

How Teachers Can Provide Adequate Support for Transgender Youth in High School

By

Lien Dilewijns

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APPROVED BY

Jennifer Campbell, PsyD, R. Psych (#2473), Capstone Advisor, Master of Counselling Faculty

Ron Manley, Ph.D., R. Psych (#0866), Faculty Second Reader, Master of Counselling Faculty

Division of Arts and Sciences

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Abstract

Teachers are at the forefront of being able to provide support and make a difference in the lives of transgender youth. Supporting transgender youth in high school requires teachers to have knowledge about gender dysphoria and gender development, knowledge of the reality of bullying and suicide, and ability to collaborate with school counsellors. This literature review looked at what training high school teachers need to be able to provide adequate support for transgender youth. The literature review looked at what gender dysphoria is, bullying and suicide rates amongst transgender youth, what the current transgender training is for teachers, and how teachers can collaborate with school counsellors in order to best support transgender youth. In the third chapter I have created a workshop that will train high school teachers on how to support and guide transgender youth. The workshop will train teachers on how to speak with transgender young people about suicide, bullying, hormone therapy, as well as teach them about how to properly use pronouns.

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How Teachers Can Provide Adequate Support for Transgender Youth in High School

Chapter One

Overview of the Topic

This research paper will look at gender dysphoria and gender identity in order to understand the psychological aspect transgender youths are dealing with. Transgender youth spend a large amount of time at high school, and I want to know if high school teachers have adequate training to support transgender youth. There are 0.39% to 0.60% of adults identify as transgender of which 6.8/100,000 male to-female transsexuals and 2.6/100,000 female-to-male transsexuals looking for treatment (Bonifacio et al., 2019; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018). Austin et al. (2020) state that 82% of transgender individuals have considered killing themselves and 40% have attempted suicide. Research states that one in five transgender students reported experiencing bullying and discrimination at school not only by peers but also by teachers (Pampati et al., 2020). I will look at some of the key struggles, such as suicide and victimization as well as protective factors in order to establish what additional training high school teachers need. In order to do that we have to look at some of the pieces transgender youth are struggling with and what factors protect them. Once having figured out what training teachers currently receive in regard to gender minority students, specifically transgender youth, we can decide what additional training might be helpful.

In chapter three, I will create a workshop that can be used for high school teachers that will educate them on how to use proper pronouns, how to stand up and stop homophobic behaviour, and how to address suicide. I hope that this workshop will provide current teachers with enough information to feel comfortable in supporting transgender students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to find out what training high school teachers need to be able to provide adequate support for transgender youth. This is why the intended audience for my research are high school teachers as I believe they are the ones on the front lines when it comes to working with transgender youth. Transgender youth develop their identity and a sense of self during their time in high school and it must be hard for transgender youth to struggle with their identity and for no one to notice. For many students, school, their peers and teachers are their only support system, so it is important for teachers to recognize when a student is being bullied for being transgender or feeling unaccepted. There are high statistics for suicide, especially for transgender youth so it's important to know what contributes to those statistics and how we can lower them. If teachers are trained on how to provide adequate support for transgender youth, they can recognize the signs and make a positive impact on that youths' life by being able to offer the proper support. Also, many other professionals such as medical professionals, counsellors, youth and parents can benefit from this research. These are the people who support, provide medical assistance, and provide resources for transgender youth.

Medical professionals such as doctors and nurses also play a huge role in the lives of transgender youth especially if that person is planning on getting gender reassignment surgery or starting hormone therapy. General practitioners are not trained in how to provide check-ups with transgender clients (Vu, 2016). Many of them will not know the proper language of how to address their clients or might not even feel comfortable helping a trans person because they did not receive any additional training (Vu, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework for this research is social justice based because all people should have equal access to, health, well-being, justice, privileges, and opportunity regardless of their legal, political, economic, or other circumstances (Walters, 2020). The transgender community has a history of oppression, racism, abuse, and needs people from outside of their community to support and speak up for them. According to the US transgender survey, 47% of transgender people reported being sexually assaulted at one point in their life (VAWnet, 2021). In transgender communities of colour, 53% of black respondents were sexually assaulted and 54% experienced intimate partner violence (VAWnet, 2021). With transgender youth, 92% hear sexist remarks made by peers, 79% experienced sexist remarks made by faculty and 89.9% reported feeling unsafe in school because of their gender expression (VAWnet, 2021). I believe it is my responsibility as a white privileged woman to support communities whose voices are being silenced and to draw attention to the discrimination and difficulties trans folks have to face.

Contributions to the Field

This research is important because there is only limited research available about transgender youth in high school. In the qualitative research that is available, the sample sizes are usually small because transgender adults are less likely to disclose their orientation as compared to transgender youth in the community (Sowden et al., 2016). “Since many LGBT individuals do not self-identify publicly, it is difficult to estimate accurately the LGBT population in the USA and to determine the scope of needs and concerns of this population” (Sowden et al., 2016, p. 2). This shows there is not only a need for research but also need for understanding and support for this community. If more people felt comfortable coming out, we would be able to gather more information and have larger sample sizes for research. As there is more support and acceptance

towards the transgender community, and more people are learning about what it means to be transgender, more youth feel comfortable coming forward and identifying as transgender. In order for high school teachers to be able to provide proper support, more research needs to be done on how to properly support and educate staff in high schools.

Research suggests that transgender youth often have negative experiences in high school, experience high levels of harassment, and feel unsafe (Riggs et al., 2015). It is important more research is done to find out why this is, and why transgender youth feel they have nowhere to go for support. It is also important to find out why school staff such as teachers are not educated on this matter and are not able to provide a safe space for transgender youth. This is why I want to create a workshop for teachers that will help them better understand the needs of transgender youth.

Reflective and positionality statement

In this section, I will discuss my social location, my understanding of struggles faced by transgender youth, perceptions of the sociocultural aspects and their influence on this area, and expected and/or hoped for outcomes of the research. As a teenager I often felt misunderstood and did not feel I had anyone to turn to. In high school I was not aware of what a school counsellor was, and I never felt safe to speak to any of the teachers. I have always had an interest in the transgender community and have wanted to gain knowledge about the many issues they face. I find it interesting that someone can be born in the wrong body and how hard it must be to make other people understand that. It must be challenging for that individual to figure out how to make themselves fit in and feel accepted by society. A regular teenager already goes through so much that being stuck in the wrong body must be extremely confusing.

