



Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Ontario Schools

Educators' Responses

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Schools: Educators' Responses

reports the findings of an Ontario-wide survey of educators. The report is part of a larger study, *Supporting Transgender and Gender Minority Youth in the School System: Investigating Policy and Practice*, funded by the Social Sciences Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)¹.

About the survey: The survey was developed in consultation with trans educators, school board officials and community members and included a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions. It was shared through several social media platforms including Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF), and various Facebook groups for Ontario educators.

About the respondents: 1194 educators across Ontario responded to the survey. They include a wide range of educational roles, racial/ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, and sexualities.

Findings

Recognizing volunteer bias. Participation in this study was voluntary and respondents may have had a special interest in the topic. Indeed, compared to statistics reported by Ontario College of Teachers, a higher proportion of respondents identified as a gender minority.

Awareness, knowledge, and understanding may be lower among those who are perhaps less interested or willing to learn and teach about trans inclusion and gender diversity issues as well as among those who are resistant and transphobic.

¹ SSHRC Grant entitled: *Supporting transgender and gender minority youth in schools: Policy and practice [435-2015-0077]* Principal Investigator: Wayne Martino.

POLICIES SUPPORTING TRANS AND GENDER DIVERSE STUDENTS

Policy awareness varies greatly. More than one quarter (28%) of educators who participated in the study indicated **little or no awareness** of transgender and gender diverse inclusive policies in schools.

Policies are implemented inconsistently. Among those who were aware of local policies (73%), most (93%) rated the policy as somewhat or very relevant and almost all (96%) indicated they were somewhat or very likely to follow policy recommendations. However, educators painted a different picture in their comments. For example, many comments reflected an understanding of the policy as a **reactive or individualized response** to the visible presence of a trans student. Others conceived of policy as accommodating individual trans students regarding provision of washroom access and pronoun use.

Support for policies varies. Although most educators (94%) rated their school

administration as very or somewhat supportive of trans-inclusion and gender diverse policies, levels of support varied, and many educators noted **a lack of support** from administrators.

General Approaches to Equity and Prioritizing Race. Some educators shared that while there was no specific policy devoted to addressing trans inclusion and gender diversity, there was a general “equity policy for all”. Others also highlighted a prioritized focus on FMNI and newcomer immigrant students in their school communities which resulted in trans inclusion and gender diversity not being addressed. These responses highlight the importance and value of both a prioritized focus on anti-racism education in schools and an intersectional approach that is aligned with a critical trans politics.

UNDERSTANDING TRANS INCLUSION AND GENDER DIVERSITY

Understanding comes from personal experience. 72% of survey respondents rated their knowledge and understanding of trans-inclusion and gender diversity as good or very good. Among 220 comments on this topic, more than half (58%) mentioned a **personal interest** and/or knowing a trans person. While professional development (PD) was a source of knowledge for some (15%), many mentioned that their learning was self-directed and motivated by knowing a trans person either as a student in their class(es) or a family member.

Many educators are uncomfortable using key terms around gender diversity. Educators rated their understanding of and comfort using 24 terms related to gender diversity. Knowledge and comfort were highly positively correlated [$r(827) = .75, p < .001$], suggesting that better understanding of terms is associated with greater comfort discussing these issues with students. Comments reinforced this finding, with more than one third (37%) noting their lack of comfort with

such terms was because they did not fully understand them.

Some educators question using gender expansive language in early years. Almost one in five (17%) comments suggested gender expansive language was inappropriate in primary classes, raising questions about how gender diversity is understood and communicated in early years.

Resistance to trans inclusion and gender diversity remains. Of concern, some comments (9%) expressed resistance or outright refusal to embrace learning and knowledge about trans inclusion and gender diversity. Some responses expressed overt transphobia and cissexism.

Lack of support from administration. Some educators pointed to a lack of “back up” from administrators, which lowered their confidence in whether trans inclusion would be supported in their classrooms.

TRAINING IN TRANS INCLUSION AND GENDER DIVERSITY

Most educators have little or no training in trans and gender diversity issues. 75% of respondents had received little or no explicit training, education, or professional development about transgender and gender diverse people.

Most educators are self-taught in trans and gender diversity issues. Most respondents (79%) indicated that self-education was their primary source of training. Among comments, half (51%) gained some knowledge through PD offered by their school/

school board; 18% accessed training offered by their union and/ or community partners such as Egale². Other sources of training included taking AQ³ courses and graduate studies, reading board policy, accessing online research, and listening to podcasts.

