitioned. Although it was not the intent to study the school experiences of elementary students who have made a gender transition, the parents who contacted me and wished to be part of this

study all had children whose birth gender no longer matched the child's gender identity. Hill and Menvielle (2009) have written about the view of parents of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. However, there is a gap in the literature exploring the views and experiences of these children within schools. Children who are still known as girls but have male gender typical behaviour and children still known as males but have female gender typical behaviour may have significantly different school experiences than the children in this study.

An interpretation of several studies has led to the conclusion that "transsexual youth experience less harassment when they conform to their new gender and remain closeted about their identity" (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey & Russell, 2010, p. 1176). However, Ehrensaft (2011) and Vandenburgh (2009) both suggested that secrets about gender identity can be damaging to families. Brill and Pepper (2008) provide rationales for both secret keeping and sharing. Further research into the effects on school relationships when children who transition do not disclose their birth born gender but rather are *found out* would provide supportive guidance to schools and families alike.

Conclusions

This study engaged the voices of three children and their parents to tell the stories of their school experiences. Through these stories we have learned that children who do not conform to gender stereotypes can continue healthy and happy lives in environments that offer love, support, acceptance and inclusion. Key environments for these children are created within homes and educational institutions. Both the home environment created by families and the educational

environment created by school staff can offer love, support, acceptance and inclusion more readily when they are also supported with accurate information and when they are able to move free of the ties that bind gender expectations with birth born gender.

What we also know to be true is that the ties that bind gender expectations with birth born gender are strong in our society and are policed regularly. So the questions that remain are these: Can we, as a society, shift our thinking about gender from a binarized model to an infinite model that recognizes gender beyond male/female and accepts the possibility of gender identities being infinite? Can we, as educators, allow students the freedom to express themselves in a manner that supports the gender they identify with in order to experience the love, support, acceptance and inclusion they require and deserve? And finally, can we, as educators, knowledgably provide education about gender identities that challenges the comfort offered by the status quo in our efforts to create inclusive school communities for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes? It is in answering these questions that we can hopefully create gender-inclusive schools where the infinity of gender is the recognized norm.

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Appendix

INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM

Study Title: ***Gender non-conformity in elementary schools: Learning from the experiences of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes***

Primary Investigator:

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Background

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you are a caregiver of a child who does not conform to gender stereotypes. The results of this research will be used in support of my dissertation and possibly be shared at educational and professional conferences and teachers' conventions.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore how we can create safer educational spaces for students to be their authentic selves when they do not conform to mainstream societal understandings of stereotypical gender behaviour as determined by biological gender. Specifically, I am investigating children's experiences in elementary schools when they do not conform to gender stereotypes. I am also investigating the experiences of the caregivers of those children and how they might imagine possible ways to offer stronger support to children who do not conform to gender stereotypes. A greater understanding of the educational experiences of elementary students who do not conform to gender stereotypes and their caregivers can open spaces for change. Learning how gender typical roles are confirmed and denied in our educational environments can support educational personnel and others to recognize ways to move beyond gender expectations to allow for freedom in gender expression.

Study Procedures

I will be using a case study approach for this study. I will be working with four students and their caregivers. The students will be selected based on their caregivers identifying

them as performing or expressing gender in a manner that is not aligned with the physical gender assigned at birth.

I will be collecting data using the following research procedures:

- 45 – 60 minute individual, semi-structured interviews with adult participants;
- Ninety minute focus group with all adult participants;
- Written personal narratives from the children and caregivers. Where the children are too young to write, they can tell the stories and have them transcribed;
- 45 – 60 minute, individual, semi structured interviews with the children in response to pictorial or storybook representations of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes; and,
- Review of school board policies and procedures used to support children who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

You will be able to review research materials and analyses as part of an interactive process where you are involved in the research process. You will be provided with drafts of analyses to provide corrections, amendments, and editing. Your changes to the drafts of the analyses will be taken into account during the rewriting and editing process.

Benefits

The children who participate in this study may benefit through the connections made between their caregivers who will be afforded the opportunity to hear collective voices, concerns, stories, and experiences. This, in turn, can create a space where adult participants may choose a more active role in supporting one another to create an inclusive and accepting environment for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

I hope that the information gathered through this study can positively impact the way educational communities create and maintain educational environments for students who do not conform to gender stereotypes.