I want to help and support transgender youth to go through their process of transitioning and want them to feel accepted and supported. I want to make sure I have the proper knowledge and education and have done the proper research in order to help support transgender youth in a way that works for them. I never received sex education in high school and any university level courses I have taken about sexuality have only talked about gender dysphoria. No one has provided further information in regard to hormone therapy, gender reassignment surgery, or how to properly support someone who is transgender. I am hoping that I can be that person for people who feel lost and have nowhere to turn, especially the transgender community.

When I position myself in this research, I am aware that I am a white heterosexual female living in Canada. I understand that I am a woman and have my own struggles such as sexism, harassment, fighting for equality, equal pay and feeling safe. I understand that the transgender community has many additional struggles. People that are part of this community face discrimination, loss of family, struggle with homelessness, and inability to find employment. Being transgender is hard as this community struggles because society does not always understand or accept them.

I see myself as an ally and a support system for the transgender community. Not only do I want to help by focusing on this community as a counsellor, but be able to provide support and be an activist outside of the counselling room. I want to fight for their rights, acceptance, freedom, and equality. I am aware that I am not a part of the transgender community as I do not identify as such and I have to be aware that someone of this community may not feel comfortable or may feel I have no way of understanding their struggles. I have to be aware that many people in this community might not just be struggling simply because they are transgender but many of them might also be part of a different cultural system or have a different ethnicity or

religious beliefs. Being a white, straight, cisgender female might be a barrier for them to share with me. Being in this location gives me privileges and acceptance in society that they do not have.

I also want to acknowledge that I do not identify as someone from the transgender or the LGBTQ2S+ community. This is important because my research will be viewed through the lens of a white, privileged, straight, cisgender women who has no personal experience of what it is like to be in someone's shoes who is transgender. Some of the research I am doing is based on what I feel I am missing educationally in regard to transgender youth specifically and what I might find helpful so I can better assist my transgender clients.

Key Terms

Ally is a person who supports and celebrates LGBTQ2S+ identities, challenges oppressive remarks and actions of others, and willingly explores heterosexist and ciscentric biases within themselves. Being an ally requires action: for example, telling colleagues that their jokes are inappropriate and advocating for the health, wellness and acceptance of LGBTQ2S+ family members (Qmunity, 2018).

Blending is a term sometimes used to refer to the state of an LGBTQ2S person not being visibly recognizable as LGBTQ2S+ (Qmunity, 2018).

Cisgender is identifying with the same gender that one was assigned at birth. A gender identity that society considers to "match" the biological sex assigned at birth (Qmunity, 2018).

Coming Out is the process of becoming aware of one's gender and/or sexuality, accepting it, and telling others about it (Qmunity, 2018).

Gender Dysphoria refers to the internalized conflict and distress experienced by an individual who's assigned gender at birth, and the gender with which they identify, are different (Qmunity, 2018).

Gender Identity is one's internal and psychological sense of oneself as man, woman, both, in-between, neither, or another understanding of gender (Qmunity, 2018).

Heteronormative refers to social roles and structures that reinforce the idea that heterosexuality is the presumed norm and is superior to other sexual orientations (Qmunity, 2018).

Heterosexism is a system of attitudes, bias, and discrimination in favor of opposite-gender sexuality and relationships. This includes the assumption that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual and that heterosexuality is inherently superior to queerness (Qmunity, 2018).

Internalized Homophobia: The experience of shame, guilt, or self-hatred in reaction to one's own feelings of sexual attraction for a person of the same gender (Qmunity, 2018).

LGBTQ2S+ is an acronym used to refer to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer and Two-Spirit (2S) people. Additional letters, or a + sign, are sometimes added to this acronym (i.e. LGBTQ+, LGBTQI2S, etc.).

Outing Someone is accidentally or intentionally publicly revealing another person's sexual orientation, gender identity, trans status and/or relationship status without their permission (Qmunity, 2018).

Privilege refers to the social, economic and political advantages or rights held by people from dominant groups on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, social class, etc. (Qmunity, 2018).

Queer is a term becoming more widely used among LGBTQ2S+ communities because of its inclusiveness. ‘Queer’ can be used to refer to the spectrum of non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender people and provides a convenient shorthand for ‘LGBTQ.’ (Qmunity, 2018).

Transgender is an umbrella term for a wide range of experiences and identities for people whose gender does not match with the gender they were assigned at birth. Identifying as trans is something that can only be decided by an individual for themselves and does not depend on criteria such as surgery or hormone treatment status (Qmunity, 2018).

Project Chapters

In chapter two, I will be reviewing research on gender dysphoria and identity, suicide factors, and transgender youth needs. I will also look into what training is currently available for high school teachers when it comes to transgender youth. Are there currently specific resources available that teachers can turn to when one of their students identifies as transgender. I will look into what extent teachers can involve school counsellors in order to support transgender students. I will focus on what the needs are from transgender students’ points of view. We need to know what types of support transgender students are looking for. I will be covering research on transgender youth and bullying and how teachers can help prevent bullying from happening.

Once I have concluded what is missing as far as training for teachers and what it is that transgender youth are looking for and needing for support, I will put together a workshop which will be covered in chapter three. This workshop is intended for cisgender straight teachers who are looking to gain more knowledge on transgender youth. The workshop will include education on gender identity and the use of proper pronouns, suicide, allyship, and how to create inclusive spaces.

Chapter Two

This literature review will cover several important topics in relation to transgender youth and the support or lack of support they are receiving at school. I will begin the research by looking at transgender youth specifically, what some of the struggles they are going through are, such as gender identity and suicide as well as their high school experiences and protective factors. Next, I will look at the training high school teachers receive in their education and how high schools can be accommodating and provide support for teachers to better support transgender youth.