Gaps exist in local school/school board training. Some educators mentioned that explicit training on gender diversity provided by schools/school boards was inadequate and often buried in broader discussions about equity and social justice.

² Egale (2019) is an advocacy organization committed to advancing the human rights of 2SLGBTQI+ people through research, education, and public policy.

³ Additional Qualification courses are courses accredited by the Ontario College of Teachers. They are designed to support professional learning of teachers and are a means by which to update and gain further qualifications in a particular subject area.

RESOURCES FOR ADDRESSING GENDER DIVERSITY IN SCHOOLS

Invited speakers and picture books were identified as the most helpful resources.

Educators rated **school visits or workshops** delivered by trans and gender diverse individuals as by far the most useful resource, with 93% of educators who had accessed this resource rating them as very or moderately useful. However, educators commented on various barriers to securing presenters, including difficulty finding speakers, lack of compensation, and constraints particular to the Catholic school system.

Among those who used **picture story books**, many educators (90%) rated them as very or moderately useful. However, educators claimed finding appropriate materials was challenging, and some educators noted a particular lack of relevant resources for early grades. Accessing age-appropriate resources in French can also be difficult.

The internet is often accessed but less helpful.

Two-thirds (67%) of educators accessed YouTube and other websites to learn about trans inclusion and gender diversity. Fewer educators rated the internet as a very useful resource (32%).

Existing materials need improvement.

School board curriculum support materials and documents were the least useful resource, with over a quarter of respondents (27%) who had accessed them indicating they were not useful, and only 10% indicating they were very useful.

Notably, many respondents had **not accessed any resources**. Many identified a lack of institutional support from their school administration and school board as a barrier to access and use of resources.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS THAT EDUCATORS NEED

Educators need PD, resources, and a shift in school culture. Respondents commented on additional supports they need to respond more effectively to transgender and gender diverse students (n= 655). Almost half (45%) **reiterated the need for additional professional development** with some suggesting that this education be mandatory. They noted that PD must include how “to use common, acceptable language and consistently create safe spaces for the learning of all communities”. A third (32%) expressed **a strong need for more resources.**

Some (8%) identified a need for support from colleagues (including administrators) to create supportive, school-wide cultures where gender diversity is embraced. Other areas of need included support for addressing parental opposition, providing trans-affirmative counselling, clarifying policy directives and facilitating student feedback to learn about students’ needs.

BARRIERS TO ADDRESSING TRANS-INCLUSIVITY AND GENDER DIVERSITY IN SCHOOLS

Lack of training, knowledge, and resources are barriers to inclusivity.

Almost half (44%) of respondents noted lack of education negatively impacted their ability to address trans inclusivity and gender diversity. Many acknowledged their lack of understanding, specifically about gender diverse terms and correct pronoun usage, was a significant challenge. In addition, 9% identified a lack of resources as a barrier.

Lack of support and transphobia are challenges. Over one quarter (28%) of respondents expressed concerns over lack of support and backlash from parents and colleagues. Some respondents specifically

mentioned overt expressions of transphobia and resistance from both groups. These attitudes act as barriers to creating school-wide gender inclusivity and supporting gender expansive education.

Religious beliefs can create barriers. Some respondents (7%) indicated that embracing gender diversity is “more challenging in the Catholic system” and that “many educators avoid this subject for faith reasons”.

IMPROVING EDUCATION ABOUT TRANS-INCLUSIVITY AND GENDER DIVERSITY

Provide PD and engage the LGBT community. 38% of respondents advocated for professional development and training (for educators and administrators) with 7% suggesting training should be mandatory. Some recommended the experiences and voice of trans folks be included in this PD and called for schools to actively collaborate with the LGBT community (5%).

Address curriculum concerns. 11% of respondents wanted more support to include trans and gender diversity representation in the curriculum. Some (3%) advised introducing gender diversity in the curriculum as early as possible.

TRANS EDUCATORS' VOICES

To better understand the experiences of trans educators, we analyzed responses of educators who self-identified as trans, nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, gender non-conforming and/or Two Spirit (n=38) as a subset of the overall data. These educators:

- demonstrated greater awareness of trans-inclusive policies and resources
- stressed the absence of system-level support for trans inclusion and trans-affirmative education and noted that increased training and awareness are needed for trans-inclusion to be a shared responsibility among all school staff
- advocated for professional learning offered by trans individuals
- identified transphobia and lack of knowledge as significant unaddressed challenges
- called for more trans representation and greater visibility of trans teachers and students in schools

Overall, their responses strongly support the view that inclusive education and the provision of curriculum resources must not fall solely on the shoulders of trans educators and trans students; it is a collective responsibility.