Risk

The interview questions and the unstructured focus group may cause distress. You can disengage from distressing or uncomfortable situations at any time.

Voluntary Participation

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can choose not to answer a particular or specific question among those asked as you participate in the study.

You can opt out without penalty and you can ask to have any collected data withdrawn from my research database and not included in the study. Even if you agree to be in the study, you can change your mind and withdraw at any time. If you wish to have your data withdrawn from the study, it will be destroyed along with any recordings. Any analysis that has been completed on the data will be removed from the findings. A request to withdraw can be made up until October 31, 2013.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

The research will be used for my dissertation. As well, findings may be used to support presentations at educational and professional conferences and teachers' conventions.

Confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy will be strictly maintained by:

- Ensuring the use of pseudonyms;
- Password protecting the data on my computer and locking hard copies of the data in a locked cabinet;
- Destroying all data 5 years after it has been collected; and
- Ensuring any identifying information, such as school names, are changed.

A transcriber will be used to transcribe focus group and interview data. The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement.

Questions or Concerns

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, you may contact the primary investigator, Alison Lewis 780.425.2157 or alisonjaye@gmail.com.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

I appreciate your contributions to this study.

Sincerely,

Alison Lewis,
Primary Investigator, PhD Candidate

Please complete the option boxes, as applicable:

OPTION 1:

If you are an adult participant, please sign here:

I _____ have been informed of the purpose of this research and agree to participate

Signature: _____ Date: _____

OPTION 2:

If you are a caregiver of a child participant and you support your child participating in this research, please sign here:

I _____ have been informed of the purpose and procedures used in this research and authorize my child/ward to participate:

Parent/Guardian's Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Please note: Children will also be provided with an assent form.

INFORMATION LETTER and ASSENT FORM

Study Title: ***Gender non-conformity in elementary schools: Learning from the experiences of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes***

I want to tell you about a research study I am doing. A research study is a way to learn more about something. I am studying how we can make school a safe and enjoyable place for boys and girls to be who they are. I am trying to learn what school is like for you as a boy or a girl. You are being asked to join the study because when you were born the doctors said you were a girl and you know that you are a boy, or the doctors said you were a boy and you know that you are a girl. It is important that schools support you to be who you know yourself to be. So my study is going to help us understand how schools can support children to be boys or girls regardless of what the doctors said they were.

If you agree to join this study, you will be asked to have a conversation with me. I will read you a couple of stories and show you some pictures of boys and girls. I will ask you questions about school and about being a girl or a boy at school. I will write down your answers and I will also record your answers so that I can listen to your answers again later when we are not together. I will also ask you to draw me pictures of you at school or tell me stories of you at school. I will visit you a couple of times to have these conversations. Each time I visit, we will be together for about an hour.

The questions that I will ask will be questions about how you live your life as a girl or a boy. Some of the questions that I ask may make you feel uncomfortable. If you do not want to answer them, you do not have to answer them. Your caregivers can be with us while we talk. You are allowed to say you don't want to keep answering questions if at any time you want to quit talking.

You do not have to be part of this research. It is up to you. You can say okay now and then change your mind later. All you have to do is tell me you want to stop and we will stop. No one will be angry at you if you don't want to be in the study or if you join the study and change your mind later and stop.

I do not know if this study will help you at your school. However, this research will help teachers and other adults in schools learn how to work with boys and girls like you.

Before you say **yes or no** to being in this study, I will answer any questions you have. If you join the study, you can ask questions at any time. Just tell me that you have a question.

If you have any questions about this study please call me at 780.425.2157.

Yes, I want to participate in this research **No, I do not want to do this.**
Name of participant: _____ Signature: _____
Signature of Principal Investigator: _____
Date: _____

Confidentiality Agreement

Study Title: ***Gender non-conformity in elementary schools: Learning from the experiences of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes***

I _____(name), have been hired to transcribe research data on the above named project.

I agree to -

1. keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than Alison Lewis, the Primary Investigator.
2. keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.
3. return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to Alison Lewis, the Primary Investigator, when I have completed the transcriptions.
4. after consulting with Alison Lewis, the Primary Investigator, erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to her as the Primary Investigator. (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).