Transgender Youth

Gender Dysphoria

According to Turban et al. (2018), the DSM-5 diagnosis of gender dysphoria (GD) refers to individuals who experience clinical distress secondary to an incongruence between their sex assigned at birth and their gender identity. Kaltiala-Heino et al. (2018) stated that “individuals with GD experience a strong desire to be treated as the other gender and/or to be rid of their sex characteristics, and/or the strong conviction of having feelings and reactions typical of the other gender” (p. 30). A recent study by Bonifacio et al. (2019) showed that 0.39% to 0.60% of adults identify as transgender, and rates were found to be higher among youth than among adults, with 1.2% to 4.1% of adolescents reporting a gender identity different from that assigned at birth. Kaltiala-Heino et al.’s (2018) research showed that there are 6.8/100,000 male to-female transsexuals and 2.6/100,000 female-to-male transsexuals looking for treatment. It also showed that the number of adolescents contacting gender identity services has risen across Europe and North America (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018).

According to Kaltiala-Heino et al. (2018), “the most commonly used guidelines for the treatment of GD in children and adolescents are those of The Endocrine Society and the Standard

of Care from the World Professional Association for Transgender Health” (p.33). Treatment guidelines state that puberty suppression with gonadotropin releasing hormone is recommended with subsequent consideration of cross-sex hormone therapy (Nahata et al., 2017). “The purpose of puberty suppression is to relieve the psychological suffering caused by the development of secondary sex characteristics, to give the adolescent time to make a balanced decision regarding whether to undergo actual medical gender-confirming treatment and to make social “passing” in the experienced gender easier” (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018, p. 33). The World Professional Association for Transgender Health Standards of Care (WPATH) and the Dutch Model Protocol recommend hormone therapy in adolescents with gender dysphoria that are different from those used in adults: they are adapted to account for the somatic, emotional and mental development that occurs throughout adolescence (Bonifacia et al., 2019; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018). In adolescents, puberty suppression with gonadotropin releasing hormone analogs is part of the medical treatment recommended at age 12 years and older (Bonifacia et al., 2019; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018).

Kaltiala-Heino et al. (2018) stated that the Endocrine Society and WPATH guidelines have paved the path for management of youth with gender dysphoria, yet future changes still need to be made. According to Kaltiala-Heino et al. (2018), we should have a curriculum of integrated education about sexual and gender minorities with continuing opportunities for additional training. Claahsen et al. (2021) suggested that a multidisciplinary team is required. This multidisciplinary team would provide access to a well-trained team of health professionals, including psychiatrists, endocrinologists, gynecologists, surgeons, and other healthcare providers (Claahsen et al., 2021). It’s important to have a multidisciplinary team because gender dysphoria may be exacerbated by mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and suicide

(Bonifacio et al., 2019; Claahsen et al., 2021). A secondary aspect to this is an affirmative approach which includes working with the youth and their family and school to support the gender-nonconforming minors in expressing themselves in a way that feels most comfortable for them (Kaltial-Heino et al., 2018). This approach also includes collaborative decision making with the youth, family, and care providers (Bonifacio et al., 2019). Bonifacio et al. (2019) stated that youth who make gender decisions within a supportive environment fare better than those without family support.

Gender Identity

The following section will look at gender identity and how transgender youth struggle and cope with gender identity. Gender identity refers to an individual's psychological sense of one's gender as male, female, or other (Turban et al., 2018). Turban et al. (2018) stated there has been increased research on pediatric identity over the past several years. According to Turban et al. (2018), transgender identity and gender diversity among children and youth have been increasingly reported in recent years and adolescent gender identity services have reported an increase in young people who seek help with incongruence between the experienced gender identity and the gender to which they were assigned at birth (De Graaf et al., 2018; Turban et al., 2018). According to Schimmel et al. (2018), many of the youth felt they lacked the language and knowledge to accurately describe feelings of gender confusion. Those authors stated that the process of recognizing, acknowledging and developing one's transgender identity is a multistage process. "These stages include awareness, seeking information/reaching out, disclosure to significant others, exploration with identity formation and self-labeling, exploration of transition issues involving appearance and possible body modification (e.g., hormone therapy, surgeries), and finally integration involving acceptance" (p. 273). A key part of Schimmel et al.'s research explored the difference support can make in transgender youth exploring these stages. One of the

main supports that had a big influence on trans youth was having a positive relationship with an educator which increased academic success and social-emotional regulation (Schimmel et al., 2018). “For trans youth specifically, having accepting school administrators not only provides social support but also affects the tone of the school concerning policies and the school climate such as programs and resources offered” (Schimmel et al., 2018, p. 274). The downside to this is that many educators feel unprepared and uncomfortable supporting transgender youth (Schimmel et al., 2018). Schimmel et al. continued by saying that “many caregivers felt the school system should be educating children about gender identity, so that all children are aware that gender is not binary, and so that youth have the terminology, knowledge, and supportive environment they need to explore their gender” (p. 275). There is clearly a gap between the information and support trans youth receive at home and the information they could be receiving from their high school teachers.

A secondary aspect of gender identity is Budge’s et al.’s (2018) research on transgender youths’ coping strategies, which contributed to how they were able to get through some of their gender identity struggles. This study showed six themes related to coping: negotiating gender, avoidance, emotional relief, personal solace, support, and active engagement (Budge et al., 2018). “When youth described their first experiences coping related to their gender identity, they described cognitive and behavioral processes related to negotiating their gender” (Budge et al., 2018, p. 3053). Transgender youth discussed methods of coping and actions they took prior to coming out and were learning to integrate their gender identity into their environment (Budge et al., 2018). Avoidance included behavioural, cognitive and emotional avoidance. Transgender youth used avoidance strategies to protect themselves from being victimized. Emotional relief however is a grimmer coping strategy. Emotional relief included self-harm and thoughts of

suicide as well as crying a lot or releasing tension through anger. I will explore self-harm and the high suicide rates in the next section. Support is a big protective factor for youth (Budge et al., 2018). Without any support or resources, transgender youth have a hard time figuring out and feeling comfortable with their gender identity.

Suicide

According to Austin et al. (2020), data indicated that 82% of transgender individuals have considered killing themselves and 40% have attempted suicide, with suicidality highest among transgender youth. Studies showed that gender clinic-referred youth are at an increased risk of suicidality as early as age five (Turban et al., 2018). Srivastava et al. (2021) stated that gender minority youth are at heightened risk of suicidality and mental health symptomology compared to cisgender sexual minority youth. Srivastava et al.'s (2021) research stated that minority stress theory (MST) has been widely used to explain the health disparities found among both sexual minority and gender minority youth (Austin et al., 2020; Srivastava et al., 2021). "Minority stress theory posits that exposure to identity-based stressors such as prejudice, stigma, discrimination, rejection, bullying, and other forms of violence may be associated with elevated mental health risk among transgender teens and young adults" (Austin et al., 2020, p. 3).