Conclusions

This survey provided insights into educator knowledge, awareness, and understanding of trans inclusion and gender diversity in Ontario schools. While many educators indicated an awareness of trans inclusive policies, there were varying levels of understanding about what support for trans and gender diverse students really entails. Often, educators understood policies as catering to individual students and did not consider broader systemic issues that foster and nurture a gender expansive school culture. In addition, the findings highlighted gaps between policy and practice, with many educators claiming local policy was not enacted or was not supported by the school administration and/or their colleagues. Our findings highlight a need for intersectional approaches to equity policy that address the ways in which trans inclusion interfaces with a necessary and prioritized commitment to antiracist, anti-imperialist and decolonial educational reform in schools.

A key theme running throughout the data was a lack of education provided to educators. The lack of PD was one of the biggest barriers to addressing trans-inclusivity and gender

diversity in the education system, with some educators calling for mandatory PD. Overall, respondents highlighted that training was personally motivated and not systemically directed.

Another barrier was a lack of resources and support for curriculum development to teach about gender diversity in schools. In addition, educators encounter lack of support from some administrators, as well as resistance from colleagues who do not believe trans inclusion is necessary. Issues of parental backlash and lack of support for trans inclusion and gender diversity, especially in the Catholic school system, were also mentioned as problems.

Overall, the findings draw attention to **systemic barriers** such as inadequate training for educators and administrators, a need for more robust policies, and the need to ensure policies are enacted. These findings raise important questions about **accountability** and Ontario's overall **commitment** to trans inclusion and gender expansive education.

NOTE: Educator Toolkit

In the short term, educators need better access to resources, as well guidance and support to support gender expansive education and trans inclusion in schools. To help address this need, we are developing **a resource entitled Supporting Trans-Affirming Education in Schools: An Educator Toolkit** to support educators in their classrooms and schools.

Recommendations

1 DEVELOP TRANS-AFFIRMATIVE POLICIES

Provincial and local policies must move beyond a focus on individual accommodation to incorporate system-wide supports and foster gender-affirming school climates. Regulatory organizations that govern education-related professions such as the Ontario College of Teachers, the College of Early Childhood Education, and others must also develop and issue Trans-affirmative policies and professional advisories.

Key actions to develop trans-affirmative policies

- Update existing provincial equity policies and guidelines to include an informed focus on fostering trans-affirmative and intersectional approaches in the education system
- Develop specific guidelines for supporting trans and gender diverse students that are consistent with the OHRC (Ontario Human Rights Code) for supporting gender diversity in all schools
- Develop policies and professional advisories on supporting trans students, trans educators and trans-affirmative education in schools through regulatory organizations of professions related to public education
- Provide dedicated financial and human resources to develop and enact trans affirming policies and pedagogies in all schools

2 PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND CURRICULUM RESOURCES

Educators need relevant professional learning opportunities and resources so they can support gender expansive education. Our findings show that educators lack the supports they need to address gender justice. Currently, the Ontario Ministry of Education (the Ministry) does not require educational workers to attend professional development that focuses on gender identity, though it does list “equity, inclusion, and human rights” as an option for one of three mandatory Professional Activity Days (PPM 151, 2019, p.5).

Key actions to provide professional learning and resources:

- Provide funding at provincial, school board and school levels to support PD centred on gender expansive education and trans-affirmative policy.
- Foster professional learning communities that are committed to gender justice
- Ensure mandatory training on trans-affirmative policy and gender expansive education in pre-service programs related to public education and teacher education
- Develop and provide appropriate curriculum resources that affirm trans and gender diverse students, and support gender expansive education in schools.

3 ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY

The commitment to support trans students and gender diverse education cannot depend on individuals—and specifically trans educators—who take it upon themselves to be better educated on these issues. The Ministry must provide systemic support and funding, so school boards can offer ongoing PD, develop resources, and foster inclusive school cultures. Subsuming trans inclusion within an overall commitment to supporting equity and inclusive education is not enough. Educators need professional learning informed by an intersectional approach with a focus on trans and nonbinary students from various cultural, economic, and racialized backgrounds and faiths, as well as those with disabilities. Teacher Education faculties also have a particular responsibility in ensuring that teacher candidates have the requisite knowledge about trans affirmative theories that need to inform a critical understanding of policy and practice in schools. Accountability measures are needed to ensure gender-affirmative policies translate into practice.

Key actions to ensure accountability:

- Ensure that all school boards develop trans-affirmative policies
- Develop detailed accountability measures to ensure trans-affirmative policies are enacted in schools and in teacher education faculties.