Transcriber:

_____	_____	_____
(Print Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

Primary Investigator:

_____	_____	_____
(Print Name)	(Signature)	(Date)

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by Research Ethics Board *(specify which board)* at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

Sample Guiding Questions for the Focus Group

1. What roles do/can school personnel play in creating a safe and inclusive educational environment for children who do not conform to gender stereotypes?

2. What is the role of caregivers in creating a safe and inclusive educational environment for their children who do not conform to gender stereotypes?

3. How can school personnel and caregivers work together to better ensure inclusive educational environments?

4. What are your stories and experiences of concern with regard to safety and inclusivity of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes?

5. What are your stories and experiences of success with regard to safety and inclusivity of children who do not conform to gender stereotypes?

Sample Interview Questions for Caregivers

1. How does your child create the story of his (her) gender?
   Potential probing questions:
   i. How does he (she) show he (she) is a boy (girl)?
   ii. How old was your child when he (she) started to tell the story of his (her) gender?

2. Did you prepare the adults in the school to support your child?
   Potential probing questions:
   i. Did you meet with the adults prior to the school year starting?
   ii. How often did you meet?
   iii. What came of the meetings?
   iv. Which adults did you prepare?

3. How were you prepared to inform and assist the adults in your child's school?
   Potential probing questions:
   i. Were there organizations that you were supported through?
   ii. What resources did you use to prepare you as your child entered into school?

4. What sort of experiences have you had with the school because your child does not conform to gender stereotypes?
   Potential probing questions:
   i. Are your experiences with the school impacted because your child does not conform to gender stereotypes?
   ii. What would you name your role in working with the school to support your child?

5. Society generally thinks about gender in terms of boys/girls or men/women. If we got away from thinking about gender as only two possibilities and thought about gender as having infinite possibilities, what do you think that might be like for those who do not fit the way we currently think about gender?
   Potential probing questions:
   i. What kinds of societal supports are there to think about gender as infinite?
   ii. What kinds of societal barriers are there to think about gender as infinite?

6. Does your child have to mediate between gender conforming and gender non-conforming roles? If yes, how?
   Potential probing questions:

i. In what situations would your child have to mediate between these two roles?
ii. Does your child pick up on the situations on their own or have you supported him (her) in recognizing situations that require mediation between gender conformity and non-conformity?

7. Who is responsible to make sure your child is safe at school?
   Potential probing questions:

   i. Has your child ever reported feeling unsafe at school?
   ii. Did your child talk to anyone at school when he (she) felt unsafe? Did that person help? If yes, how?
   iii. Are there special considerations that must be taken into account when children do not conform to gender stereotypes to ensure safety? What are these considerations and how are they met?

8. How do the adults in the school create an inclusive environment for your child?
   Potential probing questions:

   i. How does policy support _____ in the school or classroom?
   ii. Are there school or classroom routines that are used to support _____?

9. If you were going to imagine the perfect educational environment for your child, how would you describe it?

Sample Interview Questions for Students

1. What does it mean to be a boy (girl)?
   Potential probing questions:
   i. How do you show you are a boy (girl)?
   ii. How do other people show they are boy or girls?

6. How do the adults in your school help you to feel comfortable as a boy (girl)?
   Potential probing questions:
   i. Can you think of something an adult did that made you feel special as a girl (boy)?
   ii. Can you think of something an adult did that made you feel sad because of being a girl (boy)?

7. Do you wish the adults in your school helped you to be comfortable as a boy (girl) in other ways?
   Potential probing questions:
   i. Are there stories or games or activities that they could organize that would help you to be you?

8. What sort of experiences do you have in your school because you are a boy (girl)?
   Potential probing questions:
   i. Do you pick friends according to whether they are boys or girls?
   ii. What do you do in your free time at school?
   iii. Do you pick activities that are thought to be boy activities or girl activities?

9. What do you think it might be like if we thought about people without thinking of them as boys or girls?
   Potential probing questions:
   i. Does it matter if someone is a boy or a girl?

10. If you could change things in your school so that it was easier for you to be a boy (girl), what would you change?
    Potential probing questions:
    i. What kinds of things make it difficult to be a boy (girl) at your school?
    ii. Who could help you make changes and what would you like them to do? What kinds of things make it easy to be a boy (girl) at your school?

11. Who is responsible to make sure you are safe at school?
    Potential probing questions:

    i. Have you ever felt unsafe at school?
    ii. Did you talk to anyone at school when you felt unsafe? Did that person help? If yes, how?