Research showed that suicidal ideation is influenced by two interpersonal experiences: feeling that one does not belong to meaningful relationships and groups, and that one is a burden on others (Hatchel et al., 2019). A key aspect of belonging are the youth's school environment and peer group (Hatchel et al., 2019). Austin et al. (2020) stated that the first place where transgender youth spend most of their time is at home and the second place is at school. According to Austin et al. (2020), transgender youth who felt they belonged at school were half as likely to attempt suicide. "It is within the school context that youth navigate interpersonal

relationships with peers and adults, ranging from the mundane to the notable, all of which can be agonizing experiences for transgender youth who felt, and perhaps were treated, as if they did not belong” (Austin et al., 2020, p. 15). A supportive, safe school environment is key to a comprehensive public health strategy to prevent youth suicide (Willging et al., 2016).

Considering school is where transgender youth spend a lot of time it is important that proper school policies are put in place. According to Virupaksha et al. (2019), “school is one of the first places listed where implementing support and education for trans youth makes the biggest difference when it comes to suicide” (p. 509). Transgender youth were often exposed to minority stress which as stated previously is associated with elevated mental health risks. Transgender youth are also more likely to experience high school victimization when they disclose their orientation, self-identify as a sexual minority, recognize same-sex feelings at a younger age, or demonstrate gender-atypical behaviour (Austin et al., 2020; Srivastava et al., 2021; Willging et al., 2016). Victimization and minority stress can lead to depression which is the strongest predictor of suicidal ideation (Austin et al., 2020; Hatchel et al, 2019). According to Willging et al. (2016), transgender students at schools with anti-harassment policies may feel safer and are less likely to be harassed. Transgender youth with greater school connectedness, schools with supportive staff, anti-bullying policies, and Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs are less likely to be victimized, skip school because of safety concerns, or attempt suicide (Willging et al., 2016).

High School

Schools are one location where youth spend a lot of time (Colvin et al., 2019). Having supportive teachers, school environments, and school connectedness are associated with improved mental health outcomes (Colvin et al., 2019). Research showed that school

connectedness, “which refers to an academic environment where students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals”, is a key protective factor (Colvin et al., 2019; Pampati et al., 2020). Colvin et al.’s (2019) study pointed out that having a positive school climate increased help-seeking behaviour for suicidal thoughts among transgender youth and that having supportive trained staff available improved a feeling of safety and lower levels of substance abuse. “The TransYouth Project found that transgender children who were allowed to socially transition to their identified gender and were supported in their identity exhibited typical rates of depression and self-worth and only minimally elevated levels of anxiety compared with national averages” (Davies, & Kessel, 2017, p. 1152). This is again evidence that the school environment and teachers can have a huge positive impact and provide support for transgender youth.

Demissie et al. (2019) looked at trends in secondary schools from 2008-2014 that support transgender students. This study examined eight practices to support transgender youth and they found that only one of the practices (identifying safe spaces for transgender youths) increased in all states (Demissie et al., 2018). Some of the other practices that were examined were “prohibition of harassment based on students perceived or actual sexual orientation or gender identity, encouragement of staff to attend professional development on safe and supportive school environment, presence of student led clubs that aims to create a safe welcoming environment for all youth” (Demissie et al., 2018, p. 558). The findings of this research were interesting, especially since there was a growing support for the transgender community. The article stated that voicing your support requires less effort than actually creating change and implementing policies and practices, which could be why they only saw change in one of the practices (Demissie et al., 2018). Demissie et al. (2018) also stated that school’s administration

has many demands and that the implementation of these practices depends on a small number of individuals who may not prioritize these issues.

In order for school policies to change we have to look at the experiences transgender students are going through. Transgender students have experienced physical harassment and/or more violent aggression as a result of their perceived sexual orientation or gender expression (Mason et al., 2017). Research has indicated that one in five transgender students reported experiencing bullying at school on a weekly or more frequent basis (Pampati et al., 2020). “Despite faculty and staff presence during time(s) of physical harassment or assault, participants reported that no intervention took place to stop attacks toward transgender students; in fact, more than one third of these respondents indicated that various staff members engaged in homophobic rhetoric themselves” (Mason et al., 2017, p 302). This is largely because teachers did not receive information on transgender youth during their education and training. Kaltiala-Heino et al. (2018) stated that “transgender youth have been reported to experience bullying and discrimination in schools, not only by peers but even by teachers; consequently, they perceive schools as unsafe places, which again increases the risk of non-attendance and poorer results” (p. 1034). Research also has suggested that gender- and sexuality-related victimization may impair academic performance (Mason et al., 2017; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018). This can result in decreased motivation, school avoidance and harmful coping strategies such as drinking, drugs and suicidal thoughts (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2018; Mason et al., 2017; Pampati et al., 2020).

Another important piece that came up in this literature review is the importance of having gender neutral bathrooms in high schools. Davies et al. (2017) stated that “the National Transgender Discrimination Survey found that transgender adults who had been denied access to gender-appropriate bathrooms while in college had higher lifetime rates of suicide attempts” (p.

1152). Davies et al. (2017) suggested that having access to a bathroom that is gender affirming can be seen as a form of secondary prevention of mood and anxiety disorders for transgender young people. Wernick et al. (2017) stated that some transgender folks experience dehydration and urinary tract or bladder infections from avoiding or waiting to use the bathroom simply because they felt unsafe. “In order to support the wellbeing and healthy development of all students, especially transgender students, educational policies and practices can explicitly support the right of students to use a bathroom that matches their identity, including the provision of gender-neutral restrooms” (Wernick et al., 2017, p 928). The issue is that the start of this change is changing educational policies which can be difficult. Research also stated that ensuring safe access to bathrooms and other school facilities among trans students is a vital component of addressing educational inequality (Davis et al., 2017; Wernick et al., 2017). Finally, Mason et al. (2017) stated that there is limited literature on the needs of transgender youth in teacher education. This is why it is important to look at the needs of transgender youth, especially in a high school setting. As mentioned before, youth spend a lot of time at school and educational institutions are key sites in distributing resources and opportunities to young people (Mason et al., 2017; Wernick et al., 2017). There would likely be great benefits for transgender youth if staff development was improved and educators were trained in topics that would help them to better support students.

Protective Factors

In order to figure out what transgender youth need to feel supported we have to look at protective factors. We need to look at research that looks at what transgender youth need. “The importance of protective factors demonstrates that transgender youth have a greatly reduced

likelihood of negative mental health outcomes when they reported being strongly connected to their family or their school, even when they experienced stigma and discrimination elsewhere” (Veale et al., 2017). School played an important role in the lives of transgender youth, both through supportive teachers and staff and through the resources they provide (Demissie et al., 2018; Johns et al., 2018). In 2013, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) released their school climate survey (Klotz, 2015). The survey looked at anti-LGBT language and victimization in a school environment (Klotz, 2015). Half of the students surveyed said they had a Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) which resulted in those students experiencing a more positive school climate (Klotz, 2015). According to Klotz (2015), schools that had GSA clubs had school personnel intervene when homophobic remarks were made against students which allowed students to feel more connected to their school community. “Supportive school clubs can help foster a sense of connectedness to the school, while allowing a space for LGBTQ youth to create their own structures and values, and attempt to provide a space that is free of anti-LGBTQ stigma” (Veale et al., 2017, p. 214).

The GLSEN also collected data on how many LGBT students had inclusive curricula at their school (Klotz, 2015). Johns et al. (2018) stated that school policies against bullying and LGBT inclusive curricula demonstrated some evidence of being protective. When an LGBT inclusive curriculum was offered, LGBT students were less likely to hear homophobic remarks (Kaltala-Heino et al., 2018; Klotz, 2015). An important component in creating protective factors is providing professional development for staff as well as implementing bullying and harassment policies that incorporate sexual orientation and gender identity; offering curricular resources inclusive of LGBT people; and supporting student organizations such as GSA clubs (Klotz, 2015). According to Veale et al. (2017), educational systems should work directly with

transgender youth, professionals, and community leaders to develop relevant and effective programs and policies that create supportive and affirming school environments. Veale et al. (2017) also suggested that “to reduce the risk of adverse mental health outcomes, schools and educational institutions need to become safer and more affirming places for transgender youth, regardless of whether or not school staff are aware of the identities of transgender youth” (p. 214).

According to Alanko et al. (2020), having positive gender-supportive relationships, social support, personal mastery and self-esteem promotes the well-being of transgender youth. Having at least one supportive relationship may make it easier to cope with other relationships that offer less support and more rejection (Alanko et al., 2020). Another important supportive factor for transgender people was personal empowerment, that is, feelings of having agency over things in one’s life and feeling good about oneself (Alanko et al., 2020). Alanko et al. (2020) stated that friends were the most frequently reported source of social support among transgender youth. Previous studies have indicated that friends and partners can help transgender youth achieve a congruent gender and body identity which again is a great source of support (Alanko et al., 2020).

Missing Pieces

Teachers and Training

Research on teacher’s perspectives and experiences on working with transgender youth remains limited (Davies et al., 2017; Mason et al., 2017; Meyer & Leonardi, 2018). Educators are being challenged to improve their practice in order to be more affirming of expanding expressions of gender diversity (Meyer et al., 2018). “Most professional educators receive little to no formal instruction on topics related to gender diversity during their preparation

programmes” (Meyer et al., 2018, p. 452). Stiegel (2018) stated that teachers are not prepared to address issues of homophobia and heterosexism in the classroom. Meyer et al. (2018) suggested that teachers may feel vulnerable when exposing their limited knowledge and ignorance on various topics of gender diversity. The current exposure to gender identity and transgender youth was insufficient for educators to be knowledgeable and make meaningful changes in their everyday practices in regard to transgender youth and gender diversity (Meyer et al., 2018). A research study by Kearns et al. (2017) looked at current student teachers and showed that pre-service teachers noticed a lack of gender education in schools. “Teachers referred to the lack of gender education and the need for more awareness of trans and LGBTQ issues in school as problematic, as it limits the gender expression of all youth and creates heteronormative, homophobic, and transphobic school climates” (Kearns et al. 2017, p. 20). In Canada, education is a provincial jurisdiction and the inclusion of transgender youth in schools is widely varied, and there is little legislative agreement about transgender learners in schools (Kearns et al., 2017).

Research has clearly showed that teachers’ education and training does not sufficiently prepare them to meet transgender youths’ needs (Kull et al., 2017). “When schools and educators are proactive in diversifying their curriculum, seeking out resources, and making changes that provide policies and curricula that are inclusive of trans students’ needs and identities, schools can become spaces that affirm and support the development of all students and the pressure can be taken off of families and students to lead the way” (Meyer et al., 2018, p. 459). Meyer et al. (2018) suggested that schools should reach out for outside expertise. Kull et al. (2017) suggested that transgender specific training and workshops could fill gaps and enhance transgender-related graduate education. “Studies of educators have demonstrated positive effects of formal training or workshops on transgender-related competencies, such as attitudes, knowledge, and intentions

to intervene in transgender related bullying and harassment” (Kull et al., 2017, p.14). Kearns et al. (2017) stated that a key component of school and education reform is for teacher candidates to understand and incorporate anti-discrimination work into their teaching practice. There is clearly a lack of explicit LGBTQ education in teacher’s education programs (Kearns et al., 2017; Meyer et al., 2018). Kearns et al. (2017) questioned “how do we prepare pre-service teachers to go into educational environments and create and maintain safe spaces for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgendered, two-spirited, queering and/or questioning (LGBTQ) youth and allies” (p. 3). Kearns et al. (2017) suggested that new teachers require additional education on social justice policies and understanding of LGBTQ oppression.

How High Schools Can Be Accommodating

Schools are responsible for providing a safe, educational environment. For many schools this means having to take additional steps in order to be accommodating for transgender youth needs (Colvin et al., 2019; Demissie et al., 2018; Phillips, 2017). Schimmel et al. (2018) suggested that “creating gender-neutral bathrooms, distributing pamphlets with information about gender identity to students and faculty, encouraging schools to educate teachers about gender identity, and including education about gender identity within the curriculum for students” can make transgender youth feel more comfortable and safer (p. 279). Research suggested that professional development focused on transgender students is often inadequate or under-utilized (Kurt & Chenault, 2017). According to Kurt et al. (2017), administration plays a great role in supporting transgender students as they can set the tone for a supportive climate, navigate legal implications and build policies. Administrators must guide staff and faculty through focused leadership and adaptability as they are the ones who interact daily with transgender youth (Kurt et al., 2017). Some suggestions that were made are discussing the

student's preferred name and pronouns with the student, and making these choices known to all faculty and staff so the student does not have to (Kurt et al., 2017).

In addition, Kurt et al. (2017) proposed a more extensive school-based support, such as gay-straight alliance clubs (GSAs or GSCs), supportive educators, inclusive curriculum, and comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policies in schools. I mention this again because all the suggestions listed above are also protective factors, but schools and staff have to participate in order to successfully create these school-based supports for transgender youth. "GSAs are school-based groups that provide a multi-purpose setting for LGBT and heterosexual cisgender youth to socialize and receive support, to gain access to resources and learn about LGBT issues, and to engage in advocacy efforts to raise awareness and address issues of inequality in the school or broader community" (Poteat et al., 2016, p. 1438). Poteat et al. (2016) stated that schools with GSAs reported lower physical, psychological, and behavioural health concerns. For many students this setting may be one of the few places where they can make friends without the fear of victimization (Poteat et al., 2016). In an interview with GSA students, there seem to be several benefits: "GSAs help lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth find "safety in numbers," feel more connected and empowered, normalize their thoughts and feelings, reclaim "a sense of hope," negotiate peer and romantic relationships, navigate the coming out process, and play a role in the development of self-identity and self-esteem" (Ioverno et al., 2016, p. 398). Ioverno et al. (2016) also suggested that the presence of a GSA has also been associated with a greater reported likelihood that school personnel will intervene when they hear homophobic remarks and greater support from teachers and administrators for sexual minority students. The presence of GSAs is linked to lower depression and lower rates of suicide ideation for sexual minority youth (Ioverno et al., 2016). It is therefore recommended that school

administrators who aim to reduce homophobic bullying and to improve safety at school for sexual minority and all students should support the creation of GSAs (Ioverno et al., 2016).

Summary

Based on the research, it is clear that transgender students spend a lot of time at school and that their school environment can have either a negative or positive effect on them. In this research we looked at gender dysphoria and gender identity as well as risk factors for transgender youth. Much of the research showed that transgender students face struggles such as bullying, harassment, victimization and have high rates of suicide. When looking at protective factors, we see that peer support as well as feeling safe in school is important. Things such as peer run Gay-Straight-Alliance groups and gender-neutral bathrooms give transgender students a sense of safety. Staff and teachers can have a great impact on the youth in a positive way if teachers are provided with education on how to support transgendered youth. In chapter three, I will create a workshop for teachers in high school that will provide them with knowledge on how they can support transgender youth adequately. The workshop will include topics such as pronouns, how to look and listen for signs of suicidal thoughts, and how to work together with the transgender community in order to provide a safe and thriving educational space in schools for transgender youth.

Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Summary

The literature review suggests that current teachers feel there is not enough training or information provided to them in order to support transgender youth. In my research it is clear that transgender youth spend a great deal of their time at school. This shows that the experience transgender youth have in school can be life altering. As Colvin et al. (2019) stated, having a supportive school environment with supportive teachers and peer connectedness improves mental health outcomes of transgender youth. The research also showed that there are high rates of suicide, bullying, and harassment. Many of these issues can be addressed in school if teachers receive training on these subjects. The majority of the current training teachers receive does not include training on gender identity, suicide training, or how to create inclusive spaces. Teachers stated that they feel uncomfortable addressing transphobic behaviour because they have received no training in how to support transgender youth needs (Kull, 2017). Kull (2017) suggested that transgender specific training and workshops could fill gaps and enhance transgender-related graduate education.

There are some limitations to this research as well. Most of the research was not specific to transgender youth but to the LGBTQ2S+ youth. Even though transgender youth are part of the LGBTQ2S+ community this does not mean their experiences are the same. I believe that transgender youth have additional struggles because not only are they going through emotional changes, but potentially physical changes as well, due for example, to hormone blockers. A second limitation is that most of the research on transgender youth is done in countries that are fairly accepting of the transgender community. There is no research on transgender youth or teacher education in countries where people who are transgender are not accepted. I understand it

would be hard to get data from those countries as people who are transgender would want to hide their identity. However, if teachers received additional education, they could provide resources to transgender youth which could help them to stay alive.

Finally, it is clear in the research that teachers do not feel confident or educated enough in order provide support for transgender youth. The research does not make suggestions or recommendations on where teachers can get extra training or how training can be incorporated into the education program for teachers. For this reason, I have created a workshop which will combine and help support transgender youth and teachers to deal with the issues mentioned in the research. In the workshop I created, teachers will learn about correct pronouns, gender identity, tools on how to speak with transgender youth about suicide, and how they can help create safe inclusive spaces for transgender youth. I also make recommendations on what administration can do in order to make schools a more friendly trans inclusive space, such as creating Gay-Straight alliance clubs and having gender neutral bathrooms. The lesson plan is included in Appendix A and provides a description of each section of the workshop.

Recommendations

The Alphabet and Gender identity

A key aspect of a person's identity is to make sure teachers know what the student's gender identity is and what their pronouns are. In this section of the workshop, the teacher will be introduced to the LGBT2QI+ alphabet which stands for: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirit, queer and intersex (Prism Services, 2021). Each identity will be explained in detail with a specific focus on transgender terms. Several of the transgender terms that will be covered are transsexual, gender fluid, trans-feminine, trans-masculine, bi-gender, and MtF/FtM. Prism Services (2021) also state why needing to respect someone's gender identity is so important.

They state that “regardless of someone's appearance, sex assigned at birth, voice, or how you interpret/perceive their gender expression, people should be acknowledged and respected for how they identify (Prism Services, 2021, slide 15). Not all transgender folks are able to “pass” as their affirmed gender and passing is often linked to privilege. Making sure teachers know this information will make sure they call transgender youth by their correct pronouns even if that youth might not physically look like the gender they identify with.

Suicide

As mentioned in the research, suicide rates are very high amongst the transgender community. Having a conversation or approaching someone to talk about suicide can be uncomfortable. In the workshop we want to educate teachers on how to talk to transgender students about suicide and how one might pick up on risk factors if a transgender youth might be feeling suicidal. We want to help teachers feel comfortable about having a conversation about suicide. Part of the training will help teachers to understand the nature of suicide in the transgender community, how to open up dialogue about suicide and what the needs are of people who have thoughts of suicide. Participants will learn de-escalation skills; when and how to ask about suicide and how to help keep someone safe (Crisis Centre). Participants will also learn how to prevent suicide by recognizing signs, providing a skilled intervention, and developing a safety plan to keep someone alive. The key purpose of this section of the workshop is to make teachers feel comfortable about talking about suicide and to be able to have that conversation with transgender youth.

Allyship

We can look at allyship in several different ways, such as advocating, working alongside, and being in solidarity with. Allyship is something that we continuously work towards and not

something we identify with. Educating teachers on how to advocate for transgender youth and be in solidarity with them will be a big part of transgender youths' support and protective factors. There are many important pieces that will be covered in this section of the workshop. Some of the pieces being incorporated into the allyship section come from *The 519: Creating Authentic Spaces* (Hixon-Vulpe, 2021). First, we have to educate teachers on compassion and empathy. This might sound simple and straightforward, but it is something that is often overlooked. Supporting people is to show them compassion and empathy. Teachers must learn to build relationships with transgender youth and create welcoming and kind social environments in the classroom. Active listening is the second step. Teachers must learn to listen without judgement and respect and affirm what someone is saying. Third, providing support is being open to what transgender youth say they need. As a teacher we might think we know what they need but we have to be open if they require a different form of support. Learning about cisgender privileges is the fourth step. Cisgender people can have very different experiences in life and they do not always know what it is like to have to fight for the right to be addressed in a particular way. As cisgender people we have to acknowledge and be aware of the privileges we have. The second to last piece is saying something. When teachers witness transphobia in the classroom and hallways, they should not ignore it. This workshop will teach them how they can intervene and address students when a situation like this arises. Finally, teachers have to maintain an openness and willingness to learn. If teachers are unsure, ask someone. If someone addresses an issue with you or if a student is wanting to educate you, listen to them.

Inclusive Spaces

As mentioned in the research, having inclusive spaces like Gay-Straight alliance clubs are a huge safety factor for transgender youth. Being able to have a space where they can be

themselves and feel safe and comfortable is important. Affirming and positive environments are created verbally, emotionally, and physically; they are made possible through welcoming, kind actions toward trans people, as well as through inclusive physical spaces. According to Prism Services (2021), there are several key areas we can focus on in order to create an inclusive space. The first focus is language. This is why earlier on in the workshop we put great emphasis on gender identity and pronouns. It is important to refer to all people by the name that reflects their lived identity. Using the correct pronoun enables people to feel recognized for who they are. Second is having gender neutral washrooms, changing rooms and showers. According to Hixon-Vulpe (2021), it is important to provide safe and respectful access to washrooms and change rooms for transgender people that is based on their gender identity and expression. Transgender people are often targeted and harassed in gender-segregated washrooms. Schools can help accommodate transgender youth by creating gender neutral washrooms. The workshop will also cover some helpful tips. Schools can make some washrooms and change rooms gender-neutral; that way, everyone can use them. However, we should not force transgender youth to use these facilities. They should pick their own based on their lived gender identity. The washroom signage should highlight what is inside the room, not who will use it and the sign should be clear and accessible. Finally, providing accessible private facilities if and when possible. These facilities can be open to anyone who might be uncomfortable changing or using the washroom in a shared environment.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I hope that this workshop can be easily accessible. In this workshop I combine several different topics from different programs all over the country. I think that's perhaps what was missing from the trainings that I did find. Studies talk about the high rates of

suicide amongst transgender youth, but we do not teach people how to recognize the signs or how to have that conversation with transgender youth. To me that was the biggest piece that was missing. We can talk about all the struggles they are dealing with but unless we implement change and provide education for people on how to feel comfortable addressing the issues, we are only solving half of the problem. My hope is that this workshop can be implemented with teachers in training, as well as with teachers who are currently working. My hope is that we can extend this workshop and provide specific sections for parents who have a transgender child, and other youth who would like to educate themselves on transgender youth and become ally's. My research shows that teachers feel they do not receive enough or any training at all when it comes to gender identity and transgender youth. There is clearly a gap in their education, and I am hoping to fill that gap with the workshop.

Chapter 4: Reflection

When I first started this research, I had some ideas of what the research would show and what I thought might be helpful for the transgender community. The more research I did, the more questions came to mind. The main question was if I was actually allowed to be writing a paper like this because I do not identify as a part of the LGBTQ2S+ community. How could someone like me create a workshop on what transgender youth might need when I am not even part of the community? A part of me realized that perhaps this research would be helpful for someone like me, an outsider, and what does it look like to be an outsider wanting to provide support to transgender youth. I wanted to make sure that I was using the right language and that I would not be overstepping any boundaries. I asked several people who are part of the LGBTQ2S+ community and was met with different responses. The majority of the responses were positive. As long as my intentions were to help the community and to not come into this with an attitude of wanting to gain anything I was told it was okay for me to do this research. The secondary responses that I received were that if I was to put this workshop in action, I was to make sure to hire transgender people to teach the workshop. So, this notion of making sure that I wasn't taking away jobs from a transgender person because I am a white privileged female. This is something that I agree with. If this workshop was to be monetized, the transgender community should be a priority in either receiving some of the funds or to be hired for the educational purposes.

Finally, I was told by a previous supervisor who identifies as non-binary that there are already workshops like this out there. I found this to be interesting because I had to do a lot of research before I came across any workshops, which means that I do think my findings are valuable. Maybe a cisgender white female doesn't know where to look for something like this?

Perhaps the benefit is in the fact that I am a white privileged female and that this could make a big difference in how this information is put out into the world? Maybe my privileged location can cast a wider net to people outside of the community? Maybe having someone from outside the community providing this education to others outside of the community will allow outsiders to feel more comfortable asking questions they were afraid to ask before? Maybe they can relate to me in the fact that they don't know anything, and they would feel more comfortable having someone like myself as a buffer?

In the end, I felt like I needed to do this research because I felt that transgender youth did not receive enough support in high schools. As a white cis female, I was not able to find the information I was looking for which is why I created the workshop with what I felt like were missing pieces. It is my hope that the transgender community can be open to the idea of an outsider trying to provide education to other outsiders in order to support transgender youth.

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Appendix A

The Alphabet and Gender Identity

Go over each definition and ensure teachers know what they mean.

The Alphabet-LGTB2QI+
L- Lesbian G- Gay B- Bisexual T- Transgender 2- Two-Spirit (Mainly indigenous culture) Q- Queer or Questioning I- Intersex + stands for many other identities such as non-binary, genderqueer, asexual, etc.

Put emphasis on how much easier it is to identify as cisgender and the privileges that come with identifying as such.

Cisgender
People who feel their gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth. Cisgender people identify with their genders just like trans and non-binary people do, but cis people aren't questioned about it. Most policy, programming, and space design is based solely on cisgender experiences of the world.

Cover each term in depth and make sure teachers understand the difference between each term.

Gender Identity (Transgender terms)
Trans Transgender Transsexual MtF/FtM Bi-gender Trans-feminine Trans-masculine Gender non-conforming

Genderqueer
 Gender Fluid
 Agender
 Gender Divers
 Gender Creative

Two Spirit

Embraced in 1990 at a gathering in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The gathering is now known as the International Two Spirit Gathering.

Two Spirit is translated from the Anishinaabemowin term 'Niizh manidoowag', indicating a person whose body simultaneously houses a feminine and a masculine spirit.

The term highlights the traditional position Two Spirit people hold/held in their communities, and their place in the sacred circle as a 'multi-gendered person'.

Not every transgender person transition is the same. Some transgender folks may identify as transgender but may not physically look like the gender they identify with.

Gender Affirming steps vary

Not all trans individuals take affirmation steps.

There is variation in the social and/or medical transition steps that people take .

Some people transition from MtF or FtM (binary), while others transition along a gender spectrum (non-binary).

Transition is not always linear. Other considerations might impact if/when folks decide to take transition steps.

- ie. Physical safety, financial barriers, negotiating family, work, & public spaces

Gender affirmation

Steps trans people take to align their presentation and physical body with how they know their gender to be.

Social transition / affirmation:

Using non-medical means to bring an individual's presentation and/or physical body into alignment with their gender identity. Can include:

- Name
- Pronouns used
- Changing legal ID • Clothing
- Chest binder/tucking
- Prosthetics
- Vocal Pitch/Tone
- Body Language
- Shaving/Not Shaving
- Electrolysis \$\$\$

Suicide

Suicide risk assessment training is recommended for all teachers. Some of the facts below can be a helpful guide, but full training is recommended.

IS PATH WARM

- I – Ideation
- S – Substance Abuse

- P – Purposelessness

- A – Anxiety
- T – Trapped
- H – Hopelessness

- W – Withdrawal

- A – Anger
- R – Recklessness
- M – Mood swings

Warning Signs

- Threatening to harm or kill self and / or others
- Actively seeking means to kill oneself (pills, firearms, etc)
- Agitation, anxiety and or severe sleep disturbance or significant illness or chronic illness
- Family history of mental illness
- Family history of suicide
- Knowing others who have attempted / died by suicide

- Stressful life events
- Access to lethal means (firearms, pills, etc)
- Social problems

Suicide Risk Assessment

- Develop & maintain rapport
- Assess warning signs
- Sensitivity, respect & dignity
- Validate feelings & experience
- Do not judge!
- Access collateral information
- Develop risk management plan
- Seek consultation

Assessment Questions

Have you been thinking of killing yourself?

Do you want to end your life?

Do you feel as though you are tired of living?

If a teacher suspects a transgender youth is considering suicide, they should ask the school counsellor to assist in conducting a suicide risk assessment.

Assessment Questions: 5 P's

Plan

- Do you have a specific way of killing and / or harming yourself?
- Have you made any specific plans? Giving possessions away?
- Cleaning up loose ends?
- Do you have access to lethal means to end your life?
- Have you started to put a suicide plan into action?

Present Acute State

- Current intoxication
- Not sleeping / eating for length of time
- Current symptoms of a mental illness
- Hearing voices, command hallucinations, manic state, acute depression, acute anxiety, panic, out of touch with reality
- Sleeplessness

Pain

- How do you get a sense of the pain the youth is experiencing?
- How might you track a youth's pain over a series of sessions?

Previous History

- Previous Attempt(s) When? What happened? How did you try to kill yourself? What prevented death? What happened after?
- Loss to suicide?
- Mental health challenges
- What makes previous history a risk element? Intentionality
- Comfort level / barriers decreasing

Protective Factors

- What factors might you have noticed?
- Significant other? Family? Social Supports?
- Responsibilities?
- Fear/pain of dying?
- Attending counselling?
- What has prevented you from acting?
- Who or what makes life worth living?
- Community
- Safe spaces

Safety Planning

- Contact family & supports who also monitor client
- Document & follow-up
- Consider your safety!!!
- Offer support, including services and referrals

Allyship

How can we practice allyship?

Other ways we can describe allyship: advocating, working alongside, being in solidarity with.

Acknowledge the importance of ending oppression in the world

Look for opportunities to educate ourselves

Recognize the ways we experience privilege (cisgender, heterosexual, white, ability, authority from our positions, and/or other types of privilege) and how that privilege can be used to support in advocacy and confronting oppression

Realize we will mess up. Apologize, learn, and keep trying!

Inclusive Spaces

Creating Inclusive Spaces

Language (in person and on the phone- especially first contact person/intake person)

Forms & documentation (paper and electronics)

Washroom/shower/change room signs

Visuals (posters, brochures, website, lapel pins)

Post brochures, posters, & materials that are inclusive of LGBT2QI+ people

Recognize non-traditional families and same-gender partners or parents

Put a rainbow/trans flag pin on your lapel, stethoscope, etc.

Post policies on who is welcome and how people should be treated - be specific

Bathroom and Shower Access

Public washrooms can be a site of harassment, violence, and anxiety for LGBT2QI+ people.

DON'Ts

- Block people from using a gender-segregated washroom.
- Use binary sex/gender-based language and images
- Trans people in BC have the legal right to access to washrooms and change rooms that correspond to their felt gender identity, regardless of anatomy

DOs

- Multi-stall washrooms, whenever possible, should be inclusive of all genders, with multiple separate 'closets' with full doors that lock (with a small gap for safety), and a common area for hand washing